



Homelessness and Women



Just over 40% of the estimated homeless population are women. On Census night in 2006, 46,058 females were counted as experiencing homelessness in Australia. Women are 40% of the primary homeless (people sleeping rough), 48% of the secondary homeless (staying with family or friends) and 28% are tertiary homeless (people living in insecure accommodation like boarding houses).

While more males were counted as homeless on the 2006 Census night, more women than men are supported by specialist homelessness services each year.

More women than men seek assistance from the homeless service system each year. 84,000 women received support from specialist homelessness services in 2009/10 – that's 62% of all people who were assisted.

One in every 49 young women between 15 and 19 were supported by a specialist homelessness service over the course of 2009/10. Young women are the people most likely to use homeless services.

The majority of people turned away from specialist homelessness services are women and their children. One in two people who request immediate accommodation are turned away each night due to high demand and under-resourcing.

A majority of these people are women and their children. 66% of the children who accompanied an adult to a homeless service last year were in the care of a woman, usually their mother, escaping domestic violence.

Women's homelessness cannot be understood without reference to the situation of women in Australia more broadly. Women and female headed households are at increased risk of homelessness as a result of their greater exposure to violence, poverty and inequality. Domestic violence is the most often cited reason given by women presenting to specialist homelessness services for seeking assistance.

Domestic and family violence

Domestic violence can take the shape of physical, sexual, emotional, economic or spiritual abuse. In most cases the perpetrators of domestic violence are men. Almost half of the women with children staying in homeless assistance services are escaping domestic violence. One in four women escaping domestic violence are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are also more likely to have four or more children accompanying them to homeless services. One in every two women who approach services for women escaping domestic violence is turned away due to lack of accommodation or lack of resources. Women in rural and remote areas have less access to assistance from services, family, friends and police which puts them at increased risk of homelessness or unsafe housing.

One in every five women over 15 in Australia will experience sexual violence and one in three women over 15 will experience physical violence. Young women who grow up in families affected by domestic violence are more likely to be in violent relationships as adults. Women also experience higher levels of poverty than men, have lower rates of employment and levels of pay. This inequality and experience of violence puts women and female headed households at increased risk of homelessness.

Single women

A smaller number of specialist homelessness services are also used by women who do not have children in their care. Like women with children, domestic violence is the most common reason single women seek support from specialist homelessness services. Some of the experiences and needs of women without children in their care may be different to women with children. Some single women have children in the care and protection system or in the charge of family or friends and may need assistance to recover care.

Specialist homelessness services that provide support to single women account for less than ten per cent of all homelessness services in Australia and there is a distinct lack of services in many areas for women who find themselves experiencing homelessness for whom domestic and family violence is not a presenting issue.

Recent research suggests that there are a growing number of older single women who are experiencing homelessness for the first time later in life. For many of this group, a lack of financial resources and assets has meant that they are unable to sustain their housing. Reasons identified from the research included: Being forced out of the workforce early, having insufficient superannuation/savings to fund the costs of living, discrimination in the housing market, the death of an income earning spouse, poor health or serious illness often resulting directly or indirectly from abuse, and separation/divorce.



Creating a framework for ending homelessness

Homelessness and Women



What needs to happen?

1. We need an immediate increase in crisis specialist refuge and outreach accommodation and support to address the current turn away due to services being full. This is especially so during the period of increased demand on services due to increased reporting which is a direct result of increased community awareness of the issues and available responses.
2. We need a commitment to sustained on-going investment in new social housing dwellings between now and 2020. This will of course need to be accompanied by support packages for women who require assistance to re-establish housing and sustain a tenancy.
3. We need to increase the supply of affordable homes. Homelessness Australia is calling on all political parties to commit to supporting the implementation of policies, programs and strategies that will facilitate the construction of an additional 220,000 affordable homes, including social housing dwellings by 2020.
4. Women and their children must be supported to stay in the family home when domestic violence is confirmed and the perpetrator is evicted when it is safe to do so. This will require appropriate risk assessment and management, an integrated response from courts, law enforcement, housing and support services with a focus on survivor safety and perpetrator accountability.
5. Women in regional, rural and remote areas escaping domestic violence require an increased range of safe housing options and services.
6. Services for women who are not escaping violence need to be expanded and adequately resourced. There is evidence that the number of older women needing assistance for whom domestic violence is not the cause of their homelessness is growing. This group must be appropriately supported.

References:

Chamberlain, Chris; MacKenzie, David Counting the Homeless 2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. No. 2050.0
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2050.02006?OpenDocument>

Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse
<http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au/>

McFerran, Ludo It Could Be You: Older, Single, Female and Homeless, A NSW Older Women's Network and Homelessness NSW Publication, 2010.
<http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au/PDF%20files/It%20could%20be%20you%20Final.pdf>

The Use of Government Funded Specialist Homelessness Services 2009/10 Report AIHW
<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=10737419179>

The Women's Services Network
<http://wesnet.org.au/>

