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Health Equity As a New Normal: Centering Community Voices in Pandemic Recovery Efforts in Prince George's County, Maryland

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Background

Prince George's County, Maryland is a majority-minority county in the metropolitan Washington DC area; 62% of the population is African American/Black, and 20% is Latino. Historically, underserved communities in the county face health disparities in HIV, chronic diseases, infant mortality, and unequal access to health care services. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the county led Maryland in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.

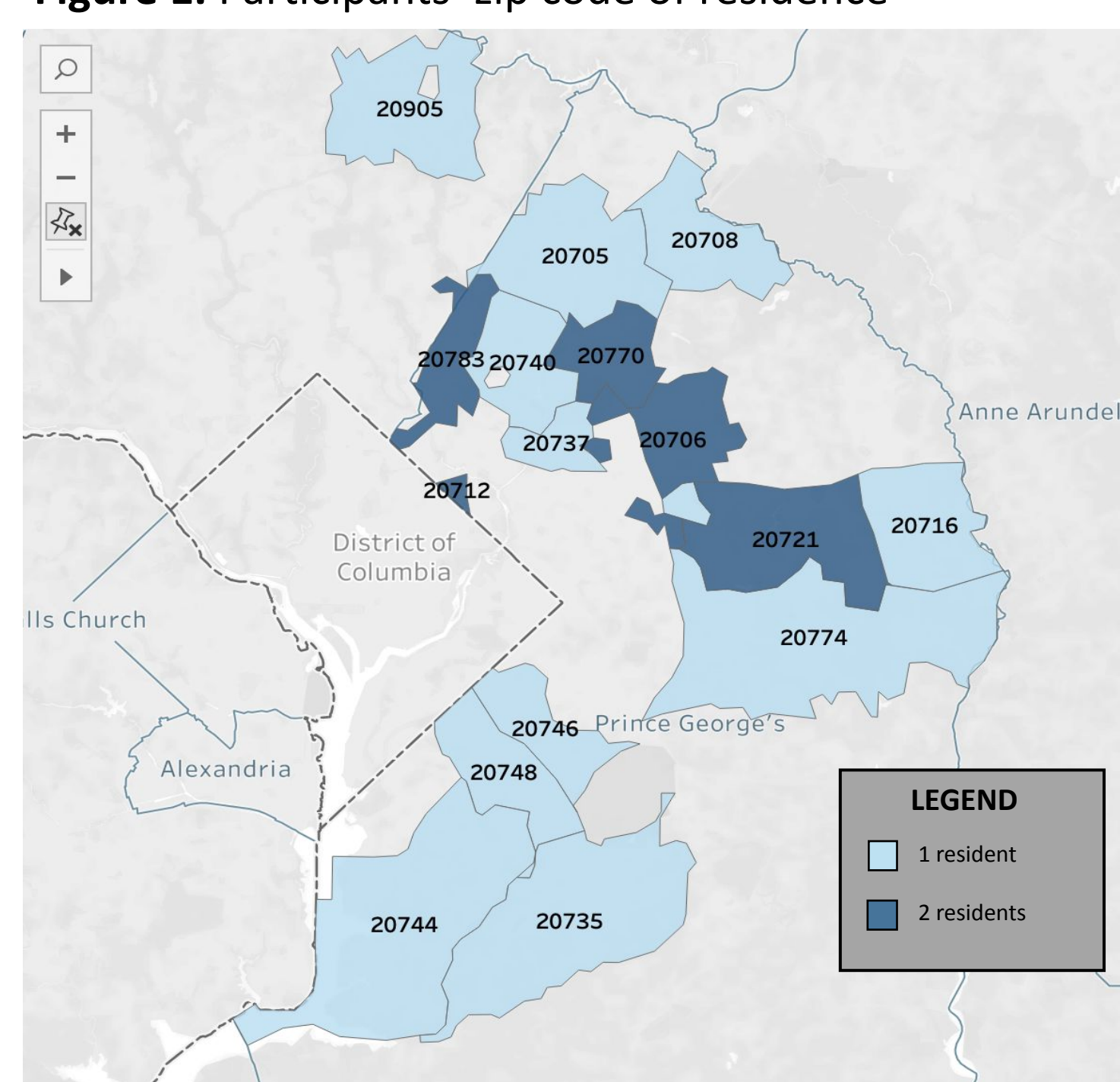
Goal

COVID-19 response strategies created inequity in access and care for Black and Latino Americans that can be seen in disproportionate hospitalizations and vaccination rates. The national CommuniVax project worked in real time to collect and amplify solutions to the inequities.

Objectives

We aimed to 1) utilize an ongoing environmental scan process to identify existing community resources and gaps in resources, 2) understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for residents of underserved communities through interviews and focus groups, particularly among the Black/African American population, and 3) leverage the research findings to inform policymakers about practical actions to address community health needs, and to reimagine a sustainable community health system over the next decade

Figure 1. Participants' zip code of residence



Approach

Using a rapid ethnographic approach, four qualitative interviewers and five note-takers interviewed 5 key informants, 22 individuals, and conducted 3 focus groups to capture insights from distinct groups (faith leaders, parents, and health care workers) from December 2020 to July 2021. Participants were recruited through community and professional networks, social media posts, word of mouth, recruitment flyers, and mailing lists. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and by phone. Interviews were transcribed in real-time using Otter and Zoom transcription, and then vetted for accuracy by the five note-takers. Data were coded and analyzed with HyperResearch.

Figure 1. Participants' Gender (n=22)

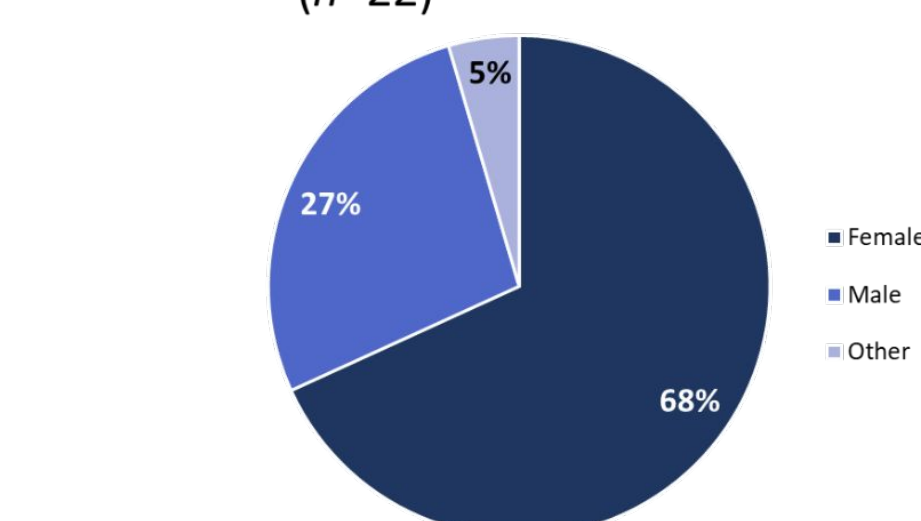


Figure 2. Participants' Annual Household Income (n=20)

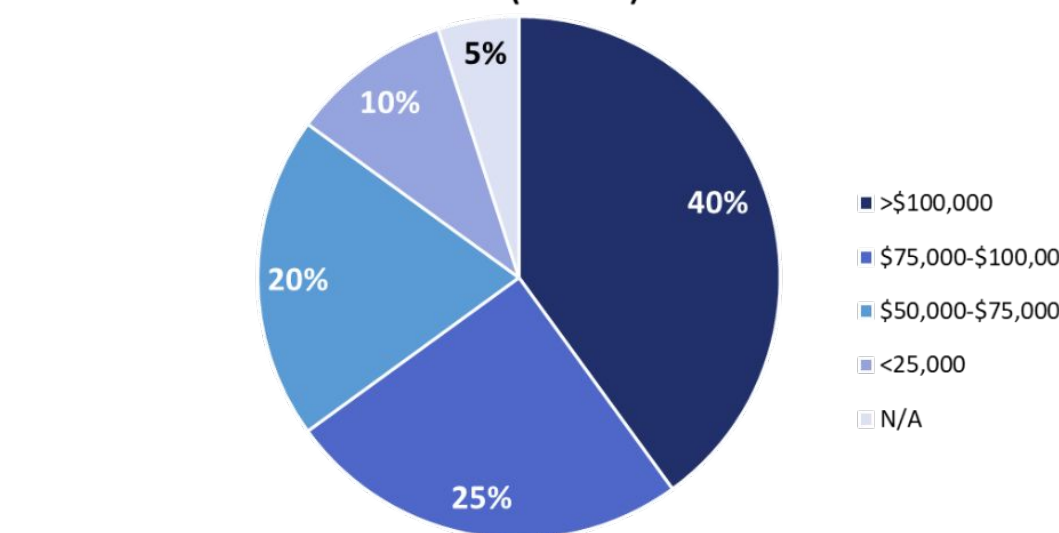


Figure 3. Participants' Age (n=21)

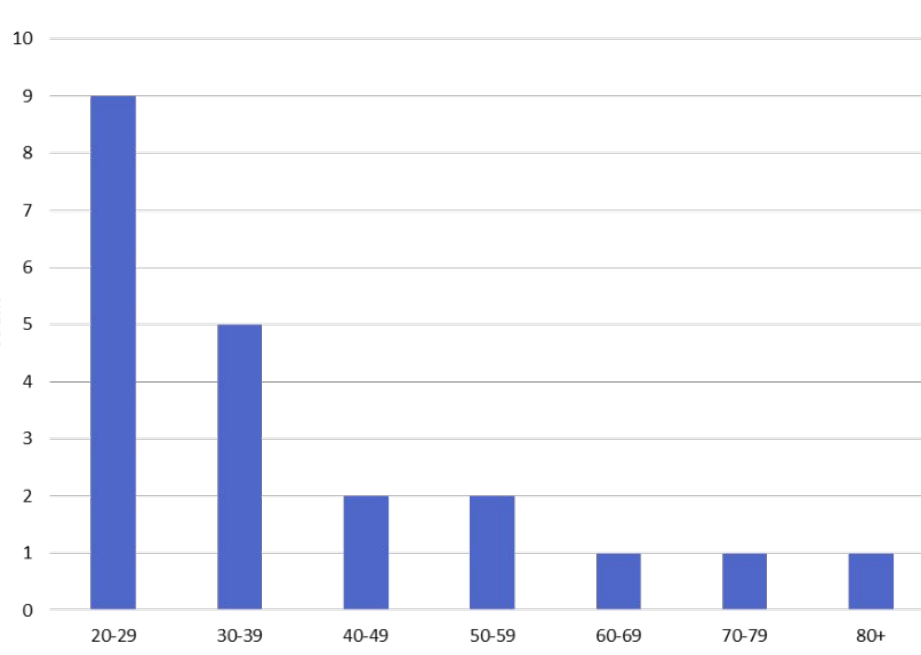
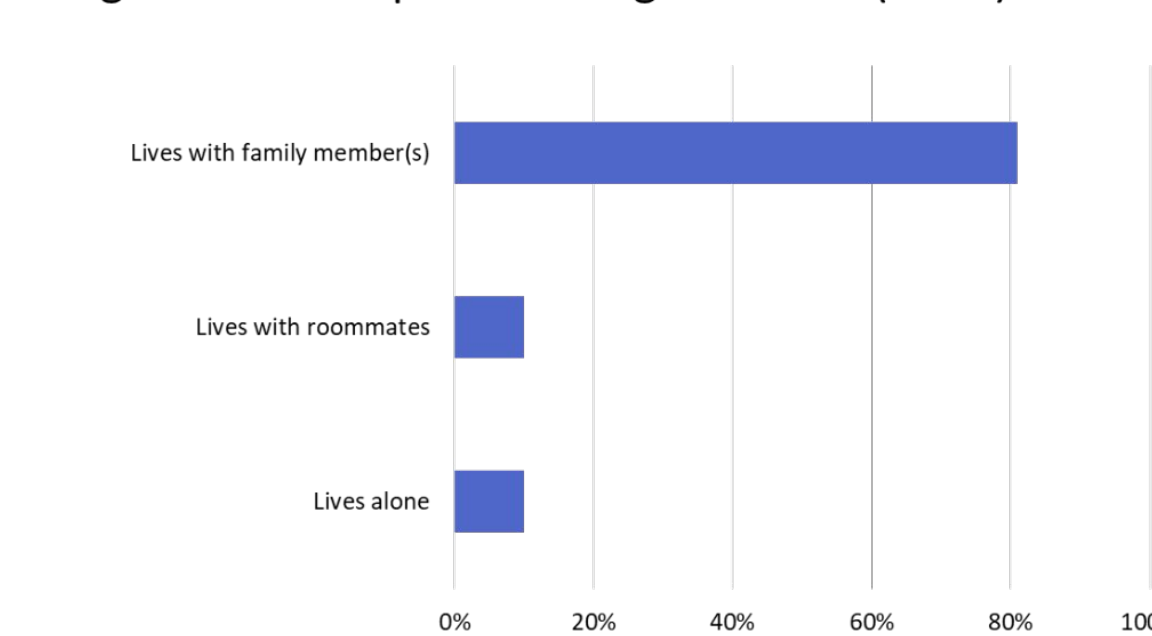


Figure 4. Participants' Living Situation (n=21)



Results/Conclusions

In focus groups and interviews, individuals stressed the unequal impact of the pandemic on Black/African American and Latino communities nationwide and locally. They highlighted the importance of broadening the communication and implementation strategy to take advantage of existing community resources to prevent compounding health inequity. Importantly, recovery efforts must center on dismantling structural racism to ensure that residents in the county have access to adequate resources for critical systems such as housing, education, public health, and human rights services, in addition to changing individual behaviors. Interviewees' recommendations centered on approaches that demonstrate a tangible commitment to valuing Black lives.

"[I]nstead of the housing program being over there and the economic development program being here and a transportation program here and education here. I mean, my hopes are that there are more linkages ... between those types of planning."

"[T]his is a permanent wake-up call with respect to what needs to happen in communities that have been ... disinvested in, communities that have been forgotten with respect to health and human services. ... This is not the last disaster, the last pandemic, the last epidemic that we're going to see in this country, the state, or this county. And unless we are better prepared in going in, we're going to end up with the same results. We're going to end up with Black and Brown people getting sick and dying."

When discussing hopes for the future and ideals for a new normal, participants focused on hope for empathy, compassion, and intentional care towards one another as the county and nation emerge from the pandemic as well as sustained public health practices such as thorough hand-washing, sanitation, and hygiene protocols.

"I can hope to, you know, kind of leave behind is the the lack of caring or the lack of intentionality around helping your fellow citizen."

From the data, four recommendations emerged: 1) That community partnerships built for COVID-19 vaccination should be sustained to address other health disparities 2) That health communication and delivery should be humanized and accessible 3) That the county should invest in a strong public health infrastructure to support recovery 4) That community health programs should be strengthened to achieve health equity. The recommendations and findings were presented for community feedback in September 2021.

Importance to public health

As the nation and Prince George's County envision a new normal post-COVID-19, urgent actions in pandemic recovery and health promotion efforts must consider practical strategies to include community engagement and existing community resources.

For questions please email Elsie A. Essien at eessien1@umd.edu