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Homelessness

Background:

'Homelessness is a risk factor for mental health and wellbeing, and mental illness is a risk factor for homelessness'¹.

Every night more than 105,000 people in Australia are homeless. The extent of the problem is hidden by the fact that most homeless people do not sleep rough on the streets. They stay with relatives and friends until they wear out their welcome, or sleep in hotels, short-term and crisis accommodation, caravan parks, boarding houses and even cars². People, who are homeless, include men, women and children and are from all age groups and cultural backgrounds. Homelessness can potentially affect anyone, at any time and has many causes³.

A secure home is widely recognised as providing a fundamental basis for building mental health. However, for many people experiencing mental illness, achieving or maintaining stable homes can prove difficult, and some slip into unstable housing or even homelessness. It is essential that mental health issues are a part of any discussion on homelessness and housing⁴.

Those who are homeless or vulnerable to homelessness face many difficulties that largely exclude them from participating in the wider community and can have a considerable impact on a person's health and wellbeing⁵.

Studies show that between 48% and 82% of homeless young people have a diagnosable mental illness and that the most common are mood disorders and anxiety disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders⁶.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders account for a quarter of all people who are homeless, this is despite making up only 2.5% of the population⁷.

It is possible to conclude from studies that between one quarter and one half of adult homeless persons are experiencing severe and perhaps chronic mental illness. Lack of employment opportunities, limited housing options, stigma and discrimination associated with having a mental illness may contribute to the risk of homelessness, while also being a consequence of the homeless state⁸.

Key Points:

- Homelessness contributes to being excluded socially and economically and may intensify health related conditions including mental illness⁹;
- Young Australians aged 12-24 years make up 36% of those who are homeless¹⁰. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are over-represented in the homeless population¹¹. People with disabilities make up about 18% of the general population, but about 25% of the clients of specialist homeless services¹²;
- People experiencing mental health issues are at risk of homelessness due to: uncoordinated service systems; poor support networks; social isolation; and high levels of stigmatisation both within the service system and in the community;

- People experiencing mental illness encounter economic disadvantage and discrimination in accessing private rental housing;
- Co-morbidity and co-occurring disorders can increase the likelihood of someone having unstable housing and they can require long term housing support needs;
- Lack of sustained community supports for people experiencing mental illness and their families places further strain –financially, emotionally and psychologically – on families and friends and can result in relationship breakdown and isolation; this further increases the risk of homelessness.

Recommendations:

An Australia-wide, whole-of-government approach to establishing safe, affordable, and stable accommodation with connection to community services that support people to maintain their choice of places to live.

Ensure that 'no-one should be discharged from hospitals, custodial care, mental health or drug and alcohol related treatment services into homelessness'¹³.

Provision of culturally appropriate services, urban, regional and remote, that support people to access and maintain their choice of where to live.

Provision of supported residential opportunities for young people who have mental health problems or co-occurring disorders that can assist them to access health and mental health support, reconnect with education and employment, and develop independent living skills¹⁴.

References:

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- ⁸ 'Homelessness and mental health linkages: review of national and international literature', viewed at www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-homeless-toc~mental-homeless-1~mental-homeless-1-4~mental-homeless-1-4-2
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- ¹¹ Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, *The road home. Homelessness white paper*. 2008, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.
- ¹² www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/homeless-statistics
- ¹³ National Mental Health Commission of Australia, (2013) *Our Report Card 2013, Recommendation 9*, NMHC:

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