

The Impact of the Living Environment on the Mental Health of People Living with Mental Ill-health

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The living environment is important for general mental health and wellbeing. Existing research suggests that if the basic requirements for housing such as access to natural light, private open space, safety, cleanliness and maintenance are denied this can adversely affect mental health and wellbeing.¹ The impact of a substandard living environment for people with mental ill-health is not well understood. A recent study carried out by Mind Australia in collaboration with the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) focused on examining the housing and mental health pathways of people with lived experience of mental ill-health. Trajectories included qualitative interviews with people with severe mental ill-health to explore their living situation and mental health.

This paper draws on data collected from 86 participants recruited from the following areas Melbourne, Wangaratta, Sydney, Bathurst, Brisbane, Mackay, Adelaide, Berri, Hobart and Perth. The findings highlighted that many participants were living in temporary accommodation that not only did not meet the requirements mentioned above, but were poorly maintained, unsafe and substandard. The findings from Trajectories demonstrated that there is a relationship between peoples' mental health and their living environment.

Some characteristics of the built environment seemed to directly influence mental ill-health such as location, neighbourhood and stigma; quality of housing and maintenance; and safety and security.

Location, Neighbourhood and Stigma

Neighbourhood characteristics can benefit people's sense of identity

in communities. In Trajectories, most participants wanted housing in areas they were familiar with and had established social connections near friends, family and amenities. However, people did often not have a lot of choice in the area that they lived and cited problems with people with mental illness and substance abuse issues being placed together.

'There is a problem with people with mental illness being in public housing where there's drug use, criminal activity, domestic violence etc. Everybody deserves to have a roof over their head, you can't just lump people like that all into one type of housing.'

Stigma around mental ill-health was also evident in neighbourhoods, particularly smaller areas. Not feeling welcome in your own community has a negative impact on mental health and can contribute to isolation which further impacts on mental health.

'At [a particular area], where people started finding out about my illness, they would literally walk across the street to avoid me because it was that type of mentality.'

Quality of Housing and Maintenance

Participants referred to aspects of the quality of housing that impacted on their mental health. For example, living in dark damp places had a negative effect on mood. Also, living in small cramped spaces made people feel like things were closing in on them. On the other hand, access to fresh outdoor air and green space had a positive impact on mental health. Having a space outdoors to retreat to from living indoors with access to a garden was important for the wellbeing of people living with mental health issues.

'Don't put me in a one-bedroom freaking room where you've got everything, the lounge room and kitchen together. I can't do that. It plays with my head. The [housing service] doesn't seem to understand. Where I am now is good because I've got my



own backyard, I can go out and have a breathe off if I want.'

Maintenance issues also had a negative impact on mental health, particularly when the person had little control over when and how they were managed. Participants reported that tardy and inadequate responses to housing maintenance impacted both on their mental health and sense of wellbeing, more so when delivered by tenancy managers who were rude or unsympathetic to the tenant's situation.

'I've got a dead bird squatted in my range hood that's been there for six weeks. They kept saying, "It will be done by the end of the week." I rang up them this week and said if it's not done by tomorrow, I'm going to a lawyer.'

Safety and Security

Participants in this study reported that a home was somewhere where they could feel safe and secure, a base where they could carry out their life from. Feeling safe was particularly important for people who had experienced past trauma because if they felt unsafe, they would retreat.

'It was just a flimsy door that anyone could break in. Certain people did. They were always breaking in, I just spent my whole time locked in the room.'

In summary, these results highlight the importance of living environment to the mental health and quality of life of people with mental ill-health. Substandard and unsafe housing and living environments can have particularly damaging effects on the

lives of people with mental ill-health. Further information about Trajectories can be accessed at: <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/trajectories>

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Endnote

1. Bond L, Kearns A, Mason P, Tannahill C, Whately E 2012, Exploring the Relationships between Housing, Neighbourhoods and Mental Wellbeing for Residents of Deprived Areas, *BMC Public Health*, vol. 12, no. 48.

