

# When I Can't Help, I Suffer: A Scoping Review of Moral Distress in Service Providers Working with Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

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## Introduction

Service providers working in the homeless service sector are experiencing mental health decline as they work to meet the needs of clients in an overburdened and underfunded system [2, 4]. The internal and external barriers and consequences faced by nurses suffering from moral distress in research literature are comparable to service providers working with persons experiencing homelessness [3, 4, 5]. Although moral distress is widely recognized in health care, little attention has been given to the occurrence of moral distress in service providers working with persons experiencing homelessness.

## Method

To identify the scope of literature on moral distress among service providers working with persons experiencing homelessness, we conducted a scoping review using Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework, informed by PRISMA ScR guidelines [1, 6]. We searched 9 databases: EMBASE, Medline, PsycInfo, AMED, CINAHL, Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Nursing and Allied Health, and Social Service Abstracts. Two independent raters performed the title and abstract screening and full-text review.

## Results

The Search strategy is current to August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023. A total of 2097 participants from 40 studies were included in this review. Qualitative data was synthesized narratively using content analysis. Four distinct themes were generated.

**Theme 1: Helping Is Part Of Our Moral Identity, It's Who We Are**

1. My professional role is fulfilling
2. We fight to get clients the help they need

**Theme 2: We Are Doing The Best We Can, But There Are So Many Barriers**

1. Structural and system barriers
2. Organizational barriers
3. External agency barriers

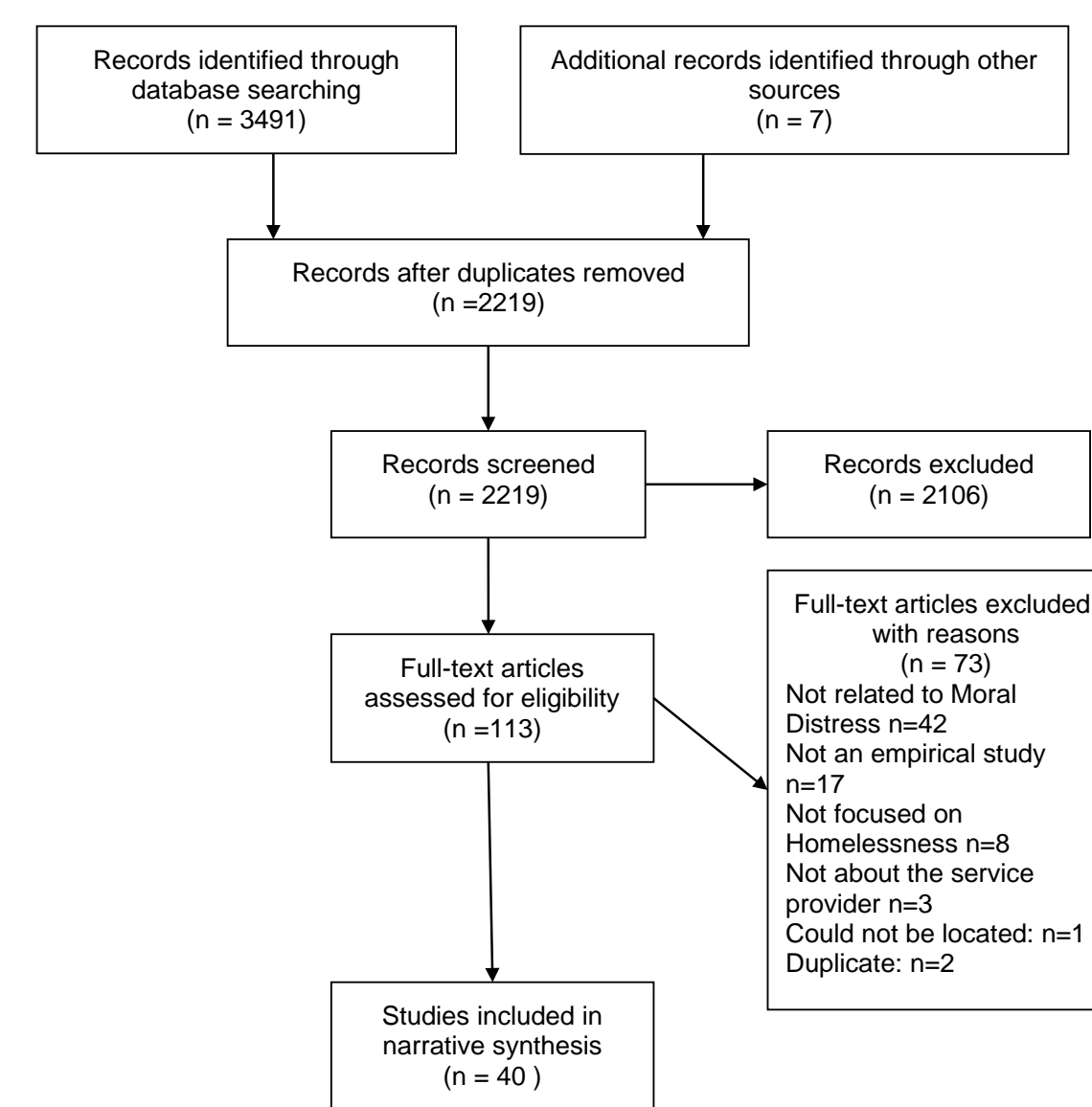
**Theme 3: Working With Persons Experiencing Homelessness Is Emotionally Demanding Work**

1. Witnessing human suffering
2. Dealing with crisis and critical events
3. The client as a barrier to care
4. Having to do things you don't want to

**Theme 4: It's More Than We Can Take, We're Not Okay**

1. The COVID-19 Pandemic made things worse
2. The high cost of caring

PRISMA Flow Diagram



## Discussion

Findings demonstrate that service providers are experiencing moral distress due to the multiple constraints that prevent them from fulfilling their moral value of helping. Service providers were experiencing moral distress concurrently with other mental health consequences related to their work.

**Practice:** Organizational leaders need to work toward reducing barriers, promoting healthy work environments, and increasing mental health support for service providers.

**Policy:** There is a need for affordable quality housing and increased funding for resources, staff training, adequate pay, and improved mental health support for service providers.

**Research:** We must deepen our understanding of moral distress experienced by service providers in the homeless service sector. More research in this area is needed.

## References

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