ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA

Homelessness can be ended in Australia through investment in social and affordable housing, long-term support to those who need it, and targeted programs addressing the underlying drivers of homelessness.

An evidence-based briefing by the Centre for Social Impact – April 2022

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The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) is a national research and education centre built on the foundation of four of Australia’s leading universities: UNSW Sydney, The University of Western Australia, Swinburne University of Technology, and Flinders University.

CSI’s purpose is to catalyse positive social change, to help enable others to achieve social impact. This is achieved through transformational research and education that is rigorous and purpose-driven, and by working with people, communities and organisations to grow their capabilities through research, education, and leadership development. Visit www.csi.edu.au for more information.
THE SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING, POVERTY AND FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS DRIVING AUSTRALIA’S HIGH HOMELESSNESS RATES

To end homelessness and housing precarity in Australia, targeted, evidence-driven policy is needed to address the shortage of social and affordable housing and the underlying causes of homelessness.

Homelessness is a growing problem—nationally there is an estimated 50 persons who are homeless for every 10,000 people. People under 35 years of age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and women and families fleeing family violence are more likely to experience homelessness.

Homelessness is not an individual issue, but a problem with inadequate funding to address systemic creators of disadvantage. Appropriate policy settings and properly-funded services that address the underlying contributors to homelessness—such as housing supply and affordability, family and domestic violence, and poverty—will have wide-reaching impact.

Inequalities are often interlinked—the ongoing role of colonisation and dispossession continues to have a direct impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who experience homelessness at rates far above those for the non-Indigenous population.

Long-term health conditions, family and domestic violence, abuse and trauma, and personal relationship breakdowns all contribute to the incidence and structure of homelessness. More people experience homelessness in disadvantaged locations.

Not every experience of homelessness is alike and a one-size-fits-all approach to solving homelessness will not work. People experiencing homelessness often also have high health needs that require long-term supportive housing. High levels of intergenerational homelessness and childhood and adolescent homelessness exist among those currently experiencing homelessness.

Investment in programs addressing family, childhood and youth homelessness will reap significant immediate rewards but also act to reduce chronic homelessness among adults.

Currently there are over 1,600 government-funded Specialist Homelessness Services providing support and accommodation services to people who are experiencing or ‘at risk’ of homelessness in Australia. Demand for these services is only increasing and is currently outpacing availability.

In 2020/21, there was an estimated rate of 108 Australians experiencing or at risk of homelessness, receiving support from Specialist Homelessness Services for every 10,000 people. Last year, there were around 114,000 unassisted requests for help to these services, with three in five of these unmet requests involving accommodation requests.

There is a critical shortage not only of immediate short-term emergency supported accommodation, but also permanent social housing and private rental housing options for those experiencing homelessness.

Across Australia, homelessness services have come together to end homelessness, particularly chronic rough sleeping homelessness, in the communities in which they work (the Advance to Zero campaign).

The Centre for Social Impact’s recently released analysis of Advance to Zero data collected over the last ten years in our Ending Homelessness report reveals the severity of the homelessness problem Australia faces.

On average, people had experienced homelessness for 3.8 years; close to double that for rough sleepers. The majority were assessed to have high health acuity needs, with those sleeping rough, those with a serious brain injury or head trauma, learning or developmental difficulties, or a physical disability, having the highest needs.

Those experiencing homelessness reported a range of long-term serious medical conditions and diagnosed mental health conditions which were significantly higher than rates seen across the general population.

The Centre for Social Impact has undertaken many studies revealing that the health and justice costs of homelessness are high; for young people, for adults, and for governments.
HOMELESSNESS IS PREVENTABLE AND SOLVABLE

Evidence has shown that offering safe and secure housing first while addressing mental illness or substance abuse problems creates better outcomes. Australian Housing First programs focus on making permanent housing available to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness as an immediate priority.

Housing provides a significant benefit for people’s wellbeing, physical and mental health and quality of life. Providing people experiencing homelessness with rapid access to permanent supportive housing results in more positive outcomes.

Impact evaluations of various Housing First programs in Australia over the last decade (e.g., the Misha project, the 50 Lives 50 Homes program in Perth, the Journey to Social Inclusion program in Melbourne, and the Brisbane Common Ground program) have found significant returns to government from investment in Housing First programs.

Recently the Housing First approach has been tabled in the House of Representatives Standing Committee’s Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia, but there must be commitment to the considerable additional investment in social and affordable housing and long-terms supports for those with high needs for it to be effectively implemented.

Currently, many people experiencing homelessness find support in an extended crisis and transitional housing response, such as remaining in temporary accommodation in a shelter. These services are important in the absence of permanent housing but are expensive to run and do not address long-term issues with housing.

The need for affordable housing for Australians is reflected in the 155,000 households currently on the social housing waiting list. There is also a national shortage of just over 400,000 homes that are affordable for Australians who are experiencing homelessness or living on the lowest incomes.

Well over one third of people accessing homelessness services in Australia seek assistance as a result of family and domestic violence (FDV).

Addressing FDV requires holistic preventative programs and while they are provided by family and domestic violence services in Australia, and having a significant social impact, they require significant increased funding.

Many of those supported by homelessness services have been in juvenile detention or prison in their lifetime or have been in out-of-home care as children. Policy actions to address the underlying drivers of entry into the juvenile justice system and out-of-home care together with supportive policies for those that are currently in custody or care has long-term positive impacts on ending homelessness in Australia.

WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN?

Homelessness continues to grow in Australia. Long-term funding for social and affordable housing, and supported housing programs are essential to end homelessness.

State and Territory governments have recently introduced holistic homelessness strategies with a stronger focus on ending homelessness and increased funding on social housing. However, to end homelessness, significant sustained investment in social housing and homelessness funding by the Australian Government is required. This funding needs to resource coordinated approaches to housing and to support, emphasising prevention and early intervention as well as crisis and post-crisis responses.

Beyond this, additional and innovative sources of funding to the homelessness and community housing sector are needed, and must be actively encouraged through policy action that will support increased giving and impact investment.

Any national strategy needs input from expert groups, particularly direct input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services and those with lived experience of homelessness.
RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Five key actions require immediate Australian Government investment:

1. The development and implementation of a National End Homelessness Strategy to be applied across Australia supported by both the Australian Government and State and Territory governments.
2. An increase in the supply of social and affordable housing directed to an end homelessness goal.
3. Comprehensive application of Housing First programs linked to wrap-around support for those entering permanent housing with long histories of homelessness and high health and other needs.
4. Targeted prevention and early intervention programs to turn off the tap of entry into homelessness which address the underlying drivers of homelessness.
5. Supportive systems and programs which build the enablers of an end homelessness program.

CSI RESOURCES/REPORTS

- Ending homelessness in Australia: An evidence and policy deep dive

OTHER RESOURCES

- Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness
- Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2020–21

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