

Selecting databases for literature searching in social care

With a focus on crime, homelessness and substance use disorders

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Introduction

Searches for systematic reviews (SR) should be exhaustive and conducted in multiple databases in order to minimize publication and selection bias. SRs in social care is no exception. There is little guidance on which databases, or combination of databases, that should be used when conducting systematic reviews in social care. Our experience is that this leads to uncertainty in the selection of databases. As a consequence, a larger number of databases is used in comparison to topics like medicine. Our objective is to investigate:

1. Which databases index the journal articles included in a set of SRs within social care (crime, homelessness and substance use disorders)?
2. The minimum number of databases needed to find all included articles.

Methods

723 unique journal articles, included in 25 SRs from the Campbell Collaboration and from the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU), have been used as a gold standard set (GS) in this database coverage analysis. The SRs were divided into three subgroups based on topic:

- **Crime:** 14 SRs with the total of 428 included articles
- **Homelessness:** 4 SRs with 214 included articles
- **Substance use disorders:** 7 SRs with 81 included articles

Results

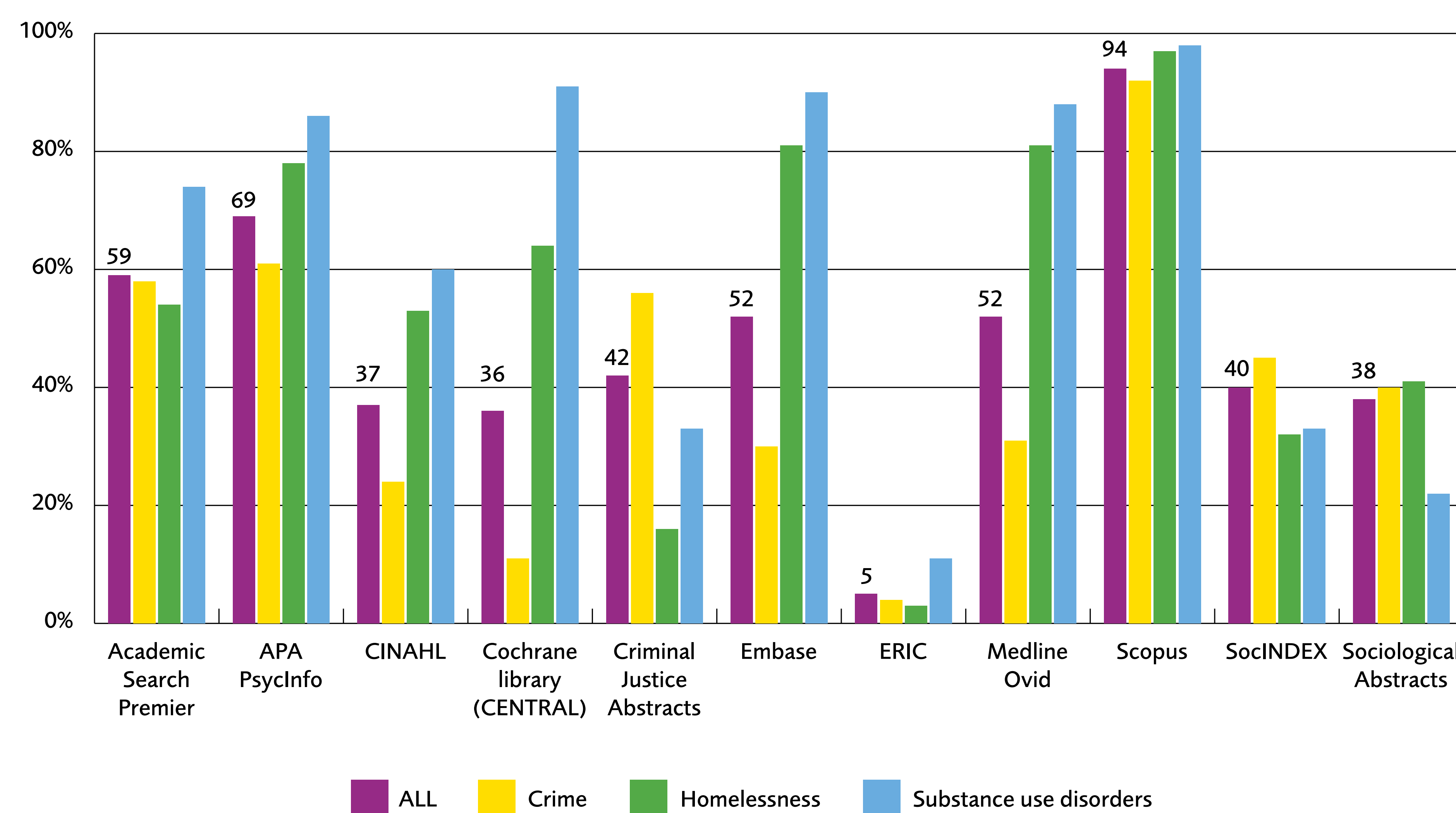


Figure 1 Percentage of included article references identified in selected databases. Overall result and subgroups.

Each of the included article references has been searched in 11 bibliographic databases. All references have been registered in an excel spreadsheet noting indexing status for all databases, see Figure 1. When calculating the minimum number of databases needed (question 2), we started with the database containing most of the included articles (Scopus), and added the databases needed to identify the remaining articles, see Figure 2-4.

A majority of the 25 SRs includes gray material. However, this analysis focuses on the journal articles.

Conclusion and discussion

Our study shows that Scopus has the highest coverage of articles in our GS, regardless of subgroup. For all subgroups a combination of two or three databases is enough to cover almost all articles. Interestingly, given their focus on social care, SocIndex and Sociological Abstracts covered relatively few of the included articles and only two unique articles. However, Criminal Justice Abstracts seems to be useful when searching the Crime topic, identifying five unique articles from five SRs.

Results

Databases needed to identify all references, in addition to Scopus. Presented in percentage rounded to whole numbers by subgroup.

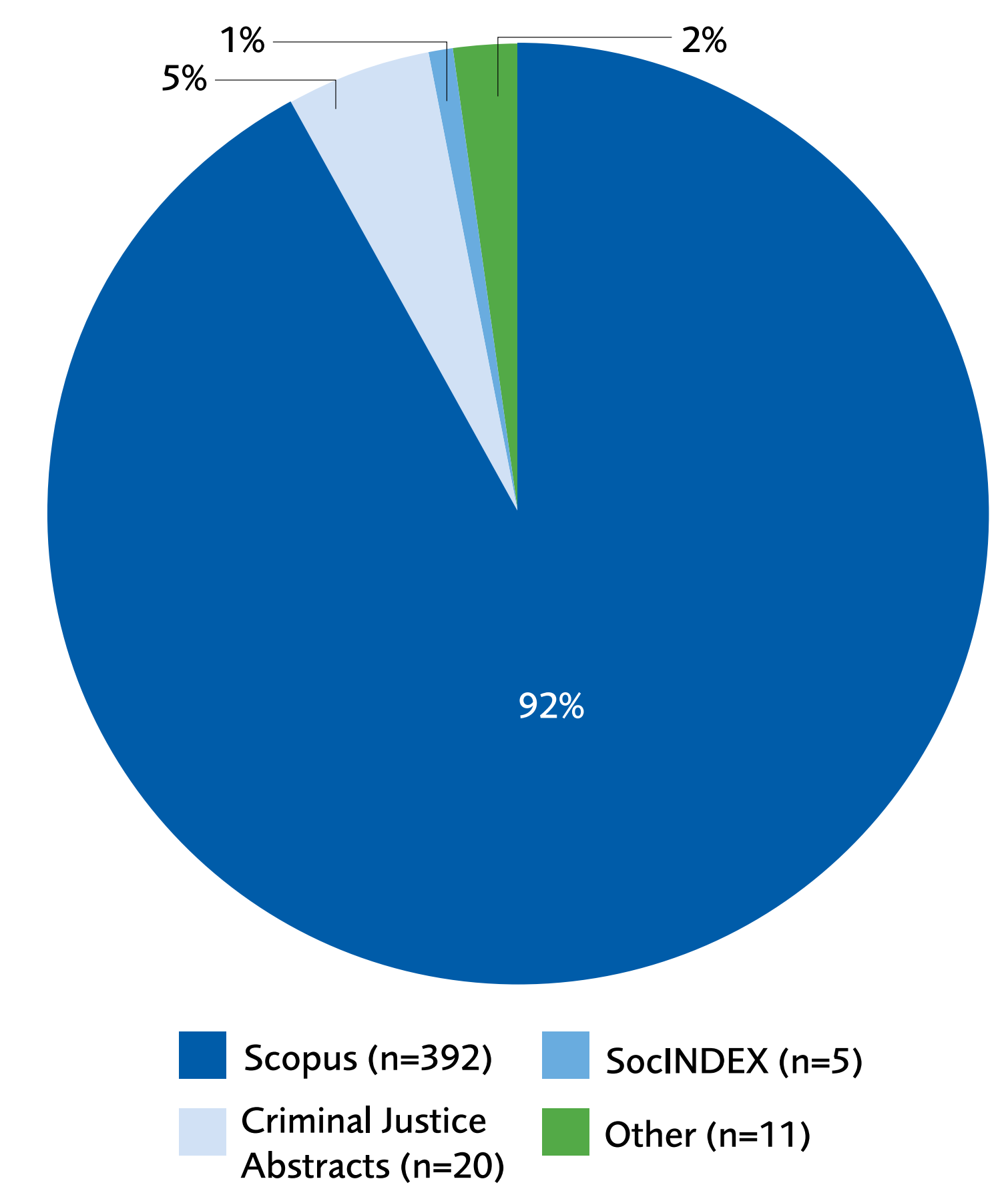


Figure 2 Crime.

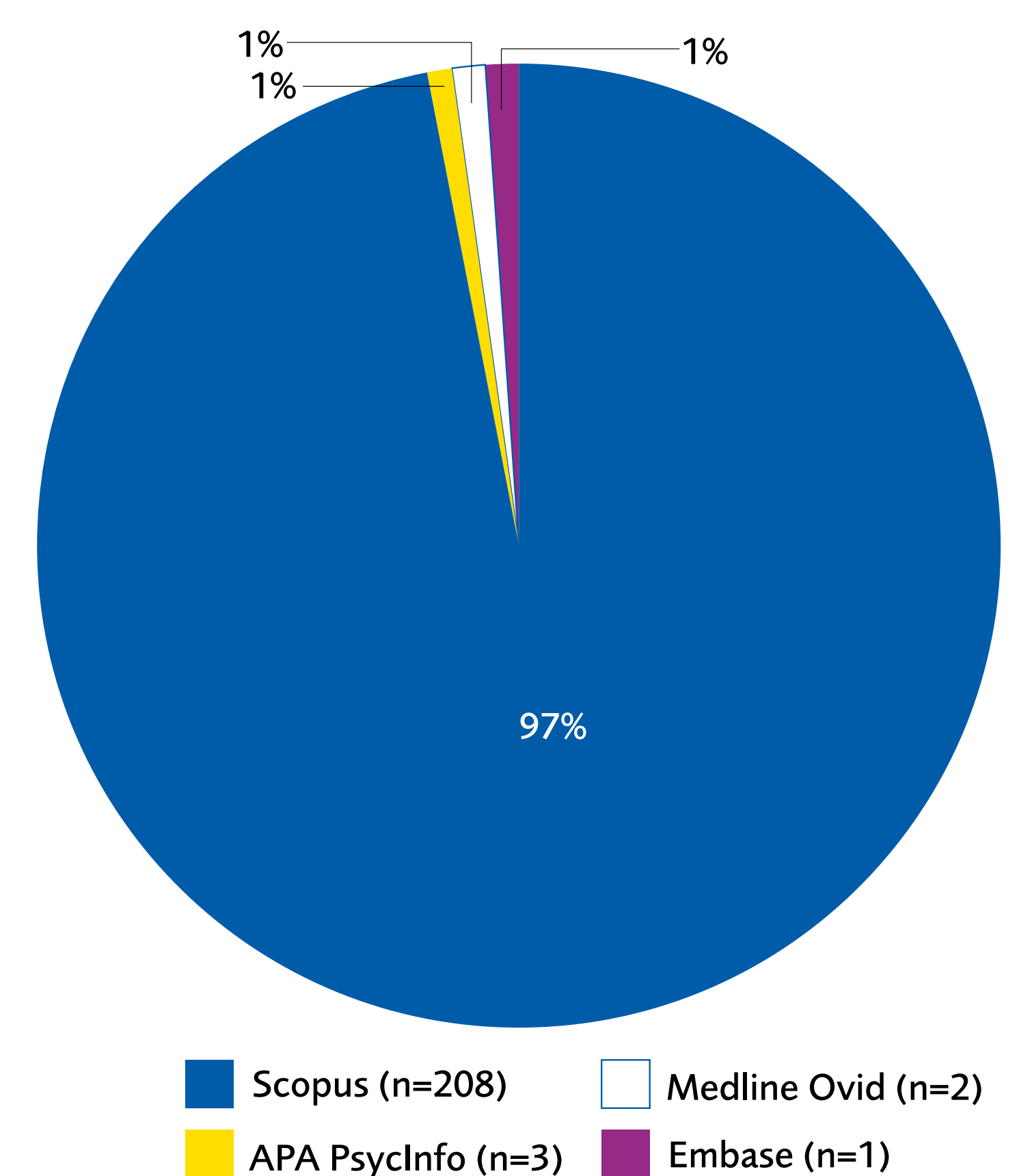


Figure 3 Homelessness.

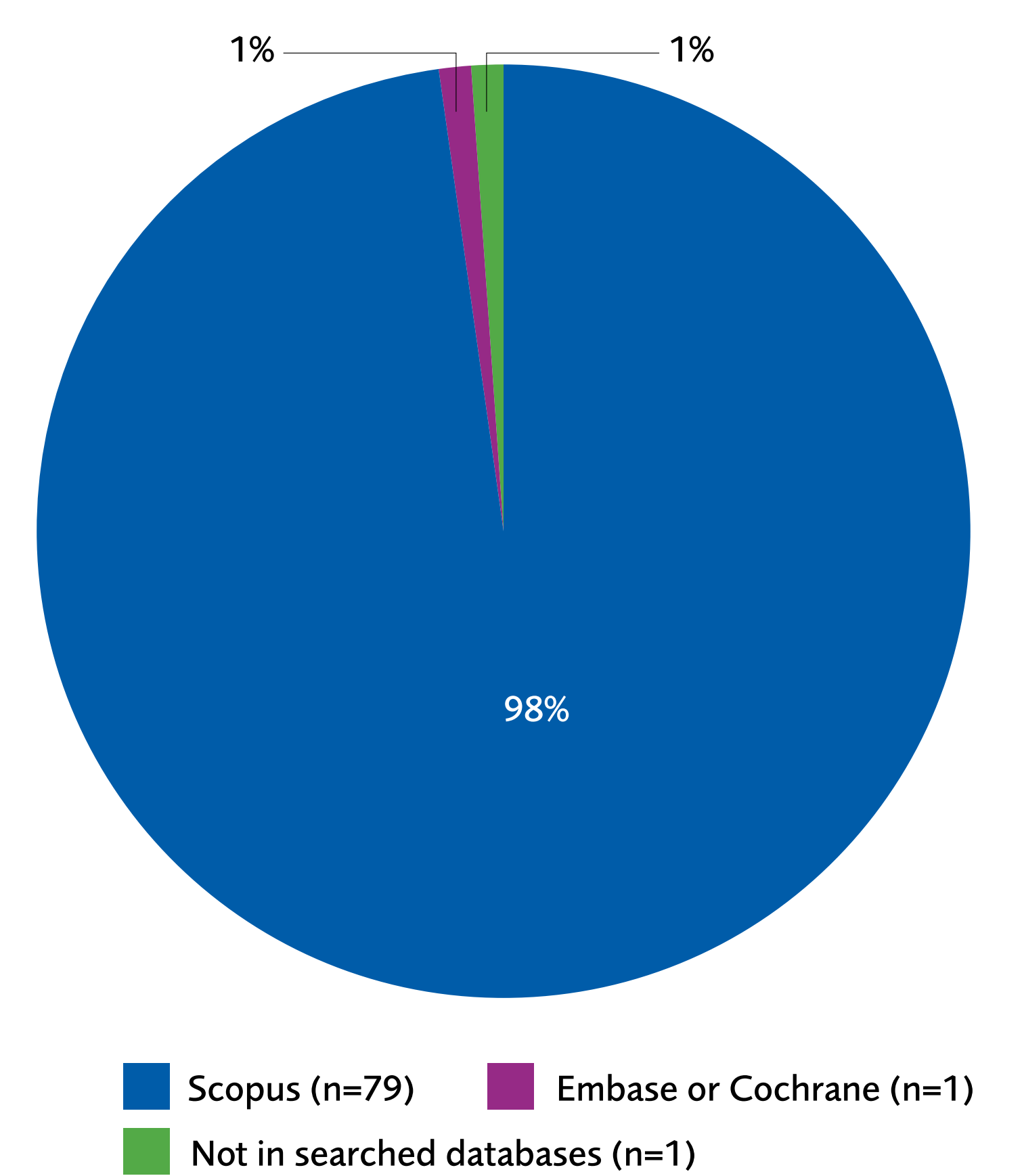


Figure 4 Substance use disorders.



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