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First published: February 20, 2023

Mental distress high, door to door survey finds

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If someone came to your front door and asked if they could talk to you about your mental health, would you invite them in for a cuppa?

A recent government-funded project did just that, doorknocking around 37,500 homes across the country. They found a surprisingly high proportion, 46 per cent, were prepared to have the face-to-face conversation, and the information gathered was disturbing.

Run by Community Mental Health Australia, the project found nearly half of those who spoke reported being in some sort of mental distress, and one-third said they needed more support than they were receiving.

Of those who said they wanted to seek help with their mental health, 43 per cent said they weren't able to, for reasons including cost, not knowing where to go to get support, or being too afraid, embarrassed or ashamed to ask.

Precarious housing, employment challenges and financial stress also correlated with higher levels of distress, the study showed.

Importantly, according to an evaluation of the project by the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia, the conversations sparked action.

Six in ten said they felt encouraged to speak to a loved one about their own mental health and wellbeing, the evaluation found.

And more than half took some further action or set a plan to seek professional help, with 32 per cent contacting a professional, a service or a community organisation to ask about support for their mental health or wellbeing.

"People welcomed the chance to open up and discuss their support needs with a stranger knocking at their front door, often expressing their struggles while also not being aware of all the support options," Centre for Social impact researcher Lisette Kaleveld said.

"Prohibitive costs, shame, the preference to self-manage and not knowing what supports are available were the most common barriers to people accessing support.

"It is clearly an uphill battle for too many people to access the support they need, especially if they are already in distress or juggling various crises such as financial or housing stress at the same time," Dr Kaleveld said.

Community Mental Health Australia chief executive officer Bill Gye said the research showed the connection between the mental health crisis and other societal issues, but they were too often treated separately in public policy discussions.

"Most people think of greater health expenditure as the policy response to the mental health crisis, but we need to be thinking more broadly about the underlying causes which drive mental distress like social inequality, poverty, lack of affordable housing and poor lifestyle," Mr Gye said.

The project included input from communities in each state and territory, including Cabramatta, Toowoomba, Ipswich, Port Adelaide, Burnie, Fitzroy and Bendigo.