A systematic review of smoking, smoking cessation and the homeless: is there a way?

Kirstie Soar¹, Lynne Dawkins², Deborah Robson³, Sharon Cox²
¹University of East London, ²London South Bank University, ³Kings College London  Corresponding author: k.soar@uel.ac.uk

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Background

Smoking continues to be a lead risk factor of morbidity and early mortality which is particularly unevenly distributed amongst marginalised groups such as the homeless. In the UK, the Department of Health's (2017) tobacco control plan has explicitly stated that health inequalities caused by smoking must be reduced. In order to achieve this aim, understanding the landscape of smoking and the homeless: there is a will but is there a way?

Method

Study Design
A systematic review (registered with PROSPERO: CRD42017081843) of peer-reviewed research literature

Primary outcomes:
• rates of smoking prevalence
• Rates of smoking cessation
• Effective methods of smoking cessation/reduction
• Barriers and facilitators to smoking cessation/reduction

Searches: Conducted from January May 2017 (see diagram for databases), using search terms ‘smoking’ AND ‘homeless’ AND ‘tobacco’.

Participants/population: Homeless adult (18+) smokers

Exclusions: Any studies where the primary and/or secondary aim was not related to smoking behaviours in the homeless

Risk of bias (quality) assessment: Assessed independently by two reviewers following a standardised approach. ROBINS-1 for nonrandomised intervention studies and the quality appraisal checklist for qualitative studies.

Results

Overview of studies (n):

Smoking prevalence and characteristics:
• 14 studies (n=14,716) reported current prevalence rates = 57-82% (mean = 73%)
• Follow up rates varied 1-26 weeks
• Drop rates ranged from 10-77%

Smoking Cessation Interventions:
12 studies reported various types of interventions (e.g. personalised counselling, NRT, MI, combinations). Of the 5 studies which reported either 24-hour or 7-day point prevalence abstinence rates ranged from 4%-45%.

Barriers and facilitators to smoking cessation:
37 studies identified barriers and facilitators to smoking cessation programmes. Barriers were categorised as:
• Personal (e.g. comorbidities, awareness and knowledge)
• Social (e.g. pressure from other smokers, ability to socialise)
• Structured and practical (e.g. access, staff not prioritising client’s needs)
Facilitators included:
• Offering financial incentives
• Social support
• Trained staff

Quality Assessment: The one RCT was assessed as uncertain risk of bias. Other intervention studies were judged as low/medium risk of bias. Biases were observed in the reporting of barriers, with less weight to possible facilitators to engaging in smoking cessation.

Limitations: We identified only one RCT (n=430). There was a lack of well conducted intervention studies, large methodological inconsistencies between studies (e.g. different outcome measures reported, methods offered, absence in recording abstinence measures) and data mostly derived from the US.

Conclusion

Smoking prevalence is disproportionately high amongst homeless adults, even when compared to other marginalised groups. Efforts to reduce smoking rates and subsequent health inequalities in the homeless represent a key group in need of support. Due to the low number of RCTs, the majority of evidence deriving from the US (hampering extent to which data represents the homeless elsewhere) and wide differences in intervention studies there is no evidence to support one type of effective intervention for this target group. There is a need for greater consistency in research design and treatment outcomes. Evidence does suggest however smoking cessation interventions are accepted and taken up by homeless adults but cessation is low. Multi-targeted and holistic approaches are needed, placing the person and the situation in the centre of care, including interventions which offer staff support and training and incentives for follow-up.