

FACT BOOK

HOMELESSNESS



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This Fact Book details the types, causes and effects of homelessness. It also covers the topic of homelessness both in an Australian and a global context.

There are a range of classroom activities linked to the Fact Book which have been designed to meet the Australian Curriculum content descriptors in a range of learning areas including Geography, History, Civics and Citizenship and English. The activities also extensively cover the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities and Cross Curriculum Priorities. The Fact Book is intended to be used as a reference guide for students, to assist them with completing the

activities. Most of the activities will direct the students to read a certain section of the fact book before attempting the task. Some of the activities are stand-alone and do not require the use of the fact book. The **Curriculum Map** details which activities are relevant for each year level, as well as providing a list of additional activities. The information contained in this fact book is current and accurate at the time of publication. It is understood that some of the information contained throughout this fact book may change and need to be updated as new information becomes available.

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Created for the teacher and with the classroom experience in mind, these resources have been designed and developed by a registered teacher.

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TYPES OF HOMELESSNESS

The definition of homelessness contained in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Act (1994) states that:

“A person is taken to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which the person has access:

- (a) damages, or is likely to damage, the person’s health; or
- (b) threatens the person’s safety; or
- (c) marginalises the person through failing to provide access to:
 - (i) adequate personal amenities; or
 - (ii) the economic and social support that a home normally affords; or
- (d) places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.”¹

There are three different definitions of homelessness that are used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to determine the amount of people experiencing homelessness in Australia.

PRIMARY HOMELESSNESS is the most visible form of homelessness. This form of homelessness is experienced by people who do not have conventional accommodation, such as people who live on the streets, sleep in parks or squat in abandoned buildings.²

SECONDARY HOMELESSNESS refers to people who move frequently between different forms of temporary shelter. This includes people who are staying in emergency accommodation and people who are temporarily residing with family or friends. ‘Couch surfing’ fits into this category of homelessness.

TERTIARY HOMELESSNESS is experienced by people who live in accommodation that falls below minimum community standards, such as those who live in boarding houses or caravan parks. In Australia, “the minimum community standard is a small rental flat—with a bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom and an element of security of tenure—because that is the minimum that most people achieve in the private rental market.”³ This is the minimum standard and is still far below what most people want, which is owning their own house.

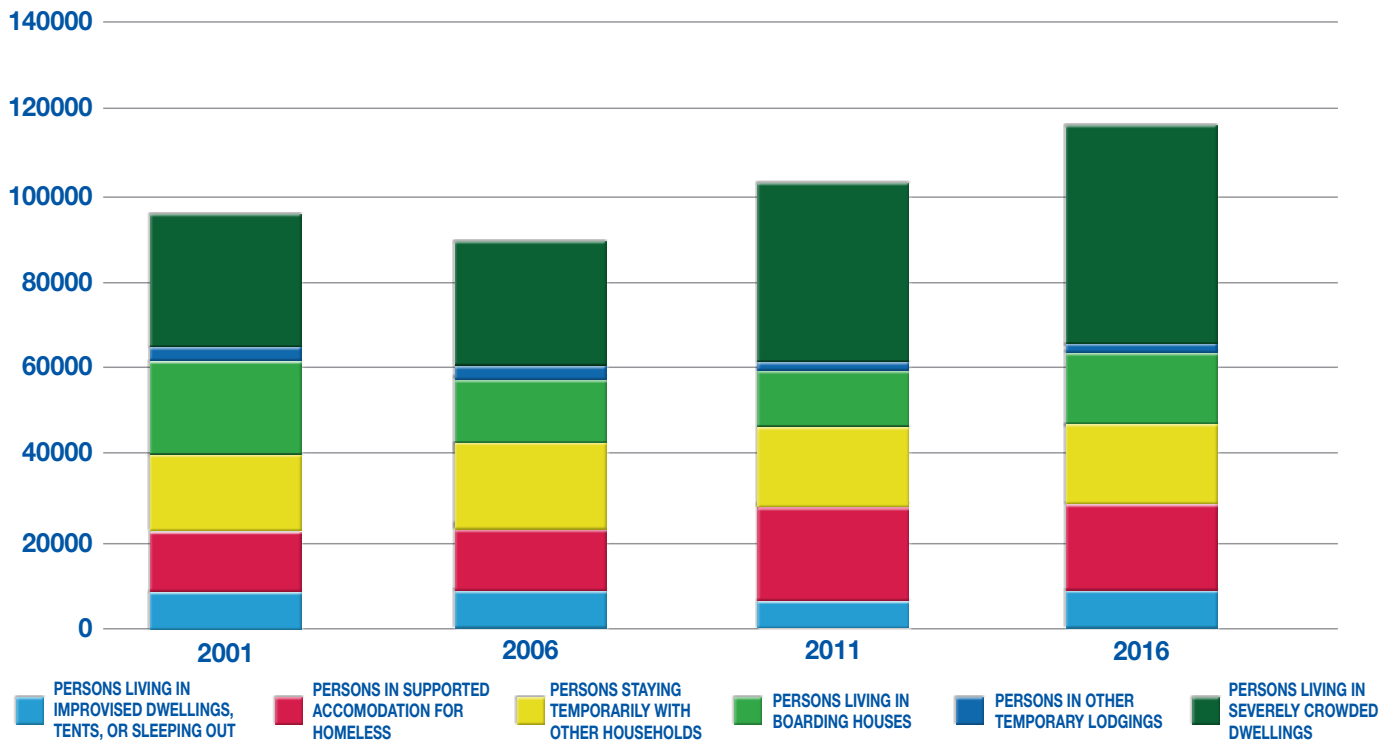
For some people, homelessness is an isolated event – it happens once and for a short time. For others, a small minority, homelessness is part of a chaotic and uncertain life of poverty and disadvantage. These people tend to cycle in and out of homelessness and when they do find housing, it tends to be short term.⁴

STATISTICS IN AUSTRALIA

Most of the statistics for homelessness in Australia are obtained from the Census. People are often in particular places on census night but many homeless people will be somewhere else a few weeks later.

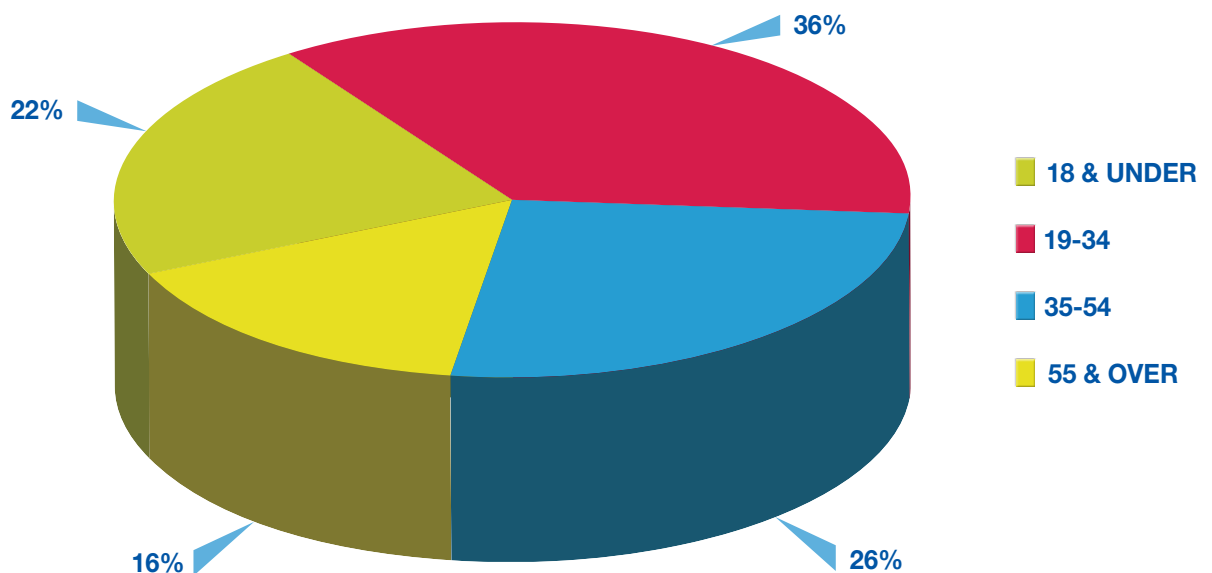
The graph below shows the number of people experiencing homelessness in Australia at the last four censuses. They are split into six different categories. In 2016, the total number of people experiencing homelessness in Australia was 116,427.

PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA



Of all people experiencing homelessness in Australia, 22% are under the age of 18. In 2016, 8,730 children in primary school and 5,785 children in high school were experiencing homelessness.⁵

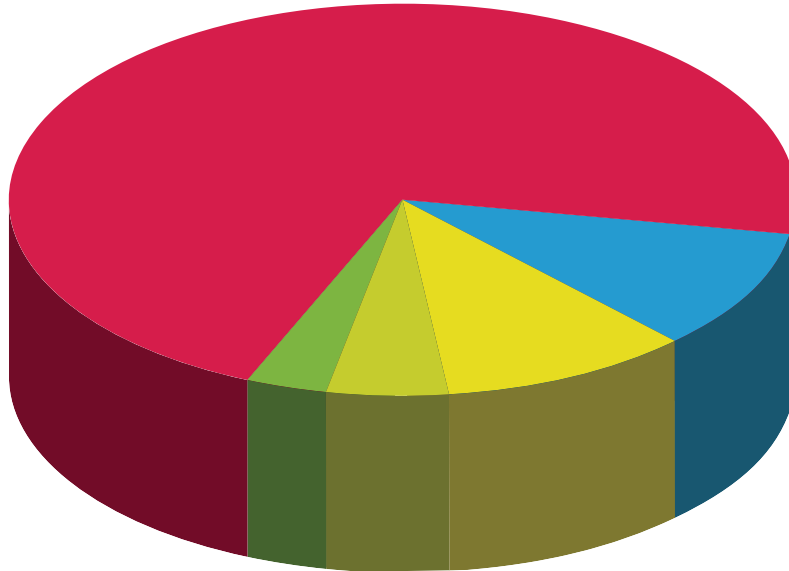
AGE OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS



STATISTICS IN AUSTRALIA

Indigenous Australians make up 20% of people experiencing homelessness, despite the fact that they only make up 3.3% of Australia's population. They also make up 27% of people sleeping rough and 32% of people living in severely overcrowded dwellings.⁶

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS - TYPE OF HOMELESSNESS



PERSONS LIVING IN 'SEVERELY' CROWDED DWELLINGS

PERSONS LIVING IN IMPROVISED DWELLINGS, TENTS, OR SLEEPING OUT

PERSONS IN SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION FOR THE HOMELESS

PERSONS STAYING TEMPORARILY WITH OTHER HOUSEHOLDS

PERSONS LIVING IN BOARDING HOUSES

The rates of homelessness among the different states of Australia are quite similar. The number of people experiencing homelessness per 10,000 of the population ranges from 31.8 in Tasmania, to 50.4 in New South Wales. The clear outlier is the Northern Territory, with 599 people per 10,000 experiencing homelessness. Out of the 13,717 people experiencing homelessness in the Northern Territory, 11,065 are living in severely crowded dwellings.⁷



CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness can be caused by a variety of factors. More often than not, people who are experiencing homelessness have been impacted by a combination of the factors outlined below.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND FAMILY BREAKDOWN

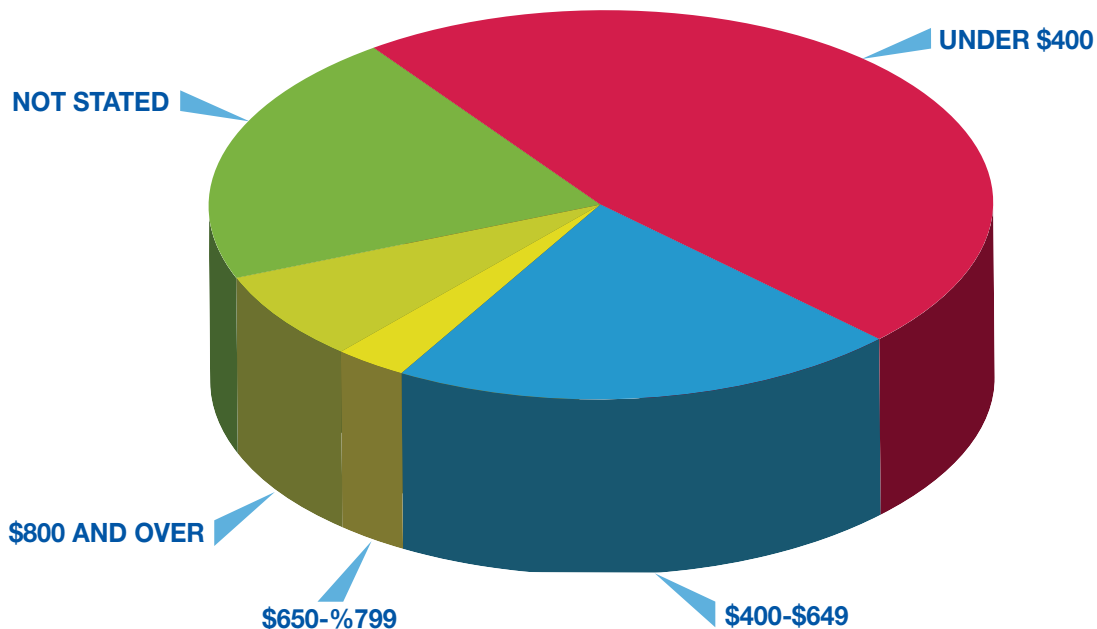
In Australia, the leading cause of homelessness among women and children is domestic and family violence. In 2017, 40% of people who were seeking support from Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) were experiencing domestic and family violence. 91% of these people were female.⁸ In situations of domestic violence, women are usually the ones who have to leave their home and they often have to leave behind their belongings, assets and money. For safety reasons, moving further away is usually the best option. However, this brings with it further

hardships, as the victims leave behind support networks and have to settle in to a new and unfamiliar area. Some victims of domestic violence may cycle in and out of homelessness if they attempt to return to their abusive partner.⁹

POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

There is a clear link between homelessness and poverty. This is because people who are poor are often unable to pay for necessities such as housing, food, health care, and education. Being in poverty is also linked with poor mental and physical health and disability. 46% of people experiencing homelessness in Australia had a weekly income of less than \$400, while only 5% had a weekly income over \$800. In addition, 70% of those experiencing homelessness were either unemployed or did not state their work status.¹⁰

HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA BY WEEKLY INCOME



In Australia, household debt levels are rising, meaning many people are living from pay to pay and are not able to save any money. Unexpected expenses such as a medical emergency or car repairs can be devastating for households who are in this situation. A Reserve Bank of Australia study has shown that one-third of Australians who have a mortgage have less than a one-month buffer on their repayments.¹¹

CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The lack of access to affordable housing in Australia is a key cause of homelessness.

In fact, 62% of people seeking support from SHS identified housing affordability as a reason for seeking assistance.¹²

From 1981 to 2015, the ratio of household income to median house prices increased from 3.3 to 7.

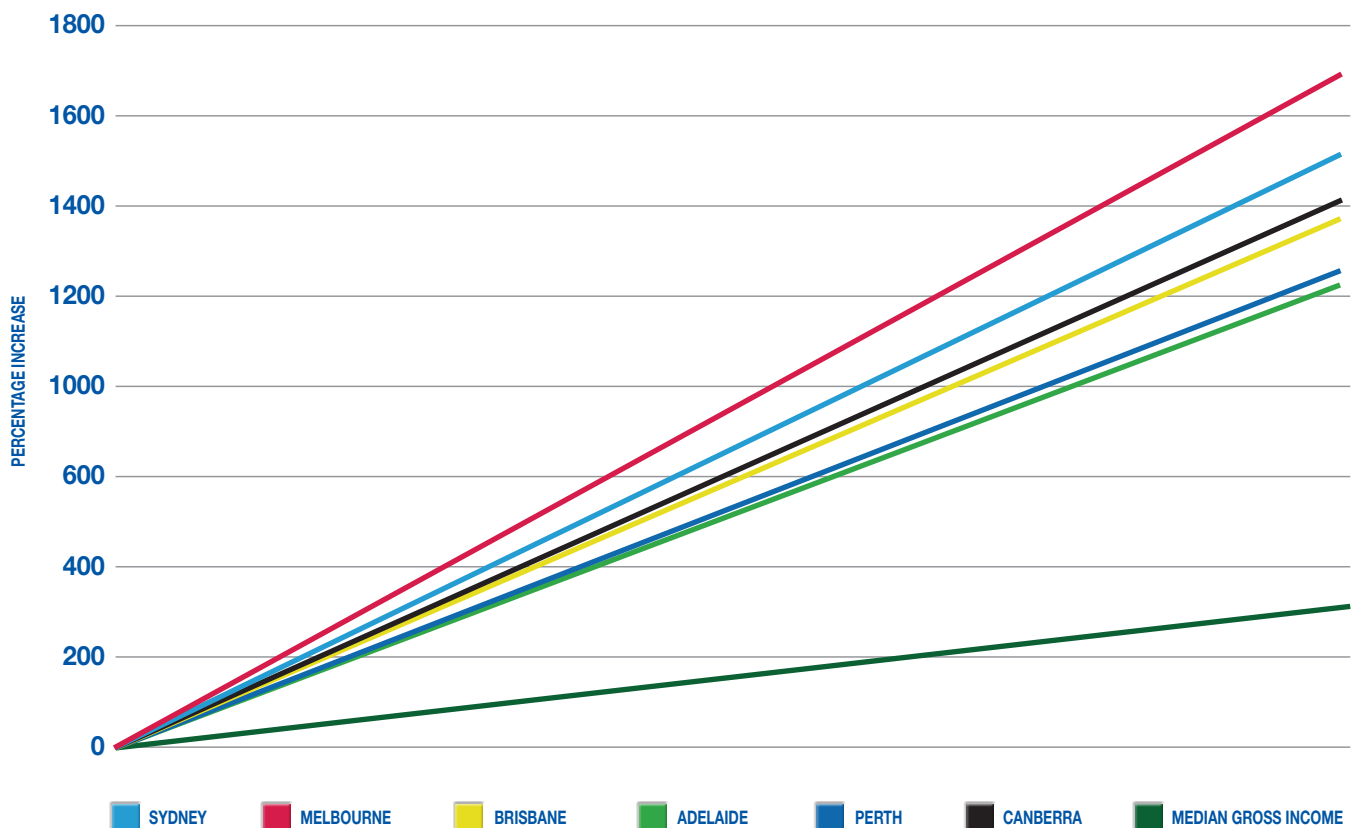
This means median house prices are now approximately seven times the average yearly income.¹³

The cost of renting privately has also increased significantly. Between 1994 and 2014, there was a 62% increase in average weekly housing costs for those renting privately.

This has led to many households being in 'housing stress'.

A household is said to be in housing stress if it is spending more than 30% of its income on housing costs. In 2016, 18% of households were in housing stress, with 6% spending more than 50% of their income on housing costs.¹⁴ Households in stress were more likely to be lone person households or families with dependent children.¹⁵ There has also been an increase in the number of older Australians in housing stress.¹⁶ For low-income households who are unable to purchase their own home or rent in the private market, social housing is provided by governments. However, the demand for social housing is not being met and there are currently more than 200,000 people on the waiting lists for social housing.

PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN HOUSE PRICES COMPARED TO INCOME



CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

HEALTH

Health issues are both a cause and effect of homelessness. Mental health, medical issues or substance abuse were identified as reasons for seeking assistance from SHS in over 22% of clients.¹⁷ Mental illness in particular can be a contributing factor to homelessness and living in unstable and uncertain housing environments can lead to further deterioration of mental health. One third of people experiencing homelessness in inner city areas have a severe mental illness.¹⁸ Furthermore, people who are sleeping rough or are chronically homeless are more likely to have mental health issues, substance abuse problems and disabilities. They also have a mortality rate three to four times higher than the general population.¹⁹

People with a disability are more vulnerable to homelessness as they are more likely to be unemployed or have a lower income. Housing options may also be scarce depending on the specific needs of the person. A large proportion of houses in Australia are not accessible or adaptable for people with physical disabilities, making their housing situation more difficult than the general population.²⁰

SYSTEMS FAILURES

“Systems failures occur when other systems of care and support fail, requiring vulnerable people to turn to the homelessness sector, when other mainstream services could have prevented this need. Examples of systems failures include difficult transitions from child welfare, inadequate discharge planning for people leaving hospitals, corrections, mental health and addictions facilities and a lack of support for immigrants and refugees.”²¹

Research in Australia has shown that many people seek support from SHS soon after discharge from hospital. This occurs more frequently for people being discharged from mental health services. In some cases, these people did not have any accommodation before going to hospital. Some are discharged to stay with family or friends but do not have a long-term housing option.²²

DISASTERS

Natural disasters are a less common cause of homelessness in Australia. A study of homelessness services in Australia and New Zealand found that “19% of people cited extreme weather as a factor in their clients becoming homeless in the first place.” When natural disasters do occur, their impact is often much more severe on those who are already experiencing homelessness. The study cited above also found that “almost one-third of people who have been homeless have suffered extra trauma because of extreme weather.”²³

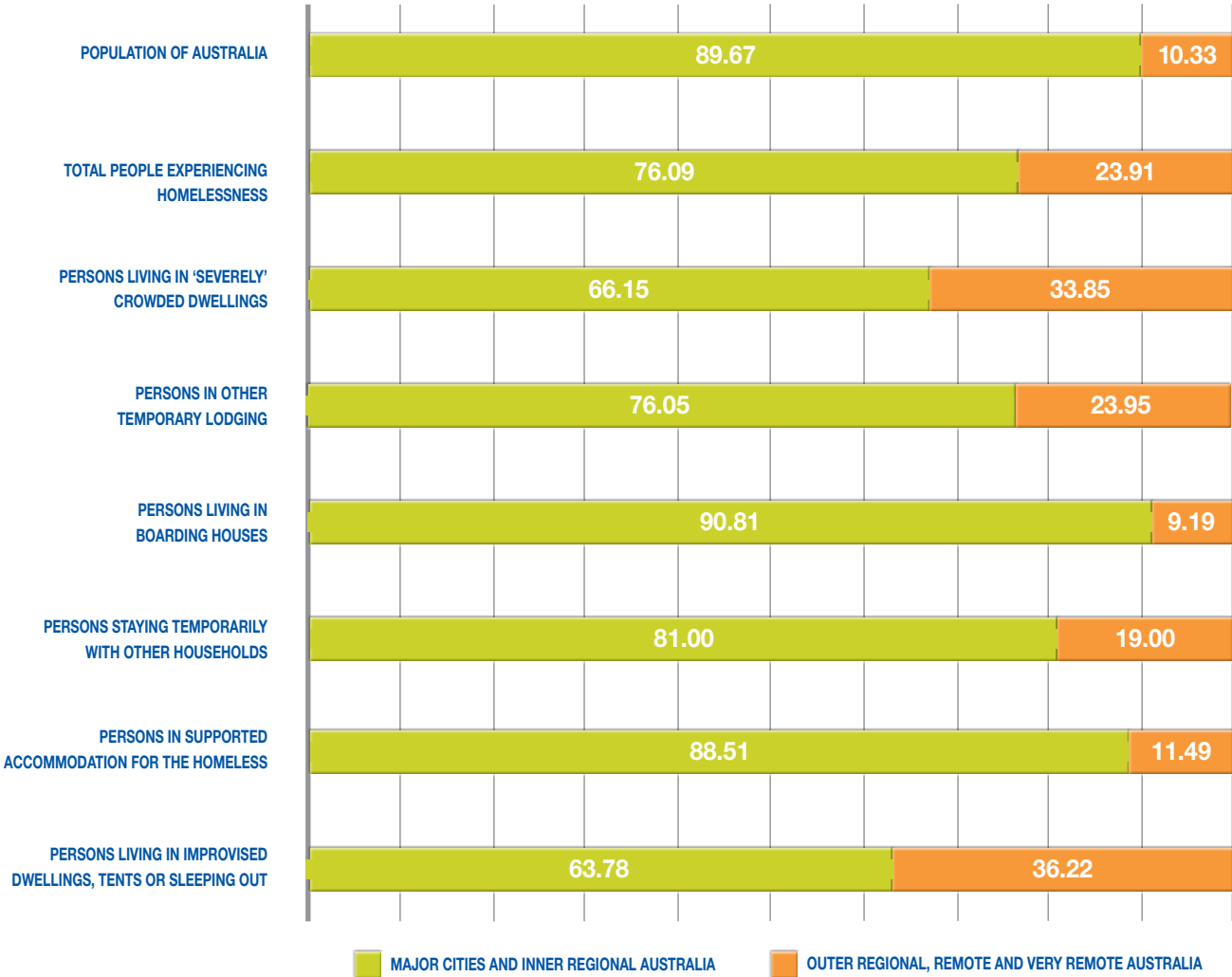
ADDICTION – DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Stereotypically, addiction to drugs and alcohol has been seen as a key cause of homelessness. However, in reality, addiction is more often an effect of homelessness, rather than a cause. A Melbourne study of 5,526 people experiencing homelessness found that 43% had a substance abuse problem, but 66% of them developed the problem AFTER becoming homeless, not before. Only 15% of people experiencing homelessness had a substance abuse problem before becoming homeless.²⁴



CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS BY REGION



EFFECTS OF HOMELESSNESS

CHILDREN AND EDUCATION

Homelessness has profound impacts on children and their education. Studies both internationally and in Australia have shown that there are significant impacts on children's mental and physical health and development, as well as their emotional well-being and behaviour.

The extent of the impact differs depending on the child's developmental stage. Some of the specific problems that have been identified in children experiencing homelessness are "poor dental health, asthma, skin problems, vision problems, and recurrent headaches." Homelessness is also likely to lead to poor nutrition, which in turn leads to poor health.²⁶

As well as impacting on health, homelessness also causes social problems for children.

Children experiencing homelessness face the loss of their home, routines, friends, belongings and much more. As a result, studies have shown that children experiencing homelessness often feel lonely and have few friends. They find it difficult to make new friends or transition to new school due to feelings of shame, as well as a fear of stigmatisation, ridicule or rejection.²⁷ Due to this fear, many children do not tell others about their living situation.²⁸

Children also regularly expressed feelings of sadness, worry and anxiety due to their unstable housing situation. Parents have reported that children can be "withdrawn, unsettled, angry and even suicidal, and suffer sleeping difficulties and bedwetting." In some cases, children may even feel responsible for the family becoming homeless.²⁹ It is also concerning that experiencing homelessness in childhood is associated with homelessness in later life. An Australian study found that most people "who had been homeless for the medium to longer-term, first experienced homelessness during their childhood."³⁰

Experiencing homelessness also has a detrimental effect on a child's education. These children tend to have more behaviour problems, which is linked to their low self-esteem and lack of social support.³¹ One Australian study found that 60% of children experiencing homelessness had moved more than three times in the previous year, which put them at great risk of educational disadvantage.³² Hunger and poor nutrition, two consequences of homelessness, can also affect the ability of children to learn in school.

In addition, homelessness disrupts opportunities for children to participate in sporting and cultural activities at school.

ELDERLY

Homelessness has a negative impact on both physical and emotional health for older Australians. Older Australians made up 25% of people accessing SHS in 2017.³³ They may experience homelessness for a range of reasons including forced retirement, insufficient savings, death of a spouse, poor health or separation. People over 55 are much more likely to access the hospital system and research has shown that for those over 55 and living on the street, 64% are at risk of death within 5 years.³⁴ Physical and mental health problems increase with age, and these problems are further exacerbated when someone is experiencing homelessness.

EFFECTS OF HOMELESSNESS

GENERAL EFFECTS

Across all age groups who are experiencing homelessness, people experience “poor dental health, eye problems, podiatry issues, infectious diseases, sexually transmitted disease, pneumonia, lack of preventive and routine health care and inappropriate use of medication.”³⁵

In some communities across Australia, homelessness can lead to a cycle of low school achievement, high unemployment, poor health, high imprisonment rates and child abuse. This leads to major costs for the individuals involved, as well as for society more broadly. Government services incur significant costs as a result of homelessness. People experiencing homelessness use hospital emergency services at higher rates than the general population. They are often using these services to treat conditions and fix injuries that are made worse by being homeless. It is estimated that the long-term economic cost of not adequately assisting

the 50,000 children who pass through specialist homelessness services each year is close to \$1 billion per annum.³⁶ This is made up of health, justice and community service costs.

Research has also shown that these costs increase the longer a person has been experiencing homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness are often living in the margins of society and have few connections to family and to the wider community. This social isolation means they lack the necessary support networks to help them manage their ongoing problems.³⁷ This in turn can lead to a loss of self-esteem and dignity. When people in a community are socially isolated or excluded, it leads to a loss of social cohesion. Social cohesion is defined as “the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper.” Social cohesion contributes to health and economic prosperity.³⁸



HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see pyramid below) is a motivational theory in psychology. It was proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. According to Maslow's theory, humans must have their most basic needs (those at the bottom of the pyramid) met before they can focus on meeting their other needs.

Therefore, physiological needs such as food and water must be met before someone can focus on their safety needs, and so on. This is an important theory to consider when looking at the plight of people experiencing homelessness.



HOMELESSNESS AROUND THE WORLD

NORWAY

In 2016, there were 3,909 people experiencing homelessness in Norway out of a population of 5.2 million, which corresponds to 0.75 per 1,000 inhabitants.

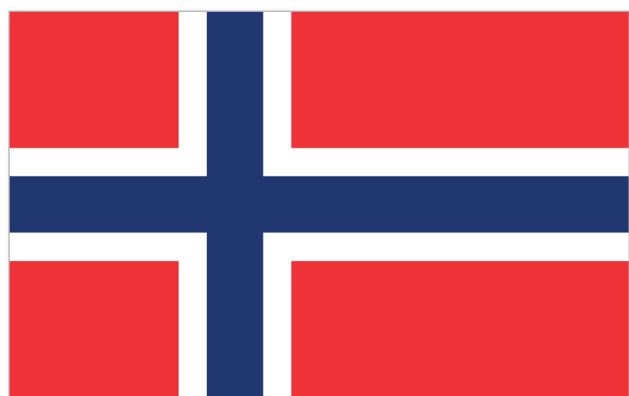
In 2012, the ratio was 1.26 per 1,000 inhabitants, showing that homelessness is declining in Norway. In fact, the number of people experiencing homelessness in 2016 was the lowest since measurements began in 1996.

Homelessness in Norway is understood and approached as a housing problem.

First and foremost, providing people with housing is considered essential to prevent and reduce homelessness.³⁹ The theory behind this model is that having a home is the most important thing for establishing stability in a person's life.

That means that before other things are put in place to help people experiencing homelessness, they must be given a home. Once they are provided with a stable home, clients in Norway are then followed up by health and welfare authorities for as long as necessary. In addition, the apartments they get are spread around in ordinary residential areas, allowing them to integrate effectively in the local community.

The goal of the program is to get people who have been experiencing homelessness into situations where they can take care of themselves.⁴⁰



FINLAND

According to recent statistics, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Finland has declined from a high of 18,000 in 1990 to approximately 7,000 in 2018. Out of these 7,000 people, approximately 5,000 are temporarily staying with friends and relatives.

Finland has made great strides in overcoming the problem of homelessness, in large part because successive Finnish governments since 1987 have made it a national priority.

They chose to implement the 'Housing First' model, in response to recommendations made by a group of experts who found that "solving social and health problems is not a prerequisite for arranging housing. Instead, housing is a prerequisite that will also enable solving a homeless person's other problems."⁴¹

The Finnish National Program to reduce long-term homelessness was introduced in 2008.

The initiative was supported by both local and federal governments, as well as non-governmental organisations, who all coordinated their efforts and resources to implement the program.

As part of the program, 3,500 new apartments were created between 2008 and 2015. This came at a significant cost, but deputy mayor of Helsinki, Sanna Vesikansa, believes that "the program pays for itself." Studies in Finland have shown that for every person experiencing homelessness that received housing, \$18,500 per year was saved. In addition, there are further benefits to the economy when residents who are given housing go on to get jobs and contribute to society.⁴²



HOMELESSNESS AROUND THE WORLD

SOUTH KOREA

At the end of 2016, the total number of people experiencing homelessness in South Korea was 11,340. Of these, 1,522 were sleeping rough, 493 were in temporary facilities and 9,325 were in rehabilitation centres.⁴³ The South Korean Government's strategy to tackle homelessness has been to focus on providing housing, medical care and helping those experiencing homelessness to find employment. Part of this involves "providing job training programs offered by the Ministry of Employment and Labor to help them find jobs and free legal consultation at homeless facilities to prevent human rights abuse."⁴⁴

This strategy has seen some success in the capital city, Seoul. The number of people experiencing homelessness in Seoul has fallen by approximately 30% between 2011 and 2017. The city has helped people find jobs and has helped those with health issues to sign up for the Government's Basic Livelihood Benefits. They also assisted with transport costs to and from work and provided people with daily necessities such as bedding and underwear.⁴⁵

UNITED KINGDOM

There is no national figure for the total amount of homelessness in the UK as the official figures do not include the 'hidden homeless'. In 2017, there were 4,751 people sleeping rough in the UK.⁴⁶

Homelessness legislation in the UK requires all local councils to have strategies to prevent homelessness and provide accommodation and support for those experiencing homelessness. The focus of legislation in the UK is on prevention.⁴⁹ There have been a number of initiatives put in place that focus on early intervention and prevention such as:

- **Sure Start** – This program targets at-risk populations and neighbourhoods for early intervention. There are over 2,000 centres which offer children and their families services, information and access to help from multi-disciplinary teams of professionals.
- **Extended Schools** – This program provides a wide range of services to children including study support, parenting and family support, access to specialist services and much more.⁴⁸



HOMELESSNESS AROUND THE WORLD

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

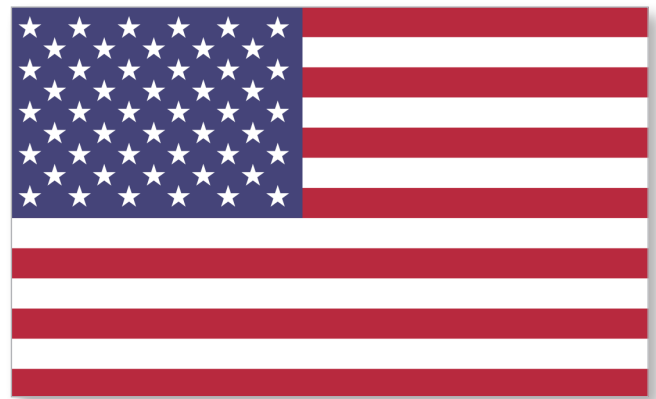
In 2017, there were approximately 554,000 people experiencing homelessness in the USA. 193,000 of these were experiencing primary homelessness.⁴⁹

Cities and counties in the United States have created 10-year plans to end chronic homelessness. These plans incorporate a housing first model, as well as focusing on service innovations and prevention. Similar to the UK, there are a number of government programs aimed at reducing homelessness:

- **The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and the Family Unification Program –** This program targets families in crisis and offers a wide range of social services. It also provides housing vouchers to families which helps to prevent family separation due to lack of affordable housing.

- **Head Start –** This program “provides early education and developmental activities that support children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. Homeless children have priority for enrolment.”

Other Federal Government programs include home visiting services and health care programs for people experiencing homelessness.⁵⁰



ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2016, the St Vincent de Paul Society released *The Ache for Home* report. This report outlines the dimensions of Australia's housing crisis, provides a comprehensive housing and homelessness plan, and includes tangible policy recommendations for all levels of government. The key recommendations made to the Federal Government are:

- The establishment of a \$10 billion Social and Affordable Housing Fund;
- The preparation of a National Housing Plan;
- The recognition of the human right to housing;
- The setting of new targets to halve homelessness and halve the housing shortfall by 2025.

Tackling housing affordability and preventing (not just managing) homelessness is possible. However, it requires political leadership, committed funding, and a willingness to work across all levels of government.

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments have a number of programs in place, but they are proving inadequate to the task. Since 2013, most of these programs have been delivered through two national agreements: the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH).

In the 2017 Federal Budget, the Federal Government announced that these two agreements (NAHA and NPAH) would be replaced by the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). This new agreement began in July 2018 and will maintain current funding levels for three years.

Although the Federal Government has committed to maintaining the present 'floor' of funding for social housing and homelessness services, much more needs to be done. Australia is still without any national strategy for ending homelessness or tackling the housing affordability crisis.

Simply preserving funding at the current levels will not address the crisis in housing affordability, nor is it sufficient for homelessness services struggling to meet growing demand – including an additional 43,000 new people requiring services each year.

Vinnies has called on the Commonwealth to develop a comprehensive national strategy to address affordable housing and homelessness. Adequate, indexed and long-term funding should be part of a renewed plan to halve homelessness by 2025 – a plan that addresses the drivers of homelessness (including the supply of affordable housing), rapidly rehouses people who are homeless, and provides adequate and flexible support for those needing to sustain housing.⁵¹

GET INVOLVED

- Hold a Sleepout at your school;
- Ask a Vinnies Youth representative to come out to your school and run a workshop on homelessness;
- Support our annual Vinnies CEO Sleepout, which raises funds for Vinnies hostels and homelessness shelters and services;
- Play a role in helping to halve homelessness by 2025 through volunteering your time;
- Learn more about exciting housing initiatives such as Rapid Rehousing projects in NSW and the work of Australians for Affordable Housing.

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Graph References:

All graphs were created using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

