

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

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Introduction:

There is increasing attention to the ways in which stigma regarding alcohol and other drugs (AODs) can impede access to support services, contributing to wide-ranging, often acute issues for people who use drugs (PWUDs), their families, and the community. Yet despite evidence of growing AOD harms in regional Australia, there has been limited attention to the nature and impacts of stigma and discrimination.

Method:

This research examines stakeholder perceptions regarding AOD use and the impacts of stigma on PWUDs' access to services in three regional communities in Victoria and South Australia (Colac, Shepparton and Mount Gambier). It further explores avenues to reduce stigma. The project uses a mixed-method approach; this presentation explores its co-design and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders (AOD workers, nurses, police, media).

Key Findings:

Stakeholders reveal the stigmatisation of AODs in regional communities, particularly methamphetamines, emphasising its multiple deleterious impacts on individuals, the workforce and community. Specifically, PWUDs are delaying or avoiding treatment due to fear of identification, concerned about confidentiality and broad feelings of embarrassment, leading some to travel outside their community for treatment, though most do not have this option. Service providers noted difficulty in establishing and maintaining connections with PWUDs, while flagging broader workforce difficulties, community backlash to the opening of new treatment services, and barriers to workforce retention/recruitment. Stakeholders also articulated constraints on PWUDs' access to other social services, including housing or employment, revealing amplifying impacts of stigma.

Practice/Policy Implications:

As one of the first Australian studies on AOD-related stigma this has broad implications, regarding where, how, and to what extent stigma impacts the lives of PWUDs in regional communities. This work establishes the pervasiveness of stigma in regional communities, while offering local perspectives from stakeholders on how to reduce drug-related stigma and increase access to AOD support services in regional communities.

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