



Homelessness is a Public Health Emergency

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Introduction

- **Homelessness as a public health emergency: learnings from crisis**
(*AHURI Final Report No. 443, 2025*)
- **Researchers**
Chris Hartley, Catherine Robinson,
Emma Barnes, Deborah Batterham,
Chris Mason and Kylie Valentine.



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Homelessness as a public health emergency: learnings from crisis

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AHURI



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Homelessness and health

- Australian and international research has consistently shown adverse physical and mental health outcomes experienced by people experiencing homelessness
- Poor health has been found to be both a driver and a consequence of homelessness (Davies and Wood 2018). Housing is thus a foundational concern for public health (Clifford, Wilson et al. 2019).

Health outcomes and homelessness

Acute health service use

Elevated ED presentations

Increased use of ambulances

Frequent readmissions

Chronic physical illness

High rates of chronic disease
(respiratory, cardiovascular, liver disease)

Multiple health conditions
(multi-morbidity common)

Premature mortality

Earlier death
(~10–20 years earlier)

Elevated mortality risk
(2–4× higher than general population)

Mental ill-health

High prevalence of mental illness
(psychosis, depression)

Complex, co-occurring needs

Why was our research conducted

- COVID-19 exposed homelessness as a public health emergency, disrupting usual responses
- People experiencing homelessness were identified as particularly vulnerable to infection, severe illness and mortality
- The pandemic triggered unprecedented collaboration between public health agencies and homelessness services
- This research captures what worked, what didn't, and what can be sustained beyond crisis conditions

Research findings

What facilitated effective responses during the COVID-19 period

- Pre-existing relationships between health and homelessness services
- Outreach-based health services already embedded in communities
- Trust, communication and rapid decision-making
- Flexibility to adapt service models quickly

Homelessness and health

Principles for ongoing service delivery

- Housing as a health intervention
- Integrated, wraparound care
- Outreach and place-based delivery
- Intersectoral collaboration as core infrastructure
- Systems-oriented, strengths-based design





St Vincent's Hospital Sydney

Homeless Health Service

Offers care to people in the community who:

- Experience homelessness
- Have barriers to accessing healthcare
- Are over 18 years old
- Sleep in the City of Sydney LGA*

The Homeless Health Service exists because homelessness is a critical public health issue





We bring
healthcare to
people who
otherwise can't
access it

We reduce pressure
on emergency
departments and
services



ST VINCENT'S
HOSPITAL
SYDNEY

Sister Clare Richardson Mobile Clinic
We acknowledge the First Nations people as Traditional Custodians of Australia and their connections to land, water and community.
We pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today.



We integrate
healthcare with
housing and other
supports

We address the complex and intersecting health needs that stem from homelessness





We advocate for an equitable and just healthcare system that works for whoever needs it



**ST VINCENT'S
HOSPITAL**
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Discussion

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<https://www.svhs.org.au/our-services/list-of-services/homeless-health-service>



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