

The effectiveness of residential treatment services for individuals with substance use disorders: A review of recent evidence

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Introduction and Aims: Residential treatment presents a unique opportunity to address the complex needs of substance dependent individuals. This review provides a comprehensive update on the evidence base for residential treatment, identifying the most effective current models, limitations and strengths.

Method / Approach: We systematically searched health and psychology databases (Medline, CINAHL, PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO), and snowballing techniques were used to identify additional studies. Studies were reviewed if they: were published between 2013 and 2017, were quantitative, assessed the effectiveness of residential treatment programs for adults, were published in English, and in academic journals. The Effective Public Health Practice Project's Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies was used to assess methodological quality.

Results: Eleven studies were identified for systematic review including five methodologically strong, two moderate and four weak. Quality ratings were impacted by numerous common limitations including attrition at follow-up and poor research design. Results provide moderate quality evidence that therapeutic communities (and other residential treatment) can result in good outcomes across multiple life domains.

Discussions and Conclusions: Despite the growing need for effective residential treatment internationally, the field continues to lack quality research to inform practice. In line with previous reviews, this review provides moderate quality evidence that therapeutic communities and residential treatment improve substance use and recidivism outcomes. Additionally, there was some evidence that these treatments can improve social relationships and mental health.

Implications for Practice or Policy: With caution, results suggest that current best practice includes the integration of mental health treatment and aftercare. Clinical practice should also focus on improving the collection of client outcome data.

Implications for Translational Research: Common methodological flaws may be addressed through data linkage of health administrative data. Additional linkages with welfare and justice administrative data may also enhance understanding of risk and recovery trajectories.