

Australian Homelessness Monitor 2020

Launch
HOUSING

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About Launch Housing

Launch Housing is a Melbourne based, secular and independent community agency formed in July 2015. Launch Housing's mission is to end homelessness. With a combined history of over 75 years serving Melbourne's community, Launch Housing provides high quality housing, support, education and employment services to thousands of people across 14 sites in metropolitan Melbourne. Launch Housing also drives social policy change, advocacy, research and innovation.

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Foreword

The Australian Homelessness Monitor 2020 (AHM 2020) analyses changes in the scale and nature of homelessness in Australia, as well as its social and economic drivers.

It also contains the first in-depth examination of the impacts of the worldwide COVID-19 public health crisis on housing markets and homelessness here in Australia.

Disturbingly, in the four years to 2018-19, homelessness climbed by 14% with around 290,000 Australians seeking help from specialist homelessness services.

Family violence was a leading factor with children and young people experiencing harm from abuse and from a lack of safe and secure housing. 30% of individuals supported by specialist homelessness services were under the age of 18 – that's more than 85,700 children and young people.

Increasing numbers of older Australians also sought help from specialist services. In fact, they were the fastest growing group recording a 33% increase between 2014-15 and 2018-19.

Expenditure on homelessness 'emergency services' increased by 27% in the four years to 2018-19 and was set to exceed \$1 billion this year, even before the pandemic. In contrast, investment in social housing solutions increased by just 4% over the same period. A lack of access to housing compromises the effectiveness of the support response and is costly in human and economic terms.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us just how critical housing is for our own health and those we live alongside. People experiencing homelessness, especially those sleeping rough, experience poor physical health and are at a significantly greater risk of harm from the virus.

Housing is the front-line defence against COVID-19; it highlights the need for more social and affordable housing. Homelessness is bad for health and the economy, and bad for society at all times, not just during a health emergency.


Before the pandemic there had already been a policy shift towards ameliorating rough sleeping. The pandemic added urgency, resulting in swift action to temporarily house at least 33,000 rough sleepers and others in very precarious housing circumstances, into hotels and motels around the country.

The challenge before and after the pandemic remains the same but the opportunity is bigger. The evidence presented shows that homelessness is solvable. But we need secure housing and more homes that people on very low incomes can afford to rent.

Regrettably, with tax breaks and subsidies abundant in the Federal Budget 2020 none could be found for social housing. This highlights the work that remains to engage the community in solutions to homelessness.

Launch Housing is proud to have partnered again with Professor Hal Pawson from the University of NSW, and Associate Professor Cameron Parsell from the University of Queensland, for this authoritative insight into the current state of homelessness in Australia.

We hope that policy and decision makers use the AHM 2020 and the insights in it to make the change the community increasingly wants to see.



Bevan Warner
Chief Executive Officer

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List of acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CBD	Central Business District
CRA	Commonwealth Rent Assistance
CHP	Community housing provider
FDV	Family and domestic violence
NGO	Non-government organisation
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
QLD	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SHS	Specialist Homelessness Services
SII	Social Impact Investing
UNSW	University of New South Wales
WA	Western Australia

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Executive summary

Australia's homelessness problem is growing.

Around

290,000

Australians received help from specialist homelessness services in 2018-19

14%

increase in the four years to 2018-19

Social housing provision fell to

15%

increase in Australia's population (2009-2019)

4.2%

a decrease from 4.6% of occupied dwellings (2009-2019)

COVID-19



Australia's homelessness situation will sharply deteriorate as temporary COVID-19 measures like income protection and eviction moratoria phase down.

Executive summary

This report presents an independent analysis of homelessness in Australia. It investigates the changing scale and nature of the problem, and assesses recent policy and practice developments seen in response. Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, the report draws on existing published sources, as well as on primary research involving interviews with government and NGO stakeholders, and with people experiencing homelessness.

Following up on our 2018 report, *Australian Homelessness Monitor 2020 (AHM 2020)* is the second in the series of studies commissioned by Launch Housing. Although we examine homelessness broadly, AHM 2020 incorporates a particular focus on rough sleeping.

While concentrating primarily on the period 2017–2020, the original research for this report was conducted in the first half of 2020, in the first six months of COVID-19. Accordingly, we examine not only the initial impacts of the pandemic on housing markets and homelessness, but also the official homelessness policy and practice responses implemented to address the public health emergency. The report shows that as Federal and State governments rapidly moved to respond to the health and economic crisis, the situation of people experiencing homelessness shot up the political and policy agenda.

Three major findings are presented:

- In the mid-2010s, rising street homelessness appears to have crossed a threshold, prompting new state/territory government recognition of the issue as a high priority policy challenge, and inducing significantly stepped-up intervention to tackle it.
- While COVID-19 triggered extraordinary and impressive official action in temporarily accommodating people experiencing homelessness, at this stage it appears that only a minority will benefit from permanent housing secured through the process.
- Despite its fundamental contribution to rising homelessness, more broadly, Australian governments have continued to ignore or downplay the fundamental failings of our housing system and the need for greater official engagement and investment.

Policy and practice responses to homelessness during the COVID-19 health and economic crisis provide a compelling example of the usually unexploited scope for decisive official action to tackle the problem. The report shows that governments possess a range of policy levers that could be pulled to reduce the unacceptable levels of housing insecurity and unaffordability that affect low-income Australians, placing many at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness is solvable. This is what it will take:

1. In tackling rough sleeping in a concerted way, Housing First, where people are provided immediate access to long-term housing as a right, must be scaled-up and institutionalised into wider housing and support systems. Expanding the supply of long-term housing with linked supports will be essential in this.
2. A strategic and evidence-based approach to homelessness prevention must aim to establish more effective upstream interventions to stem the flow of people losing accommodation or, where that is impossible, to pre-empt homelessness by helping people into new homes.
3. An official commitment to the fundamental systemic reforms required to tackle the housing system failures that are a major causal factor for all forms of homelessness — in particular, through the revival of an ongoing national social housing investment program, recognising that social housing provision is the strongest bulwark in tackling the problem.

Given its overarching responsibility for national economic and social welfare, the Commonwealth Government must play a far more active role in tackling the problem — especially regarding this final point. Pledging greatly increased utilisation of its superior tax-raising and borrowing powers to this end should form part of a comprehensive national strategy to design and phase in the wide-ranging tax and regulatory reforms needed to re-balance Australia's under-performing housing system.

Key findings

Where are Australian governments spending money, and where are they failing to invest?

- Expenditure on homelessness 'emergency services' rose by 27% in the four years to 2018–19 — far above the rate of national population growth. Social housing expenditure, meanwhile, increased by just 4% over the same period — far below the national population increment.
- In the decade to 2019, Australia's population rose by 15%, whereas social housing provision has been virtually static for most of this period — declining from 4.6% to 4.2% of all occupied dwellings as a result.

Private sector housing market trends

- In the six months to August 2020 during COVID-19, private sector rents in Sydney and Melbourne fell by 8 and 6 percentage points, respectively. Rents in Brisbane remained largely stable during this period, while in Perth they continued to climb.
- For people in the lowest income quintile, the last decade has seen a steady increase in typical housing costs, rising from 23% to 29% of household incomes over the period.
- In the decade to 2016, the national shortfall of private rental properties affordable for low income tenants grew by 54%.
- Government income protection through JobSeeker and JobKeeper during mid-2020 disproportionately benefited Australia's least affluent households, in all probability decreasing rates of rental stress, population-wide.
- Equally, because of exclusion from Commonwealth income protection programs, rental stress rates — and vulnerability to homelessness — are likely to have escalated steeply during 2020 for Australia's large community lacking full Australian citizenship. Even by May 2020, as pandemic conditions took hold, the national rental stress rate for non-citizens had already risen demonstrably above that for citizens.

Homelessness policy and practice developments 2017–2020

- This period saw most state governments stepping up their attention to rough sleeping as a major policy issue, and developing new plans to address, and in some instances, measurably reduce the incidence of street homelessness.
- In both Sydney and Melbourne, high profile homelessness protest encampments appear to have been a factor in prompting enhanced official priority accorded to the issue. In others, government action has been spurred by community-organised and (sometimes) philanthropically funded rough sleeper resettlement provision, much of it under the umbrella of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH).
- Particularly in certain cities and jurisdictions, greater official attention to rough sleeping has also been triggered by overseas advocacy and movements, including US-based organisations, the Institute of Global Homelessness and Community Solutions.
- Common to street homelessness reduction programs has been expanded use of assertive outreach, private rental subsidies and headleasing, as well as enhanced access to Australia's limited stock of permanent social housing.
- In some cities, influenced by international guidance, service provider organisations have applied significant conceptual and/or technical innovations to homelessness measurement, individual needs assessment, prioritisation and case management.
- For some, the recent policy focus on street homelessness and the message that 'better data' can provide a pathway to homelessness solutions is concerning because of an anxiety that these directions may obscure the essential need for systemic reform in tackling the fundamental causes of the problem.
- Notwithstanding the momentum and promise that some new approaches to reducing rough sleeping represent, there has been a continued lack of investment in social housing (as noted above), and this represents a significant structural impediment to any reduction in the incidence of homelessness at the population level.

Executive summary

COVID-19 and responses to homelessness

- In the six months following the first Australian confirmed case of COVID-19 in January 2020, the Victorian, New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australian governments spent hundreds of millions of dollars on people experiencing homelessness, over and above the business as usual spend.
- Extraordinary government spending has been largely directed toward placement of people experiencing homelessness in hotels and other temporary accommodation, together with some funding to facilitate onward moves to long-term housing, with floating support as required.
- Alongside additional funding, productive inter-departmental and inter-sectoral collaboration has been unprecedented in scale. Largely, but not entirely underpinned by government financial support, many NGOs rapidly responded to the crisis by assisting people to access and sustain temporary accommodation.
- The number of rough sleepers provided with emergency rehousing in the period March–June 2020 was probably just under 4,000, while the inclusive all-homeless total temporarily accommodated between March and September 2020 may have exceeded 33,000. However, there is uncertainty about these estimates due to the patchiness of available statistics which, in turn, reflects a regrettable lack of openness and transparency on the part of some state governments.
- The emergency housing program rollout presented formidable logistical challenges, and some people offered help felt insecure about their accommodation and anxious about what would come next.
- Many people experiencing homelessness who were provided with temporary accommodation appreciated the help during COVID-19. The combination of program funding and pandemic health risks may have meant that some people sleeping rough were more open to the offer than previously. Importantly, however, people sleeping rough have rarely been offered access to free accommodation in hotels.
- Within three months, many of those benefiting from initial emergency rehousing programs had left such accommodation. For some, this resulted from help to secure permanent housing. However, it appears that such positive outcomes will be realised for only a minority of those temporarily accommodated during the period.

- At the same time, alongside a ‘second wave’ emergency housing push in July 2020, in Victoria, the state government committed to an expanded headleasing program on a scale commensurate with a policymaker intention that no-one rehoused into hotels need return to homelessness.

The changing scale, nature, and distribution of homelessness

- In the four-year period to 2018–19, the number of people seeking help from specialist homelessness services (SHS) increased by 14% to some 290,000, while the number judged as actually ‘homeless’ by SHS providers rose by 16%.
- Although their numbers remain relatively small, Australians aged over 65 have recently formed the fastest-growing age cohort within the homeless service user population, with an increase of 33% in four years.
- In 2018–19, the single most frequently cited factor aggravating housing insecurity and possible homelessness among SHS service users was family and domestic violence.
- The second most frequently-cited ‘associated issue’ among those seeking help from SHS agencies is now mental ill-health. Moreover, the incidence of mental ill-health as a contributory factor rose from 25% to 30% of assisted service users in the four years to 2018–19.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain hugely over-represented within Australia’s homeless population, with a rate of homelessness ten times the population-wide norm. Moreover, in the four years to 2018–19, Aboriginal community service users increased by 26%, well over twice the rate of increase of non-Indigenous service users (10%).
- Although SHS rough sleeping estimates suggest that the incidence of the problem may have stabilised over recent years, they also indicate that the number cycling in and out of street homelessness during any given time period is far higher than the census point-in-time estimate that is the standard policymaker reference point. In considering the magnitude of the aim to ‘end homelessness’ it is vitally important to recognise the true extent of this precariously housed population.

- While the latest (2018) City of Melbourne rough sleeping statistic represented an increase of 176% since 2010, the latest (February 2020) City of Sydney total was 20% lower than ten years earlier.
- Nationally, in the four years to 2018–19, it was areas classified as 'inner regional' that tended to witness disproportionately rapid increases in homelessness, with such areas collectively recording a 30% increase in service users assisted during this period — more than double the comparable national figure (14%). This may reflect a general recent tendency for capital city housing market pressures to 'spill over' beyond their boundaries.
- By July/August 2020, after the COVID-19 emergency rehousing program had subsided, estimated street homelessness numbers in Sydney and Adelaide were once again on the rise, at around half the number recorded immediately prior to the pandemic. In Melbourne, however, it is estimated that rough sleeping ongoing in August 2020 remained at a level far below the norm of recent years.

Housing and homelessness data matters

- There is scope to enhance the value of the AIHW SHS statistics collection, including through updating certain key classificatory frameworks and moving to quarterly publication.
- Bearing in mind that many are made homeless through loss of a rental tenancy, state/territory governments should require that tenancy tribunals draw on case records to generate routinely published statistics on rental evictions.

Future prospects

This report is being completed at a time (August 2020) when the Commonwealth Government's pandemic income protection measures remain fully in force, along with eviction moratoria across Australia. The overall success of these measures is apparent from indications that newly arising homelessness probably declined during the early months of the pandemic and the associated recession (see Section 5.2.3).

Nevertheless, this initially benign pandemic homelessness trend has not extended to Australia's large population of non-citizens — a cohort pointedly excluded from emergency (and routine) income support. In any event, there is every prospect that the homelessness situation will sharply deteriorate if governments proceed with announced plans for the near-term scaling back and/or elimination of the above measures.

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Introduction

1.1 Aims and origin of the research

A safe and secure home is fundamental to an individual's wellbeing, as well as foundational for an individual's contribution to national economic activity. Even if short-lived, the experience of homelessness will be scarring for many of those affected. Long-term exposure will likely result in permanent damage to mental and physical health. Although usually treated by Australian governments as a second order issue, homelessness is in fact a substantial and growing problem for this country — a reality starkly revealed by the COVID-19 crisis.

This is the second report in this series, an independent analysis of homelessness in Australia commissioned by Launch Housing. Like the inaugural Australian Homelessness Monitor (AHM) report (Pawson et al. 2018), it analyses the changing scale and nature of homelessness and investigates the underlying housing market dynamics and policy drivers. We also review recent policy and practice developments that reflect changing responses to homelessness on the part of governments and service provider NGOs. In this respect, attention is concentrated mainly on the period 2017–2020, subsequent to AHM 2018 fieldwork.

Given the project's timing, COVID-19 impacts on housing markets and homelessness form a major focus of the report. Also, in part reflecting the stepped-up emphasis on managing rough sleeping seen in several states prior to the pandemic, action to tackle street homelessness is covered in some depth.

In analysing trends in the extent and complexion of homelessness across the country, the report draws on a range of statistical sources, both official and otherwise. Our national analysis is mainly reliant on the annual AIHW-published 'homelessness service user' statistics. This also reflects project timing in that post-2016 ABS homelessness statistics will become available only with the publication of relevant 2021 Census results expected in late 2022.

The AHM series is strongly inspired by the United Kingdom Homelessness Monitor (UKHM) series, initiated in 2010 and funded by Crisis UK and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Australian Homelessness Monitor research team leader, Hal Pawson, was a UKHM co-founder and has co-authored all of the 17 UKHM reports on England and the other three UK nations subsequently published by Crisis UK¹. Albeit adapted to accommodate important dissimilarities in social, economic, and policy contexts², AHM emulates the UKHM model in its remit and aims, as well as in its research methods and reporting structure.

¹ See: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/>

² Key features of the Australian context differing from that in the UK include the absence of a statutory homelessness framework, the more limited provision of rental assistance for lower income earners and the highly disproportionate incidence of economic disadvantage and housing stress affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Also, while many Commonwealth social security benefit rates are set at relatively low levels and some entitlements have recently experienced reform, there has been no Australian equivalent to the successive waves of 'austerity' benefit cuts rolled out in the UK over the period from 2010.

1.2 Policy context

With the onset of the 2020 pandemic, homelessness was abruptly pushed into the spotlight as an urgent policy challenge for Australian governments. Suddenly, prompted by concerns around infection and possible virus transmission by vulnerable people, rough sleeping and overcrowded homeless shelters were officially recognised as the public health problems they had always been. State governments that had — at least until quite recently — treated homelessness as a low priority issue suddenly found tens of millions of dollars to create pop-up accommodation or book rough sleepers into hotels. In a matter of weeks during April 2020, thousands of people were placed into temporary shelter across Australia.

Policy responses prompted by the COVID-19 crisis are analysed later in this report. In our view, however, the limited visibility of homelessness prior to March 2020 in no way implies that the problem was objectively of a low order until that date. Neither is it appropriate to view homelessness in isolation from the broader issues of housing stress and unmet housing need. This observation is especially valid when it comes to rough sleeping, the form of homelessness recently to the fore as an official concern (see above). Importantly, street homelessness needs to be recognised as a symptom of a much larger and more fundamental set of problems.

Rough sleeping is only the easily visible part of a much larger homelessness issue. And wider homelessness (for example, as enumerated in the ABS Census) is only the extreme end of a far more extensive problem of serious housing need. For example, some 1.3 million people in low-income households are pushed into poverty purely by 'unaffordable' housing costs — that is, where a household nominally above the poverty line has a rent payment liability that leaves them with insufficient income to meet food, clothing and other basic living costs (Yates 2019).

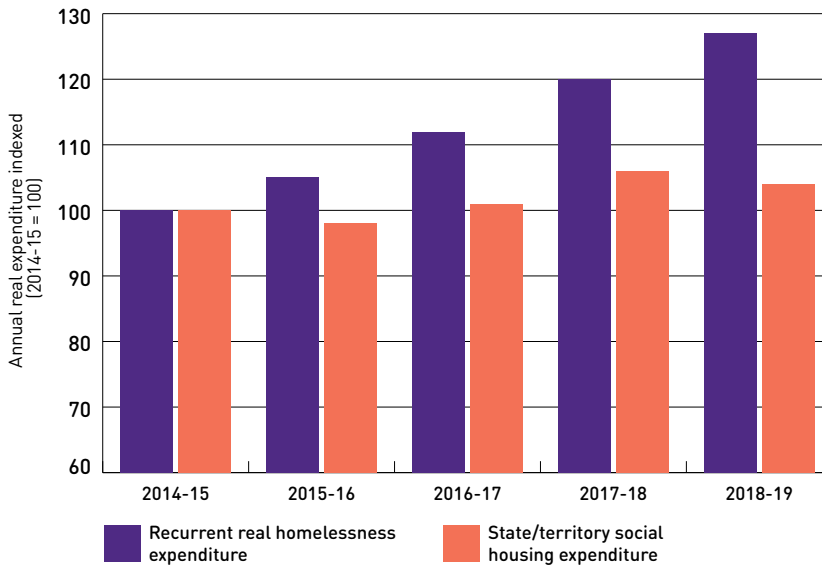
As a political issue on the national stage, homelessness has had little visibility since its brief prominence under Prime Minister Rudd around the time of his 2008 flagship Homelessness White Paper, *The Road Home* (Australian Government 2008). The present report is being published in the year by which — according to *The Road Home* — homelessness numbers were to be reduced by half on their 2008 level. Sadly, of course, this is a target that was disavowed by the Australian Government in 2013 (Cooper 2015) and one that — perhaps partly as a result — has been missed by a country mile³.

Another indirect measure of recent change in the scale of homelessness is public expenditure on services for people experiencing homelessness. Nationally, this rose from \$777 million in 2014–15 to \$990 million in 2018–19 — constant 2018–19 dollars (Productivity Commission 2020). With real terms annual spending growth running at 7% over this period, annual expenditure on such 'emergency service' provision was already likely to exceed \$1 billion - even before the pandemic. This trend contrasts starkly with capital spending on social housing; that is investment in the longer term accommodation that can provide a lasting solution for a vulnerable person without a home, thereby helping to mitigate the future incidence of homelessness (Figure 1.1). Thus, expenditure on 'emergency services' rose by 27% in the four years to 2018–19 — far above the rate of population growth. Social housing expenditure, meanwhile, increased by just 4% over the same period — far below national population increment.

³ The best proxy statistics that illustrate this being the 2006 and 2016 ABS Census figures that reveal a 30% increase in gross homelessness numbers over that decade — an increase of approximately 10% making allowance for population growth (from 45.2 persons per 10,000 population to 49.8).

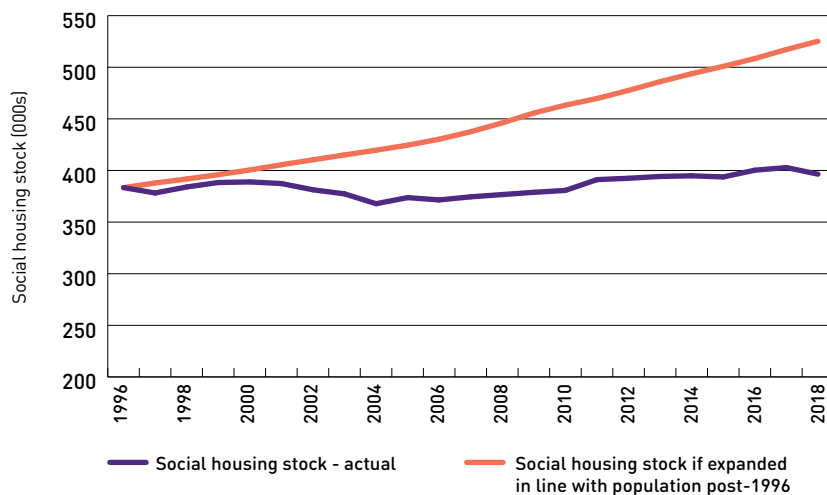
Introduction

Figure 1.1: Recent change in homelessness services expenditure and social housing capital expenditure – indexed (2014–15=100)



Source: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2020 (Table 18A.1; Table 19A.1)

Figure 1.2: Social housing provision relative to population, 1996–2018



Sources: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (various editions); ABS Cat 3101.0.

Figure 1.2 highlights the post-1996 trend in the national social housing stock. The logic of taking 1996 as the starting point for this sequence is that this marked the effective end of Australia's 50-year post-war public housing construction program (Pawson et al. 2020). During the previous two decades, public housebuilding had more-or-less kept pace with national population growth. Had this been maintained to the present day, as indicated in Figure 1.2, Australia would have a 2018 social housing dwelling stock nearly 130,000 (32%) larger than its actual size.

1.3 Homelessness conceptualisation and causation

1.3.1 Defining homelessness

In keeping with the official conception of 'homelessness' embodied in ABS Census definitions, this report adopts a broad interpretation of the term. Thus, while rough sleepers form a prime focus of attention it is crucial to recognise that homelessness extends to a broader population experiencing highly insecure or otherwise fundamentally unsuitable housing. Under the ABS definition (ABS 2012) 'homelessness' applies to anyone who:

- is entirely roofless, or
- occupies a dwelling that:
 - is physically inadequate
 - provides no tenure, or only a short and non-extendable tenure
 - enables the resident no control of, and access to, space for social relations

This broadly scoped definition is consistent with the concept of primary, secondary, tertiary homelessness developed by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992). However, the formal ABS definition draws on Shelley Mallett's (2004) important work to extend the Chamberlain and MacKenzie thinking by conceptualising homelessness as the absence of physical resources that enable people to feel at home.

As further discussed in Chapter 3, another homelessness definition or typology that has recently taken on importance in Australia is that developed by the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH). The IGH typology differentiates:

- People without accommodation
- People living in temporary or crisis accommodation
- People living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation

As regards the aim of 'ending homelessness' IGH advocates a particular emphasis on the first of the above groups (effectively, people sleeping rough, in non-residential or derelict buildings or cars), and the second group (people staying in nightly paid shelters, homeless

hostels or refuges — but not in camps for internally displaced people or designated refugee or asylum-seeker facilities).

1.3.2 Conceptualising homelessness processes and causation

As noted above, a prime purpose of this report is to chart changing levels of homelessness and to identify and analyse the factors that underlie such observed trends. In framing our exploration of the research evidence that directly addresses these issues we first need to rehearse our understanding of homelessness as a social problem.

Like many other social issues, homelessness is complex and results from diverse factors including structural, systemic and individual causes. For an individual, loss of suitable accommodation may result from the coincidence of several problematic life events, although it may be triggered by a single such event. It can be viewed in aggregate as a societal problem that needs to be quantified and addressed. Alternatively, it may be observed at the individual person level as a process that reflects (and results from) extreme stress, often accompanied by vulnerability and disadvantage.

In this report, we draw on the seminal theorising of homelessness first articulated by Suzanne Fitzpatrick (2005) and then developed as a framework driving the analysis of Homelessness Monitors in the United Kingdom. Thus, as articulated in Homelessness Monitor England 2018:

"Theoretical, historical and international perspectives indicate that the causation of homelessness is complex, with no single 'trigger' that is either 'necessary' or 'sufficient' for it to occur. Individual, interpersonal and structural factors all play a role – and interact with each other – and the balance of causes differs over time, across countries, and between demographic groups.

With respect to the main structural factors, international comparative research, and the experience of previous UK recessions, suggests that housing market trends and policies have the most direct impact on levels of homelessness, with the influence of labour-market change more likely to be lagged and diffuse, and strongly mediated by welfare arrangements and other contextual factors."

Individual vulnerabilities, support needs, and 'risk taking' behaviours may be implicated in homelessness as experienced by some individuals. Examples might include low educational attainment, mental ill-health or drug abuse. However, these are often rooted in the pressures associated with poverty and other forms of structural disadvantage. At the same time, the 'anchor' social relationships which can

Introduction

act as a primary ‘buffer’ to homelessness, can be put under considerable strain by stressful financial circumstances (Fitzpatrick et al. 2018: 21).

Other authors concur noting that research on determinants of homelessness has moved toward a general consensus that individual and structural explanations are not mutually exclusive, and theoretical models have been developed that integrate the two types of factors (Byrne et al. 2013).

In subsequent chapters we demonstrate how public policy, particularly housing and welfare policy, are (1) critical drivers of homelessness in Australia, and (2) areas that represent significant opportunities to demonstrably reduce homelessness. Thus, drawing on Fitzpatrick and colleagues, this report acknowledges the complexity of homelessness causation, while also identifying a suite of public policy changes that can improve the housing and life outcomes of people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

1.4 Research methods

1.4.1 Secondary data analysis

Mainly embodied in Chapters 2 and 5, this research is substantially based on a secondary data analysis largely focused on published data about (a) homelessness and (b) the housing market factors that we argue constitute potential drivers of (or risk factors for) homelessness.

In our trend over time analysis we rely mainly on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) series. Our housing market analysis draws mainly on ABS datasets (especially that derived from the two-yearly Survey of Income and Housing) and on rental property data published by the property market consultancy, SQM Research.

1.4.2 Primary research

The research also involved two primary research components, as elaborated further below:

- In-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders — policymakers, service provider representatives, and advocacy organisations (20 interviews)
- In-depth interviews with homelessness service users (12 interviews)

While the above fieldwork spanned all five mainland states (see Table 1.1), it must be acknowledged that the balance of this was somewhat weighted towards NSW. As far as the stakeholder interviews are concerned, this came about mainly through the fortuitous opportunity to leverage fieldwork being undertaken in parallel for another — separately funded — research project (see footnote). For reasons explained below, the in-depth interviews with homelessness service users were also confined to NSW. Nevertheless, while of course unique in certain aspects, the recent NSW homelessness policy context has been not radically dissimilar to that in Queensland, Victoria and South Australia. To that extent, many of the observations arising from the NSW fieldwork have wider relevance.

Stakeholder interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse range of key stakeholder participants across Australia, with representation in all mainland states (see Table 1.1).

The main purpose of these interviews was to investigate recent changes in homelessness policy and practice, both in the period 2017–March 2020, and during the initial 2–3 months of the COVID-19 crisis.

Key stakeholder interviewees were:

- Senior government officials with managerial (or policy) responsibility for homelessness
- Senior managers or governing body members in service provider organisations

It had been hoped that this exercise would encompass both government and non-government interviewees in all mainland states, as well as the Commonwealth Government. In the event, however, the Queensland and Commonwealth governments declined to participate⁴. In Table 1.1, and throughout the report, we have concealed interviewees’ identity to maintain anonymity.

⁴ The relatively large representation of NSW results from the fortuitous coincidence of AHM 2020 fieldwork timing with a parallel research project in NSW. In the parallel study, an evaluation of the Institute for Global Homelessness ‘Vanguard Cities’ initiative, UNSW had been commissioned by Heriot-Watt University to interview state government and NGO senior managers and front-line staff working with rough sleepers. With Heriot-Watt University agreement and interviewee consent (and as approved under UNSW ethics procedures), the research team was authorised to draw on IGH evaluation interview transcripts to inform this report.

Table 1.1: Key stakeholder interviewees

Location	Government	Homelessness services NGO
Victoria	3	2
New South Wales	4	6
Queensland	-	1
South Australia	1	1
Western Australia	1	1
Commonwealth of Australia	-	NA

Note: 'Government' interviewees in Victoria and NSW included Melbourne and Sydney City Council colleagues

Consistent with the social distancing ethic current at the time of the fieldwork, all stakeholder interviews were undertaken online.

Homelessness service user interviews

The second primary fieldwork component was undertaken in NSW and involved 12 in-depth interviews with people recently exposed to homelessness.

The staff costs involved in this part of the research were met by the UNSW Centre for Social Impact (via Amplify Insights Project) and recruitment of participants was undertaken via specialist homelessness services in Greater Sydney, Newcastle, Gosford, and Lismore. Interview participants were sought from two categories:

- People offered temporary accommodation as emergency rehousing for rough sleepers in the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- People who became (street) homeless in the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants who had been in emergency or temporary accommodation were asked to share their experiences about the process of being offered accommodation, the suitability of the accommodation and support packages provided to them, and whether permanent housing had been offered to them. Interviews with participants recently homeless during COVID-19 also addressed their perspectives on the introduction of measures such as the Australian Government's Coronavirus Supplement paid to those on JobSeeker and other eligible social security payments.

With the assistance of the interviewee recruitment organization, and once again to conform with social distancing etiquette, interviews were undertaken online.

Due to resource limitations, it was not possible to conduct interviews outside of NSW and interviewee observations therefore directly reflect the NSW context. Nevertheless, the extent of cross-jurisdictional similarity in state government actions and housing market conditions during this period means they can also be considered as indicative of service user experience of homelessness under the pandemic in other states.

Unpublished SHS data collection and collation

In an effort to gain some impression of the immediate homelessness impacts arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, we recruited 10 large SHS providers across four states to share with us their (de-identified) Quarter 4 2019–20 homelessness service user records, as supplied to AIHW. Participating organisations also shared with the research team their equivalent unit records for the comparable period of 2018–19. In a few cases, organisations found it easier to share with us summary statistics drawn from their base records for the relevant time periods, rather than the records themselves. SHS provider recruitment was achieved with the kind assistance of state-specific peak bodies who advised on the likely largest caseload organisations to be approached, as well as making initial contacts with these providers on behalf of the research team.

1.5 Report structure

Following on from this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews recent social, economic, and housing market trends with a possible bearing on homelessness. This chapter is entirely based on our secondary data analysis as detailed above. Next, in Chapter 3, we investigate recent policy and practice developments in the period immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., the 2–3 years prior to March 2020. The prime source here is our key stakeholder in-depth interviews discussed above.

Next, in Chapter 4 we explore the management of homelessness in the extraordinary circumstances of the period from March–June 2020 and — in particular — the emergency rehousing programs rolled out during this period in Qld, NSW, Vic and SA. Chapter 5 analyses data on the changing nature and extent of homelessness across Australia. This is sourced mainly from the AIHW specialist homelessness services collection and from local council rough sleeper counts. Chapter 6 discusses the importance of data. Finally, in Chapter 7, we draw brief conclusions from our analysis and findings.

02

Housing market trends

This chapter analyses the changing housing market conditions of the 2010s that are an important influence on the incidence and nature of homelessness in Australia. Most of the analyses focus on the period 2011–2020 — or as close to that period as data availability allows. However, the chapter also takes account of the extraordinary situation being experienced in 2020 as Australia’s housing market has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of economic recession. With this in mind, our analyses also include some early indications of such market impacts as these have begun to be calibrated in the second quarter of the year.

The heart of the chapter, Section 2.4, is our analysis of changing rates of housing affordability stress for low income renters. To contextualise this, in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, we first examine price and rent trends in the house sales market and the private rental market as a whole. Then, in Section 2.3 we briefly note relevant recent change in social housing provision.

2.1 The house sales market

Since homelessness usually involves former tenants rather than owner occupiers, it is the rental housing market that forms the main focus for this chapter. First, however, since the housing market is an interconnected system, we briefly review recent trends in the house sales market.

As shown in Figure 2.1 (a) and (b) the past decade has seen a considerable real increase in residential property prices at the national scale with median values up by 40% over the period. At the same time, it is apparent that trends have varied substantially in different parts of the country. Sydney and Melbourne prices rose disproportionately during this timeframe, with most of this increase taking place during the 2013–2017 period. However, these trends were not universal across the country: in Perth, for example, prices were slightly lower at the end of the period than at the start.

Housing market pressures increase the risk of homelessness for very low income renters.

23% - 29%

↑
increase in rent prices
as a percentage of
income for those on
very low incomes



The shortfall of private rental
properties affordable to low
income tenants has grown to

212,000



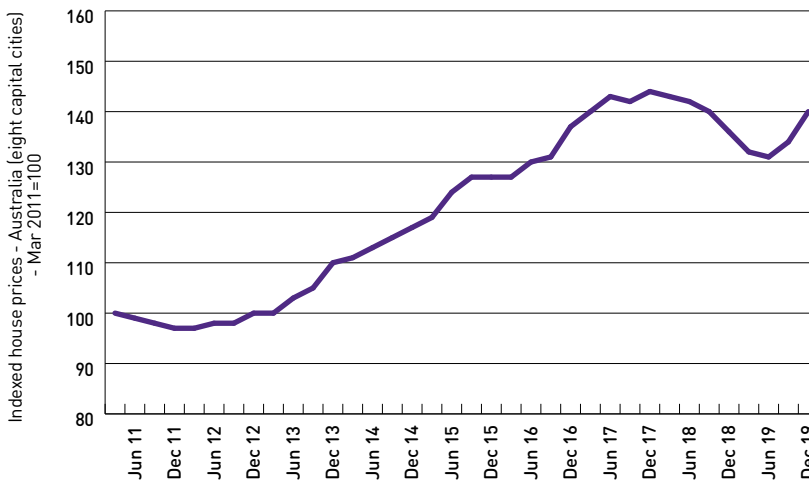
54%

↑
increase
(2006-2016)

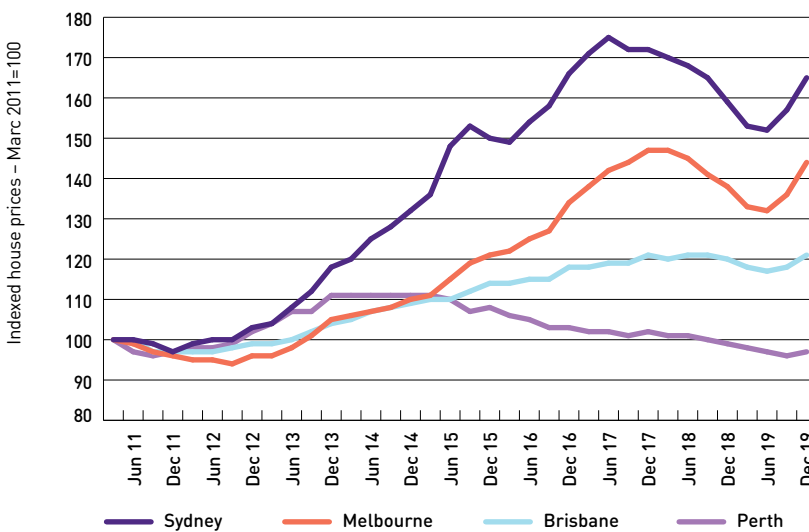
Housing market trends

Figure 2.1: Residential property price change 2011–2019

(a) Australia-wide (eight capital cities, weighted average)



(b) Selected capital cities



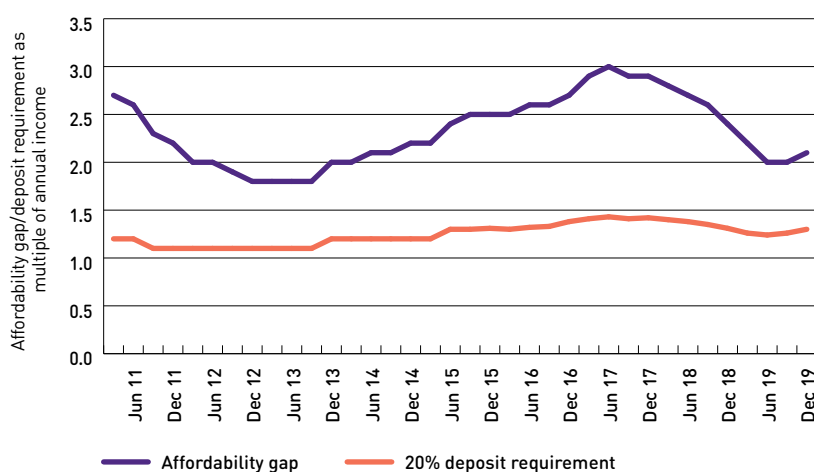
Source: ABS Residential property price indexes, Cat. no. 6416.0, Table 1

It should also be acknowledged that the variation in house price trends shown in Figure 2.1(b) will have been equally marked across regional Australia — especially in terms of the contrast between some coastal resort areas (e.g. in Northern New South Wales and South-East Queensland) and some inland settlements which have experienced boom and slump associated with the vicissitudes of the mining industry.

To benchmark the national house price trend it is relevant to note that in the period 2011–2019 the real terms increase in house prices was 22% (i.e. Figure 2.1 values adjusted according to the ABS consumer price index (all items)), while typical household incomes saw a real terms increase of only 6% over the decade to 2017–18 (ABS 2019). However, while this comparison can be considered a crude indication of declining house price affordability, the actual reduction as measured by households' ability to service debt will have been substantially cushioned by contemporaneous mortgage interest rate reductions — over the same period typical home loan rates fell by almost half (RBA 2019).

Partly due to complications such as changing interest rates, house purchase affordability is a surprisingly difficult concept to gauge in terms of meaningful trends over time. However, the metric graphed in Figure 2.2 is one way of approaching this. This charts the difference between (a) property prices and (b) what would be 'affordable' to a median earner. This difference, here termed the 'affordability gap', measures what a median earner could (theoretically) borrow, according to standard mortgage lender rules and prevailing interest rates. Since the mid-2000s, this affordability gap has been running at between two and three times a typical annual income (based on the ABS average weekly earnings series). The 2013–2017 house price boom, for example, saw the gap expand from twice, to three times, typical annual earnings (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Affordability gap and deposit requirement as multiple of incomes, 2011–2018



Source: Pawson et al. (2020) – as created and updated by Judy Yates drawing on original ABS-published data

Another way of calibrating change over time in house purchase affordability is with respect to the value of a required mortgage deposit. This refers to the fact that — irrespective of falling interest rates — prices recently rising ahead of incomes will have lengthened the period required to save for the loan down-payment routinely required by lenders. It is important to appreciate that post-1990s reductions in interest rates to historically low levels have boosted borrowing capacity. But this has no equivalent moderating impact on the mortgage deposit threshold to home ownership. Scaled in relation to typical annual incomes, therefore, rising house prices between 2013 and 2018 meant that the size of the typically-required 20% house purchase deposit increased from 1.1 to 1.4 (see Figure 2.2). This implies an increase of over a quarter in the number of years of saving required for aspirant homeowners lacking access to parental or similar financial assistance.

This rising 'wealth threshold' for access to home ownership has contributed to the growing size of the population cohort dependent on rental — predominantly private rental — housing. Moderate income earners with a prospect of attaining home ownership have been needing to spend longer and longer periods awaiting the point at which this becomes financially feasible. This, in turn, puts upward pressure on that residential market sector that also accommodates most of Australia's lower income population.

Housing market trends

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a sharp reduction in residential property transactions in April 2020, although market activity began to recover in May. In these subdued conditions, median prices drifted 1% lower in the three months to June 2020 (Gubbana 2020) amid pervasive uncertainty about wider economic prospects for 2020–21. This has generated a wide range of predictions on the likely trend of property values over the coming 1–2 years, one of the most striking involving the Commonwealth Bank’s worst-case scenario ‘prolonged downturn’ forecast of a 32% reduction over three years from March 2020 (Janda 2020). Under the more moderate ‘downturn’ scenario the predicted 3-year price reduction was 11%. A substantial decline in property values could push many homeowners into negative equity (RBA 2020). If combined with heavy job losses in a protracted recession, this situation could even result in significant homelessness triggered by mortgage repossessions.

2.2 Private rent levels and trends

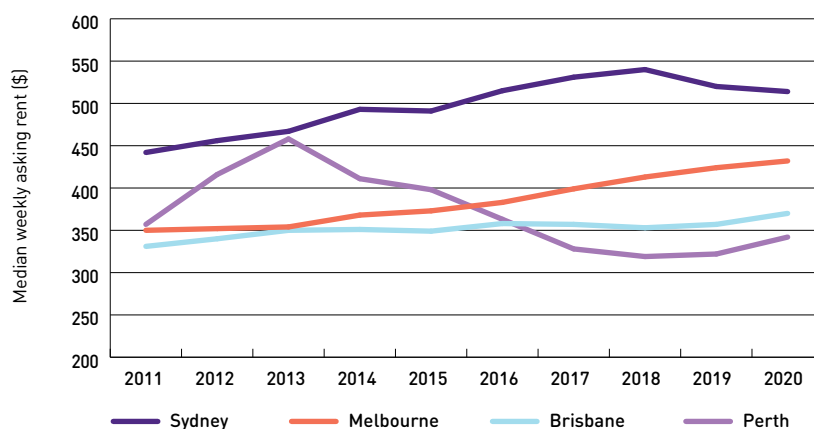
2.2.1 Market trends: 2011–March 2020

Rent levels and trends across Australia’s capital cities have been quite diverse over the past decade. During this period, rental prices have been usually much higher in Sydney than in the other three major capital cities graphed in Figure 2.3(a). For example, for most of this period, Sydney rents have been at least 25% above those in Melbourne. Since social security rates are geographically invariant this implies that benefit-reliant renters in Sydney are more likely to be experiencing rental stress than their counterpart tenants in the other three cities.

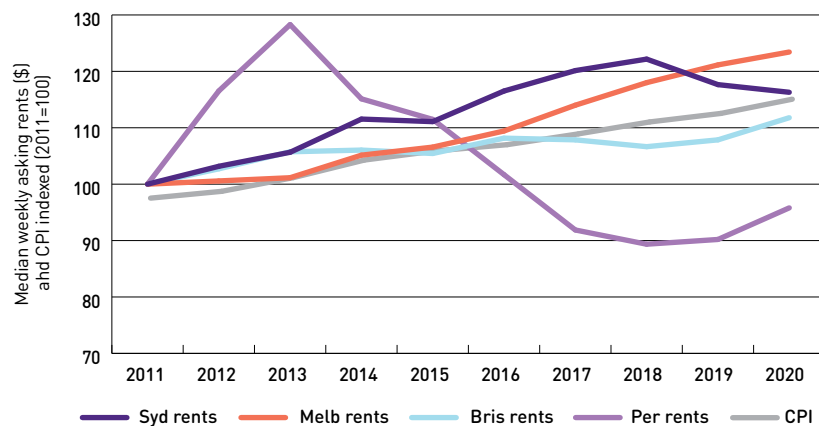
Patterns of change have also varied from city to city, with Sydney rents peaking in 2018 and subsequently falling back (see Figure 2.3(b)). Factoring in the understanding that the majority of apartment block units are commissioned or otherwise purchased by investors rather than owner occupiers, this most probably reflected a boom in apartment block completions during this period. However, by far the greatest market volatility has been seen in Perth where the rapid economic contraction that followed from the peak of the mining boom around 2013 apparently continued to depress rents for several years.

Figure 2.3: Private rent trends – 2 bed units, 2011–2020

(a) Weekly rents (\$)



(b) Weekly rents and CPI: change over time 2011–2020 (2011=100)

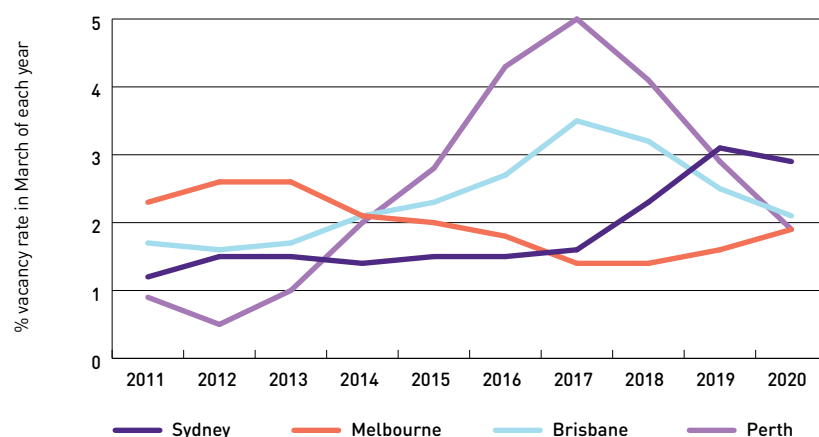


Source: SQM Research - <https://sqmresearch.com.au/weekly-rents.php>. **Notes:** 1. Graphed values relate to March of each year. 2. Data reflect 'asking rents' or advertised rents. The extent to which these coincide with contracted rents will likely vary somewhat depending on market conditions.

Across the whole of the time period shown in Figure 2.3(b) it was only in Melbourne that rents ran ahead of the Consumer Price Index — thanks to significant real terms rent increases for the period from 2015. In Sydney, while rents had been rising substantially above general inflation until 2018, they subsequently saw a marked decline. By 2020, the median rent had dropped to virtually the same real terms value recorded in 2011. The volatility of the Perth market, meanwhile, can be expressed in terms of the 24% real terms rent increase experienced in the period 2011–2013, before declining by an extraordinary 36% in real terms to 2018. Such is the unusual vulnerability to housing market flux of a state economy dependent on mining.

A more direct indicator of rental market pressure is rental property vacancy rates (Figure 2.4). This gauges the number of properties available to let as a proportion of the total stock of rental properties at any given time. Highly contrasting trends have been recorded over the past few years in this respect. Notably, however, the 2017–2020 period saw a general convergence towards rates at fairly low levels — albeit substantially above historic levels in Sydney.

Figure 2.4: Private rental vacancy rates, 2011–2020



Source: SQM Research - https://sqmresearch.com.au/graph_vacancy.php

Note: Graphed values relate to March of each year.

Housing market trends

In interpreting the statistics presented in this section it is important to recognise that they are reported in terms of market norms — for example, as expressed in median rent values. Changes in median rents have significance for lower income tenants more at risk of homelessness, but such trends do not tell the whole story. Most importantly, as analysed in recent AHURI research, Australia’s private rental markets have been experiencing a restructuring process now ongoing for decades. Thus ‘the considerable increase in the aggregate supply of private rental dwellings, notably in the decade since 2006, has not resulted in a commensurate increase in lower-rent (affordable) private rental dwellings, but an increased concentration of rentals at mid-market levels’ (Hulse et al. 2019 p28). The consequences of these processes for lower income renters are further explored in Section 2.4.

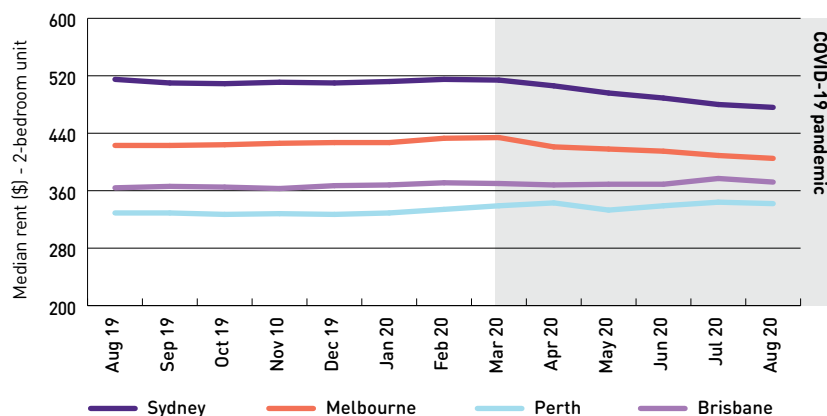
2.2.2 Market trends under pandemic conditions 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Australia’s private rental markets. A number of factors have combined to suppress demand for rental property. First, large-scale job losses and reduced hours of work will have affected rent paying capacity for many tenants in the period since March 2020. This will have resulted in some tenants choosing to end their tenancy in favour of cheaper options such as sharing with friends or (for some young adults) returning to the family home. Secondly, the cessation of international travel has reduced the inflow of international migrants, tourists and overseas students close to zero.

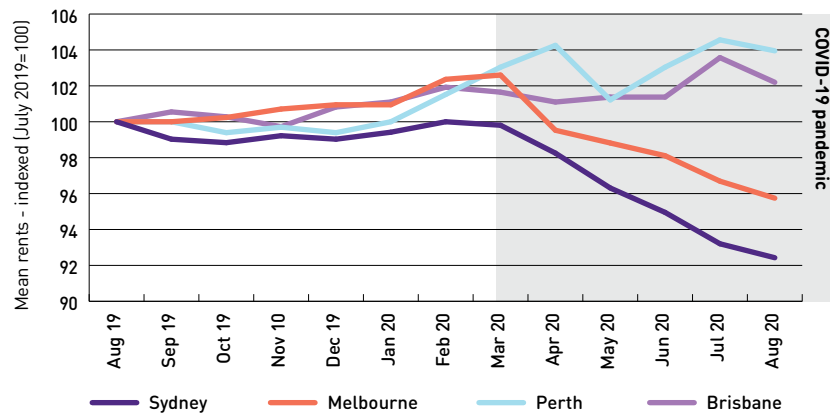
The impacts of the above factors have varied across the country. As shown in Figure 2.5, rents have fallen appreciably in Melbourne, and particularly in Sydney in consequence. By June 2020, Sydney rents had fallen by 7 percentage points (see Figure 2.5(b)). In Brisbane and Perth, however, no such reductions had been seen. These variations may be partly explicable in terms of the greater quantum of rental property normally occupied by students and international tourists in Sydney and Melbourne, as compared with Brisbane and Perth. It should be noted that the figures graphed here are advertised or ‘asking’ rents. In a market downturn of the kind being currently experienced, it is likely that the ‘buyers’ market’ conditions will lead to contracted rents being typically somewhat lower than advertised. That is, the real reduction in rents in Sydney and Melbourne is probably greater than indicated in these graphs.

Figure 2.5: Private rent trends in 2-bed units, 2019–20

(a) Weekly rents



(b) Weekly rents, indexed

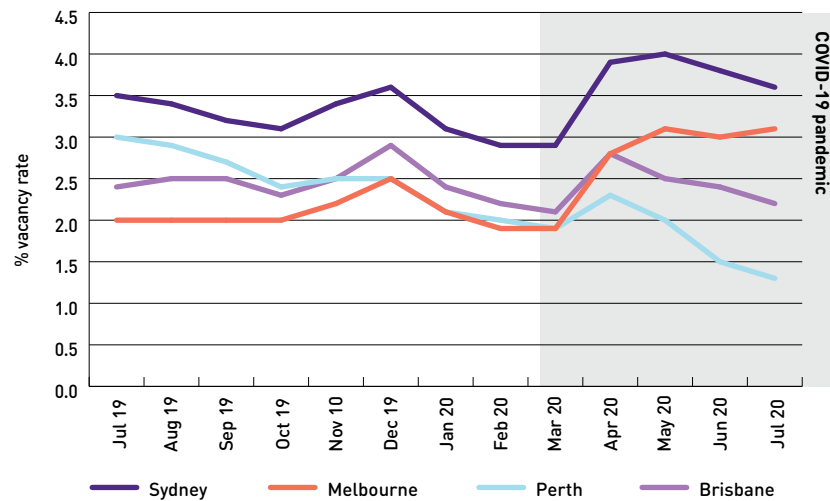


Source: SQM Research - <https://sqmresearch.com.au/weekly-rents.php>

Recent changes in private rental vacancy rates in the four cities are shown in Figure 2.6. While rates have been running at significantly higher levels in Sydney than in the other cities over the past year, the most significant increase charted for the pandemic period has been in Melbourne (see Figure 2.6(b)). Consistent with the absence of any pandemic-period rent reduction (see Figure 2.5), Perth’s vacancy rate has continued to fall since March 2020.

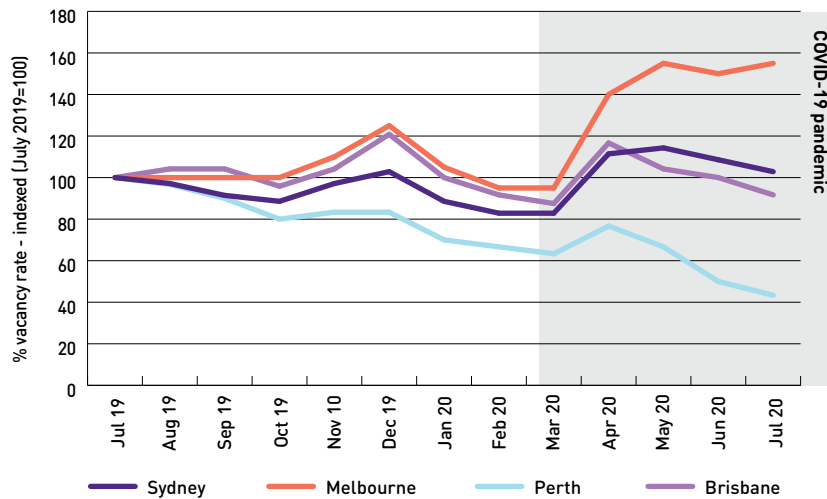
Figure 2.6: Private rental vacancy rates, 2019–20

(a) % vacancy rates



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(b) Vacancy rates, indexed



Source: SQM Research - https://sqmresearch.com.au/graph_vacancy.php

2.3 Social housing supply

Given its role in providing relatively secure tenancies usually priced well below market rates, social housing has special importance in accommodating socio-economically disadvantaged households who would be placed at risk of homelessness in the private rental market. In the Australian context, social housing refers to dwellings managed by state governments, not-for-profit community housing organisations, and Aboriginal community rental providers.

Over the past decade, according to the Productivity Commission's annual Report on Government Services, Australia's social housing stock has seen a marginal increase from 381,000 to 396,000 (2010–2018). This reflects the fact that new construction has narrowly exceeded property sales and demolitions — mainly thanks to the 2009–2011 Social Housing Initiative (SHI)⁵. However, as shown by Figure 2.7, national portfolio size in relation to population has continued to drift down, declining from 4.6% to 4.2% of all housing over the period. This, in turn follows from the fact that over the period as a whole, net additions to the stock have lagged far below the general rate of population increase. It is estimated that, even without allowing for any sales or demolitions, this would call for the construction of 15,000 social housing dwellings annually (Lawson et al. 2018). In practice, since the completion of the SHI, yearly build rates have dropped back to their former level of only around three thousand⁶.

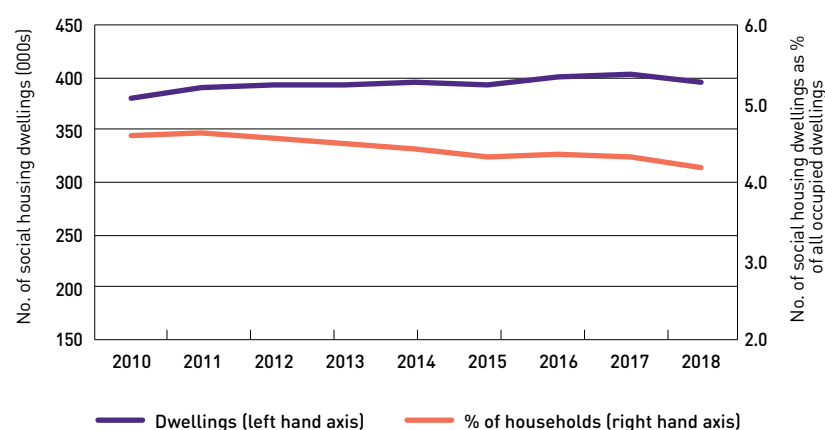
⁵ The social housing construction program that formed part of the post-GFC Nation Building Economic Stimulus Package (NBESP).

⁶ At the same time, it is fair to acknowledge that (largely unassisted by the Commonwealth Government) a number of state governments (SA, Vic, and WA among them) have recently (during 2019 and 2020) committed to modest amounts of new social housing investment — either in the context of post-pandemic economic stimulus programs, or otherwise. These could yield a few thousand additional dwellings over the next 3–5 years. Nevertheless, particularly bearing in mind that some of these programs also involve demolitions, their net effect will be small in comparison with the ongoing challenge of expanding provision in tandem with population growth, let alone in relation to addressing 'backlog need' (Lawson et al. 2018).

A more direct measure of social housing supply is the annual flow of lettable vacancies (i.e. newly built homes being let for the first time plus existing dwellings being relet after falling vacant). In the period 1991–2017, for example, published figures indicate that lettings by social housing providers declined from 52,000 to 35,000, a reduction of around one third⁷. Proportionate to population, this equates to a decline of over 50%⁸.

Since the main focus of this chapter relates to the past decade, we would ideally graph the national trend on social housing lettings over this period and compare patterns for key states. Unfortunately, however, the annually published statistics for this period are subject to imperfections⁹ that mean such an analysis cannot be implemented with any degree of confidence.

Figure 2.7: National social housing portfolio, 2010–2018



Sources: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services: Housing (various years); Households data from ABS Household and Family Projections; Cat 3236.0

2.4 Housing affordability stress for lower income renters

In the preceding sections, we have presented market-wide analyses of for-sale and rental sectors as these have functioned in the 2010s. We now move on to examine recent trends in the incidence of affordability stress experienced at the lower end of the private rental housing market. A focus on lower income renters (by custom defined as households in the lowest two quintiles of the income distribution) is particularly relevant to the central purpose of this chapter in concentrating attention on that part of the overall population more vulnerable to being pushed into homelessness by housing market pressures. Because it is likely to mean having to juggle between paying for housing and for other essential expenditures,

⁷ Sources: 1991: AIHW (1993) Table 3.22; 2017: Productivity Commission (2019) Tables 18A5, 18A6, 18A7.

⁸ Making reference to ABS estimated resident population statistics, social housing lettings declined from 30 per 10,000 people in 1991 to 14 per 10,000 people in 2017— a drop of 53%

⁹ In particular, conventions used in the data collection that informs the relevant tables within the annually published Report on Government Services include the curious practice of recording as a community housing letting, every tenanted dwelling received by CHPs via public housing transfers. Inclusion of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** housing sector lettings in the series is also incomplete and inconsistent.

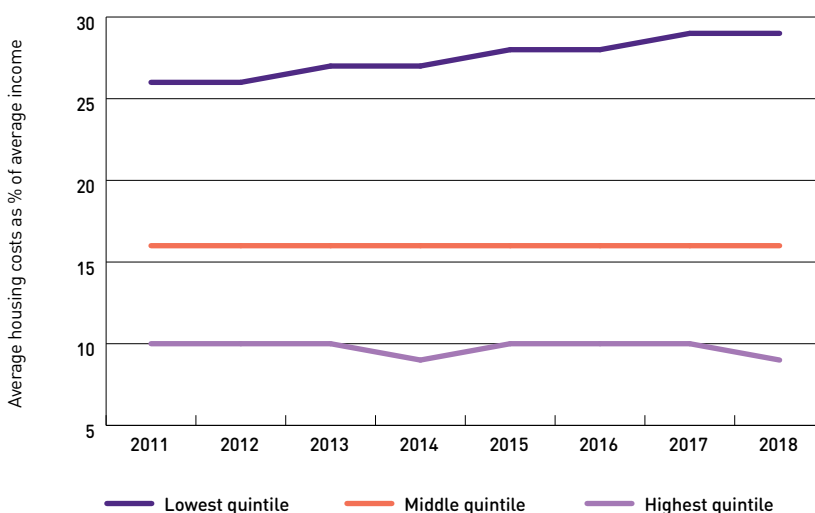
Housing market trends

a low-income tenant having to contend with an 'unaffordable rent' is at a higher risk of incurring rent arrears that could ultimately lead to tenancy termination.

2.4.1 The changing incidence of rental affordability stress during the 2010s

In framing the analysis of tenants paying unaffordable rents, it is instructive to consider the housing affordability context for all lowest income Australians (i.e. lowest quintile) as depicted by Figure 2.8 (for simplicity attention is restricted here to the highest, lowest and middle income cohorts). The population-wide statistics graphed here show markedly different housing cost tendencies affecting different income cohorts. For the lowest quintile group, most of whom will be renters, the past decade has seen a remarkably consistent rising trend, pushing up rents from 23% to 29% of incomes. Meanwhile, the comparable tendency for quintile 3 households has been flat and for highest quintile group slightly down.

Figure 2.8: Housing cost ratios by income quintiles, Australia 2011–2018



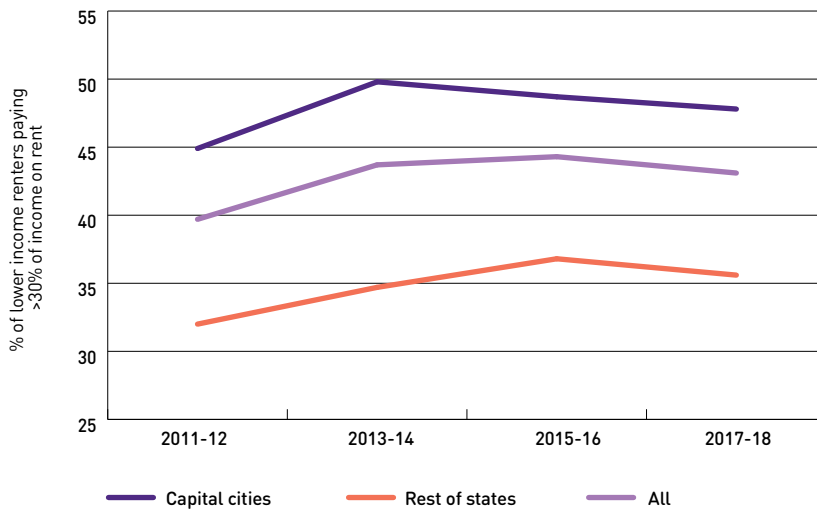
Source: ABS Survey of Housing Occupancy and Costs, Cat 4130.0 (trend interpolated)

The same ABS survey data that informs Figure 2.8 also indicates that the early 2010s saw a marked intensification of rental housing stress, as the proportion of lower income tenants paying rents exceeding 30% of incomes rose from 40% to almost 45% [see Figure 2.9(a)]. Subsequently, however, the trend has levelled off. Within this, the incidence of unaffordability continues to be much higher in capital cities than in regional Australia. For example, in 2017–18 the proportion of capital city renters affected was 48%, as compared with only 36% for those elsewhere.

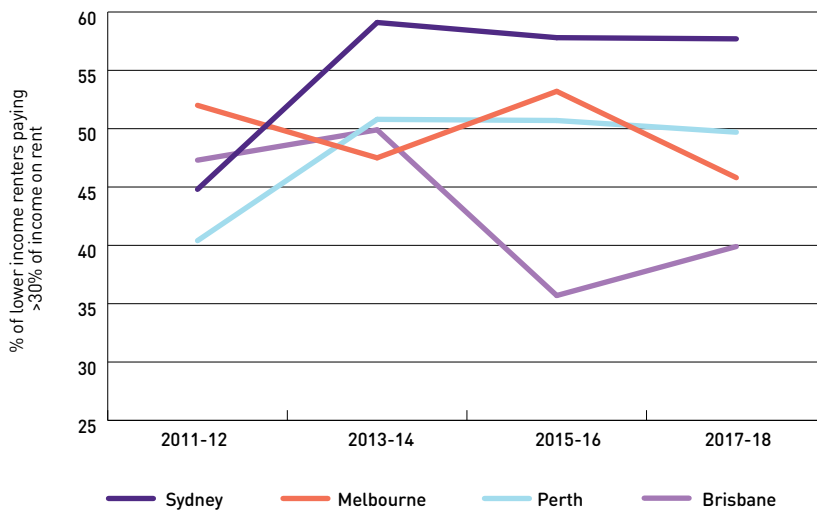
In two of the four major state capitals included in Figure 2.9(b) the proportion of low-income renters experiencing rental stress was larger in 2017–18 than at the start of the decade. This was most particularly true in Sydney where the proportion climbed from 45% to 58% over this period. In interpreting these trends, it is important to be aware that they reflect the situation for all low-income renters — including social housing tenants. One of the reasons for the longer-term tendency towards rising rates of unaffordability among this cohort is the growing proportion renting in the market sector rather than renting public or community housing. This, in turn, results from the largely static portfolio of social rental property (see Section 2.3) — in contrast with rapidly expanding private rental provision ongoing over recent decades.

Figure 2.9: Lower income renters paying unaffordable rents

(a) Australia-wide



(b) Selected state capitals

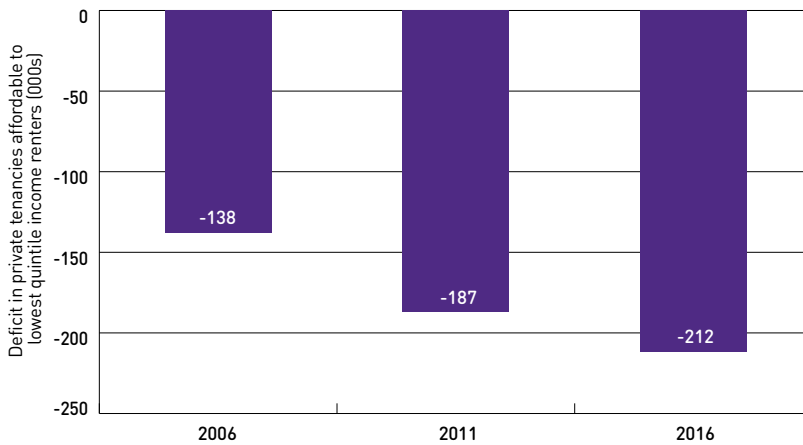


Source: ABS Survey of Housing Occupancy and Costs, Cat 4130.0. Note: Time series limited by data availability.

In their recent study that focused specifically on private rental housing, Kath Hulse and colleagues calibrated the growing shortage of tenancies affordable and available to low income tenants. Comparing the number of private tenancies being rented out at prices affordable to lowest quintile renters with the gross number of lowest quintile renters, the analysis identified a shortfall in affordable housing provision that has expanded rapidly over the past 20 years. As shown in Figure 2.10, this deficit increased by 54% to 212,000 in the decade to 2016.

Housing market trends

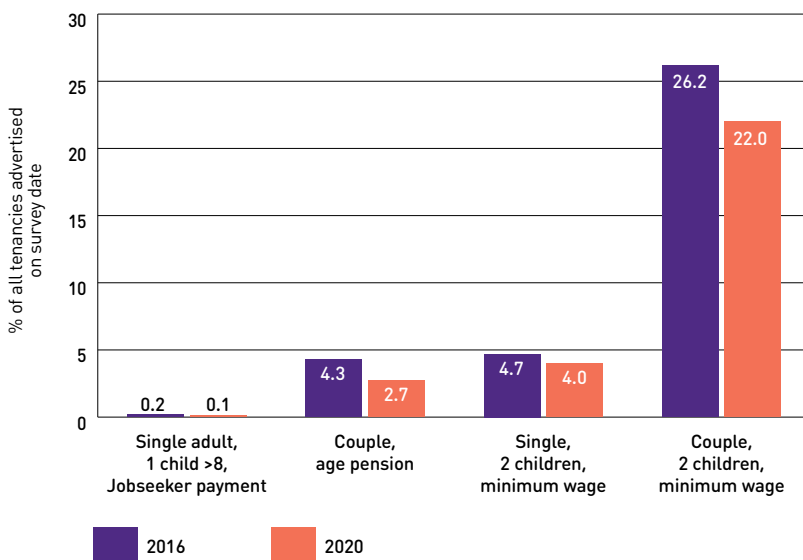
Figure 2.10: Private rentals affordable to low-income tenants, 2006–2016



Source: Hulse et al. (2019) – original data from ABS Census. Note: the numbers shown here are calculated as follows: (a) (number of tenancies let at rents affordable to income quintile 1 private renters) – (number of income quintile 1 private renters). The growing deficit resulting from this calculation reflects the divergence between the growing number of income quintile 1 private tenants and the largely static number of low-income rental properties in the market.

A distinct, and conceptually simple, way of calibrating rental housing affordability for low-income recipients involves gauging the extent to which advertised rental properties are offered by landlords at prices (rents) within the means of households on statutory incomes (e.g. Age Pension or JobSeeker benefit) or in low-waged employment. Here, for each household type in scope, affordability is calibrated on the basis of 30% of household income. Thus, for each household type, the analysis enumerates the proportion of available rental properties advertised at a rent equal to or less than that amount.

Figure 2.11: Proportion of advertised private tenancies affordable to (selected) low income household types, 2016 and 2020



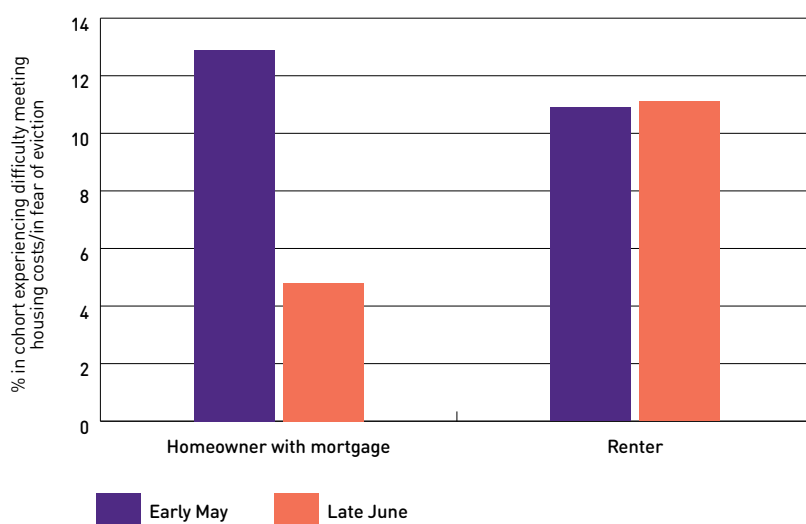
Source: Anglicare annual Rental Affordability Snapshot - <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/research-advocacy/the-rental-affordability-snapshot>

Using the approach described above, Anglicare’s annual survey showed that, of the 70,000 properties being marketed for let in March 2020, just 4% would be affordable to a single adult parenting two children, earning the minimum wage and benefiting from Family Tax Benefit A+B (see Figure 2.11). As shown in the graph, the already small share of privately rented properties affordable to the low-income groups identified has tended to shrink over the recent years as rents have run ahead of social security benefit rates and minimum wage incomes.

2.4.2 The incidence of rental stress under pandemic conditions

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has had immediate and ongoing impacts on people’s housing situations; in particular, on their ability to pay for housing. Surveyed in May and June 2020, just over one in ten renters reported difficulty in paying their rent or being in fear of eviction (ABS 2020). In the absence of any pre-pandemic benchmark, it is difficult to assess the significance of the proportionate scale of housing cost payment problems shown in Figure 2.12. What may be more revealing is that — over approximately 6 weeks during the national coronavirus lockdown — the incidence of such problems fell markedly among mortgage-paying owner occupiers, while they rose slightly among renters. This could possibly reflect the relatively limited scope for securing rent reductions from landlords, as compared with the ease of negotiating mortgage payment holidays with home-loan providers. It is also worth bearing in mind that a proportion of rent-stressed tenants are likely to have given up tenancies during the period between the two surveys — e.g. young adults returning to the family home (Clegg 2020). In the absence of this factor, the contrast between the within-pandemic trends for renters and mortgaged owners would have been sharper still.

Figure 2.12: Householders having experienced difficulty in meeting housing costs and/or fear of eviction, May–June 2020

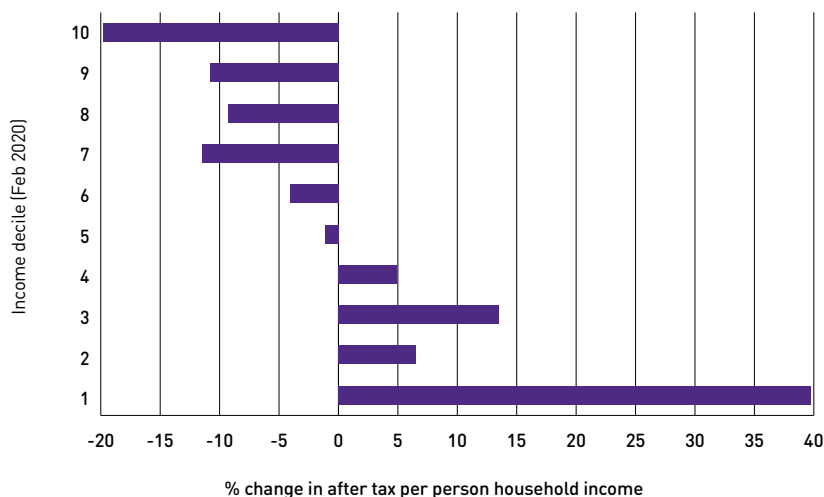


Source: ABS Cat 4940.0 Household impacts of COVID-19 survey 24–29 June, Table 9.1 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4940.0main+features124-29%20June%202020>

Housing market trends


Importantly, the rental stress consequences of the pandemic-induced recession will have been greatly muted in the short term by the Government's March 2020 income protection programs, JobKeeper and JobSeeker. Indeed, probably in large measure thanks to their effects, the average income of the poorest tenth of Australian households (decile 1) increased by a remarkable 40% in the initial lockdown period, whereas average incomes at the top of the income spectrum (decile 10) fell back by almost 20% (see Figure 2.13). However, while this contrast is notably stark, the strongly positive effect on the lowest income earners would be an expected outcome from the temporary doubling of the Newstart (now known as JobSeeker) rate, as well as the flat rate wage subsidy made available under JobKeeper. These findings would suggest that through mid-2020, rental stress rates will most likely have fallen across the main body of the low-income renter population. Or, to put this another way, a larger cohort of market rental housing will have been rendered 'affordable' to tenants in the lowest income cohort.

Figure 2.13: Change in household income Feb–May 2020 by income decile



Source: Biddle et al. (2020a)

However, the opposite effect is likely to have been felt by those excluded from the JobKeeper and JobSeeker programs. This refers, in particular, to the estimated 1.1 million non-permanent citizens resident in the country at the start of 2020. Especially since many have relied on low paid employment in hard hit sectors such as hospitality and tourism, these people will have been particularly vulnerable to the recession and resulting mass unemployment. Not surprisingly, they are reported to be grossly overrepresented among the greatly enlarged numbers of service users logged by food banks since the start of the pandemic. Thus, as recently reported to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, food bank users have jumped by 79% to 1.4 million since the start of the public health emergency (Wright & Duke 2020).



More specifically in relation to rental stress, our previously unpublished analysis of data from a nationally representative Australian National University survey of 3,429 respondents (Biddle et al. 2020b) suggests that even in May 2020 — relatively early in the pandemic — the rental stress rate for non-Australian-citizen tenants was already markedly higher than for citizen counterparts. The proportion of the former group who reported difficulty — at 33% — was seven percentage points higher than for the latter group (26%). Considering the relatively small sub-group respondent numbers involved (citizen renters: 683, non-citizen renters: 129), this difference should be regarded as indicative rather than definitive. It is, nevertheless, consistent with expectations that, thanks to Commonwealth Government policy and labour market conditions, non-citizen renters are likely to have been placed at substantially greater risk of homelessness than citizens in the initial phase of the 2020 public health crisis.

2.5 Chapter conclusion

The past few years have seen many parts of Australia in the grip of a property price boom with problematic consequences for lower income groups. Some parts of the country — notably Western Australia — have seen more subdued housing market conditions since 2011. Even here, however, survey evidence shows growing numbers of lower income renters facing unaffordable rents that will increase homelessness risk.

Moreover, evidence suggests that Australia's private rental market is subject to longer term structural trends that are progressively eroding the scope for lower income households to obtain affordable housing. In particular recent research highlights the way that more affordable rental housing is increasingly occupied by middle-income households and, while there has been an increase in overall housing supply (generally in line with population growth), there is an intensifying shortage of housing for those at the greatest risk of homelessness — very low-income households (Ong et al. 2017).

While quantitative evidence remains relatively scant, it is clear that the pandemic-induced recession has impacted very significantly on rental housing markets, even within the first three months of crisis conditions. Specifically in Sydney and Melbourne there has been a substantial reduction in advertised rents and corresponding increases in vacancies. Nevertheless, especially for non-citizens excluded from income support programs, the collapse of employment from March 2020 is likely to have pushed many tens of thousands of Australian residents towards the brink of homelessness. Future prospects are discussed more specifically in Section 5.2.3 (Chapter 5).

03

Homelessness policy and practice developments 2017-2020

Rough sleeping becomes a major policy issue.

Assertive outreach, private rental subsidies, headleasing and access to permanent social housing are common strategies to reduce rough sleeping



Lack of investment in social housing is a significant structural barrier to tackling homelessness



3.1 Chapter introduction – scope and sources

In this chapter, we investigate recent homelessness policy and practice developments in the period immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy and practice response to the 2020 coronavirus crisis is investigated in Chapter 4. The starting point for this chapter is 2017, when fieldwork for the last edition of Australian Homelessness Monitor was undertaken: thus, it covers the three years prior to March 2020. The prime source here is our key stakeholder in-depth interviews (see Chapter 1), complemented by relevant grey literature.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, in Section 3.2, we discuss recent change in the status of homelessness as an official policy concern and reflect on factors that may underlie or explain such change. Next, in Section 3.3, we outline some of the key components of recent change in homelessness practice which have followed from the recently stepped-up concern with rough sleeping. Then, in Section 3.4, we discuss the recently enhanced emphasis on data and quantification in relation to street homelessness. Section 3.5 explains two contrasting approaches to definition and measurements of rough sleeper reduction targets. Then, ahead of a discussion on recent debates on the appropriate focus of homelessness policy (Section 3.7) we first review recent developments in thinking about service procurement and commissioning (Section 3.6). Finally, in Section 3.8 the chapter concludes with a summary of key findings and reflections on wider policy implications.

3.2 Stepped-up official concern on (street) homelessness

3.2.1 Strategy commitments

While there is ample scope to debate the targeting, scale, and underlying philosophy involved, there is little doubt that the past three years (to March 2020) have seen significantly heightened official concern on homelessness at the state/territory government level. This has been embodied, in part, in a spate of strategies, plans and targets published by a number of jurisdictions. Cases in point have included:

- 'Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan' (Government of Victoria 2017)
- 'NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023' (New South Wales Government 2018)
- South Australia's 'Our Housing Future 2020-2030' (Government of South Australia 2019)
- 'All Paths Lead to a Home' (Government of Western Australia 2019)

Perhaps most tangibly of all, the NSW Government committed in 2019 to a state-wide 50% reduction in rough sleeping by 2025. Meanwhile, the SA Government has pledged to end street homelessness in 'functional zero' terms. These commitments and concepts are further discussed in Section 3.5.

Although it is often difficult to gauge the exact significance of the dollar sums associated with plans and commitments of these kinds, they have been generally accompanied by spending pledges of an appreciable scale. For example, the 2019 WA strategy was matched by a \$222 million package covering a variety of new homelessness services including social housing investment and Housing First initiatives. As an approach to resolving homelessness experienced by longer term rough sleepers, the essence of Housing First is provision of permanent independent housing accompanied by non-compulsory support, but without conditions on sobriety or psychiatric treatment. Similarly, the 2018 NSW strategy pledged \$61 million in new funding across a four-year period, implicitly amounting to a 6% increase in overall 'homelessness services' spending¹⁰.

¹⁰ The document states that the \$61 million is committed as part of overall homelessness funding of 'more than \$1 billion' over the four-year Strategy period.

Homelessness policy and practice developments 2017-2020

Naturally, there has been significant diversity in the precise scope and emphasis of such plans. However, they share some common features. In particular, while other forms of homelessness are generally acknowledged, they share a particular focus on reducing rough sleeping, and a largely common set of measures aimed at achieving this objective. Consistent with this orientation, stepped-up activity to tackle street homelessness has been recently seen in all of Australia's major cities.

3.2.2 Factors underlying stepped up action on street homelessness

Before a more detailed discussion of street homelessness management/reduction tools and techniques, we first consider the possible factors triggering recently enhanced official concern about the problem. In discussing these issues, the terms 'street homelessness' and 'rough sleeping' are used interchangeably.

Rising numbers

At least as exemplified in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, it would appear that rising rough sleeper numbers (or their rising visibility) during the mid-2010s passed some kind of 'political embarrassment threshold'.

In Melbourne, for example, an NGO interviewee observed that recent years had seen a 'massive increase' in rough sleeping, especially in the CBD. Similarly, another respondent reported that local disquiet about rising central city rough sleeping had, by 2018, escalated to a point where the City of Melbourne was under growing pressure to adopt 'a regulatory response'. This refers to controversial statements by the then Lord Mayor who, egged on by the Melbourne Herald Sun (Davey 2017), publicly contemplated a by-law to ban rough sleeping within CoM boundaries (News.com.au 2017). These perspectives of reactions to a problem objectively growing in scale are highly consistent with the rapidly rising 2010–2016 trajectory of Melbourne CBD rough sleeping as indicated by periodic street counts — to which Launch Housing has contributed resources (see Figure 5.9).

In Perth, an NGO perspective saw recent government sensitisation to street homelessness as partly influenced by business and community complaints about 'some of the not very nice behaviour that occurs ...[with] people sleeping on doorsteps...[which] created a sense of 'we've got a real problem here and we need to solve it''. Although Perth lacks any street count time series, this comment once again conveys a sense that growing numbers had passed some kind of tolerability threshold.

Protest and activism

In Sydney, meanwhile, respected City of Sydney street count statistics demonstrate that rough sleeping rose by 60% in the four years to August 2016 (see Figure 5.9). Equally, as acknowledged by government and NGO stakeholder interviewees alike, the specific trigger for stepped-up official action was the 2017 Martin Place homelessness protest encampment and associated media coverage. As subsequently reported by the NSW Government, the nine-month 'tent city' occupation involved 157 people subsequently housed¹¹ with official assistance (Baker 2018). It was, at the time, described by a major NGO as 'a protest against the housing affordability crisis that is a major contributor to homelessness in NSW' (Ibid). It seems fair to speculate that parallel rough sleeper encampments that took place in Melbourne in 2016–17 (Prezel & Mannix 2016) may have also helped to trigger Victorian Government policy movement.

At least in some jurisdictions, advocacy organisations can also reasonably claim that recently heightened official recognition of street homelessness as a policy problem partly reflects their own awareness-raising and practical activism. Much of this has been recently taking place under the umbrella of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH), a grouping that has brought together a national coalition of NGOs committed to the notion that 'the scale of homelessness in Australia is both preventable and solvable' (AAEH website - <https://aaeh.org.au/#who-we-are>).

The outsize influence that can be wielded via such 'bottom up activism' appears well-illustrated by the case of WA where, as reported by an NGO interviewee, there had been a long period of state government inaction prior to 2017. So, in 2016 "We, with no resources, wrote a 10-year plan to end homelessness, which is the WA Alliance to End Homelessness 10-year strategy... Our advocacy, us having a plan ... pushed the government to go, 'Far out. We're not in this space,' and so they then did a 10-year strategy to end homelessness ... and to [their] credit... it was a collaborative process."

¹¹ It is understood that most of those concerned will have been accommodated in public housing, although some will have been placed in headleased properties and/or private rental tenancies

Perhaps of at least equal importance was the example set by the community-led, philanthropically and government funded '50 Lives 50 Homes' project, trailblazing initiatives that piloted new Housing First models for vulnerable rough sleepers initially in Brisbane from 2010, and then in Perth from 2014. Critically, the project demonstrated the feasibility of enabling high rates of tenancy sustainment for people formerly experiencing street homelessness over many years (Parsell et al. 2013; Wood et al. 2017; Vallessi et al. 2018).

It should be acknowledged that the experience of recently enhanced official attention to homelessness in WA is, in part, the story of a new (Labor) Government taking power in 2017 after a long period of opposition. More generally, however, there is no sense that recent changes in the priority accorded to homelessness across Australia is explicable according to the party in power at the state/territory level, nor to changes of government stimulating a fresh look at the issue.

International inspiration

Finally, one significant additional factor underlying recent homelessness policy change has been advocacy encouragement — and direct assistance — provided from overseas. This refers to the US-based organizations Community Solutions, and the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH). Both exist to support efforts to end street homelessness — in the case of Community Solutions, with a primarily American focus, but also extending beyond the US; in the case of IGH, internationally.

The recent designation of Adelaide and Sydney¹² among the IGH 13 'Vanguard Cities', has undoubtedly helped to galvanise a new push to tackle the problem in these state capitals. For participating stakeholders in both places, an important aspect of this has been the inspirational leadership of IGH Chair, Baroness (formerly Dame) Louise Casey — especially as transmitted during visits to Australia over recent years.

NGO stakeholder interviewee 1: "I think the presence of Dame Louise in Sydney on a number of occasions has made a huge difference [in motivating action]... People have a huge amount of respect for her, yes, and listeners ... are guided by her." Interviewee 2: "She doesn't really give you much choice. [Laughs]"

"...once you've got this goal [ending street homelessness], a lot of things lead to Louise Casey ... we would not be where we are without the IGH link. It was very compelling to the State Premier here, to the Lord Mayor here, the relevant ministers here, other philanthropists, industry participants, it's a really valuable link...The Premier made it quite plain ... that ... she only wanted to sign agreement if Dame Louise Casey was part of it...[she], herself, is more than half of the value you get out of IGH...." [NGO stakeholder interviewee, NSW]

Sydney and Adelaide are the only formally designated Vanguard Cities in Australia. However, aspects of the approaches advocated by both Community Solutions and IGH —their recommended targeting and technologies — have also permeated homelessness policy thinking and service practice elsewhere across the country, including through the AAEH network.

The very specific (and some would say narrow) IGH/Community Solutions emphasis on street homelessness has appealed to politicians and (some) advocacy and service provider organisations alike. However, such targeting and associated techniques are also controversial. Some of the issues in play here are explored in Section 3.7. Some of the key concepts, methods and thinking associated with IGH/Community Solutions approaches are also discussed below (see Section 3.4).

3.3 Policy/practice developments: typical components

While recent homelessness policy and practice developments not surprisingly encompass a significant amount of diversity across cities and jurisdictions, a number of common components stand out; in particular:

- Expanded assertive outreach
- Boosted private rental subsidy programs
- Additional headleasing of private rental properties
- Enhanced priority for public housing, efforts to secure greater community housing provider (CHP) engagement

Each of the above elements is examined in more detail.

¹² Technically, at the Premier's request, the Vanguard City designation applies to the whole of NSW.

Homelessness policy and practice developments 2017-2020

3.3.1 Expanded assertive outreach

Within the homelessness context, assertive outreach is where rough sleepers are engaged 'on site' with the aim of enabling and supporting a transition from street homelessness to sustainable housing (Phillips and Parsell 2012). In a number of jurisdictions, the past few years have seen substantially increased assertive outreach activity commissioned or directly undertaken by respective state governments. As in Sydney and Melbourne, this has included geographically extending service coverage to certain suburban areas as well as operating more intensively in city centres.

Moreover, at least in Sydney, and prompted by the Martin Place protest, a more full-blooded form of assertive outreach has been subsequently operated. As recounted by a government interviewee:

"We [previously] sent staff out to people and said, 'Come into our office in [name of suburb]. We'll assist you with some temporary accommodation, and we'll help get you on a pathway,' and gave out a lot of information and virtually nobody turned up ...[at] our office. We realised [that], probably for a variety of reasons, people didn't like coming into a government office, they didn't trust. Then we said 'okay, we're going to take the office out onto the street', so we set up an office with tables, chairs, signs, staff in a particular uniform, so that we could distinguish ourselves and we did it day after day, and [at Martin Place] we did it 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. on many days."

As acknowledged by NGO interviewees, this more intensive engagement has been importantly underpinned by (pre-pandemic) relaxation of rules on provision of temporary accommodation to the rough sleepers concerned. "Normally there would be limits on timing, but ... they were saying to people ... 'We will put you into temporary accommodation now and you can stay there until we find you a permanent home,' and so that meant a lot of people took up that opportunity." This refers to the understanding that rough sleepers are often understandably reticent to take up short stay temporary housing offers when these provide no clear route to more permanent accommodation.

Thus, at least in Sydney, recently stepped up assertive outreach activity has been reportedly also underpinned by a stronger commitment to long-term rehousing. According to a NSW Government stakeholder interviewee, "almost 700 former central Sydney rough sleepers were

assisted in this way over the three years to 2020." (see Table 4.4). As further explained below, while most involved public housing tenancies, these were supplemented through a funded headleasing scheme.

Beyond the active engagement with rough sleepers to offer temporary accommodation, and a commitment to a longer-term housing pathway, the third essential element of effective assertive outreach is the availability of floating support to enhance tenancy sustainment in longer term housing. A long-standing model is the Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI) program developed in Victoria by the Sacred Heart Mission (Grigg 2011). For a Melbourne-based NGO commissioned for suburban assertive outreach, the contractual incorporation of post-tenancy support under the state government's Tenancy Plus program was considered highly beneficial, not least in providing reassurance for landlords. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of NGO-provided floating support was credited by a NSW Government interviewee as a key factor in former rough sleeper tenancy sustainment success — whereby the stakeholder asserted that 87% of public housing tenancies typically remained intact six months after creation.

In North Queensland, the State Government provided funding for clinical capacity to operate in the assertive street outreach team and time-limited support for people in the first months of their tenancies after exiting homelessness. Parsell et al. (2020) highlighted the important involvement of health practitioners, including clinical nurse, mental health nurse, and drug and alcohol nurse. This facilitated homelessness exits by proactively overcoming the barriers presented by the mainstream health system. In short, the research found that many people sleeping rough were unable to engage with the psychosocial support provided through traditional street outreach because of health problems associated with unmet healthcare needs. The health practitioners conducting street outreach were able to provide direct healthcare to people on the streets and thus create the conditions for people to exit homelessness and sustain housing (Parsell et al. 2020).

The integrated model of health and psychosocial care linked to housing, along with other examples of assertive outreach, Housing First, and permanent supportive housing (with both the private and social housing sector), reflect a broader theme identified across Australia. Namely, that while governments will often fund one-off trials or pilots built on evidence and which indeed contribute to their own evidence base, the learnings from

these trials/pilots are not necessarily institutionalized into practice. As Parkinson and Parsell (2018) observed, there are examples of successful initiatives in Australia that address rough sleeping, but they only work for those individuals lucky enough to have participated in the pilot projects themselves. Thus, while potentially highly beneficial for participants, small scale trials are not in themselves sufficient to address the structural barriers in housing and support systems, and therefore demonstrably fail to reduce the incidence of homelessness at the population level.

3.3.2 Private rental subsidies

Integral to assertive outreach activity, but also relevant to a wider cohort of people already experiencing homelessness and those who might potentially experience homelessness is the practice of making available time-limited (private) rental subsidies — sometimes termed Private Rental Assistance (PRA) payments. Recognising the general unaffordability of private tenancies to low-income earners (particularly single people), eligible applicants may be helped to bridge the gap between private rent and 25% of tenant income. The need for such support of course follows on from the gross inadequacy of Commonwealth Rent Assistance, especially in capital city housing markets.

Pledges to continue or expand private rental subsidies have featured in recent homelessness strategies including those published by NSW, SA and WA. Stepped-up commitment to such payments is also expected in the forthcoming Victorian homelessness strategy. In NSW, NGOs have advocated for a more flexible approach to implementation, to avoid excluding the most disadvantaged. At issue here are rules that have required applicants for such assistance to prove their capacity to transition to market rent within three years.

Some measure of the importance of private rental subsidies can be gauged for certain states from official statistics. For example, AIHW data indicate that the NSW Government made some 13,000 payments of rental grants, subsidies and relief in 2017–18 — nearly double the number of social housing lettings in the state in that year — some 7,000 (AIHW 2020; NSW Government 2020). Unfortunately, however, the incompleteness of the relevant AIHW series makes it impossible to make such comparisons for all jurisdictions, nor to calibrate change over time in private rental subsidy payment at the national scale.

3.3.3 Headleasing

Headleasing is where a state government or CHP contracts to manage a private rental property for a given period. In an investment-constrained administrative setting it is viewed as a flexible and cost-efficient way of effectively expanding the social housing stock. In several states, interviewee testimony and recently published official policy/strategy documents suggest that governments have recently authorised some enlargement of existing headleasing programs. This has been presented as integral to expansion of assertive outreach activity.

A government interviewee noted that the established stock of headleased properties in NSW numbers around 8,000 (in the context of a total social housing stock of some 156,000 dwellings). An NGO research participant reported that the boosted assertive outreach activity triggered by the 2017 Martin Place protest had included headleasing of an additional 70–90 inner city dwellings under the STEP to home project (Bridge Housing 2020). It can be assumed that these properties will have contributed to the rehousing program which, as mentioned above, has reportedly seen some 700 former inner-Sydney rough sleepers rehoused over the period 2017–2020 (see Table 4.4).

Unfortunately, however, neither the number of headleased dwellings, nor changes over time in the size of the national headleased portfolio, is routinely published. It is therefore impossible to quantify the scale of any recent increase in the use of this technique across the country. Also, advocates identify the benefits of headleasing and the private rental market over what they argue is the inflexibility of the social housing system, especially allocations. It is important to consider that the latter, like any government regulated system, can be modified, and the opportunities that headleasing is purported to represent could be achieved by re-imagining the social housing system.

3.3.4 Enhanced priority for public housing, efforts to secure greater CHP engagement

Beyond the (probably) modest recent addition to rehousing capacity through headleasing, interview evidence suggests that state governments may have also helped to underpin recently expanded assertive outreach by designating an increased proportion of public housing vacancies to former rough sleepers. Although it doesn't fully prove the above suggestion, the SA Government's commitment to designate 10 public housing vacancies per month to rehousing former rough sleepers was acknowledged by an NGO interviewee as a valuable contribution to tackling street homelessness in Adelaide CBD.

Homelessness policy and practice developments 2017-2020

As discussed above, ‘permanent’ rehousing capacity may be expanded through boosting private rental subsidies and headleasing. Otherwise, the corollary of enhanced social housing priority accorded to former rough sleepers has inevitably reduced access for other high need applicants. Many of these will be people who are, themselves, exposed to possible homelessness — a risk only likely to be compounded by an elongated wait for rehousing. Associated concerns are among the contested claims in play in the homelessness sector debate with respect to strategies to tackle rough sleeping that include little significant commitment to investment in additional permanent social housing (see Section 3.7).

Another issue related to the scope for permanent rehousing of former rough sleepers is access to community housing stock. Since this now accounts for around a quarter of all social housing (more in certain states) this is a potentially significant resource. Among Victorian interviewees, recent systemic reforms considered relevant to tackling homelessness have included the integration of CHPs into the state-wide social housing register. This was expected to have the benefit of ensuring that ‘[all social landlords] take from the top of the list, the most complex, so we can start to get some of those people housed’ (government interviewee).

Referring to rough sleeper rehousing a government interviewee in another state noted “... most people have gone [into]... public housing. We need to bring community housing into the fold as well. I think it’s the bigger challenge for us in [name of state], to make sure we’ve got that supply as well.”

Similarly, another NGO respondent noted that the recent transfer of public housing into CHP management in their state had “made some of the challenges the Housing Department faces even more difficult ... [because some CHPs] do that cherry-picking and they don’t take the hard cases.” As a result, it was seen that public housing agencies remain effectively the provider of last resort¹³. At the same time, it was recognised that public housing transfers can be a means of protecting social housing to the extent that “governments can’t flog it off in the future because it’s owned by the CHPs.” Moreover, it can enable CHPs to leverage privately financed new investment “in a way that the state governments aren’t willing to do.”

¹³ While perhaps not entirely conclusive on this point, however, AIHW data (Priority Groups Tables: Priority 1) show that in recent years the proportion of community housing allocations to ‘greatest need applicants’ has tended to exceed the comparable figure for public housing. In 2018–19, for example, the respective national figures were 81.8% versus 76.8%.

3.4 Homelessness data enhancement and quantification

“Reliable data is necessary to drive toward an end to homelessness.”

“Shared data can help cities understand real progress toward ending homelessness, see what is working, and improve strategies or problem-solve together. Locally, this may mean centrally accessible databases which rely on a common assessment tool to create a by-name list of individuals experiencing homelessness.”

(Institute of Global Homelessness website - <https://ighomelessness.org/>)

Integral to recently intensified efforts to reduce street homelessness in a number of Australian cities has been a new focus on data about people experiencing homelessness. Partly stimulated by IGH and/or Community Solutions approaches and disseminated through the AAEH network, among others, this is also motivated by several lines of thinking:

- With a multiplicity of agencies providing homelessness services of various kinds, there is an efficiency premium on commonly accessible data on individual rough sleepers to facilitate ‘joined up working’ or service integration.
- Fuller and more systematically collected data about individual rough sleepers could enhance the appropriate targeting of assistance.
- More systematic data about individuals and their social, medical and other needs could provide a ‘more objective’ mechanism for prioritising people’s access to scarce resources (housing and support).

Two of the key technologies that have enabled this are area-specific ‘by-name’, or ‘know-by-name’, rough sleeper databases, and the VI-SPDAT (Vulnerability Index Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool) that provides a vehicle for data collection to inform such lists.

As seen by an NGO know-by-name advocate, this should enable the sharing of records to create “a single point of truth in terms of who’s had what service and how have they been engaged.” Thus, a means of overcoming the problem that, as put by another NGO interviewee, “[Historically] at every juncture, you have to engage a new worker, probably a new service, a new way of working and it’s a critical point where people can get lost in the system

or disengage.” Notably, as the first recipient of such an accolade outside North America, Adelaide’s know-by-name list in 2020 received international accreditation from New York-based advocacy agency, Community Solutions.

Developed in the USA, the VI-SPDAT is an assessment method to gauge a person’s mental health, their medical and social vulnerabilities. It was developed in response to demands to ‘more efficiently allocate scarce housing resources based on the support service needs of homeless individuals and families’ (Brown et al. 2018 p110). As used in the USA, VI-SPDAT scores may divide people into three categories regarding recommended action —nominate to permanent supportive housing; identify for rapid rehousing; or no housing support services required.

Rollout of the know-by-name, or by-name list (BNL), methodology has been somewhat problematic among service providers in Sydney because of technical difficulties in accommodating the VI-SPDAT tool. Due to problems with the app’s user interface in its original 2019 incarnation, caseworkers were initially forced to revert to a paper-based process. By mid-2020, these issues had been reportedly overcome such that the VI-SPDAT approach could be routinely used for casework. At that stage, however, further development work was still needed to achieve full functionality for the local by-name list.

For their advocates, the approaches inspired by IGH and Community Solutions are seen as:

“[incorporating] a focus on prevention and working towards ending street sleeping rather than just managing it.” (NGO stakeholder)

This perspective refers, in part, to the aspiration that the collection of better data on the rough sleeping population will enable targeting of outreach activity to ‘new [street homelessness] arrivals’ to help them avoid long term homelessness. Neither is recognition of BNL utility limited to operational considerations. In an era when (some) governments have become more bullish in their public commitments on street homelessness reduction, the need for reliable real-time monitoring of rough sleeping numbers has been enhanced. Thus, the potential value of BNL technology as an accounting tool has been recently emphasised by the Victorian Auditor General (VAGO 2020 p7). There is agreement that it is insufficient for organisations/programs to report on numbers supported or even housed; it is now expected that disparate programs and initiatives are funded, designed, and delivered as a contribution to measurable outcomes at the population level. These expectations raise significant challenges to how data is collected, made publicly available, and used.

As seen by a more critical NGO interviewee, however, “The by-name lists ... are yet to show that they do more than collect data, and that they do more than a little bit of service coordination. I think internationally, when countries are not investing in social housing, they get terribly excited about service coordination, which is a good thing to do, but the get is marginal.” These contrasting perspectives are more fully explored in Section 3.7.

3.5 Homelessness reduction objectives: definition and calibration

The specification of homelessness reduction targets was considered by some NGO stakeholder interviewees as a breakthrough moment in securing broad-based commitment to tackling rough sleeping. Moreover, IGH Vanguard City designation is conditional on the commitment of the participating government and/or municipality to a clearly defined and measurable street homelessness reduction target:

“[IGH] would only accept you as a Vanguard City if you had targets which were measurable and simple and short-term as well.” (NGO interviewee)

Beyond this, IGH advises that Vanguard City targets are expected to be calibrated in simple ‘point in time reduction’ terms¹⁴, rather than in relation to alternative measures such as the ‘functional zero’ concept — as explained below. At one level, debates on homelessness enumeration approaches and targets might appear purely technical. However, these in fact involve conceptual and philosophical considerations on what it means to be ‘homeless’ and how one can practically define ‘ending homelessness’, as well as problematic questions on exactly how to measure progress towards achieving that objective.

3.5.1 Functional Zero

Alongside its Vanguard City plan for the City of Adelaide, the SA Government continues to aim for a ‘functional zero’ (FZ) situation. FZ is also the preferred AAEH target-setting concept and is favoured as such by street homelessness reduction initiatives in Sydney, Perth and Melbourne (Port Phillip).

As explained by AHURI (2020), FZ is ‘a definitional, accounting tool designed to measure whether government services responses to homelessness are keeping pace

¹⁴ Although IGH is also open to homelessness reduction targets calibrated in terms of ‘prevalence’ – e.g. people experiencing rough sleeping in a specified area within a given period.

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with increases in homelessness.’ Beyond this, however, there is an apparent lack of clarity (or unanimity) on an exact definition. Community Solutions, the American homelessness advocacy agency credited as FZ originator describes it as ‘a dynamic milestone that indicates a community has solved homelessness for a population’ (<https://community.solutions/functional-zero/>). Nevertheless, no specific overarching definition is offered.

As emphasized by some, FZ is primarily about the relationship between the scale of (street) homelessness and a city or community’s capacity to accommodate homeless people. For example, if the un-utilised capacity (beds and associated support services) of homelessness shelters exceeds the number of un-sheltered rough sleepers on a given night, functional zero is achieved. Thus, as explained by Turner et al. (2017 pp2-3):

“...a community might declare it has ended homelessness when it has enough supportive housing, shelter beds, service workers, and funds to assist the number of people accessing the services.”

Similarly, according to the Adelaide Zero project (<https://dunstan.org.au/adelaide-commits-to-functional-zero-homelessness-by-2020/>):

“Functional zero homelessness is reached when the number of people who are homeless in a city on any given night is no greater than the housing placement availability for that night – and is reduced over time.”

At the same time, another perspective on functional zero sees it defined more in terms of an emphasis on flows of people into and out of homelessness, such that FZ is achieved when:

“At any point in time, the number of people experiencing sheltered or unsheltered homelessness [is] no greater than the current monthly housing placement rate for people experiencing homelessness.”

Erlenbusch (2015 p1)

For its part, the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness has similarly defined the concept in terms of flows:

“Functional zero homelessness is reached when the number of people who are homeless in a community in any given month is no greater than the average housing placement rate for that same period.” <https://docplayer.net/188416085-Advance-to-zero-campaign-briefing-as-at-17-march-2020.html>

Viewed in relation to the need for a clear specification for statistically calibrating FZ ‘success’ — and especially given the reference to ‘average’ placement rate — this wording could be seen as not wholly transparent. Nevertheless,

in accord with this general approach, the Adelaide Zero project’s dashboard emphasises the importance of inflows to and outflows from street homelessness, monitored on a monthly basis (<https://dunstan.org.au/adelaide-zero-project/dashboard/>).

Standing back from any uncertainty on its precise definition and calibration, the rationale for the FZ concept runs as follows. While ‘ending homelessness’ is a morally necessary policy objective, it is unrealistic for a city to imagine the possible achievement of ‘absolute zero’ – i.e. a situation where “every resident in a community [is] sleeping in his or her own, secure home, on any given night” (Turner et al. 2017 p1). At any point in time there will inevitably be some ‘temporary homelessness’. FZ is therefore argued as “a meaningful and useful definition of ‘ending homelessness’ that recognises that reality” (Ibid).

In the words of an advocate interviewed in our research:

“...the real meaningful definition [of ending street homelessness] is that any rough sleeping that does occur is rare, it doesn’t happen very often, it’s brief, you could house them quickly, and it’s non-reoccurring. So rare, brief, non-reoccurring, that’s the better definition of ending homelessness.” (NGO stakeholder)

Arguably, another strength of the FZ interpretation that emphasises flows of people into and out of street homelessness, is that this usefully highlights the importance of actions to prevent the loss of accommodation, and to facilitate rehousing.

At the same time, however, some critics view FZ as definitional sophistry that avoids confrontation with underlying systemic and structural issues. In part, this critique follows from the interpretation that such a state of affairs could be fulfilled even with a large number of people technically without shelter provided that the number entering homelessness is equal to that exiting (Erlenbusch 2015).

3.5.2 Point-in-time reduction targets

Sydney/NSW

In recent years the NSW Government has committed to two specific street homelessness point-in-time reduction targets:

- 25 per cent reduction in Sydney by February 2020, using 2017 as the baseline
- 50 per cent reduction by 2025 across NSW, in relation to the 2019 position

The Government's adoption of the 2025 target (designated a 'Premier's Priority') was connected with Sydney's 2019 designation as an IGH Vanguard City (one of 13 across the world). In this specific instance, the NSW Government understands the designation as extending to the whole of the state.

As officially assessed, the 2020 Sydney-specific homelessness reduction target was almost met (pre-pandemic) — as calibrated by the comparison of 433 rough sleepers in February 2017 with the 334 three years later: a reduction of 23%. These figures are drawn from the City of Sydney's six-monthly rough sleeper street count, a series that has run for more than a decade using an enumeration methodology widely considered as highly rigorous.

For the 2025 state-wide homelessness reduction target, the NSW Government opted to treat the 2016 ABS Census enumeration as a proxy for its 2019 baseline. Since this estimated state-wide rough sleeper numbers as totalling 2,600, the 2025 goal was defined as reducing the total to under 1,300 by that date (NSW Government 2020). Subsequently, however, the NSW Government's own state-wide street count enumerated only 1,314 rough sleepers in early 2020 (Ibid). This may partly reflect the effectiveness of post-2016 homelessness management policy and practice.

It is, however, officially acknowledged that 'estimating street homelessness through [such] a statewide count is a challenging task and an undercount is very likely.' On the other hand, the ABS Census estimate was described by a key stakeholder interviewee as 'probably ... an overcount'. This judgement rests partly on the observation that the 2016 ABS Census recorded street homelessness in 'Sydney Inner City' (the area closely corresponding to the City of Sydney) as 638, whereas the corresponding City of Sydney August 2016 street count enumerated 394. Thus, the ABS Census statistic was 62% higher.

The likely explanation for this is the differing methodologies of the two approaches. In particular, the ABS Census defines rough sleepers as those 'without a usual home address' and logs them in relation to their place of enumeration. Unlike a simple street count, ABS Census enumeration involves the collection of a range of data items for each identified rough sleeper. Distinct from a rough sleeper street count, therefore, it must be undertaken during waking hours. As operated by the ABS within the City of Sydney this includes interviews conducted at 'hotspot' locations such as drop-in centres or soup kitchens. To the extent that they may attract 'out of area' users, this means that localities where such services are clustered (as in central city areas such as Sydney CBD) could logically show up in ABS Census data

as 'hosting' somewhat larger numbers of (self-reported) street sleepers than would be enumerated by a simple count limited to the area itself.

Importantly, the ABS Census methodology described above is specific to central cities. ABS Census street homelessness counts in most other areas of Australia are based on field officer reports of individuals identified in the course of the follow-up of non-responding households, population-wide¹⁵. For Northern Australia and other remote locations, however, the ABS approach involves a household form which asks the 'usual address' question and is used to attribute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people back to their communities if they are sleeping rough or in a makeshift shelter for a short period.

All of this suggests that the specification of point-in-time street homelessness reduction targets — and the calibration of associated 'performance' — involves problematic practicalities. Targets that relate to tightly bounded localities subject to rigorous periodic (appropriately timed) street counts may be relatively straightforward. For those that involve wider areas, it is hard to see any practicable alternative to ABS Census-enumerated benchmarks. This, in turn, calls for the specification of targets according to ABS Census schedules rather than electoral or other politically-defined cycles.

Adelaide

Adelaide is currently running with two concurrent street homelessness reduction goals:

- Functional zero for the entire city
- 50% reduction in chronic street homelessness in the CBD, North Adelaide, and Parklands, Dec 2018–Dec 2020

In its reference to 'chronic' rough sleeping, the latter objective adds another element of complexity — or, it might be argued, sophistication. In this context, chronic rough sleeping refers to people who have either: (a) slept rough for at least six consecutive months, or (b) had three or more episodes (defined as one day or more) of rough sleeping in the previous 12 months. The feasibility of recording performance against such a highly specific

¹⁵ ABS advises that standard practice also includes efforts to minimise undercount in these areas through sector intelligence and awareness campaigns during the planning and enumeration phase. Additionally, ABS Census staff recruitment targets people familiar with the rough sleeper population — including people working in the homelessness services sector and those with lived experience.

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target is of course predicated on the collection and holding of 'client data' at a level of detail tenable only via the efficient maintenance of a comprehensive know-by-name database¹⁶.

3.6 Procurement and management of homelessness services

The past few years have also seen some notable developments in the ways that homelessness services are commissioned or configured. Some aspects of these changes are discussed below.

3.6.1 Service integration

Reflecting one of the motivations for the know-by-name approach to addressing street homelessness, efforts at service integration have also been progressing on wider fronts. As referenced by government interviewees in both NSW and WA, giving effect to the concept of 'no wrong door' should enhance service user experience as well as potentially aiding service provision efficiency.

The WA Government, for example, has been developing an online homelessness portal for this purpose. This is also connected with aspirations for better data on the service user population. So beyond its effect in enhancing visibility of available services, the system 'will also have a backend data function so that people's information is shared with consent, ...[helping] us to get a better picture of numbers, and also mobility, because often people move, particularly people sleeping rough.'

3.6.2 Service commissioning innovations

Across a number of states there is growing interest in so-called outcomes-based service commissioning — sometimes termed 'payment by results.' For example, SA's housing and homelessness strategy envisages 'transitioning to an outcome-based service model that invests in and rewards positive outcomes' (Government of South Australia 2019 p16). This thinking is linked with the concept of social impact investing. Social impact investments are 'those that intentionally target specific social objectives along with a financial return and measure the achievement of both' (Social Impact Investment Taskforce 2014).

As applied in the arena of homelessness services, this kind of thinking may involve a contract fee (or a part of it) being dependent on achievement of specified outcomes. As explained by an NGO interviewee, therefore:

"... if the [service user] doesn't have another strike against their name, or if they don't have any more nuisance and annoyance complaints, then you'll get ... additional payments for those outcomes."

Exemplifying this model, Home and Healthy is a 'payment by results' project recently commissioned by the NSW Government. It aims to minimise homelessness involving high risk ex-patients discharged from health facilities across Sydney by enabling them to sustain independent tenancies. Under the 6-year contract, Mission Australia is expected to assist up to 1,200 people with floating support (Visentin 2019). A longer-established Social Impact Investment (SII) project is the Adelaide-based Aspire Program that provides a three-year support program to homeless referrals, with a particular focus on strengthening community engagement and employment participation. As reported by an NGO interviewee, Aspire is distinguished by being "the only homelessness social impact bond in the world to deliver savings in multiple government agencies."

However, although SII homelessness projects attract attention as a "bright, shiny, sexy new thing" (NGO interviewee, NSW), their significance is 'around the edges, marginal'. It isn't clear that such models are scalable. There is also a complexity factor and high transaction costs; essentially, the provider bears the financial risk. Therefore, not many agencies can enter into this sort of arrangement. Moreover, as noted in a recent report, "performance-based contracting requires consensus on outcomes and robust measures, neither of which are currently available" (Flatau et al. 2017 p52).

More broadly, an NGO interviewee critical of business as usual state government activity saw this as over-investment in a managerialist perspective where scope for action is largely limited to seeking efficiency and effectiveness gains from the periodic re-tendering of homelessness services. The holy grail here is the marginal 'saving' that may be achievable through competitive re-tendering, thus enabling a modest (cost-neutral) expansion of services:

"That re-tendering, we've been trying that for 60 years. Where's that gotten us? Just re-tender everything every few years, take a cut out of it, and then add a new service over here or maybe add a few more dollars."

¹⁶ However, a know-by-name framework does not necessarily require to be associated with adherence to a functional zero target setting or monitoring methodology. A know-by-name database or 'by-name-list' (BNL) can have practical utility quite independently of FZ.

3.7 Diverse perspectives on recent policy and practice trajectories

Some of the recent policy and practice developments discussed above are controversial within the homelessness advocacy and service provider arena. Certain stakeholders express concern that the AAEH-associated focus on rough sleeping can provide governments with a convenient rationale for focusing their attention on only a small part of the wider policy challenge. Moreover, any implication that rough sleeping can be substantially 'solved' through technically (or technologically) enhanced service efficiency and effectiveness may dangerously obscure the fundamental systemic forces that underlie the wider homelessness problem, and the systemic reforms necessary to address it. In other words, emphasising how to 'make the system work more efficiently' risks conveying the implicit message that "You don't need to invest more [in social housing]."

At the same time, as articulated by one NGO interviewee, this perspective is liable to feed into a policymaker perception that the issue is just too large and complex for any state/territory government to address. In this thinking, therefore, the argument is, "We think you need to invest more in this system, but even if you don't, you can make improvements in the current system." Such a 'positivity pitch' is a political strategy that follows from a particular theory of change — that is, the advocacy model that emphasises 'deliverability'.

Arguably, the two positions outlined above need not be understood as fundamentally incompatible. At the same time, they do reflect differing interpretations and political strategies as colourfully illustrated by the NGO interviewee point that "[the critics of an exclusive emphasis on street homelessness] are ... out there putting out press releases saying, 'There's a tsunami of homelessness.' And the [Functional] Zero people are out there saying, 'This is a solvable problem.'" From the 'Zero people' perspective these are considered to be 'mixed messages'. On the other hand, critics of this standpoint would contend that they likewise see homelessness as solvable — albeit stressing that this cannot be achieved without large-scale systemic reform, including major social housing investment.

As far as housing policy is concerned, the bigger picture is that social and affordable housing supply has continued to diminish in real terms across Australia. As shown in Figure 2.10, the past five years have seen a further blow-out in the national shortfall of private rental properties priced within the means of low-income Australians. Meanwhile, investment in new social housing has remained close to rock bottom. This feeds the concern that, "If you [aren't putting] more housing into the system, all you're doing is taking housing off domestic violence victims and young people and giving them to men on the street in inner cities."

These realities are well-illustrated by the situation in Victoria. On the one hand, the State Government's homelessness budget saw a 40% increase in the 3 years to 2018–19 —enabling expanded assertive outreach activity, headleasing and private rental assistance, among other things. On the other hand, none of these actions contributes to the permanent stock of social housing which has remained largely static over recent years. With very little investment in new provision the state's portfolio grew by only 0.5% in the four years to 2019 (Productivity Commission ROGS Part 18, Table 18A3), during a period where overall population expanded by 9% (ABS Cat 3101, Table 4). As measured by service user demand, meanwhile, homelessness increased by 10%. To put this another way, social housing has been growing at only one twentieth the rate of homelessness.

To be fair, investment sufficient to underpin small additions to social housing stock has been included within or alongside pledged homelessness funding by some states over recent years, e.g. as in SA and WA (see Footnote 6). Other jurisdictions, e.g. NSW and Vic, claim that modest net gains in social housing will be generated through long-term estate renewal projects — their cost being met entirely through the release of land value rather than taxpayer funding. However, sustained expansion of social housing at scale can come about only through Commonwealth Government buy-in. This reality stems from Australia's vertical fiscal imbalance, whereby it is national government — and not the states and territories — that holds by far the greater tax-raising (and borrowing) powers. Regrettably, however, the past few years have seen the frequent reassertion of the Commonwealth mantra that housing outcomes are a state/territory responsibility, and that rising homelessness is not our problem.

3.8 Chapter conclusion

The past few years — prior to the pandemic — have witnessed significantly increased state/territory recognition of homelessness as a policy problem. Albeit in some jurisdictions importantly spurred by advocacy and activism, official action in tackling rough sleeping was substantially stepped-up across a number of capital cities. In focusing particular attention on street homelessness, governments were in part reacting to public and business concerns, but also concentrating action on only one relatively small and very specific element of the wider homelessness problem. Therein lies a source of considerable controversy within the homelessness advocacy and service provider world.

In support of stepped-up engagement with street homeless populations, state/territory governments have extended and intensified assertive outreach work, underpinned by modest additional funding for private rental subsidies, headleasing, floating support, and in some cases, teams of multidisciplinary professionals. Recently published strategies have also showcased numerous usually well-justified and worthwhile projects to address other forms of homelessness. Equally, strategies typically adopt a narrowly focused perspective which fails to recognise — much less confront — the fundamental systemic reform needed to seriously confront Australia's broader homelessness challenge. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that recent rough sleeper reduction program implementation has been officially judged as far from flawless (VAGO 2020): both the design of interventions to achieve reduction targets, and the need for robust data to measure progress represent significant challenges to the policy ambition.

Above all, recent initiatives have been undertaken within a broader context where investment in expanding social housing has remained at negligible levels. In this respect, state/territory governments could undoubtedly do more to exploit the levers directly at their disposal. The continuing reluctance to develop meaningful inclusionary zoning frameworks to generate social and affordable housing through the land-use planning system is a case in point (Pawson et al. 2020). Expanding social and affordable housing provision is critical to reduce the incidence of homelessness at the population level. This necessity, and the importance of continued advocacy to achieve it, however, should not be seen as antithetical to efforts to simultaneously use data and improve homelessness and support systems. Both are required to achieve their mutual objectives.

In our view, especially through the more active use of regulatory powers (including land-use planning), there is more that state/territory governments could do to address the broader systemic causes of homelessness. However, given the balance of tax-raising and borrowing powers across Australia's two main levels of government, the scale of investment required to enable significant expansion of Australia's social housing stock can happen only with Commonwealth Government commitment and leadership in this field. In recent years, however, that leadership has been sadly absent.

04

COVID-19 and homelessness

The health consequences of COVID-19 spurred governments into action



33,000

rough sleepers and others in very precarious housing were booked temporarily into hotels and motels around the country.

Few will go on to get permanent housing through government-backed assistance.



4.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter examines how COVID-19 shaped Australia's homelessness policy and practice response from March 2020 to July 2020. Consistent with the broader report, we focus on Australia's five mainland states. As demonstrated in this chapter, policy and practice changed most significantly for people sleeping rough. The COVID-19 health crisis has meant that people sleeping rough were identified as a significant cohort of the homeless population. We also illustrate, however, that in some areas of Australia other people experiencing homelessness, such as those in crisis homeless accommodation with shared amenities, were also directly impacted by changed homelessness policy and practice under pandemic conditions.

The chapter is structured in five parts. First, we demonstrate what has been done in Australia at the policy and practice level to respond to homelessness in light of COVID-19. The second section attempts to quantify the scale of action in supporting rough sleepers and others into emergency accommodation made available through COVID-19. Third, we present qualitative interview data to illustrate the experiences of people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19. Fourth, and building on our earlier discussion on the relatively limited structural change — increased supply of affordable housing — that has hampered Australian homelessness policy in the three years prior to 2020, we offer some explanation for the homelessness policy and practice changes in light of COVID-19. Drawing on the significant short-term work that has been achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic, we conclude the chapter to propose what these lessons represent for Australia moving forward beyond the pandemic.

4.2 What has COVID-19 represented for homelessness policy and practice?

The first Australian case of COVID-19 was confirmed in January 2020. Following the first confirmed case, the Australian Government, often in partnerships with states and territories through the National Cabinet, implemented a suite of policies and legislative mechanisms to respond to the health crisis. The initial health response drew on the evidence about controlling communicable diseases. As more people became infected and more public health evidence became available, Australia's response to the developing health crisis emerged. Working through the National Cabinet, states and territories have responded in ways that reflect their infection rates and perceived risks. Despite the diversity in responses, early into the crisis, government across Australia understood that the health risks were not evenly distributed across the population.

Indeed, it was not only certain cohorts that were identified to be at greater risk, such as older people and people with immune deficiencies, but some risks were exacerbated by people's living situations. People who are homeless, particularly those living on the street or in crisis housing, may be triply vulnerable to infection. They not only have poorer health and greater risk of mortality than the non-homeless population (Nilsson et al. 2017), but by virtue of their homelessness they have limited access to amenity and space to control their health care (Parsell et al. 2018), and they also have no access to their own self-contained space to enable them to practice social distancing.

In light of the multiple increased vulnerabilities that homelessness represents, many governments acted to implement a range of specific policy and practice responses to meet the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness during COVID-19. Moreover, governments spent millions of dollars funding these policy and practice changes.

Significant new expenditure commitments have underpinned the temporary rehousing programs mandated by the various state governments — especially New South Wales and Victoria. These have included funding designated for the initial emergency phase of such programs including:

- Hotel charges (e.g. initial packages in Vic and NSW valued at \$15m and \$14m respectively, an initial \$3m in South Australia to accommodate people who are homeless in motels, and a report that the South Australian Government spent \$8.2M on homelessness during COVID-19)
- Floating support while temporarily accommodated (e.g. as included within \$25m committed by the Queensland Government for temporary hotel/ student housing)

More recent announcements by the NSW and Vic state governments have pledged new funds to facilitate rehousing out of hotels. These have included resources for:

- Private rental subsidy payments to tenants
- Private rental property headleasing charges (e.g. \$150m in Vic — also including ‘second wave’ hotel bills and floating support costs)
- Floating support where required for tenancy sustainment for up to two years (e.g. \$18m in NSW within broader \$36m program also covering headleasing charges)

Beyond this, and also prompted by the pandemic, new social housing investment initiatives have been announced by various state governments since March 2020. As it would appear, these have been substantially motivated by economic (employment-creation) objectives and some have no direct relevance to emergency rehousing programs: e.g. accelerated refurbishment of occupied public housing (as in Vic), or for modest numbers of new social housing units for completion some years ahead (as in Vic and Qld). In addition, however, some jurisdictions have pledged significant sums to restore currently vacant public housing to make it available for more immediate re-occupation, for example:

- \$47m committed by the NSW Government ‘to provide emergency accommodation in response to the crisis’ (involving rapid refurbishment to enable temporary re-occupation of a public housing estate cleared for demolition)
- \$90m pledged by the Vic Government on ‘rapid response housing refurbishments’

In Western Australia, by contrast, the state government did not adopt changes to rapidly move large numbers of people off the streets, or even out of crisis accommodation by funding widespread access to hotels or other forms of temporary accommodation. A WA Government interviewee confirmed that “the state government did not take the position of saying, ‘Right, anyone who has no shelter, let’s place them into hotels.’” “We didn’t do that.”

Instead, in March 2020, the WA Government implemented a pilot program which it referred to as ‘Hotels with Hearts’; the program accommodated 30 people who were homeless (Government of Western Australia 2020; Hansard 2020b). After less than a month, the media reported that the pilot was disbanded after half of the participants left the hotel (Kagi 2020). In the WA Parliament, the Shadow Minister for Homelessness, Tony Krsticevic, criticised the WA response to homelessness during COVID-19. Krsticevic pointed out that NSW, Vic, and Qld had spent several millions of dollars responding to people who were homeless during COVID-19, whereas the WA Government had spent only \$497,000 (Hansard 2020a).

Referring to the small ‘Hotels with Hearts’ pilot, Minister Simone McGurk advised Parliament that:

“There are no immediate plans to undertake a similar project at this time, due to the low numbers of COVID-19 infections in Western Australia.” (Hansard 2020b)

When responding to debate in Parliament about the WA Government’s response to COVID-19, Minister Simone McGurk asserted that WA needed “to take a strategic approach and look at the best evidence to resolve some of these issues” (Hansard 2020a). The Minister cited the “All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia’s 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2023”, which she had confidence would “result in some good outcomes” (Hansard 2020a).

The above illustrates the substantial funding and policy changes that were swiftly implemented to create the affordability mechanisms for people experiencing homelessness to access decent accommodation in four of Australia’s mainland states. This constitutes one, albeit an important, part of the response to homelessness during COVID-19. NGOs played a key role in delivering the services and accessing the accommodation. The NGO sector across Australia acted rapidly to implement the policy and funding transformations initiated by state governments.

In Qld, an NGO stakeholder described how her/his organisation responded to people who were homeless given the Qld Government’s announcement of increased funding because of COVID-19.

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“So we were doing health checks, giving out food, giving out sanitisers and hygiene packs, and trying to say to people, “We’re not sure what’s going to happen, but we’ll keep you informed.” So then at Easter our phones just ran hot... So, people were very desperate. The desperation that you can hear in people’s voices. And then the people that were regularly homeless, they hadn’t had a shower, they hadn’t been able to access anywhere to go and have a shower. So getting people into hotels. The government had announced the \$24.7 million, so we put 240 people in a hotel over Easter... Well, the government had sent letters saying, “Whatever you need to do to respond to COVID, you do it.” So I took them literally, and we did.” (NGO stakeholder)

The stakeholder demonstrates a wider experience across much of Australia where NGOs instantly acted to ensure that the government initiatives were realised in practice. The evidence gathered through this research illustrates how the NGO sector came together with governments to get people off the streets and at times to get people out of shared homeless accommodation.

Reflecting the Qld experience above, NGOs worked frantically to get people into accommodation in circumstances of great uncertainty at the start of the health emergency. A stakeholder from a large NGO in Vic reflected that he/she had worked in the homelessness sector a “long-time.” During COVID-19, however, it was the first time in his/her career that:

“We’ve met demand... Not just the demands that we can afford to meet... So we just went, ‘Okay, time to get everyone off the streets into accommodation.’”

The stakeholder above said that their organisation had provided accommodation to several hundred people who were homeless during COVID-19. Elaborating on his/her organisation’s response, the stakeholder reflected that we met demand because “we actually don’t have any choice other than to keep going and to keep people accommodated.”

Stakeholders across governments and NGOs throughout Australia articulated a broadly consistent theme: significant numbers of people who were homeless were accommodated in hotels because of a once-in-a-generation government funding and a commitment from NGOs to get people off the streets.

At the same time, there were inter-state variations on the duration of temporary accommodation provided. A stakeholder asserted that SA initially offered at least a three month stay in temporary accommodation, where NSW initially offered five days, or 30 days for people sleeping rough with extensions made on a case by case basis. The NSW stakeholder asserted that people who

were homeless experienced the very short stays, with the requirement of reapplying for temporary accommodation each week, as stressful. But further to this, however, stakeholders spoke about the manner in which long term rough sleepers were accepting offers of accommodation during COVID-19, whereas they previously had not. A stakeholder in a large Vic NGO that provides both housing and street outreach and a government representative responsible for public space remarked:

“They don’t want to be on the streets getting sick. Yeah, it’s a serious health issue and they’re aware of their own vulnerabilities.” (NGO stakeholder)

“Rough sleepers, many of whom have been on the streets for a long time, have very low levels of trust in government and agencies and institutions saying, ‘I’ll accept help. I want the accommodation when it’s offered and I’ll accept that help from you at this time, when I acknowledge that I haven’t been willing to accept it previously.’” (Government representative)

Consistent with the existing literature, during COVID-19 people sleeping rough exerted agency in how they engaged with street outreach, and significantly, they accepted support to move off the streets when services were able to provide resources that people wanted (Parsell 2018). The resources provided through COVID-19 bolstered agencies’ capacity to meet the needs of people who were homeless that they were previously unable to meet. The state-funded resources empowered professionals in NGOs to achieve the type of outcomes for people experiencing homelessness that they had long strived for, but had often been unable to achieve. Importantly, however, and despite formal government statements and funding that they planned for temporary accommodation to be an opportunity to facilitate access to long-term housing, stakeholders exclusively described their improved capacity during COVID-19 in terms of getting people off the streets into temporary accommodation, rather than getting people into long-term housing.

The resources available through COVID-19 were of clear significance. In addition to the extra capacity that the funding injection represents, stakeholder interviews clearly indicated that COVID-19 changed how governments, NGOs, commercial entities, and the community perceived the problem and behaved; these changes shaped what was achieved for and with people who are homeless. Stakeholders from government departments described how COVID-19 helped to clear the way to more effective inter-departmental working, and also more collaboratively with the NGO sector. Juxtaposing how government and the homelessness sector worked during COVID-19 compared to pre-COVID-19, a government representative remarked:

“Without this new level of cooperation and alignment, it wouldn’t matter how much money you threw at it, it still wouldn’t be the significant difference that it has been. So our support agencies coordinating in a way that is breathtaking. Identifying quickly where there are issues, responding. And I’m not saying there used to be turf wars, but everybody overcoming their own systems and boundaries and really rising to the occasion to deal with the solutions.”

As we made clear above, the scale of government funding made available at short notice constituted a radical change. However, our interviews with both government and NGO stakeholders showed that a shared commitment to work together to get people off the street also made a material difference, in addition to the new funding. As one government employee responsible for her/his state’s homelessness policy asserted, “I think COVID was a bit of a turning point.” Reflecting on the collaborative work to get hundreds of people off the streets and into accommodation, the stakeholder said, “I was actually quite proud to be part of the state.”

We also learnt from the interviews that accommodation providers had changed how they perceived and/or acted toward people experiencing homelessness. A manager from a large NGO organisation in Victoria that assisted hundreds of people to access hotels said that:

“The bizarre thing that happened at the same time was hotels that would never have spoken to us before were now banging on our doors because they had no guests, they had no business meetings, or anything. So they were all, ‘We’ve got rooms. Please send us your rough sleepers.’ And then we did.” (NGO stakeholder)

With the state funding available for hotels left otherwise empty due to the wider COVID-19 restrictions, it is easy to understand why some hotel providers keenly sought out this opportunity. Although the conditions in hotels varied across Australia (in NSW many hotels were four star) and we do not have clear evidence on what was provided across the country, there are examples of NGOs providing some in hotel support. In SA, a stakeholder stated:

“But when we popped people into the motels, we were really clear as well that we needed to make sure that supports were happening.”

The formal statements from other mainland states similarly articulate the intention to provide support in hotels. On the other hand, a stakeholder suggested that the rapid pace of providing temporary accommodation meant that it was likely that support was not always consistently provided alongside the temporary accommodation, and this meant that sustainment of accommodation would likely have been diminished as a result. Further, and as demonstrated below, government data provided to the research team shows that some people have moved from hotels to secure and stable housing. A final learning about the conditions that enabled governments to fund and NGOs to enable people to access accommodation is worth mentioning. A government representative, referring to Melbourne, suggested that the public sentiment had changed, and people in the wider public were concerned about the needs of fellow citizens who were homeless. The willingness of governments to invest such significant funding to accommodate people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19, together with the willingness of hotels and the community to ensure that such large numbers of people can be accommodated in neighbourhoods where large numbers of overt homelessness are often not evident, relies upon a degree of public support. A government representative explained:

“We’ve tapped the vein and we need to absolutely max out on that vein that’s been tapped through COVID. We do. It is there, it is a priority. I mean, if I went out to our residents groups, even our precinct associations pre-COVID and said, “What are your top three priorities for our spending?” [Homelessness] may not have been there. I can tell you now that [homelessness is] absolutely number one.”

In this section we have illustrated how COVID-19 has triggered massively increased funding, changed policy, practice, and community conditions that have meant people who are homeless, very often people sleeping rough, have been supported to access accommodation. In Vic, NSW, Qld, and SA, hotels have been the primary venue where accommodation has been sought. We now, drawing on the inconsistent data available at the mainland state level, report on the number of people experiencing homelessness accommodated during COVID-19.

COVID-19 and homelessness

4.3 How many people have been supported into accommodation made available through COVID-19?

While clearly a remarkable and in many ways inspiring initiative, the exact scale of Australia's 2020 emergency homelessness rehousing program may never be known with certainty. Although short term hotel/motel homelessness placements are a routine element of official practice in some jurisdictions, there are no published official statistics on such activity. Moreover, our own efforts to obtain consistent Quarter 4 2019–20 temporary rehousing statistics met with only partial success. Regrettably, only two of the five state governments approached were willing to provide such basic data.

Meanwhile, although statistics on state/territory pandemic rehousing operations have been reported extensively in the media, there are many apparent inconsistencies. Part of this is probably the inexact way that such numbers have often been reported. In part, this may result from the fact that — as discussed above (see Section 4.2) — the emergency program was not confined to former rough sleepers, alone. At least in some jurisdictions it also encompassed substantial numbers of other people experiencing homelessness, including those residents in homeless shelters or other congregate accommodation where shared facilities were considered an unacceptable health risk.

4.3.1 Temporary placement in hotels (and other facilities)

In any event, it has been reported that “More than 7,000 homeless people off the streets and into rooms in hotels, motels and empty student accommodation” (Knight 2020; New Daily 2020). At the same time, another report has it that “approximately 16,000 individuals and family units experiencing homelessness have received temporary accommodation in hotels and motels with health and social supports across Australia” (Mirage 2020).

Table 4.1: Former rough sleepers subject to emergency rehousing, Mar–Jun 2020

	Our data	Media	AAEH 23 June	Best estimate	High estimate	Low estimate
NSW	1,918	741		1,918	1,918	741
Vic			970	970	970	970
SA	536	500		536	536	500
Qld			380	380	380	380
WA		30	75	30	75	30
Australia		7,000		3,834	3,879	2,621

Sources/notes: 1. 'Our data': statistics provided by the two named state governments. NSW State Government data relate to the period 1 April–19 June 2020. 2. Media: InDaily, ABC News, WAtoday 3. AAEH 23 June: Statistics recounted in Australian Alliance to End Homelessness webinar by Prof Paul Flatau. 4. It is understood that little or no emergency rehousing was enacted in ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania.

Table 4.2: Former rough sleepers and other homeless people subject to emergency rehousing, Mar–Jun 2020

	Our data	Media	AAEH 23 June	Best estimate	High estimate	Low estimate
NSW	11,652		2,000	11,652	11,652	2,000
Vic ¹⁷		4,000	4,500	4,000	4,500	4,000
SA	536	500		536	536	500
Qld			2,445	2,445	2,445	2,445
WA		30	75	30	30	30
Australia				18,663	19,163	8,975

Sources/notes: As for Table 4.1

On the basis of Table 4.1 and Table 4.2, the number of rough sleepers provided with emergency rehousing March-June 2020 was in the range 2,621 and 3,879, while the total number of rough sleepers and other homeless people involved was in the range 8,975 to 19,163. However, taking account of new figures on total numbers accommodated in Victoria published by the Victorian Government as this report went to press – see footnote – it is likely that between March and September 2020 more than 33,000 formerly homeless people were provided with temporary housing across Australia¹⁸.

The very large ‘other homeless’ figure provided by the NSW Government and cited in Table 4.2 may include an element of ‘business as usual’ temporary accommodation activity. This is a reminder that to fully understand the scale of the emergency program it would be necessary to quantify the ‘additionality’ it involved.

Another factor which needs to be borne in mind in interpreting the ‘rough sleeper’ figures is that these are likely to have included at least some individuals (e.g. couch surfers) who presented as rough sleepers when hotel accommodation was made available.

¹⁷ Just as this report went to press (September 2020), the Victorian Government published new figures on its COVID-19 homelessness temporary accommodation response. Although not wholly compatible with statistics in this table (e.g. in relation to the time period concerned), these figures appear highly significant. It is reported that, over the period March-September 2020, an estimated 18,500 individual requests for emergency housing were met by Victorian homelessness agencies.

By September 2020, 1,201 households were logged as having departed temporary accommodation, with 635 of these having ‘exited into circumstances defined as ‘no dwelling or an inadequate dwelling’, while 566 had moved into private rental housing. The number accommodated in social housing was undisclosed - https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/SCLSI/Inquiry_into_Homelessness_in_Victoria/presentatioins/DHHS_Presentation_Homelessness_Hearing_20200909.pdf

¹⁸ Note that this takes account of our March-June 2020 ‘best estimate’ for Victoria – 4,000. That is, the overarching national estimate cited here allows for the new figure for Victoria for the period to September 2020, net of our previous Victoria estimate for the period to June (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2).

COVID-19 and homelessness

Cohort profile

As an agency heavily involved in the Victorian emergency housing program, Launch Housing has collated detailed data on the demographic and personal characteristics of those temporarily housed in Melbourne. This is clearly important in terms of its implications for the housing and support needs of those concerned. The 1,857 homeless people booked into hotels by Launch staff in the period March–June 2020 broke down* as follows:

71% Male	29% Female	
12% Aboriginal	88% Non-Aboriginal people	
72% High housing need	48% High vulnerability	
47% High support need	34% High housing, support, vulnerabilities	
Support need**		
30% Long-term	54% Brief	16% None

*on the basis of individuals assessed/responding

**in addition to affordable housing (as calibrated via VI-SPDAT assessment).

While there can be no certainty that the above profile is entirely representative of temporarily housed cohorts in other states (especially in relation to Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal people), it seems likely that it will provide a reasonable indication of their characteristics.

4.3.2 Rehousing out of hotels

Hard data on rehousing out of temporary accommodation (TA) proved even more difficult to obtain, validate and interpret. Table 4.3 presents statistics kindly provided to the research team by governments of two named states.

Table 4.3: Rough sleeper temporary accommodation placements and subsequent resident moves

	Flows			Stock	
	Total placed in TA Mar-Jun	Rehoused	Other TA departures	Remaining in TA 30 June	
				No	%
NSW	1,918	166	1,392	360	19
SA	536	121	263	152	28
Vic	780		549	231	30

Sources: NSW Government, SA Government, Launch Housing

Notes: 1. 'Remaining in TA 30 June' refers to the 'point in time' occupancy of hotels and other accommodation on that date (or 14 June in the case of NSW). This is expressed as a percentage of all rough sleepers accommodated in temporary accommodation over the preceding three months. 2. Vic data relate to Launch Housing only.

At least on the basis of the very partial statistics provided in Table 4.3, it would appear that, by the end of June 2020, only a relatively small proportion of former rough sleepers placed in hotels remained accommodated as such. At the same time, however, only a small proportion of those who had departed temporary housing had been assisted into permanent tenancies. In SA, for example, the 121 people in this category accounted for some 23% of all those temporarily accommodated. In both SA and NSW, far larger numbers had departed hotels in other circumstances. Some will have moved to designated homeless accommodation, to stay with friends, or to self-acquired private tenancies. Equally, for some, the destination may have been resumed street homelessness. Post-March 2020 trends in inner city rough sleeping numbers are discussed in Section 5.5.2 (Chapter 5).

At the same time, a proportion of former rough sleepers rehoused with state government assistance after temporary hotel stays have been placed in permanent social housing. As shown in Table 4.4, data provided by the NSW Government shows that nearly three quarters (73%) of those originating from the City of Sydney who were given emergency hotel accommodation during the pandemic, were subsequently granted public or community housing tenancies. At least in this particular context, and during the specified time periods, only a relatively small proportion of those assisted into long term housing were placed in private rental.

Table 4.4: Former rough sleepers in City of Sydney rehoused by NSW Government, 2017–2020

	Housed pre-COVID 1 March 2017– 31 March 2020	Housed during COVID 1 April 2020– 17 July 2020	Total housed 1 March 2017– 17 July 2020
Total number of people housed	606	111	717
Housing location			
City of Sydney LGA	298	45	343
Outside City of Sydney LGA	308	66	374
Housing type			
Public/Social Housing	594	75	669
Private Rental	0	24	24
Community Housing	10	6	16
Transitional Housing	0	5	5
Other	2	1	3

Source: unpublished statistics provided to the researchers by the NSW Government

It is possible that most or even all former rough sleepers remaining in hotels at 30 June 2020 (e.g. the 512 enumerated as such in NSW and SA (see Table 4.3)) will have been subsequently assisted into permanent tenancies. However, even under this ‘best case scenario’ only 526 (27%) of the 1,918 given temporary accommodation in NSW in the March–June period will have been assisted in this way. While the comparable figure for SA is 51%, this analysis may be somewhat sobering in its implications.

It seems probable that at least some of the ‘other departures’ from hotels will have been ‘positive’ in the sense of involving some form of move-on accommodation (e.g. supported transitional housing). At the same time, resumed homelessness will have been the outcome for many. Minimising this outcome in any future such program would probably necessitate (a) more rapid onward rehousing, and (b) more intensive support for rough sleeper hotel residents. The first of these is made very difficult to achieve within the context of minimal social housing availability. The second is more a matter of capacity to marshal such support, along with the political willingness to pay for it.

At the time of writing it is the Victorian Government that has made the largest-scale commitment to expand social housing capacity to facilitate post-hotel rehousing. As announced on 28 July, this is part of a \$150 million¹⁹ program that includes expansion of headleased private rental stock by 1,100 properties so that ‘2,000 [hotel-housed] Victorians are supported to access stable, long term housing’ (Victorian Government media release 28 July 2020). The duration of the funding (i.e. the length of leases to be procured) was unspecified in the announcement²⁰.

¹⁹ Also including provision for associated tenant support, as well as second wave temporary accommodation charges.

²⁰ As a benchmark, under the NSW Government’s ‘Together Home’ headleasing program to facilitate rough sleeper rehousing, private rental dwellings are being acquired for two years only.

COVID-19 and homelessness

Before concluding our discussion on rehousing out of hotels it is important to note that, while included within emergency housing programs along with other rough sleepers, those lacking Australian citizenship are generally excluded from long term housing assistance: they qualify for neither social security payments, nor social housing. Partly for this reason, it would seem highly likely that New Zealanders and other foreign nationals will form a disproportionate number of Australia's street homeless population over coming months and years.

4.4 What are the experiences of people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19?

In this section, we report on qualitative interviews with homelessness service users in NSW during COVID-19²¹ to understand their experiences of the pandemic, and how, if at all, the changed resources and practice conditions (described above) impacted their experiences and day-to-day situation. As noted in Section 1.4, participating interviewees were:

- People offered temporary accommodation as emergency rehousing for rough sleepers in the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- People who became (street) homeless in the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic

Interviewee observations show that despite practice coordination challenges and conflict and violence in some hotels, the COVID-19 response has provided both short term relief and hope of a pathway into secure housing for some people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. Indeed, reflecting the perspectives of stakeholders above, we show how people experiencing homelessness described the health crisis that COVID-19 has represented a mechanism for them to accept offers of accommodation after sleeping rough for several years.

For Ken, the offer of accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic came after a long period of homelessness, both couch surfing and rough sleeping in various locations throughout Sydney:

“For the last twelve years I’ve just been, basically, sleeping everywhere, wherever I can, like, with friends and family they got sick of me sleeping there so I go to another friend, you know, I’m couch surfing here and there, and then I ran out of friends and people didn’t, wouldn’t want me at their houses anymore, so, I just ended up being on the streets for the last few years.” (Ken)

After initial reluctance, Ken accepted an offer from the NSW Department of Justice and Community Services’ (DCJ) homelessness outreach team to be placed in a hotel during the pandemic. His first attempt in accessing temporary accommodation was frustrated by a lack of coordination between DCJ and the hotel provider:

“First night I went, the first place they offered me was in a temporary housing in [inner Western Sydney suburb], but I didn’t even stay the night there I had to wait for two hours to get a key so I just came back to my van.” (Ken)

With the support of his case worker, Ken accepted a second offer to be placed in a hotel.

While incredibly grateful for being provided a venue away from the cold of winter, Ken identified significant violence and crime taking place within the hotel. Ken described the hotel as a place that:

“Is full of drugs, people fighting; a lot of people fighting all the time, like, you know, couples always fighting all the time, two or three couples coming in and out all the time. So, most of the time I stayed in my room or I’d sit in the park.” (Ken)

In addition to a tense living situation in the hotel, Ken felt frustrated by the lack of information provided to him during his stay about how long he was going to be staying and whether he would be provided more permanent housing. However, his stay in a hotel was made more bearable by the relationship he struck up with the manager of the hotel and by the ongoing support of his case worker, Rita, with whom he worked with prior to his stay in the hotel:

“Rita just kept on calling me once a week to let me know that they’ve extended my stay, they extended my stay, you know, like, once a week Rita would call me or Karen would call me once a week to find out how I was, how I was going or if I needed to ask a question, I’ll ask Rita if she can find out for me... Oh man I thank God, I’m telling you, I thank God she’s my angel. Without her I would be stuck, I would be literally still on the streets.” (Ken)

²¹ Interviewee observations therefore directly reflect the NSW context. Nevertheless, the extent of cross-jurisdictional similarity in state government actions and housing market conditions during this period means they can also be considered as indicative of service user experience of homelessness under the pandemic in other states.

After spending time in temporary accommodation during COVID-19, Ken was allocated a social housing property. Again, lack of coordination frustrated his initial attempt to be placed in social housing, with the situation rescued by his case worker:

“And then when we first went there the house was boarded up and Rita goes, I’ll go to tell housing it’s still boarded up and then the next day and the day after they said, oh mate you can go and have a look and they took the boards out.” (Ken)

Despite these complications, Ken is excited about his future now he is housed:

“I’ve got three daughters; I want to set up my house because I haven’t seen them for a couple of years now. So, I want to get my three girls to come over and visit me and then eventually I want to, see because I suffer from major depression and I want to eventually get a job in the next few months and just try and be normal.” (Ken)

Petra has a long-term experience of homelessness, having taken up a swag and slept rough since losing her housing in 1989. She stated that she was content sleeping rough but accepted an offer of temporary accommodation during COVID-19 after having a medical incident at Sydney’s Central Station.

For Petra, the process of staying in hotel accommodation was a welcome relief from life on the streets. Rough sleeping, she identified, meant:

“Dealing with people coming and kicking you when they are having too many substances or stealing. The theft is an issue, constantly.” (Petra)

Whereas Petra described being in a hotel as an opportunity for:

“The feeling of security, and the reality of security. You suddenly sort of have a feeling of better health, as well.... For someone that basically used to be lonely, it is important not to feel lonely.” (Petra)

Similar to Ken’s experiences, Petra identified some issues with drugs at the hotel she was staying. Nevertheless, she said that her 21 years sleeping rough has meant that:

“You learn keeping distance carefully, and not step on each other’s toes, or upset the other one, because we are already highly strung on just surviving, you see.” (Petra)

As with Ken and Petra, Kevin has slept rough for a number of years, and he too described accepting an offer of hotel accommodation out of concern of the risk of COVID-19.

Kevin, at the time of the interview, was still in temporary accommodation. He expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be off the streets and into a living situation that he identified as being safe and secure. Referring to his hotel, Kevin said:

“It was [what’s] available, and it was a lot better than the street. So I took what I was offered and felt lucky to be doing it I suppose...I think it’s given me a lift and I think it’s been positive.” (Kevin)

While grateful for the safety of his hotel, a significant stress for him was needing to re-apply weekly. Kevin explained:

“The understanding was it was temporary. So generally, I had to reapply every week and that’s still the situation.... That is a little bit stressful. It is. It’s a little bit up in the air and it’s not a given that I’m going to be allowed to stay there but in saying that they have been I think fair and quite understanding I suppose.” (Kevin)

Alongside needing to re-apply for temporary accommodation weekly, Kevin also remarked upon the stress of being moved from one hotel to another. In his words:

“[I] was in one place for a night and then I went to another place for maybe a couple of nights. So it was a little bit erratic. I was just doing what I was told. I was told to move so I moved. The place I’m in now is a more low-budget place. It’s certainly not as flash as the first couple.” (Kevin)

Moreover, Kevin felt that he was provided little notice when he was asked to move from hotel to hotel. He referred to the moving between hotels as ‘sudden’, but he conceded, “what could I do, I just had to move.”

Despite the sudden movements and the feeling of insecurity that the temporary accommodation meant to Kevin, he said that he has been advised by his case worker that he will stay in his current hotel until a permanent social housing property becomes available. With a series of health issues, including addiction, he is hoping for social housing in areas close to his current support systems.

From the outset of COVID-19, Jack was provided accommodation in a men’s refuge on the NSW Central Coast; Jack was residing in this accommodation in June 2020, at the time of the interview. Jack was newly homeless, losing his shared accommodation after experiencing a medical episode. Jack was referred into the refuge by a social worker at the hospital in which he was receiving treatment.

COVID-19 and homelessness

While adjusting to living in shared refuge accommodation, Jack had welcomed the ongoing support provided to him.

“They give me the supports most needed, social support and do this, don’t do that, sort of thing, just guidance more than support.” (Jack)

While stays in refuges normally expire after 3 months, his health needs and the pandemic meant that Jack could stay in the refuge until he secured permanent housing. He had recently applied for social housing and been accepted as a priority application. Jack was thankful for his case worker for helping him through the application process:

“Everything’s fallen into place for me, it really hasn’t been a struggle, so, you just need someone there that’s willing to go that extra step at the beginning.” (Jack)

Our final participant is Ashley. Ashley’s experience demonstrates the unaffordability of the housing market and the precariousness experienced by people in short-term accommodation (who have insufficient income to pay market rents). Further, Ashley’s experiences illustrate how the challenges to access affordable housing — both during and pre-COVID-19 — are apparent for single parents with a newborn dependent child.

Ashley is currently staying in a women’s shelter with her young baby. She described her past years of homelessness thus:

“I’ve been pretty much homeless since 2014. So about six years; I had one place of my own that was share accommodation for about six months in 2016 but beyond that I’ve been couch surfing basically the whole time. So in 2016 I began escorting and I lived in hotels, Airbnbs and the like until I fell pregnant in July last year... So in July last year I fell pregnant. I was living in Sydney until then. I came back home to Newcastle and I’ve been just couch surfing since then. I gave birth in March and I’ve been in a refuge since March.” (Ashley)

Ashley described the challenges she has experienced accessing services and resources because of her lack of identification documents:

“I had no ID and also because I had no rental history since 2013, I was struggling and because of issues with homelessness when I was younger I didn’t have hardly any records and I was struggling to prove any identity... So in order to get the documentation to prove who you are you need documentation.” (Ashley)

Without documentation, Ashley reflected upon the difficulties she experienced trying to register for social housing. After initially reluctant to access a women’s shelter, Ashley has welcomed the support she has received:

“I actually don’t mind it. I never knew what to expect with refuges and I sort of always avoided them thinking that they were going to be – I didn’t feel that they would be appropriate but now [child protection author] sort of said I couldn’t go back to couch surfing... They gave me no real option and because they sort of forced me into it, I’m grateful for that because I’ve given it a go now and I feel quite content and I feel safe here. I feel supported and I feel like bubs has got somewhere secure as well. So I’m actually quite pleasantly surprised by the experience.” (Ashley)

Ashley has applied for social housing, however, she has been advised by the state government that she must first demonstrate that she is unable to address her need for housing in the private rental market. She is finding the search for housing in the market a taxing experience while also attempting to support a young child. She is also finding properties are well outside of her affordability:

“You cannot find a property. I haven’t seen anything less than \$250 for a one bedroom flat, and you’re looking at \$300 or more for a standalone home usually. So if I was to look at properties I’ve really been looking at properties that are double my price range. So to find affordability, find properties within my affordability range, is very difficult to be honest with you. I’ve got no choice in the matter.” (Ashley)

Ashley described not only the challenges of locating properties that are affordable, and the stressor of searching with a newborn, but also the concern that she may be asked to leave her refuge accommodation. Ashley’s refuge accommodation has been provided for 28 days, but it can be extended:

“I’m almost at that 28 day mark now. I think this week is my last week but if I can prove to them that I’m trying then I will be able to at least apply to I guess their management body or whoever it is to continue on my stay, but at this point, for worst case scenario, I could be asked to leave at the end of this week. I don’t think that will be the case. I highly doubt it but because they’re very short term refuges I could be asked to leave at the end of the week and I would be back to the same scenario with being on a couch or worse with bub”. (Ashley)

Ashley went on to explain that the worst-case scenario she was looking at was “being literally on the street with my newborn.” Ashley did note optimistically, however, that “women here at the refuge occasionally get transitional housing and medium-term accommodation” so she still holds hope of avoiding unsheltered homelessness. During the interview, Ashley said that one key to addressing housing and homelessness is permanently increasing income support payments:

“I guess to have payments that are above the poverty line would be the very least. I would expect that if they were looking at things that could make changes to the lives of people in this situation I would say have payments above the poverty line would be the first step that I would look at doing.” (Ashley)

Drawing on the firsthand experiences of people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19, in this section we have shown how some people have been assisted into hotel accommodation. Indeed, after years of sleeping rough, people spoke positively about the relative safety that hotels meant to them, and some were optimistic that they were being supported to access social housing as a realistic exit from hotels; one person was allocated a social housing property after initially staying in hotels. Some people, however, such as Jack and Ashley, resided in traditional homelessness refuges during COVID-19. Although the experiences of Jack and Ashley differ, both illustrate that the unaffordable private rental market and extended waits for social housing that have long constituted barriers to exiting homeless accommodation are a reality of people during COVID-19 in a way they have been for many years.

4.5 How can we understand the response to people experiencing homelessness through COVID-19?

When examined in light of the findings from the previous chapter, the story presented in this chapter represents something of a paradox: Why did governments across Australia in the days, weeks, and months following the COVID-19 pandemic respond to many people experiencing homelessness by spending millions of dollars to get them rapidly into quality, self-contained accommodation, when in the years prior a primary government response had consisted of short term crisis accommodation, often with shared living arrangements? As the Minister responsible for homelessness in SA asserted in 2020, “we have a homelessness system that is outdated, expensive and does not achieve real outcomes for South Australians

who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless” (Government of South Australia 2020a).

What was it about the COVID-19 pandemic that acted as a catalyst for governments to swiftly get people who are homeless into accommodation? Why did governments so rapidly, and with the exception of WA, consistently provide decent resources to many (but not all) people experiencing homelessness that they had otherwise been unwilling to provide? Indeed, as clearly evidenced in Qld, governments spent considerable money to access quality student accommodation to rehouse people from government funded homeless accommodation. In response to COVID, governments immediately identified the problems with the accommodation they funded, and they went to the market to access accommodation for people who were homeless on the recognition that what they ordinarily provide is sub-optimal.

Although many people experiencing homelessness still remain in shared homeless accommodation (see Jack and Ashley above), data from multiple sources presented in this chapter illustrate that people who have been enabled to access hotel and other temporary accommodation identify it is an improvement, particularly the safety it achieves compared to rough sleeping. This section offers some analysis to explain the rationale behind Australia’s dominant response to homelessness during COVID-19 and why it differs so starkly from business as usual.

The formal government documents and publicly available statements from politicians, together with our stakeholder qualitative interviews, illustrate that Australia’s response to people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 was informed by three rationales, these are:

- To protect a vulnerable/sick population;
- To provide the amenity for people who are homeless to practice social distancing, and significantly,
- To mitigate the risks that the homeless population represent to the broader public, including to healthcare systems.

The NSW Government explains that the state’s massive investment in responding differently to people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 was influenced, in part, by acknowledgement of the ‘stressed immune systems’ (New South Wales Government 2020b) that people experiencing homelessness disproportionately experience. In SA, the media reported the Families and Communities Minister Gareth Ward stating that “throughout the COVID-19 response, we’ve worked hard

COVID-19 and homelessness

to keep rough sleepers safe” (Koziol 2020). The pilot hotel initiative in Western Australia, similarly, positioned “health risk [as] the fundamental factor in determining allocation” (Hansard 2020b).

In explaining the response during COVID-19, governments also emphasised that people experiencing homelessness are vulnerable and may be at further risk of “contracting COVID19 due to crowded accommodation and potential lack of access to hygiene facilities such as showers and laundries” (New South Wales Government 2020b). A stakeholder from an NGO in Vic stated that since the onset of COVID-19, their organisation stopped referring people to boarding houses or any accommodation with shared facilities. Also in Vic, as part of the COVID-19 Isolation and Recovery Facility, the state government established pop-up quarantine facilities in Melbourne for people experiencing homelessness to enable them to quarantine or self-isolate (Victorian Government media release 9 April 2020).

In addition to the poor health of people experiencing homelessness, and the manner in which poor health can be exacerbated by the lack of amenity that homelessness represents (Parsell et al. 2018), governments have justified the massive spending on people experiencing homelessness on the basis that the interventions benefited the wider, non-homeless population. People who are homeless have benefited from being provided decent accommodation, but this accommodation has been provided for reasons that extend beyond benefiting them. The government response to people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 was a public health intervention, which was motivated to benefit the public, in addition to benefit those directly assisted.

In a statement that the Victorian Government identifies as a quote “attributable to Minister for Housing Richard Wynne”, the COVID-19 response to people experiencing homelessness is presented as a benefit to the wider community:

“This funding will help to get a roof over the head of more Victorians, helping to reduce transmission amongst the community.” (Victorian Government media release 18 March 2020)

In SA, a statement from the Minister for Human Services likewise explains that the funding to enable people experiencing homelessness to access hotels is “part of the Marshall Liberal Government’s COVID-19 response to prevent the spread of the coronavirus” (Government of South Australia 2020c), which is the exact justification provided by WA Community Services Minister Simone McGurk in a Facebook post: “About 20 people experiencing homelessness have been moved in to the hotel, *as part of our efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19*” (McGurk 2020, emphasis ours).

An official statement from the WA Government further identifies the importance of accommodating people experiencing homelessness in hotels to benefit society. The government explains that the hotel pilot initiative will “take the pressure off the health system in Western Australia and potentially help to flatten the curve as the state fights to stop the spread of COVID-19” (Government of Western Australia 2020).

The Qld Government is similarly explicit in publically explaining why it spent money to lease a student accommodation building, in a prestigious Brisbane suburb, to enable people experiencing homelessness to leave crisis accommodation. On its website, the Queensland Government asks “why we’re doing this”, and responds with the justification that “this is a critical health response to a *community health emergency*” (Queensland Government 2020c, emphasis ours). Indeed, it goes on to further explain that housing people experiencing homelessness is entirely for the benefit of the non-homeless:

“COVID-19 presents an enormous challenge for Queenslanders, and it’s important that we are proactive in responding to any potential broader community health impacts” (Queensland Government 2020c, emphasis ours).

Referring to the broader suite of policy responses to, and additional resources for, people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19, the Qld Government makes clear that they will be available, only “until the pandemic is over” (Queensland Government 2020a). This unequivocal statement helps us understand that the benefits to people experiencing homelessness will be retracted when the public health risks are no longer evident. In WA, Minister Simone McGurk explained to Parliament, that the state government would not extend the pilot initiative to support people experiencing homelessness into hotels, “due to the low numbers of COVID-19 infections in Western Australia” (Hansard 2020b).

Policy decisions are made to provide or withhold resources to people experiencing homelessness to access decent accommodation, including the duration for which the accommodation will be provided, based on public health concerns, with a particular emphasis on the potential risks that homeless people pose to “community health” (Queensland Government 2020c). Disturbingly, these justifications for accommodating people experiencing homelessness are not only for the community’s benefit, but people experiencing homelessness are positioned as distinct from the community.

As demonstrated in this chapter, Australia's initial response to homelessness during COVID-19 entailed many people otherwise excluded from decent accommodation being provided with self-contained, affordable, and often high-quality accommodation. The significant government investment has been matched by a remarkable step-up in collaboration and service provision among stakeholders across government and the NGO sector. That said, the extent and effectiveness of joint working across sectors and government departments (in particular, involving Housing and Health officials) has varied significantly from state to state, and over time.

Although the availability of reliable numbers across Australia are limited, we have confidence that the initial COVID-19 response was indeed appropriate and significantly benefited many people experiencing homelessness at that time. Our qualitative interviews with people experiencing homelessness speak to some of the benefits. Although not long-term housing, the accommodation provided during COVID-19 enabled many former rough sleepers and others to live safely, with dignity, at least for a short period of time. Consistent with formal government statements, some people remaining in hotels in July 2020 held out hope of being on a clear pathway to permanent housing.

However, it is clear that Australia's response to people experiencing homelessness — even a response that has benefited people experiencing homelessness — has been driven by a concern that they would transmit and create an infection outbreak to the non-homeless population. The accommodation response, furthermore, was also informed by a desire to take pressure off the public health system. When reporting on the benefits to people experiencing homelessness that many important COVID-19 measures represent for them, we must acknowledge that these policy and practice measures were motivated to benefit society, not *the homeless*.

4.6 What are the lessons of COVID-19, moving forward?

The experiences of people who are homeless during COVID-19, and the joint government and sector responses, provide lessons for what we need to do moving forward.

- **Homelessness policy and practice should be informed by evidence.** There is a significant body of robust evidence about how to end homelessness, particularly rough sleeping. Indeed, governments across Australia have developed pilot initiatives that are based on evidence, and they have often funded research to generate evidence from the pilot initiatives. In the same way that health and medical policy and practice is driven by evidence, Australian

homelessness policy and practice should likewise be. Informed by the evidence, Australian government should scale up the successful pilot initiatives and practices that exist across Australia. Furthermore, evidence is never static. The canons of science mean that evidence should always be challenged through rigorous research. Australia should develop homelessness policy based on the best evidence and invest in research — in the same way that medicine does — to constantly test and push forward evidence and our responses to homelessness.

- COVID-19 has shown what the practice and research evidence has long demonstrated: crisis accommodation or homeless accommodation with shared amenity is inadequate for anything beyond a crisis (McMordie 2020). As was shown many years ago with analysis of the former Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, people stay in crisis accommodation longer than their crisis because of a lack of (exit points) housing that is affordable (Fopp 1996). Further, because crisis accommodation is full of people who are not in a crisis, but rather, in need of long-term affordable housing, those people who are homeless and in a crisis experience barriers accessing crisis accommodation (Fopp 1996). COVID-19 has shown that **Australia needs to invest in a range of social and affordable housing options**, including models of permanent supportive housing.
- COVID-19 has shown that governments can overcome departmental silos and work together (in addition to working across levels of government), and that government departments and diverse sections of the sector can work together for the purposes of rapidly accommodating people experiencing homelessness. Together with the fundamental point about increasing the supply of affordable and social housing, cross government and inter-sector collaboration should be actively pursued for the purposes of ending homelessness. Collaboration should involve not only the policy and practice levers, but also **collaboration as a shared vision of ending homelessness**.
- Homelessness has always caused ill-health and accelerated mortality. During COVID-19 the health consequences — to people who are homeless and especially the non-homeless population — were instrumental in how governments saw and funded interventions and made resources available. **When COVID-19 is passed, the deleterious health consequences of homelessness will remain.** We must understand and appreciate the damage to health and human life that homelessness amounts to, not just during times of pandemic when the wider population are confronted by their own death.

4.7 Chapter conclusion

Although not uniform across all states, Australia's response to people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 is positive. First, thousands of people were assisted, often immediately, to access quality and self-contained accommodation. The data is not available to confidently say exactly how many people experiencing homelessness were accommodated during the first six months of COVID-19, but the unprecedented government funding certainly enabled many thousands of people access to decent accommodation that they would not have accessed in the absence of COVID-19. Paradoxically, the health, social, and economic disaster that COVID-19 represents for Australia has also meant that people experiencing homelessness have been supported to access the self-contained accommodation that they have otherwise been excluded from.

The speed with which governments and NGOs acted to respond to homelessness during COVID-19 inevitably resulted in examples of poor coordination and stress experienced by people who are homeless as they moved from one form of temporary accommodation to the other. This notwithstanding, governments responded to people who are homeless during COVID-19 by quickly and successfully working across government siloed departments and productively with the NGO sector. This successful coordination and collaboration provides an important lesson for moving forward post-pandemic.

The research literature has long shown that homelessness causes ill-health. During COVID-19, governments responded immediately on the basis of the poor health of people experiencing homelessness, along with the motivation to accommodate homeless people so they did not spread the virus to the non-homeless population.

The positive outcomes achieved for people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 force us to consider what will happen to those people when the pandemic is over (and at the time of writing we cannot say when that will be) and how we can take the positives achieved during COVID-19 and institutionalise them into wider systems that respond to people who are homeless in routine circumstances. In terms of the former, we reported data to show that some people have indeed left temporary accommodation and moved into long term housing. It is too soon to say what, if at all, COVID-19 will mean for improving our responses to homelessness going forward. We argue for governments to develop policy based on rigorous evidence, and moreover, to respond to people who are homeless on the acknowledgment that homelessness is deleterious to health.

05

The changing scale, nature and distribution of homelessness

5.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter reviews the latest data on recorded levels of homelessness across Australia, together with quantitative evidence on the profile of the 'homeless population' and about factors precipitating loss of accommodation. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) dataset is the chapter's main statistical source. This is a record of service user/service provider interactions where someone seeks and receives some form of 'homelessness service'. Statistics drawn from resulting records can be regarded as a measure of 'homelessness expressed demand'²². These data contrast with the other main source of homelessness statistics in Australia — the ABS Census — in that they gauge 'flows' of homelessness service requests rather than 'stocks' of people in a 'state of homelessness' on a given night once every five years (ABS defined)²³.

AIHW SHS statistics are complemented in this chapter by data drawn from local council-instigated rough sleeper counts. The analysis is primarily focused on the four-year period between 2014–15 and 2018–19. This slightly longer time frame than that for the report as a whole is to provide a stronger sense of trend trajectories. However, in an effort to provide some insight on immediate COVID-19 pandemic homelessness impacts, we also refer to statistics relating to the first half of 2020, as sourced from the AskIzzy online advice service system.

The chapter is structured in seven main sections. Following on from this introduction, we first provide an overview of recent trends in overall homelessness. This reports on recent (pre-pandemic) trends in homelessness services provision at national and state/territory levels, as well as interpreting the fragmentary data on homelessness impacts of the 2020 public health crisis. Next, in Section 5.3, we describe the factors predicating the incidence of homelessness in Australia. Section 5.4 focuses on Aboriginal Community service clients, while Section 5.5 focuses on street homelessness or rough sleeping. Finally, ahead of our conclusion, we reflect on the spatial distribution of homelessness across Australia in 2018–19 and changes since 2014–15.

²² Although it is important to acknowledge that, in focusing our analysis on 'assisted cases', the resulting statistics may be, to some extent, subject to limitations associated with service provider capacity. The AIHW's SHS data collection framework in fact allows organisations to also record 'unassisted cases', but the associated statistics appear to suggest inconsistent recording of such instances (see Chapter 6). At the same time, of course, many people at risk of homelessness, or even experiencing homelessness, may seek no assistance from SHS providers. That is, they may not 'express demand' for such help — and therefore remain uncounted in the statistics on which this chapter draws.

²³ In-depth analyses of homelessness trends to 2016, as revealed via ABS Census analysis, were published in AHM 2018 (Pawson et al. 2018) and in Parkinson et al. (2019).

The changing scale, nature and distribution of homelessness

Family and domestic violence was a key factor cited by people who accessed services in 2018-19

50%

of all people assisted by specialist homelessness services were

adults aged 18-44



30%

of people seeking specialist homelessness services were

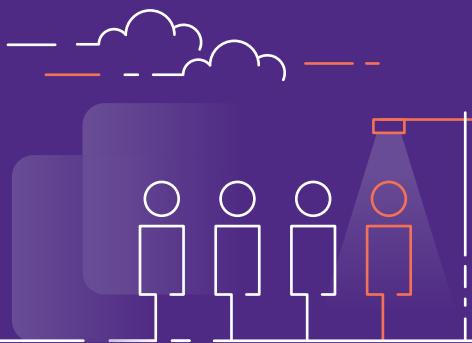
aged 0-17



This means that a significant number were parents with accompanying children

One of the fastest growing groups was adults aged

65+



33%

increase in the last four years

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

homelessness rates compared to the general population.



10x

higher

5.2 Recent and prospective trends in overall homelessness

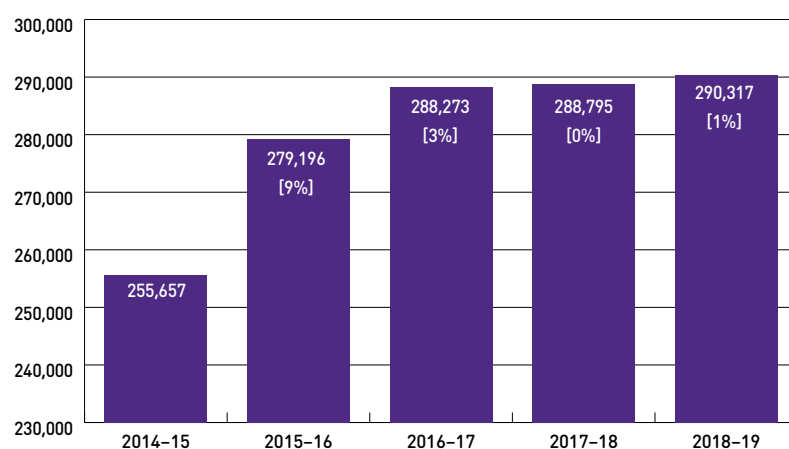
5.2.1 Change in overall scale of homelessness during four years to 2018-19

In the four-year period to 2018-19, the number of SHS clients increased by 14% to some 290,000 (see Figure 5.1(a)). As shown in Figure 5.1(b), however, this national aggregate change statistic conceals strong variation across jurisdictions. The particularly large increase registered in NSW could be partly a reflection of Sydney's especially pressured housing market which experienced boom conditions for much of this period. The Northern Territory's relatively large rate of increase could be partly the result of Aboriginal population movement to locations where homelessness services are available.

Also notable is that the number of people assisted by SHS agencies and also judged as 'homeless' (as opposed to being 'at risk' of homelessness) rose by 16% over the period covered in Figure 5.1(a). Nationally, this climbed from 90,266 people in 2014-15 to 104,496 people in 2018-19.

Figure 5.1: Overall homelessness Australia-wide, 2014-15 to 2018-19

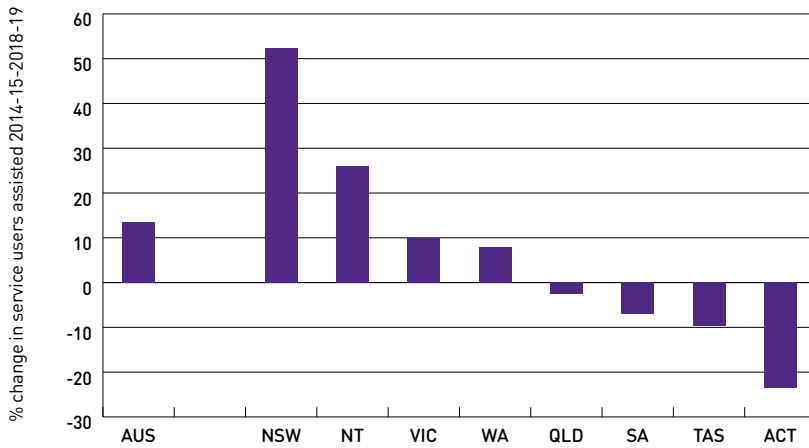
(a) Total number of SHS service users



Source: AIHW Historical Tables Specialist Homelessness Services (Table 2). Note: Percentage change since previous year included in [square brackets].

The changing scale, nature and distribution of homelessness

(b) % change 2014–15 to 2018–19 (breakdown by state/territory)



Source: AIHW Historical Tables Specialist Homelessness Services

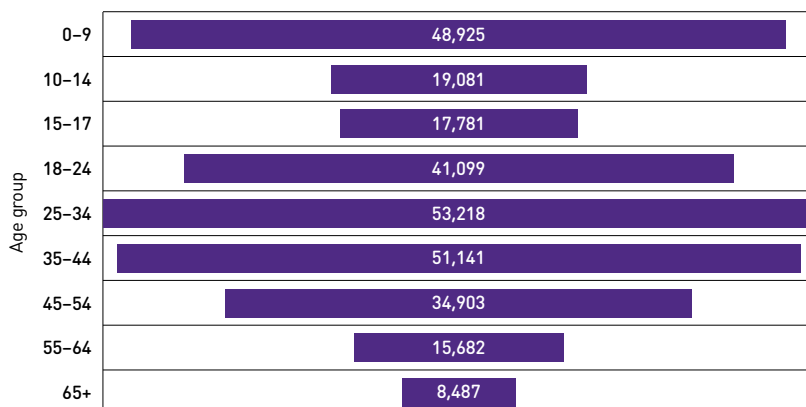
5.2.2 Changing profile of homelessness during four years to 2018–19

As shown in Figure 5.2(a), adults aged 18–44 accounted for about half of all homeless people assisted by SHS providers in 2018–19. It is also clear that a substantial number are families with children. Moreover, as shown in Figure 5.2(b), recent years saw a disproportionate increase in children. All three under-18 age groups increased in number at rates above the all-age norm (14%). The bigger conclusion that comes from this is that family homelessness has been growing at a disproportionate rate. This is probably closely associated with the still rapidly growing number of cases where family and domestic violence is an associated issue, as reported later in this chapter (see Figure 5.4).

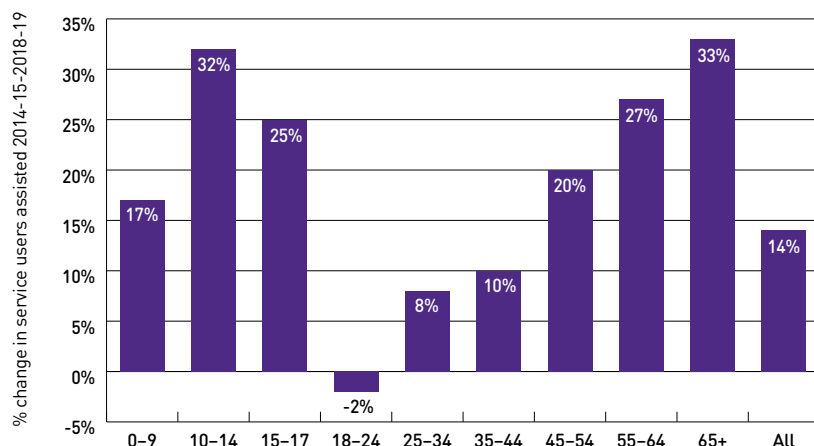
Nevertheless, albeit that they involve a much smaller total number, the single fastest growing age cohort has been older people; that is persons aged over 65. Notably, this is highly consistent with the pattern of homeless demography change over the decade to 2016, as shown by the 2016 census (see AHM 2018) (Pawson et al. 2018).

Figure 5.2: SHS service users broken down by age group

(a) Age group distribution of assisted persons in 2018–19



(b) Percentage change in age cohort numbers, 2014–15 to 2018–19



Source: AIHW SHS various years (Table CLIENTS.1)

5.2.3 Possible homelessness impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

At the time of writing (August 2020), there are as yet no published official statistics that provide any direct insight into the homelessness impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Chapter 2, the deep economic recession brought on by the health crisis has already led to a sharp rise in unemployment and loss of earned income for hundreds of thousands of people. Significant impacts on the housing market have also been already seen. At the same time, the likely effects on the overall scale of homelessness will have been masked in the short term by the Commonwealth Government's income protection measures under the JobKeeper and JobSeeker programs.

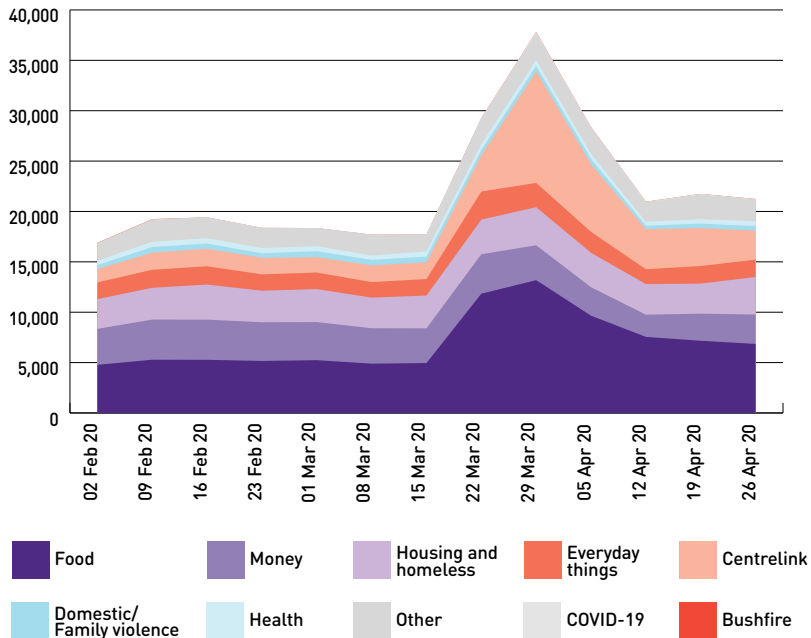
As shown in Chapter 2, the short-term impact of these changes was to substantially increase incomes of eligible low-income households (see Figure 2.13). For large numbers in this income bracket, rental stress levels — and consequent risk of homelessness — will have temporarily fallen as a result. At the same time, as also noted in Chapter 2, the large body of non-permanent residents in Australia and their exclusion from income protection will have undoubtedly pushed a very substantial number into extreme poverty — and vulnerability to homelessness.

Until the next release of AIHW SHS statistics — expected in late 2020 — there is no routinely published official statistical source that can indicate the direct homelessness impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, one possible means of gaining insight into the likely effect is via data about search activity recorded by the online advice service *Ask Izzy*²⁴. As shown in Figure 5.3, overall advice seeking activity rose sharply in the initial period of lockdown. However, this was largely associated with queries on food assistance and social security benefits. The flow of queries on housing and homelessness remained largely unchanged during the period.

²⁴ As indicated in Figure 5.3, AskIzzy offers advice on a range of different welfare-related issues.

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Figure 5.3: Ask Izzy online advice service online search activity early in the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: <https://www.infoxchange.org/au/news/2020/05/how-covid-19-affecting-ask-izzy-usage>

As another way to provide an indication of initial pandemic homelessness impacts, we collated unpublished SHS statistics from ten large SHS providers²⁵, with respect to Quarter 4 2019–20 (i.e. April–June 2020). Through comparison with equivalent data for the same quarter of the previous year (April–June 2019) we hoped to gain some impression of change over time. Fuller methodological details are provided in Section 1.4.2.

As shown in Table 5.1, the total number of homelessness service user interactions in the early months of the pandemic was slightly reduced by comparison with the previous year. While there were large variations across the cohort, six of the ten organisations saw a reduction in service users assisted, with one recording a similar number to that in the previous year, and three recording substantially larger numbers. The vast bulk of this collective increase is probably attributable to the extraordinary emergency hotel-rehousing programs in which all three providers were substantially involved over the period. That is, the extra throughput of assisted cases involved ‘existing’ rather than ‘new’ homelessness. Bearing this in mind, the national reduction in newly occurring homelessness seen in Q4 2019–20 compared with the previous year was probably considerably larger than the 3% shown in the ‘all’ row of Table 5.1 — probably more in the order of 10–20%.

²⁵ In illustrating their relatively large scale of operation it should be noted that the number of assisted cases recorded by participating providers in two quarters concerned (see Table 5.1) equates to around a third of the national SHS caseload (bearing in mind that assisted cases enumerated by AIHW on an annual basis total around 300,000).

Table 5.1: Homelessness service users assisted Q4 2018–19 and Q4 2019–20 (selected large SHS providers)

	Jurisdiction	No of assisted cases		% change
		Q4 2018-19	Q4 2019-20	
Provider 1	NSW	644	1,928	199%
Provider 2	NSW	1,600	1,373	-14%
Provider 3	NSW	9,018	8,162	-9%
Provider 4	NSW	2,643	2,700	2%
Provider 5	QLD	855	785	-8%
Provider 6	QLD	2,750	4,667	70%
Provider 7	VIC	2,522	1,301	-48%
Provider 8	VIC	2,420	1,755	-27%
Provider 9	VIC	2,811	1,631	-42%
Provider 10	WA	233	329	41%
All		25,496	24,631	-3%

Source: Unpublished data collated by the authors – see text

SHS records kindly provided by participating organisations also facilitated indicative analysis of changes in the profile of the service user cohort between Q4 2018–19 and Q4 2019–20. For the reasons given above, analysis of these data excluded the providers known to have been most heavily involved in emergency hotel-rehousing programs. On this basis, there were few marked changes in the April–June 2020 service user cohort profile compared with the previous year. On this (albeit highly limited) basis for comparison, some possibly notable changes in relation to age of main applicant and main reason for seeking advice were:

- Disproportionately large reduction in cases involving adults aged 30–39
- Disproportionately large reduction in people having experienced 'housing crisis', family and domestic violence (FDV); moderate increase in number affected by 'inadequate housing conditions'

At the time of writing, it is understood that the JobKeeper and JobSeeker income protection programs are to be phased down over the six months from September 2020 rather than terminated at that point, as originally announced. However, during and after that phasing down it is anticipated that unemployment will rise and unemployed persons' incomes will fall. This will inevitably lead to a resurgence of rental — and mortgage — stress which is highly likely to flow through into increased homelessness. The extent of such an increase is of course highly uncertain since it depends on the changing public health situation during 2020–21, as well as the timing and vitality of post-pandemic economic recovery. However, on the basis that unemployment doubles from its early 2020 level of around 5%, it was recently projected that homelessness in NSW could rise as a result by 21%²⁶.

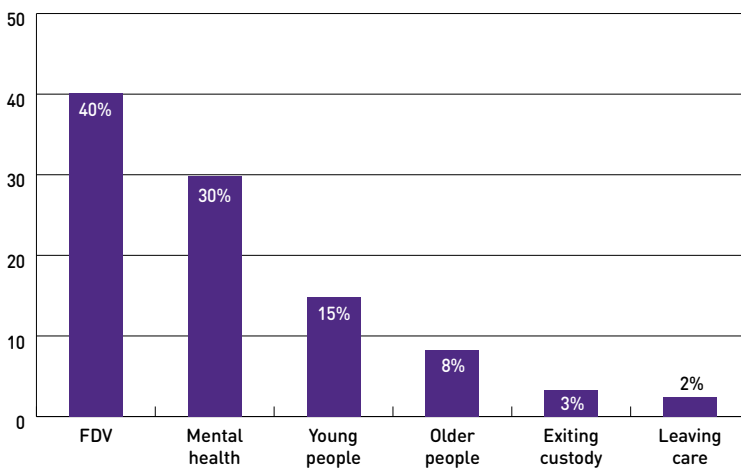
²⁶ This estimate, by Equity Economics (2020), applied research findings by Guy Johnson and colleagues (Johnson et al. 2019) based on the Journeys Home dataset.

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5.3 Predicating factors of homelessness

In 2018–19, the single most frequently noted factor aggravating housing insecurity and possible homelessness among SHS service users was FDV. This was identified as an ‘associated issue’ for 40% of all service users (Figure 5.4). The second most frequently cited such issue in the latest year was mental ill-health.

Figure 5.4: Assisted homelessness service users in 2018–19: number with identified ‘associated issues’ as percentage of total cases assisted

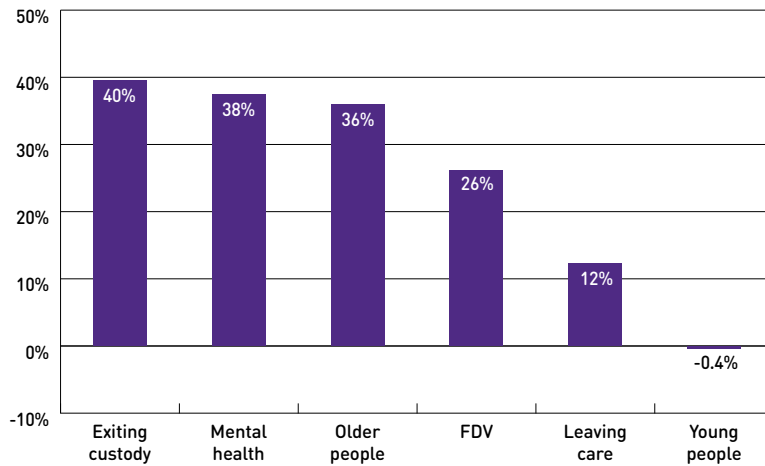


Source: AIHW Historical Tables Specialist Homelessness Services (Tables 4–9).

Analysing change over time in the four years to 2018–19, the numerically small cohorts of exiting custody and older people were among the categories exhibiting fastest proportionate growth (see Figure 5.5). More significantly, considering its larger overall representation (see Figure 5.4), there was a large increase in service users where mental ill-health was a noted ‘associated issue’ — up by 38% over the period (see Figure 5.5). This latter trend might possibly reflect an impact of disability services transitioning to delivery under NDIS, with resulting negative effects for those with psychiatric disorders or other forms of mental ill health. Whatever its causes, this is a significant finding, considering the possible service provision implications of a homelessness services user cohort in which people experiencing these problems now form a larger component.

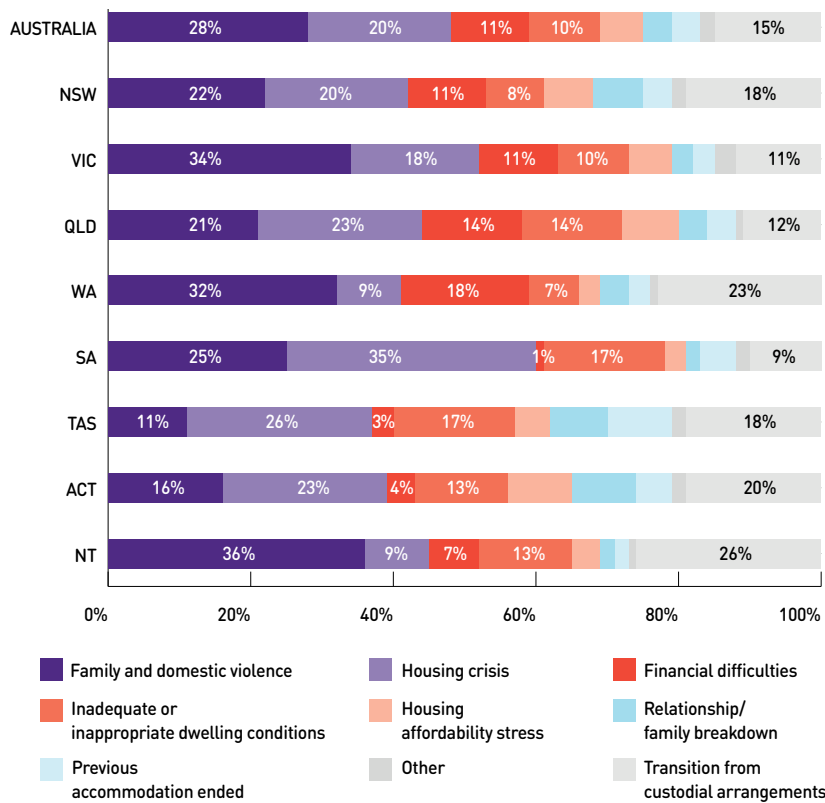
At the other end of the spectrum, by comparison with 2014–15, there were in 2018–19, marginally fewer people assisted by SHS providers where being a young person was a noted ‘associated issue’ (-0.4%). Similarly, while there was an increase in the number of service-users for whom ‘leaving care’ was a relevant factor, this was slightly below the all-service user increase (12% compared with 14%).

Figure 5.5: Assisted homelessness service users with associated issues: % change 2014–15 to 2018–19



Source: AIHW Historical Tables Specialist Homelessness Services (Tables 4–9)

Figure 5.6: Assisted service users in 2018–19. Breakdown by main reason for seeking assistance



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services statistics (CLIENT.1; CLIENT.16)

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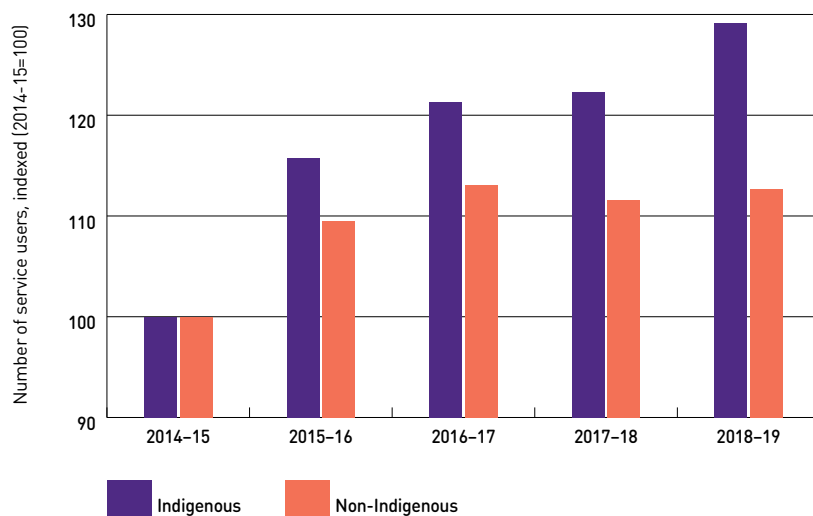
As shown in Figure 5.6, the prevalence of different factors associated with homelessness varies substantially across the country. In 2018–19, for example, FDV cases accounted for much larger proportions of total caseloads in NT and Victoria than in ACT and Tasmania. At least in part, this likely reflects varying service provision capacity (rather than need, specifically). For example, the relatively extensive network of family and domestic violence services in Vic is probably partly responsible for the proportionately large representation of cases where FDV was the main factor prompting households to seek housing assistance in that state. However, as further discussed in Chapter 6, the ‘reason for seeking assistance’ classification is problematic in a number of ways and, for that reason, fails to fulfil its potential as a means of better understanding homelessness drivers.

5.4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are hugely over-represented within Australia’s homeless population. While accounting for only 2.8% of all Australians according to the 2016 Census (ABS 2017), Aboriginal people made up 26% of all homelessness service users in 2018–19. In other words, the rate of homelessness involving Aboriginal Australians is around ten times the population-wide norm. This is highly consistent with relative homelessness rates informed by census-based point-in-time statistics (Pawson et al. 2018).

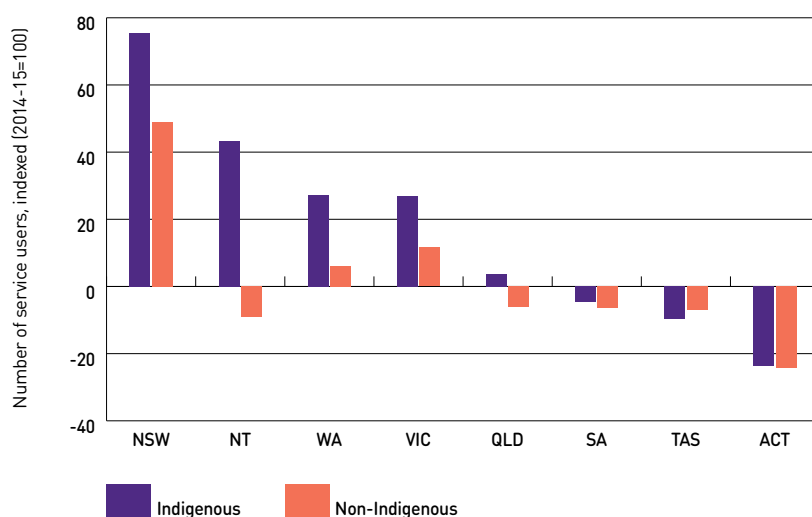
As shown in Figure 5.7, the recent rate of increase in demand for (use of) homelessness services has been much more marked for those of Indigenous origin. In the four years to 2018–19, Indigenous service users increased by 26%, well over twice the rate of increase of non-Indigenous service users (10%). Notably, the former trend has continued to increase in recent years while the latter has slightly fallen since 2016–17.

Figure 5.7: Indexed trend in Indigenous versus non-Indigenous service users assisted, 2014–2019



Source: AIHW Historical Tables Specialist Homelessness Services (Table 2). Note: Non-responding applicants on Indigenous origin question redistributed pro rata to respondents

Figure 5.8: Change in service user caseloads 2014–2019: breakdown by Indigenous/non-Indigenous status



Source: AIHW Historical Table Specialist Homelessness Services (Table 2). Note: Figures take no account of non-responses on the Indigenous origin question.

As shown in Figure 5.8, recent change in service demand involving Indigenous applicants has varied substantially across jurisdictions. At the same time, however, in all the mainland states — and in NT — the past four years saw Indigenous numbers rising ahead of non-Indigenous cases (or, in the case of South Australia, a smaller reduction in Indigenous cases than non-Indigenous).

5.5 Rough sleeping

5.5.1 Street homelessness trends in the period to March 2020

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, street homelessness — or rough sleeping — has formed the main focus of policy and practice developments in this field in recent years. Associated with this emphasis, statistics on rough sleeping have become more contested and highly charged. The latest national estimate, from the ABS Census, enumerated some 8,200 people sleeping rough (improvised dwellings, tents, sleeping out) on Census night in August 2016²⁷, a 20% increase on the number at the 2011 census.

The SHS series captures the incidence of street homelessness more indirectly, with respect to service users reporting having slept rough during the month prior to first presentation. Such experience was reported by 42,404 service users in 2018–19. While hard to verify or validate, and probably subject to a degree of double counting, these figures nevertheless suggest that the population affected by rough sleeping during any given time period is far greater than the number of people sleeping out on any specific night. In other words, street homelessness involves a shifting population that usually includes a proportion of long-term

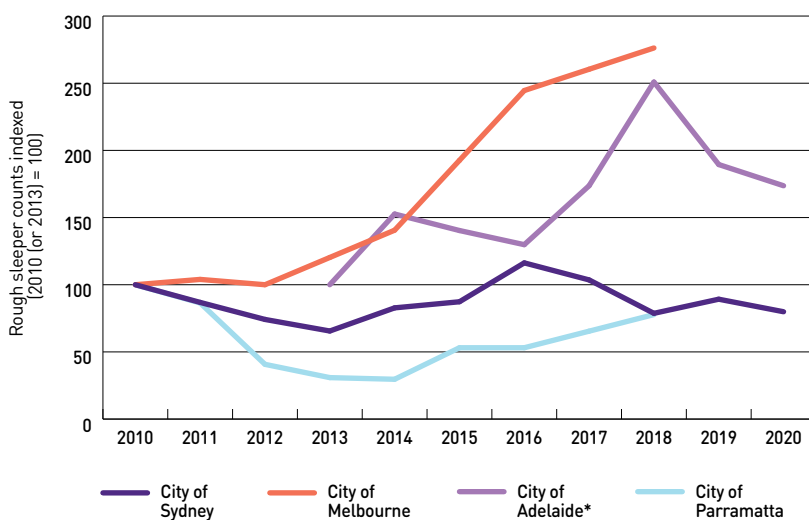
²⁷ ABS Census rough sleeper enumeration methodology is discussed in Chapter 3 [Section 3.5.2]

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chronic rough sleepers, alongside others lacking settled housing and therefore liable to cycle in and out of actual rooflessness. This is consistent with both Australian and international evidence²⁸.

As explained above, SHS rough sleeping estimates suggest that the incidence of the problem stabilised over recent years, with the national total having plateaued since 2015–16 (at some 42,000 per year). However, more directly enumerated statistics are available for a few local authority areas where councils have taken the trouble to organise periodic counts.

Figure 5.9: Changing incidence of rough sleeping in selected cities, 2010–2020: street count data



Source: collated by authors from municipal street homelessness count statistics.

Notes: 1. 2013, 2015 and 2017 data for the City of Melbourne, and 2017 data for the City of Parramatta have been interpolated. 2. City of Sydney statistics reflect annual February (rather than August) counts

Street counts are conducted on different cycles (ranging from monthly to bi-annually) and at different times of the year. Figure 5.9 shows the change in incidence of rough sleeping across these four LGAs, indexed to 2010 (2013 for Adelaide²⁹). This highlights the varied pre-pandemic trajectory of street homelessness across the four localities. Most strikingly, the latest (2018) City of Melbourne statistic represented an increase of 176% since 2010, whereas the latest (February 2020) City of Sydney total was 20% lower than 10 years earlier.

²⁸ In the UK, for example, estimates based on a recent BBC survey of local authorities (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-51398425>) suggest that more than 28,000 people slept rough in England at least once during the latest year on record whereas the official UK Government point-in-time measure for Autumn 2019 was 4,266 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2019>) — less than one sixth of those sleeping rough at least once across a year according to the BBC evidence. Estimates from Australia (Chamberlain and Johnson 2015) suggest the one-night count of people sleeping rough each Census is a fraction of all people who sleep rough in a lifetime.

²⁹ The City of Adelaide changed its counting method in 2016 via its *Adelaide Zero Project*. The figures included here are from the May count of each year plus April 2020 (latest), referenced to the May 2013 count.

5.5.2 Street homelessness numbers in the COVID-19 pandemic

How far have the emergency hotel and similar placement programs described in Chapter 4 affected the ongoing extent of street homelessness? While there are no official statistics that can provide a definitive answer, there are informed estimates that provide a basis to explore this question. This is made possible largely as a by-product of the much enhanced street homelessness monitoring systems now being operated in the inner areas of all Australia's major cities. These now provide certain city councils, state governments and collaborating NGOs with something close to real-time data on rough sleeper cohort size and characteristics within these limited geographies (see Section 3.4).

In the case of SA, point-in-time (PIT) street homelessness statistics for inner city Adelaide are now routinely published by the Don Dunstan Foundation on a monthly basis: <https://dunstan.org.au/adelaide-zero-project/dashboard/>. The number fell from 150 in March 2020 to 83 in June. By August, however, it had once more risen to 117. In Sydney, a base pre-pandemic number is provided by the City of Sydney's latest street count which recorded 334 rough sleepers in February 2020. According to routine monitoring by the peak body, Homelessness NSW, by April the hotel rehousing program had reduced this to 90. By August, however, Homelessness NSW estimated that the total had drifted back up to 170.

In Victoria, meanwhile, City of Melbourne street counts in 2016 and 2018 had recorded 247 and 279 rough sleepers respectively. The base number immediately prior to the pandemic is not known. By August, however, the total had been undoubtedly much reduced through hotel rehousing, with the Council for Homeless Persons — the peak body — estimating street homelessness at 30.

These statistics therefore illustrate that emergency hotel-rehousing programs enacted in the public health emergency substantially reduced street homelessness in the three cities (especially in Melbourne), although in all cases falling somewhat short of entirely eliminating it. In Sydney CBD, especially, the rising trend seen from May 2020 will have probably resulted from a combination of hotel-housed returnees to the street, along with a flow of newly homeless people — including some having lost accommodation as a direct result of the pandemic-induced recession. Particularly notable within the August 2020 cohort is the growing number and proportion of non-Australian citizens, estimated by Homelessness NSW as totalling 30 of the 170 rough sleepers at this date.

The changing scale, nature and distribution of homelessness

5.6 Spatial concentration of homeless service users

As demonstrated by existing research, the incidence of homelessness is unevenly distributed across populated Australia (Pawson et al. 2018; Parkinson et al. 2019). Many factors are at play here. These include variations in housing market conditions and in the spatial distributions of economically vulnerable populations. When homelessness is measured according to recorded interactions between people seeking housing help and organisations that provide such help, the clustering of such service-providing agencies in specific locations is also relevant – see Chapter 3.

This spatial variation in homelessness rates³⁰ in 2018–19 (illustrated in Figure 5.10) once again draws on SHS statistics, utilising the geographical identifier for the service user’s home address (or locality). The inclusion of such a spatial reference point is a new feature of published SHS that facilitates geographical analysis at below state/territory level. In calculating standardised homelessness rates, we have integrated these SHS data with ABS Estimated Resident Population (ERP) at the Statistical Area 3 (SA3) geographic level. The year-end ERP of the previous corresponding year (i.e. 2018 for the 2018–19 SHS data) was used. The five categories are divided on a standardised 50-unit scale to facilitate time-series comparisons.

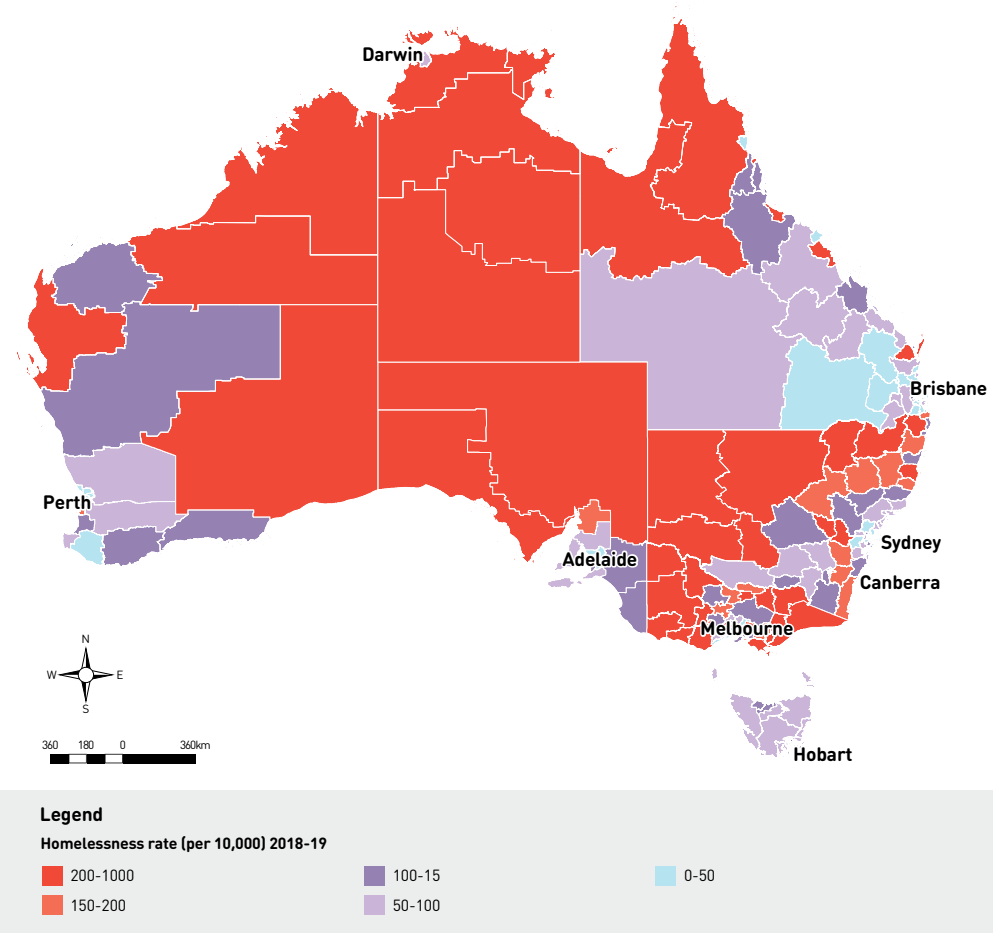
Strictly speaking, of course, this is a measure of homelessness service provision rather than homelessness demand. It is only a proxy for the latter and is, as such, somewhat compromised by the inevitably uneven geography of service provision. Nevertheless, especially as a means of tracking trends over time (assuming that the siting of homelessness services organisation access points does not change markedly from one year to the next), it is a data source of some utility.

It is observed in Figure 5.10 that extensive areas throughout Australia had homelessness rates at 200/10,000 population or higher in 2018–19 (darkest shade). This category represents 54 SA3s in 2018–19, an increase from 39 SA3s in 2014–15. These SA3s are most notable in regional and remote areas across all states and territories (except Tasmania); likely the result of relatively low populations spread across large geographic areas thus more notable on the map. There were comparatively lower rates of homelessness (100/10,000 population or below) throughout Tasmania, Southern Queensland, Western WA, South-East SA, and in metropolitan and inner regional NSW. Across all state and territory capital cities, there were generally higher rates of homelessness in the inner city as well as outer suburban areas.

For more detailed visualisations of specific cities and regions of Australia and other years, please visit unsw.to/AHM2020.

³⁰ Calculated as the number of SHS clients assisted per 10,000 population of the corresponding SA3.

Figure 5.10: Homelessness rate (per 10,000), Statistical Areas 3 of Australia, 2018–19



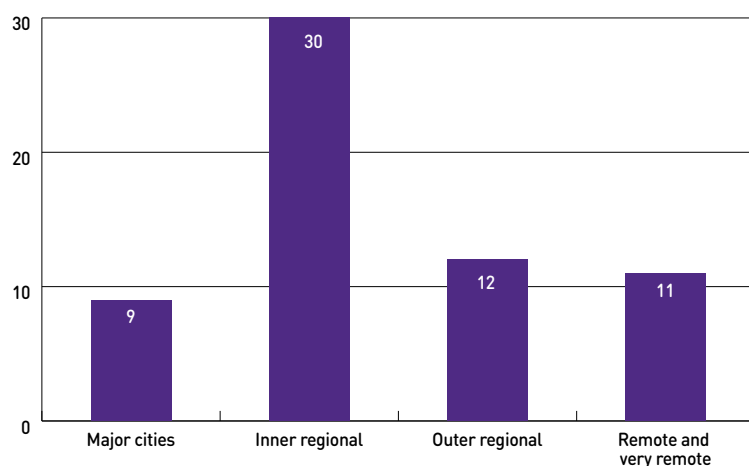
Source: ABS (n.d.); AIHW (2019)

The changing scale, nature and distribution of homelessness

5.7 Changing spatial patterns of homelessness

Recent rates of change in homelessness expressed demand, as recorded via SHS statistics, have varied substantially across Australia. Nationally, in the four years to 2018–19, it was areas classified as ‘inner regional’ that typically witnessed by far the greatest rate of increase (see Figure 5.11). This would include regional cities such as Newcastle, Ballarat and Townsville. It is of course possible that this is more a reflection of expanded service capacity in inner regional areas than locally expanded need for such services. However, the markedly higher growth rate — and the fact that it was reflected in most jurisdictions seems to suggest that it was more a matter of the latter than the former.

Figure 5.11: % change in incidence of homelessness by 2014–19 by location type



Source: AIHW Historical Tables Specialist Homelessness Services (Tables 3).

Note: Data reflects the location where clients first sought homelessness service support. Area remoteness based on official ABS classification.

Table 5.2: Change in incidence of homelessness by 2014–19 by area remoteness and jurisdiction

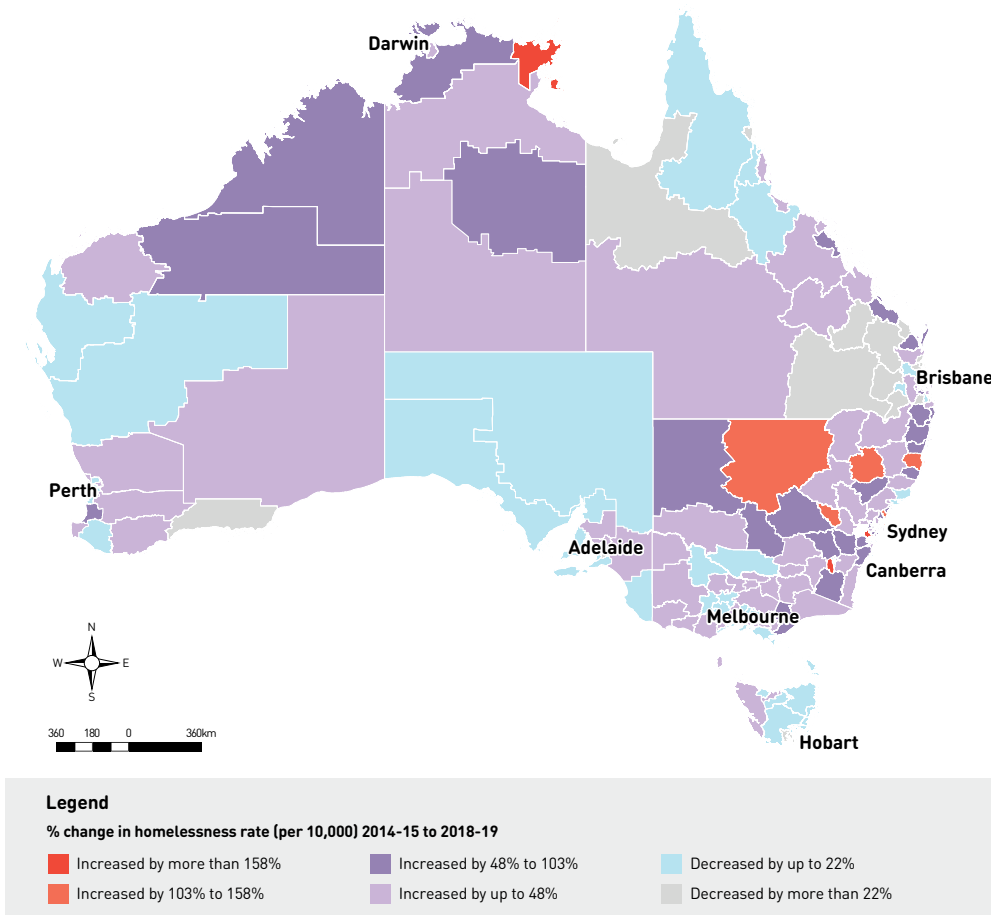
	Aus	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
Major cities	9	32	8	-3	-3	-1	-15	-24	-14
Inner regional	30	105	15	0	35	42	-11	NA	33
Outer regional	12	66	24	5	-8	-32	11	NA	24
Remote/v remote	11	165	-13	-38	32	-35	-93	NA	28

Source: AIHW Historical Tables Specialist Homelessness Services (Tables 3).

Note: Data reflects the location where clients first sought homelessness service support. Area remoteness based on official ABS classification.

While within-jurisdiction rates and patterns of change were highly varied over the time period examined here, disproportionate increases in inner regional localities have featured in almost every state and territory (Table 5.2). These variations are illustrated in greater detail in Figure 5.12. This highlights notable increases (in red and dark orange) throughout various regions of NSW and the NT, while there were reductions (in light blue and grey) throughout Victoria, Queensland, SA and Tasmania. Collectively, red and dark orange represent SA3s where homelessness rate at least doubled between 2014–15 and 2018–19. The highest increases (in red) were observed in outer suburban Sydney (Camden and Wollondilly), regional ACT (Urriarra-Namadgi), and in East Arnhem land in the NT. It is possible that this could reflect a recent general tendency for inner regional rents to rise at rates above national norms — perhaps as a spillover from pressured urban markets. Unfortunately, however, detailed analysis of the possible contributory drivers that underlie these patterns is beyond the scope of this report.

Figure 5.12: Percentage change in homelessness rate (per 10,000), Statistical Areas 3 of Australia, 2014–15 to 2018–19



Source: ABS (n.d.); AIHW (2019)

Focusing on the period 2014–15 to 2018–19, Figures 5.13–5.17 map changes in homelessness rates at the Statistical Area 3 (SA3) level, focusing on the five greater capital city regions of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. Gradations of percentage change are divided into six classes by natural break classification, with red and orange hues denoting increases in homelessness rate while light blue and grey hues denoting decreases.

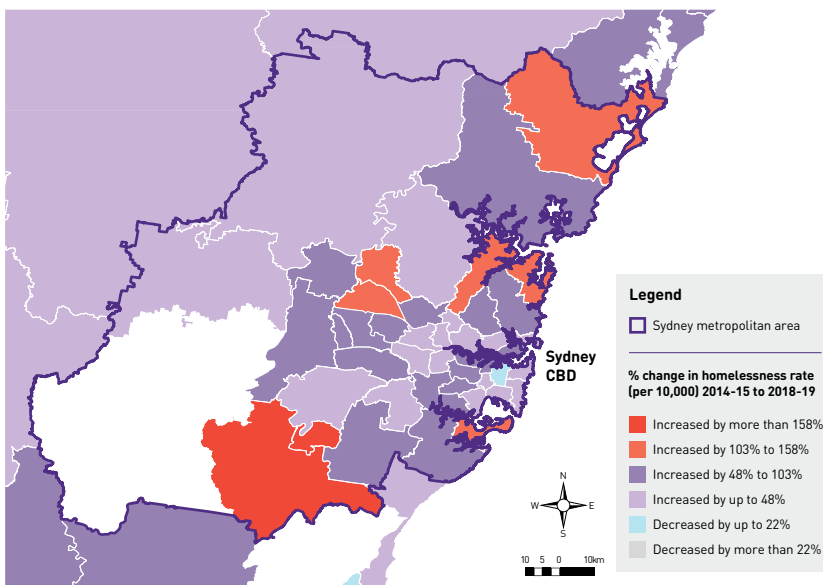
The changing scale, nature and distribution of homelessness

It is observed that, across the five greater capital city regions, there were notable decreases in homelessness rates throughout the metropolitan areas with the exception of Sydney where there were varying levels of increase in inner city, suburban and outer suburban areas. In Sydney, the only SA3 where a decrease in homelessness rate was observed was in the Central Business District area (Sydney Inner City), with notable increases (in dark orange, between 103% and 158%) in Cronulla-Miranda-Caringbah in the south, Blacktown-North and Rouse Hill-McGraths Hill in the north-west, Hornsby, Pittwater and Wyong in the north; and significant increases (in red, by more than 158%) in Camden and Wollondilly in the south-west.

In contrast, there were general decreases in homelessness in Greater Melbourne, Greater Brisbane, Greater Adelaide and Greater Perth. For Greater Melbourne, such changes were observed in the inner city and middle ring suburbs, with moderate percentage increases (in yellow, up to 48%) observed in the western and eastern outer suburbs. For Greater Brisbane, decreases in homelessness were observed in both the inner and outer suburbs, with moderate increases in the middle ring. Homelessness also decreased throughout most of the metropolitan area, with Prospect-Walkerville in the inner suburbs being the only SA3 where homelessness rate increased between 2014–15 and 2018–19. Homelessness rates also decreased throughout the commuter suburbs and southern coastal region of Greater Perth.

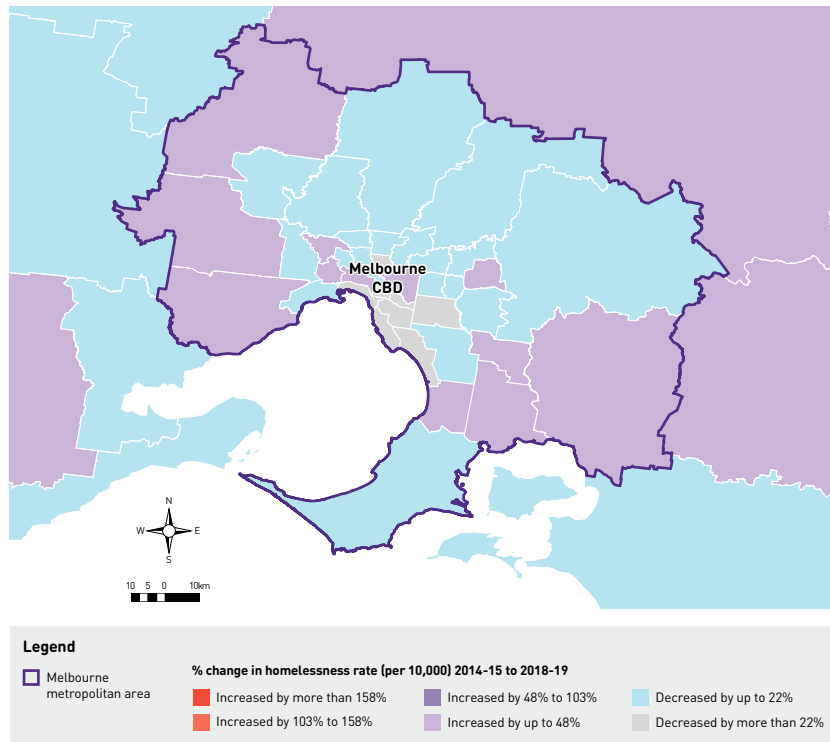
For more detailed visualisations of other cities and regions of Australia, please visit unsw.to/AHM2020.

Figure 5.13: Percentage change in homelessness rate (per 10,000), Sydney Greater Capital City region, 2014–15 to 2018–19



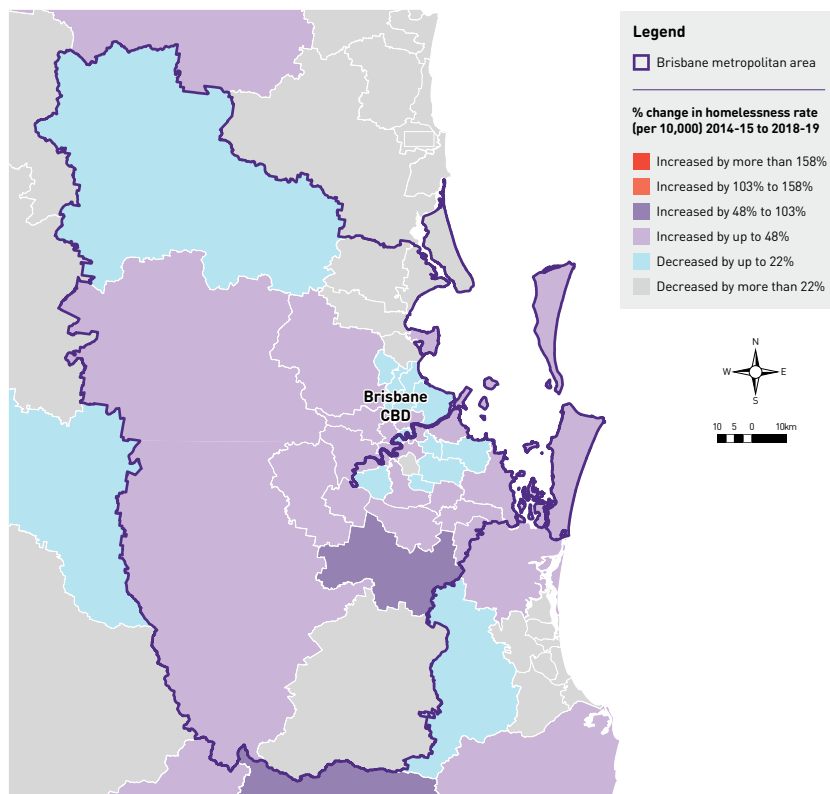
Source: ABS [n.d.]; AIHW (2019)

Figure 5.14: Percentage change in homelessness rate (per 10,000), Melbourne Greater Capital City region, 2014–15 to 2018–19



Source: ABS (n.d.); AIHW (2019)

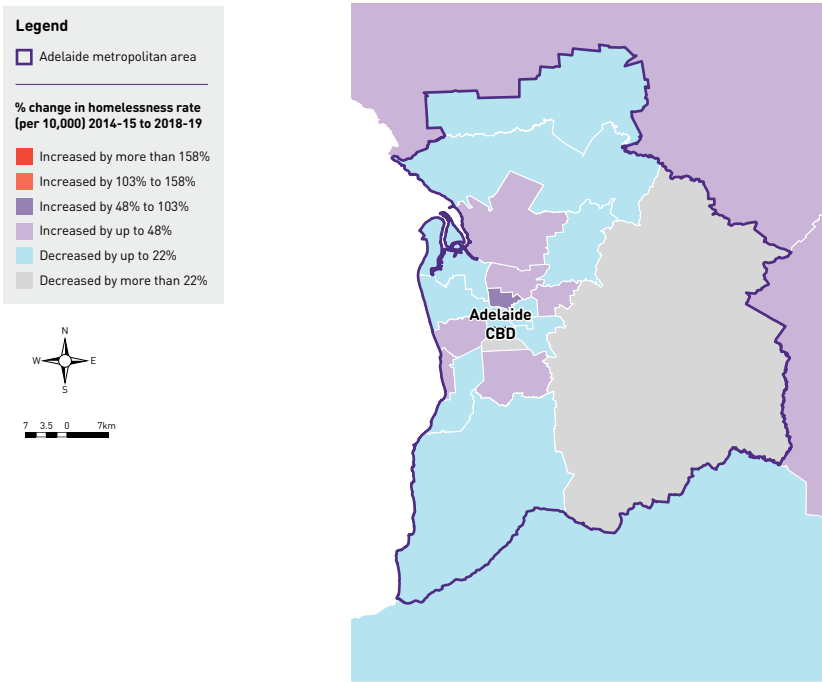
Figure 5.15: Percentage change in homelessness rate (per 10,000), Brisbane Greater Capital City region, 2014–15 to 2018–19



Source: ABS (n.d.); AIHW (2019)

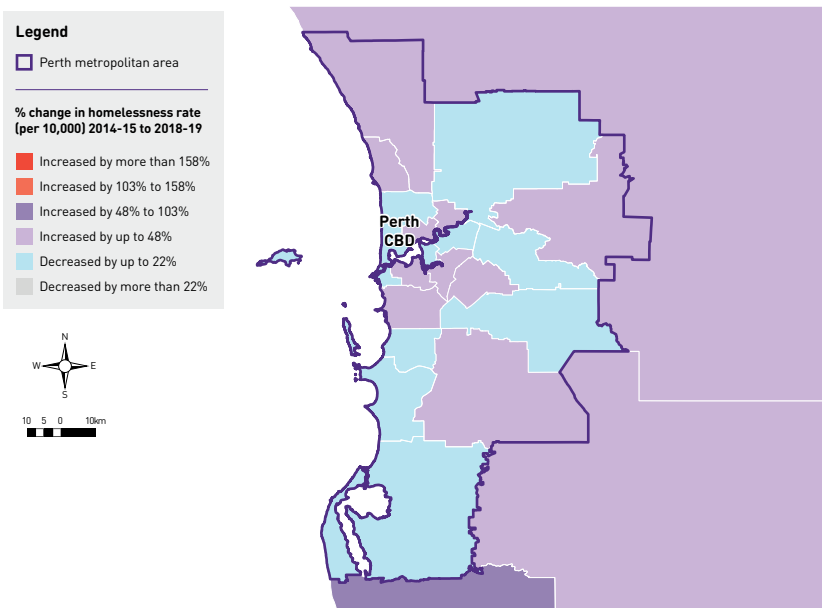
The changing scale, nature and distribution of homelessness

Figure 5.16: Percentage change in homelessness rate (per 10,000), Adelaide Greater Capital City region, 2014–15 to 2018–19



Source: ABS (n.d.); AIHW (2019)

Figure 5.17: Percentage change in homelessness rate (per 10,000), Perth Greater Capital City region, 2014–15 to 2018–19



Source: ABS (n.d.); AIHW (2019)

5.8 Chapter conclusion

As demonstrated by ABS Census statistics, homelessness continued to grow ahead of population in the five years to 2016 — the period that formed the main focus of AHM 2018. In the absence of directly comparable statistics for subsequent years, there is less certainty about the trajectory of homelessness since then. Administrative data related to requests for homelessness services suggests that overall numbers might have plateaued in the period to 2020. Hard evidence on homelessness impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is, at the time of writing, even more scarce. However, alongside temporary moratoria on rental property evictions, the scale and configuration of government income protection schemes may have quelled any immediate recession-induced homelessness spike.

In the specific context of street homelessness, intensified downtown action over recent years may have also been sufficient at least to stem the previously rising trends affecting cities such as Adelaide and Sydney. Latterly, as already reported in Chapter 4, unprecedented emergency rehousing programs will have at least temporarily reduced rough sleeping numbers to historic lows in mid-2020. Whether it will be possible to maintain this situation is, however, very much in doubt — especially in the absence of systemic and sustained change in broader housing and social security policy.

Significant developments in relation to the scale, nature and spatial distribution of homelessness seen in recent years have included:

- The markedly varying trends in the numbers of homelessness service users – with especially rapid increases in NSW and NT co-existing with reductions in SA, Tasmania and ACT
- The continued huge significance of family and domestic violence as a homelessness driver — resulting in very large numbers of children experiencing homelessness, which should be a special concern for all levels of government
- The rising profile of exiting custody, leaving care and mental ill-health as factors placing people at risk of homelessness
- The disproportionate increase in Aboriginal community homelessness
- The marked tendency for rising homelessness in inner regional settings

06

Homelessness data matters

6.1 Homelessness data topicality

As discussed in Chapter 3, recent policy priorities have shone a new spotlight on debates about homelessness data metrics, availability and management. Heightened state/territory government concern over escalating rough sleeping has triggered efforts to specify street homelessness reduction objectives in measurable terms. Concurrently, aspirations to 'end homelessness' have raised similar questions among advocacy and service provider organisations. In parallel, for some, aspirations to more 'objectively' calibrate individual client needs and appropriately target service responses have prompted a strongly-expressed faith in data enhancement as an essential pathway to homelessness solutions.

As reported in Chapter 4, data matters also came very much to the fore in this research in our attempt to calibrate simple dimensions of the emergency rehousing programs rolled out at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Section 4.3). Albeit that requested statistics were kindly provided by two of the five state governments approached, it seems to us unhealthy that in some jurisdictions, such basic information remains a closely guarded secret.

In the remainder of this short chapter, we briefly touch on some of the shortcomings of currently available homelessness data and how these might be addressed.

6.2 Fulfilling the potential of SHS statistics

In monitoring the changing scale and nature of homelessness, Australia remains heavily reliant on the ABS Census. The traditional five-yearly ABS Census cycle presents a major limitation in the use of Census-derived statistics to inform homelessness policy, e.g. in informing 'performance assessment' against homelessness reduction targets. Moreover, given the need for Australia to adopt a more prevention-centred approach to the problem, the key challenge is to minimise the flow of newly homeless people. Logically, therefore, the cohort on which to concentrate is not so much those homeless at a point in time, but those who are newly experiencing the problem.

With these considerations in mind, the key data source here is not the census, but the AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) statistical collection that records requests for assistance logged by homelessness service providers. As shown in Chapter 5, the system generates valuable data on the scale and nature of homelessness and has been recently enhanced to facilitate geographical analysis.

However, the SHS framework has a number of drawbacks. These include the imperfect classification of an applicant's stated reason(s) for seeking assistance — in particular as regards the ambiguous and widely used category 'housing crisis'. Analysed in terms of service users' main reason for seeking assistance, this accounted for 20% of all applications in 2018–19. Other possible enhancements to the system that should be considered within this context include:

- Placing greater emphasis on consistently recording — and publishing — statistics on service users judged to be homeless (as distinct from at risk of homelessness)
- Harmonising approaches to recording of 'unassisted cases' for greater consistency
- The publication of SHS statistics on a quarterly rather than annual basis, so as to provide more timely access to data that would be of particular benefit at times of economic turbulence.

More generally, a limitation on the robustness of SHS statistics is the huge number and organisational diversity of the data points on which the system draws (1,583 agencies in 2018–19). Data quality could likely benefit from data handling capacity-building in participating organisations, as well as resources sufficient to enable an optimally intensive approach to data management and enhancement at the centre. An eye-catching example of currently inconsistent practice is the improbable observation that the number of unassisted applications in 2018–19 varied from 2% of all logged applications in South Australia to 62% in Tasmania.

6.3 Rental evictions data

Also related to informing homelessness prevention strategies, better data on tenant evictions by social (as well as private) landlords would be highly beneficial. The basis for such statistics would be the case records held by the tenancy tribunals that govern tenancy repossession cases across Australia. State/territory governments should be requiring that the tribunal for their jurisdiction routinely publishes statistics drawn from rental property repossession casework records. Ideally, these would be configured according to a common framework determined and administered by the AIHW.

6.4 More in-depth data on homelessness

Especially given the limitations of the SHS and census data collections as discussed above, there is a case for government investment in other sources of in-depth data on homelessness.

One 'routine' source of such data is the ABS General Social Survey which, drawing on a population-wide sample, periodically includes questions about 'previous experience of homelessness'. Unfortunately, however, such data is published only very infrequently. This long cycle is far from ideal.

Initiated in 2011, the Journeys Home research project involved a longitudinal survey of Australians experiencing homelessness, or at high risk of becoming homeless. A cohort of social security recipients was periodically surveyed over a 2.5 year period. The rich resulting data informed a host of in-depth research reports and journal articles, providing in-depth and policy-relevant insights into homelessness pathways that could be obtained from no other data source. Now that it is almost a decade since the survey cohort was selected, there is a case for a follow-up project to provide insights into the different housing, labour market and other factors that will be influencing experiences of homelessness in Australia in the 2020s.

07

Conclusions

7.1 Enhanced official sensitisation to homelessness

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered widespread anxiety on implications for the connected issues of rental stress and homelessness. But even the immediate pre-pandemic years saw rising concerns at the unjust situation where growing numbers of Australians have found themselves without an adequate and affordable home — or actually sleeping on the street. This, in one of the wealthiest countries on the planet, where the vast majority are well-housed, and where many have lately accumulated huge fortunes on the back of the property market.

The growing visibility of rough sleeping in Melbourne, Sydney and other cities during the 2010s prompted state and territory governments to respond with a new level of urgency. Controversially, proposed responses have included punitive actions such as street sleeping bans in the City of Melbourne, or changed legislation in New South Wales to enable the forcible removal of homeless encampments in Sydney. However, ‘street clearing’ policing actions are not the main story. This second Australian Homelessness Monitor has demonstrated that in many parts of Australia, the heightened government attention to street homelessness has also seen increased supportive intervention intended to assist people sleeping rough into long-term housing. In the years immediately preceding the pandemic, a number of governments had already moved to fund new measures, including assertive street outreach, headleasing and enhanced private rental subsidies, alongside community-led initiatives involving more technically enabled approaches to measuring and tackling rough sleeping.

7.2 Implications for strategic action

The housing and welfare system failures embodied by rising homelessness and increasingly overt forms of rough sleeping have created an impetus for society and governments to appreciate the problems and develop new solutions. At the time of this report’s publication — in the fourth quarter of 2020 — Australia is well positioned to learn from our failures and progress systemic reform.

Although initially delayed because of COVID-19, the Australian Parliament has launched a formal Inquiry into homelessness in Australia. This Inquiry had its first public hearing in July 2020. Included in the Inquiry remit is consideration of the “services to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including housing assistance, social housing, and specialist homelessness services”. As we recount in this report, there are examples of outreach models linked to long-term housing that do, indeed, enable people to exit rough sleeping. When move-on housing is suitable and affordable, and when floating support is available, the evidence shows that people can exit rough sleeping and chronic homelessness and sustain housing.

The research indicates that we need to do three things. First, we need to take the evidence-based and successful Housing First style pilots and initiatives in Australia and institutionalise them into wider housing and support systems. Homelessness cannot be ended at the project or pilot initiative level. Second, beyond the scaling-up of evidence-based models to end rough sleeping, we need to simultaneously redouble efforts to expand upstream interventions to prevent rough sleeping in the first place. Genuinely strategic and comprehensive approaches to homelessness prevention remain to be developed.

Third, while a focus on ending rough sleeping is of course well-justified, this must be framed within an understanding of the need for the fundamental systemic change required to tackle the housing system failures that are a major causal factor for all forms of homelessness. Crucially, even the scaled-up application of Housing First solutions to street homelessness, coupled with a more

rigorous emphasis on prevention will count for relatively little unless social and affordable housing provision is expanded in parallel. In any case, as demonstrated by our own and other recent research (Bullen & Baldry 2019), the minimal availability of social housing in Australia seriously undermines the functionality of Housing First approaches in this country.

Especially given the shrinking supply of so-called 'naturally occurring affordable housing' via market provision (see Section 2.4.1), there is an urgent need for additional social housing to reduce homelessness at the population level. The Commonwealth Government has a critical role to play at the policy and funding level here. Given its overarching responsibility for national economic and social welfare, the Commonwealth must play a far more active role in tackling the problem. Moreover, utilising its superior tax-raising and borrowing powers to enable the resumption of a routine social housebuilding program after a 25-year break should be only one aspect of this. As argued elsewhere (Pawson et al. 2020), such action should form part of a comprehensive national housing strategy to design and phase in the wide-ranging tax and regulatory reforms needed to re-balance the system.

7.3 Learning the homelessness lessons of the early phase COVID-19 crisis

The inadequacy of Australia's social and affordable housing provision was cast into sharp relief by the immediate impacts of COVID-19. As the pandemic hit, several state governments acted quickly to accommodate people experiencing homelessness to protect them, to enable them to isolate, and to prevent associated virus spread. We accept that the large-scale use of hotels for such a program will have been inevitable in any case. However, insufficient access to the longer-term solution that social housing ideally provides has left governments battling huge challenges in transitioning temporary hotel residents into permanent homes. For many former rough sleepers, the resulting likelihood of a long and uncertain wait for a permanent home will have led to self-discharge and — for many — a resumption of homelessness.

The headleasing programs recently announced in NSW and Victoria will help deal with the immediate crisis. They are a logical means of effectively expanding short-term social housing capacity. Given their limited scale and contract duration, however, they are no substitute for the investment in additional permanent sub-market stock the country badly needs.

The pandemic has also provided a stark reminder that resulting health risks are unevenly distributed across the population. COVID-19 has thus demonstrated how homeless people living on the street or in shelter accommodation experience pandemic shock in a more urgent way than the population at large. Equally, the crisis also showed the capacity for humane response to these problems. Governments quickly found the unprecedented sums of money needed to act with decisiveness that was equally remarkable. Moreover, as shown in this report this decisive action involved departmental silo-busting as well as joint working with NGOs at a new level. Indeed, with never seen before levels of government funding, NGOs acted quickly to ensure that people on the streets, and sometimes in shared homeless accommodation, received immediate access to self-contained accommodation. The pandemic offers an insight into what is possible when political will is present.

We know that thousands of people experiencing homelessness accessed accommodation during COVID-19, but we know less about what has happened next. Without the fuller exposure of this remarkable and unique episode, Australia will be unable to benefit through learning the lessons of this experience. As revealed through our work on this Homelessness Monitor, this aspiration is liable to be frustrated by limited government transparency – a concern that chimes with related misgivings highlighted by a recent Audit Office report (VAGO 2020 p9). Indeed, especially given the need for a cross-jurisdictional remit of such investigation, we believe that this could call for the establishment of a new and more specifically focused Parliamentary, Productivity Commission, or Audit Office Inquiry into homelessness policy and practice responses to the pandemic.

A broader reflection on transparency relates to what we consider as positive recent moves by certain state governments to specify homelessness reduction targets. In our view, a commitment to such targets should be accompanied by openness to the publication of statistics illuminating progress in meeting such goals.

Conclusions

7.4 Future prospects

We are completing this report at a time (August 2020) when the Commonwealth Government's pandemic income protection measures remain fully in force, along with eviction moratoria across Australia. While these measures appear to have been highly effective in suppressing any immediate surge in recession-induced homelessness (see Section 2.4.2), there is every prospect that this situation will sharply deteriorate if governments proceed with announced plans for their near-term scaling back and/or elimination.

The recently announced reduction in the JobSeeker rate to take effect from September 2020 is expected to push 370,000 people into poverty (Australia Institute 2020). Moreover, if government proceeds to cut the rate back to its former NewStart level, 270,000 mortgagees and renters above the poverty line before COVID-19 will be likewise forced below it (Ibid). Even the first of these moves seems certain to trigger rising rent and mortgage arrears which, at least for some, will likely result in homelessness. If the resulting situation is to be kept under control, further unprecedented homelessness intervention measures may well be needed at that point.

Existing research demonstrates that, in addition to the injustice that homelessness represents, it is a state of exclusion that forces society to spend money on band-aid interventions that are costly and only serve to prolong associated harms (Parsell, Petersen, and Culhane, 2017). COVID-19 has clearly shown that society can temporarily (virtually) end rough sleeping and overcrowded occupancy of shared homelessness accommodation. Australia's challenge — and opportunity — is to take the successes achieved during COVID-19 and integrate them into mainstream systems. Homelessness is bad for health and bad for society at all times, not just during pandemics. Australia's future prospects require coupling the commitment shown for people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 with a resolute commitment to using evidence to shape how we meet the basic and fundamental needs of homeless and 'at risk' populations.

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