

COVID-19 vaccination among people experiencing homelessness: reviewing knowledge and practices

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During the first wave of COVID-19, field data and experience rapidly showed that people living in precarious situations, especially those experiencing homelessness, were disproportionately exposed to the risk of infection and its consequences (mortality, morbidity, physical and psychological sequelae), as well as the pandemic's immediate impact on mental health and social interactions [1; 2].

Several factors contribute to an increased risk of coronavirus infection among these populations: densely inhabited living conditions, difficulties applying preventative measures (i.e. inability to isolate, reduced access to clean water, lack of masks), daily exposure via the need to find food or to earn money in activities not covered by aid measures, and problems accessing health care and rights [2-10].

People experiencing homelessness contend with a number of social, economic and environmental determinants that make them particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and simultaneously hinder their ability to access health care and prevention services. These determinants include, among others, the lack of a

permanent address, generally insufficient medical coverage and healthcare use, or the low priority of prevention compared to other competing and essential needs [2-11].

Among people living in a precarious situation linked to the absence of a permanent address, vaccination coverage is often lower than in the general population. This is due to various barriers, such as access to and lack of dedicated health services for the homeless, or even personal perceptions and beliefs [12-17].

As the COVID-19 vaccination effort in the general population progressed in early 2021 [18] and the availability of vaccine doses increased, it became clear there was a lack of data concerning people who live in precarious situations. To address this issue, Santé publique France proposed a knowledge-mobilization approach that would combine and analyse different types of knowledge and experiences: successful vaccination strategies implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, results from previous or ongoing research in France, experience gained in the field, and various levels of action carried out by the government and decision-makers in France and abroad. The objective was to explore the challenges surrounding this specific population in order to produce a set of collective definitions that would guide good practices around action, prevention and health promotion, all firmly rooted in current knowledge and field experience. This article provides an overview of several outcomes from the process, an exercise in knowledge co-production whereby more than 120 researchers, stakeholders and decision-makers came

KEY POINTS

Since the autumn of 2020, in the context of the pandemic, researchers, stakeholders and decision-makers have been sharing their knowledge and practices to help people experiencing homelessness better protect themselves from COVID-19. This knowledge mobilization in support of those living in precarious situations is called the MobCo approach. Led by Santé Publique France, the MobCo group provides a framework for knowledge exchange on strategies used to fight COVID-19 in France and abroad. By facilitating new partnerships and centralizing feedback from different regions, the MobCo approach has revealed promising avenues for action. In autumn 2020, MobCo brought together a group of 60 experts and field staff to discuss screening; in May 2021, a group of 120 participants convened to focus on vaccination. Here we provide an overview of MobCo's ongoing work.

together to improve COVID-19 vaccination among people living in precarious situations.

Method

The knowledge mobilization approach used by MobCo (*Mobilisation des connaissances*) was set up by Santé publique France in the autumn of 2020 based on the spiral model of "knowledge transfer", as developed by the Quebec Institute of Public Health (Institut National de Santé Publique du Québec, INSPQ). In May 2021, researchers, stakeholders and decision-makers came toge-

People experiencing homelessness
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ther to discuss COVID-19 vaccination among people experiencing homelessness, bringing theoretical and experiential knowledge on the subject from France and abroad. The objective was to co-build new knowledge on operational strategies that would improve vaccination adherence. In addition, 20 interviews were carried out by researchers from the Bordeaux Population Health team (INSERM – University of Bordeaux U 1219), in conjunction with Santé publique France, during which stakeholders in France and abroad were asked about their experiences and needs regarding COVID-19 vaccination among people living in precarious situations. Wider webinars took place in May and June 2021, followed by remote workshops that focused on specific topics: vaccination intention and adherence; specific characteristics of populations and living environments; tools for health information, education and communication; support services; and actions implemented to vaccinate these groups.

First results

The following keystone strategies were defined as a result of this work.

Being together:

- Through a bottom-up approach that incorporates local stakeholders who have long-standing involvement with very precarious populations;
- Through collaborative actions that include social and medical stakeholders working on the ground, as well as at departmental, regional and national levels;
- Through actions that are guided by a clear framework.

“Reaching out” and “bringing in”: two complementary strategies

- “Reaching out” with mobile teams visiting accommodation centres, associations, food banks, etc.;
- “Bringing in” using either dedicated vaccination centres or vaccination centres for the general public that offer fast-track, easy-access services for people who live in precarious situations (no waiting time, no appointment, separate entrance, support from social or health workers).

Working together:

- Engaging and involving community intermediaries to improve techniques for communicating and distributing information among precarious populations;
- Regarding national coordination for:
 - the weekly distribution of vaccine doses, driven by a departmental-level organization that integrates those who work with precarious populations (associations, federations, social and medical stakeholders) in order to determine the number of doses required in real time;
 - the division of tasks between several stakeholders in order to optimize vaccine awareness and delivery among recipients.

Working with:

- Population-appropriate communications (e.g., dedicated social marketing campaign, tools adapted to the latest specific obstacles and opportunities);
- Tools that are designed to support social workers, health mediators, health professionals and volunteers in communicating with vulnerable people about vaccination;

- A stance that is respectful of every individual’s sociocultural customs.

Temporality:

- Allowing for shifts in vaccination intention and adherence, including vaccine hesitancy, among people living in a precarious situation, who can be influenced by the views of friends and family members, but also by their interactions with trusted stakeholders.

Conclusions and outlook

The MobCo knowledge-mobilization approach provided a methodological framework for knowledge-sharing on precariousness, shedding light on ground-level actions while also stimulating new research and studies. Additionally, it helped initiate a process of consolidation around the activities of research teams working on extreme precariousness and the respective needs of decision-makers and stakeholders working on the ground.

In this way, MobCo supported new and existing partnerships in applied research. For example, Épicentre (Médecins sans Frontières epidemiology and research centre), Médecins du Monde, Samusocial, Interlogement93 and the French Red Cross proceeded to collaborate with the regional health agencies of Île-de-France and Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur on the Prevac project¹, which explored COVID-19 vaccination coverage among populations living in precarious situations in Île-de-France and Marseille. The MobCo approach also identified the need for co-constructed and specifically adapted communication, which inspired the production of a monthly FAQ document on COVID-19 vaccination. Launched in December 2021, the newsletter supports professionals and volunteers who work directly with people in precarious situations.

MobCo succeeded in generating a collective overview of the interdependent social and health issues affecting highly vulnerable populations, notably through the collective consultation processes that gathered feedback on vaccination difficulties. Major stakeholders have since implemented concrete actions, such as the emergency number set up by National Health Insurance Fund (CNAM) to streamline communication from partner organizations, and alerts were raised on

specific situations such as unaccompanied minors. The mobilized network demonstrated agility, responsiveness and effectiveness. ■

1. PREVAC: Evaluation of vaccine coverage and success determinants of COVID-19 vaccination programme in very precarious populations Ile-de-France and Marseille, June-December 2021 Final summary report Version 2 - March 2022 Thomas Roederer, Bastien Mollo, Charline Vincent, Ghislain Leduc, Jessica Sayyad, Stéphanie Vandentorren https://epicentre.msf.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Etude%20PREVAC_Rapport%20SYNTHETIQUE%20Final_4%20avril%202022_reduit_0.pdf

For more information:

- Vandentorren S., Shah J., Richard É., Laporte A., Allaire C., Désenclos J.C. *et al.* *Lutte contre la Covid19 auprès de personnes en situation de précarité en France : partage des connaissances sur les stratégies de vaccination [Protecting very precarious populations in France against COVID-19: knowledge-sharing on screening strategies]*. [Report] Santé publique France, coll. Études et Enquêtes, 2022: 36 p.
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sur les stratégies de dépistage [Protecting very precarious populations in France against COVID-19: knowledge-sharing on screening strategies]. [Synthesis] Santé publique France, coll. Méthodes, 2021: 12 p. Online: <https://www.santepubliquefrance.fr/maladies-et-traumatismes/maladies-et-infections-respiratoires/infection-a-coronavirus/documents/rapport-synthese/lotte-contre-la-covid-19-aupres-de-populations-en-grande-precarite-en-france-partage-des-connaissances-sur-les-strategies-de-depistage>

● To subscribe to the “Covid Vaccination FAQ” newsletter, send an email to mobco-covid-precarite@santepubliquefrance.fr

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