

Critical issues in Australia's 10-year national homelessness plan

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Scope

The main reasons that people seek homelessness assistance relate to broader issues that sit outside the homelessness service system.

Main reason for seeking homelessness assistance (1)	% of all clients
Housing issues	35
Financial difficulty and housing stress	17
Family violence and other violence and abuse	28
Other family relationship issues	5
Other issues	15

To reduce homelessness, these critical drivers of homelessness need to be addressed.

Implication for the national plan:

A systems approach to homelessness, that addresses homelessness prevention in critical policy areas, as well as specialist homelessness responses to people without homes, will have more impact on reducing homelessness than a narrow focus on the homelessness service system. (2)

Some examples of contemporary national homelessness strategies that have demonstrated significant impacts on homelessness include:

- Welsh Government, 2021 Ending homelessness: A high level action plan – 2021-2026
- Scottish Government, 2020, Ending homelessness together: updated action plan - October 2020
- European Social Policy Network, 2019 Overview of Finland's National Strategy to end homelessness and housing exclusion

Homelessness prevention

A challenge for the national plan will be to identify what drivers of homelessness are directly in scope, which are linked but not fully within the plan, and which are out of scope.

The major drivers of adult and family homelessness include:

- access to safe, appropriate and affordable housing
- adequacy of incomes, and
- domestic and family violence

The major drivers of homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people include:

- child abuse and neglect, and
- domestic and family violence

Implication for the national plan:

Access to housing, adequacy of incomes, domestic and family violence and child abuse and neglect are so significant to the level of homelessness that they need to be included within scope of the national homelessness plan.

At a superficial level the major drivers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness are the same as drivers of homelessness in the mainstream community: access to housing, poverty and living situations in which violence propels victim survivors into homelessness.

However, the significant overrepresentation of First Nations Australians among people without homes is the result of deeper problems that require different solutions. (3)

This overrepresentation cannot be decoupled from the historical experience of colonisation and dispossession, which has left a lasting legacy

(1) AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2021-22, Table Clients 22: Main reasons for seeking homelessness assistance

(2) Prof. Eoin O'Sullivan, Key Elements in Homelessness Strategies to End Homelessness by 2030: A Discussion Paper, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

(3) Aboriginal Housing Victoria, Mana-na woom-tyeen maar-takoort : The Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, 2020

of economic exclusion and poverty, housing market discrimination, stressors which compound the risk of health, mental health and substance use problems, and a lack of cultural safety in human services, including many homelessness and housing services.

Implication for the national plan:

Ending homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians needs holistic prevention strategies to close the gap in housing, health, economic security and family wellbeing. This needs to be driven by First Nations communities in the same way as the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

Homophobia and transphobia are also significant issues that result in family breakdown and children and young people removing themselves from a home.

Adequacy of mental health, disability, and drug and alcohol supports are also important drivers of homelessness for both adults and children and young people.

Implication for the national plan:

Linking the national homelessness plan to policy development in mental health, disability, and drug and alcohol supports, and including homelessness prevention as a priority objective in strategies and policy development agendas across these areas will reduce the number of people becoming homeless.

Primary prevention of homophobia and transphobia and homelessness responses that meet the needs of people from the LGBTIQ community are also critical.

Targeted prevention and early intervention

The best way to end homelessness is by preventing it from occurring in the first place. Preventing an episode of homelessness is also far less costly than responding to people who have lost their home, who then need support and access to a new home.

Focussing targeted prevention efforts on key groups who are overrepresented in homelessness is an effective way to have a significant impact on the number of people needing specialist homelessness services.

Groups vulnerable to homelessness include: (4)

Vulnerable group	Proportion of all homeless clients
Women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence	50%
Children and young people removing themselves from unsafe home environment	16% (children and young people aged 10-24 presenting alone to homelessness services)
People in rental arrears or conflict with their landlord	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 37% clients are in housing crisis 39% are having financial difficulties 31% are in housing affordability stress
People experiencing a sudden drop in income	17% clients are facing difficulties with employment or facing unemployment
First Nations Australians	27%
People exiting institutional settings, such as prison, acute mental health care or statutory care	Only 2% of homelessness clients are leaving care, but this group represent a higher proportion of repeat service users
Older people on low incomes	9%

(4) AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2021-22 and Data Cubes

An effective system of targeted prevention includes interventions that sit outside of the specialist homelessness service system, as well as early interventions within the homelessness service system. These can be connected at a local area level to provide a seamless system of supports and referrals.

Some examples of targeted prevention outside the homelessness service system include:

Group at risk	Targeted prevention outside the homelessness system
Women and children experiencing violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe at home models • Family violence brokerage for housing/ accommodation
Children and young people removing themselves from unsafe home environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School wellbeing support • Family support services • Brokerage to support kinship or other alternative care • Police referrals to child and youth services
People in rental arrears or conflict with their landlord	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenancy/legal advice
People experiencing a sudden drop in income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centrelink emergency payments • Provision of support by Centrelink staff/social workers for people to access their full entitlements, avoid unfair breaches or penalties, and connect with other services
First Nations Australians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports provided by Aboriginal community controlled organisations at life transitions • Adequate funding for First Nations housing
People exiting institutional settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing planning from intake through to discharge/exit • Provision of specialist 'step-down' supported housing models
Young people exiting statutory care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension of statutory care to 21
Older people on low incomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial and tenancy advice

Some examples of early interventions within homelessness services include:

Group at risk	Targeted prevention within the homelessness system
Women and children experiencing violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority access to social housing • Rapid rehousing models to support access to private rental
Children and young people removing themselves from unsafe home environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family mediation services • Youth refuge • Specialist youth housing models
People in rental arrears or conflict with their landlord	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private rental brokerage • Tenancy support workers
People experiencing a sudden drop in income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rental brokerage • Tenancy support workers
First Nations Australians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to connect with ACCO and other services • Private rental brokerage • Tenancy support workers
People exiting institutional settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homelessness workers based in prisons • Housing First models
Young people exiting statutory care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist youth housing models
Older people on low incomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist support to navigate housing options and aged care entitlements that are specific to older people

NB. These are not an exhaustive list of targeted prevention and early intervention programs but aim to illustrate how action is needed outside the specialist homelessness service system at critical touch points for people at risk of homelessness, as well as within the homelessness service system to prevent homelessness.

Implication for the national plan:

The national plan needs to identify changes and interventions both within and outside the specialist homelessness service system to prevent homelessness for groups at most risk of homelessness.

Homelessness prevention for children and young people

The interventions needed to prevent homelessness for children and young people who have left an unsafe home and are couch surfing or in public space, are significantly different to interventions that prevent homelessness for adults. (5)

Children and young people present at risk of homelessness in different settings, including schools, in interactions with police, or in the child protection system. This creates unique opportunities for homelessness prevention in these environments.

Homeless children also face challenges unique to their age and stage of development. They are likely to lack access to money needed for basic nutrition, to be experiencing poor sleep, to struggle to attend school regularly and get health care. They are likely to be experiencing psychological distress and are at risk of violent victimisation, including sexual abuse. This set of issues creates trauma that can impact children's development and cause lifelong problems.

To address these challenges, targeted prevention of homelessness for children and young people needs to be integrated across children and youth services, education, family services, justice and health services. Specialist early interventions that are currently rare or unavailable in homelessness services are also needed to prevent unaccompanied homeless children falling through the gaps.

Implication for the national plan:

To have a significant impact on child and youth homelessness the national homelessness plan will need a specific focus on the needs of unaccompanied children and young people in prevention, early intervention and response. This could be achieved with a separate child and youth homelessness plan or a significant chapter within the plan.

Responding to homelessness

While prevention is the most effective way to reduce the numbers of people who become homeless, specialist homelessness services are also needed to respond to people who lose their homes.

Specialist homelessness services work to minimise the harm of homelessness by providing support to people in crisis, and provide support for people to achieve a pathway out of homelessness and to sustain housing.

To be effective, services need to be able to respond to people's individual needs, rather than provide a one size fits all response.

Housing led responses

Homelessness services have traditionally responded to people in housing crisis using a 'staircase' of crisis accommodation options, including shelters, refuges, and motels, and medium-term accommodation, such as transitional housing. In the 'staircase' approach, people are supposed to progress through crisis accommodation to transitional housing, and then move into long term housing. But as exits into long-term housing options have become more difficult to achieve for people without homes, the bottlenecks and problems of this approach have intensified.

In practice, bottlenecks exist at each point of the accommodation staircase. The consequence is people becoming stuck in a damaging merry-go-round of accommodation and homelessness that re-traumatises them, resulting in an intensification of mental ill health and economic exclusion.

Too often this further entrenches homelessness, rather than providing a pathway out of homelessness.

Housing led approaches seek to minimise the harm of homelessness by rapidly rehousing people, and providing the support needed to address issues that increase future risk of homelessness.

(5) Catherine Robinson, 'Yes, we see you. Why a national plan for homelessness must make thousands of children on their own a priority', The Conversation

At a system level this can only be achieved with adequate access to affordable and appropriate housing, and sufficient capacity to provide the support people need when they need it.

Many people who have lost their homes require minimal support to sustain housing once a new tenancy is established, but some people have more complex needs and need ongoing and more intensive support, such as a Housing First model, to break the cycle of homelessness.

Implication for the national plan:

Addressing bottlenecks in the homelessness system, where people cannot exit temporary accommodation or refuge into long-term housing, requires significant investment in social and Indigenous housing.

Housing options are needed to meet the diversity of people's housing needs including:

- safe housing for women and children fleeing violence
- youth housing models
- singles housing
- housing for families, including large families
- supported housing options
- housing for older people without homes

Housing First

Housing First programs have increasingly been recognised as best practice in providing sustainable housing outcomes for people experiencing long term or recurring homelessness who have more complex needs. (6)

Housing First responses are a housing led approach, but not all people who have no home need the intensity or breadth of support provided in a housing first model.

These programs couple assertive outreach to people who are sleeping rough, or who are experiencing recurring homelessness, with rapid access to long term housing and ongoing flexible support.

Both internationally and in Australia, these programs have consistently delivered sustained housing outcomes for more than 80 per cent of participants, and achieve significant improvements in people's health, wellbeing and employment.

Many people who benefit from Housing First models also rely on acute mental health services, and are clients of or potentially eligible for the NDIS. Housing First programs provide the housing stability and support people need to improve and better manage their mental health and can knit together the gaps in accessing and gaining benefit from the NDIS for people with more complex needs.

Initial pilots called 'streets to home' were funded in the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, but were never significantly increased beyond the initial small programs and lacked specific allocations of housing.

Implication for the national plan:

Australia has several Housing First programs that have delivered excellent housing sustainment results for people with more complex needs experiencing long term homelessness. There is also a growing community of practitioners with the skills to deliver Housing First programs.

However the scale of existing programs, and the resourcing for the research, evaluation and development capacity needed is too limited to realise the full potential of Housing First in ending homelessness for people with more complex needs.

The national plan needs to include investments to embed and scale up Housing First.

Responses to children and young people

Children who flee their home and cannot be safely reunited with family require specialist supports appropriate to their developmental stage and needs. This includes housing models in which their care and support needs are met,

(6) Nicolas Please, Housing First Guide Europe

assistance to remain engaged in education, and specialist supports to address trauma and other complex needs.

Young LGBTIQ people need homelessness supports that are safe and which affirm their identity. Young First Nations people need homelessness supports that affirm their identity and connection to culture.

Responding to people sleeping rough

People sleeping rough comprise only 6% of those homeless on any given night, and 16% of people accessing homelessness services. Although people sleeping rough are only a small proportion of those who are homeless, they are a highly vulnerable group.

Rough sleepers are also very visible to the public and consequently generate relatively more attention and political interest than other people without homes, like women and children fleeing violence, whose homelessness is more hidden.

Ineffective and band-aid solutions are one consequence of the visibility and resultant political emphasis on rough sleeping.

Considerable international evidence has identified that effective strategies to end rough sleeping need to (7):

- be housing led
- offer person-centred support and choice
- take swift action
- employ assertive outreach leading to a suitable accommodation offer
- address people's wider support needs, and
- enable effective collaboration between agencies and across sectors

Several Australian jurisdictions and communities have implemented strategies to end rough sleeping that focus on strengthening collaboration between services working with people sleeping rough. Improved local service coordination and collaboration is important and generally improves the efficiency and effectiveness of local responses, but on its own is not enough.

Significant reductions in the numbers of people sleeping rough relies on better prevention of homelessness and increased access to housing and support, including Housing First programs.

Implication for the national plan:

Responses to people sleeping rough in the national plan need to be driven by evidence and strengthen access to proven Housing First approaches.

Conclusion

Australia's homelessness service system is dealing with significant increases in demand for homelessness support that is the result of rising rents, record low vacancy rates, a continued epidemic of gendered violence, and support gaps in family services, health, mental health, substance use, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, and disability services.

The result is more people being turned away, and bottlenecks at each point of homelessness services delivery. It is not possible to resolve this situation by focussing on homelessness services in isolation.

A successful homelessness strategy needs to reduce the incidence of homelessness by focussing on prevention, with different preventative strategies relevant to different groups in the community.

Prevention then needs to be complemented by evidence-based homelessness service models delivering effective early intervention, and longer term responses that are tailored to meet the needs of different people experiencing homelessness.

This will necessarily include changes to improve the supports available to people in service systems outside of homelessness, and a much greater availability of housing options that meet the needs of people escaping homelessness.

(7) Mackie, Johnsen & Wood, Ending Street Homelessness: What Works and Why We Don't Do It, European Journal of Homelessness _ Volume 13, No. 1, 2019