

Positive experiences despite barriers to accessing services—results from an alcohol and other drug service users survey in the ACT

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Introduction: Alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) programs adopt a person-centred approach and provide a broad range of treatment and harm reduction services and ancillary supports. Access to programs for service users can be constrained by both individual and systemic factors. Barriers to access (including, but not limited to, extended wait times) may impact the quality of the experience and satisfaction with the service that is subsequently received.

Methods: The Service Users' Survey of Outcomes, Satisfaction and Experiences (SUSOSE), provides unique information about the demographics, experiences (including satisfaction) and outcomes of service users accessing services across the entire ATOD sector in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). A total of 302 surveys were collected from nine organisations delivering programs across a diverse range of treatment and harm reduction intervention types. Descriptive analysis of survey data has identified key issues associated with access and service user experiences (including satisfaction).

Results: Many service users have intensive engagement with ATOD programs, and rely on these programs for active provision of, or referral to, a range of ancillary health and social supports. Where service users had difficulty accessing services, this was mostly due to financial barriers, life responsibilities, being told the waiting list is too long, and fear of being judged. Eighty percent of service users accessing residential services reported an average 56-day waiting time. Service users reported high satisfaction with ATOD services (median CSQ-8 score of 29—out of 32); positive agreement for all 50 items on an experience measure; and the majority reported improved outcomes for health and social measures. There was no correlation found between barriers to access (including extended wait times) and satisfaction, experience and outcomes.

Discussions and Conclusions: Despite being a service system under high-demand, service users, in general, report positive experiences accessing ATOD services in the ACT, and improved outcomes from their engagement.

Implications for Practice or Policy: The SUSOSE collects information not available from other data sources. The survey's collaborative development has resulted in the inclusion of items of importance to key stakeholders—service users, service providers and policy makers—that are valuable in informing service quality improvement, sector reform, and policy in the ACT ATOD sector.

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