

Rural and remote homelessness

Homelessness is often perceived to be a metropolitan problem. In fact, a significant proportion of people experiencing homelessness are in regional, rural and remote Australia, where there are fewer services available to assist them to resolve the issues leading to their homelessness. This is especially the case in outlying and remote areas.

How many people are homeless in rural and remote Australia?

It is difficult to give a clear indication of the numbers of Australians experiencing homelessness outside our major cities. This is largely because few statistics are gathered to assist us to quantify this information nationally. In part, this reflects a more general bias toward metropolitan areas in social research. Also, homelessness in rural and remote areas is often less visible than homelessness in cities: in rural and remote areas people are likely to live in their cars, to couch-surf, or to stay in crowded or substandard accommodation. When people do sleep rough or in improvised shelters they are more likely to do so in secluded places that are out of public view, or where fewer people will observe them. However, the scale of need is very great in rural and remote Australia.



Rough sleeping

Most rough sleeping occurs outside major cities. About two-thirds of Australia's population live in capital cities, but just 26 per cent of people sleeping rough on Census night 2006 were in these cities. At a conservative count, some 16,375 people sleep rough or in improvised dwellings nationally at any time; this is 16 per cent of the total homeless population.

Caravan parks

Caravan parks are often used as emergency accommodation in rural and remote areas, where there are few homeless assistance services and boarding houses. Boarding houses are often an option of last resort for people at risk of homelessness in cities, but 70% of Australia's boarding houses are located in urban areas, while 70% of caravan parks in rural and regional locations. It is not uncommon for workers in rural and remote homelessness services to reluctantly send people seeking accommodation to the local caravan park. A shocking 50% of people seeking emergency accommodation nationally must be turned away due to under-resourcing and high demand.

Indigenous Australian homelessness

The high incidence of homelessness in remote Australia also reflects the higher Aboriginal Australian population in these areas.

Poverty, dispossession, spiritual homelessness and a chronic lack of appropriate and affordable housing contribute to higher rates of homelessness for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous Australians. One in 10 Indigenous Australians experiences homeless.

Lack of services

There are far fewer homelessness services in rural and remote areas than in metropolitan and regional centres. People may have to travel for hours or days to reach a service. Indeed, they may not be able to afford to travel at all, making longer-term homelessness more likely and making it more difficult for people to resolve their homelessness.

Homelessness services in remote and rural Australia often report it is difficult to attract and retain staff, and that the costs of service delivery (including travel costs) are rarely fully reflected in their funding arrangements. It is also difficult to refer people to sparse specialist services such as disability, employment, health and other services they require.

Domestic and family violence is the single largest cause of homelessness in Australia. However the lack of services to assist victims of domestic and family violence in rural and remote areas, along with fear of negative community judgement, may prevent women from leaving situations of violence.

What causes rural and remote homelessness?

Homelessness in rural and remote Australia is related to a lack of employment opportunities, a lack of affordable housing and a lack of community services, including health services, and is marked by physical and social isolation.

The risk of homelessness in rural and remote areas is high due to a greater likelihood of low incomes, high living costs and poor housing relative to regional and metropolitan centres. The limited availability of services means that people's choices and ability to find pathways out of homelessness are greatly reduced.

What can be done?

1. Provision of a broader range of service options and models is required to address and prevent homelessness in rural and remote Australia.
2. Specific and significant measures must be taken to address homelessness in rural and remote Aboriginal communities, in a context of far-reaching reforms to address poverty and the lasting effects of dispossession on Indigenous Australians.
3. Increased provision of specialist and universal social services in rural and remote areas, along with attention to workforce and costing issues for homelessness services.



Creating a framework for ending homelessness

National Homeless Persons' Week



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policy



issues

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services



networking

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