

Homeless largely escape virus

By JANIE HAR
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — When the coronavirus emerged in the U.S. this year, public health officials and advocates for the homeless feared the virus would rip through shelters and tent encampments, ravaging vulnerable people who often have chronic health issues.

They scrambled to move people into hotel rooms, thinned out crowded shelters and moved tents into designated spots at sanctioned outdoor camps.

While shelters saw some large COVID-19 outbreaks, the virus so far doesn't appear to have brought devastation to the homeless population as many feared. However, researchers and advocates say much is unknown about how the pandemic is affecting the estimated half-million people without housing in the U.S.

In a country that's surpassed 5 million identified cases and 169,000 deaths, researchers don't know why there appear to be so few outbreaks among the homeless.

"I am shocked, I guess I can say, because it's a very vulnerable population. I don't know what we're going to see in an aftermath," said Dr. Deborah Borne, who oversees health policy for COVID-19 homeless response at San Francisco's public health department. "That's why it's called a novel virus, because we don't know."

More than 200 of an estimated 8,000 homeless people in San Francisco have tested positive for the virus, and half came from an outbreak at a homeless shelter in April. One homeless person is among the city's 69 deaths.

In other places with large homeless populations, the numbers are similarly low. In King County, which includes Seattle, more than 400 of an estimated 12,000 homeless residents have been diagnosed. In Los Angeles County, more than



A woman sleeps as another sits in a homeless shelter inside the San Diego Convention Center.

Gregory Bull/AP Photo

1,200 of an estimated 66,000 homeless people have been diagnosed.

It's slightly higher in Maricopa County, which includes Phoenix, where nearly 500 of an estimated 7,400 homeless people have tested positive, including nine who died.

Francisco, 50 homeless people died over an eight-week period in April and May — twice the usual rate, said Dr. Barry Zevin, medical director of the public health department's street medicine program.

The official causes are pending, but Zevin notes that

on the homeless population because hospitals and death certificates don't track housing status, says Dr. Margot Kushel, director of the Center for Vulnerable Populations at the University of California, San Francisco.

She was hesitant to draw conclusions about how the pandemic has affected homeless people overall but said "this may be an example where being outside and unsheltered, just in terms of COVID, maybe let people be at lower risk. But again, part of that is that we just don't really know."

New York City has reported more than 1,400 infections and 104 deaths among homeless residents out of more than 226,000 positive cases and 19,000 deaths. Roughly 60,000 people live in shelters, unlike in West Coast cities where many more are unsheltered.

But because New York's shelters have more children than the general population, when deaths are adjusted for age, the mortality rate for homeless people is 67% higher than for the overall population, said Giselle Routhier, policy director for the Coalition for the Homeless.

"That's extraordinarily high, in our opinion," she said.

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Health experts say the numbers don't indicate how widespread the disease is or how it might play out long term. It's unknown how many people have died of conditions indirectly related to the virus. While the coronavirus may dissipate more easily outdoors than indoors, living outside has its own risks.

With public libraries and other places closed, homeless people say they're short on food and water, restrooms and cash. In San

fentanyl overdoses are rising and stay-at-home orders may prevent people from getting help quickly. He knew isolation could result in more overdoses.

"I think that's happened, and whether it's more or less than I would have expected, I don't know," he said. "It's frustrating to be able to forecast something as a problem, do everything you can to prevent it as a problem, but it's absolutely a case of competing priorities."

Good data is difficult to get

Not fond of check splitting

Dear Annie: We're a group of about 10 over-60 high school friends who get together for brunch or dinner annually around Christmastime. "Ronnie" will always make the reservations, send out the details and grab the check. She'll simply divide for the number and ask everyone for that amount.

This most recent dinner, there were nine of us. The bill, before tip, came to \$360. Many in the group had a drink, some ordered a second one, including top-shelf brands. Most had dessert. I don't drink much, and I'm not into dessert. I ordered an entree that cost \$17. We were each asked to pay \$55. Needless to say, when the check is split, those who spend the least get taken advantage of the most.

This time, I did express my displeasure to Ronnie, but she quickly shot me down. Nobody else said anything.

Look, if it's only a few dollars, I'm OK with easier math for everyone, but not when my share gets more than doubled. Mind you, I'm doing fine financially, so that's not the issue. I would never ask someone to pay more to subsidize my drinks and dessert.

Any thoughts on how to handle this for next year? I'm tempted to drop out or even say I'll only attend if we ditch the check splitting. — *Split the Bill*

Dear Split the Bill: I would bite your tongue and not say anything. It is a yearly occurrence, around the holidays, with friends you've known for at least the last 40 years. Much like giving birthday and Christmas presents, look at this dinner as a kind gesture from you to your friends because you enjoy their company. As finances are not your concern, weigh the pros and cons for yourself. Is saving \$40 worth losing the memories you'd gain from attending the meal?

Let this one go and focus your attention on the joy of being with your friends who you have known for so long. What a gift.

However, if this advice drives you nuts, you could always ask for a separate check. But don't be surprised if your friends start calling you Scrooge.

Dear Annie:

I was sad to read the letter from the woman in the long-distance relationship whose boyfriend of 14 years failed to remain in contact with her. I feel lucky to say that this pandemic has made my long-distance relationship of four years — between Indiana and Florida — even better.

Before, I would spend one week a month down there. But I don't want to travel yet — especially to high-risk areas. We may not see each other physically, but we have worked to maintain communication. We actually talk more now.

I'm not running around like crazy, so I have time to carry on a decent conversation. We met halfway over the July 4 holiday and both agreed that visit was better than my monthly trips. We were able to spend quality time together because he wasn't working.

I'm hopeful that things will go back to "normal," but until then, we are making the best of the situation. It really depends on what you're willing to put into a relationship. — *Stronger in a Pandemic*

Dear Stronger in a Pandemic: Your letter brings up a good point. If you want to make something work, then you make something work. If you don't, then you can always find excuses as to why it can't. While the distance is certainly challenging to you and your boyfriend, you have been committed to making it work and, like anything in life, we get what we put in.

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