Racial and Ethnic Disparities in COVID-19: Addressing Health Equity in Connecticut and West Virginia

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Background
Connecticut’s Urban Service Track (UST)/AHEC Scholars Program is designed to engage students across various health disciplines in clinical, didactic, and community-based activities that draw attention to and build skill sets that can address the needs of Connecticut’s urban underserved communities. Students from the UST were encouraged to supplement these efforts through participation in monthly interest group meetings for the 2020-2021 academic year. This year, the UST program also invited students from West Virginia’s AHEC Rural Scholars Program to join in on these interest group discussions. As part of the Healthcare Advocacy and Policy Interest Group, we used this time to research how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted minority communities in Connecticut and West Virginia and how we may be able to take steps to reduce the disparities recognized in these underserved communities.

Methods
UST scholars conducted a retrospective cross-national analysis of COVID-19 infection in minority communities with a focus on disparities in Connecticut and West Virginia. Data was gathered from public resources including the CDC, WHO COVID-19 surveillance database, and The COVID Tracking Project.

Objectives
- Compare COVID-19 incidence and outcomes based on race and ethnicity.
- Assess disparities primarily in Connecticut and West Virginia.
- Question addressed: Why is COVID-19 hitting certain communities harder than others?

Results
- In July of 2020, Black CT residents accounted for 18% of all positive COVID-19 cases, despite making up 12% of the population.
- From January 2020 to February 2021, cases were most concentrated in Fairfield County (primarily Bridgeport, CT), Hartford County, and New Haven County.

Discussion
- Structural determinants explain the disproportionately higher out-of-hospital deaths in Black and Hispanic communities due to COVID-19.
- Per Johns Hopkins University, of 151 predominantly Black counties in the United States, infection rate and death rate is 3-fold and 8-fold higher, respectively, than in predominantly white counties.
- Various factors contribute to the higher morbidity and mortality, including racial and ethnic minorities being 3x as likely to be on Medicaid, 2x as likely to live in low-income areas, and overall more likely to have one or more chronic comorbidities.
- WV has seen a disproportionally higher number of cases per 100,000 people than in CT in both Black and white patient populations. WV's disparities may be influenced by a greater burden of underlying conditions known to put patients at risk for COVID-19 morbidity and mortality, and a lack of access to care influenced by the rural setting of WV.
- Resident zip codes and associated poverty explain the higher rates of COVID-19 positive cases and hospitalization.
  - CT underserved locations including Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford with more concentrated cases.

Health Equity Strategies
- American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 passed as of March 11, 2021 - Title II Subtitle D Public Health, Title III Urban Affairs, Subtitle J Medicaid
  - Emergency grants for rural health care development
  - Funding for COVID-19 Vaccine Activities and Testing - expansion to marginalized communities and mobile health units in primarily underserved areas
  - Expansion of healthcare facilities in underserved areas
  - Federal transit administration grants for transportation barriers
  - Mandatory coverage of COVID-19 treatment under Medicaid, both inpatient and outpatient
  - Additional support for Medicaid home and community-based services
  - Prioritizing entities serving communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and utilizing culturally competent and multilingual strategies in the provision of health services, including racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, or geographic diversity
- Per CDC, pivotal and continuously growing role of community pharmacies in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 via vaccinations, testing, population health promotion - especially in disproportionately affected communities.

Conclusions and Future Direction
- Further studies are warranted to assess how community-based health interventions via community or religious leaders (i.e. through churches, apartment complex committees, etc.), and community-based health centers may reduce future COVID-19 infection rates in minority communities.
- Addressing disparities in technology, transportation, language barriers, and vaccine hesitancy are all necessary measures to ensure reduction in COVID-19 morbidity and mortality across racial and ethnic minorities.
- UST Scholars should focus on the effects of the nationally implemented health equity strategies during the pandemic in future studies.

References
CT AHEC Program at UConn Health Center Urban Service Track/AHEC Scholars Program h.uconn.edu/UST

Acknowledgements
Volunteer preceptors supporting CT AHEC COVID student projects.

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