

ONE PERSON, MANY STORIES: SERVICE INTEGRATION IN FAR WESTERN QUEENSLAND

Flat country leached of colour due to the drought, no stock, not much roadkill either. The towns are a hotchpotch of dignified old, dilapidated old, touristy old, not-so-old, and a flash of new – just blips on a landscape whose impact you cannot escape. This far western part of Queensland is where a small ISSR team has been conducting research to identify practical ways to improve the ability of people with mental health difficulties, mental illness or problematic substance use to access services. The research was commissioned by the Queensland Mental Health Commission and involved travelling to 10 different towns in three regions of far western Queensland to interview consumers face-to-face in their local environment.

Our research team connected with consumers by enlisting the support of a range of community-based services, ranging from neighbourhood centres through to providers with specialist expertise in mental health. We interviewed a total of 39 consumers across these towns, ranging in age from 19 to 72 years, with nearly equal numbers of males and females. Of the 39 respondents, significant proportions identified as Aboriginal or LGBTIQ. They lived in larger regional centres, smaller, isolated towns and in a range of council areas. Their stories and the challenges they faced varied widely.

This project investigated lived experiences of people with mental health difficulties, mental illness or problematic substance use as they have accessed (or attempted to access) human services in the three regions. We identified enablers and barriers to their uptake of service referrals, individual desires for holistic solutions, and consumer-oriented perceptions of good service integration and referral processes.

Assumptions about consumer experiences are often challenged by the stories recorded in the field. In Queensland, life in the far west provides a much different context around engaging with health and human services than in urban regions. Vast distances, isolation, climate and transport limitations are all more extreme, yet communities are sometimes more tightly knit because of these issues. Technology is often proposed as a solution to distance and sparse services, but it can be difficult to navigate. Booming industries like mining can have a mixed effect on the regions, and inequitable distribution of new wealth may exacerbate local disadvantage. These issues highlight the importance of researchers going out to meet people in their own environments. By spending time in each location, talking to locals and observing local geographical and cultural characteristics, our researchers were able to tailor the interviews to fit consumers at each site.

Although we are still analysing the findings, our prior research on service integration and supportive policies, as well as the literature, suggest that collaboration between service providers will be a key area of focus. The final report of our findings will be available on the ISSR website later in 2018.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This work describing the experiences of consumers complements earlier research commissioned by the Queensland Mental Health Commission and carried out by CheckUP. The 2015 *Service Integration and Referral Mapping for Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs Regional Reports* documented frontline service providers' perceptions of service integration and referrals in the North West, Central West and South West Hospital and Health Service regions in Queensland.

THE TEAM

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Note: The topography and infrastructure varies throughout the three regions of far western Queensland. However, the picture above conveys the actual and metaphorical distance that these consumers face in accessing health and human services.