

A plan to end homelessness

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Introduction

Australia is facing a perfect storm of factors driving increased homelessness, with rents skyrocketing, a tight rental market making it much harder to find an affordable home, and the continuing scourge of domestic and family violence driving victim survivors into homelessness.

Australia is also experiencing more frequent and severe fires, floods, other extreme weather events and natural disasters, causing mass homelessness in affected communities.

But homelessness can be solved. People at risk of losing their home, or who don't have a home need:

- safe, appropriate and affordable housing
- enough income to manage the cost of housing and other essentials, and
- for some, support to gain or sustain their housing.

The fact is that housing, an adequate income, and the support people need are not currently available.

As rents rise and the cost of living increases faster than people's incomes, the need for help to avoid homelessness will only increase.

In 2020–21, 109,207 people came to homeless services needing long term housing. This housing was only provided to 3.4 per cent of those needing a home. A further 26.9 per cent were referred to housing providers, and **76,177 people missed out** on a service.

This is the critical issue driving people to sleep rough on the cold streets of our cities, in their cars or in tents pitched in a state park, or in a friend's back yard.

Lack of access to affordable long-term housing means that those who could avoid or quickly escape homelessness, become stuck in a cycle of moving between temporary housing situations, like rooming houses, couch surfing and rough sleeping, and seeking homelessness help. In 2020–21, 61 per cent of people seeking homeless services were returning clients.

Since June 2021, rents in Australia have increased a further 13.2 per cent, with rents in some locations increasing more than 25 per cent in a year.

Research by Everybody's Home has revealed that lack of affordable housing means an estimated 7,690 women fleeing domestic and family violence return to perpetrators each year because they have nowhere to go, and another 9,000 become homeless after leaving a violent home.

The housing crisis is destroying people's lives. Without a home people struggle to remain in employment, their health suffers, and children's participation in education is compromised.

In addition to the devastating human toll, this creates direct costs to our community and to government budgets. Research by Swinburne University has revealed that Australia's underinvestment in social housing has meant that wider social and economic benefits have been foregone, costing the community \$676.5 million per annum currently, rising to \$1,286 million in 2036.¹

These foregone wider social and economic benefits take the form of added costs addressing homelessness, mental health, domestic violence, alcohol/substance abuse, but also reduced household spending and lower community wellbeing.

Setting targets for actions to end homelessness

In order to end homelessness, Australia needs a plan that includes clear targets for investment to reduce homelessness over time and end it within a decade.

The targets and actions needed to achieve them include:

TARGET ONE

Halve the number of households experiencing rental stress by 2027 and end rental stress by 2032

- 1.1 Build at least 25,000 social housing properties a year
- 1.2 Invest in 25,000 affordable rental properties a year
- 1.3 Increase JobSeeker to at least \$70 a day and increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 50%

TARGET TWO

End homelessness for women, children and young people

- 2.1 Strengthen the draft plan to end violence against women and children and others experiencing gendered violence to:
 - a. significantly reduce gendered violence
 - b. provide a housing guarantee for victim survivors escaping gendered homelessness, and
 - c. provide the support victim survivors need, alongside housing, to escape from violence and rebuild their lives free from violence
- 2.2 Create a national child and youth homelessness strategy to address the drivers of homelessness for children and young people and provide appropriate responses

TARGET THREE

End homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

- 3.1 Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to develop a self-determined national strategy to end homelessness for First Nations communities

TARGET FOUR

Halve the number of people returning to homelessness services by 2027 and halve the numbers again by 2032

- 4.1 Invest in adequate homelessness support service capacity to provide people at risk of or experiencing homelessness with the support they need for as long as they need it to avoid homelessness, or to achieve and sustain housing outcomes
- 4.2 Target new social housing to people experiencing homelessness
- 4.3 Invest in enough Housing First programs to end long-term and recurring homelessness

Make housing affordable

Financial difficulties, housing crisis and other problems with housing and affordability are the main reasons for seeking help for 50 per cent of people presenting at homelessness services.

This problem can be solved by building more affordable housing and by people having more adequate incomes to afford housing that is available.

Build more social and affordable housing

Australia has an increasingly unaffordable rental market and a shortfall of social housing of over 433,000 properties.

Providing access to housing that people on low and modest incomes can afford prevents homelessness and is also critical to responding quickly to provide access to an affordable home to people with no home.

Build at least 25,000 social housing properties a year

Building at least 25,000 social housing properties a year across Australia would generate urgently needed housing options for people who are currently missing out on housing in the private rental market and would progressively address the shortfall in social housing.

Target new social housing to people experiencing homelessness who need long term housing

By targeting these 25,000 new homes to people experiencing homelessness and needing long term housing, the numbers of people becoming stuck in homelessness would significantly reduce.

Invest in 25,000 affordable rental properties a year

Investing in a further 25,000 affordable rental properties a year would enable new supply to be built in locations with inadequate supply of rental housing to meet the needs of local renters, particularly those on low and modest incomes.

Increase income adequacy

During 2020, the Federal Government dramatically slashed rental stress among low- and modest-income Australians by paying increased income support payments via the Coronavirus Supplement and JobKeeper payments.

In June 2020, when income support was increased, rent stress among households receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance fell from 40.5 per cent to 29.4 per cent.² Rent stress was avoided for more than 155,000 households.

Increase JobSeeker to at least \$70 a day and increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 50%

Increasing the JobSeeker payment to at least \$70 a day and increasing the maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 50 per cent would provide more struggling renters with the income needed to avoid rental stress, and homelessness.



Support to prevent and respond to homelessness

Ending homelessness relies on providing the support people need to avoid homelessness where possible, and to quickly escape homelessness when people lose the security of a home. Some people need additional support to gain and sustain their housing.

A plan to end homelessness requires specific strategies to provide appropriate support to groups with different needs. This includes:

Provide enough support to prevent homelessness

Much of the work done by homeless services is to prevent people becoming homeless. One in three clients of homelessness services (32 per cent) are seeking support to sustain tenancies and/or prevent tenancy failure or eviction. Making a critical intervention before homelessness occurs can prevent much bigger problems unravelling. But opportunities to prevent homelessness are missed when services are so overwhelmed that they can't see everyone needing assistance. In 2020–21, 77,943 people needing homelessness help were turned away by services who didn't have the staff or other resources needed to respond.

Additional support, and access to appropriate supported housing, is also needed to stop the revolving door of homelessness from out of home care and institutions like hospitals, acute mental health care, prisons and the defence forces.

Provide enough support for people to gain and sustain housing

When people come to homeless services needing assistance, they have often experienced a series of stressful events that have resulted in homelessness. The pressures of rental stress, loss of employment, illness, family breakdown or domestic and family violence, commonly has negative impacts on people's wellbeing and mental health. Providing adequate support for them to gain access to housing, and to navigate access to income support, legal services, and any required health or disability supports is the most effective way to minimise the length of time people spend without a home, prevents them cycling back into repeat experiences of homelessness, and minimises the harm to their wellbeing of an experience of homelessness. Changes are also needed to make supports, such as Centrelink benefits, and human services, like the NDIS, easier to navigate when people are in crisis.



Strengthen the draft plan to end violence against women and children and others experiencing gendered violence

Domestic and family violence is the major driver of homelessness for women and children. Of all people seeking homelessness services, 39.4 per cent cite domestic and family violence as a reason for seeking assistance. This means strategies to end gendered violence would also have a major impact on reducing homelessness.

The plan to end violence, and the investments to implement the plan, also need to provide victim survivors with the specialised support they need to avoid homelessness when they do experience violence, either by enabling them to safely remain in their home, or to quickly establish a new home and build a life free from violence.

The current draft plan identifies housing as a critical issue for women and children escaping violence, but lacks clear targets or commitments to provide the housing and support needed.

The *Nowhere to Go* report identified that every year an estimated 7,690 women return to perpetrators due to having no-where affordable to live; and 9,120 women a year become homeless after leaving their homes due to domestic and family violence and being unable to secure long-term housing.³ *The Choice: Violence or Poverty* revealed that around 45,000 women want to leave a violent home but don't because they can't afford to leave or have nowhere to go.⁴

Providing victim survivors fleeing domestic and family violence with a housing guarantee if they flee a violent home would open the door to a safe future and prevent victim survivors having to choose between violence and poverty.

Create a national child and youth homelessness strategy

In 2020–21, 41,652 young people presented alone to homeless services: more than one in seven of all homeless clients. Young people who can't live safely at home require specialised help to either resolve issues in the home, or to find an alternative safe place to live. Affordability of housing is particularly challenging for young people who have lower income support and wages than adults. Most will also need help to maximise their potential, such as help to stay connected to education and succeed with their learning, to maintain their health and wellbeing, and to transition to employment.

Children under the age of 15 also flee their homes and become homeless. Across the States and Territories, child protection services respond to children's harm. But much abuse or neglect of children is not noticed or responded to by child protection services, and children themselves don't often know about and don't self-refer to these government agencies. Others flee experiences in out of home care. To meet the needs of children who flee from abusive homes, or out of home care, into homelessness, support services are needed that can engage with young people where they first present as homeless, such as at schools or youth services.

A national child and youth homelessness strategy needs to include measures to strengthen, align and coordinate universal and targeted services to prevent homelessness. A public health response to children's homelessness would also provide a suite of responses to be wrapped around the young person through family, education, health, and homelessness services, equipped to meet the child's needs, and where appropriate, those of their family of origin. Services that are now generally not available would need to be provided, such as supported crisis accommodation, adolescent trauma care or alcohol and other drug services.

Create a national strategy to end homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

First Nations Australians are 9.4 times more likely to be without a home than other Australians, and this over-representation is growing.⁵ In 2020–21, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians represented three per cent of the Australian population but 28 per cent of specialist homelessness service users.⁶ A strategy to end homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians requires fundamental issues to be addressed in our nation that result in more poverty and disadvantage among First Nations communities than other Australians. Addressing racism, poverty and disadvantage would significantly reduce the numbers of First Nations people experiencing homelessness.

Specialist services are also needed to respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People who are experiencing homelessness, to provide rapid pathways to a home and culturally safe support to sustain a home. Working with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to support First Nations Australians to develop a self-determined plan to end homelessness would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop plans that address these issues, and which include housing and support responses that meet local needs, and which are linked to other community-based responses.

Invest in Housing First to end long-term and recurring homelessness

Although people that sleep rough are a minority of all people experiencing homelessness, many have been homeless for a long time and/or had multiple periods of homelessness. Among this group, many have experienced multiple traumatic events, and they are more likely to have serious illnesses or disability. Typically, this highly vulnerable group of people without homes cycle in and out of homeless services, but lack of housing and support services means they don't get the support they need to sustain an exit from homelessness.

However, a growing body of international and Australian evidence has demonstrated that Housing First programs are highly successful at enabling people experiencing long term and recurring homelessness to escape homelessness and sustain their housing. Multiple studies in different locations have found that over 85 per cent of people in Housing First programs retained their housing for two years compared to 47 per cent in other programs. Housing First programs have also been shown to reduce costs in people cycling in and out of homelessness and other acute services in health, the justice system and child and family services.

Housing First involves provision of housing, assertive outreach, and ongoing flexible support, with an approach that enables choice and self-determination for people receiving the support.

Despite the success of Housing First, these programs are only available in many locations in Australia as small pilot programs, and many people needing this support miss out. Expanding Housing First programs to those who need this support alongside the other actions in this plan would end rough sleeping in Australia.



References

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- 2) Productivity Commission, 2021, *Report on Government Services; Housing and homelessness sector overview data tables*. Australian Government, Canberra.
- 3) Equity economics, 2021, *Nowhere to go; the benefits of providing long-term social housing to women that have experienced family violence*. p.5
- 4) Summers, A., 2022, *The Choice: Violence or Poverty*. University of Technology Sydney.
<https://doi.org/10.26195/3s1r-497>
- 5) Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2021, *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection*, Australian Government, Canberra.
- 6) AIHW, 2021, *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection*, Australian Government, Canberra.

ABOUT HOMELESSNESS AUSTRALIA

Homelessness Australia is the national peak body for homelessness in Australia. We provide systemic advocacy for the homelessness sector. We work with a large network of organisations to provide a unified voice when it comes to preventing and responding to homelessness.

Visit homelessnessaustralia.org.au

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Homelessness Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of all of the lands on which we meet and work. We pay our respects to First Nations peoples and elders past, present and future. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.