



Homelessness in Australia



Each day nearly 1 in every 200 Australians is homeless, without safe, secure or affordable housing. Last year, 220,000 Australians received support from specialist homelessness services, this equates to 1 in every 100 people. Alarmingly 1 in every 38 Australian children aged 0-4 spent time in a homelessness service over the course of 2009/10. 1 in 4 people who experience homelessness on any given night are under the age of 18. Every day, more than half the people who request immediate accommodation from homelessness services are turned away. Two in every 3 children who need support are also turned away, as are almost 80% percent of families.

Australia's homeless service system

Services began to provide support to people who were experiencing homelessness in early twentieth Century in Australia. In many cases they accommodated itinerant workers or families who were homeless because of mass unemployment particularly during the great depression. Services for single men expanded following the Second World War. As a result, the stereotypical image of an older male alone on a park bench became the stereotypical image of homelessness in Australia.

From the 1970s onwards this began to change. New social movements such as women's liberation and the growing voices of young people and their advocates saw new service models emerge, predominantly for women and children escaping the appalling indictment of domestic and family violence and young people who were found to be emerging on the streets and in squats in growing numbers, many fleeing abuse in the home or family breakdown.

By 1985, the Hawke Government had funded the establishment of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program which drew together a wide range of services that provided accommodation and support to single men and women, families, women escaping domestic and family violence and young people. The program was backed by national legislation that included a rights based preamble and a definition of homelessness that was sufficiently broad to cover groups whose homelessness is hidden and those at risk of becoming homeless because of safety concerns.

In December 2008, the Australian Government released the first ever White Paper on homelessness entitled The Road Home which outlined a new approach to reducing homelessness in Australia based on three pillars, *turning off the tap*- stopping the flow of homelessness, *improving and expanding services* and *breaking the cycle of homelessness*. The new approach included a series of interim targets to be reached by 2013 and headline goals of halving overall homelessness and offering supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who seek it by 2020. This was backed by more than \$1.2 billion in new investment in homelessness services and affordable housing specifically for people experiencing homelessness over four years. On 1 January 2009, the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) replaced the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) as the principal funding instrument for social housing and housing assistance in Australia. Funding for specialist homelessness services that were previously funded under SAAP bilateral agreements is now drawn from the NAHA.

In 2009/10 more than 1500 specialist homelessness services were funded to provide accommodation and support to people experiencing homelessness across Australia. Each year the homelessness service system provides more than 3 million nights of accommodation. Homelessness services provide crisis, medium and longer-term accommodation, assistance with living skills and financial management, counseling and advocacy. Specialist services work with specific groups of people (for instance young people or women escaping domestic violence). Agencies often work in partnership with other services to provide services including outreach and early intervention programs, advocacy, legal advice, medical services and meals.

In addition, the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) has provided \$800 million between 2009 and 2013 to support the establishment of 192 new programs and service models to support people who are experiencing homelessness in Australia.

The new services funded under the NPAH supportive housing models such as Common Ground which provides permanent supportive housing to people who have experienced chronic homelessness, FOYER models which provide long-term accommodation with on-site support services for young people in exchange for their participation in education and training, Street to Home models for young people, homelessness programs for older Australians, legal services, early-intervention services and expanded tenancy support programs.

Homelessness services are under increasing financial pressure as a result of higher levels of demand, insurance premiums, wage indexation and reporting requirements. As a result, agencies are forced to restructure to minimise staffing costs and lose skilled, experienced workers. Homelessness Australia estimates that maintaining services at existing level costs at least fifteen percent extra per year. Average annual funding increases from the Federal Government remain well below this level averaging less than 3% per year between 1997/98 and 2007/08. An ageing workforce is another massive issue facing the homelessness sector.

Counting Australia's Homeless population

The Australian Bureau of Statistics makes a special effort to include Australians who are experiencing homelessness in the Census. In 2001 and 2006 the Census indicated that on any given night at least 100 000 Australians are homeless. The Census also tells us where homeless Australians are staying. Approximately:

- 44% are staying temporarily with relatives and friends,
- 21% percent are living in boarding housings and other temporary accommodation,
- 19% percent find a bed in the homelessness service system,
- 16% are in improvised dwellings or sleeping rough.



Creating a framework for ending homelessness

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Causes of homelessness

Homelessness can be caused by poverty, unemployment and by a critical shortage of affordable housing. Escaping domestic and family violence is the most often cited reason for seeking assistance given by women who present to specialist homelessness services in Australia. Homelessness can also be triggered by family breakdown, mental illness, sexual assault, addiction, financial difficulty, gambling and social isolation.

One in every 2 women who presented to specialist homelessness services in 2009/10 with children cited escaping domestic and family violence as their main reason for seeking assistance. Family breakdown is one of the primary reasons young men and women seek support from homeless assistance services. Many men who stay in homeless assistance services seek support due to financial difficulty, mental illness and/or drug and alcohol use. Couples with children are most often in the homeless service system because of eviction and financial difficulty. Children who experience homelessness are more likely to become homeless as adults and raise families who, in turn, may also become homeless.

References: Counting the Homeless 2006 ABS cat. no. 2050.0, 2008, [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/57393A13387C425DCA2574B900162DF0/\\$File/20500-2008Reissue.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/57393A13387C425DCA2574B900162DF0/$File/20500-2008Reissue.pdf)
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Submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Content of Homelessness Legislation
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The impact of homelessness

Homelessness results in social and economic costs to individuals, families, communities and our nation. Homelessness forces people away from their family, friends and communities. It makes it difficult to maintain school or further study, and leaves people vulnerable to long-term unemployment and chronic ill-health. Homeless Australians are often excluded from participation in the social, recreational, cultural and economic life of our communities. Homelessness means that every day almost 1 in every 200 Australians live without one of their most fundamental human rights.

What needs to happen?

1. A holistic, comprehensive national action plan to prevent and respond to homelessness in Australia. The 2008 White Paper provided us with an excellent framework for medium term action to progressively reduce homelessness in Australia. We need to build upon and strengthen this approach.
2. We need to build more homes. Homelessness Australia is calling on all political parties to support the adoption of policies, programs and strategies that will provide for the construction of an additional 220,000 affordable houses by 2020 including social housing dwellings.
3. Australia needs a Minister for Housing and Homelessness who sits in Cabinet at a Federal level.
4. We need to expand the value and reach of the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). The next NAHA must include substantial growth funding to enable the expansion of the social housing sector especially community housing. Specialist homelessness services require growth funding to reduce turn-away rates and provide support to every person seeking it, every night.
5. A commitment to fund the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) for a further four years with a minimum of at least \$849 million in new funding is needed.

