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Violence as a Deterrent for Shelter Usage Among Persons Experiencing Homelessness in Detroit: a Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract :

Introduction: Persons experiencing homelessness (PEH) are hospitalized at rates four times higher than the US average and face significantly worse health outcomes, particularly for those residing in cities with harsh winters. Fear of violence or theft is frequently cited as a deterrent to emergency-based shelter usage among PEH; however, there is little research assessing its effects on health and safety among PEH. This project qualitatively assesses violence as a deterrent to emergency shelter usage.

Methods: A semi-structured interview guide was designed to assess experiences with, and fear of, shelter-based violence among PEH and the effect of shelter-based violence on mental and physical health. Data were analyzed through conventional content analysis.

Results: Preliminary results suggest that shelter-based theft and violence are associated with cyclic exacerbation of negative health outcomes. All participants reported experiences with theft or violence in shelters, with descriptions of resultant lack of sleep or anxiety-related behaviors. A majority (66%) of participants cited fear of shelter-based violence or crime as a reason for foregoing shelter usage.

Conclusions: Experiences with, and fear of shelter-based violence have a negative health impact on PEH in Detroit, exacerbated by our seasonally severe weather. It is necessary, as healthcare providers, to understand these health implications in order to deliver high-quality care to PEH. The findings will inform continuing medical education on strategies to improve quality of care for PEH. Data will also inform design and implementation of targeted safety interventions in local emergency shelters to reduce barriers to using shelters.

Key Words : homelessness, mental health, shelter-based violence

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