

## Housing and mental illness

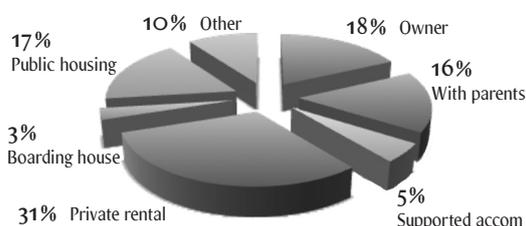
*People affected by mental illness are far more likely to become homeless than others – facing many more barriers – yet do not receive the appropriate help they need to find and retain housing . . .*

Mental illness is acknowledged by the Australian Government as a major risk factor for becoming homeless.\* Despite this, a recent study by the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) found that people with a mental illness are ‘less likely than other homeless people to receive the type of support they need.’\*\*

This SANE Research Bulletin investigates the housing status of people living with a mental illness, and the factors which help and hinder them from finding suitable housing.

The survey was conducted during March and April 2008, using a convenience sample of 372 people who completed a questionnaire via the SANE Helpline or website. The majority of respondents were female (61%) and predominantly 25-39 years old (40%). Nearly all (89%) had dependent children. The most common diagnoses reported were depression (29%), schizophrenia (25%), bipolar disorder (23%), and anxiety disorders (9%).

### Where do people with a mental illness live?



The most common form of housing reported was private rental (31%), followed by owner-occupier (18%), public housing (17%), and living with parents (16%). Only 5% were in supported housing.

Nearly half (47%) of all respondents were in unsatisfactory accommodation and looking for somewhere else to live. Almost 90% had applied for public housing but had experienced difficulty with their application.

### What barriers do people with a mental illness face in finding suitable accommodation?

People living with mental illness are among the most vulnerable members of the community, living close to or below the poverty line. About 60% of respondents were living on the Disability Support Pension, and 27% were receiving a Newstart allowance.

A key finding of the survey was the extremely high number of respondents (94%) who had been homeless or were without suitable housing at some time. A number of barriers were identified which had contributed to this.

**Discrimination** 90%  
 Nearly 90% believed they had been discriminated against at some time, particularly in seeking private rental accommodation – forcing them to accept unsafe or substandard housing options.

**Public housing application** 90%  
 Nearly 90% also reported that the complexity of applying for public housing had created difficulties for them.

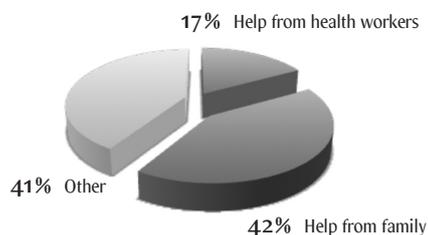
**Lack of support** 87%  
 A majority (87%) reported that lack of support around the time they became unwell and were hospitalised had contributed to loss of accommodation.

**High rental costs** 83%  
 Eighty-three per cent of respondents reported that high rental costs were a major barrier to finding a suitable place to live.

Housing difficulties also created problems in maintaining relationships with family, friends and health practitioners, while others needed to cut back on basic necessities such as food and heating to meet rising rental expenses.

# Housing and mental illness

What helps people with a mental illness to find suitable accommodation?



Fewer than one in five (17%) reported receiving help from a health worker to find somewhere to live. Where people did receive help, the task usually fell to families (42%).

Asked what would help most, almost all (90%) agreed on more active help from health and community workers, and improved availability of low-cost and long-term housing. Many felt there needed to be improvements to the public housing system especially.

Respondents also suggested that help was needed to prevent people from losing their accommodation in the vulnerable period during and after hospitalisation.

## In summary

- The majority of respondents reported having been homeless or without suitable accommodation at some time in the past. Many lived with the worry of becoming homeless again.
- A significant number indicated that they had become homeless following a period in hospital, when they had not received sufficient support to maintain their accommodation.
- Many respondents felt they received little help to find suitable accommodation, apart from their own families who were not experts in the area.
- Respondents indicated there was an urgent need to increase the availability and type of low-cost public housing: emergency or crisis, short-term, and long-term supported accommodation.

## Recommendations

### 1 RECOGNITION AS PRIORITY GROUP

*The Australian Government's commitment to tackling homelessness is welcome, and the recent Green Paper on this issue acknowledges that people with a mental illness are a primary risk group. \* More than acknowledgment is required, however.*

*The White Paper, due later in 2008, needs to include specific measures to tackle the special challenges faced by people with a mental illness. These should include measures to prevent homelessness, to help this group find and maintain accommodation, and improve availability of housing, including supported accommodation.*

### 2 PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS

*People with a mental illness need active support to prevent them from losing their homes, especially where they have children. Health services, especially, need to provide effective early treatment, and to ensure that if someone does become unwell and is admitted to hospital, they are not in danger of losing their home.*

### 3 SUPPORT TO FIND HOUSING

*Poverty and the disabling effects of mental illness mean that many of those affected have difficulty finding suitable accommodation. Filling out a form to apply for public housing can be a daunting task, apart from the competitive challenge of finding affordable private rental accommodation. More practical support is therefore needed for people with a mental illness to locate and acquire a place to live.*

### 4 IMPROVE AVAILABILITY

*With long waiting lists for public housing and competition for scarce private rental accommodation, people with a mental illness are often forced into unsuitable housing or homelessness. It is essential that the range of public housing available be improved, including short-term, emergency, supported, and long-term affordable accommodation.*

\* Commonwealth of Australia, 2008. *Which Way Home: A new approach to homelessness*. Green Paper. Commonwealth of Australia.

\*\* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008. *Housing Assistance in Australia*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

## SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research.

Supported by the R. E. Ross Trust.

*SANE Research Bulletin 7: Housing and mental illness*  
(June 2008) ISSN 1832-8385

PDF version available at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)