



Homelessness: NESB and migrants

Some people who are homeless are from non-English speaking backgrounds. This creates extra barriers to accessing emergency accommodation, long-term housing and other support to resolve homelessness. Refugees and asylum seekers can face particular issues related to legal and language barriers that make it difficult to work and to use social services, increasing their vulnerability to homelessness. With few specialist providers of culturally diverse support models in an over-stretched homeless service system, the homelessness of people from non-English speaking and migrant backgrounds often remains hidden.

Ethnic backgrounds of people using services

More than 1 in 10 people who use homelessness services are of non-English speaking backgrounds. 12% of men and 15% of women who used the homeless service system in 2006-07 were born outside Australia. People born outside Australia are less likely than the Australian-born population to use homeless services: while 17% of Australia's population hail from countries that are mostly non-English speaking, just 11% of the people seeking help from homeless services are from these countries. In contrast, while people born in Australia are 73% of the country's population, they were 86% of the users of homeless services in 2006-07. People of non-English speaking backgrounds are not less likely than others to become homeless or to suffer the poverty, ill-health and violence that are among its causes. However they may be unaware of the support services that are available. Due to funding restrictions homelessness services are not always able to provide culturally appropriate support such as translation services and bilingual staff.

Refugee and asylum seeker issues

Refugees and asylum seekers are very vulnerable to homelessness. Young refugees are 6 times more likely to become homeless than other young people. Depending on which category of visa an asylum-seeker or refugee holds, their visa conditions may mean they cannot legally work, access social security, Medicare or government assistance to undertake education or training. This means refugees and asylum-seekers may be dependent on community support services, which are generally under-resourced.

Recently arrived migrants and refugees can be especially vulnerable to social isolation as a result of separation from family as well as language and cultural barriers. As many as one-third of refugees and asylum seekers may become homeless at some point after arriving in Australia. This is primarily due to the temporary and transitory nature of their accommodation. However, many people in this situation do not consider themselves to have been homeless, most probably due to the fact that they had not been without some form of shelter.

Prior to resettling in Australia, many asylum seekers and refugees spend several years in transition; in refugee camps, as illegal immigrants in second countries, or as internally displaced peoples in their countries of origin. Exposure to conflict, war and transition trauma can limit people's ability to resettle in a safe country. Young people may arrive in Australia alone. Parents and guardians may be less able to support children as a result of their refugee experiences.

As for the total Australian population, domestic violence is a common cause of homelessness for NESB and migrant women and children. Women may be unaware of services, or lack the confidence, independent income or language skills to leave the violent situation and access services.



Culturally appropriate services

Homelessness service models are not always appropriate to the cultural norms of people from diverse backgrounds. For instance, many youth crisis accommodation models raise barriers for particular groups such as young Muslim women who are unable to share accommodation with young men. Discrimination on basis of age and race occurs in the private rental system and this is also a challenge.

What needs to happen?

- Ensure access to social services for asylum-seekers and refugees;
- Enhanced support for recent migrants including those seeking asylum or awaiting confirmation of refugee status. Adequately resourced case-work models appear to be most effective in this context;
- Expand culturally appropriate domestic violence service delivery including funding for free-to-user translation services and dedicated bilingual workers in domestic violence services;
- Review spouse visas and active dissemination of clear guidelines for the support of women experiencing domestic violence who have been supported to enter Australia by violent or neglectful partners; and
- Provide interpreter services in homelessness and other community services free of charge, rather than on a fee for service basis.

For a full list of references from which material in this document is drawn, please email info@homelessnessaustralia.org.au

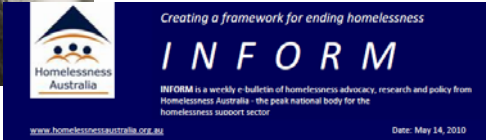


Creating a framework for ending homelessness

National Homeless Persons' Week



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