



## **Out in the cold**

# Rough sleepers dying 'alarmingly' premature deaths, Sydney homeless data shows

**People suffering from schizophrenia especially at risk, homelessness advocates say**

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One of Sydney's largest [homelessness](#) services says its client data shows the city's rough sleepers are dying at "alarmingly" [premature rates](#), particularly those with schizophrenia.

Matthew Talbot Hostel, a homelessness service run by St Vincent de Paul Society NSW based in the inner-city suburb of Woolloomooloo, said data from about 4,000 patients attending its health clinic shows those experiencing homelessness are dying at an average age of 55.9.

For those diagnosed with schizophrenia, the average age was even lower, at 52 years.

The data, captured as [part of a study last year](#), is further evidence of a [disturbing life expectancy gap](#) between those experiencing homelessness and the general population in Australia.

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The clinic manager at the Matthew Talbot Hostel, Julie Smith, has worked in homelessness health since 1990. She has not seen a significant change in the age of death of those experiencing homelessness in that time.

“We have been aware that homeless people die 25 to 30 years younger - we’ve known forever that they die prematurely and they die, in many cases, of preventable illness, due to their circumstances,” Smith said.

She said it was “extraordinary” such deaths persisted in a country as rich as Australia.

“I remain shocked at the amount of people with serious illness, particularly serious mental illness, who remain on the streets, that it’s so difficult to get housing and healthcare for these people.

“Sydney is an extremely wealthy, western-style society, and I find it really difficult to grapple with the knowledge that there are so many disadvantaged people living on the streets, living in incredibly substandard housing, and without protection.

“Their vulnerabilities mean they require protection and they require targeted services and they require specific types of housing and care in many places. It’s shocking - the number of people with schizophrenia that we allow to remain homeless.”

Earlier this month, the Guardian revealed the results of a 12-month investigation into homelessness deaths, which included an analysis of 627 cases reported to the coroner. The average age of death among those cases was 44. That is in line with studies in [Perth](#) and [Melbourne](#), and the Sydney study that included Matthew Talbot Hostel clients, led by Macquarie University.

The Macquarie University study analysed 324 deaths among clients of three homelessness services in inner-city Sydney and found the median age at death was 50.7.

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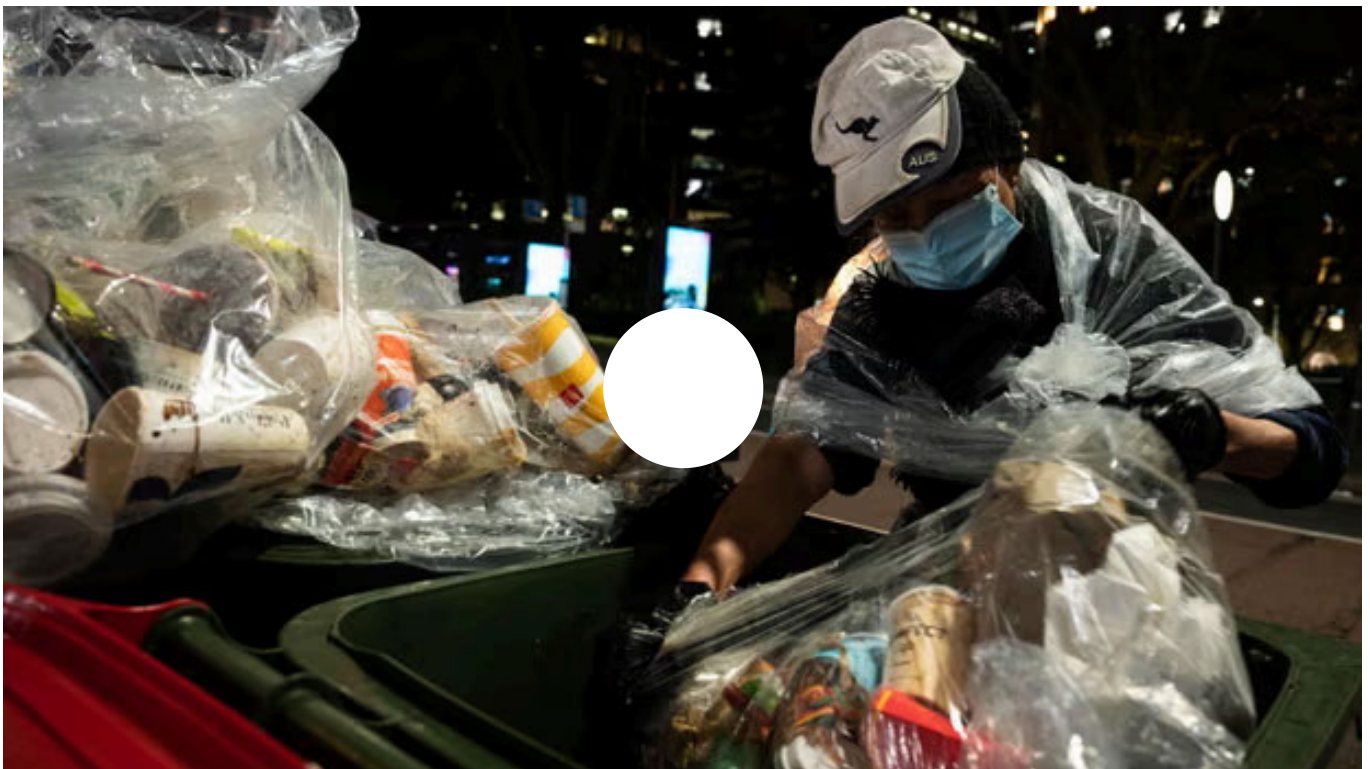
Dr Olav Nielsen, one of the study's authors and also a psychiatrist at the Matthew Talbot clinic, said the absence of supported housing was a major factor in poor health.

“We found quite an alarming mortality and that the mean [age] of death was alarmingly low. The mean age of death ... was in the 50s, and for those who had substance abuse issues, it was even younger.”

Emeritus Prof Ian Webster, a physician who worked for more than 40 years with people who have experienced homelessness, said the average life expectancy had not changed since his time in the field.

“There are many factors which lead to premature ageing in this group,” he said. “Exposure to the elements, exposure to infection, lifestyles which include, among other things, extraordinarily heavy levels of smoking and, of course, of alcohol use and, these days, use of opiate and related substances too.

“I often regard this group of people as prematurely aged or prematurely ageing.”



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