

# Homelessness, Illicit Substance Use and Outreach

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## Homelessness in Australia

The most recent data from the census of population and housing show that there were approximately 116,000 people experiencing homelessness in Australia in 2016 (ABS 2018).

- This is a rate of 50 people for every 10,000 population and includes people who were in supported accommodation for the homeless, in temporary accommodation, in severely crowded dwellings and people who were 'sleeping rough' (ABS 2018).
- The Journeys Home project (a longitudinal survey of Australians), found that of those people who had experienced housing instability or homelessness, use of substances was also reported for the injection of drugs at a rate of 14% in the previous 6 to 12 months.

## *Specialist homelessness services*

- Specialist homelessness services (SHS) are delivered by non-government organisations and include specific services for those people seeking housing as well as other services that assist them to maintain housing. These include people who experience alcohol and/or other drug issues.
- In 2021–22, 8.6% or around 23,400 SHS clients aged 10 and over, reported problematic alcohol and/or drug use (AIHW 2022).
- The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is an annual survey of people across Australia who regularly inject illicit drugs. Of the 879 participants interviewed in 2022, one-quarter (26%) reported that they were homeless.
- Persons who sought assistance from both SHS and AODTS were twice as likely to report heroin as a principal drug of concern (11.3%)

## *Health and harms*

For clients with problematic drug use, additional vulnerabilities such as mental health issues, may make them more vulnerable to homelessness.

In 2019–20, 44% clients with problematic drug use also reported a current mental health issue.

These combined issues amongst the homeless population can be treated with community outreach services.

Outreach services can offer a holistic treatment approach to those who would usually avoid or are unable to access clinic/hospital based settings.

## WHAT IS OUTREACH?

Outreach refers to “contact with any individual who would otherwise be ignored or un-served in non-traditional settings for the purposes of improving their mental health, health, social functioning or to increase their human service and resource utilisation”

Outreach strategies require the development of an understanding of the individual circumstances and needs of each individual, as well as cultural barriers that may prevent people from accessing either mainstream services or those that target people who experience homelessness.

Through the development of positive relationships, the attainment of the larger goal of helping people access the services and supports they need in order to help them move forward with their lives can be achieved.

In order to achieve this goal, outreach workers need to be familiar with, and have access to, a range of mainstream and community services. i.e. mental health and AOD services.

Outreach services that are run by an agency whose goal is simply to link the person to that agency, are not seen as effective. Workers need to be seen as doing the work of the sector, and not simply of the agency they work for. This requires a higher degree of interagency collaboration.



## *Housing situation and outcomes*

While overall housing outcomes generally reflect trends towards more favourable housing, experiences of homelessness, particularly rough sleeping, were more common for clients with problematic drug and/or alcohol use both at the start and end of SHS support compared with other client groups.

People who are homeless and use drugs experience many barriers to accessing healthcare and treatment. Evidence regarding interventions designed specifically for this population is limited, but harm reduction and case management approaches can lead to improvements in substance use outcomes.

More research is needed regarding optimal treatment length as well as qualitative insights from people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

## SUMMARY

- 50 people for every 10,000 population are considered homeless in Australia.
- 14% of this population are using IV illicit substances.
- People experiencing homelessness often experience co-occurring mental health and AOD problems.
- Homelessness services offer assertive outreach, treatment and linkages to other community services.
- When outreach case management is delivered to it's full potential, client outcomes are positive and withstanding.



## REFERENCES

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QUESTIONS?



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