Identifying and Addressing Mental Health Disparities in the Era of COVID-19

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Objective/Aim/Hypothesis:
The existing social and economic barriers to mental health care in the United States have been amplified by the recent COVID-19 epidemic. Without stable access to transportation, internet, and mobile devices, many children and families have been left without reliable and consistent care. The closure of schools further intensified this problem for families, as many children rely on their school system for mental health support. The primary purpose of this presentation is to discuss how these barriers to mental health care for children and families have become exacerbated over the last several months. The secondary focus is to propose strategies for designing culturally-sensitive and empirically-informed approaches to minimizing mental health disparities across the state.

Design/Approach/Methods:
The author will present on qualitative research conducted with homeless youth prior to the start of the shelter-in-place guidelines. The author will then discuss the development of several projects aimed at better measuring and more directly targeting mental health inequities among historically underserved communities in both rural and urban settings.

Results:
Preliminary results from the author's work with homeless youth suggest multiple pathways to homelessness, and highlight many intersecting risk factors for ongoing mental and behavioral health challenges that cannot be adequately addressed with current models of care. These preliminary results will be presented in the context of several research directions emerging from the COVID-19 epidemic.

Conclusion:
The COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted the vast inequities in access to reliable mental health services, but has also ushered in opportunities for leveraging technology to address these gaps in care.