

# Addressing Homelessness in Social Work Education: Emerging findings

HSCWRU Webinar 20.9.23

KARL MASON  
&  
JESS HARRIS



---

# Introducing the study

---

- Small National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) School for Social Care Research (SSCR) funded project - 2023
  - Addresses one finding of study on Safeguarding responses to homelessness and self-neglect: that social workers (SWs), including those leading Safeguarding, may be under-prepared for working with people experiencing homelessness; many reported limited learning on qualification courses and uncertain attitudes about the role of social work in this area; SWs striving to drive good practice are often isolated/unsupported in their work (hence new national Peer Network - first meeting 4.10.23) .
  - Will produce free online report/resource: baseline snapshot of teaching and learning and good practice examples (will be sent to everyone here today).
-

# Method and Outline of Study

---

Scoping Review of Literature - 22 studies

---

National 'Call for Evidence' from Universities - 44 responses from 39 (almost 50% SW providers in England)

---

Interviews with Academics - 9 conducted

---

Interviews with Placement Providers - 9 conducted

---

Focus Group with Students - 8 participants

---

---

# Key messages from literature 1

---

- Homelessness and housing run alongside issues all social workers (SWs) work with; SWs have key skills for work with people who experience complex needs and are marginalised, yet this topic / experience is often neglected
  - Most literature came from the USA: 'Ending Homelessness' is one of Council for Social Work Education's 12 Grand Challenges for SW profession (Gallup et al, 2022); papers related to 'innovations' may not translate (Burns et al, 2020; Donaldson et al, 2020)
  - Creative classroom approaches help to engage values / biases or invigorate creative thinking outside what individual 'silos' can do. Some inter-disciplinary learning approaches (Petrovich and Navarro, 2020; Siegel et al, 2020) or academic-industry partnerships (Watson et al, 2021)
  - UK example: problem-based learning involving simulated case study acted out by lecturer to stimulate students to engage with legal literacy and push beyond (Simcock and Machin, 2019)
-

---

# Key messages from literature 2

---

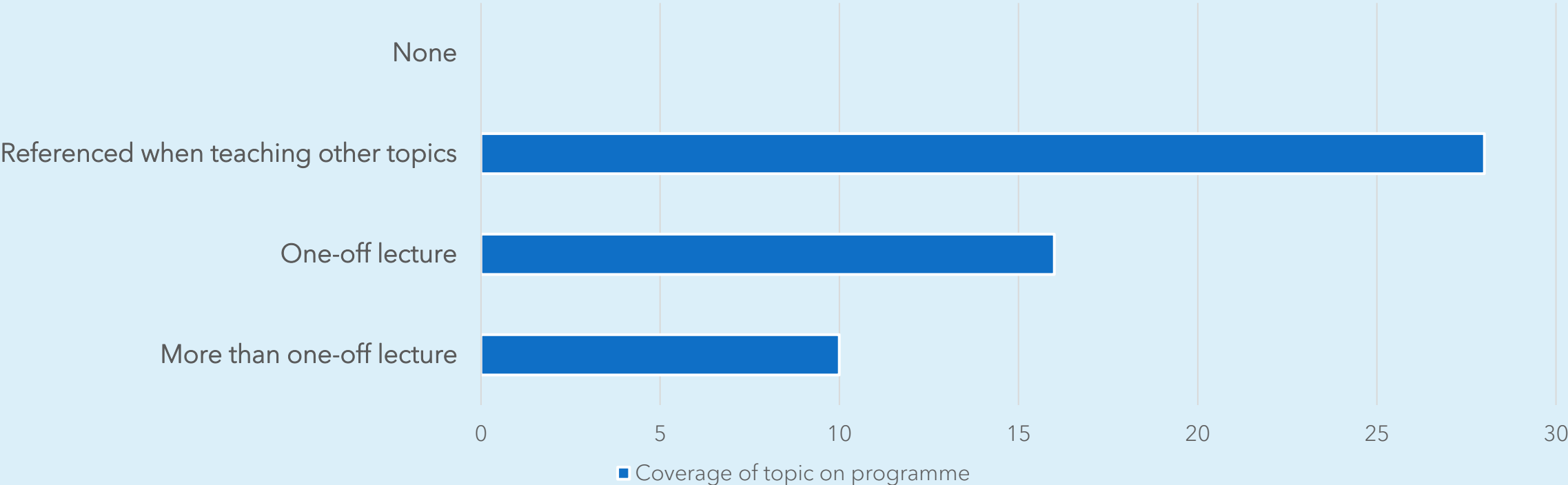
- Aykanian and Ryan-Dedominicis (2021) identify three tiers of curriculum integration: low to high effort. Where an academic team lacks specialist knowledge, low effort (exposure) strategies such as case studies can be effective, or medium effort (deliberate and direct inclusion) strategies such as a lecture, an external speaker, perhaps with lived experience. Higher effort strategies more likely to provide rich learning – such as immersion learning, agency visits, community project, an assessed project, threading homelessness through all modules.
  - Lived experience is sometimes thought of as gold standard but this has a range of problems when it comes to more extreme marginalisation and normative discourses around ‘recovery’ may be expected, so is delicate and needs a careful approach (Veronka and Grant, 2022)
  - Important to remember students may have their own experiences of insecure housing or homelessness (Mulrenan et al, 2018; Crutchfield et al, 2020)
-

---

# Call for Evidence: Extent of Coverage

---

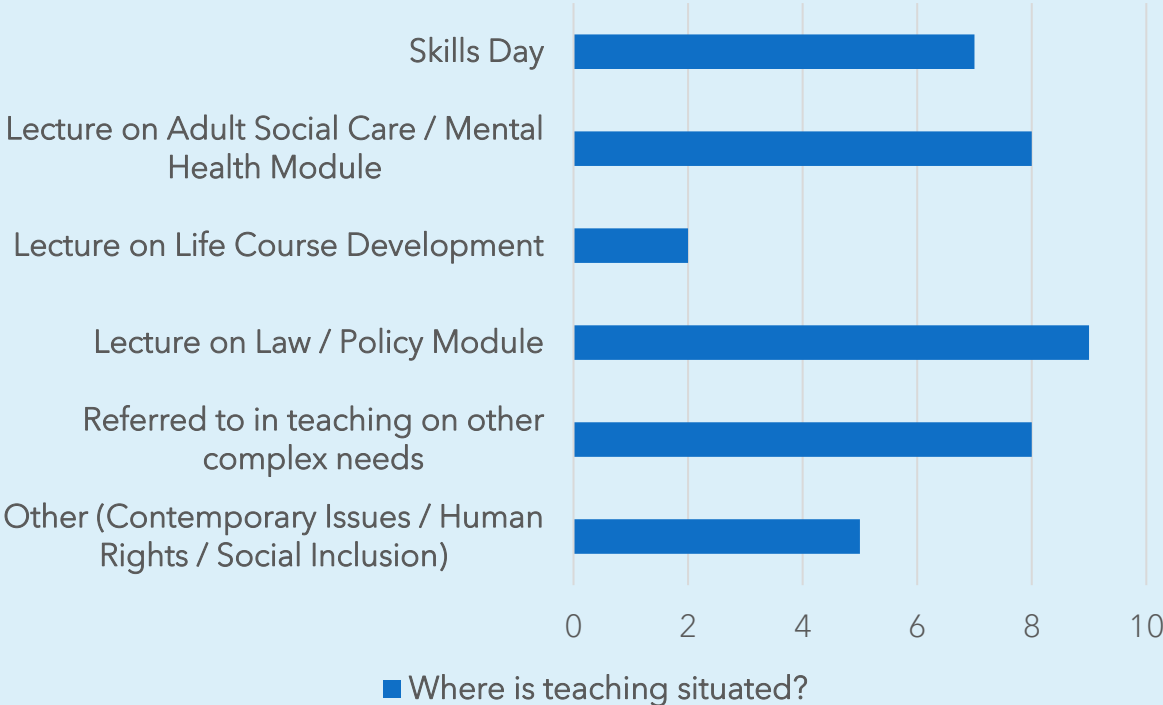
Coverage of topic on SW programme  
(No. of positive responses)



# Call for Evidence: Inclusion and Barriers

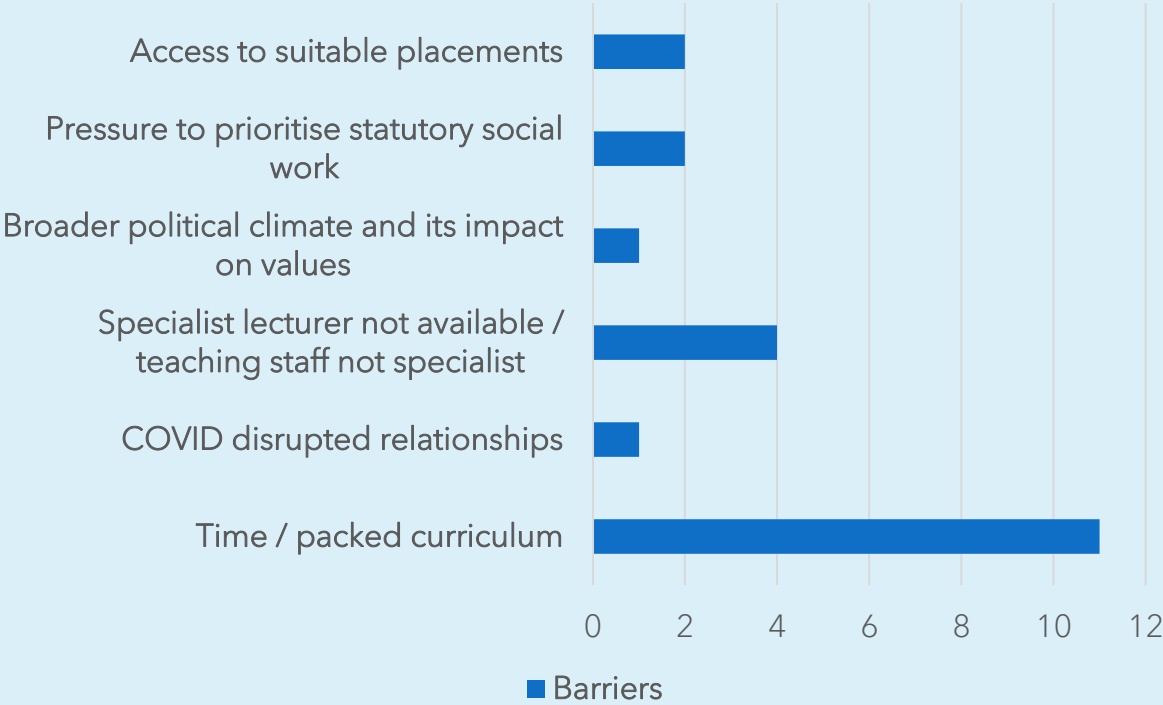
## Where is teaching included?

(No. of positive responses)



## Barriers

(No. of positive responses)



---

## Particularly innovative examples of teaching

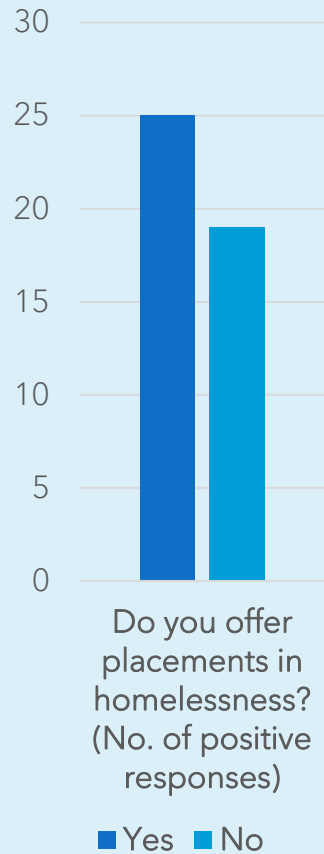
- **Validation with Chartered Institute of Housing** - "(We) insert housing in the core modules, so as they go through, I go in and do sessions on homelessness in relation to professionalism, partnership working, the life cycle... different elements of the core social work curriculum" (Academic interview 1).
  - **Widening participation partnership with local charity** - "We were asked by a local homelessness charity to do a session on resilience with their residents... (which turned into) a 3 or 4 month course where we teach them academic skills and critical thinking based on lived experience... The brilliant thing for our social work students is they meet first hand people who are really, they are so honest about what's happened to them, and the feedback from the students is it's really useful and humbling" (Academic interview 3).
  - **Problem-based learning** - "Based on a homelessness case I had worked with, what always struck me was the 'ping pong' thing: they sent her back and forth, back and forth, she'd rock up at social services and we'd be saying '*There's nothing we can do - you need to go back to homelessness*'... (U)sing a problem-based learning approach... we can actually dramatize it in the classroom, so we physically have this person walking from one place to another... made it very real to the students ... We tie that in with legal literacy and thinking '*How does this work and what role do we do we have?*'" (Academic 9 - interview)
  - **Use of film in inter-professional learning** - "We have an interprofessional event (for) students from the medical school and social workers... (who) work together to develop a risk assessment, unpick the reasons why (X) is homeless and to select person centred tools to facilitate engagement" (Participant 11, CfE)
-



---

# Placements

---



- “Of course there is, you know, lots of complexity here, homeless agencies do exist but they're smaller. The ones that are very much established and perhaps in a position to grow student placements have already been taken, if you like, by the bigger universities and therefore it's harder to get to get those relationships.” (Academic 3)
  - “We did, but currently don't, use an outreach service. This is because they needed students to be able to work late evenings and with student poverty this was no longer viable” (CFE Participant 1)
  - “We're not part of a teaching partnership and we really struggled to get statutory local authority placements ... we work with four plus large homelessness service providers and have a really, really high proportion of placements first and second year going out to various different types of homeless provision” (Academic 8)
-

---

# Student roles on placements

---

- “They get initiated into building relationships with our regular clients, sometimes its sporadic but down the line they’ve learned how to welcome people, to properly listen: *‘Tell us your story’* rather than *‘What’s your date of birth’* or going down the form filling road. So it’s *‘Come in, have a cuppa, have a sit down. What’s going on? ...’* (Placement Provider 8)
  - “My role was that of a Housing First support worker ... pretty much hit the ground running when I started placement. We started off with one or two cases being allocated to me and it was entirely my work to do. So, I did initial assessments with some, building that bond with someone” (Student 1)
  - “It was a real hands-on experience working with the street team - I went out and would visit people that were street homeless... in hostels, people that moved from hostels to their homes and supported them... met people from prison and went to appointments with people. And I think that was some of the most eye-opening experiences was walking along alongside people in their shoes ... seeing how they experienced it, with all the additional challenges that they had” (Student 6)
  - “We provide emergency accommodation for homeless people in the homes of local volunteers ... Students get involved in their placement and they do different tasks, they are the main point of contact for the client when they get in contact with the service, they explain about the service, but also they complete the risk assessment for the client and that’s obviously to make sure that they will be safe within the volunteer home and then they support the client as well with the move on, they also help us with the volunteers.” (Placement Provider 7)
-

---

# Under-prepared and under-informed?

---

- “Before my placement, I didn't even know social workers helped homeless people” (Student 2)
  - “I think we maybe touched on it in like the social policy units. We maybe had like one or two lessons that that mentioned homelessness, but it certainly wasn't anything substantial” (Student 3)
  - “Placements that students were often going on, particularly that first placement, which not always, but was often third sector, and that often included either very explicitly a homelessness organisation ... I recognized that students were going out and hadn't really been taught anything about how was it, or homelessness” (Academic 9)
  - “But in terms of the homelessness legislation they don't know much about it. They don't know about how the local authority will deal with the homeless person when they present themselves and into the local authority. Sometimes when we get clients that they are refused support from the local authority, they don't know the reason” (Placement Provider 7)
-

---

# Statutory versus non-statutory placements

---

- “Initially, I was upset with it... we're comparing with our peers. *“Oh, you're going there... How will you meet the PCF? (Professional Capabilities Framework)”* I kind of envy them because I wanted to learn to be a social worker. I wasn't happy. I wanted to go to Council. It might be difficult for me to get job, so that was a big thing in my mind” (Student 7).
  - “(Students) find it really hard to understand that there can be social work practice outside of the Care Act, and around the difference between non statutory roles and statutory and how important that is... not all social work needs to sit under a local authority ... Sometimes they tick boxes of, like, how many assessments have you done? ... A psychosocial assessment is just as important as a Care Act assessment and not everything is about eligibility for care and support.” (Placement Provider 4)
  - “That's what these placements give them, that wider breadth of actually what is social work? And because it is very easy to get caught in statutory work and not think about where of our service users come from, where did the people with lived experience come from...” (Placement Provider 1)
  - “As part of our teaching partnership, we've got a very strong push on statutory placements and that has impacted our use of placements for people who are homeless” (Academic 6)
-

---

# First or second placement?

---

- A good first placement...
    - "In first placement, what are we trying to do for the students, and for me it's really firmly about helping the students see from the other side and to see some of the really critical issues around multiple disadvantage and substance use" (Academic 7)
    - "It brings in so much: things like physical and mental health, poverty, trauma, relationship breakdown, drug and alcohol use, all of those things. So the students, particularly if you've got a student who hasn't got a lot of experience, then they can get quite a bit of experience quite quickly in quite a few different things" (Placement provider 2).
  - **But... these placements are not an easy option; they are tough learning environments, from complexity of need through to advocacy and systems challenges and some providers wanted second placement students:**
    - "The increase in this kind of mental acuity it is a really stressful place to be... most of the time it's fine but if you walk down there and it's absolute chaos, it's quite intimidating... it's not something that somebody who's never had any exposure to really complex case management would find easy to sit with" (Placement Provider 4)
    - "My sense with a good proportion of the final year placements is that it's out of necessity rather than design ... we've had this really heavy, umm, reliance, really on homelessness services to plug a gap essentially for quite a long time." (Academic 8)
-

---

# “Eye-opening experiences”: Values, Ethics and Perceptions of Risk 1

---

- “Looking at actual homelessness and that was a real eye opener for my student ... saying how cynical she felt about people being regarded as intentionally homeless, and this kind of rubber stamps on the application and how, there's some incredible learning around that in terms of disadvantage and how we work with people” (Academic 7 - interview)
  - “We talked about going into the forest to find people who sleep in tents and how do you knock on a tent?” (Placement Provider 2)
  - “Whether you understand what social work values are or not, we're all human. I had a student and she worked with somebody who had offending behaviours and she talked about going into the shop with him and he stole so many things but she didn't realize at the time, and not only did he steal, he's quite resourceful ... I'm not saying it's right, but the mere fact that she could witness this person being resourceful, because he had nothing” (Placement Provider 1)
  - “We went round and the condition of some of the rooms really surprised me because it looked as though they were still living as a homeless person... they'd have a mattress, but they wouldn't even have a sheet or duvet, or the condition of the room” (Student 5).
  - “I got a bit stuck on the unpredictability of people - that used to scare me and stuff, which isn't how I feel now” (Student 5)
  - “If they're working on the independent voluntary sector side, they have their eyes opened in the barriers that people face and sort of pushing against the systems” (Academic 7)
-

---

# “Eye-opening experiences”: Values, Ethics and Perceptions of Risk 2

---

- “My biggest takeaway from this placement is sometimes we have to break the rules, and there's always gonna be a moral dilemma in our profession. I have done certain things on placement where I had to pick and choose my battles, so I've gone against what theory would suggest or what my professors have probably said in class, but that was the best situation” (Student 1)
  - “I met them from prison. I had to let them go off and score and wait for them. When they then came back we went and got a methadone script for him to go into a placement. I remember finding that so uncomfortable because it was against everything that I believed and my morals, but the takeaway for me was, the people we were working with are adults ... And the other thing that I remember really clearly thinking, and it is never left me, was that these people are the people we missed as children and families” (Student 6)
  - “From a values point of view we discuss labelling... this is a woman that's known to the system which is a little bit like a revolving door. We don't know what to do with her. From a values point of view this (problem-based learning session) was very interesting” (Academic 9)
  - “(It's important we are) building those foundations for students to just stay strong and not absorb the narrative that can persist ... *'They've been offered something ... it's their fault they've turned it down'*, or the whole intentional homelessness culture that does absorb across agencies potentially to social work ... I think peer supervision or critical reflection is like the key, really, to just try to not get absorbed in that narrative” (Academic 3)
-

---

# Placement provider preparedness

---

- “They'd had social work students previously, so they knew what we needed in order to be able to reach the PCF. But I didn't have a lot of social work contact with other social workers” (Student 6)
  - “I didn't feel like they had any awareness of social worker role, and I didn't come across any social workers or know that any of the clients had a social worker. So I passed my placement and managed to meet my PCF but I had to be really proactive in trying get involved in all different areas and go to other meetings and do other shadowing with other people that other agencies that came in and stuff, but I didn't feel like it was a social work role at all. I did get to go to some like mental capacity meetings and I was present for some detainment and things like that. So I would say it was more about I got a really good understanding of their lived experience, which I think is really precious” (Student 4)
  - “There are lots of changes of tender and provider and it's quite a mobile market and so building up relationships with placements where, in full confidence, you could place the student there and they'll be absolutely fine with changes of personnel and the supernumerary thing does actually need time, because we've had a few cases where we've had to intervene if people have been put on onto a shift and there's not enough cover, they're not adequately supervised” (Academic 7)
-



---

## Parting shots 1 – Students want to know more about non-traditional settings and have space to discuss in class

---

- “I don't know how you would go about doing it, but obviously I think when you take on the social work course, you picture it, you're either gonna be in child protection or you're gonna be working with adults and that's it. But there's so many smaller sections in it that that I don't think are necessarily advertised. I'm really grateful that I did get that experience, but obviously not everybody does. So I think maybe just education on how many vast roles of social work can do, should be at the forefront, because I think it would actually appeal to a lot more people” (Student 8)
  - “I think we need to come back and have a platform to share our experiences about going into placements in the homelessness setting because there is a stigma and stereotype that people associate with this group. I have seen fellow students who felt uncomfortable when they've seen homeless people on the street and has been OK because of had the placement experienced, but not everyone has” (Student 1)
-

---

# Parting shots 2 – Stop thinking of homelessness as ‘niche’ for social workers

---

- “I think every placement’s talking about housing of some description, isn't it?” (Academic 6)
  - “Show me a social worker who is not working with housing or homelessness issues of some sort” (Academic 1)
  - “Homelessness and housing in a broader sense, it is something they will encounter ... it's not niche, social workers in and across teams: mental health, learning disability, older people, children and families are going to come across housing and homelessness in some form in their careers. So I think perhaps that's one thing we can do is assert, that it's not niche, and therefore that it needs to be part of mainstream curriculum” (Academic 9)
  - “It's a shame that it's not covered within the university nationally as a standard” (Placement Provider 7)
-

---

# References

---

- Aykanian, A; Ryan-Dedominicis, T (2021) Teaching Note-Teaching Students About Homelessness: A Model for Curriculum Integration, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(2), pp. 572-582
- Burns, V; Kwan, C; Walsh, CA (2020) Co-producing Knowledge Through Documentary Film: A Community-Based Participatory Study With Older Adults With Homeless Histories, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56, s119-s130
- Crutchfield, RM; Maguire, J; Campbell, CD; Lohay, D; Loscko, SV; Simon, R (2020) I'm Supposed to Be Helping Others: Exploring Food Insecurity and Homelessness for Social Work Students, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56, s.150-s.162
- Donaldson, LP; Streeter, CL; Larkin, H; Briar-Lawson, K; Meyer-Adams, N; Lupfer, K; Elder, J; Grimshaw, A (2020) The SOAR Model as an Effective Mechanism for University-Community Partnerships to End Homelessness, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56, s.99-s.110
- Gallup, D; Henwood, BF; Devaney, E; Samario, D; Giang, J (2022) Shifting social worker attitudes toward homelessness: an MSW training program evaluation, *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, Advance Access Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2022.2061238>
- Petrovich, JC; Navarro, C (2020) A Breath of Fresh Air: Social Work IPE With People Experiencing Homelessness, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56, S.46-S58
- Mulrenan, P., Atkins, J., & Cox, S. (2018). 'I get up in the night to cry': The impact of homelessness on higher education students in London, UK. *Critical Social Policy*, 38(1), 143-154.
- Siegel, DH; Smith, MC; Melucci, SC (2020) Teaching Social Work Students About Homelessness: An Interdisciplinary Interinstitutional Approach, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56, s.59-s.71
- Simcock, P; Machin, R (2019) It's not just about where someone lives: educating student social workers about housing-related matters to promote an understanding of social justice, *Social Work Education*, 38(8), pp.1041-1053
- Voronka, J; Grant, J (2022) Service user storytelling in social work education: goals, constraints, strategies, and risks, *Social Work Education*, 41(5), pp.977-992
- Watson, J; Nipperess, S; Johnson, G (2021) Social Work Education and Homelessness: Mobilising Academia-Industry Partnerships to Create a Homelessness Subject, *Australian Social Work*, Advance Online Access: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2021.1989606>
-

---

# Disclaimer & thanks

---

This presentation draws on independent research funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) School for Social Care Research. Views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or Department of Health and Social Care.

Many thanks to all our Call for Evidence, interview and focus group participants for their generous time and insights.

The Call for Evidence is still open!

---