

## **Mitigating digital exclusion in a remote research world: reflections from conducting research on populations experiencing homelessness during the pandemic**

*Emma A Adams*

*Population Health Sciences Institute, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK*

**Background:** The global Covid-19 pandemic challenges researchers to adapt and adjust previous engagement and coproduction strategies in order to continue research projects remotely. Transitioning to remote recruitment and data collection has led to concerns around digital exclusion and further marginalisation of populations that already faced heightened disadvantage. Throughout the pandemic, individuals experiencing homelessness, sometimes perceived as ‘harder-to-reach’, have faced added challenges for participating in remote research. This study aims to outline critical reflections and observations related to conducting research among individuals experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.

**Methods:** This reflective analysis provides insights from an early career researcher on their experience navigating methodological and logistical challenges that arose while conducting a qualitative study involving individuals experiencing homelessness in the North East of England. Lessons learned on mitigating concerns around digital exclusion were shaped through collaborations with ‘Experts by Experience’ and analyzing the researcher’s reflective journal.

**Results:** Reflections on lessons learned to reduce digital exclusion are centered around three overarching themes: i) meaningful and realistic co-production—ways the research was coproduced with individuals with lived experience; ii) appropriateness as the most important criteria for vouchers and remuneration—process taken to determine the best approaches; iii) inclusiveness and choice for recruitment and data collection – strategies to increase participation and reduce participation burden.

**Conclusion:** The responsibility of researchers to find ways to engage homeless populations has become more urgent as the pandemic has created new barriers to access. Concerns about widening the digital divide are given special consideration and approaches used in the context of this study are reviewed and successes are highlighted. Being clear about time and resource expectations while respecting that any commitments are subject to change was helpful for coproduction. Providing participants with physical vouchers required creativity when it came to distribution as gatekeepers were more effective than postal service. Worries about recruitment lag and data collection were overcome by leveraging existing networks and offering participants choice in the way they were contacted and engaged. Conducting research within remote contexts always requires innovation and creativity. However, not all approaches will work for everyone. Guidance on conducting research remotely or while practicing social distancing does not necessarily take into consideration populations facing the greatest marginalisation or digital exclusion. Collectively learning about experiences and approaches to date can ensure that current and future projects do not avoid populations that are likely to experience digital exclusion or other access issues.