

# CHALLENGES FOR THE MULTIPLY DISADVANTAGED: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBSTANCE USE AND HOMELESSNESS AMONGST PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS

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**Introduction and Aims:** Homelessness status is strongly correlated with higher rates of substance use and mental health disorders. People who inject drugs (PWID) and are homeless have been found to be more likely to be unemployed, inject in public, have poorer mental health and higher imprisonment rates. This study extends previous research by comparing the correlates of homelessness among PWID according to the type (primary vs. secondary) and duration (short vs. long) of homelessness.

**Design and Methods:** A cross-sectional sample of 898 PWID were recruited for the 2014 Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS). Multivariate logistic regressions of homelessness by type and duration were conducted. Type was categorised as primary (no shelter) versus secondary (temporary shelter such as boarding house) and duration as short (<6 months) versus long (≥6 months).

**Results:** Three-quarters (74%) of PWID reported a lifetime history of homelessness. PWID who experienced primary homelessness reported poorer mental health ( $p<0.001$ ), higher imprisonment rates ( $p<0.05$ ) and greater occurrences of recent arrests ( $p<0.01$ ). Analyses by duration revealed that both short and long homelessness histories were associated with poorer mental health ( $p<0.01$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Furthermore, PWID with a longer homelessness history were more likely to be unemployed ( $p<0.01$ ) and have a prison history ( $p<0.01$ ).

**Discussion and Conclusions:** Findings highlight distinct differences among PWID in terms of the type and duration of homelessness. Specifically, the challenge of mental health for homeless PWID and heightened risk of criminal justice system contact are findings of concern.

**Implications for Practice or Policy** (optional): Improving long-term engagement with homeless PWID through existing services may be an important means to reducing the burden on already stretched acute health care services and the criminal justice system in Australia.

**Implications for Translational Research** (optional): Further research examining homelessness and appropriate interventions is warranted given that the majority of PWID had experienced homelessness.

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