

# Mental health, drug and alcohol, loneliness and homelessness.

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We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country.



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# Overview

- Research Presentation
- Carlos Response
- Q&A



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# Psychiatric disorders in inner city refuge sample (n=210) experiencing homelessness (Teesson, et al 2004)



4x

greater prevalence of any mental disorder than  
general Australian population



We need more research

# 2018 – 2019 AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Client data

**Approx. 1 in 3 had a current mental health issue**



30%  
*homeless*

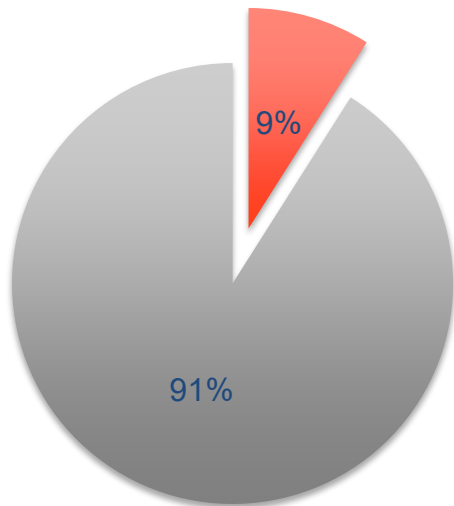
**1 in 10 SHS users reported problematic substance use**



55%  
*homeless*

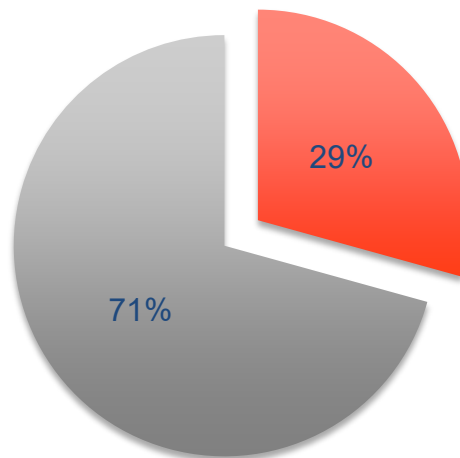
# Multiple identified needs

Those with current mental health issues

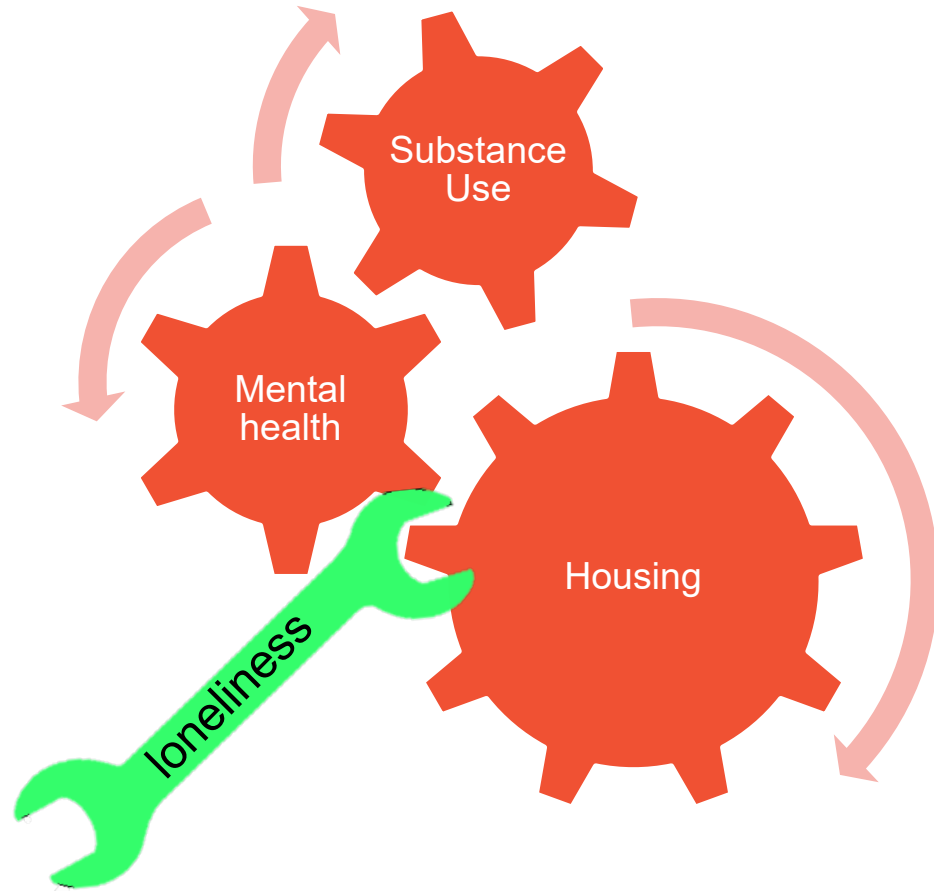


■ Identified needs for AOD services

Those with problematic AOD use



■ Identified needs for mental health services





# So why study loneliness amongst the homeless?



Major public health concern



The homeless are particularly susceptible to loneliness - mental health, relationship breakdown, trauma histories, multiple forms of discrimination



Can affect tenancy success & mental health

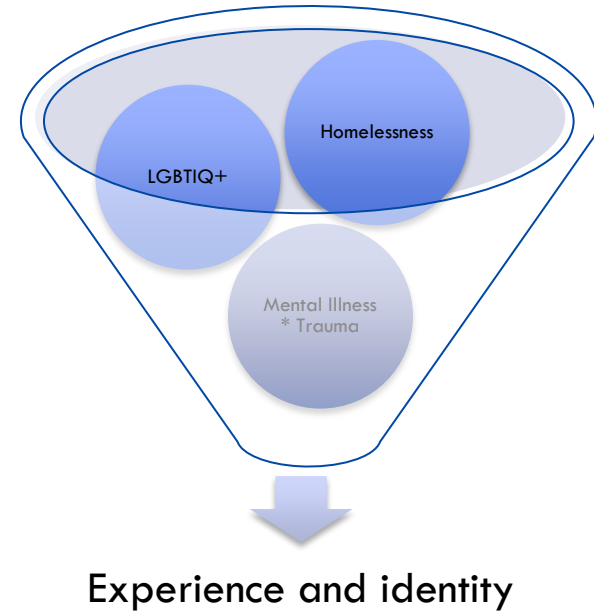


# Two conceptual frameworks

## Social Identity Approach



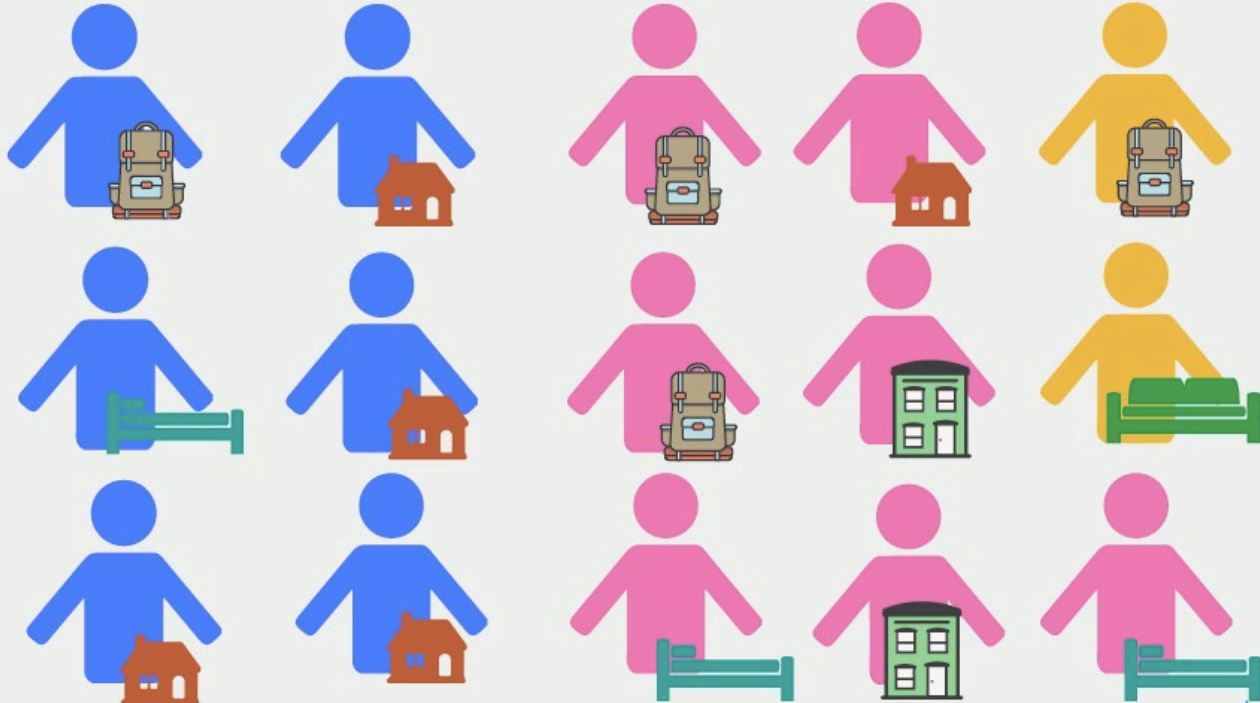
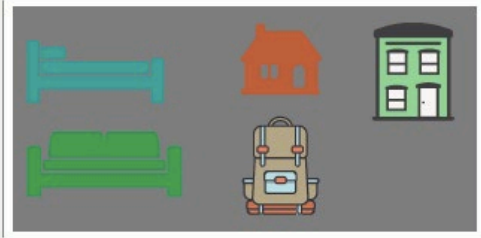
## Intersectionality



**How do people with a lived experience of homelessness understand and experience loneliness?**

# 16 participants

*aged 21 - 70*



# My sample was diverse...



n=2  
incarceration



n=3  
professional/  
upper middle  
-class backgrounds



n=2  
Aboriginal  
and transgender



n=1 had an intellectual  
disability



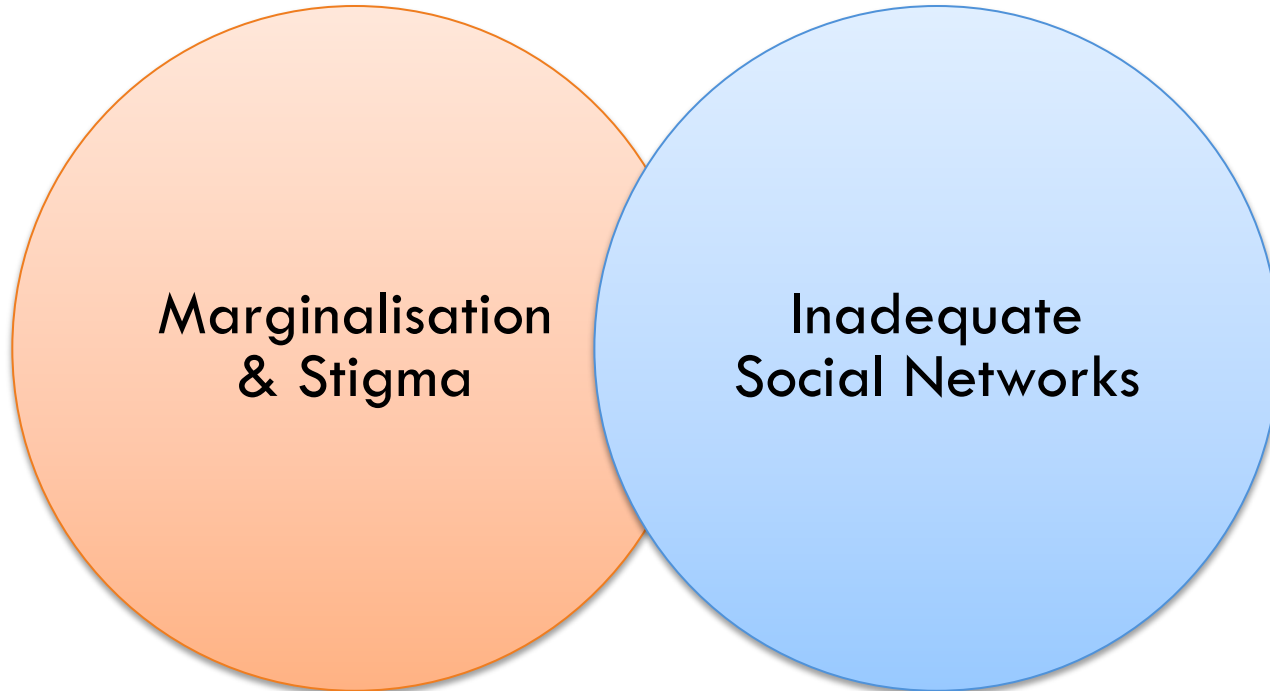
n=2 were under 30  
n=3 were over 55



n=1  
currently employed

Most had self-reported  
mental disorder(s)

# How was loneliness experienced?



# Rejection and disconnection from family

Like feelin' that no-one wants you in the world anymore..  
your parents don't want you and you just feel alone.

*Mylie, 21*

They just said, "don't call us, we won't call you – my own sister, you know!

*Pieter, 60*

# Rejection from society: visibility

You're forced to live out in the open on display in front of everyone. But at the same time you're invisible because no one's willing to acknowledge you as a person... So you've got this, where you're so visible, it hurts! But where you're so invisible it hurts all at the same time.

*Sarah, 53*



# Hyper(in)visibility



- Occurs when a person is sometimes paid exceptional attention [and judgement] and is sometimes exceptionally overlooked, and it can happen simultaneously - Gailey (2014, p7)
- One's situation becomes 'hyper' when their (in)visibility becomes socially oppressive, constraining their ability to participate in a socially meaningful way.

# Desiring a positive visibility & Loneliness

“There needs to be more faces to homelessness... to stop the stigmatism [and] take away the shame. Like gay rights, you know, everyone was whinging about Dykes on Bikes and stuff like that, until there’s representation of white middle class people [involved].”

*Susan, 53*

Loneliness wouldn’t exist with “[a] connection on a compassionate level, with someone who looks at you and sees you and makes you visible in a way that doesn’t feel ugly.”

*Sarah, 53*

# Internalising stigma into shame: self-isolation

I don't impose myself on the non-homeless, as the presence of a homeless person made "people uncomfortable"; "part of loving people is accepting that they're not comfortable with you and they don't want you."

*Sarah, 53*

I just had no conversation to have with them. They would have asked me where I was living and I would have said 'I'm homeless' and they may have shot away from that. They may have wondered why [I] was homeless

*Trevor, 60*

# Devaluing themselves & existing relationships

My social life “could be better if I was employed. I think what this conversation ... you’re still the same person but you’ve lost that feeling that you’re worth something.”

*Sahara, 45*

you’re typecast, it’s natural. These people do not do themselves any favours, they leave a path of death and destruction - litter, drugs, alcohol, stealing; peeing, crapping all over the show. They don’t do themselves any favours. No wonder people don’t want them around.

*Pieter, 60*

# Managing a 'Valuable' Personal Identity

... you have to be around people and survive with them and live with them day in, day out, that you wouldn't even look at,

...they think I'm a snob

*Susan, 53*

At least these people [at the service] - they're real people...What they say is what they say. They're not shit-talkers.

*Craig*

I'm at bottom of the [homeless] pecking order... I have a learning disability, I'm a gentle person, I'm weak physically and emotionally and mentally and I have no support.

*Sarah*

# Forming other types of relationships

I have friends at the [lawn] bowling club, it's a bit like a small country town – because everybody knows everybody [and] knows what everybody does.  
*Sahara, 44*

If I am at all strong enough to get there, even this time of year when there aren't any roses ... I go and visit them because that's my little sacred spot where I go to God when there's times in the mass when people make me leave and I can't stay.

*Sarah*

“It really feels like they [service workers] care, actually. When you're there you feel like a proper person, and you feel like, you just get a little bit more better about yourself.”  
*Athena, 42*



## These issues persisted into housing

because you don't have a fancy suit, or  
you don't have a lot of money, they'll be  
snobs to ya.... even if you've have to sit  
down for a couple of minutes they'll tell  
you to piss off or something.

Walker, 32



# Most retained homeless friendships

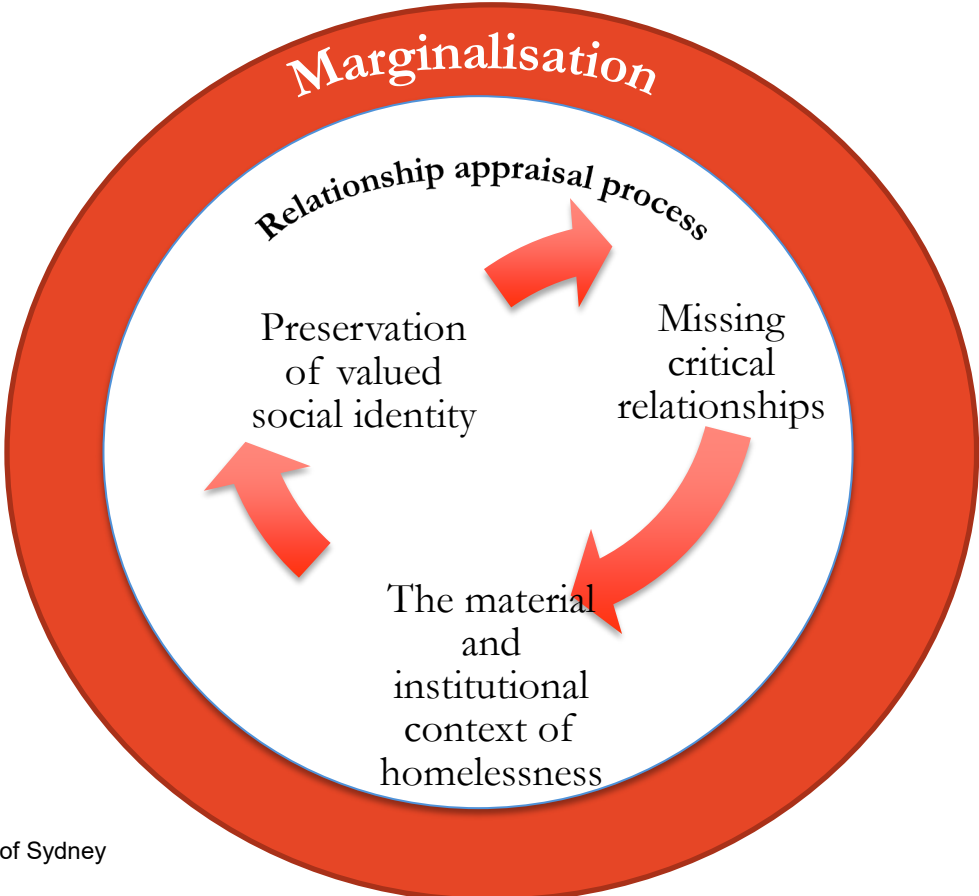
“I’ve got good friends now...”, I feel “respect” in the homeless community, “no one judges ya... no one tells ya you’re a loser!”

*Walker 30*

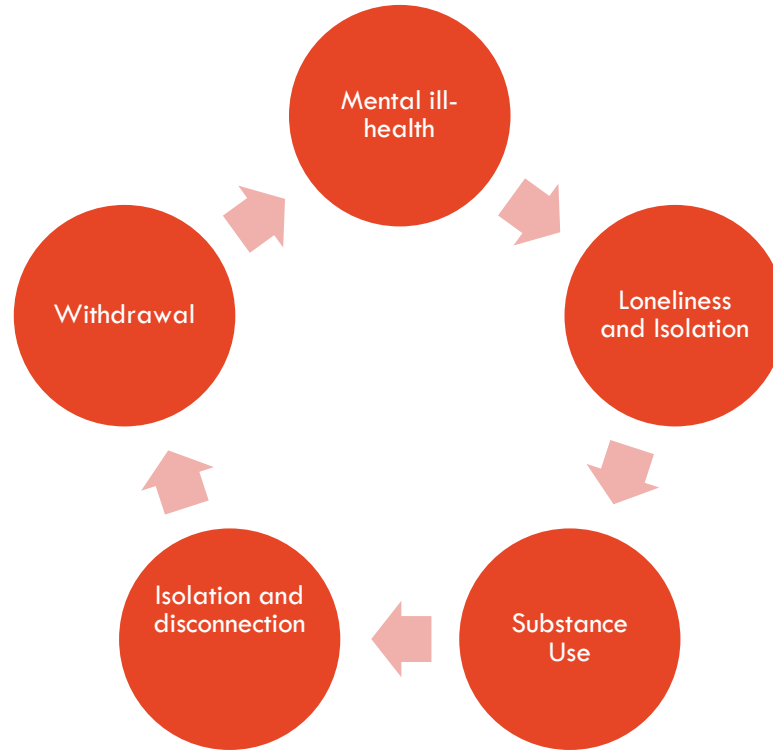
I don’t wanna interact, you know, I think it might rub off... I just choose not to sort of associate with these guys... I just know I’m not where I should be, you know.

*Pieter, 60*

# Negotiation between several factors

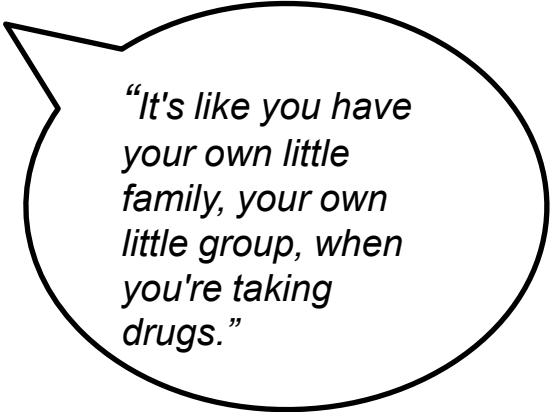


# How does substance use fit into this?

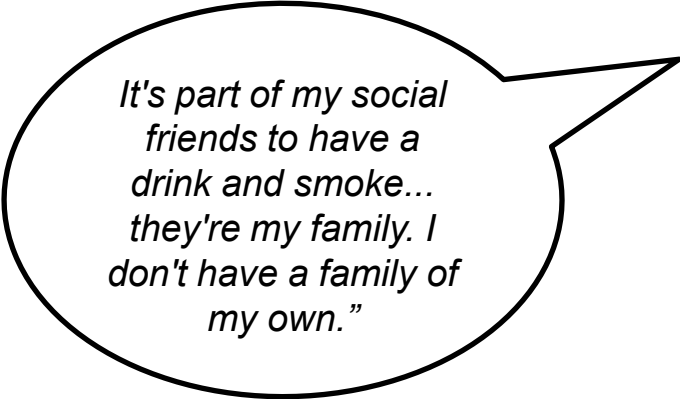


## Substance use & identity

**People who were isolated prior to homelessness found their substance use provided them with a new, valuable social identity**



*“It's like you have your own little family, your own little group, when you're taking drugs.”*



*It's part of my social friends to have a drink and smoke... they're my family. I don't have a family of my own.”*

**People who had identities that they valued highly prior to homelessness were less likely to discard these to adopt a substance user identity**

# Substance use leads to isolation

## Financial costs

*“90% of people in boarding house have a very poor social life because of their drinking...not much money left to socialise.”*

## Stigma

*“In some places you can't smoke... it can isolate you from people.”*

*“You know, [using] probably distances me from certain people because I have to hide it.”*

# Substance use to cope with stress & loneliness

## ***Substance use helped people regulate their emotions:***

*“When I go out, in my mind and I'm thinking about things; you think about what you're doing with your life, will you be homeless? Are your relationships strong enough? Are you going to have a job? Are you going to be able to cope in a new place? People take drugs because of this—they have no support, [and many] things to think about.”*

## ***Substance use to socialise:***

*“Drugs make me feel accepted. I don't feel as lonely.”*

*“[using substances...] control[led] my anxiety and I was able to be in crowds without feeling like someone was ‘out to get me.’ a relaxation thing, it's a coping mechanism for stress, sometimes instead of screaming at people.”*

# Negotiating socialising & abstinence

## ***Abstinence would overall social world:***

*Several participants who injected drugs explained how their substance use was “what every thought and conversation revolve around.” Participants described how using drugs “Is my social interactions. Everyone I know uses.”*

## ***Abstinence meant changing social behaviour:***

*“[Substance use is] a way of socialising on the street, and it makes it hard not to do it when you’re around it all the time. I’m currently trying to get into a rehab and detox to change it. I don’t go to bars, don’t expose myself to smoking areas [and] I know that in my situation I should not drink, as [my] situation will get worse as I am depressed.”*

*“I avoid it if I know someone’s a user, I shut them out of my life.”*

## ***Was linked to the quality of relationships***

*“If it wasn’t for drugs, many of my friends ‘so called’ wouldn’t be my friends, they’d go elsewhere, find another co/ey, someone to share [drugs] with, go halves with and so forth. Hard to find people to trust!”*



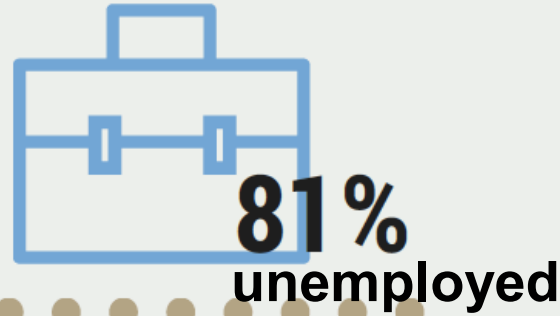
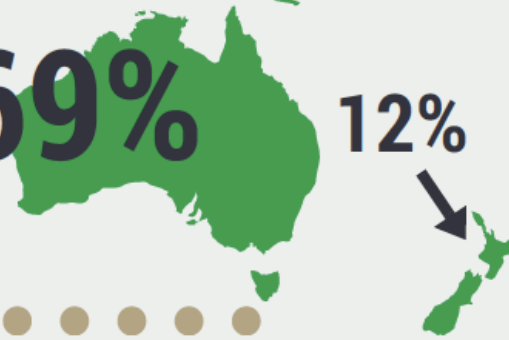
# Who is likely to be lonely and why?

**129**  
**participants**  
*median age 44*

13.8%  
ATSI

**69%**

**12%**



Male

49.6%



Female

42.6%



Trans female

6.2%



Intersex

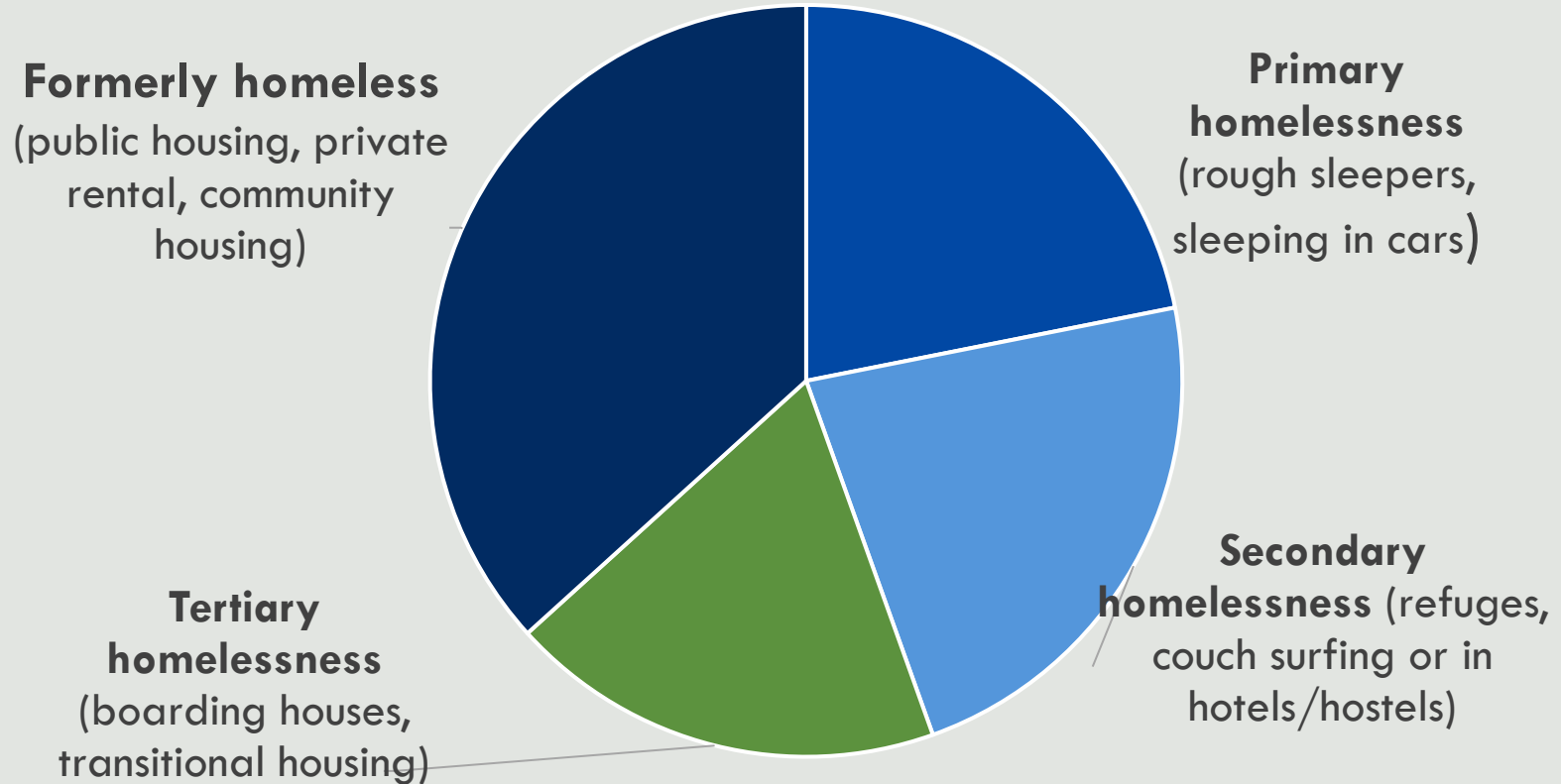
.78%



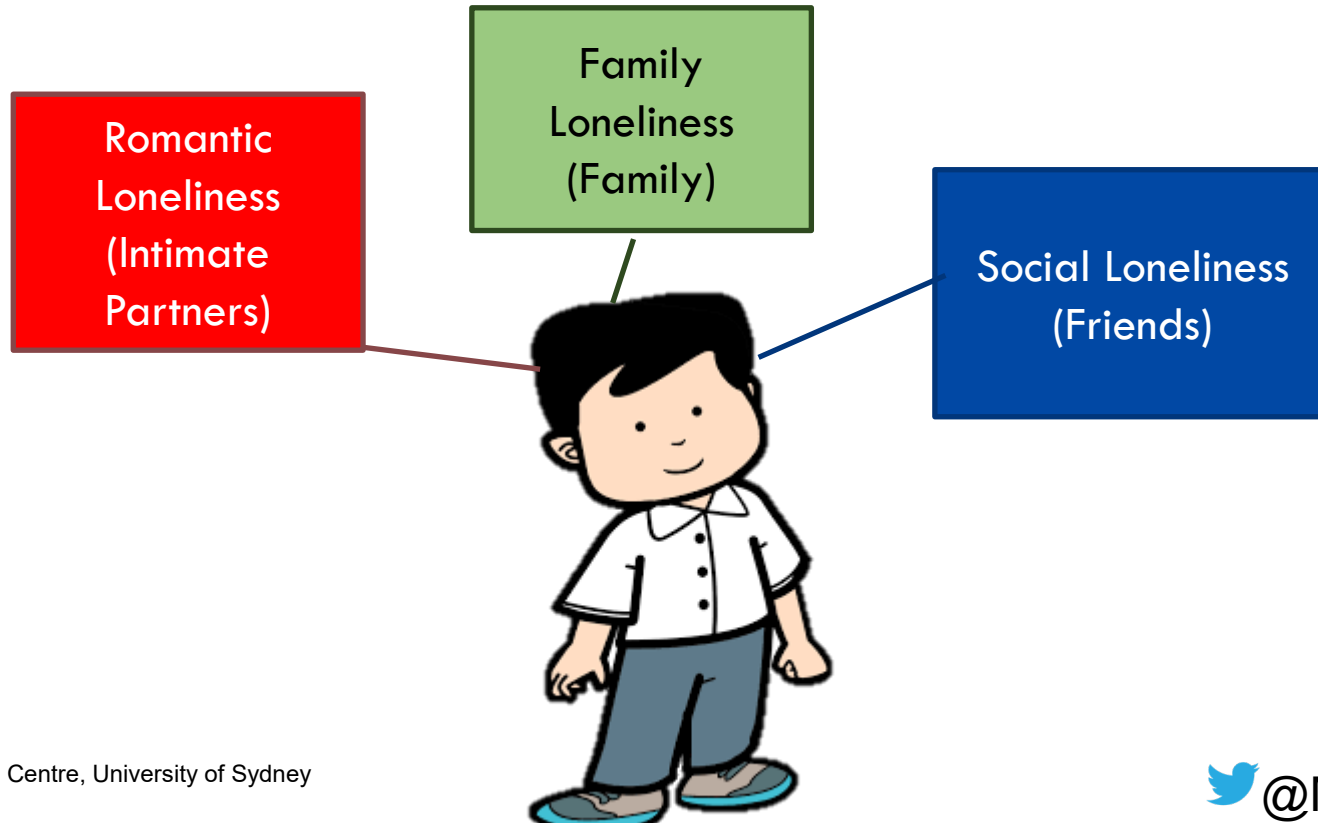
Gender fluid

.78%

# HOMELESS STATUS OF SAMPLE



# Measuring Loneliness: Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale (Short; SELSA-S)



# Characteristics associated with loneliness



Reduced social  
loneliness



Increased social  
loneliness



Men more socially lonely than women  
Women & non-cisgender more romantically lonely  
than men

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# More social support = more loneliness?



Higher access to affectionate support = increased romantic loneliness



Higher access to positive social interaction support = increased social loneliness



Higher access to emotional/informational support = increased family loneliness

# Deeming a social network as more important = more loneliness ??



Increased romantic  
loneliness



Increased social loneliness



Increased family loneliness



# More satisfactory relationships = more lonely?



Increased family loneliness



Increased romantic  
loneliness

# Satisfaction with current friends and old friends



unrelated to social  
loneliness



# Only specific relationships ameliorated loneliness.



Social loneliness



Family loneliness

# Did this differ between people who were currently and formerly homeless?



NO DIFFERENCE: Social Loneliness and romantic Loneliness

HIGHER: Family Loneliness

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# Conclusions

ONE SIZE  
DOES NOT  
FIT ALL

Relationships formed during homelessness are beneficial for survival but can maintain and marginalise people long term.

A person's loneliness can only be addressed through meaningful relationships with a person/group they value. Substitute relationships will not compensate.

Rather than just tenancy support or case management, **social identity** may be an important framework for understanding community integration and recovery after homelessness. We need to ask people how they want to live, how they understand themselves within the network of social relationships, identities and experiences that matter to them. This may seem pretty intuitive and common sense, but it's a large departure for what actually happens on the ground in public housing and some community housing today.

# Thank you

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Please contact me if  
you want any more  
information or  
results!

**The Matilda Centre for  
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