

# ASSESSING BARRIERS AMONG HIV, SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER, AND TRANS PATIENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## Background

COVID-19's effects on the health of vulnerable populations are still emerging; however, current data suggest a disproportionate burden of illness and death among groups with substance use disorders (SUD), HIV/AIDS, and the transgender community. The widening of healthcare disparities during COVID-19 justifies the exploration of any implicit and explicit barriers faced by vulnerable populations when accessing healthcare.

## Objective

To explore socioeconomic barriers by surveying healthcare providers at Fenway Health about the impacts of COVID-19 on their patient's healthcare access and to investigate ways to mitigate barriers that may be widening the health disparities for vulnerable patients.

## Methods

74 providers completed a cross-sectional survey administered via email in July 2020 at Fenway Health, a large multi-site community health center. Fisher's exact tests were used to compare outcomes with respect to the COVID-19 time periods.

## Results

The frequency of outcomes reported are associated with whether providers were asked about *before* versus *during* COVID-19. Providers reported that, during COVID-19, mental health concerns for patients were higher ( $p < 0.001$ ) and more patients were lacking access to transportation ( $p < 0.001$ ). Most providers (88%) reported that their patients were not informed of the resources available to them through the CARES Act, where providers identified financial barriers (66%) to be the most common and language barriers (22%) to be the least common.

## Conclusion

Evidence suggests that improvements can be made to better facilitate efficient transportation, provide mental health services, and make appointments more convenient for these patients. Most providers identified a lack of education and understanding of the CARES Act among their patients to access available resources. This indicates a need for providing an outreach and education department to ensure that patients are aware of their options and resources. Financial barriers were the most common, which may require institutional and governmental resources to curb this disparity. Language barriers were least commonly reported.

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