**Research Summary:**

**How Do People Who Use Substances Experience Accessing and Living in Homeless Hostels? (A Systematic Review)**

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**What was this research about?**

* Intersection of homelessness and substance use: The research focuses on the experiences of people in the UK who use substances and have accessed or lived in homeless hostels, highlighting how homelessness can both contribute to and result from substance use due to coping with trauma, poor mental health, and a lack of support.
* Challenges of hostel accommodation: It explores hostel accommodations, particularly how the lack of communication around regulations (e.g., curfews, no visitor policies) and inconsistent quality of emotional and physical support can create barriers to stable housing and recovery.
* Need for trauma informed care (TIC): The research emphasises the importance of supportive relationships between staff and residents, advocating for psychologically informed environments (PIE) and trauma informed approaches (TIA) to improve recovery for residents.
* UK policy and practice gaps: It highlights gaps in UK policies, such as the Homelessness Reduction Act not addressing the complex needs of substance users. It also calls for tailored services, including involving those with lived experiences in the design and delivery of homelessness services.
* Research aims:  
  - How do people who use substances experience accessing and living in homeless hostels?   
  - Do hostels support or hinder behavioural change?

**What did we do?**

* We conducted a systematic review, which analysed eight qualitative reports.
* We analysed what participants’ interpretations were and the authors’ interpretations, to then create our own interpretations. This helped us to find themes across the reports.

**What did we find?**

We found four themes:

* *Living in fear*:

People described feeling physically unsafe in hostels due to threats and theft of money, food, and drugs, making sleep feel risky. It suggested that people’s basic needs for safety were unmet. While some appreciated access to safe spaces for drug use, concerns were raised about hostels unintentionally perpetuating substance use. For some, streets felt safer than hostels, perceiving hostels as more dangerous than public environments, ultimately hindering recovery for many.

* *The power of human connection*:

Most people highlighted the importance of human connection in hostels, with many seeking friendships for companionship, support, and a sense of belonging and acceptance. Shared substance use, particularly drugs and alcohol, was an attempt to overcome loneliness and create these friendships. It often facilitated social bonds but also encouraged new or increased substance use among residents. It is suggestive that individuals who are lonely have fewer resources to rely on and crave more social connectedness, which is often achieved through shared substance use.

* *The need for emotional safety*:

Emotional safety in hostels was closely linked to relationships with staff, with perceived unprofessionalism leading residents to feel unheard and distrustful. Positive staff interactions, such as active listening and treating residents with dignity, fostered trust, social inclusion, and optimism about recovery. However, organisational pressures such as large caseloads often hindered staff's ability to build these supportive relationships.

* *The use of restrictive practices – Rules take away choices*:

Residents often felt a lack of autonomy due to strict hostel rules, such as eviction threats and room checks without notice or consent. Issues arose when rules were enforced without explanation. People generally accepted rules when communicated clearly, but when imposed, they felt trapped and isolated, hindering recovery. This suggests the problem lies more in how rules are implemented rather than the rules themselves.

* *The use of restrictive practices – Infantilisation*:

The lack of autonomy in hostels left residents feeling infantilised, frustrated, and hopeless. Being reliant on others for their care diminished their sense of control over their lives and recovery, further hindering their progress.

**What does this mean?**

* Hostel residents need physical and emotional safety as a foundation for recovery from substance use. Without it, they remain in survival mode, hindering progress.
* Trauma Informed Care (TIC): Hostels often struggle to adopt trauma informed approaches (TIA), which emphasise choice and autonomy. Without these, residents remain in a state of hyperarousal, increasing vulnerability to substance use. Implementing trauma informed practices can create safer, more supportive environments.
* Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE): Effective hostel environments should be designed with psychological awareness, ensuring that rules are implemented with empathy and clarity. PIEs promote emotional safety, social connection, and autonomy, which are crucial for recovery and reducing reliance on substances.
* Hostel rules are not necessarily problematic, but how they are implemented matters. Transparent explanations and offering residents choices in decisions where possible can improve acceptance and support recovery.
* High staff turnover, burnout, and pressure from commissioners create environments that feel punitive, undermining emotional safety and reinforcing substance use as a coping mechanism.

**What future research might be needed?**

* Research into best practices for developing and implementing hostel policies in ways that promote safety, autonomy, and recovery.
* Including people with lived experience in designing and delivering services can lead to safer, more supportive environments that better meet residents' needs.
* Investigating how increased investment in staff wellbeing and retention can improve hostel environments and recovery outcomes.
* The congregate hostel model, where residents share communal spaces, may hinder recovery by exposing individuals to substance use. Alternative housing provisions, such as Housing First approaches, could be more effective in determining long-term effectiveness.

**Want to find out more?**

The full article has been published in *European Observatory on Homelessness:*   
<https://www.feantsaresearch.org/en/publications/european-journal-of-homelessness>   
  
<https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2024/EJH_18-2_RN02_v01.pdf>

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