Chapter 24
Cyber Behavior of Homeless Adolescents and Adults

Karin M. Eyrich-Garg
Temple University, USA

Eric Rice
University of Southern California, USA

ABSTRACT

A common stereotype is that persons experiencing homelessness have no access to digital and Information Technology. Even if they could obtain access, they would not have the skills necessary to use it. In this entry, the authors examine the scientific literature focused on the Internet use of persons experiencing homelessness. Both homeless adolescents and adults use the Internet at public libraries, social service agencies, and via mobile phone. They use the Internet to obtain employment and housing, seek services, remain socially connected, and have fun. The Internet has enormous potential as a tool to improve the lives of persons experiencing homelessness in terms of social support, advocacy, connection to and rating of services, online education, online intervention scheduling, and online intervention delivery. This field is new, and its development should prove both exciting and vital for the assessment, research, and intervention of persons experiencing homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is prevalent in the United States, with approximately 643,067 individuals experiencing the condition on a single night and approximately 1.56 million individuals using shelter services in a single year (Office of Community

Planning and Development, 2010). Persons experiencing homelessness can be classified as (1) unsheltered, sleeping on the streets or in places not meant for human habitation, (2) sheltered, sleeping in emergency shelters and transitional housing programs, or (3) doubled-up, sleeping temporarily with family members or friends because they have nowhere else to sleep (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010).

Some low-income populations have limited or no access to digital and information technology. Those who do have access sometimes do not have the skills necessary to use the technology. This phenomenon of inequitable access to digital and information technology is termed the "Digital Divide" (Norris, 2001). In this entry of the *Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior*, we examine the Internet use of persons experiencing homelessness, many of whom may be on the disadvantaged side of the Digital Divide. The study of cyber behavior among persons experiencing homelessness can be defined as the Internet and other computer-mediated activity of persons who lack a fixed, regular address and whose primary nighttime residence is on the streets, in shelters, or temporarily with others (family, friends, and acquaintances) because they have nowhere else to stay.

OVERVIEW

The field of cyber behavior among homeless persons is relatively new as the first peer-reviewed journal article on the subject was published in 2005 (Miller et al., 2005). Researchers are showing increasing interest in the cyber behavior of this population, so we expect the field to grow in the coming years. The research shows that many persons experiencing homelessness use the Internet (19% - 47% of adults and 84% - 93% of adolescents). The most common access points are public libraries (87% of adults and 50% of adolescents), social service agencies (28% of adults and 31% - 39% of adolescents), friends' homes (22% of adults and 22% - 34% of adolescents), and mobile phones (19% of adults and 18% - 51% of adolescents). They use the Internet for business, social, and leisure purposes. Although this population has complex problems, its members are resourceful, using modern technology to access needed services, maintain social support, and relax.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Concerns about the physical and mental health of persons experiencing homelessness have driven researchers to examine the cyber behavior of homeless adults. The first scientific journal article to focus on the cyber behavior of persons experiencing homelessness was published in 2005. In this article, Miller evaluated computer use as an occupational therapy intervention with seven homeless men (Miller et al., 2005). One year later, Redpath published his findings on the first survey of computer and Internet use of homeless and indigent drug users in Long Beach, California (Redpath et al., 2006). His work emerged out of a concern that the population may not have adequate access to much-needed Internet-based health information such as HIV prevention strategies. Next, Eyrich-Garg, concerned about the unsheltered homeless population's ability to access their social support network members in Philadelphia, published her work about their use of mobile phones and computer technologies in 2010 (Eyrich-Garg, 2010, 2011). Finally, LeDantec, an expert in human-computer interaction, presented innovative work at an academic conference about cyber interactions among shelter staff and residents (LeDantec et al., 2011).

Work on the cyber behavior among homeless adolescents is in a nascent stage as well, but has roots to traditional issues in research on homeless youth. Research on homeless youth has long been concerned with the social networks of homeless youth, which were traditionally depicted as small, transient, and composed primarily of other homeless and street-involved youth (Kipke et al., 1997). By the middle of the last decade, a few researchers began to explore how homeless youth continue to maintain connections to family and friends that predate their experiences of homelessness (Johnson et al., 2005). These observations led to some initial questions as to how these youth

6 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/cyber-behavior-homeless-adolescents-adults/64761

Related Content

An Analysis of Children's Content on YouTube in the Context of Sharenting: Case Study From Turkey
Pelin Kilinç Özüölmezand Senem Duruel Erkiliç (2022). *Handbook of Research on Digital Violence and Discrimination Studies (pp. 291-314).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/an-analysis-of-childrens-content-on-youtube-in-the-context-of-sharenting/296090

Identity and Language Use Online: Stories from Syria
Naseem Hallajow (2016). *International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning (pp. 73-87).*
www.irma-international.org/article/identity-and-language-use-online/149172

Young Adults' Sense of Belonging in the Context of SNS and Cyberspace Usage: Istanbul, Turkey
Ilkim Markocand Tuba Sari Haksever (2021). *International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning (pp. 1-12).*
www.irma-international.org/article/young-adults-sense-of-belonging-in-the-context-of-sns-and-cyberspace-usage/275825

Learning to Work Virtually: Conversational Repair as a Resource for Norm Development in Computer-Mediated Team Meetings
Kris M. Markman (2010). *Interpersonal Relations and Social Patterns in Communication Technologies: Discourse Norms, Language Structures and Cultural Variables (pp. 220-236).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/learning-work-virtually/42863

Mobile Devices and Recording in the Classroom: A Survey of Policy in UK Higher Education Institutions
Yasmin Ibrahimand Anita Howarth (2014). *International Journal of Cyber Ethics in Education (pp. 21-32).*
www.irma-international.org/article/mobile-devices-and-recording-in-the-classroom/102589