Homeless People

Edited by Justin Healey

Volume | 351
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Homeless People is Volume 351 in the ‘Issues in Society’ series of educational resource books. The aim of this series is to offer current, diverse information about important issues in our world, from an Australian perspective.

KEY ISSUES IN THIS TOPIC
On any given night, 105,000 Australians are homeless and without safe, secure or affordable housing. Every day, more than half the people who request immediate accommodation from homelessness services are turned away. Homelessness has profound effects on various groups in society including families, young people, women escaping domestic violence, indigenous Australians, and people with substance abuse and mental health problems. Homelessness results in social and economic costs to individuals, families, communities and the nation. How is homelessness currently defined and how are homeless people counted? Who are the homeless and how can they be housed?

This book presents a current overview of the plight of Australia’s homeless, exploring their unmet needs and strategies to address the entrenched problem of homelessness. There’s no place like home – but what happens if you have no home at all?

SOURCES OF INFORMATION
Titles in the ‘Issues in Society’ series are individual resource books which provide an overview on a specific subject comprised of facts and opinions.

The information in this resource book is not from any single author, publication or organisation. The unique value of the ‘Issues in Society’ series lies in its diversity of content and perspectives.

The content comes from a wide variety of sources and includes:

➤ Newspaper reports and opinion pieces
➤ Website fact sheets
➤ Magazine and journal articles
➤ Statistics and surveys
➤ Government reports
➤ Literature from special interest groups

CRITICAL EVALUATION
As the information reproduced in this book is from a number of different sources, readers should always be aware of the origin of the text and whether or not the source is likely to be expressing a particular bias or agenda.

It is hoped that, as you read about the many aspects of the issues explored in this book, you will critically evaluate the information presented. In some cases, it is important that you decide whether you are being presented with facts or opinions. Does the writer give a biased or an unbiased report? If an opinion is being expressed, do you agree with the writer?

EXPLORING ISSUES
The ‘Exploring issues’ section at the back of this book features a range of ready-to-use worksheets relating to the articles and issues raised in this book. The activities and exercises in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond.

FURTHER RESEARCH
This title offers a useful starting point for those who need convenient access to information about the issues involved. However, it is only a starting point. The ‘Web links’ section at the back of this book contains a list of useful websites which you can access for more reading on the topic.
INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is not just the result of too few houses. Its causes are many and varied. Domestic violence, a shortage of affordable housing, unemployment, mental illness, family breakdown and drug and alcohol abuse all contribute to the level of homelessness in Australia (FaHCSIA, 2008). Homelessness is not a choice. Homelessness is one of the most potent examples of disadvantage in the community, and one of the most important markers of social exclusion (Department of Human Services, 2002).

Effective targeting of policies and services for reducing homelessness and allowing all Australians to participate in society requires transparent, consistent and repeatable statistics. However, there are many dimensions to homelessness, and different statistics are needed for different purposes. Guidance on using different data sources on homelessness will be released in 2012 in the ABS Information Paper: Guide to Homelessness Statistics (cat. no. 4923.0).

Prevalence estimates (of how many people experienced homelessness at a particular point-in-time) allow society to judge the scale of homelessness, and can be used to report trends and to target services to prevent or ameliorate the circumstances of homelessness through knowing both the locations of the homeless and their characteristics.

While homelessness itself is not a characteristic that is directly collected in the Census of Population and Housing, estimates of the homeless population may be derived from the Census using analytical techniques based on both the characteristics observed in the Census and assumptions about the way people may respond to Census questions.

This publication presents estimates of the prevalence of homelessness, and the characteristics and living arrangements of those likely to be homeless, on Census night 2011 and compares those estimates to 2006 and 2001. Estimates are also provided for people whose living arrangements are close to the statistical boundary of homelessness, but who are not classified as homeless.

For some groups of people, Census variables provide limited opportunity to estimate those likely to be homeless. Three key groups are: homeless youth; homeless people displaced due to domestic and family violence; and homeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Domestic violence, a shortage of affordable housing, unemployment, mental illness, family breakdown and drug and alcohol abuse all contribute to the level of homelessness in Australia.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the Census variables for the analysis of homelessness, the estimates presented in this publication have been compiled on a generally consistent basis so that they can be compared over time to track increases or decreases in homelessness. Any unavoidable inconsistencies in methodology are described and broadly quantified so that users can understand any limitations in comparisons over time.

An overview of the ABS methodology for estimating homelessness from the Census is provided in Appendix 1: Estimation Methodology. For more information, see Information Paper – Methodology for Estimating Homelessness from the Census of Population and Housing (cat. no. 2049.0.55.001).

The ABS definition of homelessness underpins the
methodology used to compile the ABS estimates of homelessness. An overview of the definition is provided in Appendix 1: Definition of Homelessness.

Under the ABS definition, a person is homeless if they do not have suitable accommodation alternatives and their current living arrangement:
➤ Is in a dwelling that is inadequate, or
➤ Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or
➤ Does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

For more information on the ABS definition of homelessness see Information Paper – A Statistical Definition of Homelessness (cat. no. 4922.0).

**KEY RESULTS**

The key homelessness estimates from the 2011 Census are:
➤ There were 105,237 people enumerated in the Census who are classified as being homeless on Census night (up from 89,728 in 2006)
➤ The homeless rate was 49 persons for every 10,000 persons enumerated in the 2011 Census, up 8% from the 45 persons in 2006 but down on the 51 persons in 2001
➤ The homelessness rate rose by 20% or more in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT, with the largest fall being in the Northern Territory down 8%
➤ Most of the increase in homelessness between 2006 and 2011 was reflected in people living in severely crowded dwellings, up from 31,531 in 2006 to 41,390 in 2011
➤ The number of people spending Census night in supported accommodation for the homeless in 2011 was 21,258, up from 17,329 in 2006
➤ There were 17,721 homeless people in boarding houses on Census night in 2011, up from 15,460 in 2006
➤ The number of homeless people in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in 2011 was 6,813, down from 7,247 in 2006
➤ About three quarters of the increase in the homelessness estimate was accounted for by people who were born overseas
➤ There was little change in the total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who were homeless (up 3% to 26,744 in 2011)
➤ 60% of homeless people in 2011 were aged under 35 years, and 22% of the increase in homelessness was in the 25 to 34 years age group (up 22% to 19,311 homeless people in 2011)
➤ The male homelessness rate fell slightly to 56 males per 10,000 males enumerated in the 2011 Census, while the rate rose slightly for females to 42 per 10,000 females, and
➤ Among those people who were not classified as being homeless on Census night but were living in some form of marginal housing and may be at risk of homelessness, the number of people living in improvised dwellings fell sharply, down 42% to 4,504 people in 2011, the number of people marginally housed in caravan parks was little changed (at 12,963 people in 2011), while the number of people living in crowded dwellings requiring three extra bedrooms jumped 41% to 60,875 in 2011.

The following table (see below) presents the time series of homelessness estimates for the six operational groups for 2001, 2006 and 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.1: PERSONS BY HOMELESS OPERATIONAL GROUPS, 2001, 2006 AND 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2001</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persons who are in improvised dwellings, tents or sleepers out</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Persons staying temporarily with other households</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persons staying in boarding houses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persons in other temporary lodging</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persons living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALL HOMELESS PERSONS</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Severe overcrowding

People living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings (i.e. usual residents of dwellings which needed four or more extra bedrooms to accommodate them adequately) have been the largest homeless group in each of the last 3 Censuses. While the number of people in this group fell slightly between 2001 and 2006, it jumped 31% (or 9,857 people) to 41,390 in 2011 and accounted for most of the rise in homelessness. Two thirds of the rise in ‘severe’ crowding is attributable to a doubling of the number of people in this homelessness group who were born overseas.

In 2011 there were 5,915 people in severely crowded dwellings who were born overseas and who had arrived in Australia in 2006 or earlier, similar to the total number of all overseas born people in this homeless group in 2006. However, in 2011 there were an additional 6,265 people born overseas that arrived in Australia after 2006 and were living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings on Census night.

People arriving from China, New Zealand, Afghanistan and India accounted for about half the rise in the overseas born estimate for this homelessness group.

Overseas born homeless people in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings accounted for more than half the rise in homelessness in both the 19 to 24 years age group and in the 25 to 34 years age group.

Supported accommodation

After severe crowding, supported accommodation for the homeless was the largest homeless group in 2011, accounting for 20% of homeless people on Census night. There were 21,258 people in supported accommodation in 2011, up 23% on 2006. While Victoria was still the jurisdiction with the largest number of people in supported accommodation, its share had slipped a little due to stronger rises in both New South Wales and Queensland.

While supported accommodation accounts for 20% of the homeless in 2011, it accounts for 31% of homeless children aged under 12 years, and 28% of youth aged 12 to 18 years. There were slightly more females than males in supported accommodation in 2011, while across all other homeless groups males outnumber females by 39%.

Indigenous people were over represented generally in the 2011 homelessness estimates (25%) and in supported accommodation (15%). However, in supported accommodation the not stated rate for indigenous status is double that for all homelessness and may mask an even higher proportion of indigenous people in supported accommodation.

See Appendix 4 of the Census for a comparison of ABS Census based estimates of people in supported accommodation and estimates from the new Specialist Homelessness Services Collection conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Boarding houses

There were 17,721 homeless people in boarding houses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATES AND TERRITORIES</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>37.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>904.4</td>
<td>791.7</td>
<td>730.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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on Census night in 2011, up 15% on the estimate for 2006 but still well down on the 21,300 estimate for 2001.

The homeless boarding house population is overwhelmingly male (75%), and much older than the rest of the homeless population – 46% of the boarding house homeless population is aged 45 years and over, compared to 22% of the other homeless groups being of that age.

See Appendix 2 of the Census on methodology which describes some changes for the boarding house estimates that may account for some of the rise between 2006 and 2011.

**Homeless and staying temporarily in other households**

The 17,369 homeless people staying as visitors temporarily in other households and who reported no usual address accounted for 17% of the homeless population in 2011, and was down slightly on the estimate for 2006. This group includes homeless people staying as visitors with friends and relatives and people who were homeless in ‘visitor only’ households where none of the persons present on Census night usually lived in that dwelling.

Homelessness is not a choice. Homelessness is one of the most potent examples of disadvantage in the community, and one of the most important markers of social exclusion.

This visitor homeless group reflects the average male/female ratio of all homeless people in 2011 (56% to 44%), and while younger than the boarding house population is older than either the supported accommodation or severely crowded groups (35% of this homeless group were aged over 45 years and older).

As noted in the introduction, some groups, in particular youth, those escaping domestic and family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are likely to be underestimated in this category of homelessness because, despite their homelessness, a usual address may be reported for them on Census night and therefore they cannot be distinguished from people who were visitors on Census night and who were not homeless.

**Improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out**

There were 6,813 homeless people in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in 2011, down 6% on 2006. Males are over represented in this homeless group (68%) as are Indigenous Australians (25%).

**States and Territories**

In 2011, there were similar rates of homelessness in New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland (ranging from 41 to 46 homeless persons per 10,000 persons), while South Australia and Tasmania had the lowest rates (38 and 32 homeless persons per 10,000 persons). While the Northern Territory had the highest rate of homelessness in Australia in 2011 (731 persons homeless per 10,000 persons), this was an improvement on the homelessness rate in 2006 of 792.

In the Northern Territory, 85% of the homeless were in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings in 2011. Severe crowding in the other States and Territories ranged between 12% in Tasmania to 43% in Western Australia. Compared to other
States and Territories, the Northern Territory also had a high rate of homeless persons in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out at 40 per 10,000 persons. The next highest rates were in Western Australia and Queensland (each 4 per 10,000 persons).

The rates of people in supported accommodation for the homeless were highest in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory (31 and 27 persons respectively per 10,000 of their populations). The rates in supported accommodation were lower in the other jurisdictions, ranging from 4 persons per 10,000 in WA to 15 in Victoria.

**Youth**

Most of the homeless youth aged 12-18 years in 2011 were in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings (56%) or in supported accommodation for the homeless (28%). While 8% of homeless people aged 12-18 years were staying temporarily with other households, this proportion increases to 14% for youth aged 19-24 years.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples made up 2.5% of the Australian population in 2011. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians accounted for 25% of all persons who were homeless on Census night in 2011 (26,744). Of those who were classified as homeless, 75% were living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings (the same proportion as in 2006), 12% were in supported accommodation for the homeless and 6% were in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out. For non-indigenous homeless persons, 30% were living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings, 20% were in supported accommodation, and 7% were in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out.

The estimate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who were homeless on Census night is likely to be an underestimate, particularly for those staying temporarily with other households, reflecting both a relatively large underenumeration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons in the Census and because for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians a usual address may be reported that is associated with a ‘place’ rather than with a home or dwelling (see Explanatory Notes of the Census for more information).

**Marginally housed and at risk of homelessness**

People who were not classified as being homeless on Census night but were living in some form of marginal housing and may be at risk of homelessness are people whose living arrangements are close to the statistical boundary of homelessness. The number of people marginally housed and living in improvised dwellings fell sharply, down 42% to 4,504 people in 2011, the number of people marginally housed in caravan parks was little changed (at 12,963 people in 2011), while the number of people living in crowded dwellings requiring three extra bedrooms jumped 41% to 60,875 in 2011.

As in 2006, for the marginally housed population living in other crowded dwellings the rate in 2011 was highest in the Northern Territory with 244 per 10,000 persons, followed by New South Wales (32) and Victoria (25).

**REFERENCES**


New data shows there is much work to do

HOMELESSNESS AUSTRALIA RESPONDS TO THE RELEASE OF NEW HOMELESS STATISTICS

Crucial new data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has found that the number of Australians experiencing homelessness on Census night increased by 17% to 105,237 people, prompting a call for an urgent injection of new funding to ensure that more Australians can access the affordable housing and support services that they need to end their homelessness and achieve greater levels of social and economic participation.

In 2008, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pledged to reduce overall homelessness by twenty per cent by the end of 2013 and halve it by 2020. Today’s data provides the first national, State/Territory and regional breakdown of homelessness numbers since the historic announcement and homelessness advocates are worried.

“We had expected to see a decline in homelessness numbers given the significant new investment in homelessness programs and services and social housing over the past four years. The new figures demonstrate that urgent action is needed to ensure we deliver the right housing and support services to people to ensure that we can continue to reduce homelessness over time. This includes addressing structural drivers like poverty, labour market exclusion, domestic and family violence and the high number of exits into homelessness from corrections, mental health settings and state care,” Homelessness Australia’s Chairperson Narelle Clay said today.

Homelessness Australia believes that the following urgent steps must be taken in order to ensure we get back on track and make progress towards meeting the target of halving homelessness by 2020.

What needs to happen …

➤ We need an affordable housing growth fund built into the next National Affordable Housing Agreement to deliver a minimum of 20,000 new affordable homes each year including a dedicated pool for people experiencing domestic and family violence and homelessness
➤ The operational subsidy for public housing should be funded on a per dwelling basis not per capita to discourage States and Territories from selling off low-cost housing
➤ The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness should be re-funded for a further four years with a minimum of $1.2 billion of new money. The current agreement expires 30 June 2013
➤ Early intervention programs that have been proven to work should be given funding certainty and not treated like pilot programs
➤ Non-pension allowance payments should be increased by a minimum of $50 per week to give people reliant on income support some chance of meeting the costs of living especially rent
➤ The National Rental Affordability Scheme should be extended for a further 5 years to 2021.

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DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS
CHANGES BUT PROBLEMS REMAIN

Changes in how homeless people are defined and counted have reduced the previously accepted numbers – but how successful have Australian governments really been in reducing homelessness, asks James Farrell

The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ revised definition of homelessness will give us a clearer understanding of the crisis in Australia.

The existing definition

Since 2001, the ‘cultural definition’ of homelessness, developed by Melbourne academics Chris Chamberlain and David Mackenzie, has been used to describe the nature and extent of homelessness in Australia. This definition defines homelessness as not having access to:

“the minimum accommodation that people have the right to expect in order to live according to the conventions of contemporary life”.

Chamberlain and Mackenzie describe the accepted minimum Australian community standard as “a small rented flat”, with the minimum required amenities, such as a bedroom, living room, bathroom and kitchen.

This ‘cultural definition’ of homelessness led to the identification of three categories within the homeless population:

a) Primary homelessness – people without conventional accommodation living on the streets, in deserted buildings, railway carriages, under bridges and in parks (‘rough sleepers’)

b) Secondary homelessness – people moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends’ homes, emergency accommodation, refuges and hostels, and

c) Tertiary homelessness – people living permanently in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom or kitchen and without security of tenure. They are homeless because their accommodation does not satisfy the requisite conditions of the minimum community standard.

The ABS endorsed this ‘cultural’ definition of homelessness, but in 2009 advised that it was reviewing Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s
A new definition

The ABS released a discussion paper reviewing the methodology of Counting the Homeless in March 2011. It didn’t change the definition but it challenged some of the assumptions that informed the definition. The discussion paper was criticised for lacking consultation with experts and failing to have an on-the-ground understanding of homelessness.

Commendably, the ABS then took the opportunity to engage more fully with experts in homelessness policy and service delivery. As a result of this work, the ABS released a report earlier this month that includes a new definition of homelessness:

When a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

> Is in a dwelling that is inadequate, or
> Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or
> Does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

Unlike the cultural definition, which judges the adequacy of housing against an amorphous ‘standard’, this new definition is informed by the notion of ‘home’ and the elements that are consistently identified with home. The definition is intended to operationalise the collection of official estimates of homelessness through the Census. While an admirable goal, this presents several practical difficulties.

The definition includes elements of ‘habitability’ or ‘adequacy’, which aren’t measured by Census data. And the definition fails to address any specific cultural definition issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ understandings of home or homelessness, which the ABS have committed to addressing.

Interestingly, the Commonwealth is now contemplating a new statutory definition of homelessness. The Commonwealth’s definition has been criticised for introducing an element of choice into peoples’ experience of homelessness, risking the perpetuation of the common myth that people choose to be homeless.

It is unfortunate that there will be multiple definitions rather than a commonly accepted and understood definition, but the loose consensus on the ABS’s work may lead to an agreed definition and understanding of homelessness.

Recounting the homeless

A week after releasing the new definition, the ABS recast the estimate of people who were counted as homeless through the Census process in 2001 and 2006. As a result, the number of homeless Australians counted changed from about 100,000 to over 95,000 in 2001 and 105,000 to almost 90,000 in 2006.

There are also changes in demographic groups: the estimate of people experiencing homelessness in the Northern Territory has almost tripled; overcrowding is recognised as a new form of homelessness; and the number of young people (aged 12-18) has halved. The measurement of young homeless people is particularly problematic (acknowledged by the ABS) and may be the clearest example of the shortcomings of using census data to measure homelessness.

While the use of Census data is problematic, this data shows a minor decrease in the number of people experiencing homelessness from 2001 to 2006, and the ABS will release its estimation of homelessness from the 2011 census later this year, which will hopefully show a further decrease.

Despite the revised figures, as Council to Homeless Persons CEO Jenny Smith points out, there is still a huge and growing demand for homelessness services, with thousands of people becoming homeless on any given night and limited resources in the sector to deal with this pressure.

The ABS’s commendable work in measuring homelessness will enable the government to report against its commitment to halve homelessness by 2020. While the census isn’t the only tool, it is part of a body of work that will contribute to a better understanding of homelessness, and how it can be ended.

James Farrell is Lecturer in Law at Deakin University.
Domestic and family violence
Issues with violence in relation to housing and homelessness

Domestic violence can take the shape of physical, sexual, emotional, economic or spiritual abuse. In most cases the perpetrators of domestic violence are men. Almost half of the women with children staying in homeless assistance services are escaping domestic violence. One in four women escaping domestic violence are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are also more likely to have four or more children accompanying them to homeless services. One in every two women who approach services for women escaping domestic violence is turned away due to lack of accommodation or lack of resources. Women in rural and remote areas have less access to assistance from services, family, friends and police which puts them at increased risk of homelessness or unsafe housing.

One in every five women over 15 in Australia will experience sexual violence and one in three women over 15 will experience physical violence. Young women who grow up in families affected by domestic violence are more likely to be in violent relationships as adults. Women also experience higher levels of poverty than men, have lower rates of employment and levels of pay. This inequality and experience of violence puts women and female headed households at increased risk of homelessness.

Resolving issues with violence in relation to housing and homelessness

➤ Women and their children must be supported to stay in the family home when domestic violence is confirmed and the perpetrator is evicted when it is safe to do so. This will require appropriate risk assessment and management, an integrated response from courts, law enforcement, housing and support services with a focus on survivor safety and perpetrator accountability

➤ Women in regional, rural and remote areas escaping domestic violence require an increased range of safe housing options and services

➤ We need an immediate increase in funding for crisis specialist refuge and outreach accommodation to support women and children who have left domestic and family violence situations. More funding is needed so that services are not forced to accommodate women and children in hotels and motels which is expensive, frequently unsafe and unsustainable

➤ We need to ensure that after a refuge support, women can access housing that is affordable, appropriate safe and secure. The current chronic shortage of affordable housing coupled with a shortage of beds in crisis and refuge services limits women’s options when they leave violence

➤ Older women with limited means need to be able to access social housing or subsidised private rental when they leave after years of violence.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets

ISSUE 2
Exiting care
Issues facing care leavers in relation to housing and homelessness

➤ “Not having the ability to find your own house and ending up on the streets”

➤ “No family home”

➤ “Setting up a house is expensive!”

➤ “Left to get things done by self, like power/water”

➤ “Takes too long on the housing list”

➤ “Nowhere to go when turning 18”

➤ “Private rentals are too expensive”

➤ “Young people don’t know about renting”

➤ “Not enough accommodation options”

➤ “Not enough medium- to long-term accommodation”

➤ “Eligibility and lack of housing options”.

Resolving issues facing care leavers in relation to housing and homelessness

➤ The Australian Government must commit to the ongoing expansion of funding for a range of affordable accommodation dwellings with support packages attached to tenants regardless of housing and/or tenure type. This would ensure that people can be exited into stable accommodation; the present major shortage of affordable housing makes this very difficult

➤ The Transition to Independent Living Allowance needs
to be provided on an ongoing basis as a recurring budget item. The current TILA program is inadequate and frequently runs out part way through the year forcing services to access brokerage dollars not intended for people exiting care

➤ Youth Allowance must be increased by a minimum of $50 per week and Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 30% so that young people are given some chance of sustaining themselves in an overpriced private rental market. Punishing people for being young and not yet employed is not good social policy

➤ Young people need an exit plan in place that includes multiple accommodation options. This should be negotiated well before young people exit care and fully involve them in design and development. Exit plans need to be well-resourced or they will fail.

Reference: Create Foundation NYACS Summit Report 2011

ISSUE 3
Addiction

Issues with addiction and homelessness

➤ Addiction can have a devastating impact on the lives of individuals and families, whether that addiction is to gambling, alcohol or illicit drugs. The sheer expense of dependency particularly on gambling and powdered illicit drugs and the disruption it can cause to work patterns may leave people financially unable to service a mortgage or pay rent

➤ Often, dependency on alcohol, gambling or illicit drugs follow other life events and it should be noted that people with chronic addiction problems have had histories of trauma, institutionalisation and abuse. This series of events then leads them to become homeless and it may compound other problems placing people at risk of entrenched, chronic homelessness

➤ Research conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence estimates as many as 1 in 10 men in crisis services are there at least in part because of gambling addiction

ISSUE 4
Disability

Issues with disability in relation to housing and homelessness

➤ There is a dearth of research and data on the subject of non-psychiatric disabilities amongst people experiencing homelessness in Australia

➤ Until recently the main information we did have related to forms of dementia amongst older people experiencing homelessness and acquired brain injury typically amongst older males presenting to homelessness services after lengthy histories of trauma and abuse or long-term alcoholism

➤ Recent research funded under the National Homelessness Research Agenda has found that people with disabilities are at increased risk of becoming homeless and that disabilities may often be wrongly classified as challenging behaviours leading to people becoming barred from services and not receiving correct support

➤ The research suggests that people with physical data on alcohol and other drug use varies and often people develop alcohol and other drug problems after becoming homeless. People with substance use disorders are particularly overrepresented in the chronic homeless population.

Resolving issues with addiction in relation to housing and homelessness

➤ Confronting alcohol or other drug or gambling addiction is usually incredibly difficult and requires willingness on the part of the person. Forcing people into treatment programs doesn’t work and therefore it is difficult to see how requiring people to commit to abstinence in exchange for accommodation can help them resolve problems that have contributed to homelessness

➤ We need to see improved access to alcohol and other drug services and better coordination and linkages between the homelessness and alcohol and other drug sectors

➤ Wet housing models that do not require people to commit to giving up alcohol or other drugs but provide housing with encouragement to access services that may assist people to contemplate and confront addiction have been shown to deliver improves outcomes including a reduction in use and improved emotional wellbeing in the medium term should be promoted and supported. Such models follow a harm minimisation approach which our drug policy/strategy is supposedly underpinned by. It should therefore be possible to base access to housing on these models

➤ For many people alcohol and other drug use worsens or addiction develops after becoming homeless. This is understandable at it means that prevention and early intervention approaches that have been proven to work should be replicated and expanded as a means of reducing the correlation between addiction and homelessness.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets
disabilities are less likely to end up in the homelessness service system.

- There is a need for much better and more comprehensive research on housing careers and homelessness trajectories of people with disabilities in Australia.

**Resolving issues with disability in relation to housing and homelessness**

- The first step is better research and data capturing so that we can more accurately estimate the prevalence of intellectual and physical disabilities amongst people experiencing homelessness.
- We need to see increased support provided to families and carers of people with disabilities.
- There is a case for making people with disabilities a priority in the next National Affordable Housing Agreement. In light of the continuing move away from congregate accommodation models and more institutionalised settings we need to ensure that people with disabilities can access safe and secure, accessible housing that is affordable and meets their needs.
- As with most facets of homelessness, it is people with limited means and less economic and social capital who present to homelessness services with disabilities in need of assistance. We must ensure that economic disadvantage is addressed for people with disabilities and that the new NDIS and associated measures are closely linked to homelessness and affordable housing agendas.
- Policy directions must be aligned at a national and State/Territory level.

**ISSUE 5**

**Unemployment**

- Issues with homelessness and unemployment

- Financial crisis is a leading cause of homelessness in Australia and is most often triggered by unemployment.
- People who lose their job are required to virtually exhaust their savings before being eligible for Newstart Allowance which equates to just $35 per day. There has not been an increase to the rate of Newstart Allowance in real terms since 1995 and this makes meeting the costs of housing and other costs of living very difficult especially since rents have risen by more than the CPI each year since 2003.
- Unemployment is a significant issue facing people experiencing homelessness. For young people it is particularly damaging as it can often go hand in hand with disengagement from education and when both occur at a young age it can set people up for a long-term cycle of unemployment and entrenched disadvantage.
- Long-term unemployment has increased markedly in Australia since the recession in the late 1980s-1990s and there is now a pool of people who never regained steady and regular employment since that time.
- The intergenerational cycle of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion has for arguably the first time created multi-generations of families with minimal or no histories of successful tenancies.

**Resolving issues in relation to unemployment and homelessness**

- For young people, early intervention programs and services that ensure people remain engaged with education; vocational training and employment must be expanded and provided with recurrent funding.
- Important changes have been made to employment services in recent years which have led to better targeting of more disadvantaged job seekers. We need to see further improvements to the overall suite of support provided by government to address long-term unemployment and assist people with multiple barriers to employment including homelessness to overcome these.
- It is not helpful to force people into employment if they are not job-ready. We need to ensure that the approach to getting people into paid work is a supportive and enabling one and not one characterised by punitive measures and coercion such as through the administrative breach penalty system.
- The Newstart Allowance is woefully inadequate and punishes people for unemployment that is often caused by labour market failure. We need to see Newstart Allowance payments increased by at least $50 per week and then indexed at least to the rate of CPI each year thereafter.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets.

**ISSUE 6**

**Lack of support**

- Issues with homelessness and a lack of support

- Most people have a network of family and friends to whom they can turn in the event of a crisis or following adverse life events.
- For people without strong networks, a series of even a few major life events can result in homelessness typical caused by economic and social exclusion.
- This is not to say that people experiencing homelessness are always without support. Many have strong social networks and most are incredibly resilient and resourceful.
- It is also true however that isolation and exclusion from social and economic participation exacerbates the risk of homelessness and makes homelessness more difficult to resolve when it occurs.
- People living with mental illness who are without support are more likely to experience homelessness as a result of this than people who have strong support network to draw from.
- A lack of material support increases risk of homelessness as a result of financial crisis and unemployment.
- The high cost of rental housing coupled with the inadequacy of income support to enable individuals and families to sustain tenancies in the private rental market is placing people in housing stress and housing crisis and leading to an increase in demand on material aid organisations.
- Poorly located housing that is far from transport corridors and essential services places people at risk of social isolation and exclusion from their community.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets.
**Resolving issues in relation to homelessness and a lack of support**

- Homelessness must remain at the forefront of the social inclusion agenda. Socially inclusive communities provide opportunities for all citizens to engage and civic, cultural and social activities and institutions.
- Material support matters. We need to see an increase in income support allowance payments of at least $50 per week and an increase to Commonwealth Rent Assistance of at least 30% pending a Productivity Commission review of its efficacy.
- Client centred service delivery that delivers a holistic response to the support needs of people are important. They focus on harnessing the resilience and strengths that all people possess and have available to them.
- Increase funding to ensure the viability of day centres and other community based settings that provide points of access to a range of health and social services for people experiencing homelessness as well as being important places of social interaction, on-site case management and meals and places to store belongings.
- Locate new social housing where possible in Transit-Oriented Developments (TODs) close to transport corridors ensuring that people can readily access opportunities to participate in education, employment and training and access essential services.

**ISSUE 7**

**Illness**

**Issues with homelessness and illness**

Rates of mental illness are believed to be significantly higher amongst people experiencing homelessness in Australia than amongst those who are stably housed.

People experiencing homelessness are also at greater risk of developing chronic illnesses or suffering from diseases related to homelessness including:

- Pneumonia
- Liver disease
- End stage renal disease
- HIV/AIDS
- Hepatitis (B and C)
- Three or more inpatient hospitalisations per year
- Co-morbidity (mental illness and alcohol or other drug use disorder), and
- Tri-morbidity (mental illness, chronic physical illness and alcohol and other drug use disorder).

**Resolving issues in relation to homelessness and illness**

- People sleeping rough are frequent users of accident and emergency departments
- Generally speaking, people experiencing homelessness use the same types of health services as all of us but there are some outreach services that go directly to where people are sleeping either on the street, in homelessness services or in boarding houses. This includes mobile GPs

The most effective way to mitigate against the serious health effects that can result from homelessness is to provide people with access to stable accommodation with support services.

- Providing permanent supportive housing to people with long-term histories of homelessness has been shown to reduce costs in other areas of the service system particularly as a result of a significant reduction in admissions to accident and emergency departments.
- Many providers now offer health services to people on the site of the homelessness service. These include; psychiatric services, doctors and dentists.
- Youth friendly health services must be accessible to young people experiencing homelessness. Youth health practitioners delivering place-based services are vital.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets

**ISSUE 8**

**Refugee**

**Issues for refugees in relation to homelessness**

Humanitarian entrants face a number of significant barriers to accessing homelessness services and sustaining stable housing in Australia, including:

- Insufficient knowledge of the service system
- An inability to navigate homelessness and housing service systems
- Being discouraged from accessing services because they are ‘culturally unfriendly’
- Insufficient literacy in English making complex administrative and bureaucratic forms difficult to comprehend and complete
- Lack of access to or knowledge of how to access interpreter services
- An aversion or unwillingness to access external help
- Discouragement from accessing services from members of emerging communities
- Past experiences of discrimination
- Services not appropriately tailored to meet cultural needs
- Experiences of trauma and sustained exposure to violence in countries of origin.

**Resolving issues in relation to homelessness and refugees**

- We need to ensure that humanitarian entrants, particular people very recently granted refugee status are provided with support and a worker who can assist them to broker access to housing and other social services.
- The provision of enhanced support and information provision about how, what, when and where to access health and social services including education, employment and training.
- Provide better targeted housing assistance to recently arrived humanitarian entrants to ensure their risk of homelessness is minimised.
- Increase the supply of affordable and social housing in Australia. Homelessness Australia has previously backed call for initiatives and measures to boost

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets
housing supply that will deliver 220,000 new homes by 2020
➤ Of these we need to see provision of sufficient larger sized homes to meet the needs of families arriving from humanitarian resettlement zones and single room occupancy accommodation for younger people arriving alone
➤ Review spousal visas and actively disseminate clear guidelines and information to support women experiencing domestic violence to access help and leave violent partners without becoming homeless and socially excluded again.
   
   Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets

ISSUE 9
Mental Illness

Issues in relation to homelessness and mental illness
➤ The link between economic and social disadvantage, mental illness and homelessness is well established. People with strong family and social support networks with mid-higher level incomes do not tend to become homeless as a result of mental illness. The link then is as much about economic and social inequality as it is about mental health and wellbeing
➤ People often lose their housing when symptoms of their illness worsen and they require in-patient treatment. Their landlord may not be informed of this and it may be wrongly assumed they have abandoned the property
➤ Other people become homeless when they become unwell because they become estranged from their family or the burden placed on individual carers becomes too great. Carers and consumers need more support and respite options
➤ Workers in both sectors lament inadequate and poor coordination and collaboration between each sector. This is particularly problematic for people with co-morbidity and tri-morbidity diagnoses
➤ Homelessness service workers report finding it incredibly difficult to secure referrals to specialist mental health services let alone in a timely manner
➤ There is a lack of suitable affordable and well-located housing options for people living with mental illness.

Resolving issues in relation to homelessness and mental illness
➤ There is an urgent and pressing need for increased flexible, affordable and secure housing opportunities. We need to see a dramatic increase in the provision of more affordable housing in Australia to meet the needs of all low income Australians including people living with mental illness
➤ This needs to be matched with funding for tailored support packages for people experiencing homelessness and mental illness across all access, treatment and support stages of the continuum of care. Homelessness Australia believes there is scope for a significant proportion of new mental health funding to be allocated for this purpose
➤ Young people must be a key target group of youth homelessness and mental health coordination. 75% of people with mental illness first exhibit symptoms under 25 and 50% of homelessness service users in 2011 were under 25
➤ Step up step down continuum of care accommodation and supported housing models should be endorsed by FaHCSIA and expanded
➤ That FaHCSIA work with the Department of Health and Ageing to drive improved coordination between the homelessness, housing and mental health systems
➤ Preventing exits into homelessness from mental health settings need to be made a higher priority in the next National Partnership on Homelessness.
   
   Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets

ISSUE 10
Unaffordable housing

Issues in relation to homelessness and unaffordable housing
➤ More than 1.1 million Australians are in housing stress, paying more than 30% of their disposable income to service the costs of housing. Of these more than 350,000 are in housing crisis, allocating more than 50%. The latter group are at an elevated risk of becoming homeless
➤ There is currently a shortage of approximately 500,000 rental properties that are affordable and available to people in the bottom 40% of income earners
➤ There are currently just over 250,000 Australians on public and community housing waiting lists across Australia, many of whom have been waiting much longer than 5 years for a property
➤ An additional 85,000 dwellings are needed just to provide homes for people currently experiencing homelessness in Australia
➤ With rents having risen above the rate of CPI each
year for more than five years now, social housing is increasingly the only option that is affordable to people experiencing homelessness while they overcome barriers to finding employment. CRA is no longer sufficient to help people afford to sustain themselves in private rental, especially in our cities

- While homelessness is not just about housing, bricks and mortar is an essential component of the framework we need to create in order to end homelessness in Australia.

**Resolving issues in relation to homelessness and unaffordable housing**

Bricks and mortar are an important part of Australia’s national response to homelessness. Government policies to improve housing affordability and increase the supply of affordable housing including the National Rental Affordability Scheme are positive first steps.

In addition:

- Federal and State government must commit to progressively increasing the supply of public and community housing
- We need a commitment to supply 220,000 additional affordable housing dwellings between 2010 and 2020
- We need to reform Australia’s taxation system so that investment in affordable housing is incentivised and rewarded
- We need all levels of government and the private sector to commit to the reforms and capital investment necessary to increase the supply of affordable housing in Brownfield, Greenfield and Greyfield developments
- We need to increase the supply of affordable dwellings in developments that offer permanent, supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness; ideally these should be mixed tenure communities, close to health and support services and/or located in transit-oriented developments
- We need to see a comprehensive affordable housing strategy developed and implemented at a federal level that addresses demand, resourcing, planning and supply issues and commits to the achievement of benchmarks and targets for the proportion of new housing stock in developments that is designated ‘affordable’
- The maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance should be increased by at least 30%, pending a Productivity Commission review of its efficacy.

**ISSUE 11**

**Debt**

**Issues with homelessness and debt**

- Financial crisis can tip some people over into homelessness if they can no longer meet household expenses such as the cost of rent or utilities
- If triggered by longer term unemployment it may result in people in home purchase defaulting on their mortgage and becoming homeless as a result
- Many people experiencing homelessness for longer periods have significant issues resulting from bad debts and these can be related to unpaid fines which have escalated to critical levels due to additional late fees for non-payment
- People with a bad credit rating or who have unpaid fines can be disqualified from housing applications for both social housing and private rental (once a credit check is done). This prolongs homelessness and can even force people into ‘rough sleeping’
- People who have had problems with gambling and/or alcohol and other drug dependence can have significant issues with debt as a result of the high cost of servicing their habits
- Debt is an issue that cuts across all age groups but specialist homelessness services data shows it is more commonly cited by single males aged 25 and over than for other client groups
- Homeless persons' legal clinics report it as a significant issue preventing clients from accessing housing and ending their homelessness.

**Resolving issues in relation to homelessness and debt**

- Financial counselling services are broadly recognised as important in assisting people experiencing homelessness to address issues arising from significant levels of debt
- Financial counsellors work with people to address issues with budgeting, debt consolidation and the management of expenses
- Many financial counsellors deliver ‘place-based services’, conducting visits to homelessness services and working with tenancy support programs in cases where rental arrears are an issue placing tenants at risk of eviction
- Millions of Australians struggle with debt but the vast majority do not become homeless as a result. People need be able to access financial counselling and debt consolidation services as soon as risk of homelessness due to debt and financial difficulty is identified
- Legal services for people experiencing homelessness need to be given increased funding as they provide specialist legal services that other firms may not be in a position to provide and which differs importantly from legal aid services
- Income support levels need to be increased to enable people to have a better chance of meeting the costs of living.

Action is needed to assist people experiencing long-term unemployment to re-enter the workforce where they have capacity.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets

**ISSUE 12**

**Blacklisted**

**Issues in relation to blacklisting and homelessness**

- Service providers tell Homelessness Australia that ‘blacklisting’ is a major issue for clients who end up in homelessness services
Property managers and housing authorities state that the practice of placing people on so-called ‘watch-lists’ where they are marked as ‘less desirable’ or ‘undesirable’ tenants is a rarity.

For tenants who have faced eviction, with or without an appearance at the Residential Tenancies Tribunal and who then find it near impossible to access a rental property (either social housing or private rental), rough sleeping, crisis accommodation and/or boarding houses and caravan parks can become the only option.

Blacklisting often results following evictions for disruptive behaviour, significant rental arrears and property damage.

The experience of homelessness is often temporary and frightening for people. For those with scarred rental histories, longer term homelessness and the detrimental health and social consequences that follow are a significant concern for Homelessness Australia.

**Resolving issues in relation to blacklisting and homelessness**

Resolving issues in relation to blacklisting is a difficult task. Many times we are told that the practice does not happen. This is at odds with the information we hear from our members and people experiencing homelessness.

The solution must then be in early intervention initiatives, in particular tenancy support programs that connect people to support services when risk of tenancy failure is identified.

We need to ensure that people are not unnecessarily evicted without issues placing tenancies at risk being addressed. This is often more difficult for tenants in the private rental market but there are good programs at a State and Territory level that are successfully supporting people to sustain tenancies.

Financial counselling, family relationships and behaviour change programs are other examples of more generic programs that can help support people to address issues that may give rise to eviction and blacklisting before it occurs.

Property managers and support services need to be assisted to work closely to devise responses that protect the interests of property owners and tenants.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets

**ISSUE 13**

**Poverty**

**Issues with homelessness and poverty**

Using the Henderson Poverty Line as an indicator it is estimated that more than 2,000,000 Australians are living in relative poverty. Of these more than 400,000 are children.

Particular groups of Australians are disproportionately living in relative poverty in Australia such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, humanitarian entrants, low-income earners and people who have faced labour market exclusion for some time.

Australia is now dealing with the consequences of intergenerational poverty and unemployment and locational disadvantage.

For the first time we are seeing evidence of the intergenerational use of homelessness services.

The high cost of housing is a significant factor pushing Australians into poverty and can lead to homelessness. High numbers of Australians in the lowest income brackets and who are totally reliant on income support are in housing crisis, allocating more than 50% of their weekly income on housing costs.

Poverty is a major cause of homelessness in Australia.

**Resolving issues in relation to homelessness and poverty**

Ensure Australia’s welfare system provides a living income for every citizen. Homelessness Australia recommends increasing non-Pension payments by $50 per week and the maximum rate of rent assistance by 30%, pending a Productivity Commission review of its efficacy, to ensure that Australians who are reliant on income support have a chance of accessing and maintaining rental properties.

We need to see sustained, ongoing new investment in social housing so that it can provide the housing safety net that it should for Australians on very low incomes and people who are reliant on income support. More than 250,000 Australians are languishing on social housing waiting lists. This is a national scandal and it must be rectified. The expansion of the not-for-profit housing sector is a positive step but Homelessness Australia also believes that government has a responsibility to increase expenditure on public housing for those who are not provided for by the housing market.

Business, government and communities can provide meaningful opportunities for people with experiences of homelessness to participate in economic and social life including through employment and vocational training.

Reducing poverty is everyone’s responsibility. Governments must be encouraged to implement policies and strategies that reduce social inequality rather than allowing it to flourish. A national poverty action plan to take coordination action at all levels of government to reduce poverty and social inequality and attack their root causes is long overdue.

People must be provided with increased opportunities for civic and economic participation, engagement with the labour force and social inclusion.

Reference: Homelessness Australia fact sheets

**ISSUE 14**

**Kicked out of home**

**Issues in relation to being ‘kicked out of home’ and homelessness**

Being ‘kicked out of home’ is an issue that predominantly affects young people, though Homelessness Australia is hearing reports that older Australians...
are being forced from their homes by children, step-children and even carers

- Young people report being ‘unable to live at home’ or ‘needing time out from family’ as common reasons for seeking assistance from homelessness services
- Both the Burdekin report, Our Homeless Children and the National Youth Commission Inquiry report Australia’s Homeless Youth cited being evicted from the family home as common starting points in the process of youth homelessness which commonly begins with the experience of ‘couch-surfing’
- Being ‘kicked out’ is a frightening, unnerving and unsettling experience for young people even when the homelessness that results is only a temporary experience
- It can happen for any number of reasons and is often the result of family conflict and/or the arrival of a step-parent
- In the case of older people, gaining access to the asset of the family home has been cited in recent reports on ‘elder abuse’ as a common reason for forcing older people from their home.

**Resolving issues in relation to being ‘kicked out of home’ and homelessness**

- In the case of young people, early intervention is vital and the goal of family re-unification must be pursued as quickly as possible in cases where it is safe to do so
- Family conflict can often be mediated by bringing young people together with parents/guardians and siblings and devising ways forward to resolve or work through presenting issues
- In some cases, more intensive work will be needed with parents/guardians than with young people
- The Reconnect Program and therapeutic youth and family services provide us with thousands of examples of great work being done across Australia to resolve homelessness resulting from being kicked out
- It is important to bring all parties together as quickly as possible before homelessness becomes more than an unsettling temporary event. Holistic and multi-faceted interventions are often the most successful
- By working closely with schools and other mainstream agencies, specialist homelessness services effectively resolve homelessness resulting from being kicked out in many instances
- In cases where the person kicked out is an older Australian, resolving the problem may be more difficult. It is vital that legal protections are in place to prevent such cruel occurrences from taking place.

**ISSUE 15**

**Separation**

**Issues in relation to separation and homelessness**

- Homelessness can result from separation from a partner and/or divorce and is usually related to inadequate support networks and insufficient finances and material resources to sustain their mortgage or maintain private rental
- Recent research has found that older women are at higher risk of homelessness as a result of separation than people in other demographics
- This has been put down to issues such as; workforce discrimination, being forced out of the labour force prior to the age of 50, inadequate superannuation, not being in home ownership or home purchase, not participating in the labour force and financial control relating to continued exposure to domestic and family violence
- The decline in housing affordability over the past decade with house prices and median weekly rental prices increasing at rates in excess of CPI has made risk of homelessness as a result of separation more acute
- The death of an income-earning spouse is also a known risk factor for homelessness. This can be directly related to financial issues or the grief and loss that the death of a partner can cause can be the beginning of a series of events or process which results in homelessness.

**Resolving issues in relation to separation and homelessness**

- Preventing separation is incredibly difficult and dependent by and large on personal circumstances. Put simply, separation happens
- It should not be the case however, that homelessness results from separation from a partner or spouse. We need to ensure that adequate superannuation, fair settlements between parties, access to affordable housing and adequate levels of income support and housing assistance are in place for people following life events such as separation from a partner or spouse
- People need to be connected to housing as quickly as possible after relationship breakdown. This tends to be much easier for people on good incomes with economic and social capital in abundance than it is for people on the margins
- Access to crisis payment should be fast tracked in the event of separation that results from the breakdown of a relationship and separation from a partner or spouse
- We need to increase the supply of affordable dwellings in developments that offer permanent, supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness; ideally these should be mixed tenure communities, close to health and support services and/or located in transit-oriented developments
- We need to see a comprehensive affordable housing strategy developed and implemented at a federal level that addresses demand, resourcing, planning and supply issues and commits to the achievement of benchmarks and targets for the proportion of new housing stock in developments that is designated ‘affordable’.

**Reference:** Homelessness Australia fact sheets

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**Homing in on the real issues of homelessness**

Resource Kits 1-3, Homeless Persons Week, 6-12 August 2012

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Over 18,500 people accommodated every night by homelessness services

On average, 18,574 people were accommodated by specialist homelessness agencies on any given night from October to December 2011, according to the latest information on homelessness services from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

This includes people who were accommodated in crisis or emergency accommodation, as well as medium-term and long-term accommodation provided to people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness when they sought assistance,” said AIHW spokesperson Geoff Neideck.

“Overall, over 1,700,000 accommodation nights were provided to clients of specialist homelessness agencies on any given night from October to December 2011, according to the latest information on homelessness services from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

The report, People turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation 2010-11, provides information on the requests for homelessness accommodation that cannot be met – those people who are considered to have been ‘turned away’.

It shows that government-funded specialist homelessness agencies were operating to capacity and unable to fully meet the demand for accommodation in 2010-11.

“While the report shows that 59% of people needing new and immediate accommodation were turned away, these people account for a relatively small proportion of the total demand for accommodation on an average day,” said AIHW spokesperson Alison Verhoeven.

“If you consider the total demand for accommodation to be new requests plus those already in emergency and crisis accommodation (including those who are continuing their accommodation from a previous day) then new requests made up only 4% of the total demand and 2% of these were turned away.”

Some groups, such as families, experience more difficulty in obtaining accommodation than others. Couples with children were most likely to be turned away, followed by individuals with children and couples without children. Over half of those turned away were aged under 20 (57%) and the majority (60%) of all people turned away were female. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were over-represented among those turned away from specialist homelessness agencies.

A lack of accommodation was the main reason people were turned away (85%). The remaining unmet requests were for other reasons, including cases when the agency was not able to provide the type of accommodation requested.

“For instance, a person may be seeking long-term or independent accommodation, but the agency is only able to offer them refuge or dormitory-style crisis accommodation,” Ms Verhoeven said.

Further information on homelessness in Australia is available in the AIHW’s major report Australia’s welfare 2011, released in November. This is the final report to be sourced from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) National Data Collection (NDC). Data on the people using specialist homelessness services will in future be reported from the new Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) collection.

The AIHW is a major national agency set up by the Australian government to provide reliable, regular and relevant information and statistics on Australia’s health and welfare.
Overall, 52% of clients helped by specialist homelessness agencies were categorised as homeless at the beginning of their support period. Around one-third (34%) of these ‘at risk’ clients had been homeless in the previous year.

Over one-third of all support periods involved providing accommodation to clients. The average length of accommodation provided was 66 nights.

Similar to the September quarter 2011, 18% of clients were aged under 10 and just under half of all clients (48%) were aged under 25. Among those who received assistance, 59% were female and 41% were male. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represented 21% of clients.

Most people (69%) presented alone to specialist homelessness agencies, with the remainder presenting in groups, such as families with children.

Domestic and family violence was the most common reason for seeking assistance (25%). It was also the most common reason reported by females (34%), while for male clients the most common reasons were financial difficulties and housing crisis (both reasons reported by 18% of male clients).

There were slightly fewer clients living without shelter, or in inadequate dwellings, at the end of support (11% of closed support periods, compared with 14% at the beginning of these support periods).

...The remaining 48% were ‘at risk of homelessness’ at the beginning of their support period. Around one-third (34%) of these ‘at risk’ clients had been homeless in the previous year.

The AIHW is a major national agency set up by the Australian Government to provide reliable, regular and relevant information and statistics on Australia’s health and welfare.

Media release, 4 July 2012
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www.aihw.gov.au
Helping the homeless saves money: charity

A recent report into homelessness says it costs Australian governments more to leave people on the streets than it does to help them. An ABC News report by Meredith Griffiths and staff

As part of the three-year Michael Project, Mission Australia boosted health, education and support services for 250 homeless men in Sydney.

A cost-benefit analysis by Murdoch University and Mission Australia found that the government saved $3,600 for every person that the project helped.

Eleri Morgan-Thomas, the social advocacy and public affairs manager at Mission Australia, says the Michael Project spared the government from spending money on ambulances, emergency department care, court and police costs.

“They saved $8,446 per person in the study. It was a higher cost to run the Michael Project, but there’s a net saving to government of just over $3,600 per person,” she said.

“We would argue to government that they’re better off not spending it on health and crisis, because we know those bits of the health system are already in trouble, and we’re better off spending it in homelessness services, so that we can really end homelessness for those people.”

Gordon Broomham was a successful accountant until mental illness led him to walk away from his practice, his family and his friends. He ended up living in a shipping container that he spotted on a property in Windsor on Sydney’s outskirts.

“In the river I washed and went to McDonald’s for lunch most of the time,” he said.

He became suicidal and ended up in hospital for two years until his psychiatrist got him into a Mission Australia hostel, and from there he was referred to the Michael Project.

Funded by a private donor, the three-year trial allowed Mission Australia to change how it supported homeless men.

Ms Morgan-Thomas says Mission Australia was able to bring resources to people when they needed them.

“We were able to say to the men in the project – you need drug and alcohol counselling, I can get that for you this afternoon, you need psychological support, we can book you in to see that person today,” she said.

“Maybe I wouldn’t be alive today, I would have had alcohol poisoning, or I don’t know if I’d be shooting up, but I was going down a different path.”

Mr Broomham used all the services he could, including podiatry and dentistry. Soon he was moved into a new unit. He says if he had not received help, he would have ended back in hospital.

“It was the help that I got from the case managers there and my psychiatrist and my psych nurse – they got me through that period,” he said.

The Michael Project also included an accompanying research program to demonstrate the differences the project was making. The research shows over the course of a year, many of the men moved into stable housing, starting looking for work and became more socially active.

Ronald Masters the stability to start to learn life skills.

“[They] teach you how to cook, how to manage your finances, to wash your clothes, clean – hygiene and all that,” he said.

“Maybe I wouldn’t be alive today, I would have had alcohol poisoning, or I don’t know if I’d be shooting up, but I was going down a different path.”

Mr Masters now works at a food bank, has run the City to Surf three times, and has quit drugs and alcohol.

“You’ve got to have willpower and you’ve got to think positive, not negative. The government, they give you a chance in life,” he said.
Chapter 2
Profiles of homeless people

MYTHS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS
FACT SHEET INFORMATION COURTESY OF THE MERCY FOUNDATION

MYTH 1: People choose to be homeless
Fact 1:
➢ People do not choose to be homeless
➢ Homelessness is often the result of many interconnected factors – some of these are family breakdown, abuse, trauma, disability, addictions, illness and poverty
➢ Some people who become chronically homeless may ‘adapt’ to homelessness and may appear to be making a choice to remain homeless – this is very different to ‘choosing’ to be homeless
➢ Some people may remain homeless because they are waiting to access affordable housing
➢ Homelessness can be very unsafe and many people who experience chronic homelessness are vulnerable. It is important to acknowledge the stress and difficulties inherent in becoming and remaining homeless.

MYTH 2: All homeless people live on the streets or in parks
Fact 2:
➢ 104,000 people are homeless on any given night in Australia, of that only 15-20% are chronically homeless, and 5% are rough sleepers. The majority of people who become homeless remain so for short periods. In practice, most long-term homeless people move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another, often spending occasional nights in the primary population.

MYTH 3: We have adequate income support in Australia – so no one should be homeless
Fact 3:
➢ There is not enough affordable housing in Australia – especially in the major capital cities
➢ Private rental housing is often beyond the money available from government income support such as Newstart or the Disability Support Pension.

MYTH 4: Homeless people are criminals and can be dangerous
Fact 4:
➢ Many homeless people who live on the streets are themselves very vulnerable and are at risk from other members of the community
➢ A recent study in Brisbane reported that 49% of homeless people had been victims of a violent attack since becoming homeless
➢ It is sometimes difficult for people leaving prison to access housing or accommodation.

MYTH 5: All homeless people have a mental illness
Fact 5:
➢ Mental illness – such as schizophrenia – tends to first occur when people are young, at a stage when people are completing education or starting a career. Mental illness can seriously disrupt this process and lead to unstable job and housing careers
➢ The majority of mentally ill people live in their own homes in the community and usually receive support from families and community health services
➢ A recent study has shown that only 30% of homeless respondents had mental health problems prior to becoming homeless
➢ There is evidence to suggest that being homeless impacts badly on people’s mental health – with 53% of homeless people in a recent study reporting that they...
developed mental health problems after becoming homeless.4

**MYTH 6:** Most homeless people are men

***Fact 6:***
- Census night 2006: the counted homeless were 56% men and 44% women5
- Women are less likely to sleep rough and their homelessness is less visible.

**MYTH 7:** Homelessness only occurs in cities

***Fact 7:***
- Most rough sleeping occurs outside major cities. About two-thirds of Australia’s population lives in capital cities, but just 26% of people sleeping rough on Census night 2006 were in these cities. At a conservative count, 16,375 people sleep rough or in improvised dwellings nationally at any time; this is 16% of the total homeless population.6

**MYTH 8:** The federal government made a commitment to reduce homelessness, but nothing has happened

***Fact 8:***
- This is not true. There have been many new initiatives and projects supported by the federal government since they made the commitment in 2008 to reduce homelessness. They have sensibly placed resources into increasing affordable housing and support services and not just into crisis responses. It will take a few years before many of these projects are complete. Increasing affordable and community housing cannot be achieved quickly – as many properties need to be built. However this is the best long-term solution.

**MYTH 9:** There will always be homeless people and it is nonsense to make statements about ending homelessness

***Fact 9:***
- As a community, we can agree to put an end to chronic homelessness. It is unacceptable in a developed and wealthy nation such as Australia.
- Britain successfully reduced its rough sleeping population by two-thirds within a few years – once the Blair government put in place initiatives to solve that type of homelessness.
- Many cities in North America have made plans and commitment to end homelessness locally. Already many of those cities have increased affordable housing and increased support services and this has resulted in reductions in homelessness.7

**MYTH 10:** Homeless people are just lazy and don’t want to get a job

***Fact 10:***
- It is really difficult to apply for jobs and present well once you become homeless. Stable housing is usually required before people can rejoin the workforce.

**MYTH 11:** All homeless people are alcoholics

***Fact 11:***
- Some homeless people have addictions to drugs and/or alcohol. They are not the majority. Some people begin using or consuming drugs or alcohol after they have become homeless.8

**MYTH 12:** Why bother solving homelessness?

***Fact 12:***
- Chronic homelessness is a social injustice as well as being economically irresponsible.
- It costs significant amounts to sustain someone in a state of chronic homelessness. Use of crisis services, emergency departments, acute hospital admissions, mental health crisis care, detoxification centres as well as police responses, ambulances, court and prison costs all add to the total cost and tragedy of chronic homelessness.
- Research has shown that it can cost the same amount or less to provide people with suitable housing and good support to sustain that housing as it does to provide crisis services (such as those noted above).9
MYTH 13: If a young person gets kicked out of home it is always their fault and they deserve to be homeless
Fact 13:
➤ Many teenagers experiencing homelessness have left homes for a range of reasons. These sometimes include family breakdown or violence.

MYTH 14: People experiencing homelessness remain homeless for years
Fact 14:
➤ The majority of people who become homeless experience it quite briefly. It is estimated that only 15-25% of homeless people are long-term (or chronically) homeless.

MYTH 15: Homelessness can never happen to me
Fact 15:
➤ No one is immune from potentially becoming homeless. Studies have shown that just a few unfortunate events can turn someone's life around completely. It may be the loss of a partner, an unexpected expense or an eviction at short notice.

MYTH 16: Families don't become homeless
Fact 16:
➤ Families do become homeless, as a result of loss of job, low income, eviction on short notice, unaffordable living expenses and housing.

MYTH 17: No older people are homeless
Fact 17:
➤ Recent reports show dramatic increase in older people who are becoming homeless, specifically there has been an increase of older women seeking accommodation
➤ It is difficult for older people to sustain payment in a private rental market, especially when the pension amount they receive is not enough to cover this expenditure.

NOTES
10. McFerran, L. 2010, It could be you: female, single, older and homeless, collaborative project: Homelessness NSW, Older Women’s Network NSW, St Vincent de Paul Society, UNSW.

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FACTS VERSUS PERCEPTIONS ON HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA

By breaking stereotypes and fostering a sense of responsibility and community involvement we can ensure that the homeless are respected and protected, according to Students in Free Enterprise

DID YOU KNOW?

Homelessness is a human rights issue

A human rights approach departs from a welfare approach to homelessness by demonstrating that homeless people are not merely objects of charity, seeking help and compassion. Like all Australians, they are individuals who are entitled under international law to protection and promotion of their human rights. (Australian Human Rights Commission)

What is the reality?

➤ On any given night, there are 105,000 homeless Australians, 20,511 of which are in Victoria and 63% of 34 or younger (Census 2006)
➤ 54.8% of organisations working with the homeless reported that they are struggling to meet the growing demand for their services
➤ 47% increase (between 2009 and 2010) in the number of people being turned away from financial support/ emergency relief. (Across Community Sector Survey, 2010)

Who are they?

➤ More women than men
➤ Indigenous people are over-represented
➤ One in every three is a child
➤ Half of all people using homelessness services are parents with children
➤ The most common cause of homelessness is domestic violence
➤ Two-thirds of children presenting at services are with their mothers escaping domestic violence
➤ Indigenous people are over-represented (while they make up 2% of the Australian population, they make up 18% of people in homelessness services)
➤ Problematic drug and alcohol use and mental health issues are issues, but they are not the most common issues. (*Problematic drug and alcohol use is an issue in 12% of periods of support. Mental health issues are an issue in about 19% of periods of support). (Data from service providers)

Public perceptions of homelessness and reality do not line up

Hanover Welfare Services Research unit asked two questions in the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AUSSA):

1) What are the causes of homelessness?
Public perceptions on the causes of homelessness don’t line up with the facts, in particular beliefs about mental health and drug and alcohol abuse.

2) Who are responsible for solving homelessness?
People continue to strongly believe it is the sole problem of the individual, their family and the government. There is a lack of personal engagement or community involvement with the issue.

But homelessness is a human rights issue and since human rights belongs to everyone; shouldn’t it be our responsibility as a community to ensure that the rights of all people are respected and protected?

How? By fostering a greater sense of responsibility and community involvement, breaking incorrect stereotypes by education and empowering those who experience homelessness to have a voice.

REFERENCES

➤ Australian Human Rights Commission.

Students In Free Enterprise is a non-profit student organisation from the University of Melbourne which develops community projects to drive social change.

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INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS

Indigenous people without housing will approach kinfolk for shelter first, and will usually be given a place to stay. Housing strategies to address indigenous homelessness should work with indigenous people to ensure access to sufficient affordable housing and resource families to accommodate kin.

A bulletin from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

KEY POINTS

➤ Indigenous homelessness is defined as the inability of an indigenous person to access appropriate housing that caters for their particular complex social and cultural needs

➤ Primary homelessness (rough sleeping) and use of refuges among indigenous people is reduced because indigenous people look after one another through kinship obligations. However, indigenous people experience high rates of secondary homelessness, in which people make use of others’ dwellings

➤ Because visiting of others is a normal cultural practice in indigenous culture, this potentially disguises the degree of homelessness. Even so, the high rate of overcrowding is an appropriate indicator of homelessness (in 2004-05, 17% were in overcrowded dwellings)

The most disadvantaged people in indigenous society are single men from remote area communities.

➤ While the system of kinship obligation is a useful hedge against primary homelessness, it can be strained to breaking point – notably where there are family-based feuds and where alcohol and drug abuse are involved. In these cases, hospitality is sometimes refused or households face eviction

➤ With regard to housing, the most disadvantaged people in indigenous society are single men from remote area communities. Because housing is women’s responsibility in these communities, remote area single men lack the knowledge and skill to navigate the public housing system and may therefore remain homeless for longer than men who have partners

➤ Homeless indigenous people are particularly vulnerable once their life circumstances bring them into conflict with the institutions of the wider society – this makes it much harder for them to exit homelessness.

BACKGROUND

The research sought to understand the place, house and home needs of indigenous peoples and to identify actions required to address these needs through housing and other service responses that secure sustainable solutions and support stable life conditions.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research investigated the indigenous homeless experience, and sought to use the understandings and definitions of homelessness developed in previous research to understand how indigenous culture mediates the experience of homelessness for indigenous people.

Interviews were conducted within local indigenous communities in the Western Australian towns of Broome and Carnarvon and in the state capital, Perth and from practitioners working in relevant non-government service organisations. Thirty-two indigenous women, 10 indigenous men and 34 practitioners were interviewed making a total of 76 participants. The purpose of interviews was to ascertain the participant’s view of the pathways in to and out of homelessness for indigenous people. It compares the understandings of indigenous homelessness held by indigenous homeless people with those of the providers of services to indigenous people.

KEY FINDINGS

What is indigenous homelessness?

One simple definition of indigenous homelessness is an inability of an indigenous person to access appropriate private or public housing that caters for their particular complex social and cultural needs.

There are various cultural factors that shape how indigenous people view their housing situation which might contrast to mainstream society:

➤ An indigenous person, according to Keys Young (1998) might experience ‘spiritual homelessness’ where that person is denied access, for whatever reason, to their land, or spiritual home.

High rates of mobility in indigenous society are sometimes the product of homelessness.

➤ Travelling as well as family and kinship visits may result in symptoms of homelessness, such as overcrowding, but are usually viewed by indigenous people as normal cultural practice.

The issue of visiting (and temporary overcrowding) must be distinguished from homelessness as non-indigenous society understands it. Unlike visiting (where the visitor has a home to return to), those that are otherwise homeless and sharing with kinfolk can become semi-permanent residents and this can lead to long-term overcrowding.

In seeking to define homelessness, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992) distinguish between primary homelessness (those without accommodation of any kind), secondary homelessness (those with no home but who move between friends, relatives and refuges), and tertiary homelessness (those who are housed in accommodation that is substandard to the societal norm such as caravan parks).

This study finds that indigenous people are most likely to experience secondary homelessness, which is best gauged from statistics on indigenous
household overcrowding. AIHW (2009) data indicate that in 2004-05, 17 per cent of indigenous adults were experiencing overcrowding.

Tertiary homelessness (involving residence in a hostel, boarding house or caravan) did not appear to be common in indigenous society. While indigenous people may be resident in specific-purpose hostels, particularly dialysis hostels, none could be discovered in a boarding house or caravan.

How does indigenous culture mediate homelessness?

Kinfolk obligations, which are deeply ingrained in indigenous society, shape their response to homelessness. Those in need of housing for a wide variety of reasons will most often resolve this need by approaching their relatives prior to considering other housing options and are generally housed. There appears to be no prioritising of housing need: those without housing are taken in along with those relatives who are merely visiting. This cultural obligation clearly mediates homelessness within indigenous society; but it can also lead to overcrowding which may in turn lead to homelessness.

Practitioners and homeless people agree that overcrowding acts as both a hedge against primary homelessness and as a force that can lead to homelessness for the entire household, particularly where a drinking and/or a substance abuse lifestyle is present.

Housing is also seen as the responsibility of women in indigenous society generally. What are the causes of homelessness for indigenous people?

Indigenous homelessness needs to be understood in the context of indigenous culture and society which itself sits within the confines of the wider Australian society.

Practitioners and homeless people themselves differed in the emphasis they gave to different causes of homelessness. Homeless people emphasised their own life circumstances and how these came into conflict with institutions.

The circumstances of primary homelessness are varied and include:

- Family and other cultural matters, for example deserting the home in response to the death of a close family member, which is generally restricted to the closest members of the departed's family, and usually involves staying with other relatives for a period of time. If for some reason it is not possible to stay with other relatives, people may end up living in a camp
- Overcrowding, which often breaks the lease requirements of public housing authorities and private rental arrangements; this may in turn lead to the eviction of residents and homelessness
- Violence, often involving family members that results in victims having to leave their family home and may lead to the entire family becoming homeless. In addition to violence that may occur within households, violence can also occur among extended kin groups, known as 'feuding', leading to the victimised household becoming homeless
- Alcohol and drug issues may result in visitors being restricted in accessing accommodation with some family members. An indigenous man from Broome explained his primary homelessness as a result of this: 'I been here (at his cousin's house) for two weeks. I was living with my sister, she's up on the corner there, but she asked me to move out. Before that I was living with my daughter,'
but she kicked me out on account of my drinking’.

The real estate market can undermine access to suitable accommodation even if people have jobs. The high costs of rent, the eligibility criteria for public housing coupled with discrimination within the real estate sector can mean households fall into homelessness.

From a practitioner’s perspective indigenous homelessness has come about as a result of specific structural issues such as a lack of suitable housing, or eviction due to an inappropriate use of the facilities. They also included changes to specific policies and practices of housing authorities that result in indigenous people being unable to negotiate the new requirements for public housing rentals. Practitioners highlighted the prevailing economy that led to a shortage of low cost private rental housing.

Issues of indigenous life circumstances were also considered as well. For example, ex-prisoners often have difficulty in re-integrating into society after serving a jail sentence. Alcohol, child abuse and violence were also important factors.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The issue of indigenous homelessness as described in the report is a complex phenomenon, requiring sensitive, flexible and innovative responses from government that meet the specific cultural needs of indigenous people.

The federal government’s current policy initiatives in indigenous affairs are seeking to enlist the support of indigenous communities in the management of issues concerned with community development and housing (Macklin 2009).

Violence, often involving family members, can result in victims having to leave their family home and may also lead to the entire family becoming homeless.

This research supports this policy approach and highlights aspects of indigenous culture with which future government policy might engage. There is no doubt that engaging the indigenous community in the development of programs to address the needs of homeless people will be more effective and successful.

Government should investigate ways of better utilising the institutions of indigenous society in the development of homeless policy, for example the kinship system and its obligations to house relevant individuals and families because this system has been crucial to the maintenance of indigenous culture in the face of key challenges such as colonisation, protectionism, assimilation and racism.

Government also needs to pay particular attention to the ways in which its policy and programs positively or negatively affect the fabric of indigenous society. Such policy responses can be adjusted for greater effectiveness.

For example, household over-crowding due to a shortage of both public and affordable private housing is unavoidable. If government recognises that the kinship model in fact ameliorates aspects of homelessness it may find ways of managing household over-crowding to the advantage of both indigenous households and their neighbours.

Further policy responses are also required that have the objective of interrupting pathways to homelessness, especially in the area of domestic violence, debt to the public housing provider, drug and alcohol addiction, housekeeping practices and educating men in the process of accessing and acquiring housing.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 80368, Indigenous homelessness. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: [www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au) or by contacting the AHURI National Office.

This bulletin is based on research by Dr Christina Birdsall-Jones, Ms Nalita Turner and Ms Vanessa Corunna from the AHURI Western Australia Research Centre and Ms Gemma Smart and Dr Wendy Shaw from the AHURI UNSW- UWS Research Centre.

They undertook a comparative analysis of indigenous homelessness in the contrasting settings of major cities and regional country town centres.
Mental illness, housing instability and homelessness often share much common ground. An understanding of the relationships between these experiences is essential if accommodation problems are to be tackled.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND HOMELESSNESS

Results from a Commonwealth Government review show that the homeless appear to have a higher prevalence of severe mental disorders than the wider population.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING AND MAINTAINING STABLE HOUSING

People experiencing mental illness, particularly episodic mental illness, face a range of difficulties in maintaining stable housing, which in turn can have adverse effects on a person’s mental health. These barriers are numerous and involve many different situations, such as:

Housing affordability

Housing payment problems can have significant effects on wellbeing.

Insecurity of tenure

Insecurity of tenure may cause significant stress and other health problems.

Housing conditions

Housing must be of an adequate quality, as various conditions and features within a dwelling can have significant negative impacts on health.

Safety and security

Feelings of safety and security in a dwelling are also essential to mental health and wellbeing, and may be affected by fear of threats and crime, as well as exposure to and fears of violence, including domestic violence.

Location factors

A home’s location can also affect a person’s mental health.

Administrative barriers

Complexities of applying for public and private housing often create difficulties for applicants.

Behavioural and social issues

When they are unwell, some people with a mental illness exhibit behaviours or symptoms that may threaten their housing stability.

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

1. A national homelessness strategy must recognise mental illness
2. Increase access to mental health care
3. Invest in innovative home-based programs
4. Housing must be a mental health priority for COAG
5. Treatment must be available in the community and at home
6. Housing must be set aside for people with mental illness
7. Community services must respond to issues of mental illness and homelessness
8. Poorly resourced and monitored discharge planning must be implemented
9. Housing and mental health programs must be regularly evaluated
10. Research must be a priority.

NOTES

1. More information can be found in the MHCA’s report, Home Truths, which can be obtained by contacting the Mental Health Council of Australia on 02 6285 3100 or www.mhca.org.au

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www.mhca.org.au
Being likened to Jesus Christ was terrifying. I was sitting opposite a young man in his early 20s dressed in a brightly coloured summer shirt, long beige pants and black thongs on a blustery and cold autumn day. His eyes were watery from agitation, lines were etched across his face, and he radiated nervous, fearful energy.

He told me I was like Jesus Christ because I sat with him and heard his tale. It was a story which began at his family home in Bangladesh being bullied, hounded and harassed for converting to Christianity. It was a story of repeated rejection and humiliation because his Bangladeshi family and then Sydney-based brother abandoned him and refused all contact. It was a story which wound through dark, lonely nights filled with terror. It was a story which finally ended with us sitting on a park bench wistfully watching laughing, happy families pass by.

Being told that I was like Jesus Christ implied that I could solve his problems. I knew I couldn’t. It implied I was able to help him resolve his visa status. I knew I couldn’t. It implied I could heal the hurts he sustained all those months of sleeping in Sydney’s iconic Hyde Park. I knew I couldn’t heal that pain.

Being told that I was like Jesus Christ implied that I could solve his problems. I knew I couldn’t.

Every night, there are 105,000 people who are homeless. But there is a possibility that this young man, and other people who have immigrated to Australia, may not be represented in this alarming figure. Consequently, there is a grave possibility that they are hidden from view and their ardent desire for assistance passes unnoticed.

The difficulties associated with navigating a complex welfare system can be insurmountable when you don’t know the country, don’t know the language, and don’t realise there are people who can help.

These barriers are best summed up by the young man from Bangladesh, who described his first year of living in Sydney:

“At that time I know nothing because I was speaking not well English. I don’t know where to go for sleeping, where I need to go for my food, where I need to go for safe accommodation. I tried to find a homeless person organisation because that time I am new and struggling much myself. But I couldn’t. That’s why I was moving, moving, moving ... I will be one night here, another night there, one night here, a couple of nights there. There is nothing permanent in my life. Nothing permanent. Only temporary.”

A new report by Multicultural Mental Health Australia (MMHA), Homelessness amongst culturally and linguistically diverse people with a mental illness, recommends that improved data collection by homelessness, mental health and multicultural agencies is the first requisite step to improving our understanding of precipitating factors and prevalence rates of homelessness among people from immigrant backgrounds. Data collection probably seems like a dry, tedious starting point but it forms the backbone of all essential policy and government decisions. If we don’t know the extent of the problem, services and strategies cannot be tailored to meet the needs of people most at risk of homelessness.

Among culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, the
MMHA report identifies four groups who are particularly vulnerable to homelessness:
➤ People with a mental illness
➤ Female victims of family violence
➤ Refugees and asylum seekers
➤ Youth.

The young man from Bangladesh falls into three of these categories. He has symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, he is desperately filing for asylum, and his lined, careworn face belies his 23 years. For him, the nights are the worst because he is transported back to Bangladesh and imagines that his family are once again looming over him:

“When I sleep, I see one person coming with fire. They come with petrol and my body is always burning. ‘Help me, help me’, I cry. But it is my dreams. I lost myself. Maybe I can’t keep my brain with me ... I can’t talk with black people because I have a trauma problem and when I see same skin people I scare myself. Most of the time I feel very scary when I see Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistan people. I think they know me, that they will be again attacking me again, torturing me.”

Culture, language, ethnic background and mental illness all have a huge bearing on homelessness. Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that service access barriers can be attributed to language, lack of information about services, communication, stigma, inappropriate use of interpreters, cultural differences between clients and services. However, research urgently required to understand how these factors impact upon pathways to services.

If we don’t know the extent of the problem, services and strategies cannot be tailored to meet the needs of people most at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness data collection is already happening to a certain extent. People experiencing homelessness are surveyed on Census night and services under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) provide an annual data collection report. However when it comes to measuring homelessness among people from CALD backgrounds, the data is neither consistent nor mandatory.

While some services do collect information related to country-of-birth, this identifier doesn’t accurately reflect the needs of people who are second-generation immigrants, nor people who were ethnic or linguistic minorities in their country of origin. This has huge implications for developing appropriate policies, equitable strategies and diverse programs.

Moreover, data concerning people with a mental illness is also problematic because statistics can be based on a range of collection methods, including diagnoses, observation and self-reported mental illness.

In order to address the structural problems of homelessness, governments, policy-makers and services need to understand the scope and complexity of the issue. It is for this reason the MMHA report urges the Australian Government to implement standardised national data collection across social services using multiple cultural identifiers; including country-of-birth, language spoken at home, ethnic background, and parents’ country-of-birth. Once we can begin to break down the data, then we can start to break down the problem.

Rebecca Lewis is the Communications Officer at Multicultural Mental Health Australia, a national program funded by the Australian Government to work with relevant peak bodies to promote mental health and wellbeing across Australia’s multicultural communities.
This report documents a collaborative project which sought to interrogate the experience of older women and the reflection of that experience in policy. The project sought an inclusive homelessness definition, and to build a more robust knowledge base through which to inform policy and service delivery to this group.

Most of the women did not fit the profile of older homeless people: most had worked throughout their lives, raised children, and endured abusive and difficult relationships.

The study was prompted by evidence of increasing numbers of older women entering for the first time the homeless population, and the concern of the homeless service system that demand could not be met. To put the experience of these older women into context the study examined the evidence of the combined impact of housing trends affected by changing demographics, the impact of ageing, and entrenched financial disadvantage on women. Combined with the qualitative evidence from the thirty one homeless older women, the study concluded that being female, older, and single is to be at housing risk.

Most of the women interviewed for this study did not fit the profile of older homeless people: most had worked throughout their lives, raised children, and endured abusive and difficult relationships. As women living alone in their fifties and sixties, however, they became susceptible to a health crisis, sometimes work related, or age discrimination at work, resulting in difficulties keeping or finding employment. The crisis of losing work, combined with the failure or refusal of their family to support them, put these women at housing risk.

Housing risk is fundamentally an issue of poverty ... the emerging levels of housing risk for older women cannot be reduced without a combined effort by governments, industry and community to address the poverty of older women that has accumulated over a lifetime.

The study argues for a gendered analysis of housing, homelessness and ageing policy if we are to adequately understand and respond to the different experiences of women and men.

The study recommends more inclusive definitions and tools for counting housing risk and homelessness that balance a problem of the hidden nature of many older women’s homelessness with the evidence of housing risk provided in the social and economic research.

The study contains recommendations on the need for an increase in appropriate and affordable single person housing stock for older women, and for innovative solutions such as a program promoting secondary dwellings to create new rental opportunities in three bedroom homes with one occupant.

The study cautions that housing risk is fundamentally an issue of poverty, and that the emerging levels of housing risk for older women cannot be reduced without a combined effort by governments, industry and community to address...
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Collect mainstream homeless and housing data disaggregated by sex that enables the development of a gendered homeless and housing policy
2. Consult with older women on their experience and needs when developing mainstream homeless and housing strategies
3. Set targets to meet the needs of older women in all relevant strategies
4. Fund a quantitative study to identify numbers of ‘at housing risk’ older women
5. Adapt this quantitative methodology to ABS Census counts of the homeless
6. Balance quantitative data on homelessness with evidence of economic disadvantage putting older women at risk
7. Housing policy ensures that appropriate and affordable single person housing stock meets the needs of older women into the future
8. Fund a market survey to gauge older homeowner support for a secondary dwelling program, the barriers and necessary incentives to take up for a national secondary dwelling program
9. The Commonwealth funds a national secondary dwelling program
10. The Commonwealth ensures all financial barriers are removed for secondary dwelling program
11. Local government restrictions are lifted for a secondary dwelling program
12. Fund a study into the viability of a shared equity scheme and community land trust schemes targeting older women with housing deposits below market value
13. Early and accelerated access to social housing for women aged 45 and older by raising the social housing income eligibility limit
14. Prioritise older women and affordable single person housing in the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS)
15. A restructure of the existing homeless service system to respond on a proportionate level to older women, with targets set of 25 per cent older female clients in women’s services and services located according to demographic need
16. Temporary accommodation locations provided for older women must address health and safety needs of older people such as the provision of lifts and basic kitchen facilities
17. A funded outreach program to support older women to stay safely in their homes, to assist women’s access appropriate support and training systems, and provide support to older women placed in temporary accommodation
18. Boarding house regulations, standards and design must meet the safety and security requirements of older women
19. To ensure that boarding house design meet the safety and security requirements of older women all rooms should have as a minimum a kitchenette and en suite
20. Basic tenancy rights, similar to that enacted in the ACT, must be available
21. Boarding house provision must include boarding houses exclusively for older women.

the poverty of older women that has accumulated over a lifetime.

This study and report was a collaborative project of Homelessness NSW, the Older Women’s Network NSW and the St Vincent de Paul Society, with support provided by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse.

The project was funded by the Office for Women’s Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet, NSW Government and the St Vincent de Paul Society (NSW).

Researched and authored by Ludo McFerran with assistance from Sonia Laverty.
Why do young people experience homelessness?

Family breakdown and domestic and family violence are two of the primary reasons young women seek support from specialist homelessness services. Family breakdown is also one of the primary reasons young men report for seeking support from services. For some young people, parental separation and the arrival of a step-parent can cause conflict that makes home life seem untenable. For young people fleeing physical, sexual and emotional abuse, reconciliation with their families may not be possible. With adequate support and resources reconciliation may be possible for other young people and their families.

In addition, there are a number of structural factors that cause youth homelessness including: poverty, social inequality and youth unemployment. Intergenerational poverty is a reality for many families, and workers in homelessness services are now supporting second and third generations of young people whose families have had contact with the homelessness system. Poverty means missing out and going without. ABS data indicates that more than one in six Australians aged 15-24 is living in poverty. High housing costs in Australia mean that some families struggle to keep a roof over their heads. Intergenerational unemployment is a lived reality for many young people. Labour market marginalisation is also a cause of youth homelessness identified in the landmark Burdekin Report in 1989 and again in the National Youth Commission report in 2008. Youth unemployment has remained consistently higher than the average across all age groups over the past thirty years. Young people reliant on inadequate income support payments may find themselves unable to meet the cost of living including rent.

Young people in out of home care are significantly more likely to experience homelessness than other young people. The CREATE foundation Transitioning from Care report cards have found that as many as 40 per cent of young people who are discharged from out of home care will experience homelessness within twelve months of exiting. Many young people exit care with no accommodation plan in place and with inadequate resources to access and maintain housing and meet other costs of living. Others are exited into accommodation that is tenuous and breaks down.

The link between mental ‘illness’ and the experience of homelessness is well established. According to the Mental Health Council of Australia, as many as 75 per cent of people who meet the criteria for mental illness, first exhibit symptoms prior to the age of 25. Young people who are experiencing homelessness are significantly more likely to experience anxiety and depression than those who are stably housed. The longer a person experiences homelessness, the more likely it is that they will develop severe and persistent states of mental ‘illness’. While prevention is better than cure, early intervention services that work to ensure that young people are re-housed and supported to maintain engagement with education and training and their families and communities are essential.

Services for young people who are experiencing homelessness in Australia

There is a wide range of services in Australia for young people who are experiencing homelessness. Centrelink is the key agency that provides income support to Australians with limited means. Youth Allowance is the most common form of income support payment received by young people accessing homelessness services.

There are over 500 specialist homelessness services for young people across Australia as well as...
the Reconnect program, community housing and on-site accommodation and support services such as the FOYER models. In addition there are a range of services for ‘at risk’ young people as well as early-intervention services funded by states and territories.

Young people experiencing homelessness must also be supported to access Job Services Australia, TAFE, University and Vocational Training as these can lead to pathways out of homelessness. Equally important is the need for young people to have access to civic participation opportunities, community groups, music/performing arts and sporting clubs.

Homelessness services in Australia cannot meet the demand for accommodation. The majority of people turned away from specialist homelessness services every day are under 20. Services for young people experiencing homelessness funded under the National Partnership Agreement are also full.

Young people also have difficulty securing long-term accommodation and are particularly affected by poverty and the shortage of affordable housing in Australia. The level of Youth Allowance payments makes it difficult for independent young people to meet the basic costs of living. People on youth allowance receive approximately 20 per cent less than those on Newstart Allowance and more than 40 per cent less than those on the aged pension. This makes accessing private rental difficult especially in a tight rental market characterised by low vacancy rates, strong demand and high median weekly rental prices.

Young people with no rent references or an unstable housing history are disadvantaged in this environment. Young people face a long wait for social housing and often experience discrimination in the private rental market.

Young people under 16

State and Territory governments are responsible for the care and protection of children and young people if their parent or guardian can’t care for them for any reason. Family breakdown and the breakdown of foster care and out-of-home care arrangements means there are some young people under 16 in the homelessness delivery service system. Some States and Territories have developed service responses for young people aged 12-15 who are experiencing homelessness that are funded under the National Partnership Agreement.

What needs to happen?

➤ Young people experiencing homelessness have the same needs, hopes and aspirations as other young people. They also need access to affordable, safe and secure housing that is located close to community centres, education, employment and training opportunities.

➤ Australia needs a housing strategy for young people. A generation faces the prospect of being locked out of home ownership. This is not acceptable.

➤ Australia needs to improve our efforts to seriously address poverty, social inequality and intergenerational unemployment. Some young people are now being born into the fourth generation of poverty and unemployment. The cycle must be broken.

➤ Assist with transition and exit plans to support the bridge between assisted and non-assisted accommodation from out of home care. Too many young people leave out of home care without an exit plan or are exited into tenuous accommodation that quickly breaks down.

➤ The Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) program must be included as a budget item with ongoing funding as needed so it doesn’t run out part way through the year.

➤ Increase funding for services with a focus on early intervention and prevention such as the Reconnect Program which has been proven to successfully reconnect young people with community and family. Program funding must be doubled over the next four years.

➤ Increase funding for specialist youth homelessness services and FOYER models. Youth homelessness services are forced to turn away more than one in two young people on any given night due to inadequate resourcing. A 40 per cent increase in funding is needed to meet demand for every person, every night.

➤ State and Territory welfare authorities must be sufficiently resourced to meet the needs of young people under 16 in state care and protection to ensure these young people do not become homeless. Too many young people end up in the homelessness service system after being in state care. They must be supported and resourced to keep independent housing.

➤ Implement the recommendations of the 2008 Report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness.

REFERENCES


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To do this, the snapshot draws on key findings from national and international research, and from a recent exploratory study conducted by a family homeless network comprising a small number of organisations which began working together as part of an Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People (ARACY) collaboration.

The snapshot concludes with a recommendation to better support children and families who become homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless, to ensure that these children are given focused attention and resources.

HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE HOMELESS?

More than 84,000 children accessed a specialist homelessness service in 2009-10.

In 2009-10, more than 84,000 children (under 18 years) across Australia accessed a specialist homelessness service accompanying their parent or guardian (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). This is equivalent to one in 60 Australian children and one in every 38 children aged 4 years or younger. Many of these children were living in single parent families, with almost 25% of all homelessness service support periods provided to single parent households (AIHW, 2011). Most of these parents were women escaping family violence, although it is important to also acknowledge single fathers. Severe financial stress, family crises and eviction are also major individual-level causes of homelessness for children and their families.

Of the children who accompanied their parent or guardian to a specialist homelessness service in the 2009-10 financial year, almost three quarters (72%) of these children were under the age of 10. Nearly half (44%) were 4 years of age or younger, while over a quarter (28%) were aged 5-9 years (AIHW, 2011).

Recent research reported on by the AIHW indicates that significant numbers of people who need help from government-funded accommodation are turned away each day (AIHW, 2011a). Family groups were the most likely to be turned away, including 82% of couples with children and 67% of individuals with children.

The actual number of homeless families and children in need of services is likely to be much higher than the figures above, as these capture only those who have accessed or tried to access a service. These figures exclude those who may be staying temporarily with friends or family or in insecure accommodation such as a caravan parks or boarding houses.

Indigenous Australians are over-represented in specialist homelessness services. Indigenous Australians accounted for 18% of clients in 2009-10 even though they...
Children experience homelessness largely when their family becomes homeless. The causes of family homelessness are both structural (such as the crisis of housing affordability, the decline of low skilled jobs, wage poverty) and personal or familial. The most commonly reported reasons for children and their families approaching specialist homelessness services are related to interpersonal relationships including domestic violence and/or relationship breakdown, and accommodation issues such as eviction or being asked to leave (AIHW, 2011). While these are the commonly cited reasons for homelessness, families often present to leave (AIHW, 2011). While these are the commonly cited reasons for homelessness, families often present to leave (AIHW, 2011). While these are the commonly cited reasons for homelessness, families often present to leave (AIHW, 2011). While these are the commonly cited reasons for homelessness, families often present to leave (AIHW, 2011).

Recent Australian research indicates the high prevalence of earlier periods of childhood and teenage homelessness amongst people who experience homelessness as adults (Flatau et al., 2009). This suggests that the impact of childhood homelessness can be long-term and points to high rates of intergenerational homelessness.

The social policy implications of disrupted schooling, behavioural problems, and poor developmental outcomes and the potential long-term social and economic costs are increasingly understood (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008: 52). The Road Home estimates that the long-term economic cost to the community of not assisting the children who pass through specialist homelessness services each year is close to $1 billion per annum (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008: 10).

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the survey was to explore what workers in homelessness services do on a day-to-day basis to specifically meet the needs of dependent children. While service workers reported a clear understanding of the diverse physical, emotional and material needs of children of varying ages accessing the specialist homelessness services, it was evident that both the processes of identifying and assessing the needs of children and the range of services provided were inconsistent across the sector.

Five main categories of direct assistance were identified across the service system.Direct assistance provided by individual services included:

➤ **Accommodation:** providing temporary accommodation and assisting people to attain and maintain sustainable accommodation. Respondents stressed the importance of providing appropriate accommodation to children, which was described as having sufficient bedrooms for children and outside space for children to play in. It was also preferable for the accommodation to be located close to facilities such as schools, public transport and shopping

➤ **Basic material assistance:** providing food, clothes, furniture, books, uniforms, toys and baby goods. Children and their families often arrived at homelessness services without any possessions, and it was seen as particularly important for children to be given items of their own. One service reported: “Each child is given an age-appropriate backpack with pyjamas, toiletries, books, teddy etc. We applied to a foundation for those …”

➤ **Transport:** providing transport for children and their parents to school, recreational activities and appointments

➤ **Group programs:** providing on-site or off-site preschool playgroups, art therapy sessions and pet programs depending on resources. Running groups within services was more frequent where there was a designated Children’s Worker

➤ **Recreation:** arranging camps, excursions, activities and school holiday programs. Often these recreational activities were run in conjunction with other organisations, such as local sporting clubs or welfare agencies.

Two main forms of indirect support were identified:

➤ **Networks of support:** for example, links with the education and health services. Many services had connected with educational providers, such as childcare, primary schools and high schools. Numerous examples were also given of links with health services, such as regular visits by a nurse to the specialist homelessness service in order to improve the physical wellbeing of their clients

➤ **Specialist services/referrals:** when children were identified as needing disability services, psychological counselling and mental health support. Referring children and families to such services was one of the most frequently mentioned forms of assistance. However, it was thought that access to these services was often hampered by long waiting times and eligibility barriers.

While each individual service was likely only to provide some of the forms of direct and indirect support noted above due to capacity constraints, there was a strong focus on keeping children at the heart of service provision. Workers mentioned the importance of giving children direct attention, consideration, respect and time. There was also the recognition of the need to assist parents to address both their own and their children’s particular needs.

**SPECIALIST HOMELESSNESS SERVICES:
THE EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN SUMMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Frustration in accessing the service system is common.

Simultaneous to the telephone survey of service workers, the family homelessness network undertook focus group research in late 2009 with parents currently or recently accommodated in specialist homelessness services in Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. The groups explored parents’ experiences of the homelessness service system, and identified three main issues: difficulty in accessing the service system, frustration at not being able to find an exit point, and concern about the effects on children of being homeless including while they were within the service system.

Frustration in accessing the service system was a common experience across the groups. For some, the unexpectedness of the events precipitating homelessness caught them off-guard; for others they just didn’t know where to turn or found frustration and difficulty in accessing the service system.

“They were just like passing the buck to everybody else they’re like, oh no we’ve got none but try this number, and then try this number or ring the other number you’ve just called back. Yeah, it was just really hard.”

Parents’ experience of the service system was also sometimes complicated by their own issues, particularly the reluctance to disclose detailed information about their circumstances. Two main types of reason were given: some could not conceive that they would get help for their particular issues and others felt that they would be penalised for these issues if they were disclosed.

There was much that parents found positive in their experience once they had found their way through the service system to tangible support. Generally, they were satisfied with the range of services that they were linked to by their support workers. Childcare and counselling were identified as particularly useful. Additional resources, such as clothing, train tickets, outings, transport (i.e. to and from their existing schools) or toys for kids were also identified as helpful.

A couple of parents noted that they were given parenting support, which they found helpful given the stress of...
It is pure chance what supports and services families and children are able to access. This snapshot of the evidence about children and homelessness illustrates that:

- Children and young people are over-represented in specialist homelessness services, especially children under five
- Most come from single parent households, principally female headed households
- Homelessness and housing crises can have a profoundly negative impact on children’s health and wellbeing, their engagement with school, their capacity to learn and their connections to friends, extended families and communities.

While individual pathways into homelessness are diverse, income poverty and family breakdown are the key reasons people present at homeless services. However, while some families only require access to affordable housing others have multiple and complex needs that require the efforts of multiple service sectors, typically mental health, drug and alcohol, early childhood, employment and education.

Across the homelessness service system in Australia there is little consistency in the services and supports provided to children who accompany their families into homelessness. Several supports for families that are consistently provided or accessed by services include temporary accommodation, basic material assistance and transport. However, significant differences occur in the

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Homeless People
extent to which these services are provided, the quality of the services and the supplementary services available. For example, a sizeable proportion of homelessness services employ a Children’s Worker, however the vast majority, two-thirds, do not (Gibson and Morphett, 2010). There are specialist homelessness services which are able to provide educational assistance to children, for example help with homework, tutoring programs and access to computers, through their relationships with other services or through philanthropically funded programs. Some are able to negotiate outreach support from other local services, for example local health service visits to provide health care to those who would otherwise find access difficult.

From the perspective of children and families who are homeless, it is pure chance as to the sort of supports and services they are able to access across Australia. This is notwithstanding the great ingenuity and resourcefulness shown by services in the way that they work with children and families to attempt to meet their needs. The ability to respond to the needs of children was heightened when relationships with other services and sectors were positive. However, at present homeless service resources and funding are not adequate to address children’s needs in a consistent and systematic way.

The benefits of supporting children as much as possible especially in their earliest years is well known. “Children who have good early childhood experiences before age six, in stimulating, nurturing environments have better outcomes throughout their life … better school grades, better self-esteem, fewer social problems, and fewer health problems and are less likely to be teen parents, use drugs or be involved in crime” (Hertzman, 2003). This has been acknowledged in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Early Childhood Development Strategy. From an early childhood development perspective, there is clear value in enhancing service provision to homeless children and their families.

**KEY AREAS FOR ACTION**

*Prevention, early intervention and better support for children and families once homeless is necessary.*

A consistent and nationwide framework is required to address the needs of homeless children, informed by child- and family-centred practice.

This framework should articulate how to:

1. Prevent families and children from becoming homeless
2. Intervene early to stabilise housing where it is precarious

**Prevention**

It is imperative from what is known about the impact of homelessness on children that more is done to prevent children becoming homeless in the first instance. A continued effort by the government to increase the supply of affordable housing is essential. The importance of a family home, and especially a kitchen table where families can eat together where children can do their homework, was of clear importance to the families involved in the research. The government has made good headway in delivering social housing and it is essential that this continues.

**Early intervention**

The objective should be to intervene early with vulnerable families prior to housing breakdown. Where housing has already been lost, rapid re-housing should be a priority in the belief that stabilising households stabilises children. Many parents report a complicated service sector that is difficult to identify, access, negotiate and leave. As a result, families often refrain from using services or wait until their situation becomes dire before they make any request for support. Time and again parents in the focus groups reported that it was an individual worker who helped families to navigate the service systems and finally help them to find assistance. Individuals who provide client support and advocacy can make a real difference at the prevention and early intervention end of the spectrum. In addition, existing programs and strategies that have been shown to work could be bolstered, such as the Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) advice program; financial aid, including interest free loans and rental brokerage funds; and referral by real estate agents of people at risk of losing their rental property to services which negotiate the payment of arrears and arrange financial counselling.

**Crisis support**

Families with children who find themselves in crisis require a level of support which exceeds accommodation, material assistance and transport. Parents and children who come into homeless services have varied needs, and these should be appropriately assessed as a starting point. Some children will require intensive support and services; some will not. An assessment of all children entering specialist homelessness services will assist in ensuring that resources are best utilised.

Additional resources, through increased brokerage funding for example, are required to ensure that areas of remedial action discovered in the assessments can be addressed.

Consideration should also be given to employing a dedicated Children’s Worker at all specialist homelessness services who work with children. From the research, having access to in-house expertise seemed to improve the quality of service on offer. Whether the best ‘application’ of such expertise is to do direct work with children or build capacity in the team for child-centred practice or a hybrid of the two needs to be further explored. Nonetheless, these workers can clearly make a difference.

All the efforts outlined above, whether through prevention, early intervention, or in crisis support, need to be underpinned by practice which is strengths-based and child- and family-centred. There is a broad consensus across the service sector dealing with disadvantaged families that the key to appropriately supporting homeless families and children is through building child- and
family-centred practice. This should be routinely done whether working with children, such as facilitating relationships with schools, pre-schools and referral to allied health services, or with the family or household unit, such as toward housing, employment or safety and in valuing and investing in supporting collaborative service provision and networks.

CONCLUSION

An evidence-based framework of support for children and their families is required.

There is an increasing awareness of the needs of children who are homeless and the value of preventing homelessness. This is manifest at both a policy level, particularly through The Road Home, and at a service level through the research findings presented. There is also increasing recognition of children as clients in their own right and not as appendages to an adult.

Two years on from the White Paper’s release, good efforts have been made in a number of areas, particularly in addressing supply-side issues, developing more effective services for adult rough sleepers, and focusing specialist homelessness services more clearly on targets leading to the ultimate eradication of homelessness. However, while the White Paper makes a range of commitments to Australia’s homeless children there appears to have been little in the way of realising these commitments. Thus far there has been little in the way of setting clear national targets, increased resourcing, or developing and supporting child- and family-centred practice in homelessness services although it is welcome that homeless children will be counted as individual clients within the service system from July 1, 2011.

There is a demonstrable need for better support for children and their families who become homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless. The current challenge is the limited data and evidence to inform what, when and how that support is provided. Future research needs to build on improved national data collection and have a significant emphasis on prevention and early intervention initiatives so to reduce the risk of children being exposed to the impacts of homelessness.

The current collaborators remain committed to progressing research to assist in developing a national framework of support which integrates with existing frameworks, policies and programs that relate to homelessness and children’s wellbeing such as The Road Home, the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s children and the COAG National Early Childhood Development Strategy. It is apparent that such a framework must enhance practice approaches which are child-centred and improve health and wellbeing and future life opportunity for children. Building accountability mechanisms for the delivery of evidence-based initiatives into the framework will help this to be achieved.

REFERENCES


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Seen and Heard: putting children on the homelessness agenda

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A major report on family homelessness shows a growing number of Sydney families are struggling to gain secure accommodation and are being displaced by a critical shortage of rental accommodation and public housing while struggling with mental health issues, isolation and an outdated system geared towards the needs of individuals and not families.

The Wesley Report, More than a bed: Sydney’s homeless families speak out is the result of a study of 50 homeless families. It examines their experiences, the causes of homelessness and the impact on children.

While previous studies have looked at individual homelessness this new Wesley Report switches the focus to homeless families in Sydney. It is estimated that homeless families currently account for between a quarter and a third of the homeless population in Australia.

As part of an 11-point plan to help homeless families the CEO of Wesley Mission the Rev Dr Keith Garner has called for increased community and public housing, an integrated, family-friendly approach to support services and a shift towards more appropriate integrated models of care and a more flexible system that is user-friendly for families applying for accommodation.

“Alarmingly, the population of homeless families is on the rise,” Dr Garner said.

“They are in our suburbs, sleeping on the floor in a relative or friend’s house, sleeping in their car, living in a refuge after they’ve left a violent partner, sitting patiently at Centrelink trying to arrange emergency accommodation or living with their three kids in a motel room until a vacancy comes up on the long waiting list for public housing.

“They’re mostly young, more often than not women, and they are almost always accompanied by young children. A growing number of families who have never experienced homelessness before have the overwhelming impression that the welfare system is complex, confusing and alienating.”

By far the most common reason for family homelessness was domestic violence, with more than four in 10 naming this as their number one reason for being homeless and almost half placing it in their top two. This is almost double the second most quoted cause, relationship breakdown or divorce.

Homeless families are often disconnected from their traditional networks of support – family, friends, known health professionals, schools and public transport. One in every five families lives more than 20 kilometres from their support networks.

Half of the homeless families surveyed discussed the need for appropriate accommodation. What is ‘appropriate’ for people generally revolved around being ‘family friendly’, ‘areas where people have connections’, and long-term.

Many of those in the study wanted to access private rental properties but given the tight market, were unable to compete with real estate agents who ‘auction off’ properties, inflating market value beyond their reach.

“With the current limited supply of rental properties in Sydney and with average rental prices rising by 10-20 per cent a year, this is not likely to change soon,” Dr Garner said.

The report also found that new homeless families, in particular, do not know where to turn for help, and it is evident that there is no one simple way to find appropriate help.

The Wesley Report also reveals that children in homeless families are socialised by the experience and can often repeat the pattern as adults. Again, highly successful long-term programs, like the State government’s Brighter Futures initiative, show how to support these children at an early stage so that the cycle of disadvantage and despair does not become entrenched.

Early intervention is vital: more than half the adults surveyed for the report had been homeless as children.

“It is clear from these results that having a parent who has been homeless is a significant predictor of being homeless as an adult,” the report states. “More than half the respondents had parents who had been homeless. Poverty and alcohol are also common links, with more than half having had parents who had financial problems and issues with alcohol abuse.”

Experiencing violence or being bullied also appears to predispose people to later homelessness, as does violence and mental illness.
The true face of homelessness

Homeless men ‘sleeping rough’ represent only a relatively small proportion of the homeless population. Only around seven per cent of homeless people in Sydney sleep ‘rough’, with the majority of others ‘couch surfing’ between friends’ and relatives’ homes, or living in some form of crisis or assisted accommodation. Homeless families make up an increasingly large component of this majority. Also, a homeless person is almost as likely to be a woman as a man.

Homeless children risk becoming homeless adults

Strong intergenerational links exist for homelessness. An experience of homelessness, and physical, drug or alcohol abuse predisposes children to homelessness as an adult. Intervention programs need a long-term (10-20 year) approach to identify and address issues to ensure the next generation does not repeat this pattern.

Young people over-represented

Of the homeless parents interviewed, around a third were under 24, and two thirds were under 34. This represents a significant over-representation of younger people in the population of homeless families.

‘New’ homeless families don’t know where to seek help

People new to the experience of homelessness do not know where to turn for help and are confused by the apparent complexity of the welfare system. This overwhelming and frightening situation can lead to depression, stress and longer-term problems, or worsen an existing mental health problem.

Mental illness is rife

Three quarters of the adults in the survey had been diagnosed with a mental illness (acquired either before or after the homelessness incident) and the potential for mental health issues among homeless children is significant.

Inconsistencies in the welfare system exacerbate problems

Getting access to, or retaining, assistance can be very difficult for those facing an accommodation crisis. A small improvement in financial circumstances can have disastrous consequences for a family by making them ineligible for benefits or encouraging them to mislead authorities to retain them.

Long-term support is critical to positive outcomes

A strong support network is vital for a homeless family, as is trying to find temporary accommodation for them which is close to these support networks.

ENDNOTES

Lee and her kids make it through: LEE’S STORY

Lee believes there were two reasons she survived a traumatic experience of homelessness – their names are Seth and Katie.

“A few times I felt close to ending it all but the kids kept me strong,” the 42-year-old mother said.

“I had to make sure they wouldn’t be permanently scarred by the experience of having nowhere to live.”

Lee’s nightmare began a few years ago when an acrimonious relationship breakdown robbed her of her home and small business. Fortunately some time before, Lee had met Horace, a Wesley Mission case manager who had been working with Lee and her kids through the Brighter Futures program. Horace convinced her to visit the Department of Housing and get on the list for public housing.

Lee joined the queue for public housing and in the meantime she and the kids found themselves placed in a two-bedroom cabin in a caravan park at Emu Plains.

Lee soon lost patience with ‘the system’ and she and the kids stayed with her grandparents in another part of Sydney, sometimes sleeping in her car and sometimes on the floor of their garage.

Throughout it all, Lee kept her focus on the kids and drew her strength from them.

“They barely missed any school during the six months or so that we were homeless. I rented a friend’s old car for $50 a week and made sure I was able to get them to school each day,” she said.

The sky eventually brightened when Horace was able to arrange a three-bedroom home for the family in a nice neighbourhood through Wentworth Community Housing.

Things have stabilised and the kids are now thriving at the local primary school.

Homelessness as a way of life: AMANDA’S STORY

Ask Amanda what she remembers of her teenage years and she’ll answer with one word – refuges.

The bright, attractive girl, now 26, spent seven years in various refuges on the NSW Central Coast and in Sydney after she left home at 14.

An abusive family and a range of serious mental health issues launched her onto the homeless path.

Her teenage years were a blur of different refuges and foster homes, stays in psychiatric hospitals, amphetamine use and several suicide attempts.

“I’d be in one refuge for three weeks, another for three, depending on where there was room. I was still going to school and none of the kids understood my situation. All I had in life was a suitcase,” Amanda said.

By the time she came to Wesley Mission’s Independent Living Program (ILP) on the Central Coast in 2005, Amanda had hit rock bottom.

“If it wasn’t for those people (at the ILP), I wouldn’t be here,” she said.

The ILP caters to 16-25 year olds and offers them accommodation in a house for up to two years, as well as counselling and other support.

Despite some ups and downs, Amanda stayed with the program for two years and has returned again after a break of several years when she had a young son and an unsuccessful relationship.

“I initially looked for private rental accommodation but it’s pretty hard to afford when you’re on Centrelink benefits, and most real estate agents won’t look at single parents with young kids. I went on the Department of Housing waiting list but that’s years long. I am lucky that Wesley Mission has been able to take me, and my son, back.”
Three generations of a family face homelessness:

**MARGARET’S STORY**

The professionals call it ‘inter-generational homelessness’. It’s a complex sounding term for the fact that many children who experience homelessness risk growing up to be homeless adults.

Many children who experience homelessness risk growing up to be homeless adults.

Margaret, her daughter, Natalie, and granddaughter, Aeesha bear sad testimony to this cycle.

Margaret, 55, has recently been made redundant and was forced to live with her elderly father because she can't afford to pay rent. But he's about to move into a retirement village and Margaret is at risk of becoming homeless – again.

Her daughter, Natalie, 25, is already homeless and has lived in refuges on and off since she was 16. She has a three-year-old daughter, Aeesha.

Margaret left school in Year 10, got married not long after and had her first child. However, her husband was abusive and Margaret soon left that relationship.

A few years later, she became pregnant with Natalie. Her new relationship also broke down and Margaret found herself homeless with two kids and little means of support.

Like her mum, Natalie also left school in Year 10. She developed psychosis and mood problems. Margaret saw the signs and tried unsuccessfully to get help.

After Aeesha’s birth, Natalie suffered postnatal depression and attempted suicide, which led to the child being placed in Margaret’s care.

Over time, however, Natalie got a handle on her depression and became involved in Wesley Mission’s Brighter Futures program to improve her relationship with her daughter.

Eventually Natalie regained custody of Aeesha and they moved in with Margaret. After many years, the family was back together.

But the stability hasn’t lasted long. Margaret’s recent job loss means the women can no longer pay the rent – and the cycle of homelessness is set to start again.

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**CLARISSA’S STORY**

It can happen in the blinking of an eye. One day, Clarissa and her five kids, aged four to 13, had a home in Sydney’s Baulkham Hills. The next day they were on the streets.

A fire during the night destroyed the rental property and introduced the 30-year-old single mother and her children to the bewildering and frightening world of the homeless.

“The main thing is that no one was hurt in the fire,” she said.

“In retrospect, apart from ensuring everyone was safe, the smartest thing I did was make sure I rescued my ID and personal documents. This was a godsend later when I was trying to negotiate the public housing maze.”

Neighbours, the school and a local radio station rallied around to help the family with clothes and beds. Clarissa and the kids stayed with a neighbour the first night and began trying to find a home the next day.

“Priority Housing told us to go out and find a rental property and they would pay the bond. Not easy to do with five kids in tow and no car! I can tell you, real estate agents aren’t interested in single parents with large families.

“We must have applied for 20-30 properties but never got a single bite.”

“We must have applied for 20-30 properties but never got a single bite. I’d been renting for 13 years and had never encountered anything so discouraging,” Clarissa recalls.

Meanwhile, persistent pressure on her local MP finally paid off and last October she and the family were re-united in another rundown property in Baulkham Hills.

“It’s not a palace but it doesn’t leak and it’s in the area where we lived before and the kids can continue going to the same schools,” she said.

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Life after homelessness

This article from *Australian Social Trends* was published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and examines a range of socio-economic indicators of those who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the last 10 years, but were no longer homeless.

Anyone in society can experience a period of homelessness at some stage in their life. Adverse life events or circumstances, such as illness or being the victim of violence, may trigger an episode of homelessness that, for some, may only be short-lived. However, others experiencing homelessness may have struggled with considerable personal disadvantage throughout their lives. In such circumstances there may be less personal, family or community resources at their command to either avoid or quickly recover from an episode of homelessness.

People who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness can be disconnected from employment and education institutions, be socially excluded from support networks, and are more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health. This article examines a range of socio-economic indicators of those who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the last 10 years, but were no longer homeless. It does not examine causal relationships between homelessness and people’s circumstances.

**WHO HAS BEEN HOMELESS?**

In 2010, 1.1 million adults (7% of the 16.8 million adult population living in private dwellings) had experienced homelessness at some time in the previous 10 years. There were a similar number of men and women in this group.

... age

People who reported experiencing homelessness in the last 10 years were generally younger than those who had never been homeless. While one third (32%) of the general adult population were aged 18-34 years, this age group accounted for 55% of those who had been homeless. In contrast, while those aged 55 years and over also accounted for one third (33%) of the general adult population, only 11% of those who had experienced homelessness were 55 years or over.

![AGE DISTRIBUTION – 2010](image)

*Source: ABS 2010 General Social Survey*  
*(a) Age reported at time of survey.  
(b) Excludes persons who had been homeless more than 10 years ago.*

... education

People who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years reported lower levels of educational attainment. After standardising for age, of adults who had been homeless, one third (33%) had not gone beyond Year 10 at school nor obtained a non-school qualification above Year 10. After standardising for age, of adults who had been homeless, one third (33%) had not gone beyond Year 10 at school nor obtained a non-school qualification above Year 10.

... disability and long-term health condition

Adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years were much more likely to report having a disability or long-term health condition (64%) compared with those who had never been homeless (37%). People who had a disability or long-term health condition and had been homeless in the last 10 years were four times as likely to report that they had a disability type or restriction which was psychological (22% compared with 5%).

DATA SOURCES AND DEFINITIONS

Data in this article are from the ABS 2010 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS provides a very wide range of information about people who, at the time of the survey, were living as usual residents of private dwellings in Australia (excluding very remote areas). The GSS, therefore, does not include people who, at the time of the survey, were staying in homeless shelters; sleeping rough; staying temporarily with other households; or staying in boarding houses. Therefore very few people who may have been experiencing homelessness at the time of the survey will have responded to the survey. See ABS General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2010 (cat. no. 4159.0).

In this article, *homelessness* is defined as a reported period in the past when the respondent had been without a permanent place to live as a result of: violence/abuse/neglect; tight housing market/rental market; family/friend/relationship problems; financial problems; alcohol or drug use; mental illness; gambling; job loss; eviction and natural disasters. While there were 965,000 adults whose most recent period of homelessness had been more than 10 years ago, this article focuses on the 1.1 million people who had at least one episode of homelessness in the last 10 years. *Never been homeless* refers to people aged 18 years and over who had never experienced homelessness. It includes both people who had never been without a permanent place to live, or for whom the only reasons for being without a permanent place to live were: travelling/on holidays; work-related reasons; just moving back/into town or city; house sitting; saving money; and building or renovating a home.

*Age standardisation* removes the effect of age when comparing socio-economic characteristics between the population who had experienced homelessness in the past 10 years with those who had never been homeless.

*Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA)* summarise different combinations of the social and economic information from the Census of Population and Housing to allow ranking of regions/areas, by the level of social and economic wellbeing in each region. The SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage includes attributes such as low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and jobs in relatively unskilled occupations. The index refers to the average population of the area in which a person lives, not the socio-economic situation of any particular individual. The first quintile represents the areas of most disadvantage and the fifth quintile represents the areas of least relative disadvantage.
LIVING CONDITIONS

... employment

Being employed has many benefits aside from financial ones, such as providing the opportunity to build networks and have social interaction. It can also assist with building confidence, developing a sense of pride and achievement and motivating people. People who are unemployed or not in the labour force may be more vulnerable to missing out on these opportunities.

In 2010, adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years were more likely to report being unemployed (9%) than those who had never been homeless (3%). They were also more likely not to be in the labour force (41% compared with 31%).

... income

Adults who had been homeless were twice as likely to report that their main source of personal income was a government pension or allowance compared with those who had never been homeless (48% compared with 24%). Adults who had experienced homelessness were more likely to live in a lower income household than those who had never been homeless. In 2010, three in five (59%) of the adults who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the 10 years prior to the survey were in the bottom 40% of the household income distribution (after adjusting gross household incomes for household size and composition), compared with 36% of those who had never been homeless.

... living arrangements

Adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years were more than twice as likely to be in a one parent family (17% compared with 8%) and much more likely to be living alone (28% compared with 12%) or in a group household (9% compared with 3%) than adults who had never been homeless.

Adults who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years were five times more likely to be living in public housing than those who had never been homeless (10% compared with 2%).

They were also twice as likely to be renting privately (45% compared with 20%), and much less likely to live in an owner occupied dwelling (38% compared with 74%).

MORE DEFINITIONS

A person has a disability or long-term health condition if they have a limitation, restriction, impairment, disease or disorder, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and/or restricts everyday activities.

Unemployed people are those aged 18 years and over who were not employed, but were actively looking for work in the four weeks prior to the survey and available to start work in the week prior to the survey.

Not in the labour force refers to people aged 18 years and over who were not employed and who were not actively looking for work in the four weeks prior to the survey.

... financial stress

Adults who had experienced homelessness within the last 10 years were more likely to live in households constrained in their activities because of a shortage of money.

In the 12 months prior to being surveyed, almost one quarter (23%) of people who had experienced homelessness lived in households which reported having three or more different types of cash flow problems (compared with 5% of people who had never been homeless).

Of adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years, 38% reported being unable to pay electricity, gas or telephone bills on time, compared with 10% of people who had never been homeless, while one in ten (11%) of the adults who had been homeless reported that a member of their household went without meals, compared with 1% of people who had never been homeless.
WHERE DO THEY LIVE NOW?

Compared with persons who had never been homeless, in 2010, people who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years were more likely to be currently living in more disadvantaged areas.

People who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years were more likely to report neighbourhood problems than people who had never experienced homelessness. Of those reporting problems, they were twice as likely to report that using or dealing drugs was a local neighbourhood problem (28% compared with 13%). They were also more likely to report people being insulted, pestered or intimidated in the street (32% compared with 18%) and that there were higher instances of offensive language or behaviour in their local area (41% compared with 29%).

Living in areas of social disadvantage with limited community cohesion can place people at greater risk of crime victimisation. In 2010, people who had been homeless within the last 10 years were almost three times as likely to report being a victim of physical or threatened violence in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with those who never had been homeless (25% compared with 9%).

SEEKING ASSISTANCE

While there are services available to assist people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, 60% of the 1.1 million adults who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the previous 10 years reported that they had not sought assistance of formal services when homeless. Most (81%) of those who did not seek assistance felt that they had not needed it.

Of the 460,000 people who had been homeless and sought assistance from a service provider for their most recent experience of homelessness, over half (56%) had approached housing service providers. Two-thirds (66%) of those adults who did seek assistance from services felt that the services were helpful.

LOOKING AHEAD

The experience of homelessness is not the same for all people. The reasons people were homeless in the last 10 years differed, as did the length of time they had been homeless, the number of episodes of homelessness that they experienced, and whether or not they had sought assistance of formal services when homeless.

The 2008 Australian Government White Paper, The Road Home, A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness set an ambitious target to halve homelessness by 2020 and offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it. The measures in the White paper were targeted to both help prevent more Australians from becoming homeless each year, and to strengthen the provision of services for those Australians who do become homeless.
EXPLORING ISSUES

ABOUT THIS SECTION

‘Exploring issues’ features a range of ready-to-use worksheets relating to the articles and issues raised in this book. The activities and exercises in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond.

As the information in this book is gathered from a number of different sources, readers are prompted to consider the origin of the text and to critically evaluate the questions presented.

Does the source have a particular bias or agenda? Are you being presented with facts or opinions? Do you agree with the writer?

The types of ‘Exploring issues’ questions posed in each Issues in Society title differ according to their relevance to the topic at hand.

‘Exploring issues’ sections in each Issues in Society title may include any combination of the following worksheets: Brainstorm, Research activities, Written activities, Discussion activities, Quotes of note, Ethical dilemmas, Cartoon comments, Pros and cons, Case studies, Design activities, Statistics and spin, and Multiple choice.

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WORKSHEETS AND ACTIVITIES

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Brainstorm, individually or as a group, to find out what you know about homelessness.

1. What is homelessness? In your answer consider the ‘cultural definition’ of homelessness as well as the latest Census definition adopted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

2. What are the effects of homelessness on a person?

3. Which groups of people in Australia are most at risk of being homeless, and why?
4. What is supported accommodation?

5. What is primary homelessness?

6. What is secondary homelessness?

7. What is tertiary homelessness?
Complete the following activities on a separate sheet of paper if more space is required.

There are many factors which may contribute to a person experiencing homelessness. Consider each of the following causes, and briefly explain how they might lead to a person becoming homeless:

**Family conflict/breakdown:**

**Physical/sexual/emotional abuse:**

**Economic hardship:**

**Family and domestic violence:**

**Overcrowding:**
**WRITTEN ACTIVITIES**

**Social isolation:**

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________


**Unaffordable housing:**

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________


**Lack of support from parents:**

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________


**Mental illness:**

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________


**Drug and alcohol/gambling addiction:**

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________


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EXPLORING WORKSHEETS AND ACTIVITIES

To understand why people are homeless, we need to see how they become homeless.

Focus on one of the causal factors for homelessness listed below. Research the extent and impacts of the chosen factor in relation to housing and homelessness in Australia, and explain the issues involved and how they might be resolved. Note: Your chosen focus topic is likely to also involve one or more of the other factors on the list.

➤ Domestic and family violence
➤ Exiting care
➤ Addiction
➤ Disability
➤ Unemployment

➤ Lack of support
➤ Illness
➤ Refugee status
➤ Mental illness
➤ Unaffordable housing

➤ Debt
➤ Blacklisting
➤ Poverty
➤ Being ‘kicked out of home’
➤ Separation/divorce
DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Organise a debate with three speakers on each side supporting one of the following views. You may write your debating notes in the spaces below. After the debate has concluded, discuss as a class the views and information presented and take a vote on the findings from your discussion in order to reach a conclusion.

‘IT IS EASY TO BECOME HOMELESS’

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

‘IT IS DIFFICULT TO BECOME HOMELESS’

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

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________________________________________________________________________
Choose one of the following three design options and create a poster (A3 format or larger) to promote better understanding and awareness of homelessness in Australia. In the space below, write the key poster text, such as slogans and statistics, and describe the visual design concept.

1. Design a poster portraying a cycle of situations which may result in a person becoming homeless.
2. Design a poster appealing to young ‘couch surfers’, alerting them to options for help that are available to them. If relevant, refer to organisations featured in this book.
3. Design a symbol which represents homelessness, and feature it in a poster for display in your classroom. Cite some of the latest Census statistics on your poster, to emphasise the size and scale of the homelessness problem.

**Poster text**

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
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____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Poster visual design concept**

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
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____________________________________________________________________
EXPLORING
issues worksheets and activities

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Complete the following multiple choice questionnaire by circling or matching your preferred responses. The answers are at the end of the next page.

1. How many people were classified as being homeless on Census night in 2011?
   a. 5,237
   b. 15,237
   c. 105,237
   d. 1,105,237

2. Match the following homeless groups to their Census (2011) counts:
   a. Persons in supported accommodation
   b. Persons in other temporary lodging
   c. Persons staying temporarily with other households
   d. Persons staying in boarding houses
   e. Persons in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out
   f. Persons living in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings

   1. 6,813
   2. 21,258
   3. 17,369
   4. 17,721
   5. 686
   6. 41,390

3. Match the following terms to their correct definitions:
   1. Primary homelessness
   2. Secondary homelessness
   3. Tertiary homelessness
   4. Homelessness – cultural definition
   5. Homelessness – Census definition
   6. Marginally housed
   7. Domestic violence
   8. Housing stress
   9. Poverty
   10. Specialist Homelessness Services
   11. Couch surfing
   12. Rooflessness

   a. People in housing situations close to the minimum standard.
   b. People without conventional accommodation (living in the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, under bridges, in parks, etc).
   c. People living in crowded housing who are considered homeless because they do not have control of, or access to space for social relations.
   d. People moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends, emergency accommodation, youth refuges, hostels and boarding houses.
   e. State of being homeless and spending the night sleeping on the street, as opposed to at a shelter.
   f. Services assisting persons who are, or are at risk of, sleeping rough or living in an improvised dwelling.
   g. People living in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.
   h. Without a shelter of any kind; sleeping rough.
   i. With a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter.
   j. Living in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding.
   k. Living under threat of severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence.
   l. State of being without the necessities of daily living, often associated with need, hardship and lack of resources across a wide range of circumstances.
   m. Housing costs exceed 30% of disposable income.
MULTIPLE CHOICE

n. Short-term, temporary accommodation including refuges, shelters, motels, flats, boarding houses or caravan parks; for people who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness.

o. The minimum accommodation that people have the right to expect in order to live according to the conventions of contemporary life.

p. When a person’s current living arrangement is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

q. Physical, sexual, emotional, economic or spiritual abuse.

r. Practice of moving from one friend’s house to another, sleeping in whatever spare space is available, floor or sofa, generally staying a few days before moving on to the next house.

4. Respond to the following statements by circling either ‘True’ or ‘False’:

a. People choose to be homeless.

b. All homeless people live in parks or on the streets.

c. All homeless people have a mental illness.

d. Most homeless people are men.

e. The federal government has not yet actively committed to reducing homelessness.

f. The majority of homeless people do not have a drug or alcohol addiction.

g. Only 15-25% of homeless people are long-term (or chronically) homeless.
For some groups of people, Census variables provide limited opportunity to estimate those likely to be homeless. Three key groups are: homeless youth; homeless people displaced due to domestic and family violence; and homeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. (p.1)

There were 105,237 people enumerated in the Census who are classified as being homeless on Census night (up by 17% from 89,728 in 2006). (p.2)

The homeless rate was 49 persons for every 10,000 people in 2011, down from 51 persons in 2006. (p.2)

In the 2011 Census the homelessness rate rose by 20% or more in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT, with the largest fall being in the Northern Territory, down 8%. (p.2)

Most of the increase in homelessness between the 2006 and 2011 Census counts was reflected in people living in severely crowded dwellings, up from 31,531 in 2006 to 41,390 in 2011. (p.2)

The number of people spending Census night in supported accommodation for the homeless in 2011 was 21,258, up from 17,329 in 2006. (p.2)

There were 17,721 homeless people in boarding houses on Census night in 2011, up from 15,460 in 2006. (p.2)

The number of homeless people on Census night in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out in 2011 was 6,813, down from 7,247 in 2006. (p.2)

About three quarters of the increase in the 2011 homelessness estimate was accounted for by people who were born overseas. (p.2)

There was little change in the total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who were homeless (up 3% to 26,744 in 2011). (p.2)

60% of homeless people in 2011 were aged under 35 years, and 22% of the increase in homelessness was in the 25 to 34 years age group (up 22% to 19,311 homeless people in 2011). (p.2)

The male homelessness rate fell slightly to 56 males per 10,000 males enumerated in the 2011 Census, while the rate rose slightly for females to 42 per 10,000 females. (p.2)

Among those people who were not classified as being homeless on Census night but were living in some form of marginal housing and may be at risk of homelessness, the number of people living in improvised dwellings fell sharply, down 42% to 4,504 people in 2011, the number of people marginally housed in caravan parks was little changed (at 12,963 people in 2011), while the number of people living in crowded dwellings requiring extra bedrooms jumped 41% to 60,875 in 2011. (p.2)

Most of the homeless youth aged 12-18 years in 2011 were in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings (56%) or in supported accommodation for the homeless (28%). While 8% of homeless people aged 12-18 years were staying temporarily with other households, this proportion increases to 14% for youth aged 19-24 years. (p.5)

A week after releasing the new homelessness definition in 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics recast the estimate of people who were counted as homeless through the Census process in 2001 and 2006. As a result, the number of homeless Australians counted changed from about 100,000 to over 95,000 in 2001 and 105,000 to almost 90,000 in 2006. (p.8)

Almost half of the women with children staying in homelessness services are escaping domestic violence. (p.9)

Research conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence estimates as many as 1 in 10 men in crisis services are there at least in part because of gambling addiction. (p.10)

Data on alcohol and other drug use varies and often people develop alcohol and other drug problems after becoming homeless. People with substance use disorders are particularly over-represented in the chronic homeless population. (p.10)

Financial crisis is a leading cause of homelessness in Australia and its most often triggered by unemployment (p.11)

Rates of mental illness are believed to be significantly higher amongst people experiencing homelessness in Australia than amongst those who are stably housed. (p.12)

Humanitarian entrants (refugees) face a number of significant barriers to accessing homelessness services and sustaining stable housing in Australia. (p.12)

There is currently a shortage of approximately 500,000 rental properties that are affordable and available to people in the bottom 40% of income earners. (p.13)

There are currently just over 250,000 Australians on public and community housing waiting lists across Australia, many of whom have been waiting much longer than 5 years for a property. (p.13)

Being ‘kicked out’ is a frightening, unnerving and unsettling experience for young people even when the homelessness that results is only a temporary experience. (p.16)

Recent research has found that older women are at higher risk of homelessness as a result of separation than people in other demographics. (p.16)

On a typical day in Australia, 59% of people who make a new request for immediate accommodation from government-funded specialist homelessness agencies are turned away, according to a 2011 report by the AIHW. (p.17)

Homeless men ‘sleeping rough’ represent only a relatively small proportion of the homeless population. Only around 7% of homeless people in Sydney sleep ‘rough’, with the majority of others ‘couch surfing’ between friends and relatives’ homes, or living in some form of crisis or assisted accommodation. Homeless families make up an increasingly large component of this majority. Also, a homeless person is almost as likely to be a woman as a man. (p.19)

In 2010, 1.1 million adults (7% of the 16.8 million adult population living in private dwellings) had experienced homelessness at some time in the previous 10 years. There were a similar number of men and women in this group. (p.44)
Causes of homelessness
Homelessness can be the result of a number of factors: relationship and family conflict or breakdown; physical, sexual or emotional abuse; domestic violence; lack of support from parents; not enough emotional support; social isolation; eviction, or time out from a family situation; pregnancy; sexual preference; premature school leaving, avoiding school and failure at school; low income or severe economic hardship; being kicked out or feeling unwanted at home; physical or mental illness; intellectual disability; drug and alcohol abuse; gambling; grief or loss; not enough affordable housing, and overcrowding.

Cultural definition of homelessness
Since 2001, the 'cultural definition' of homelessness (Chamberlain & MacKenzie) has been used to describe the nature and extent of homelessness in Australia. This definition defines homelessness as not having access to: "the minimum accommodation that people have the right to expect in order to live according to the conventions of contemporary life". In September 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released a new definition of homelessness (see 'Homelessness' definition below). Unlike the cultural definition, which judges the adequacy of housing against an amorphous 'standard', this new definition is informed by the notion of 'home' and the elements that are consistently identified with home.

Domestic and family violence
Domestic and family violence is a significant cause of homelessness and personal safety is a concern for people who are subject to, or fleeing domestic and family violence. A person displaced from their home due to domestic violence becomes homeless if they have a temporary living situation and do not have access to accommodation alternatives that are secure, safe and adequate (and the home in which they were subject to domestic violence is not considered a safe alternative accommodation to their homeless situation).

Dwelling structure
Dwelling structure classifies the structure of private dwellings enumerated in the Census. The broad categories are: Separate house; Semi-detached, row or terrace house, townhouse, etc; Flat, unit or apartment; Caravan, cabin, houseboat; Improvised home, tent, sleepers-out; House or flat attached to a shop, office, etc.

Dwelling type
Dwelling type classifies all dwellings into the basic dwelling types. The categories in the Census are: Occupied Private Dwelling; Unoccupied Private Dwellings; Non-Private Dwellings; Migratory; Off-Shore; Shipping.

Homeless person
A person who does not have access to safe, secure and adequate housing. A person is considered not to have access to safe, secure and adequate housing if the only housing to which they have access: damages, or is likely to damage, their health; or threatens their safety; or marginalises them through failing to provide access to: adequate personal amenities, or the economic and social supports that a home normally affords; or places them in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing; or has no security of tenure. A person is also considered homeless if he or she is living in accommodation provided by a special homelessness agency or some other form of emergency accommodation.

Homelessness
According with the Australian Bureau of Statistics' latest statistical definition, when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement is: in a dwelling that is inadequate; or has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

Impacts of homelessness
Homelessness results in social and economic costs to individuals, families, communities and the nation. Homelessness forces people away from their family, friends and communities. It makes it difficult to maintain school or study, and leaves people vulnerable to long-term unemployment and chronic ill-health. Homeless Australians are often excluded from participation in the social, recreational, cultural and economic life of our communities.

Marginally housed
People in housing situations close to the minimum standard.

Primary homelessness
People without conventional accommodation (living in the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, under bridges, in parks, etc).

Secondary homelessness
People moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends, emergency accommodation, youth refuges, hostels and boarding houses.

Severe overcrowding
People living in severe overcrowding are considered to be homeless because they do not have control of, or access to space for social relations. In such circumstances, if people had accommodation alternatives it would be expected that they would have exercised them.

Sleeping rough
State of being homeless and spending the night sleeping on the street, as opposed to at a shelter. Also called 'rough sleeping'.

Specialist Homelessness Services
As of 1 July 2011, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) National Data Collection was replaced with the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) collection. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare compiles SHS data about the pathways people take in and out of homelessness and the kinds of work homelessness agencies do.

Tertiary homelessness
People living in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.
Websites with further information on the topic

Australian Bureau of Statistics  www.abs.gov.au
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  www.aihw.gov.au
Australian Homelessness Clearinghouse  http://homelessnessclearinghouse.govspace.gov.au
Council to Homeless Persons  www.chp.org.au
Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs  www.fahcsia.gov.au
Hanover Welfare Services  www.hanover.org.au
Homelessness Australia  www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au
Mercy Foundation  www.mercyfoundation.com.au
National Shelter Inc  www.shelter.org.au
NSW Women’s Refuge Movement  www.wrrc.org.au
Reach Out  www.reachout.com.au
Salvation Army (Homeless Services)  www.salvationarmy.org.au/homeless
St Vincent de Paul Society  www.vinnies.org.au
The Big Issue  www.bigissue.org.au
UnitingCare Australia  www.unitingcare.org.au
Wesley Mission  www.wesleymission.org.au

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