

# Ending Homelessness in Western Australia 2021 Report:

## KEY FINDINGS



Western Australian Alliance  
to End Homelessness

#EndHomelessnessWA

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### Background

*The Ending Homelessness in Western Australia 2021 Report builds on previous work undertaken by the Centre for Social Impact at The University Western Australia* including analysis of national Registry Week data (Flatau et al., 2018); reviews of the research and statistical evidence pertaining to homelessness in Western Australia (Kaleveld et al., 2018; 2019a) and among particular cohorts (Kaleveld et al., 2019b); and the WAAEH outcomes measurement and evaluation framework (Mollinger-Sahba et al. 2019; 2020) and related Dashboard (Flatau et al., 2019a, 2020a, and 2021) and Data Dictionary (Flatau et al. 2019b; 2020b).

*The report presents the state of play in Western Australia with regard to homelessness in three parts.*

### Key messages from the report

Significant resources and effort are being put towards addressing homelessness in Western Australia from homelessness services, housing providers and the Western Australian Government particularly through the Homelessness Strategy and programs flowing from it as well as new initiatives in social housing supply, family and domestic violence, out-of-home care and youth justice programs.

Since the launch of the WAAEH Strategy, the focus in Western Australia has moved to an end homelessness agenda and a Housing First approach. The Western Australian Government has also recognised the critical role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in ending homelessness in its recently announced Housing First initiatives. Despite the good progress being made, our examination of recent trends on homelessness and the current state of play of homelessness in Western Australia in this Report highlights just how far we need to go.

There is a long way to go before we achieve our WAAEH targets and the overall goal of ending homelessness. It will take some time before the current range of measures may impact on homelessness outcomes.

Our review of the Advance to Zero data for Western Australia also highlights the fact that, for those experiencing homelessness, particularly those who have had long periods rough sleeping, the level of need is particularly high.

There is a critical need for a more proactive response from the Australian Government, for increased supply of low-cost housing targeted at vulnerable households both in the social housing sector and the private rental market and a significant push into preventative policies and programs to address family, childhood and youth homelessness. In addition, a renewed focus on high rates of homelessness in outer regional and more remote areas of Western Australia is required.

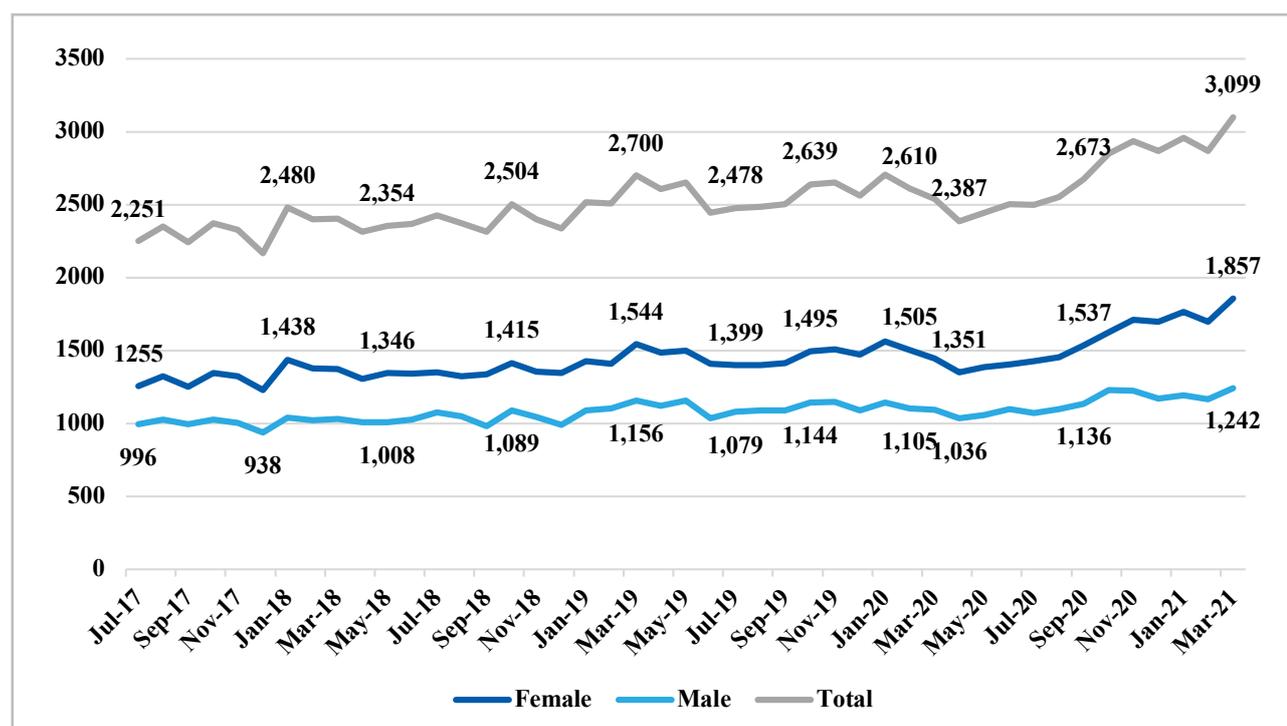


## PART I: TRENDS IN HOMELESSNESS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Using ABS Census and AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services data, we examine trends in homelessness over time, including homelessness among particular cohorts and regional and remote homelessness. We find:

- The overall rate of homelessness in Western Australia, measured by the Census, has decreased from 53.6 per 10,000 people in 2001 to 36.4 per 10,000 people in 2016.
- However, between 2011 and 2016, the proportion of the homeless population enumerated by the Census who were rough sleeping increased from 9% to 12%.
- Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) are accessed by 95.2 per 10,000 Western Australians each year – just under 25,000 Western Australians in 2019/20. This is lower than the national rate of 114.5 per 10,000 Australians, but has been steadily increasing since 2011/12.
- The number of people accessing SHS dipped in March 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic during which several services had to temporarily pause and individuals began to receive increased rates of income support. However, monthly client numbers have now exceeded pre-pandemic levels (see Figure 1).
- Western Australians who use SHS record substantially shorter support period durations (16 days versus 43 days) and fewer nights in accommodation (8 nights versus 28 nights) compared with Australian averages, perhaps reflecting a skew of the Western Australian homelessness system towards crisis rather than temporary or permanent accommodation options.
- The majority of people who access SHS while homeless end their support periods with the same housing status (i.e. they stay homeless)(see Figure 2). However, 30% do transition into permanent housing and very few people who present to SHSs at risk of homelessness are homeless at the end of their support periods, suggesting that SHSs are effective at helping people to retain their housing.
- Rates of regional and remote homelessness, according to both Census and SHS data, are substantially higher than in Perth. The Outback – North Statistical Area Level 4 (SA4) region recorded the highest rate of SHS access in the whole country, and a rate of homelessness and marginal housing almost five times that of Perth (244.1 per 10,000 people versus 51.7).

**FIGURE 1** Number of clients accessing Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in Western Australia who were homeless on entry to support



Source: AIHW 2021 Specialist Homelessness Services: monthly data, Cat. No. HOU 321.

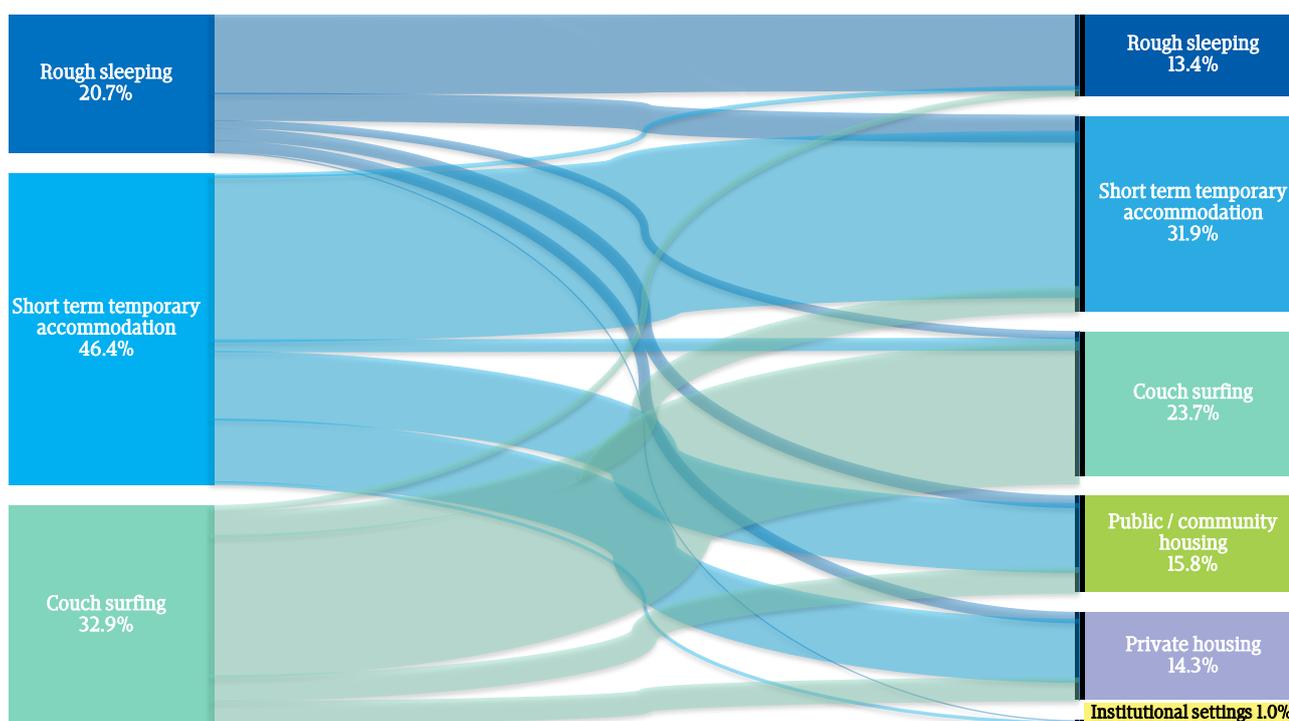


- Living in overcrowded dwellings was the most common form of homelessness in regional and remote Western Australia, though rough sleepers accounted for a higher proportion of the homeless population in regional and remote areas (14.9%) than in Perth (10.2%).
- Aboriginal people are significantly overrepresented in the Western Australian homeless population, comprising 3.1% of the overall population and 29.1% of the homeless population according to the Census. Similarly, 42.1% of Western Australian SHS clients identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. These figures point to a need for increased investment in programs, services, and housing stock that meets the needs of Aboriginal people.
- Several other cohorts are at higher risk of homelessness, such as people leaving institutional care (such as out of home care and prisons), veterans, people who experience family and domestic violence, people with mental health issues, and people with drug and alcohol issues. Programs that are responsive to the particular needs of individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness are critical.

Overall, progress towards ending homelessness in Western Australia is mixed: while the overall rate of homelessness according to the Census decreased between 2001 and 2016, the proportion of people experiencing the most acute form of homelessness, rough sleeping, has increased. The rate and number of people accessing Specialist Homelessness Services has also increased, as has the proportion of people ending support periods without their needs met. The rate of Aboriginal homelessness has substantially decreased over time, and this rate of decrease will need to be maintained over the next 10 years for the Aboriginal and overall rates of homelessness to reach parity.

As we elaborate in Part III, continued use of policy and practice levers is required to ensure progress towards ending homelessness. In addition, maintenance and expansion of robust data collection is required to inform responses to homelessness and track progress. In terms of existing data collections, the 2021 Census estimates of homelessness will be an important source for tracking progress towards ending homelessness, particularly since the intensified efforts of the Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, the homelessness sector, and the Western Australian State Government towards this goal.

**FIGURE 2** Housing tenure outcome for clients of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) with closed support periods who were experiencing homelessness at the start of support in Western Australia, 2019–20



Source: AIHW 2020 Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2019–20.



## ADVANCE TO ZERO (WA), A PROFILE OF THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA 2012–2021

### DEMOGRAPHICS



- Western Australian rough sleepers surveyed between 2012 and 2021 (March 31) were mostly **male** (66.7%), **straight** (88.1%) and had an average age of **41.2 years**
- Over one quarter (26.6%) had educational attainment of **Year 9 or lower**
- **53.4% were sleeping rough** at the time of survey, with the vast majority of the rest being in crisis, temporary, and short-term accommodation
- Individuals had, on average, spent over **4.5 years** (55 months) homeless in their lives. Families had spent just over **3 years** (37 months) homeless, on average

### HEALTH



- 29.2% of Western Australian respondents in the Advance to Zero database reported that they had experienced **dehydration**; 26.7% a history of **heatstroke/exhaustion**; 18.8% **skin & foot infections**; and 8.8% **epilepsy**
- Almost one third (32.3%) had **asthma**, 19.3% had **Hepatitis C**, 19.9% had **heart disease**, arrhythmia or irregular heartbeat, 13.2% had **diabetes**, and more than 7% had **emphysema & kidney disease**
- Over a third (35.6%) reported **serious brain injury or head trauma**

### MENTAL HEALTH



- More than two thirds (66.9%) of Western Australian respondents reported that they have **problems concentrating** or **remembering** things
- More than half (55.2%) had **spoken with a psychiatrist**, psychologist or mental health professional in the last six months
- Nearly half (48.7%) had gone to an **emergency department** (ED) due to not feeling emotionally well or because of their nerves
- Over one third (34.4%) reported that they had been **taken to hospital against their will** for mental health reasons
- More than half reported diagnosis of **depression** (58.7%) and **anxiety** (52.3%)
- Almost a third (30.2%) of people reported diagnosis of **post-traumatic stress disorder** and 26.2% had been diagnosed with **psychosis**

### ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE



- Almost three quarters (74.8%) of respondents reported that they had experienced or been told that they had **problematic drug or alcohol use** or abused drugs or alcohol
- Just over 40% (41.7%) reported that they had **consumed alcohol or drugs almost every day** or every day during the past month
- 41.9% reported that they had **used injection drugs** or shots in the last six months



## ADVANCE TO ZERO (WA), A PROFILE OF THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA 2012–2021

### ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE



- Nearly half (47.6%) of respondents reported that they had been treated for drug or alcohol problems and **returned to drinking or using drugs**
- Nearly a third (31.5%) reported **blacking out** because of alcohol or drug use in the past month
- Most (70.0%) were aware of **safe injecting practices**

### HEALTH SERVICE USE



- On average, respondents had been **hospitalised 1.88 times** in the six months prior to survey. Almost half (49.0%) had not been hospitalised at all, indicating that a small number of people accounted for a large proportion of hospitalisations
- **Emergency Departments** (Accidents and Emergency) were visited an average of **3.45 times** per person in the six months prior to survey
- On average, Western Australian respondents were taken to **hospital by ambulance 1.67 times** in the six months prior to survey
- Average per person cost of **health service** use by Western Australian respondents in the 6 months prior to survey was **\$14,359**, comprised of **\$10,458 in hospitalisation** costs, **\$2,182 in Emergency Department** costs, and **\$1,718 in ambulance** costs

### FINANCIAL WELLBEING



- Most (90.7%) Western Australian respondents had **regular income, control of their finances** (85.3%), and a **health care card** (81.4%)
- Less than half (40.9%) reported that they **received enough money** to meet THEIR expenses on a fortnightly basis
- Only 22.2% reported that their **basic needs were met**
- Over one third (34.6%) said that there was a person or people who believed that they **owed them money**

### SOCIAL WELLBEING



- More than half (52.2%) reported that they have friends of family that take their money, borrow cigarettes, use their drugs, drink their alcohol or get them to **do things they don't want to do**
- Almost half (49.0%) report that they have people in their life whose **company they do not enjoy** but are around out of convenience or necessity
- Over one third (37.7%) planned **activities for happiness**
- About one in ten (9.9%) reported that they **have a pet**



## PART II: ADVANCE TO ZERO: INSIGHTS INTO HOMELESSNESS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Part II presents the first comprehensive analysis of Western Australia's Advance to Zero data from 2012–2021 (March 31). The Advance to Zero data comprises surveys of people experiencing homelessness, primarily rough sleeping, using the Vulnerability Index, Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool, and the By-Name List instruments. Analysis of this data reveals people's experiences of homelessness across domains of wellbeing – physical and mental health, financial and social – and charts their journeys through homelessness.

In terms of acuity on the VI-SPDAT, 53% of Western Australian respondents in the Advance to Zero database were considered high acuity needing permanent housing with long term support; 32% were considered moderate acuity and needing permanent housing with tapered support; and 15% per cent were considered low acuity and needing no intensive supports to access or maintain permanent housing.

Part II also presents the first analysis of the Western Australian By-Name List data in conjunction with the VI-SPDAT data. A total of 1,117 people were housed between 2012 and 2021. Of these, 32% were permanently housed and 68% were temporarily accommodated. Of those with a permanent placement, 52% were placed in public housing, 20% in community housing, 13% in private rentals, 7% in supportive housing, and 8% in a group home, aged care, and 'other' permanent housing. As one would expect, those who were chronically homeless were more likely to return to homelessness after being housed.

Overall, the experiences and outcomes of Western Australian respondents indicate complex, multidimensional needs. These needs will differ from person to person, thus the supports offered need to be adaptable and person-centred, accepting that the journey out of homelessness is not likely to be linear.

## PART III: POLICY SETTINGS AND PROGRESS IN ENDING HOMELESSNESS

Part III examines policy and practice settings in Western Australia. Analysis of the Western Australian Government's Homelessness Strategy 2020–2030 and related strategies is undertaken, along with an environmental scan of selected programs and initiatives to address homelessness that are underway in Western Australia. The final chapter looks forward to where we need to focus attention in order to end homelessness in Australia.

In 2019, the Western Australian Government released All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020–2030 (the Strategy). In many ways, the Strategy reinforces the WAAEH 10-Year Strategy to End Homelessness: it adopts a whole-of-community approach, integrates Housing First principles, has an initial focus on rough sleeping and chronic homelessness, works towards a No Wrong Door approach, and focuses on prevention and early intervention.

To implement the policy, the Western Australian Government has made significant investment across a number of homelessness initiatives. These include,

but are not limited to, increasing new social housing stock and refurbishing existing stock, building two Common Ground facilities, developing a blueprint for a No Wrong Door approach to service delivery, and the Housing First Homelessness Initiative (HFHI), which will provide accommodation and wraparound support to people sleeping rough in the Perth Metropolitan Area, Rockingham/Mandurah, Bunbury, and Geraldton.

The homelessness service system is also actively working across a number of initiatives to address homelessness. Preventative initiatives such as Home Stretch, 12 Buckets, and Wungening Moort seek to support children and young people before they enter homelessness. Housing First initiatives, such as 50 Lives, 50 Homes, 20 Lives, 20 Homes, the Zero Project and Moorditj Mia offer housing and intensive support to facilitate exit from homelessness. Often complementary to Housing First initiatives, several initiatives such as the Royal Perth Hospital Homeless Team, After Hours Support Service, and StayWitch's seek to address the complex health needs of people experiencing homelessness.



Several initiatives seek to break the cycle of homelessness for people experiencing FDV, for example Zonta House and Ground and Co, and for people leaving prison, such as Ebenezer's VTEC program. COVID-19 also saw the introduction of several rapid housing initiatives, the momentum of which several service providers have sought to continue. These include Beds for Change and

HEART. In addition, the WAAEH has continued its role as a connector and coordinator for the sector, becoming a member of the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH) – the International Network supporting communities to end rough sleeping and facilitating several sector and Western Australian Government processes in the homelessness space.

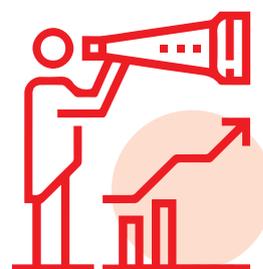
## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Our analysis of the state of play of homelessness in Western Australia, comprising analysis of Census and Specialist Homelessness Services data, Advance to Zero and By-Name List data, as well as policy and practice documentation, reveal a varied picture. A significant amount of money has been invested and a number of initiatives are in place. Further, many of these are recent, and thus we will expect to see changes in the size, structure, and nature of homelessness in Western Australia in the future. However, it must be noted that at aggregate at present, homelessness outcomes are not improving and there is a long way to go before we achieve our WAAEH targets and the overall goal of ending homelessness.

There are a number of key areas upon which we must not lose focus if we are to end homelessness. First, while the initial focus on rough sleeping makes sense – rough sleepers have the highest need and face the worst outcomes from homelessness – addressing rough sleeping and chronic homelessness must not come at the expense of prevention and early intervention. In addition, efforts to address rough sleeping are heavily contingent on the availability of housing stock, for which there is a significant time lag in bringing to market. We must ensure that rough sleepers are adequately supported while social housing stock is being developed.

Second, rates of regional and remote homelessness are far higher than in Perth, where most initiatives to end homelessness are focused. Responses in these areas need to be expanded but nuanced and specialised, and therefore resourced appropriately. Finally, there is a critical need going forward to focus on early onset child, adolescent and youth homelessness.

Several factors would facilitate efforts to end homelessness, including but not limited to a clear, consistent and long-term agenda on homelessness at the federal level, and facilitation of social impact investment into housing in Western Australia.





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