

# Australian Homelessness Monitor 2020

**Launch**  
HOUSING

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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

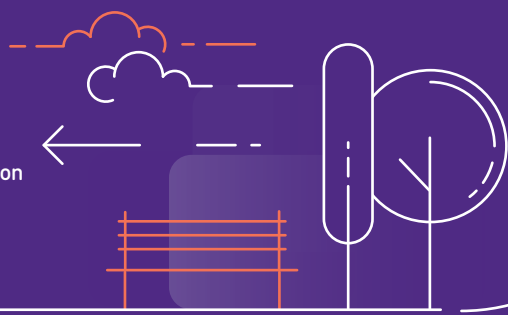


**15%**  
increase in Australia's population (2009-2019)

Social housing provision fell to  
**4.2%**  
a decrease from 4.6% of occupied dwellings (2009-2019)



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.

## Executive Summary

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.

## 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.

## Executive Summary

- 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.

## 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



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