

Analysing patterns of alcohol and other drug use in regional Australia: Impacts of stigma and discrimination on access to services

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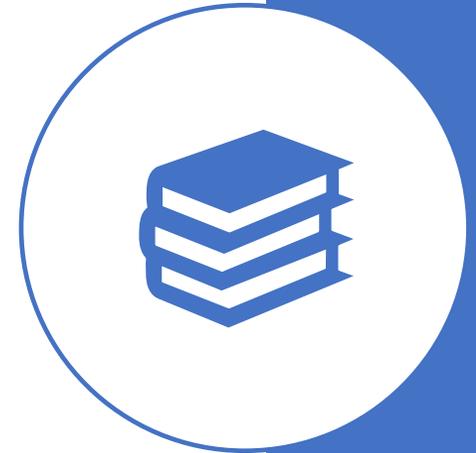
Communities Involved

- **Mount Gambier**
- **Shepparton**
- **Colac**



Presentation Overview

- Research context
- Research questions
- Research design
- Findings:
 - Impacts on the individual
 - Impacts on the AOD workforce
 - Impacts on broader social services
 - Greater impact of stigma
- Research significance and contribution



Research Context

- There is increased research and policy attention about issues of stigma and discrimination about alcohol and other drugs (AOD)
- Research by Lancaster, Seear and Ritter (2018) and Treloar (2022) shows
 - Stigma and discrimination often a common occurrence for people who use drugs (PWUD)
 - Can contribute to wide-ranging, often acute harm including feelings of worthlessness and shame for PWUD and their families
 - Can lead to delays in disclosing drug use or barriers or delays in treatment seeking
- NDARC research showed 38% of IDRS respondents and 28% of EDRS respondents reported experiencing stigma when visiting healthcare services in the last 6 months (Sutherland et al, 2023)
- Yet despite evidence of growing AOD use and harms in regional Australia (e.g. ACIC, 2023), there has been limited attention to the nature and impacts of stigma and discrimination in regional Australia and whether and how such issues may differ to urban contexts
- This is problematic as well-known differences for regional communities e.g. geographic isolation, lack of anonymity

Research questions

1. How does stigma impact the lives of people who use alcohol and other drugs in regional and/or rural communities in Australia?
2. How does stigma affect these individuals' efforts to access support services?
3. Does the experience of stigma, as well as efforts to seek support vary across different cohorts (e.g., by substance type, demographic group, geographical community/area)?
4. What can regional/rural communities do to help minimise the effects of stigma and increase access to services for people who use AODs?

Three regional communities were selected for this research: Colac, Shepparton and Mount Gambier.



Mount Gambier, SA

Research Design

PHASE 1: Key stakeholder interviews

- Interview approx. 45-60 mins in length
- Stakeholders: AOD workers, GPs, Police, journalists, local council
- 32 interviews – approx. 10 from each community.
- Recruited through email.
- Key themes – Stigma, Alcohol Vs Drugs, Rural vs urban and Service Provision
- Vic Police approval

PHASE 2: Online survey

- Approx. 10-15 mins in length
- PWUDs, their families and broader community.
- Recruited through social media post and flyers in community
- 342 survey responses
- Mount Gambier – 170, Shepparton – 99, Colac – 73
- PWUDs – 101 out of 342

Qualitative Findings: Stigma and community attitudes towards people who use drugs

- Stakeholders confirmed stigma is present and pervasive in the three communities
- Also show stigma is in many ways exacerbated by the rural and regional communities
- e.g. Cannot exit the AOD clinic without being noticed...

“Its definitely here, and I'm starting to realise about stigma, is that it doesn't have to be in your face. It's the subtle and cumulative effect that wears down people's sense of self” - *Jamie, Shepparton, community services*

“We come across the same people a lot, so it's going to be very difficult not to attach their past towards what you're dealing with, obviously you shouldn't but it'd be very difficult not too” - *Ashley, Colac, justice*

“It's a space [AOD service] that is very public and that is definitely a hindrance” - *Drew, Colac, health services*

Qualitative Findings: Stigma and community attitudes towards people who use drugs (cont)

- Seemingly different views towards alcohol vs illicit drugs (and different types of illicit drugs)
- Some groups of PWUD are doubly stigmatised e.g. homeless, prisoners
- Stigma exacerbated in towns like Mount Gambier due to presence of prison

“People go to a pub every Friday Saturday night and get drunk, because that’s just what we do” - *Taylor, Shepparton, health services*

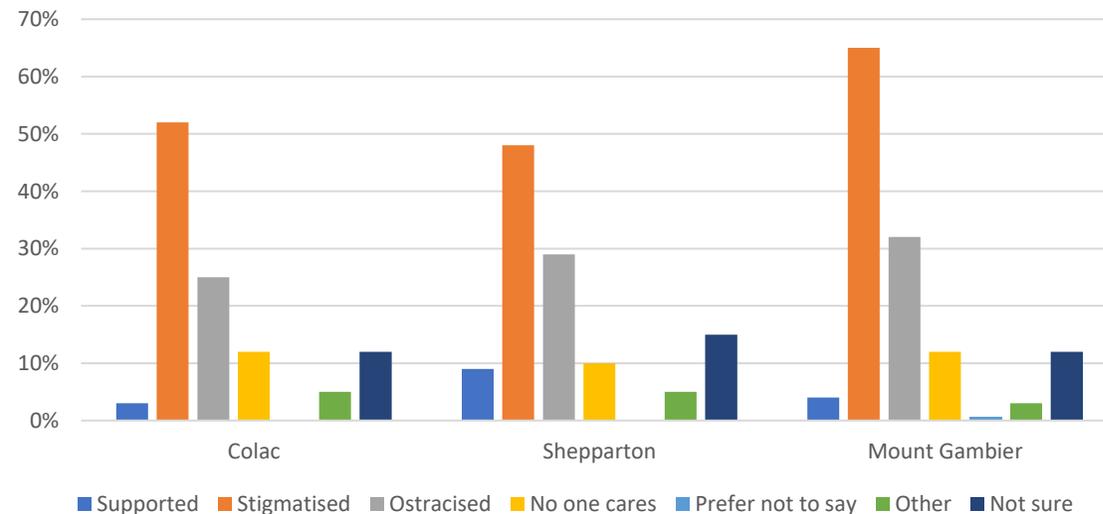
“All of those sort of party drugs, MDMA, obviously marijuana - more socially acceptable than ice or you know heroin or something like that” - *Rory, Colac, community services*

“I'm quite sure they are part of the stigma of, we've got a jail, and therefore we've got all these drug addicts” – *Carter, Mount Gambier, justice*

Quantitative Survey of Residents Reinforces High Levels of Stigma

- A survey of 342 regional residents backs up these findings as 48% reported people who misuse illicit drugs are stigmatised in their local community
- A further 26% reported ostracisation
- Notably higher in Mount Gambier: 65% stigmatised

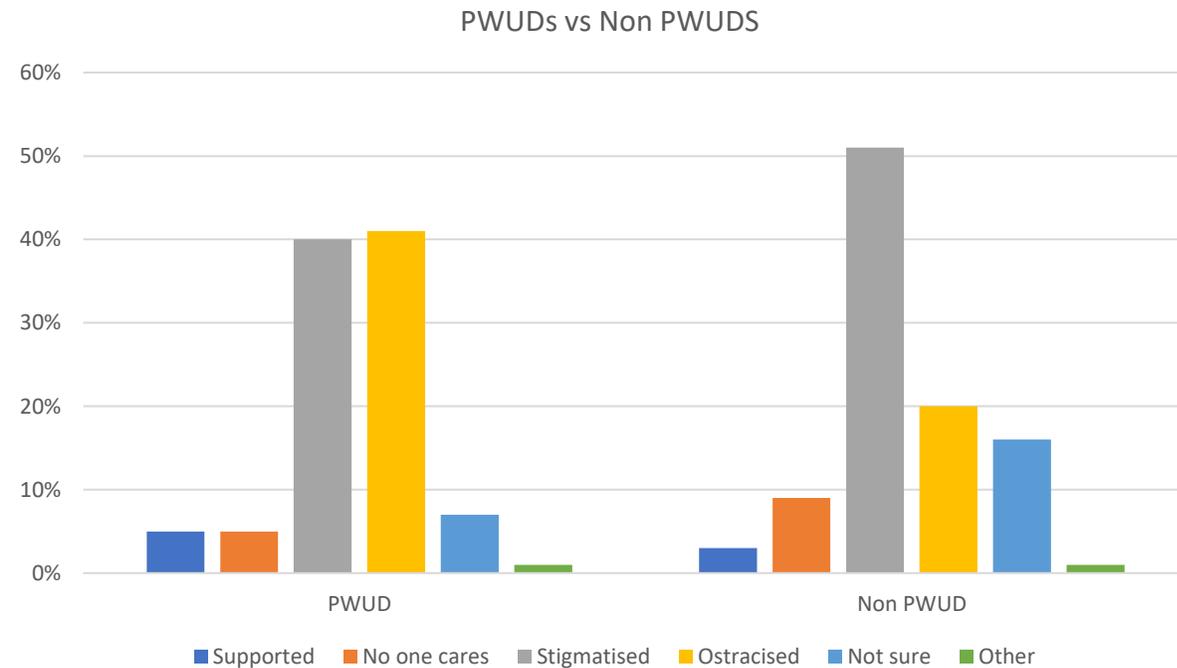
How are people who misuse illicit drugs treated by others in your local community?



Rates are higher again amongst people who use illicit drugs

- 41% PWUD reported people who misuse illicit drugs are ostracised
- And 40% stigmatised

How are people who misuse illicit drugs treated by others in your local community? Responded by PWUDs n = 101 vs Non PWUDS n = 241



Qualitative Findings of Impacts of Stigma on Access to Services in Regional Communities

Stigma impacting the ability for PWUDS to access services:

- **Impacts on the individual**
- **Impacts on the workforce**
- **Impacts on greater services**

Impacts on the individual

- Fear of being seen
- Fear of judgment/negative attitudes from staff
- Delaying and/or avoiding access
- Opting to travel elsewhere

“There's no anonymity, none. Which means once that happens [labelled an AOD user], you're targeted and people don't think about the fact that this person might rehabilitate, could have been a one-off event. It affects your workplace, it affects your opportunity for work and relationships” - *Drew, Colac, health and community services*

Impacts on the AOD workforce

- Reduced quality of service provision to PWUD
- Delay in rollout of facilities
- Hiring challenges

“If this was a cancer treatment facility, would anyone be opposing it?” – *Brooklyn, Mount Gambier*

“Everyone thought it was a great idea, but no one wanted it in their street, you know?” – Cameron, Shepparton



Impacts on broader social services

Flow on effect, impacting broad social services:

- Criminal Justice System
- Police
- Real Estates and other housing organisations e.g. Housing SA

Resulting in PWUD's not being able to go about their everyday lives in their community.

“If I'm writing support letters to housing SA or things like that, it's actually going to make them less favourable candidates because then the housing case management team know, oh well, they're engaged with this particular service. Obviously, substance is a concern” - *Billy, Mount Gambier, community services*

Greater impact of stigma

Stigma and discrimination have the ability to impact all three sectors simultaneously; the individual, the AOD workforce and broader social services.

- Displacement
- Fundings issues/Skewed Investment
- Impacts retaining employees

Ultimately, effecting wider community

“What we do need in the area is a detox centre, which we've been trying to scream out for and get funding for years” - *Taylor, Shepparton, community services*

Research significance and contribution

1. First comprehensive analysis of impacts of stigma towards AOD use and people who use drugs (PWUDs) in regional communities
2. The research shows:
 1. High rates of stigma in Australian regional communities
 2. Similarities and differences e.g. higher stigma in Mount Gambier
 3. Multiple ways stigma is impacting AOD in regional towns:
 - Shame and isolation for PWUDs and families
 - Delays in treatment seeking & AOD workforce challenges in hiring and funding
 - Impeded access to not only AOD services but also housing, employment etc.
 - Community concern about the damaging impact of stigma
3. Shows importance of addressing stigma and working with local communities to build bespoke and targeted responses
4. This PhD will produce a roadmap of potential policy responses, that are community informed, which could be used to reduce stigma and reduce drug-related harm in the three regional communities

Thank You – Questions?

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