



## Australians for **Ending Homelessness**

### **Ending homelessness in Australia: facts and testimonials**

The facts are shocking. 35,000 children are homeless in Australia. Tonight, more than 105,000 Australians will be homeless. A further 17,500 live in insecure, unsafe accommodation that falls below minimum community standards.

The following report outlines some of the data and the personal stories that accompany the facts. The importance of investing in a national response to homelessness has never been more relevant, and as the economic climate fluctuates we must have practical, targeted strategies in place to make sure the most vulnerable in our communities are protected.

By tackling homelessness now, we can gain through economic growth and stimulus of infrastructure projects, encourage homeless people to re-engage with the community in meaningful ways, with pathways to employment, housing and community involvement; and work towards ending homelessness in Australia.

Homelessness is of course a complex issue, in order to address it appropriately, we must know the facts.

#### **Why homelessness is a pressing issue**

The incidence of homelessness is increasing. Between 2001 and 2006, there was a 4.8 percent increase in recorded homelessness (excluding marginal residents in caravan parks) (*Census 2006*)

In 2001 100,000 people were without secure shelter on Census Night. By 2006 that number had risen to nearly 105,000. The number of homeless families rose by almost 17% in that time and the demand on homelessness services nationally increased by 12% between 2006 and 2007.

However this information can only tell us so much. The true experts on homelessness are the diverse Australians who have overcome it, and those still trapped in its tragic cycle. What advice can they offer to governments and communities seeking to end homelessness in Australia?

**“I realised that I have hit rock bottom and that is very lonely and emotional. I hope I never have to experience this again. Going to jail was a terrible experience and the stigma stays with you. I lost so many friends but most of all my wife and daughter. I was tarred with being a criminal and a homeless person.”**

**A major cause of homelessness is family breakdown**

The loss of family and social networks features strongly in the stories of many people who are homeless, which is why early intervention programs involving social inclusion are crucial to re-establishing this link.

- 26,790 people in families with children in Australia were recorded as homeless on Census night, 2006. *(Census 2006)*

**“Being homeless had a huge effect on my life. I ended up in a psych hospital for four months. My husband had bashed me and I was staying with friends... Then I found out my mother and grandmother died in a car accident. I felt the walls were falling in on me and I lost myself on the streets.”**

We have seen a change in the composition of the homeless population in Australia, with an increase in the number of families with children affected. There has been a 16.8% rise in families experiencing homelessness over the last five years 2001-2006

**Table 2: Change in Target Group composition of the Homeless Population in Australia on Census night, 2001-2006**

Target Group	2001	2006	% Change
Families with children	22,944	26,790	+16.8
Adults (singles & couples only)	54,356	59,995	+10.4
Youth aged 12 to 18 (on their own)	22,600	17,891	-20.8

For young people with experiences of homelessness, home is “where there is love and happiness”, “where you live in a safe environment with people who love you and support you”, and “where you sleep and get cared for”. Tellingly it is also “a luxury and not to be taken for granted”.

- 33 percent of the recorded homeless population on Census night in 2006 were 18 years and under, 43 percent were 24 years and under. *(Census 2006)*

Parents both struggle to find housing, jobs and child care. Australia's preschool attendance rate for 4 year olds ranked in the bottom third of OECD countries, the lower rate likely to be a considerable underestimate due to the large number of privately operated child care facilities. *(OECD 2008)*

The impact of homelessness on children is considerable. It includes

- emotional and behavioural problems such as sleep disturbance, eating difficulties, aggression and over activity,
- depression, anxiety, grief, trauma and self-harm,
- learning difficulties and disrupted schooling impacting on literacy and numeracy skills, ,
- medical problems including potential for higher rates of acute and chronic illness, asthma, ear infections, skin problems and developmental delay as well as lack of access to immunisation and dental care, and
- social isolation and feelings of a lack of connectedness, identity and belonging.

In addition there can also be a lack of routine and boundaries and exposure to unsafe environments.

### **Homelessness is complex and demands a complex response**

There are as many pathways into homelessness as there are people who experience it. The structural causes of homelessness include the crisis of housing affordability, poverty, violence and lack of access to social services and support. The immediate triggers of homelessness in people's lives include debt, family conflict including domestic and family violence, inadequately supported release from imprisonment or state care, deteriorating health and chemical addiction.

The experience of homelessness is shaped by culture, geography, age and gender.

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• About 10 percent (10,363 persons) of the recorded homeless population in Australia on Census night were indigenous. (<i>Census 2006</i>)</li></ul> |
|--|

**“If an Aboriginal person or family presents at a homelessness service it usually means this is a last resort; they and their extended families and community have no resources for support or accommodation left.”** (service worker)

### **Visible and invisible homelessness**

Homelessness has visible and invisible faces. Just one in six people who are homeless on any given night are sleeping rough. A majority of homeless people are staying temporarily with friends or acquaintances. Like people “sleeping rough”, those who are “couch-surfing” are more vulnerable than the general population to poverty, violence and exploitation. There is considerable cross-over between these groups – a person may move between the categories.

Some people experience homelessness just once in their lives as a result of a catastrophic or landmark personal event, such as leaving a violent partner; for others homelessness can all too easily become a cycle of poverty, insecure housing, health problems and social dislocation, leading to recurrent episodes of homelessness. Different individuals require different kinds and levels of support to resolve the homelessness in their lives.

A comprehensive national response to homelessness must respond to this full diversity of causes and experiences of homelessness. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this challenge – and there is no group of homeless people more worthy of attention than another.

What the diverse people who experience homelessness share is their aspiration for a better life, despite often being caught in a situation beyond their control.

**“No one chooses homelessness as a career path. I accept responsibility for my situation but I don’t want to be trapped in poverty. I want my child to have the same opportunities as Kevin’s (the Prime Minister’s) children to get a good job. It starts with a home but I can’t afford one because rents keep going up.”**

Despite the complexity of homelessness, we can respond to the varied experiences of homelessness effectively, through targeted Government and community initiatives.

### **Secure, affordable, supported housing – a crucial missing link**

Australia is in the grip of a crisis of housing affordability. The recent global economic crisis is likely to compound the challenge of escaping poverty in a time of economic downturn. In this environment, many people with experiences of homelessness find that their struggle to find housing drags on indefinitely. Some find themselves applying unsuccessfully for twenty, fifty or more private rental properties. Nationally, wait-times for public and community housing exceed 1.5 years, sometimes by many months. It is very difficult for people to focus on accessing employment, education and training, improving their health, building social networks, participating in community life or re-establishing family links without the stable base that a permanent home provides.

- Between 1986 and 2007, house prices in Australia increased by 400 percent while income increased by 120 percent. (AMP NATSEM 2008)
- Between 2006 and 2007, more than a quarter of support and accommodation homelessness clients in Australia had been previously living in private rental housing. This has more than doubled since 2003. (AIHW 2008)

**“I am in transitional housing and I am on a waiting list for public housing. The support worker is great but I have been here for three years with my two kids. My reality, I have received a notice to vacate, there is no public housing available, I cannot afford private rental, my kids will have to leave their school and I have no idea of where we are going to go. We slept for two weeks in my car before all this due to violence and now I don’t have a car anymore so even that’s no longer an option.”**

- Approximately 180,000 households were on waiting lists for public rental housing as at 30 June 2007
- Commonwealth funding for public and non-profit housing has fallen by 30% in real terms since 1996

Homelessness is not just a bricks and mortar problem. It has to do with the inclusiveness of our communities, the responsiveness of essential health, education, employment and housing services, and the willingness of every level of government to protect the right of vulnerable people to access these services.

Homelessness flourishes when, as a nation we allow families and individuals to fall through the gaps of social service provision, economic opportunity and the sense of belonging and connectedness that is the foundation of everyday life for most Australians.

### **Economic and social dislocation**

The hardship of receiving no income and being homeless is clear. The insecurity of income associated with homelessness is connected to a loss of the basic rights most Australians take for granted: including the right to identity and secure income. Many people who are homeless aspire to work. Unfortunately their experience is often that the employment and income support systems display a lack of understanding about the circumstances and difficulties of people who are homeless, to the point of discouraging their genuine search for work.

**“See for yourself, you have to live it to understand how desperate people become, no family, no documentation to use as proof of identity, no income, no postal address, no Centrelink payment for eight weeks, no one to talk to... and exams start tomorrow.”**

- 32,000 people had their income support payment suspended for 8 weeks last year. Under the previous compliance system there was no way for them to work off this penalty

**“Have you ever gone one month, one week, a 24 hour period without a cent of money, no where to sleep, lining up at soup vans, trying not to make eye contact with people on the street, try it Mr Rudd and then you might understand.”**

Social inclusion initiatives, employment programs and the use of specialist services such as health and education where necessary have been used to great effect, but more is needed.

**“It feels like you are being punished if you work. When I found some work I actually received less money. Is it really worth it? Why aren’t there rewards if you find work?”**

### **“One good worker”: supporting services to support outcomes**

Homelessness services are crucial to the resolution of homelessness.

- Between 1997 and 2005, demand on homelessness services in Australia increased by 20.7 percent. (Average of 2.6 percent per annum) (AIHW 1998-2006)

The personal support that workers and services offer greatly assists people to resolve the issues that contributed to their homelessness. This is despite the considerable structural barriers discussed above.

**“The housing and support service were non judgmental and helped me to achieve independence without making me feel like a dickhead when I stuffed up. I didn’t have the confidence to approach places and they helped me to make the first steps. One good worker can make a huge difference.”**