

What is the role of harm reduction in addressing homelessness?

What is this research about?

Homelessness and substance use often coexist. Lack of affordable housing, poverty, and current drug policies create an environment in which risks of substance use are increased. Ensuring that people have housing regardless of substance use can reduce these risks. Harm reduction approaches are an important part of strategies to end homelessness. A cornerstone of many comprehensive strategies to end homelessness is a Housing First philosophy and programs. Housing First programs focus on prioritizing placement of people into housing and providing access to services as desired. Housing first programs do not require sobriety or treatment attendance in order to obtain housing. Housing First may include the use of: market rental units in which supports follow the client; or provision of supportive housing where supports are available onsite. Benefits of Housing First include increased housing stability, improved health and well-being, decreased hospitalizations and in one study, reduced alcohol consumption and policing costs for those with severe alcohol dependency. Harm reduction is a key principle of Housing First programs. Existing studies have shown the benefits of harm reduction strategies such as needle exchange, methadone maintenance, and supervised injection services to prevent the harms of substance use and for reaching and linking those in need of housing and social supports. Peer involvement (social inclusion) is an important principle of both Housing First and harm reduction approaches.



KEYWORDS

Homelessness, harm reduction, ten year plans to end homelessness, Housing First, risk environment, substance use

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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The goal was to create a policy framework for including harm reduction strategies as part of a comprehensive approach to ending homelessness. The researchers reviewed current

approaches and evidence for Housing First and harm reduction programs to inform a policy framework that can enhance integration of harm reduction into Housing First strategies.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers recommended four areas for action in policy. What you need to know: Housing First programs and harm reduction strategies are effective for reducing harm caused by homelessness and substance use. Clear policies are needed for the integration of housing and harm reduction as part of comprehensive strategies to end homelessness. What is the role of harm reduction in addressing homelessness?

1. Include diverse group of people who are homeless and/or using substances in policy development.
2. Increase the supply of affordable and publicly funded housing.
3. Increase the availability of “on demand” harm reduction services as part of a strategy to end homelessness.
4. Organizational policies and staff training in harm reduction are needed to ensure the inclusion of harm reduction as part of the provision of supports.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Housing First programs and harm reduction strategies are effective for reducing harm caused by homelessness and substance use. Clear policies are

needed for the integration of housing and harm reduction as part of comprehensive strategies to end homelessness.



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HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Policy makers should consider creating socially inclusive policies to engage a range of people with experience of homelessness to inform harm reduction and housing strategies. An adequate supply of affordable housing is essential to reducing harms of substance use and addressing homelessness. Ensuring availability of harm reduction services should be part of plans to end homelessness. These strategies may be provided ‘on demand’ in the community and/or as part of housing programs. Organizations providing Housing First services should have clear and explicit policies on harm reduction accompanied by harm reduction education and training for staff. Research that examines the effectiveness of the integration of housing and harm reduction strategies such as managed alcohol programs are needed.