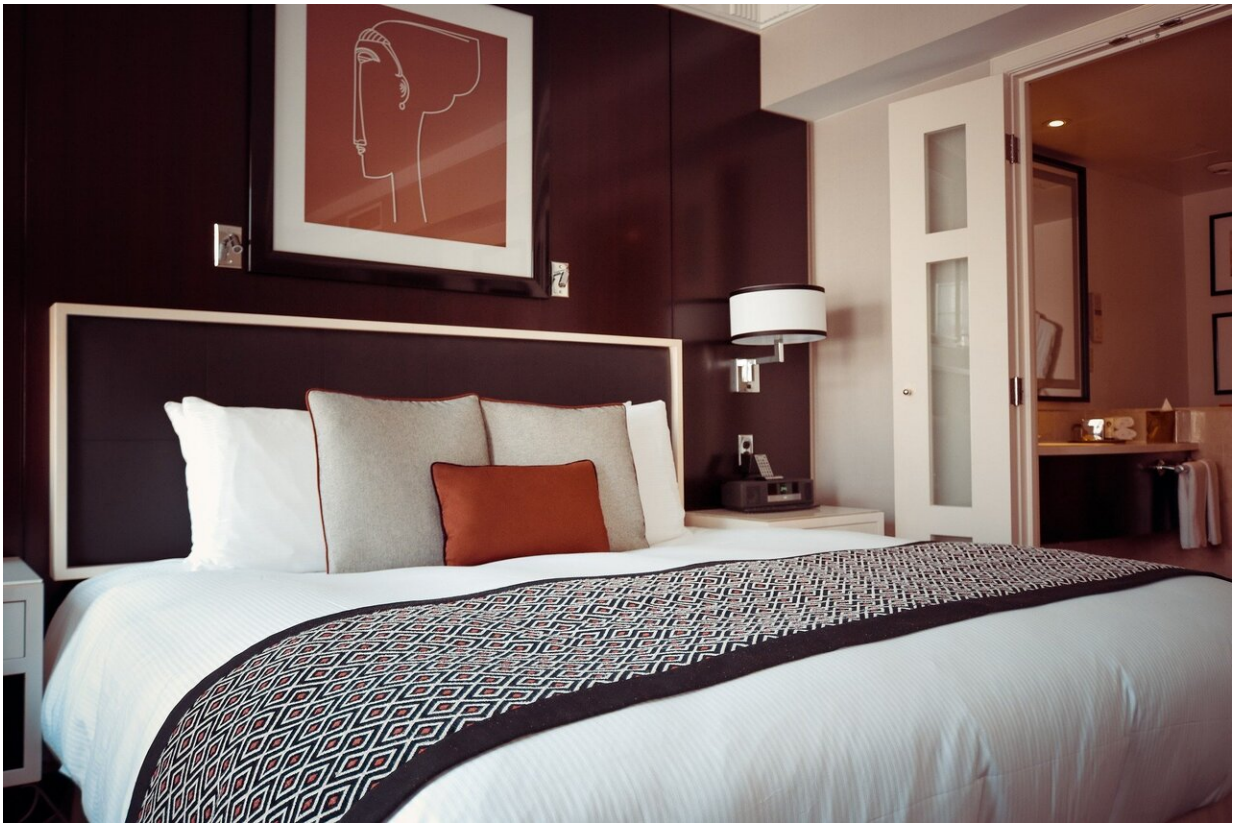


# Hotels offering rooms to homeless in pandemic reap reputational reward

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Hotels that opened their doors to homeless people in their community during lockdown generated greater positive word-of-mouth marketing than those that offered free accommodation to frontline healthcare

workers, finds new university research.

However, despite the [positive impact](#) on tourists' intentions to share the good news story, the immediate impact on intention to book a visit was the reverse, with people less inclined to book a stay at a [hotel](#) that had housed [homeless people](#).

Researchers at the Universities of Bath and Southampton were struck by [news reports](#) of the "heart-warming initiatives" to offer free accommodation and wanted to investigate how they compared in terms of business benefit to the tourism sector.

"Our study found that hotels that provided [community support](#) in the form of free accommodation to [medical professionals](#) had little impact on how tourists felt about them, we think because showing gratitude to healthcare workers had quickly become a social norm," said Dr. Haiming Hang from Bath's School of Management.

"In contrast, the hotels that offered accommodation to homeless people really seemed to move tourists and generate a feeling of warmth and a perception of the hotel as kind and generous. Going beyond the social norm was seen as a marker of genuine concern for social welfare. The hotels were rewarded with a marked intention by tourists to spread positive word of mouth."

Previous research has identified negative public perception of homeless people in terms of cleanliness and the authors of this new study believes that this stereotype could be a factor in immediate impact on intention to book.

"If hotel management can successfully communicate how they maintain high standards of cleanliness then their community initiatives should not pose a long term risk to bookings," said Dr. Zhifeng Chen at the

Southampton Business School. "In the long run, positive word of mouth is very important because it can attract both prospective employees and new customers."

Reported in *Tourism Management*, the study is unusual in examining the impact of a hotel's community support, or [corporate social responsibility](#), during a crisis, and focusing on initiatives aimed at the [local community](#) rather than employees or shareholders.

Local communities have been noted as crucial to the success of a hotel, partly because tourists' memorable experiences are significantly influenced by the nature of the local people they meet.

Over 450 American tourists, who intended to travel after the pandemic, took part in the research and were allocated to one of three experimental scenarios that focused on a hotel's commitment to cleanliness and its cancellation policy as its responses to COVID-19; community support through donating rooms to medical professionals; or to homeless people.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on tourism, with the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimating a contraction of the tourism sector by 20 to 30 percent in 2020.

**More information:** Zhifeng Chen et al, Corporate social responsibility in times of need: Community support during the COVID-19 pandemics, *Tourism Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tourman.2021.104364](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2021.104364)

Provided by University of Bath

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