Water Accessibility among Homeless Individuals

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Background

Homelessness only further exposes an individual to human rights abuses regarding water, food, privacy, shelter, and health. Water is a right and necessity. It is especially pertinent in Texas when temperatures reach well over 100°F. My research aimed to increase water accessibility among the homeless population of Austin by distributing reusable water bottles. I hypothesized that by providing homeless individuals with reusable water bottles, it would increase their accessibility to water, decrease health risks, and limit their environmental footprint.

Barriers to clean drinking water:

- "Customer-only" rule
- Limited public drinking fountains
- Lack of storage

(Left) Aluminum reusable water bottle distributed to homeless individuals, equipped with a carabiner for easy travel. Courtesy of Jetline.

(Middle) Researcher Alexis Fischer talking with Austin homeless individual. Photograph by Nandin Dandar.

(Right) Photograph by Emily Mackay.

Research Questions

- Do reusable water bottles increase water accessibility and consumption for homeless individuals?
- Do reusable water bottles reduce one's environmental footprint?
- Do homeless individuals feel more secure with a reusable water bottle?

Methods and Materials

Data Collection

- PI used convenience and snowball sampling to recruit participants
- Collected qualitative data through interviews
  - Loose, open-ended questions designed specifically for Austin homeless community
  - Questions focused on subjects' experiences with water accessibility

Data Analysis

- Used narrative analysis to interpret data
- Identified impact of reusable water bottle in terms of accessibility, approachability, and storage

Results

Research is still in progress. Below are preliminary findings:

- Many stopped using plastic or paper water cups once given a reusable water bottle
- Reusable does not have the convenience of being disposable
- Reusable is the healthier option
  - More likely to drink recommended 2-3L of water per day.
  - Water bottles especially useful for keeping water cold
  - Aluminum bottles are BPA-free and individuals are not ingesting toxins from the plastic as it melts in the sun/heat.

Discussion

Most homeless individuals identified businesses where they could access clean drinking water. If they did not lose their water bottles, they tended to drink more with the reusable bottles since they were not worried about buying water and were able to store more at a time. Fieldwork so far proves my hypothesis correct and has made an impact for some individuals within the Austin homeless community. I will continue to distribute reusable water bottles after the end of my research to actively increase water accessibility.

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