Homelessness in Australia
An APS insights paper

Summary

While addressing the homelessness crisis is undoubtedly about providing physical shelter, it is also much more than that. Experiencing homelessness can negatively impact every aspect of a person's life, from the quality of their health to securing and maintaining employment. This paper examines the causes and impacts of homelessness in Australia and breaks down the not-for-profit ecosystem that seeks to address the issue.

We hope it will provide givers interested in making a difference to this cause with a better understanding of how and where they could place their donations.

Kate Stone
Head of Philanthropic Giving

Introduction

Homelessness is experienced differently by each person it affects. For some people, homelessness means living in crisis accommodation or rough sleeping on the street. For others, it's temporary housing that does not provide stability or security. The Australia Bureau of Statistics considers people to be experiencing homelessness if their current living arrangement:

- is in an inadequate dwelling; or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to control and access space for social relations.

Homelessness is, therefore, about more than not having a roof of one's own. It's about not having a home that provides a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control your living space.

In the last census,[1] more than 116,000[2] people were experiencing homelessness in Australia. While 7% were sleeping rough, 18% were in supported accommodation, and almost half (44%) lived in severely crowded dwellings.

Why do people experience homelessness?

The causes of homelessness are numerous and complex. Poverty, unemployment, or a shortage of affordable housing can bring about homelessness. It can also be triggered by family breakdown, mental illness, addiction, financial difficulty, gambling, social isolation, or sexual assault. Domestic violence is the single most significant cause of homelessness in Australia.[3]

What is the impact of homelessness?

Whether short or long term, experiencing homelessness is one of the most severe forms of disadvantage and social exclusion. Inadequate housing affects all areas of people's lives and can cause them to miss out on everything associated with having a home. People experiencing homelessness often feel that they lack a place in a community, a neighbourhood, and friends. It results in significant social and economic costs, not just to individuals and their families but also to communities and the nation.[4]

Homelessness significantly impacts people's health. People experiencing homelessness are more likely to report having a mental health condition or a long-term health condition, with depression, back pain or back problems, anxiety, and asthma the most commonly reported long-term conditions.[5]

Experiencing homelessness makes it difficult for individuals and families to engage in education and training. It can leave people vulnerable to long-term unemployment[6] and facing multiple challenges finding and keeping a job. These challenges include stigma, greater difficulty in maintaining hygiene, a lack of proper time or structure, and frequent moves.

Homelessness is recognised as a factor that often leads to criminal behaviour. People can become involved in "survival crime" whilst experiencing homelessness, committing property offences to support themselves. One in ten people apprehended by police was homeless at the time of the arrest. If you include housing stress within homelessness, 22% of police detainees were experiencing homelessness before their arrest.[7]

The homelessness ecosystem

Charities assist both people experiencing homelessness and people at risk of homelessness. Their services are aimed at prevention and early intervention, crisis and post-crisis assistance to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and addressing the systems-level problems that cause homelessness.

It is worth noting that although charities operate in the following areas, they may also focus their efforts on supporting priority groups such as young people or First Nations people.

A	**Prevention and early intervention**
B	**Crisis support**
C	**Post crisis assistance**
D	**Structural solutions**
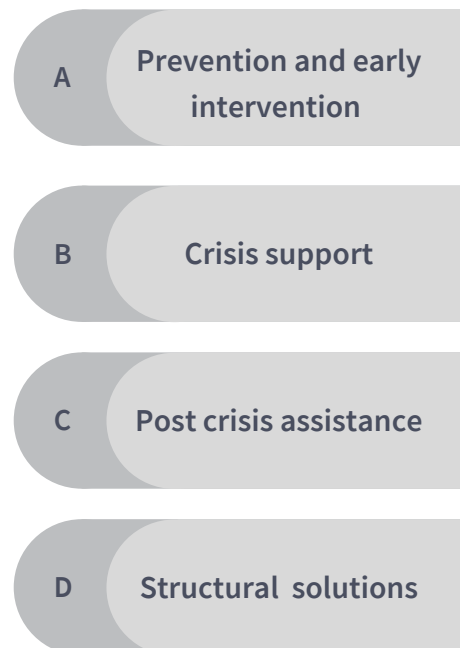
The homelessness ecosystem

A. Prevention and early intervention

Many factors, including mental illness and poverty, contribute to individuals or families ending up in precarious housing situations. Preventative approaches are designed to stop people from experiencing homelessness in the first place.

There are several ways in which charities intervene to reduce or prevent people from experiencing homelessness:
1. Reducing the number of people exposed to problems that make them vulnerable: for instance, by addressing poverty, abuse, unemployment, and low skills
2. Targeting priority groups: young people, prisoners, families experiencing domestic violence—to help them avoid housing breakdown; or providing housing advice to help people avoid making poor choices that lead to experiencing homelessness

3. Intervening to prevent housing breakdown. This could be in the form of support through a crisis like a bereavement or job loss and include counselling or job brokerage.

4. Early intervention: helping someone whose housing breakdown is unavoidable to find suitable accommodation quickly.[8]

B. Crisis support

Often a day centre is the first port of call once someone experiences homelessness. Charities run day centres which generally operate on a walk-in basis, whereby visitors find assistance with basic needs including showers, clothing, information, and access to a phone. Support workers and care coordinators also assist with applications and referrals, linking visitors to agencies for housing, health, legal and financial support.

C. Post-crisis assistance

There are several aspects of longer-term post-crisis assistance that charities provide:

1. Longer-term accommodation or community housing services: often provided at very low cost, with wrap-around services to support people access education, employment, training and health services

2. Support to develop soft skills: Lack of confidence and self-esteem can result from experiencing homelessness. Charities are increasingly offering activities like drama, sport and art that build 'soft skills' and friendships, helping people to take the first steps towards overcoming the personal barriers they face

3. Employment and training programs: many people experiencing

homelessness are unemployed, so they lack the income, status and satisfaction a job can provide.Charities provide training and education, support with work experience, find jobs and assist with maintaining employment.

D. Structural solutions

The key structural constraint causing homelessness is too little housing in the right place at the right price. Charities are advocating for government to increase the availability of affordable housing. Charities are also working directly to increase the supply of quality affordable housing, including:

- Developing strategic and creative responses to increasing affordable housing, such as demonstrating innovative financial models
- Building and designing affordable housing developments that are innovative and can be used as prototypes
- Raising community awareness to increase public support for affordable housing developments.[9]

Charities are vocal lobbyists and advocates for change, including through:

- Leadership and proactivity at the federal and state government levels to encourage a national approach to ending homelessness across all states and territories
- Culturally safe and appropriate service delivery, including expansion of First Nations-led and controlled services to help address high rates of homelessness in their communities
- Improving data quality, evaluation and research around ending homelessness in Australia.

Key issues in homelessness

As well as expanding knowledge, services and solutions across the homelessness ecosystem, there are several key issues where both funding and expert efforts are required.

COVID-19 and homelessness

The economic impact of COVID-19 and its responses placed many Australians at risk of experiencing homelessness. The onset of COVID-19 occurred against a backdrop of intensifying housing affordability stress, affecting large parts of the country. In many cities and regions, house prices and rents have continued to trend upwards for much of this period. At the same time, the number of people experiencing homelessness has also outpaced broader population growth.[10] In the first wave of the pandemic, governments around Australia provided temporary housing to people experiencing homelessness. However, many people have now been removed from their temporary accommodation and are without a home.

Women and children affected by family and domestic violence

There is a notable link between domestic violence and experiencing homelessness. Domestic violence survivors turn to homeless shelters when they seek refuge from their abusive relationship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were increased incidents of domestic violence. Calls to domestic violence helplines increased during the lockdown in Australia, including an 11% increase in calls to 1800RESPECT and a 26% increase in calls to Mensline.

Google reported a 75% increase in internet searches relating to support for domestic violence. These increased calls and inquiries likely signal a much bigger problem.[11]

First Nations people

Historically, First Nations people in Australia have been over-represented among people seeking homelessness and social housing services. Not having affordable, secure and appropriate housing can further compound the social exclusion and disadvantage experienced by some First Nations people.

First Nations people face many barriers in the housing market, including discrimination, cultural and historical pressures, and intergenerational trauma. Hence, they are a priority group for many housing assistance services. However, public and First Nations community housing availability has decreased in recent years, with 48% of people waiting more than two years to secure public housing.[12]

Housing quality is also an issue—in 2018–19, one in five First Nations households were living in dwellings that did not meet an acceptable standard, and 33% of First Nations households were living in homes with at least one major structural problem.[13]

Young people

Young people are a national priority homelessness cohort at both Federal and State levels. In the last census, young people aged 15–24 made up 21% of those experiencing

homelessness - around 24,200 young people.[14] Young people are particularly vulnerable to the enduring harm caused by disruption to their education and transition to employment, and the formation of stable and healthy social networks.   Experiencing homelessness can limit access to medicine, treatment and basic hygiene and expose young people to sexual exploitation, violence and social isolation. It can also lead to high levels of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, behavioural issues and alcohol and drug misuse. Due to a combination of these factors, young people experiencing homelessness face a high mortality rate.

Older people

Older people are not immune to the experience of homelessness in Australia. In the last census, one in six people experiencing homeless were 55 years or older. Structural factors such as the lack of affordable housing options or financial instability can impact everyone in the community. Still, older men and women are often more vulnerable to changes in lifestyle and health. Older people who experience a decline in their physical and mental health can also risk losing their homes and livelihoods.[15] Older Australians that don't own their property or rely on social security payments and support from family members are at risk of rental stress and changing housing needs. Women over 55 are recognised as the fastest-growing cohort of people experiencing homelessness,[16] a trend that is expected to continue.

Housing affordability

Australia is experiencing severe housing affordability issues. Over a million lower-income households pay housing costs that exceed the commonly-used affordability benchmark of 30% of household income. While many Australians are struggling with housing costs, most of those under housing stress are private renters. Rising rent levels have also increased the pressure on public housing and crisis accommodation services and contributed to the current rate of homelessness. When more than 100,000 people are experiencing homelessness, crisis accommodation services are turning away more than half of those seeking new places to live, primarily due to a lack of properties.

Public housing stock has also declined. Charities advocate for a fair and equitable housing system where low-income Australians have access to safe, secure and affordable housing and for the government to have a sustained investment in affordable housing over the long term.[17]

Find out more

APS has developed a list of some of the charities working in the homelessness space for you to consider:

[Give list: homelessness](#)

If you have any questions or would like to discuss funding the homelessness sector, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Footnotes

1 https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/homelessness-and-homelessness-services
2 Of the 116,000 people who were estimated to be homeless in Australia—58% were male, 21% were aged 25–34, and 20% identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
3 https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/homelessness
4 https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2018/208/4/many-costs-homelessness
5 https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/health-of-people-experiencing-homelessness
6 https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2018/208/4/many-costs-homelessness
7 https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/violent-cycles-homelessness-and-crime/
8 https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/lost-property/
9 https://www.lmcf.org.au/our-impact/impact-areas/homelessness-affordable-housing
10 https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Covid-19_rental-housing-and-homelessness-impacts-in-Australia-v3.pdf
11 https://www1.racgp.org.au/ajgp/coronavirus/domestic-violence-and-covid-19
12 https://www.csi.edu.au/research/project/building-back-better-deep-dives/
13 https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-housing
14 https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/homelessness-and-overcrowding
15 https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/stories/safe-homes/three-different-experiences-of-homelessness-in-australia
16 https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/projects/risk-homelessness-older-women
17 https://www.acoss.org.au/housing-homelessness/

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