

Reasons and Complexities around Using Alcohol and Other Drugs among Aboriginal People Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract : Alcohol and drug dependency are pertinent issues for those experiencing homelessness. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Australia's traditional owners, living in Perth, Western Australia (WA). Societal narratives around the drivers behind drug and alcohol dependency in Aboriginal communities, particularly those experiencing homelessness, have been biased and unchanging, with little regard for complexity. This can include the idea that Aboriginal people have 'chosen' to use alcohol or other drugs without consideration for intergenerational trauma and the trauma of homelessness that may influence their choices. These narratives have flow-on impacts on policies and services that directly impact Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness. In 2021, we commenced a project which aimed to listen to and elevate the voices of 70-90 Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness in Perth. The project is community-driven, led by an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in partnership with a university research institute. A community-ownership group of Aboriginal Elders endorsed the project's methods, chosen to ensure their suitability for the Aboriginal community. In this paper, we detail these methods, including semi-structured interviews influenced by an Aboriginal yarning approach - an important style of conversation for Aboriginal people which follows cultural protocols; and photovoice - supporting people to share their stories through photography. Through these engagements, we detail the reasons Aboriginal people in Perth shared for using alcohol or other drugs while experiencing homelessness. These included supporting their survival on the streets, managing their mental health, and coping while on the journey to finding support. We also detail why they sought to discontinue alcohol and other drug use, including wanting to reconnect with family and changing priorities. Finally, we share how Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness have said they are impacted by their family's alcohol and other drug use, including feeling uncomfortable living with a family who is drug and alcohol-dependent and having to care for grandchildren despite their own homelessness. These findings provide a richer understanding of alcohol and drug use for Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness in Perth, shedding light on potential changes to targeted policy and service approaches.

Keywords : Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, alcohol and other drugs, homelessness, community-led research

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