



*'If only ...'*

**Resourcing responses  
to homelessness**

Case studies from Homelessness Australia





# 'If only ...'

## Resourcing responses to homelessness

The case studies in this collection are from people on the frontline of Australia's response to homelessness. Their stories show how important Australia's homelessness support services are, and they bring the innovation and commitment of homelessness support professionals into the spotlight.

These stories from our sector highlight how much would be possible with more resources. Too often, programs and services to reduce homelessness and its impacts are inadequately funded and simply can't do enough to help all those who need assistance.

Homelessness Australia thanks the busy professionals who gathered stories from people experiencing homelessness, and those who generously shared them. Neither support agencies nor individuals are named in this collection in order to protect the anonymity of people accessing services.



# About Homelessness Australia

Homelessness Australia is the national peak body advocating for people experiencing homelessness and those who provide services to them. Homelessness Australia works collaboratively with homelessness organisations, assistance services, state and national peak organisations from other sectors, government and the broader community. We advocate for a holistic response to homelessness involving prevention, crisis intervention and pathways out of homelessness.

## Our Vision

**Creating a framework for ending homelessness**

## Our Mission

**To promote national policy and action to reduce homelessness and its impact on the diverse range of people it affects through proactive research.**

## Our Goals

**To contribute** to and inform Australian government policy on homelessness and related issues.

**To increase** the Australian community's awareness and understanding of homelessness.

**To represent** the homelessness service sector in crucial policy processes and ensure an integrated response.

*Homelessness Australia was formerly the Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations.*

# The Changing Face Of Homelessness

Most Australians still believe there is a typical homeless person. He is single, middle-aged and has a drug and or alcohol problem. He may suffer from a mental illness, and he sleeps on the streets.

It's less common that we identify women, families, children and young people as among the homeless, or those at risk of homelessness.

In a benchmark study, 1000 people were asked to identify the causes of homelessness. Their most common answers were drug addiction (identified by 91% of respondents), mental illness (81 %), domestic violence (81%), and alcoholism (80%). Three out of every four people interviewed said homelessness was primarily caused by the poor decisions of homeless people themselves.<sup>1</sup>

## **The reality of homelessness is more complex than the stereotype.**

Much of what we know about those most likely to experience homelessness is drawn from the Census night count of homeless people conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>2</sup>. In 1996 and 2001 the Census count indicated that on any given night around 100,000 Australians are homeless.

The data shows that common perceptions about who is likely to be homeless, as well as about the causes of homelessness, are largely mistaken. **Of the people experiencing homelessness, there is no 'typical' homeless person.**

there is no 'typical'

## Of the 100,000:

### **Just over half are adult men.**

The causes of homelessness for this group are complex, and include financial difficulty, family breakdown, and mental health issues as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

### **Over 40% are women.**

Overwhelmingly, women become homeless as a result of domestic violence. Women escaping violent partners are often accompanied by their children: one in every 57 Australian children under 5 used a homelessness support service in 2005-2006<sup>3</sup>.

### **Half are under 25 and nearly 10,000 are under 12.**

Young people experiencing homelessness are often running away from homes and families characterised by poverty, violence and drug and alcohol abuse.

**One in every four people is a member of a homeless family.** This includes single parent families and couples without children.

**One in five is homeless together with their partner.** Couples with and without children often experience homelessness as a result of a financial crisis, such as the loss of a job. This can also lead to a loss of housing.

**Almost one in ten are Indigenous.** Indigenous people experience homelessness for a range of reasons including poverty, discrimination in the private rental market, family and domestic violence and lack of access to social housing.



# homeless person



*"If only..."*

Working With People Experiencing Homelessness

**A common lament of people working with the homeless is: “If only”. If only we had more resources, we could do more to make a difference for people experiencing homelessness, and those at risk.**

## Preventing homelessness

Early intervention program  
Reconnect, a family reconciliation  
homelessness<sup>4</sup>. HOME (Household  
nationally<sup>5</sup>.

## Crisis response

The national safety net for  
beds, safe shelter, basic necessities, support and referral, and are jointly funded by the Federal and State and Territory Governments.

There are many people in need who this program can't assist. Every night, one in every two people who request accommodation at a SAAP service are turned away, because there are simply not enough beds<sup>6</sup>. There is no starker illustration of the need for increased resources in the homelessness support sector.

The last national evaluation  
people experiencing homelessness achieve independent living.<sup>7</sup>

## Leaving homelessness

There are fewer and fewer a  
housing waiting lists for as long as 18 months – even when they have been granted priority access!

As well, to leave homelessness behind them for good, people who have experienced it need to address the reasons they first became homeless. While every individual and family is different, waiting lists  
for these services are often long.



**Just over half of all homeless people**

## Bill's story

Bill is in his early 30s. An ex-prisoner, he has hepatitis C and struggles with drug and alcohol addiction. Bill recently accessed a homelessness service in Western Australia, his second period of support there. Both times Bill entered this service a Centrelink benefit was his major source of income, but he was able to gain paid work soon after admission.

The service provided him with a case manager who helped him map out strategies to achieve his goals. Bill was referred to a general practitioner, addiction counselling, and an anger management course. The service also helped Bill to develop a finance management plan: he started repaying his debts and began to save for a future home.

### If only...

Despite finding full-time work, Bill has been unable to leave homelessness behind. On his low wage income, he couldn't afford the \$18 per week anger management course he was referred to. The waiting list for drug and alcohol counselling was lengthy. The current wait list for rehabilitation services in Bill's area is 5 to 6 weeks, but many on the list lose their battle with addiction after 2 or 3 weeks. When Bill returned to the service a second time, he was in considerably worse shape in relation to his drug and alcohol issues.

**Problem:** Services that address the causes of homelessness, such as addiction support and domestic violence counselling, remain difficult for those experiencing homelessness to access. They are often expensive, or have long waiting lists.

**Solution:** Services need additional funding so that the people who need them, can access them.

# in Australia are adult men.

## Ambika's story

Ambika has two pre-sc emotional abuse. She stayed with fr information including about Centrelink payments, child support issues, domestic violence counselling and Family Court matters.

Now Ambika lives in medium term supported accommodation while she waits for a public housing property. She has regular contact with an outreach worker. Her children attend a child support service, giving her time to go to appointments.

## Claire's story

Claire, who lives in regional Australia, approached a local agency seeking a Domestic Violence Protection Order. As it was unsafe for Claire to return home that night, the agency contacted the only local women's refuge, which was full. The State-wide domestic violence telephone service was able to arrange a bed in a shelter three hours drive from Claire's town. She worried the move would disrupt and isolate her three children, who would need to leave their school and friends to move to safety.

Once the Protection Order was granted, Claire and her children returned to their home town and were able to find temporary accommodation there. An outreach worker from

## If only ...

Claire and Ambika's stories stay in abusive relationships because they have nowhere else to go. Every day, more than 300 adults and their children (overwhelmingly women escaping domestic violence) are turned turned away<sup>6</sup>.

**Problem:** Homeless services cannot meet demand. Nationally, one in every 2 people who approach a homeless service seeking accommodation will be turned away tonight.

**Solution:** Governmen





## Jane and Fred's story

Jane and Fred, a couple in their early 30's, have 3 children aged between 6 months and 10 years old. They were evicted at short notice when their landlord decided to renovate and sell their rental property.

They accessed an early intervention service for families at risk of homelessness. The service supported the family to apply for private rental properties. After 17 unsuccessful applications, Jane, Fred and their children were anxious and stressed. The service helped by referring them to relationship counselling. With support from the service, the family developed a money management plan and applied for Centrelink benefits. The children were referred to an early intervention program for children at risk of dropping out of school. Eventually, the family found a home to rent in their local area, allowing the children to remain in the same school. The service provided a household cleaning kit and contributed to the cost of hiring a removalist.

### If only ...

Homelessness services that respond to the specific needs of families are few and far between. Fred and Jane's family were supported by a pilot project for families at risk of homelessness. Currently, this project only receives enough funding to operate in a small number of sites in the State where Jane and Fred live.

**Problem:** Early intervention programs should be greatly expanded to meet demand. They run on short-term funding in a handful of locations, and often only reach a tiny percentage of the people who are potentially eligible.

**Solution:** When early intervention programs are shown to be successful, it makes sense to fund them on an ongoing basis and make them as widely available as possible

# Almost one in ten home

## Nola's story

Nola is a young, Indigenous single mother of a two year old daughter. She became homeless when she left a violent relationship, and has been homeless for three years. Nola's family has a history of homelessness: her mother lost her public housing property as a result of anti-social behaviour and debt. Nola left school at 14. She speaks English as a third language, and her literacy is poor.

Nola was referred to a tenancy support and social housing program for women escaping domestic violence. She was referred to a program to help her address past family violence and sexual assault issues. She attended literacy classes and is now able to read to her daughter. She also learnt how to cook healthy, tasty meals for herself and her child.

Nola appreciated the flexibility of the service: she was able to ring the program and change appointments if she had cultural obligations including sorry camps or funerals.

## If only...

Nola was on the waiting list to enter this program for two years. During this time she lived in a tent during summer, a caravan in winter and a bush camp at other times. In the meantime, she stayed in touch with the program co-ordinator and attended community education, tenancy and parenting sessions in her community. This meant she was well prepared to begin and sustain a public housing tenancy. Parenting sessions helped Nola to care for herself and her daughter.

**Problem:** Many people experiencing homelessness wait too long for public housing. When they are lucky enough to access it, they often don't receive the support they need to maintain their tenancy.

**Solution:** More public and social housing is a necessary part of a holistic response to homelessness. Along with more funding for long-term, flexible, culturally sensitive programs to help people maintain their tenancies, an increased amount of public and social housing stock will assist in responding to homelessness.



less are Indigenous.

# The way forward

**Homelessness affects diverse people:** young people, children, women escaping violence, families on the breadline, those struggling with addiction or trauma. What these people share is their vulnerability. There is no reason why we can't meet the needs of the most vulnerable people in our communities – those experiencing homelessness.

**Programs and services for homeless people work.** But we need more of them: more beds in homeless services, more public and social housing, more early intervention services and more support to address the reasons that people first became homeless.

**This requires leadership.** Federal, State and Territory Governments must have the determination and foresight to support innovation in our sector, and co-operate to fund and expand programs that work.

*For more information on the way forward: [www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au](http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au)*

## Endnotes

- 1 Hanover Welfare Services 2006, 'Public Perceptions of Homelessness – Key findings', [www.hanover.org.au](http://www.hanover.org.au)
- 2 Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D, 2003, *Counting the Homeless 2001*, ABS cat no 2050.0
- 3 AIHW 2007, *Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2005-06*, SAAP NDCA report series 11, cat no HOU 156, p.25
- 4 Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D 2004, *Youth Homelessness: Four Policy Proposals*, AHURI final report no.69, pp.42-43
- 5 A list of the 8 locations (as at Oct 07) that HOME Advice operates from and the current providers is available on-line at <http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/house-flhpp.htm>
- 6 AIHW 2006, 'Demand for SAAP Accommodation for Homeless People 2004-05: a report from the SAAP National Data Collection', Bulletin, Issue 50, p.3
- 7 *National Evaluation of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP IV): Executive Summary*, p.9



Homelessness Australia

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*Creating a framework for ending homelessness*

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