



Homelessness and Men



Homelessness Australia often sends the message that the stereotypical image of the older male sleeping alone on a park bench no longer tells a wholistic story of homelessness in Australia. However men still account for just over 50% of people who are experiencing homelessness on any given night . In addition men make up a large majority of those who are staying in boarding houses (72%), are just over 60% of people sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings, and are a much higher percentage of people sleeping rough in major cities are males. On Census night 2006, 58,619 men were counted as homeless in Australia.

Why are men homeless?

There are a variety of reasons why men experience homelessness in Australia. Some men lose their housing following relationship breakdown and find re-accessing stable housing difficult.

Other men come to experience homeless as a result of a series of adverse life events that are triggered initially by a financial crisis that may follow an economic downturn or result from unemployment. Given the current chronic shortage of affordable housing it is not difficult to see how the loss of a job and the resultant depletion of savings can result in the loss of housing. Of 10,000 properties available for rent in Sydney in the June quarter of 2011, just one was affordable to a single person on Youth Allowance or Newstart. The shortage of dwellings that are affordable and available to persons in the bottom 20% of income earners topped 200,000 in 2011. The affordable housing crisis is a common cause of homelessness among men and it prevents people from being re-housed quickly when they fall into homelessness.

Younger males are more likely to nominate family breakdown and conflict within the home that may be caused by the break-up of a marriage and the arrival of a step-parent or guardian as reasons for their homelessness. The affordable housing crisis is another key contributing factor to homelessness among young men.

Some men become homeless as a result of mental illness or problematic substance use (most commonly alcohol) or because of gambling debts (most commonly poker machines). An estimated 20,000 Australians are experiencing homelessness in Australia as a result of problem gambling, the majority of this group, because of pokies. It is also true that problems with mental illness and dependency *after* becoming homeless. A large Melbourne study of over 5500 people found that of the 40% who identified substance use as a problem, two-thirds indicated that they developed the problem after becoming homeless.

Use of specialist homelessness services

47,804 men were supported by specialist homelessness services over the course of the 2009/10 financial year. One in every 65 young Australian men aged 15-19 were supported by specialist homelessness services in 2009/10. Males aged 25 and over account for the largest single demographic of people supported by specialist homelessness services.

Reasons for seeking support

44% of men reported that the breakdown of interpersonal relations or family conflict was their main reason for seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services. 29% of men nominated financial crisis leading to eviction.

Of the males aged 25 and over presenting alone, 15% nominated problematic substance use as a main reason for seeking assistance.

Young men aged 15-25 were more likely to nominate family breakdown and family conflict as main reasons for seeking assistance than older males.

Men presenting with accompanying children were more likely to nominate financial difficulties as their main reason for seeking assistance.



Creating a framework for ending homelessness

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Chronic homelessness

Research indicates that men make up the majority of those who may be classified as chronically homeless. This group are those who have a minimal history of successful tenancy often cycling through homelessness services, boarding houses, rough sleeping and back again. The detrimental impacts of long term homelessness on mental and physical health are well documented but include chronic illness, an increase in the likelihood of developing an affective or schizoid-type disorder, breathing difficulties and premature death. Chronic homelessness is also often linked with dependency and mental illness and multiple indicators of disadvantage. Long term housing with appropriate connections to support services has shown to deliver positives outcomes for men who have experienced long periods of homelessness.

What needs to be done?

1. We urgently need to reverse the affordable housing crisis in Australia. Homelessness Australia urges all political parties to commit to supporting a range of policy initiatives that will deliver an additional 220,000 affordable homes including social housing dwellings by 2020.
2. Income support payments, particularly non-pension allowances must be raised by \$50 per week and the maximum rate of CRA increased by a minimum of \$20 per week in order to enable people reliant on income support to have some hope of making it in the private rental market
3. We need to encourage employment and social participation for people experiencing homelessness and long-term unemployment.
4. A significant proportion of new mental health funding must be allocated to the community sector so that community services can provide on-going support to men (and women) who present with complex mental health conditions.
5. For young men, we need to see the promised increase in funding for early intervention programs such as Reconnect delivered.

References

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Mental Health Council of Australia Fact Sheet: <http://www.mhca.org.au/documents/AboutMentalHealth/FactsonMentalHealth.pdf>

Australians for Affordable Housing www.housingstressed.org.au

