

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Provision of community eyecare for adults experiencing homelessness

The 2016 Australian census estimated over 116,000 Australians were homeless, with the number of homeless adults aged 50 and above increasing year on year (28% increase from 2011 census).

Increasing age increases risk of developing certain ocular diseases, with homelessness likely to compound this effect due to higher incidence of certain co-morbidities, although such interactions have been poorly studied to date. Addressing eye health for this group, and reducing barriers to seeking eyecare when visual capacity reduces, mitigates their elevated risk of preventable visual impairment. This is important due to the known linkages between sight loss and depression, anxiety, social isolation and reduced ability to self-care for other co-morbidities, in a group already characterized by their increased vulnerability to mental health problems and drug or alcohol addiction.

Further research is necessary to establish the impact of providing an eyecare service to this group, and to identify the influence upon visual outcomes of other factors that characterize this group, such as level of homelessness (primary, secondary, tertiary), presence of mental health problems, treatment compliance, the need to engage with other service providers for treatment (e.g. public hospital eye service) and follow-up frequency. This population's eyecare needs have primarily been evaluated through cross-sectional research or small-scale case studies, with a dearth of literature monitoring visual outcomes following the initial eye examination and identifying key factors that may interact with these outcomes. Further, few studies have explored the role of homelessness support workers in supporting the engagement of homeless adults with eyecare services and self-management of chronic eye conditions, or the views of homeless adults about their eyesight or experience of seeking and receiving eyecare.

Addressing these considerations with robust research requires a longitudinal programme of work with prospective data collection that is sensitive to the ethical considerations associated with involving this vulnerable group with research. Identifying key issues that influence long term visual outcomes for adults experiencing homelessness provides an evidence base for the design and delivery of eyecare models accounting for the unique needs of this group. This area has received little research attention to date in Australia. Evidence-based service models could equalize visual impairment prevalence rates.