

# Coronavirus pandemic requires action to protect people who are homeless

April 10 2020, by Lauren Slagter

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As the coronavirus pandemic grows, the University of Michigan's Jennifer Erb-Downward discusses how people who are homeless will likely be affected by the public health emergency and how policymakers

can respond. Erb-Downward is a senior research associate at U-M's Poverty Solutions initiative who studies family homelessness, behavioral health, chronic illness and the reduction of health disparities.

## **What are some unique challenges people who are homeless face in taking precautions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus?**

When you are homeless, you have very little control over the spaces where you live. This makes social distancing—one of the main [recommendations for coronavirus prevention](#)—incredibly difficult. Both living in a [shelter](#) or temporarily with another family means you are in an environment that is overcrowded, where it is easier for viruses to spread. If you are couch surfing or living in public spaces, it means you are frequently changing locations and encountering new people every time—again, increasing your risk of exposure. Lack of stable housing also means that if you fall ill, you do not have a stable place to recover.

More than 560,000 people in the U.S. were counted as homeless during a point-in-time count by HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) in 2019, and about 37% of them were unsheltered. People who are unsheltered are already having difficulty finding places to use the restroom and wash their hands now that many businesses are closed during the pandemic, and this will become even more challenging as states implement strict shelter-in-place orders.

Another issue facing unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness in Michigan is that they cannot consent for their own routine medical care. This creates unnecessary barriers to accessing care—which is exactly what we do not need at this time. During a declared emergency, the governor has the ability to waive these consent requirements and increase access to care.

## **What steps can policymakers at the local, state and federal levels take to address these issues?**

Michigan's Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and federal lawmakers have already taken action to prevent more people from losing their homes by temporarily suspending residential evictions and foreclosures. But there still is a need for more support for people who are currently homeless during the coronavirus pandemic.

Ideally, we should find housing for people who are unsheltered or living in unstable housing situations—such as doubled up with another family or couch surfing. California is purchasing trailers and leasing hotel rooms to provide shelter for vulnerable populations and isolate homeless people displaying COVID-19 symptoms. Convention centers, university dorms, recreation centers and other public spaces that are currently empty due to shelter-in-place orders also could serve as temporary homeless shelters. While these makeshift shelters likely would not allow for self-isolation, they would give traditional shelters some breathing room and enable them to better comply with guidelines around hygiene and social distancing.

In the meantime, homeless shelters are trying to quarantine people with COVID-19 symptoms and connect them with medical care, while still providing services to healthy clients. Additional funding for the existing homelessness system would help ensure shelters are fully staffed and have adequate supplies like hand sanitizer and facemasks.

If we cannot find shelter for everyone who needs it, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends allowing homeless encampments to remain undisturbed](#) while asking that people maintain a safe distance between sleeping quarters and providing access to nearby restrooms or portable toilets and hand-washing stations. In general,

funneling federal and state resources to local officials and temporarily loosening restrictions that would prevent quick action will be the best way to make sure responses directly address local needs.

## **What other long-term considerations related to homelessness should we keep in mind as the pandemic progresses?**

As the federal stimulus packages are rolled out, one thing we need to be proactive about is ensuring that people who lack a stable address are able to access the direct stimulus payments and other supports. The [Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness](#) (PDF) tells us roughly 48,000 adults were living in shelters at some point in 2018. People in homeless shelters are likely eligible for the stimulus checks, and we need to make sure they complete the forms necessary to file their taxes and submit their bank information or current address to the IRS, because not filing means a loss of \$1,200 per adult.

Many states have closed their K-12 schools to slow the spread of COVID-19. While this is a necessary step, it has a significant impact on children and youth experiencing homelessness in terms of taking away access to school meals and increasing their risk of trafficking, predation and harm as they look for alternative places to spend their days. While [school meal distribution sites](#) are critical during this time, the families of Michigan's approximately 37,155 homeless K-12 students may not have access to reliable transportation, which could prevent them from picking up the meals. Also, children who are homeless often do not have access to Wi-Fi or the technology needed for online learning, let alone a place where they can do their school work. As long as the schools are closed, the learning gap will grow between students who have access to needed resources and those who don't.

Given the high number of business closures and layoffs due to the coronavirus pandemic, we also need to think about how loss of income will affect people's ability to pay for basic necessities such as food and medical care long term. We need to implement policies now that will prevent more people from being forced out of their homes as the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic grows and the state's moratorium on evictions ends.

Provided by University of Michigan

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