



Homelessness Election Platform

January 2022

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Why a homelessness election platform?

Making homelessness rare, requires just four things. People having enough money to live with dignity; housing being available and affordable on that low income; family violence being reduced; and when people need support to gain or sustain their housing, that support is available. Each component needed to make homelessness rare, is also an essential feature of a country with opportunity for all.

For opportunity to exist for *everybody*, we need to ensure that life's regular setbacks don't regularly lead to calamity. All Australians know that across the course of their lives, both good and bad things will occur. Job loss, illness, or relationship breakdowns, may be around the corner for any of us. The pandemic has made the precarious nature of life, real for many who have previously escaped adversity.

But what we must never accept is that homelessness routinely ruins the lives of those living that experience. When people need help, that help should be there, to escape family violence, to help teens resolve conflict with parents, to find a new rental affordable in older age, or to support a relative struggling with mental health issues.

Australians *want* the Government and charity sector to work together to help people without homes, and children who are mistreated. This paper describes how we can do more, and get great outcomes for these groups. But the truth is not only that we can do more, but we must do more. For them, but also for our well-being as a community.

Elections are an opportunity for Australians to consider our vision for the country. There are no advocates for an ongoing per capita increase in homelessness. We don't see advocates for more family and domestic violence, nor advocacy for children to be without homes. Every political party should come to this election with a plan to deliver solutions addressing homelessness.

With the right measures in place, we can prevent homelessness, we can intervene early where it does occur, and we can keep people stably housed. This election platform details those measures.

As Australians take the chance to consider their vision for Australia, so too will political parties and candidates. We urge each of them to envisage a nation with a national plan in relation to homelessness.



We can halve homelessness by 2032

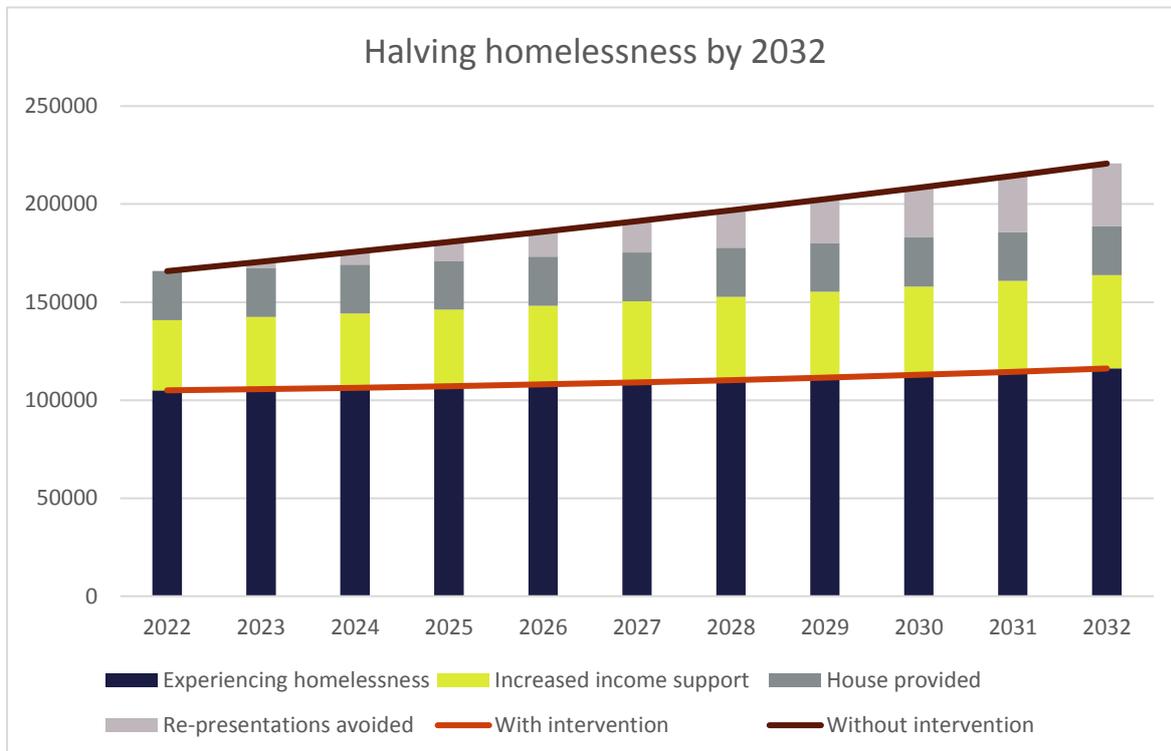
Every year in Australia, more people experience homelessness than did so the year before. It's not just the number of people experiencing homelessness that's growing, but the proportion of Australians without housing. With each year that passes, more Australian households are likely to fall into the most extreme form of deprivation – surely this suggests that something has to change.

This document provides the evidence base for a plan to ultimately end homelessness, with the first step of halving homelessness by 2032. Homelessness and how to end it have been thoroughly studied. We know the common precursors to homelessness, the risk and protective factors, and we know what's needed to sustainably rehouse and end a household's homelessness.

In 2020, we saw that increased income support resulted in a massive reduction in homelessness. We estimate that increasing income support by \$500 a fortnight could prevent homelessness for 35,800 households in its first year. Across the ten years to 2032, some 456,400 households who are currently projected to experience homelessness could use additional financial resources to stay safely housed.

Building 25,000 new social homes each year would directly end the homelessness of 25,000 households per year (275,000 households to 2032). But social housing doesn't just end homelessness - it sustains this outcome. Our analysis of service use patterns shows that by the time 250,000 properties are tenanted, they will prevent a return to homelessness for almost 32,000 of their residents. This effect cumulatively accounts for 175,000 re-presentations avoided in the ten years to 2032.

If the numbers in this report seem stark, they are. Taken across this time scale, we see clearly just how many Australians will fall into homelessness. Australia can be a nation that ultimately eliminates homelessness, beginning by halving homelessness by 2032. This outcome is achievable, but will require concerted action. But doing "more of the same" will see a nation in which the rate of homelessness continues to grow.



Source: Homelessness Australia analysis, based on Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, Australian Bureau of Statistics Household and Family Projections, Productivity Commission Report on Government Services, and Taylor, S., and Johnson, G., Service use patterns at a high-volume homelessness service; a longitudinal analysis of six years of administrative data.

- Homelessness is growing at 2.9% per year¹ – which is a higher rate than the 1.9% yearly growth in the national population over the same period.
- It is projected that at the current rate 165,817 households will experience homelessness in 2022, and that this will grow to 220,690 households in 2032.
- 25,000 new social housing properties each year would end the homelessness of 25,000 households per year. In addition, it would also prevent many of those households experiencing homelessness again in the future.
- By avoiding re-representations, it is anticipated that by the year 2032, it would prevent almost 32,000 households from experiencing homelessness in that year.
- Increasing income support payments would make the biggest contribution to ending homelessness. In the year 2032 this would reduce homelessness by almost 48,000 households.
- The full implementation of the measures contained in this report would prevent or end homelessness for over 60,000 households in the first year.
- By 2032 the number of households experiencing homelessness would be 47.4% lower than the number of homeless households projected if no new and additional action is taken.
- Continuing these measures would see the reduction against projections continue to grow.

Prevent homelessness

There is a saying about economic growth that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’. Yet in recent years, even when Australia’s economy was growing, the factors driving homelessness remained entrenched, and homelessness increased. In the context of our national policy settings, some boats appear to be tethered below the waterline.

With adequate incomes, access to affordable housing, and a reduction in family violence, we could prevent tens of thousands of households from experiencing homelessness each year.

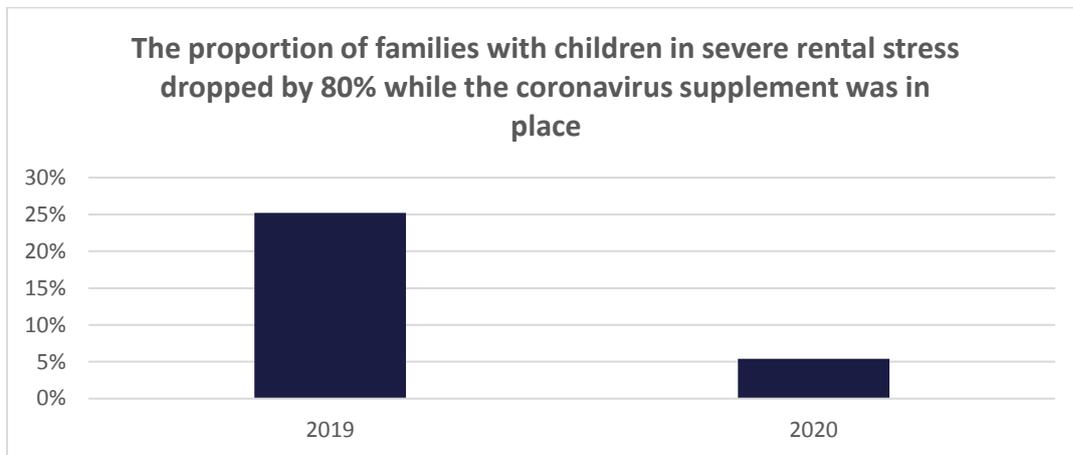
Individually, these goals stand alone as important priorities for the next Federal Government. Together, they comprise a national plan to end homelessness.

Adequate incomes

Every day in Australia, people experience the types of events that cause homelessness, like eviction, relationship breakdown, and hospitalisation. But the majority of people experiencing these challenges don’t become homeless. Under their own steam, those on adequate incomes are able to find a new home, and prevent homelessness. People with the resources to avoid homelessness do so. After all, homelessness is one of the worst experiences a person can have, and most people hope to never face it in their lifetimes. The simplest and most effective way to prevent homelessness is to ensure that people have sufficient financial resources to prevent it for themselves.

More than one in ten Australians, almost three million of us, don’t have \$500 available in case of an emergency.² Those on income support receive the lowest payments in the OECD³ – too low to avert poverty for the majority of recipients.⁴ Over ten per cent of us live in poverty after accounting for housing costs.⁵ It adds up to a nation in which far too many people have incomes too low to allow them to keep their housing stable. Of the 74,000 rental properties advertised in Australia on the weekend of 26 March 2021, just three were affordable to a person on JobSeeker – each of them a shared housing arrangement.⁶ This leaves over a million JobSeeker recipients and their families vulnerable to homelessness.⁷

Not all of these people *will* experience homelessness, but in a nation where 2.2 million of us have at some point been without a permanent place to live⁸, this will be the outcome for far too many. An increase in income support payments would make Australians more financially resilient, and better able to avoid the traumas of homelessness. When in 2020 Australia did briefly increase income support, the number of low-income households in severe rent stress almost halved overall, and also dropped by 80 per cent among families with children.⁹ With 72 per cent of Australians backing an increase in welfare payments¹⁰, pledging to raise income support in this election is both good policy and good politics.



Source: Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, 2021. This measure includes all households in receipt of Commonwealth Rent Assistance, where at least one member of the household is aged 24 or under.

Access to affordable housing

Over the past decade, Australia's rental market has become less affordable. Once an affordable housing option for people on low-incomes and those trying to save money for a home deposit, rents once clustered at the affordable end of the market. Now they cluster towards the middle.¹¹ There aren't enough low-cost rental properties for all those on low incomes, and inevitably many miss out. Unfortunately, a declining rate of social housing¹² means that even if the proportion of people in need wasn't growing as it is currently, it would still be more difficult to access this essential protection now than at any time in living memory.

Research has identified that Australia has a massive shortfall of 433,000 social housing properties, and this shortfall is only expected to grow.¹³ Yet even among those at highest risk of homelessness, one factor has been shown as far more effective at preventing homelessness than any other, and that is - whether or not a person is a resident of public housing.¹⁴

Addressing this shortfall will require both immediate and long-term action to reverse the trend of declining federal investment, and to grow the stock of social housing. In 2013, the total social and Indigenous housing and homelessness funding was \$2 billion.¹⁵ Indexed for inflation and population growth that funding should have grown to \$2.7 billion. However, in 2023, the Federal Government has only budgeted \$1.6 billion – a real reduction in value of \$1.1 billion¹⁶

The stark truth is that without Federal and State collaboration to each contribute, social housing growth won't be possible. As it stands, homelessness has grown far more quickly than population growth over the last ten years.^{17, 18} Without a commitment to a large increase in social housing, this trend will continue in future terms of Parliament.

There are few signals that a country needs to make some fairly drastic changes as compelling as an increase in the proportion of the population experiencing homelessness. To respond to this worrying sign, the next Federal Government must work with the States and Territories to deliver 25,000 net

new/ additional social housing properties per year to progressively address the need for housing from people who are homeless, and those in rental stress.

Take action on family violence

Family violence is the number one cause of homelessness for women and children. It is now well accepted that family violence stems from a desire to control another person, in a manner that not only often results in injury and death, but has ongoing ramifications for a person's self-worth and independence. For around 120,000 women and children each year, when they do leave this situation, they face homelessness.¹⁹ It is not known how many women stay in violent relationships due to the likelihood of homelessness, but we do know that homelessness drives thousands of women each year back to their violent partners.²⁰

Preventing family violence is important work in its own right – no person should be unsafe when at home, no person should be subject to control by others. Addressing family violence is also important in relation to homelessness. Homelessness in Australia would plummet if family violence were eliminated. But there is still a mountain of work to do to get to that point.

The next Government of Australia should commit to primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of family violence. Ideas linking masculinity with dominance and aggression directly feed into violent attempts to control women. These attitudes must be addressed at a population level. Secondary prevention includes better support for women and children at high risk of family violence.

Lastly, one of the strongest predictive factors in whether a woman will experience family violence is whether she has experienced family violence in the past.²¹ Tertiary prevention is an intensive recovery approach, supporting women and children with access to safe, affordable long term housing, and support to fully recover from the traumas of family violence. This approach means that women don't feel compelled to return to violent partners. To prevent family violence we need to address the conditions that cause so many women to stay in violent relationships, or to return to them. Only then will we stem the growth of homelessness, and eliminate family violence.

Rapidly respond to homelessness to minimise its impact

People who have never before been homeless will do almost anything to stay housed. People have an incredible capacity to overcome hardship. But personal crises can escalate. When violence enters the home, when your parents kick you out, or when you simply can't keep living like this, it's time to reach out for support.

The longer individuals or households are homeless, the harder it is to end that homelessness. As existing health and financial conditions worsen, you begin to exhaust the favours you can call on to stay safely housed.

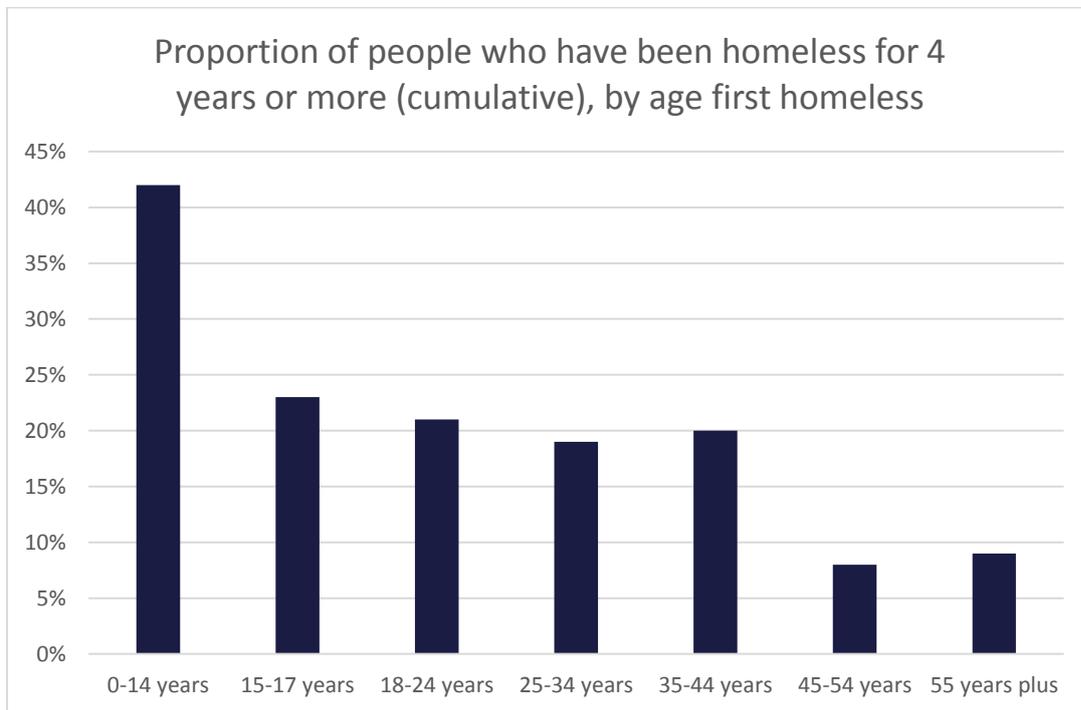
When homelessness happens, professional support should be available. By intervening early, the worst harms of homelessness can be avoided, and situations can improve. When housing and support are available, people can be housed and supported. Homelessness can be brief, and a productive life can be resumed.

Housing and support are currently inconsistently provided in Australia. We can and should do more.

Rapid response to families fleeing violence

Nothing is more important than the safety of our children. Yet when children are unsafe, when their home is violent or they do not have a home, Australia does little to respond. The evidence shows that many children never recover from a prolonged experience of childhood homelessness, and homeless adults who first experienced homelessness as a child are more than twice as likely to experience long durations of homelessness in their lifetimes.^{22 23} We must build a service system that can rapidly rehouse women and children experiencing family violence and homelessness.

To rapidly rehouse women and children escaping family violence, we need to address two factors; the financial shock of the relationship breakdown, and the replacement of the home from which they have fled. For many families, the choice to find safety, realistically means several years of living in poverty – but it doesn't have to be this way. To get women and children back on their feet quickly, we need to provide a rental subsidy, to allow families to enter the rental market while their incomes remain low.



Source: Scutella, R., Johnson, G., Moschion, J., Tseng, Y., and Wooden, M., 2012, *Journeys Home Research Report No. 1; Wave 1 Findings*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, p.21

The end of any relationship is a financially unstable time, but to flee a relationship may leave a family without any access to money at all. The Federal Government should invest in social housing specifically targeted for women and children escaping violence. This would help to alleviate the poverty that they experience, end their homelessness, and remove a major factor pushing women and children back to violent partners and violent homes.

The fact that in children we can identify the need for support to avoid a lifetime of homelessness should be encouraging. But it will only be so if we make those supports available. Australia's most vulnerable children need more than they currently get. For them, we must make homes available.

Support to end youth homelessness

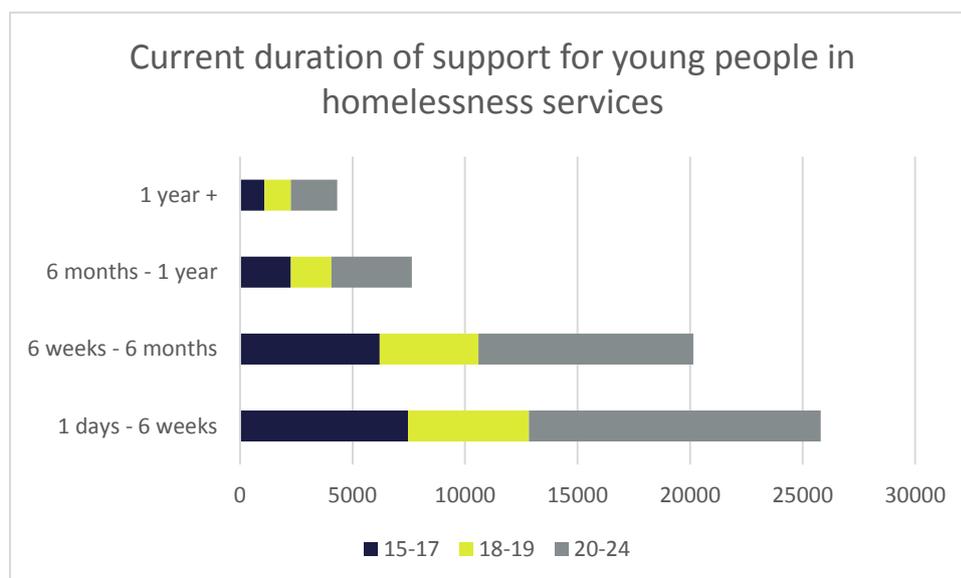
Young people are one of the biggest groups among those without homes. Those aged 15-24 make up one in five of those people seeking help for homelessness. Yet despite this massive over-representation, services are being hampered from responding adequately. The youth homelessness support model needs to reflect the reality of youth homelessness.

The challenge of supporting young people without a home includes more than accessing a stable home. Where that influence is and/or has been inconsistent in their lives, the question remains as to how a service system can meaningfully provide a substitute for the care and guidance so critical to positive adolescent development. Adolescent development requires young people to make steps and missteps as they grow in independence, and healthy interdependence. But for young people

experiencing homelessness, those steps aren't consistently guided by a responsible parent, and the missteps are more likely to have devastating consequences without the protection of a family.

These positive influences can't be replaced by a time-limited 'support period'. Young people need case workers who can work with them to grow their independent living skills and caring social networks, however long that takes. And when they take a misstep, they need to be able to call the trusted adults in their life – the case workers with whom they worked earlier, to support them in their accountability, help them learn from their mistake, and trust them to grow through the process. Support periods that “close”, and triaged waiting lists for new case management periods, don't reflect these needs.

To make the benefits of youth homelessness programs sustainable, we need to fund youth homelessness services differently. Just like a family home, support needs to step up and step down in response to a young person's needs – and just as parents respond to children, the care needs to reflect where the young person is at, in terms of their emerging adulthood.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, duration of support by age.

An end to homelessness for older people

While only eight per cent of people without a home are aged 55 or over,²⁴ this small cohort is growing rapidly. There were 49 per cent more older people without a home on Census night in 2016 compared to 2006.²⁵ While people aged 55 are not considered 'older' in the general community, long term and recurring homelessness prematurely ages people,²⁶ and so people as young as 50 demonstrate high rates of multiple age-associated conditions.²⁷

Many of the building blocks to end older peoples' homelessness are already in place. Aged pensions are higher than other income support payments, resulting in far more housing options being available for older people. Meanwhile, Australia's system of aged care supports means that the care that older people need, is more often available to them. For this cohort, a lot can be achieved

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through the mainstream services already provided – but navigating these service systems is difficult for older people, and even support workers, especially in the face of the barriers and exclusion people with long histories of homelessness face.

It requires real expertise to navigate the My Aged Care portal (especially for those under 65 who must demonstrate that the NDIS is not the more applicable scheme). Older-people can also require support to house hunt, understand the specialist older persons housing options, or to have their health and accessibility needs addressed in the mainstream market.

Specialised homelessness support programs for older people are rare in Australia, but have achieved strong outcomes. A relatively small program funded by the Federal Government, called the Commonwealth Home Support Program’s Assistance with Care and Housing (ACH) should be expanded to assist more older people experiencing homelessness as this cohort experiences rapid growth.²⁸

Invest in Indigenous housing

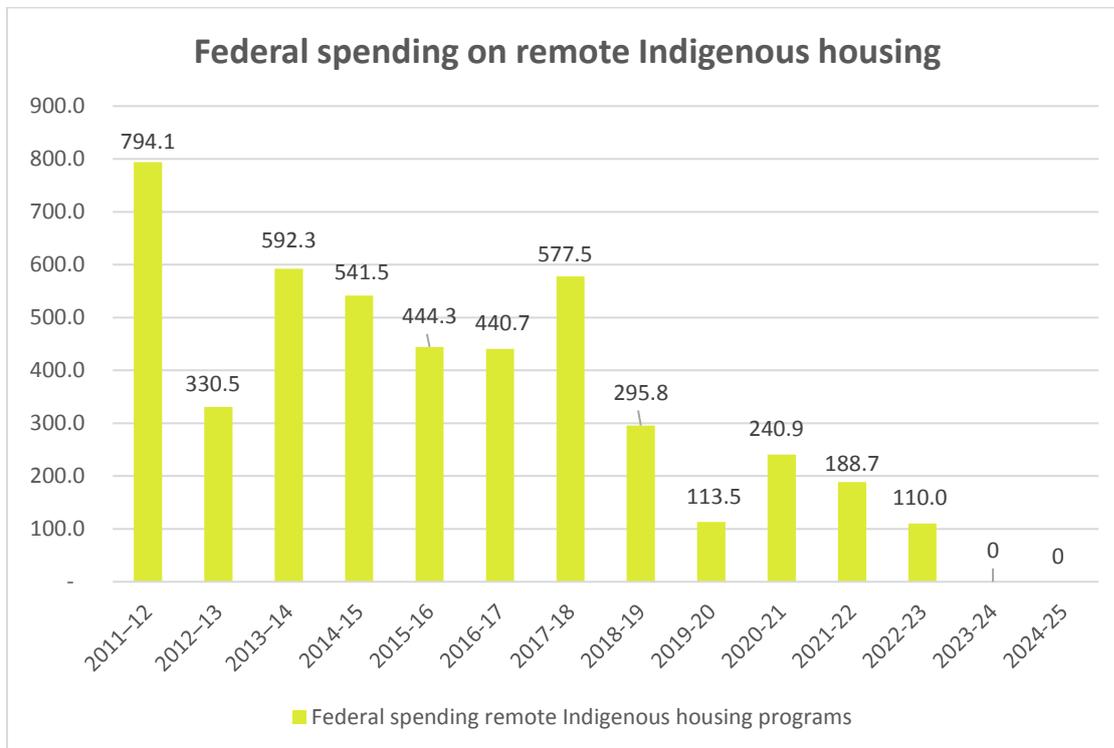
“By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent”

- National Agreement on Closing the Gap²⁹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are 3 per cent of the Australian population, but comprise 26 per cent of specialist homelessness service users. First Nations Australians are 9.4 times more likely to be without a home than other Australians,³⁰ and this over-representation is growing.³¹ That approximately 1 in 12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians face homelessness each year should be a matter of deep concern to all.

Australia’s closing the gap agreement sets out a pathway for Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to reduce the staggering levels of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The agreement includes targets, regularly reported which help us to understand whether progress – or in many instances, deterioration, is occurring in the social and material conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

More than half of homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is occurring in very remote communities. This is due in large part to a lack of housing, and in particular, to housing being too small to meet households’ needs.³² Yet despite the Closing the Gap commitments, Federal funding for remote Indigenous housing is in decline. In 2017-18, the Federal Government invested \$577.5 million in remote Indigenous housing, but has now budgeted to not make any investment from 2023.



Source: Commonwealth of Australia, Budget.

Australian Governments have committed to closing the gap – but this commitment to reducing overcrowding in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households within ten years, will only be realised with dedicated Federal funding. Ten years is a short time, and Infrastructure Australia have identified this as a ‘High Priority Initiative’, on which work must begin in the next zero to five years – in short, in the next term of Parliament.³³

End homelessness for the most vulnerable Australians

Imagine for a moment that we decided that homelessness was unacceptable. That we would take all reasonable steps to end homelessness in Australia.

You might think that it's not possible. That the reason that we haven't done these things is that truthfully, we didn't know how.

That might have been true once upon a time. But advances in homelessness practice mean that we *can* end homelessness and provide the support needed by even the most vulnerable people.

Advances in homelessness practice mean that the question that now remains, is whether the next Federal Government will commit to taking all the reasonable steps.

Nationwide rollout of Housing First programs to the scale needed to fully address long-term and recurring homelessness

Homelessness practice in Australia has had a eureka moment. In a stunningly short period of time, Australia has trialled, proven, and embraced the remarkably successful Housing First approach to ending rough sleeping.

Housing First programs began in Australia around 2009, when the Federal Government funded trials in some Australian cities. The combination of housing, assertive outreach and ongoing flexible support is achieving staggering results, consistently rehousing rough sleepers, and sustaining this result long-term.³⁴ In a little over ten years, Housing First has proven to be the effective approach to ending rough sleeping for which we have been looking.

Yet, Housing First's history as a series of trial projects needs to be addressed – Australian governments (State and Federal) have not prioritised expanding the geographic reach of Australia's Housing First programs to support people across the country. We now have a situation where we know how to end rough sleeping for good, but we only do so in certain parts of the country.

The promise of this moment could mean a genuine end to rough sleeping in Australia. The homelessness sector is eager to do the work, to achieve what was previously unimaginable. But Government funding hasn't responded to this new opportunity. Should they choose to do so, a future Government could eliminate street homelessness.

An end to child homelessness

The forces that drive children to escape the family home, and face homelessness unaccompanied by their parents, are among the darkest experiences in Australia. When a child experiences homelessness, they often do so in response to violence from caregivers, physical, sexual and



emotional abuse, neglect, and/or abandonment.³⁵ The vulnerability of these children is such that they come to similar, and often greater harms once they are homeless.³⁶

Across the States and Territories, child protection services respond to children's harm. But inevitably, some of what happens in private homes is missed by these public agencies. Homeless children, for their part, don't know about and hence don't self-refer to these government agencies. Others flee experiences in out of home care. Homeless children instead can be noticed at school, or turn up at the homelessness services and youth services, more likely to be known by others in the community.

A public health response to children's homelessness would co-ordinate the agencies involved in delivering support to children without homes. Child protection access points would allow children (or the services to which they initially turn) to nominate for themselves that they are in need of greater support. From there, a suite of responses should be wrapped around the young person through existing family, education, health, and homelessness services, equipped to meet the child's needs, and where appropriate, those of their family of origin. In part this is a question of resources for more coordination – but you can't coordinate services that aren't available. The provision of supported crisis accommodation for children, adolescent trauma care or alcohol and other drug services, and respite education services, among others, are all deeply lacking.

It's a truism that no child should experience homelessness, or be without a family. Yet this is currently the experience of many, and will remain so until we provide the services and service system that would allow young people to effectively seek and get the help needed.

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