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Provision of peer support at the intersection of homelessness and substance use services: a 'state of the art' review.

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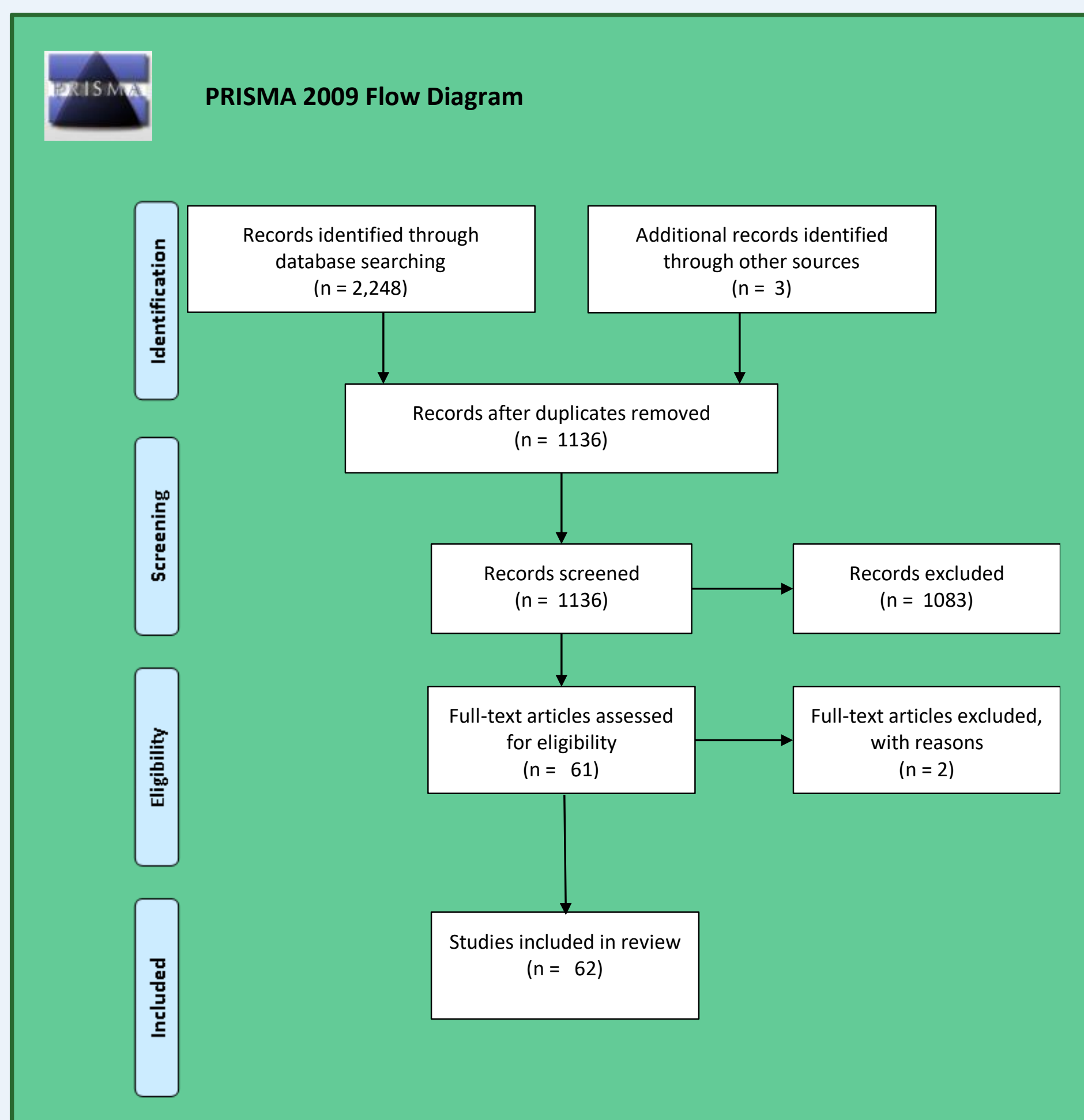
Background

- Homelessness is a complex term with no uniform definition, encompassing issues of rough sleeping, sofa surfing, and temporary accommodation.

- Those who experience homelessness represent the 'hardest-to-reach' population, with complex intersecting health and social challenges and 'tri-morbidity' - poor mental and physical health and problem substance use [1].

- Peer support refers to a process whereby individuals with lived experience of a particular phenomenon provide support to others by explicitly drawing on their experience of this situation. It has become integral to health systems [2].

- Peer support is utilised in homelessness services, criminal justice interventions, addiction treatment, and mental and physical health services ([3]; [4]; [5]).

- Peer interventions are present in numerous organisations and their prevalence is increasing.

- No review to date has explicitly examined peer support interventions at the intersection of homelessness and substance use.

Aims of the review

This 'state of the art' review provides a systematic search and synthesis of literature examining use of peer support models within services, specifically exploring the role of peers at the intersection of homelessness and substance use.
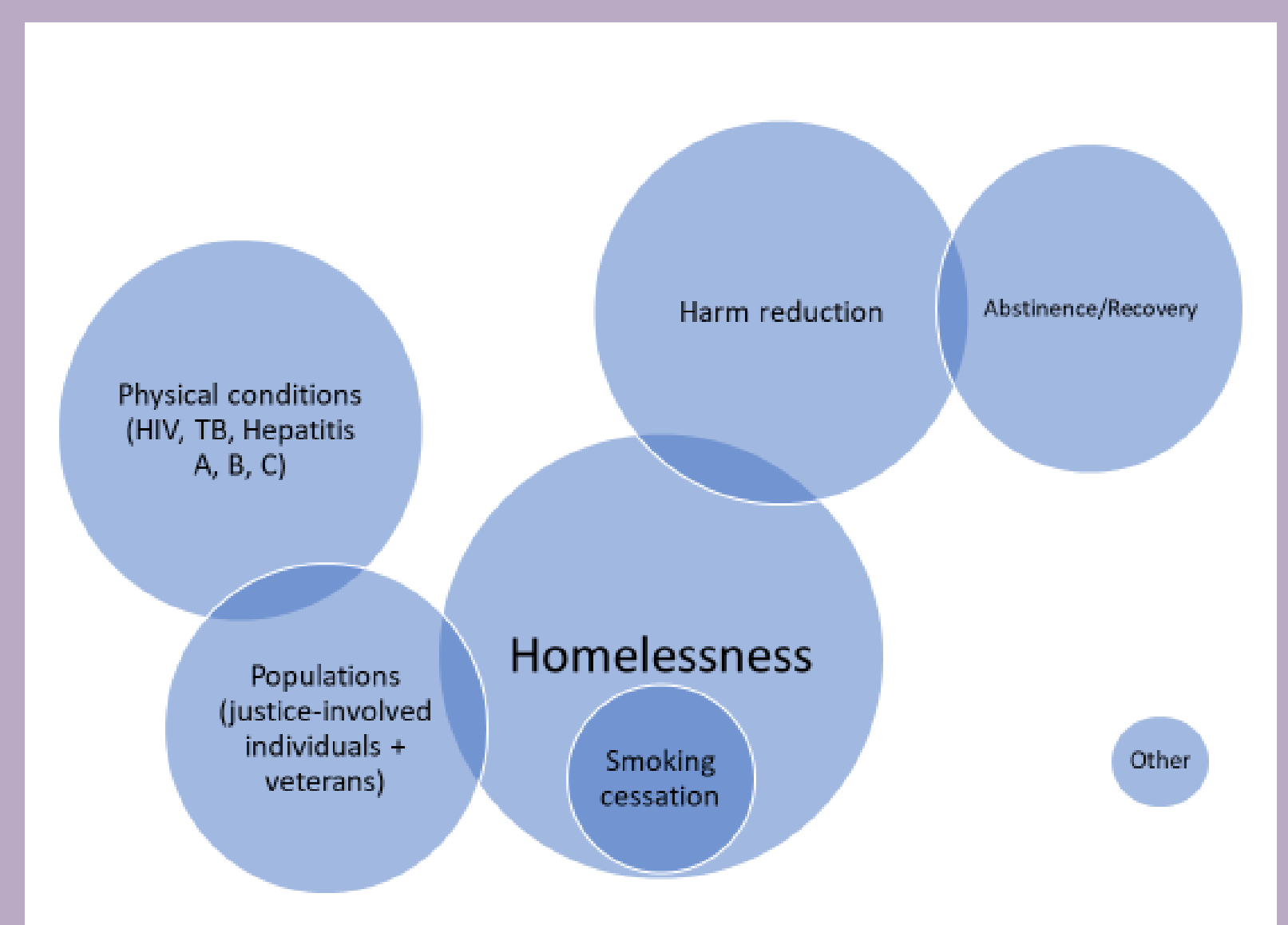
Methods

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram

Results

Recurring themes:

- **Effectiveness of peer support (n=40)**

- **Challenges for peers (n=11)**

Challenges included:

1. **Authenticity**
2. **Vulnerability**
3. **Boundaries**
4. **Stigma**
5. **Recognition of the value of peers.**

Theme	Number of papers
Harm reduction (including Needle/Syringe exchange; Supervised injection safe consumption sites; naloxone training/distribution)	13
Homelessness	15
Abstinence based programs (including AA/12 steps); relapse; and recovery	12
Smoking cessation	4
Physical health (including: Tuberculosis, Hepatitis; and HIV)	12
Particular populations (including: veterans; prisoners and criminal justice experienced individuals)	11
Other	2 (history of development of peer support; 3 separate studies commentary)

Implications for Policy and Practice

In our full paper (submitted for publication) we propose a set of guidelines and recommendations developed from the synthesis of key themes in this state of the art review regarding:

1. How to present research involving peers;
2. How to most effectively embed peers in services.

Peers are often viewed as a separate category of employees, one that lacks some of the standard workplace benefits such as support services, training opportunities, career progression and more.

It is vital that peer workers are treated fairly and comparably to other employees.

Disclaimer

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