

Evidence check

Updated 17 April 2020

Rapid evidence checks are based on a simplified review method and may not be entirely exhaustive, but aim to provide a balanced assessment of what is already known about a specific problem or issue. This brief has not been peer-reviewed and should not be a substitute for individual clinical judgement, nor is it an endorsed position of NSW Health.

Temporary shared accommodation (boarding houses, backpacker accommodation and hostels)

Rapid review questions

1. What guidance is available regarding temporary shared accommodation in response to COVID-19?
2. What recommendations are available for temporary shared accommodation and people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19?
3. Is temporary shared accommodation being closed in response to COVID-19?

In brief

- Guidance across countries in response to temporary and shared accommodation differs, with some countries closing hostels, campsites or boarding houses, while others allowing sites to remain open with conditions such as enforced social distancing.
- There are inconsistencies across commercial accommodation providers and countries regarding closures, with some chains closing all or some of their hostels, and some remaining open (but with additional requirements around cleaning/social distancing or access).
- Media coverage has focused on people in temporary accommodation, in particular backpacker accommodation, not adhering to social distancing directives. There are recent reports from Singapore that clusters of COVID-19 infections are occurring in dormitories for temporary and peripatetic workers. Universal testing in one USA shelter had a 36% positivity rate.
- Temporary accommodation is also used to house people who are experiencing homelessness.
- Homelessness is a significant social determinant of health. It is associated with compromised health and an elevated risk of infection. Lessons from previous outbreaks show that planning for the isolation and quarantine of people experiencing homelessness is a challenge.

Current recommendations: establishing COVID-19 isolation sites, converting vacant accommodation into temporary housing, securing additional shelter spaces, expanding the eligibility criteria (e.g. elderly people or women and children experiencing violence) and providing additional resources to specialist homelessness services.

Background

Boarding houses, backpacker accommodation and hostels offer dorm-style accommodation; with shared rooms (often 4, 6, 8 or 10 bunk beds) and shared facilities. This include bathrooms, a kitchen with shared cooking equipment and communal dining, sitting and leisure spaces.

Under the Temporary Accommodation Program, every person has an allocation of 28 days paid crisis accommodation, with commercial accommodation providers having contracts in place with specialist homelessness services.(1)

People experiencing homelessness often have compromised health and are at an elevated risk from viruses including COVID-19. Lessons from previous outbreaks show that planning for the isolation and quarantine of people experiencing homelessness is a challenge, alongside infection control.(2, 3)

There are some issues unique to people experiencing homelessness with regards to COVID-19. People are often more transient and geographically mobile than the general population, making it difficult to track and prevent disease transmission, as well as treat those who need it.(4)

In 2017-18, more than 121,000 (42%) of people assisted by specialist homelessness services had experienced domestic violence. Of these, more than three in four (78%, or 94,100) were women.(5)

Recent media coverage in Singapore has identified dormitories and temporary accommodation for 'foreign workers'.(5)

Universal testing of an adult homeless shelter population (n=408) in the USA shortly after the identification of a COVID-19 case cluster yielded 36% positivity rate.(6)

Methods (Appendix 1)

PubMed, Google and Twitter were searched on 29 March and a supplementary search was conducted on 12 April 2020 and 17 April 2020.

Limitations

- Available information is drawn from policy documents and media reports, and the evidence base for these is not clear.
- This is not a comprehensive review on homelessness and COVID-19. Secondary results are included as temporary accommodation is a component of the crisis accommodation response to homelessness in Australia.

Results (Tables 1-3)

Table 1: Guidance on temporary accommodation from other countries

Country	Guidance	Source
NSW, Australia	<p>The following accommodation remains open:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crisis and temporary accommodation • disability or aged care facilities • hotels, motels or other accommodation • youth hostels. <p>Restricted: Caravan parks and camping grounds are closed to the public, except for people who are permanent residents or who have no other permanent residence.</p>	https://preview.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/public-health-orders
Victoria, Australia	<p>If you are currently in a backpacker hostel, you should regard it as your home for the purposes of the Stay at Home direction. You should avoid spending time in communal areas of the hostel. You may leave the hostel to board a flight out of Australia. Always observe physical distancing requirements within the hostel.</p>	https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/stay-home-and-restricted-activities-directions-frequently-asked-questions#can-i-have-visitors-in-my-home
Scotland	<p>Hostels, campsites or boarding houses must remain closed, with exceptions for occupants for whom their primary residence is unavailable, or if for non-UK residents who are unable to travel, key workers or permanent residents.</p> <p>Where providing rooms to support homeless and other vulnerable people (such as those who cannot safely stay in their home) through arrangements with local authorities and other public bodies, they may remain open.</p>	https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-business-and-social-distancing-guidance/
England	<p>Public Health England will be issuing updated guidance for those working with people who are experiencing rough sleeping and living in hostel environments (updated on 25 March 2020).</p>	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-services-for-people-experiencing-rough-sleeping/covid-19-guidance-for-hostel-

Country	Guidance	Source
		or-day-centre-providers-of-services-for-people-experiencing-rough-sleeping
USA (New York)	Limit the number of people who congregate and interact within a facility. For example: increase spacing between beds (3-6 feet apart), create barriers between beds, stagger mealtimes and bathing schedules, and ensure room isolation for anyone who is unwell.	https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/guidance-for-congregate-settings-covid19.pdf
Spain	The vast majority of hotels, hostels, campsites and other accommodation in Spain closed 27 March 2020. Selected hotels are available to those who need to accommodation in order to carry out valuable work during COVID-19.	https://es.usembassy.gov/covid-19-information/
Inter-Agency Standing Committee	Interim guidance addresses specific needs and considerations required in humanitarian situations, including camps and camp-like settings and surrounding host communities.	https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-03/IASC%20Interim%20Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20for%20Outbreak%20Readiness%20and%20Response%20Operations%20-%20Camps%20and%20Camp-like%20Settings.pdf

Table 2: Homelessness and temporary accommodation

Study	Country	Source type	Results
Kirby, 2020 (5)	England	Journal article (opinion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The COVID-19 Homeless Sector Plan address issues and risks around concentrated outbreaks of COVID-19 that are likely to occur with this vulnerable group. • The plan follows an announcement by the UK government and £3.2 million of initial emergency funding if they need to self-isolate to prevent the spread of COVID-19. • Coordination, resources, and facilities (unused hotels from commercial operators) will be divided into two categories: COVID-CARE (for people who are symptomatic or have tested positive) and COVID-PROTECT (for people who have other medical vulnerabilities who are asymptomatic or screen negative). • Fewer homeless people will be entering day centres or overnight hostels. These centres will wind down their operations, allowing some or all of their staff to be deployed to COVID-PROTECT centres.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020	USA	Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with COVID-19 who are currently experiencing homelessness and cannot be discharged to a congregate setting should access an isolation site and low-acuity alternative care sites.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020	USA	Guidance	<p>This guidance addresses two tiers of facilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation Sites (Tier one) – Temporary housing for a cohort of patients with COVID-19 who do not need medical attention but cannot stay at home. These patients could be housed in a dedicated hotel or dormitory meant for this purpose (in their own rooms with their own bathroom). • Low-acuity Alternate Care Sites (ACS) (Tier two) – This level of ACS provides medical care to convalescing cases of COVID-19 after hospital discharge and are equipped to provide low-acuity care for other medical conditions in this population (e.g. assistance with managing blood glucose). These patients may be better suited in a facility that has an open layout (e.g. school gymnasium) to allow limited numbers of healthcare personnel to more easily monitor their status.

Study	Country	Source type	Results
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020	USA	Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This guidance describes a community-wide approach to prepare for COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness • Focus includes communication, supplies, staff considerations, facility layout considerations and facility procedure considerations
Government of Canada, 2020	Canada	Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with community networks in advance to secure additional shelter spaces in order to accommodate the requirements of social distancing in an outbreak. • Coordinate with affiliated shelters or congregate living facilities in the community to plan to cohort those who have mild cases of COVID-19 together. • Identify if alternate care sites for those with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 or plan to isolate cases. • Transport those with severe symptoms to emergency medical services.
Centre for Social Impact (UNSW, the University of Western Australia and Swinburne University of Technology), 2020	Australia	Factsheet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy and practice responses that would significantly reduce the impact of COVID-19 with respect to homelessness include: transitioning those without shelter or in supported accommodation into permanent housing; converting vacant accommodation into temporary housing for new entrants to homelessness; expanding the eligibility for temporary accommodation and crisis accommodation (in particular for women and children experiencing violence); and flagging all elderly people accessing specialist homelessness services as a high risk for COVID-19.
Homeless link, 2020	England	Website - actions for Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove legal barriers to accessing self-contained accommodation for people facing homelessness. • Increase access to self-contained accommodation so that people who are homeless can self-isolate. • Ensure that homeless people most at risk have rapid access to testing.
Homelessness NSW, 2020	Australia	Website - actions for Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediately enact a planned response to those who are in overcrowded accommodation, who are in boarding houses, who are couch surfing and who are in unstable accommodation.

Study	Country	Source type	Results
NSW Government Communities and Justice, 2020	Australia	Website Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities and Justice is currently seeking to maximise opportunities with temporary accommodation providers to support self-isolation. They have released guidelines in March 2020 on homelessness accommodation and COVID-19. • The response includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing people in shared accommodation with information on symptoms • service delivery adaption to minimise the risk to staff and clients, including risk mitigation strategies • active monitoring of people with symptoms • managing mental health care needs of staff and clients • plans to isolate confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 • considerations for children and young people.
Groundswell, 2020	England	Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed resources to support people experiencing homelessness during the current COVID-19 pandemic.
Homeless Dublin and Depaul, 2020	Ireland	Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening a 100-bed ‘cocooning’ unit in conjunction with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive in response to COVID-19. • The unit is for people experiencing homelessness with serious underlying health issues including cancer, HIV, organ transplants, heart disease, and respiratory conditions or those who are receiving chemotherapy.
Victoria State Government, 2020	Australia	Media release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homelessness services will have additional resources to find temporary accommodation in metropolitan and regional areas of Victoria. • Alternative ‘pop up’ accommodation will be established for people experiencing homelessness who require quarantine or self-isolation in Melbourne.
Chair, Toronto Board of Health	Canada	News and Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toronto has acquired hotel and motels as part of its integrated homelessness response to COVID-19. • The temporary accommodation is for people experiencing homelessness to quarantine, self-isolate or recover from COVID-19.
Government of India, 2020	India	Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Ministry of Home Affairs directs the provision of temporary accommodation, food, clothing and medical care to people experiencing homelessness in response to COVID-19.

Table 3: Temporary accommodation closures

Country	Hostel	Advice	Source
Australia	YHA Australia and Hostelling international	Some hostels are temporarily closed and reception hours may vary due to current circumstances, check individual hostels when booking.	https://www.yha.com.au/hostels/nsw
Australia	Habitat HQ and Griffith Working Hostels	Operations suspended; aligned to government directives it is untenable to provide communal accommodation with shared facilities.	https://www.habitathq.com.au https://www.griffithworkinghostels.com.au/
United Kingdom	YHA	Coronavirus statement 23 March 2020: All YHA (England & Wales) hostels will remain closed and off sale for recreational and non-essential travel until 31 July 2020.	https://www.yha.org.uk/coronavirus-statement
New Zealand	YHA	<p>COVID-19 update 30 March 2020: YHA is currently looking after a small number of international travellers who have no alternative place to stay, and is not accepting any new check-ins during the lockdown period. YHA is implementing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • activation of YHA New Zealand's Pandemic Response Plan • assigning all guests assigned to single rooms, or where they are one family/friend unit, to a shared room with appropriate social distancing rules applied • closing non-essential communal areas • reducing bed linen changes to a minimum • scheduling cooking and dining times to minimise the number of people in the kitchen and dining areas • assigning all guests their own dishes and cutlery and utensils if required • providing extra cleaning and hand sanitisation products • using additional protective equipment and increased cleaning practices 	https://www.yha.co.nz/travel-info-deals/novel-coronavirus

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> providing clear information regarding lockdown requirements for guests who want to purchase cooking supplies facilitating safe social distancing practices. 	
International	Hostelling international (network of hostels)	<p>Coronavirus statement 26 March 2020: In the following countries/areas some or all hostels are closed for various durations. Contact the hostel before travelling to check: Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Denmark, England & Wales, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Iceland, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Korea, Scotland, Spain, Thailand, Tunisia and USA.</p>	https://www.hihostels.com/pages/coronavirus
Scotland	Hostelling Scotland	<p>COVID-19 update, 23 March 2020: We have had to temporarily close our Youth Hostel network until further notice.</p>	https://www.hostellingscotland.org.uk/covid-19/
Europe	a&o Hotels and Hostels	<p>COVID-19 information page indicates they have implemented:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> disinfectant dispensers additional treatments with disinfectants in common areas certified disinfectant. 	https://www.aohostels.com/en/covid-19/
Germany	Munchen Hostels	<p>Hostels are temporarily closed as per advice from the Bavarian Ministry of Health.</p>	https://www.euro-youth-hotel.de/

Appendix 1

PubMed search terms: (homeless*[title/abstract]) AND (("pandemics"[MeSH Terms] OR pandemic[title/abstract] OR "disease outbreak"*[title/abstract]))

Google: 'COVID-19' and 'temporary accomodation/homelessness' and 'closed/shut' and 'youth hostel/backpackers'

Document history

Original search	Updates
17 April 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three references added to background (4) (5) and (6) • Added limitation section • Updated brief with social determinants of health reference to homelessness

References

1. Homelessness NSW. Temporary Accommodation Program – A Review. Accessed on 29 March 2020 Available from: https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/sites/homelessnessnsw/files/2017-03/Temporary%20Accommodation%20Paper%20-%20FINAL_1.pdf. 2016.
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