AUSTRALIAN HOMELESSNESS MONITOR 2024

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In partnership with: Homelessness Australia
Generously supported by: Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation; Council of Capital City Lord Mayors

December 2024

Acknowledgements

The research detailed in this report was conducted with funding support from the ***Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation*** and from the ***Council of Capital City Lord Mayors***.

The report authors are also indebted to the many industry and government (state and local) colleagues who contributed to the research in the guise of interviewees and survey participants.

Thanks are additionally due to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and, in particular, Emily Norton for their expert statistical advice, and for providing customised tabulations based on specialist homelessness services (SHS) caseload data.

Invaluable assistance with survey recruitment was also contributed by Homelessness Australia and homelessness sector state and territory peak organisations, as well as by the Australian Local Government Association.

Beyond this, the research team gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the following colleagues for their expert advisory input:

- Kate Colvin (Homelessness Australia) – Advisory Group Chair
- Deborah Di Natale (Council to Homeless Persons)
- Barney Wilson (City of Melbourne)
- Deborah Wilkinson (Council of Capital City Lord Mayors)
- Jonathon Louth (Centacare SA)
- Frances Crimmins (YWCA Canberra)
- Karyn Walsh AM (Micah Projects - Brisbane)
- Kate Davies (Homelessness NSW)
- Paul Scarmozzino (Homes Victoria)
- Kath Paton (DSS)

Shaya Nettle (Toward Home, SA), Orla Matthews (Uniting SA) and George Hatvani (Launch Housing) kindly reviewed draft text and provided expert comments.

Above all, the researchers are indebted to Kate Colvin for her multiple inputs to the project including detailed advice on policy developments, on potentially suitable interviewees and data sources, on the commissioning of unpublished statistics, and on the interpretation of statistical findings. However, since it remains an independent study, the report is a UNSW/UQ publication and its content is ultimately the responsibility of the academic project team.

Suggested citation

Pawson, H., Parsell, C., Clarke, A., Moore, J., Hartley, C., Aminpour, F. and Eagles, K. (2024) Australian Homelessness Monitor 2024; Sydney: UNSW City Futures Research Centre https://cityfutures.be.unsw.edu.au/

ISBN: 978-0-7334-4097-7

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Executive Summary

Key points

- National survey evidence collected in this research from homelessness service providers and local government authorities (LGAs) in most parts of Australia indicates that homelessness had risen to well above pre-pandemic rates by 2023-24
- More than three quarters of services (77%) and nearly two thirds of LGAs (62%) reported homelessness having 'significantly increased' since 2019-20, with well over half of the former (59%) also reporting 'significantly increased' numbers in Q1/2 2024 compared with Q1/2 2023.
- While homelessness services have seen continuing increases in typical monthly caseloads (up by 12% since 2019-20), their ability to accept new referrals has been increasingly restricted by resource capacity constraints. This has arisen because the task of assisting people into secure housing has become increasingly difficult; a challenge that has continued to intensify into 2024
- More than three quarters of homelessness services (76%) reported finding it 'much harder' to find suitable housing for clients in mid-2024 compared with 12 months earlier, with another 19% finding it 'somewhat harder'.
- As a result, people are becoming stuck in homelessness for longer; requiring longer periods of agency support, and/or more repeated periods of short-term support – as evidenced by the increase in the median duration of homelessness service support periods, up 44% in the five years to 2022-23. As described by one stakeholder interviewee: 'We are operating within a clogged-up system with exits continuing to be insufficient to [meet] need'.
- These longer service periods in a context of growing homelessness are consistent with the standstill annual total number of persons assisted by Specialist Homelessness Services
- While total government homelessness expenditure rose by 31% in real terms in the four years to 2022-23 (ROGS report), this has been generally insufficient to expand service capacity in line with rising need. One result of growing demand outpacing service capacity has been that agencies have been increasingly unable to provide support to assist people to avoid homelessness, as they focus on responding to crisis
- Applicants newly assisted by services and classed as homeless (as opposed to 'at risk of homelessness') rose in 2023-24 for the third year in succession after an initial pandemic dip. During this period the number of 'newly homeless persons' assisted by agencies rose by 9% to more than 10,000 per month.
- Both quantitative and qualitative research evidence indicate that the 2022-24 period has seen homelessness pressures beginning to extend to a broader cohort within the general population – including more employed people. Due to growing housing affordability stress, more people in work are needing to seek crisis assistance.
- This shift is also reflected in people undergoing harsher experiences of homelessness prior to gaining support, with persons newly assisted by agencies and having recently slept rough increasing by 22% in the three years to 2023-24 – from a monthly average of 3,808 to 4,636 persons. Separately, NSW 'point in time' rough sleeping numbers increased by 51% in the period 2020-24, driven by regional rises.

- Housing affordability stress is the identified 'main factor' triggering homelessness that has most markedly increased in recent times. In the three years to 2023-24, the flow of new service users reporting this as the main factor prompting them to seek support jumped by 36%.
- A decade of generally negligible social housing growth saw a further decline in social housing as a proportion of all housing; continuing the trend that has seen this sink from over 6% in the 1990s to barely 4% by 2021. In a striking reversal, however, new investment pledged by both state and Commonwealth governments since 2020 looks set to see the delivery of around 60,000 new social homes during the current decade.
- Allowing for public housing demolitions and sales, the net addition to national social housing stock during the 2020s may total around 50,000 dwellings, equating to an increase of around 11% on the 2023 national portfolio.
- At least for a few years during the late 2020s these programs may generate sufficient construction activity to – at least temporarily – halt the decline in social housing as a proportion of all housing. Yet they will remain small relative to both the scale of unmet need, and housing and homelessness advocates calls for social rental homes to form 10% of all homes.
- Moreover, major new funding commitments will be required by Australian governments even to maintain mid-late 2020s output levels, let alone to expand these towards investment levels consistent with fully addressing unmet housing need over the medium term.
- There is growing recognition of the role local governments can/do play in augmenting local service system responses to homelessness. Common contributions include surveillance and referral activities; coordination of services and resources; and facilitation of housing and accommodation services. Local government homelessness responses nevertheless remain highly constrained by limited resources and mandate, and by the dearth of affordable housing options to relieve the problem.

Report purpose and methods

Australian Homelessness Monitor (AHM) 2024 presents an independent analysis of this important concern. The research has been guided by senior state/territory, local government and NGO colleagues via an Expert Advisory Group chaired by Homelessness Australia. Its overarching purpose is to inform evidence-based housing and homelessness policymaking. To this end we investigate the changing scale and nature of the problem and assess associated policy and practice developments and debates.

Primary research involved in-depth interviews with 18 key stakeholder representatives (state and local government, NGOs) across all eight Australian jurisdictions, as well as eight in-depth interviews with council staff and other local stakeholders in three case study localities. Online survey responses were submitted by 173 specialist homelessness services agencies and by 167 councils, nationally. The report also draws on a policy document review and on original statistical analysis of both published and unpublished data on recent housing market conditions as well as on people experiencing homelessness.

Following on from our first edition in 2018, AHM 2024 is the fourth in the series. It is funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation and by the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors. While our policy review focuses mainly on changes taking place in the past two years, our statistical analysis concentrates mainly on the period 2019-20 – 2023-24, partly so as to benchmark up-to-date statistics with the situation immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research findings

Housing market context

A key factor underlying the recent escalation in homelessness has been the remarkable surge in private sector rents affecting most parts of Australia since 2020. Over this period rents have risen at rates unseen since 2008. Between March 2020 and June 2024, the median advertised weekly rent for all property types across all cities and regions rose from $413 to $624 – a 51% nominal increase, which exceeded the increase in general inflation over the same period by 29%.

Given that rent increases have substantially outpaced earnings growth since 2020, they have caused a quite substantial decline in rental affordability for people starting a new tenancy during this period – especially for those ineligible for Rent Assistance such as low wage workers. According to a recent estimate by Impact Economics and Policy, the number of households in rental stress increased by 141,000 – or 18% – between 2021 and 2024.

One contributor to recent rent inflation has been the plunge in rental vacancy rates seen in the period 2020-22, with the national rate falling to the unusually low level of 1%, and subsequently remaining at or close to this rock bottom level. The combination of reduced affordability and low vacancy rates has exacerbated the risk of homelessness for low income and vulnerable households over this period.

The acute and still intensifying shortage of tenancies affordable to low-income Australians was starkly illustrated by Anglicare's March 2024 survey of advertised rents. This showed that, of the 45,000 properties being marketed for let across Australia at that time, just 2.7% were affordable to a 2-parent, 2-child family, with both parents in minimum wage employment and receiving the Parenting Payment.

Referencing comparable data from previous Anglicare surveys confirms that the already minimal share of private rental properties affordable to identified low-income groups has tended to further diminish since the late 2010s as advertised rents have run ahead of social security payment rates and minimum wage incomes.

The period 2018-2023 saw social housing expanding by 2.3%. However, since Australia's population rose by 6.8%, the sector's share of all housing has continued to fall, as it has for most of the past 25 years. A more direct measure of long-term contraction of social housing supply is the reduction in annual new lettings by social housing providers from 52,000 to 32,000 1991-2023, a reduction of 38%. Proportionate to population, this equates to a decline of 60%.

However, thanks to recent social housing investment programs in certain states, letting supply has recently begun to increase in those jurisdictions. Also reflecting enhanced priority accorded to homeless households, Victoria consequently recorded a rise of 82% in 'homeless with support' social housing tenancies initiated in 2023-24 compared with 2019-20.

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Social housing, homelessness and Rent Assistance funding

Especially within a context of diminishing availability of suitable private tenancies, social housing is a critically important resource in affordably and securely accommodating low income and/or vulnerable households, and in preventing and relieving homelessness.

In re-asserting a national housing leadership role, the current federal government has re-instated national funding for new social housing development via a suite of investment programs:

- The $10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF)
- The $2 billion Social Housing Accelerator program
- Jointly with the Northern Territory Government, the $4 billion remote NT Indigenous housing investment scheme.
- The $1 billion 'refreshment' of the National Housing Infrastructure Facility (NHIF).

In total, these initiatives are projected to add around 25,000 new homes to the national social housing portfolio by 2029 (completed or under construction by that time). Beyond this, Commonwealth funding should underpin construction of 20,000 affordable rental homes by 2029.

Recent federal social housing investment commitments compound a marked post-2020 upswing in state/territory government self-funded social housing development programs, led by Victoria and Queensland, but also now including most other states. Although the regrettable absence of nationally co-ordinated monitoring impedes definitive quantification, it is likely that state/territory initiatives will generate 30-40,000 new social housing dwellings during the 2020s, over and above those funded by the Commonwealth.

These new initiatives add to the base level of funding provided for social housing via the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NAHA), which was replaced with a new five-year agreement, now called the National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH) on 1 July 2024, albeit with funding levels essentially unchanged.

The Federal Government has also increased direct payments to low-income tenants in receipt of Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA). In combination with annual indexation, the two 'extraordinary' increases in CRA maximum payments sanctioned by the Commonwealth Government in 2023 and 2024 have lifted maximum payments by 45% in cash terms since early 2022. This will have substantially softened the effect of dwelling cost increases for renters eligible for such payments over this period, in this way tempering the impact of rising rents in exposing more Australians to the risk of homelessness. These increases, nevertheless, only partially offset the longer-term devaluation of CRA relative to actual rents.

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Recent homelessness policy developments

Important innovations in homelessness policy have been developing in recent years, notably including widening professed adherence to Housing First principles and aspirations to expand permanent supportive housing provision in certain jurisdictions. Arguably, however, it remains the case that Australian homelessness programs genuinely consistent with Housing First principles are few in number. Moreover, such schemes are often operated only as one-off pilots or small-scale initiatives targeting very small populations.

Aspirations to 'end homelessness' are increasingly widely voiced by governments and NGOs, albeit that this commitment generally remains lacking in precise definition and unaccompanied by the necessary commitment to ongoing funding for support as needed, and to the long-term expansion of social and affordable housing provision, similarly required to make this a reality.

The past year has also seen the conclusion of state government COVID-19 pandemic emergency accommodation (EA) programs in NSW and Victoria, and the scaling back of the longer term housing and support programs, Homeless to a Home in Victoria and Together Home in NSW. Program evaluations credit these with generally positive outcomes in facilitating safe, secure and supported housing pathways for a cohort of former rough sleepers with complex needs initially prioritised for support during the public health emergency.

Several new and ongoing state and territory initiatives seek to foster Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led homelessness and housing responses. Among our SHS survey respondents 81% report having culturally safe measures in place, including training, engagement with local First Nations led organisations, and employing First Nations staff in leadership positions. It is critical that such efforts succeed in disrupting the stark injustice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing deprivation at rates astronomically higher than experienced by non-Indigenous people.

Sector workforce issues

There are significant workforce challenges in the homelessness sector largely attributable to recently increasing demand for services. These challenges include not only the growing overall volume of people seeking help, but the tendency towards increased client complexity, and also the growing challenge of securing housing outcomes, a combination that can sap staff morale. These stresses compounding agencies' uphill struggle to retain skilled staff at risk of burn-out and aware of better pay for similar work in other sectors.

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The unprecedented government funding and system-wide response to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic is referenced by homelessness services staff as exemplifying how they could meaningfully improve client welfare. Meanwhile, their current inability to assist all among a growing number seeking help detracts from workers' job satisfaction and commitment to remain in current roles.

A sector funded by government at a level inadequate to keep pace with rising demand, yet also officially assessed on whether this demand has been met, risks alienating agency staff. The homelessness services workforce not only needs to be resourced to meet demand, but also contracted and assessed on measures that can directly and realistically be achieved.

Homelessness prevention approaches

Key challenges posed in attempting a truly preventative approach to homelessness include the sufficiency of government funding, the adequacy of social housing provision and the functionality of the private rental market. In the absence of these conditions service providers are forced into a crisis-driven and responsive approach to homelessness.

Despite the resource challenges increasingly impeding prevention efforts, there is nevertheless engagement in preventive and early intervention work for people at risk of homelessness.

The dominant form of prevention in Australia involves assisting people at risk of homelessness in sustaining existing accommodation, with most jurisdictions having some type of state government funded intervention to prevent homelessness through tenancy sustainment and tenancy access models.

There is an urgent necessity for the sector to be better resourced so that SHS staff can adapt their work, including models of homelessness prevention, to respond to growing and changing need illustrated in our SHS survey. Increasingly unaffordable rents are creating cohorts of private tenants placed at risk of homelessness, many of whom are presenting to SHS providers, seeking assistance due to financial problems.

The rise of the Advance to Zero homelessness services sector

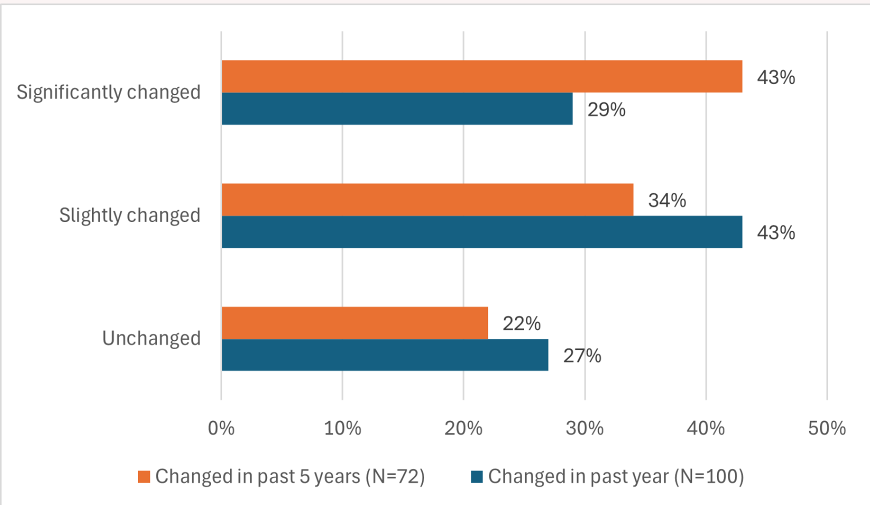
Australia has seen a steady uptake of Advance to Zero (AtoZ) 'community-driven' homelessness projects in recent years, with well over 20 AtoZ projects now operating in capital cities and elsewhere. In its commitment and its methodology the AtoZ movement brings value to its affiliated communities by way of collaboration, locally-determined and owned responses, and a systems understanding of homelessness (which is drawn on in utilising data to advocate for systems change).

However, at a time when SHS capacity is at full stretch, there are concerns around the resource input implications of data collection conventions central to the AtoZ model. A judgement on the 'added value' contribution of AtoZ will require demonstration that it enhances housing outcomes for individuals and facilitates data-informed advocacy to address system failures, including housing unaffordability and the limitations of social support systems .

The changing profile of homelessness

Asked about the mix of persons affected by homelessness, more than three quarters of service provider agencies (77%) responding in our online survey reported notable change over the past five years, with almost half (43%) perceiving 'significant change' – see Figure A.

Figure A: Perceived change in mix of people seeking SHS agency assistance

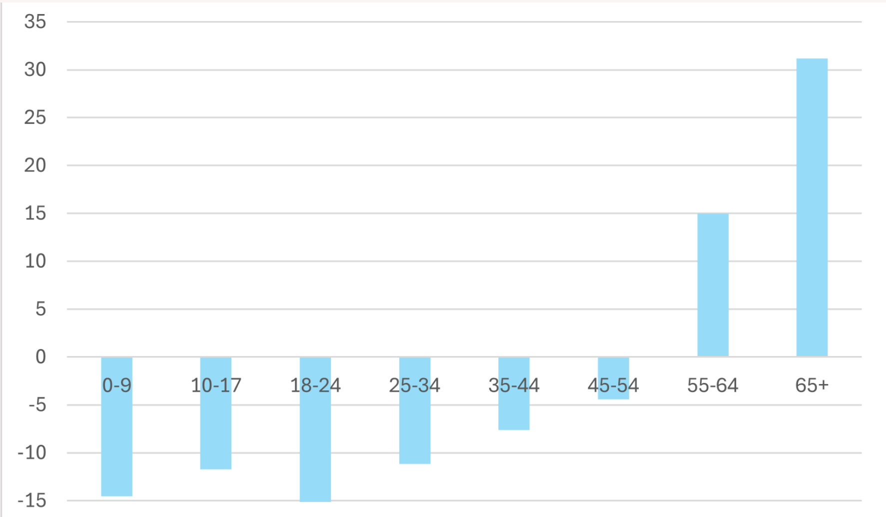


Source: Authors' survey of specialist homelessness services providers. N=100.

Both survey respondents and stakeholder interviewees described perceived recent changes as reflecting impacts of housing insecurity extending across a widening group within the general population:

We're seeing a new wave of homelessness from people who have never accessed services before. Low and middle-income earners, who used to manage on their own, are now seeking help due to rising rents and cost-of-living pressures [SHS survey respondent].

Figure B: New SHS service users broken down by age group, % change 2017-18 – 2023-24



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – unpublished. Notes: 1. Figures relate to average monthly new SHS service users. 2. So as to capture longer term trends of demographic change which are typically slow-moving, analysis encompasses the entire period since AIHW initiated monthly statistics publication in 2017-18.

Consistent with this perspective, statistical evidence shows a notable recent increase in the proportion of employed persons receiving homelessness services – up from 10.9% to 15.3% - in the five years to 2022-23.

According to others, groups disproportionately represented among those accessing homelessness services for the first time included families, people with a disability, persons in work, and older women, as well as – in some areas – people whose Australian residency status renders them ineligible for social housing or temporary accommodation.

Statistically supporting the perception of homelessness beginning to affect a wider population cohort, recent years have seen an increase in new service users with no previous service history, relative to the number that would have been expected given previous trends.

Extending previously identified patterns, the cohort of persons newly accessing homelessness services has seen ongoing growth in representation of older age groups (see Figure B) and Indigenous persons. In contrast with earlier analyses, however, the largest percentage increases were for males (rather than females) within the 55-64 and 65+ age groups.

The local government role

As custodians of the local public realm, local governments face increasing pressure to respond to the visible manifestations of homelessness. Over two thirds of councils (67%) identify this as a significant, acute or very acute problem in their area. Of these, 85% consider themselves as actively addressing the issue.

In implementing their responses, 'homelessness active' councils seek to exploit their pervasive presence in the public realm and their intimate knowledge of local services systems to help augment and facilitate local homelessness responses. To do so, they have developed functions that can be classed under three broad headings:

- Surveillance and referral
- Coordination actions
- Facilitation of new accommodation and service options.

Performing these functions has required councils to transform how staff approach homelessness, partially diverging from the compliance-oriented responses of the past.

However, despite their positive impact on local homelessness responses, homelessness active councils face multiple barriers and challenges. These include resourcing and statutory limitations, as well as difficulties balancing local amenity with the needs of people on the street whilst long-term affordable housing options remain scarce.

Conclusions

The balance of evidence presented in this report clearly indicates that homelessness has recently escalated significantly. For lower income Australians in need of accommodation, private housing market conditions have become increasingly stressful since 2020. Unusually low tenancy turnover within the rental market has co-existed with a downturn in newly-built homes being made available for let. A long-overdue influx of newly-built social housing has begun to filter through in some states – notably Victoria. However, since it will be some time before this flows through in most parts of Australia, the bulk of the country currently remains in the grip of a tightening squeeze on public and community housing supply.

For homelessness services agencies, these trends have created something of a perfect storm, as rising underlying need for assistance has paralleled declining scope to provide such help. These problems would have been yet more acute in the absence of the significant boosts to Rent Assistance sanctioned by the Commonwealth Government in 2023 and 2024.

However, the housing market drivers that underlie rising homelessness are structural, not (only) cyclical. To squarely address the underlying problem, therefore, fundamental policy reforms are required. Relevant policy settings must be acknowledged, analysed and reconsidered in any National Housing and Homelessness Plan worthy of the name.

If Australia has a serious ambition to measurably reduce homelessness at the societal level and to prevent it in the future, it cannot ignore the urgent need to reduce poverty and expand access to suitable and affordable accommodation. Just as the current situation has come about thanks to mistaken policy choices of the past, these are challenges that could be squarely addressed by course corrections today.

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims and origin of the research

A safe and secure home is fundamental to individual wellbeing, as well as foundational for people's contribution to national economic activity. Even if only briefly encountered, homelessness is often a scarring experience. Long-term exposure commonly results in permanent damage to mental and physical health. Although usually treated by both national and state/territory governments as a second order issue, homelessness is in fact a significant, fundamental and growing problem for Australia.

This is the fourth report in the Australian Homelessness Monitor series, an independent analysis of homelessness modelled on the long-established UK homelessness monitors series. In keeping with the three earlier editions (Pawson et al. 2018; 2020; 2022), AHM 2024 analyses the changing scale and nature of homelessness across Australia and investigates the underlying housing market dynamics and policy drivers. The report also reviews recent policy and practice developments that reflect changing responses to homelessness by governments and service provider NGOs.

For the first time in the series, AHM 2024 includes a focus on the role of local government in the prevention and relief of homelessness. Unlike the way things work in some other countries, local councils in Australia have no statutory responsibilities or official mandate in relation to homelessness. However, as detailed in Chapter 6, homelessness is widely recognised as a local problem which many councils are actively addressing in a variety of ways.

With its underlying fieldwork undertaken during 2024, the report's policy and practice analysis focuses mainly on the immediate post-pandemic period, following the resumption of 'normal' homelessness service delivery arrangements after most public health restrictions were phased out from early 2022.

The emergency measures to combat homelessness implemented during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 were analysed in detail in AHM 2022 (Pawson et al. 2022). They are also summarised in a more recently published account (Pawson 2024). However, the actions of the New South Wales and Victorian Governments in following through from their pandemic era temporary accommodation programs for vulnerable rough sleepers[1] with new programs for this group through 2022-24 have been impactful, and are therefore touched on in Chapter 3.

The timeframe for our policy review is primarily 2022-24; that is, the period which largely post-dates AHM 2022 but also covers what is nowadays generally referenced as the immediate 'post-COVID era'. Our statistical analysis, however, largely focuses on the period 2019-20 to 2023-24. The aim here is to provide a pre-pandemic benchmark for measured homelessness over the past two years. A far more in-depth and long-term analysis of the changing geography of homelessness in Australia has been recently published by AHURI (Batterham et al. 2024).

In analysing trends in the extent and complexion of homelessness across the country, we draw primarily on homelessness service user caseload data collated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The term caseload, in this instance, refers to people using homelessness services at some point during a given time period. Primary reliance on AIHW statistics also reflects project timing, with 2021 Census results already somewhat dated, as well as compromised by the unfortunate timing of Census fieldwork in the midst of the public health emergency.

As noted above, the AHM series is strongly inspired by the United Kingdom Homelessness Monitor (UKHM) series, initiated in 2010 and funded by Crisis UK and the Joseph Rowntree

1 Known as 'Together Home' (NSW) and 'From Homelessness 2 a Home' (Victoria)

Foundation. AHM research team leader, Hal Pawson, was a UKHM co-founder and has co-authored all of the 27 UKHM reports on England and the other three UK nations subsequently published by Crisis UK[2] - most recently Homelessness Monitor Scotland 2024 (Watts-Cobbe et al. 2024). Albeit adapted to accommodate important dissimilarities in social, economic, and policy contexts[3], AHM emulates the UKHM model in its remit and aims, as well as in its research methods and reporting structure. The AHM series objective is also held in common with UK counterpart reports: to strengthen the basis for evidence-informed policy in this important area.

1.2 Policy context

The COVID-19 emergency is generally understood to have ended in early 2022. But pandemic-related economic and demographic disruption relevant to housing and homelessness has continued to reverberate through to 2024. In particular, as analysed in detail in Chapter 2, rental markets have continued to run extraordinarily hot during this period. Although the Federal Government has increased Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) in the past two years, this situation has, nonetheless, placed immense pressure on lower income Australians reliant on rental housing. This has led to increasing homelessness and to the growing incidence of homeless people sleeping in cars (e.g. Elias 2024, Fenner 2024) or occupying 'tent cities' (e.g. Aubry 2024, Masters and Todhunter 2024). At least as far as New South Wales is concerned, these impressions are substantiated by the latest in a series of annual official rough sleeper counts suggesting a strongly rising trend running into 2024 (see Chapter 5).

However, rough sleeping is of course only the most visible part of a much larger homelessness issue. And wider homelessness (for example, as enumerated by the ABS Census) is only the extreme end of a far more extensive problem of serious housing need. For example, some 1.3 million people in low-income households are pushed into poverty purely by 'unaffordable' housing costs – that is, where a household nominally above the poverty line has a rent payment liability that leaves them with insufficient income to meet food, clothing and other basic living costs (Yates 2019).

As a political issue on the national stage, homelessness has had relatively little visibility since its brief prominence under Prime Minister Rudd around the time of his 2008 flagship Homelessness White Paper, The Road Home (Australian Government 2008). However, with a new federal administration installed in 2022, there have been hopes of renewed and sustained commitment to tackling the problem at national level. A stronger focus on the problem was most tangibly embodied in the Albanese Government's re-establishment of a cabinet level housing and homelessness ministry, in its plans for a new social housing investment program (see Chapter 4) and in its pledge to formulate a National Housing and Homelessness Plan – developments that we covered in detail in AHM 2022.

Another indirect measure of recent change in the scale of the problem is public expenditure on services for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Nationally, this rose from under \$1.1 billion in 2018-19 to \$1.4 billion in 2022-23 (constant 2022-23 dollars), a 31% hike (Productivity Commission 2024). Even discounting Australia's growing population, the increase was 25%. Homelessness is clearly a growing problem for the country, even in narrow 'cost to government' terms.

2 See: ***https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/***

3 Key features of the Australian context differing from that in the UK include the absence of a statutory homelessness framework, the more limited provision of rental assistance for lower income earners and the highly disproportionate incidence of economic disadvantage and housing stress affecting First Nations Australians. Also, while many Commonwealth Government social security payment rates are set at relatively low – and, arguably, inadequate – levels, there has been no Australian equivalent to the successive waves of 'austerity' welfare payment cuts rolled out in the UK during the 2010s.

1.3 Homelessness conceptualisation, enumeration and causation

Defining and measuring homelessness

In keeping with the official conception of 'homelessness' embodied in ABS census definitions, this report adopts a broad interpretation of the term. Thus, while rough sleepers form a prime focus of attention it is crucial to recognise that homelessness extends to a broader population experiencing highly insecure or otherwise fundamentally unsuitable housing. Under the ABS definition (ABS 2012) 'homelessness' applies to anyone who:

- is entirely roofless, or
- occupies a dwelling that:

◊ is physically inadequate

◊ provides no tenure, or only a short and non-extendable tenure

◊ enables the resident no control of, and access to, space for social relations.

This broadly scoped definition is consistent with the concept of primary, secondary, tertiary homelessness developed by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992). However, the formal ABS definition draws on Shelley Mallett's (2004) important work to extend the Chamberlain and MacKenzie thinking, by conceptualising homelessness as the absence of physical resources and security that enable people to feel at home.

The homelessness statistics most widely cited in Australia are those generated by the five yearly ABS Census of Population and Housing. These 'point in time' estimates are built up from the ways that inadequately housed Census respondents describe their living situation on census night, and also from direct enumeration of people lacking accommodation of any kind (i.e. rough sleepers – or, in ABS terminology, 'Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out') (ABS 2012). The precise methods employed in Census rough sleeper enumeration were discussed in AHM 2020 (see Section 3.5.2 of that report (Pawson et al. 2020)).

The ABS estimated that some 122,000 people were experiencing homelessness on Census night 2021, of whom 7,600 were rough sleepers. However, this data is already more than three years old at the time of the current report. Moreover, resulting statistics were affected by the problematic coincidence of 2021 Census fieldwork with the COVID-19 crisis (ABS 2023) AThis report, therefore, places greater reliance on statistics drawn from data provided to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) by Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) organisations. This SHS Collection (or SHSC) originates from records of service user/service provider interactions where someone seeks and receives some form of 'homelessness service' from one of the many hundreds of non-government agencies tasked with providing such help.

In our judgement statistics derived from these records can provide some meaningful quantitative measure of changing homelessness rates and trends, as well as informative insights on the cohort characteristics of people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. They also have certain important advantages over the Census. Firstly, since SHS statistics are being constantly updated, they are capable of indicating trends over time that are not limited to five-yearly snapshots. The scope for near 'real time' observation of such changes has been enhanced since 2020 with the AIHW decision to initiate monthly, as well as annual, publication of SHSC summary statistics.

Secondly, there is arguably a positive quality to statistics generated by requests for relevant services, since such requests demonstrate 'felt need', indicating that those concerned perceive their own housing situation as problematic. Thirdly, being drawn from service provider organisations that collect operationally relevant information from people seeking help, the SHSC data about people experiencing or at risk of homelessness is much richer than that available from the Census. Importantly, for example, it can provide some indication of the experiences and situations prompting such applications – i.e. 'homelessness triggers' or immediate reasons for homelessness, as reported. No such data are collected by the census.

At the same time, as a proxy measure of homelessness expressed demand, SHSC data have important limitations. Firstly, to the extent that most published statistics from this source enumerate service recipients, they will be influenced by SHS organisational capacity. People seeking help from organisations already operating at full capacity are liable to be denied assistance. Thus, most of the SHSC analyses in this report relate specifically to those both seeking, and provided with, some form of 'homelessness service' during the relevant time period. They therefore exclude anyone seeking help but turned away due to lack of resources. Secondly, at least as usually cited in the media, SHS service user statistics combine those logged as 'homeless' and those 'at risk of homelessness' – actions to assist this latter cohort representing a contribution to homelessness prevention.

Thirdly, many people at risk of homelessness, or even already in this situation, may of course seek no assistance from an SHS provider[4] That is, they may not 'express demand' for such help (perhaps lacking confidence that meaningful assistance is available), and therefore remain uncounted in the AIHW statistics as analysed in Chapter 5. Strikingly, population-wide survey evidence suggests that two-thirds of people experiencing homelessness do not in fact seek support (ABS 2015).

4 A particular issue here may be the geographical distribution of SHS services; i.e. the absence of any such organisation in the home area of a person in need of such help.

Conceptual and practical issues related to the measurement of homelessness in Australia are further discussed in Section 5.2.

Conceptualising homelessness processes and causation

As noted above, a prime purpose of the AHM series is to chart changing levels of homelessness and to identify and analyse the factors that underlie such observed trends. In framing our exploration of the research evidence that directly addresses these issues we first need to rehearse our understanding of homelessness as a social problem.

Like many other social phenomena, homelessness is complex and results from diverse factors including structural, systemic and individual causes. For an individual, loss of suitable accommodation may result from the coincidence of several problematic life events, possibly triggered by a single such event. It can be viewed in aggregate as a societal problem that needs to be quantified and addressed. Alternatively, it may be observed at the individual person level as a process that reflects (and results from) extreme stress, often accompanied by vulnerability and disadvantage.

In this report we draw on the seminal theorising of homelessness first articulated by Suzanne Fitzpatrick (2005) and then developed as a framework driving the analysis of Homelessness Monitors in the United Kingdom. Thus, as articulated in Homelessness Monitor England 2022 (Watts et al. 2022: 3):

> *Theoretical, historical and international perspectives indicate that the causation of homelessness is complex, with no single 'trigger' that is either 'necessary' or 'sufficient' for it to occur. Individual, interpersonal and structural factors all play a role – and interact with each other – and the balance of causes differs over time, across countries, and between demographic groups.*
>
> *With respect to the main structural factors, international comparative research, and the experience of previous UK recessions, suggests that housing market trends and policies have the most direct impact on levels of homelessness, with the influence of labour-market change more likely to be lagged and diffuse, and strongly mediated by welfare arrangements and other contextual factors. The central role that poverty plays in shaping homelessness risks in the UK is also now well established.*

Individual vulnerabilities, support needs, and ‘risk taking’ behaviours may be implicated in homelessness as experienced by some individuals. Examples might include low educational attainment, experiences of violence, mental ill-health or problematic alcohol or drug use. However, these are often rooted in the pressures associated with poverty and other forms of structural disadvantage. At the same time, the ‘anchor’ social relationships which can act as a primary ‘buffer’ to homelessness, can be strained by stressful financial circumstances (ibid).

Other authors concur, noting that research on determinants of homelessness has moved toward a general consensus that individual and structural explanations are not mutually exclusive, and theoretical models have been developed that integrate the two types of factors (Byrne et al. 2013). As alluded to in the quote above, housing market conditions play a particularly important role in these models. This is because, when analysed in aggregate, access to housing that is adequate and affordable mediates whether individual risk factors actually ‘trigger’ instances of homelessness (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Parsell, 2023).

In subsequent chapters we demonstrate how public policy, particularly housing and welfare policy, are (1) critical drivers of homelessness in Australia, and (2) areas that represent significant opportunities to demonstrably reduce homelessness. Thus, drawing on Watts and colleagues, this report acknowledges the complexity of homelessness causation, while also identifying a suite of public policy changes that can improve the housing and life outcomes of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

1.4 Research methods

Primary research

The research involved four primary research components, as elaborated further below:

- In depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders – senior government policymakers, service providers, and advocacy organisations
- A national online survey of homelessness service practitioners
- A national online survey of local governments.
- Local case study work focused on three LGAs in three state jurisdictions.

Stakeholder interviewee recruitment aimed to secure participation of a state/territory government representative and at least one NGO representative in each jurisdiction. Substantially improving on previous Monitors, five government representatives agreed to participate.

In Table 1.1 and throughout the report we have concealed interviewees’ identity to maintain anonymity.

Stakeholder interviews were undertaken via video conferencing (Teams or Zoom), utilising a semi-structured topic guide.

To extend the reach of the research a **national online survey of Specialist Homelessness Services providers** was undertaken. The aim here was to probe ‘front line’ service provider perspectives on the problem. Here we took our cue from the UKHM series which includes, as standard to each edition, an online survey of local authority housing options managers (see, for example, Watts-Cobbe et al. 2024).

Emulating the roughly equivalent UKHM surveys, the SHS questionnaire was primarily designed to explore service provider organisation perceptions of:

- Recent changes in the scale, nature and causality of homelessness
- Recently enacted or proposed policy developments (whether at the state or national level) potentially significant for homelessness (either in exacerbating or ameliorating the problem).

Table 1.1: Key stakeholder interviewees and focus group participants

	State/territory government	Homelessness services NGO/ advocacy org/peak body	Total
NSW	1	2	**3**
Victoria	1	2	**3**
Queensland	1	1	**2**
South Australia		1	**1**
Western Australia		1	**1**
Tasmania	1	1	**2**
ACT		1	**1**
NT	1	2	**3**
National focus		2	**2**
Total	5	13	**18**

While mainly involving a multiple choice format, the survey also included some open-ended questions – see Appendix 1.

The survey was circulated to specialist homelessness services by the national homelessness peak body, Homelessness Australia (HA) and state/territory homelessness sector peak bodies and/or jurisdiction representatives. Participating agencies totalled 173, spanning all eight states and territories. However, given the recruitment method, a precise response rate cannot be determined.

Alongside the SHS survey, a **national online survey of local governments** was also undertaken. With the help of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), an invitation to participate in the survey was sent to all 537 councils across the country, for forwarding to the staff member or team most significantly engaged with homelessness issues. Completed responses were received from 167 councils, representing a 31% response rate. The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate whether homelessness was considered a problem in their area and, if so, what (if any) responsive actions were undertaken by the council. It also asked in what ways councils might extend their homelessness responses and what barriers they face in doing this. As in the SHS survey, the questionnaire mainly involved a multiple-choice format, although with a few open-ended questions also included.

To gain some further depth of insight into the role that local governments play in responding to homelessness, we conducted a set of **three case studies in selected LGAs**. The case study sites were chosen using principles of maximum variation sampling and reflect the diversity of Australian LGAs in terms of their geography and demographics; the size and organizational capacity of their councils; and the scale and nature of their homelessness challenges. The LGAs selected are located in three different states and include:

1. A capital city LGA in a major metropolitan region with a history of homelessness challenges
2. A regional city with a de-industrializing economy and emerging but acute homelessness challenges
3. A coastal city with high levels of tourism and amenity migration and emerging but acute homelessness challenges.

The case study fieldwork involved qualitative interviews in each LGA with council staff with homelessness responsibilities and 1-2 stakeholders from local SHS providers who worked in partnership with the councils on homelessness responses (n=8 total). Topic guide questions reflected the main themes of the research, as well as paralleling the online survey. We also conducted a review of publicly available policy documents produced by each council regarding their homelessness responses.

Secondary data analysis

Mainly embodied in Chapters 2 and 5, this research is substantially based on a secondary data analysis focused mainly on published data about (a) homelessness and (b) the housing market factors that we argue constitute key drivers of (or risk factors for) homelessness.

As discussed above (and in greater depth in Section 5.2) much of our analysis draws on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) series. This includes both published statistics and unpublished analyses commissioned from AIHW for this project.

Our housing market analysis draws on a range of published official and industry sources that calibrate different rental sector indicators.

1.5 Report structure

Following on from this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews recent social, economic, and housing market trends with a possible bearing on homelessness. This chapter is largely based on our secondary data analysis as detailed above.

Building on AHM 2020 and subsequent associated work (Pawson et al. 2021a and b), Chapter 3 further examines recent policy and practice changes and initiatives. The chapter includes a detailed analysis of social housing investment commitments recently pledged by Australian governments, and a listing of notable recent homelessness policy changes enacted by each of the nine jurisdictions 2022-24. Some of the most important of these are further elaborated and discussed.

Next, in Chapter 4 we take a deeper look at recent progress and challenges in the homelessness services sector; in particular, sector workforce issues, homelessness prevention approaches, culturally-led services and Advance to Zero (AtoZ) projects.

Drawing on the AIHW's specialist homelessness services collection (SHSC) statistics, and on numerous other sources, Chapter 5 then analyses the changing nature and extent of homelessness across Australia.

Chapter 6 draws together findings on local government roles in managing and preventing homelessness.

Finally, Chapter 7 reflects on our analysis and findings as set out in previous chapters and presents recommendations on both homelessness statistics and on housing and homelessness policy.

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2 Housing market context

Key points

- Since 2020, rents have risen at rates unseen since 2008. During the period March 2020 to June 2024, the median advertised weekly rent for all property types across all cities and regions rose from $413 to $624 – a 51% increase. This increase exceeded overall inflation over the period by 29%.
- Rent increases likewise substantially outpaced earnings growth over the same period. The resulting increase in the ratio of rents to earnings reflects a general, and quite substantial, decline in rental affordability for people starting a new tenancy during this period.
- The early 2020s have also seen rental vacancy rates plummet across Australia. Since 2022 rates in most locations have remained at close to rock bottom levels of 1-2 per cent. The combination of reduced affordability and low vacancy rates has exacerbated risk of homelessness for low income and vulnerable households.
- Anglicare's latest survey of advertised rents showed that, of the 45,000 properties being marketed for let across Australia in March 2024, just 2.7% were affordable to a 2-parent, 2-child family, with both parents in minimum wage employment and receiving the Parenting Payment. For a couple on the age pension, the proportion was a mere 1%.
- Referencing comparable data from previous Anglicare surveys confirms that the already minimal share of private rental properties affordable to identified low-income groups has tended to further diminish since the late 2010s as advertised rents have run ahead of social security benefit rates and minimum wage incomes.
- The period 2018-2023 saw social housing expanding by 2.3%. However, since population rose by 6.8%, the proportionate share of social housing has continued to drift downwards.
- A more direct measure of long-term decline in social housing supply is the reduction in annual lettings by social housing providers from 52,000 to 32,000 1991-2023, a reduction of 38%. Proportionate to population, this equates to a decline of 60%.
- Thanks to recent social housing investment programs in certain states, lettings supply has begun to increase; together with increased priority accorded to homeless households, Victoria consequently recorded a rise of 82% in 'homeless with support' social housing tenancies initiated in 2023-24 compared with 2019-20.

2.1 Chapter introduction and overview

This chapter analyses the changing housing market conditions of recent years that are an important influence on the incidence and nature of homelessness in Australia. Although some involve longer-term analyses, most span the period 2019-24. In this way we aim to contextualise market developments associated with pandemic disruption and in its aftermath with respect to pre-COVID baselines.

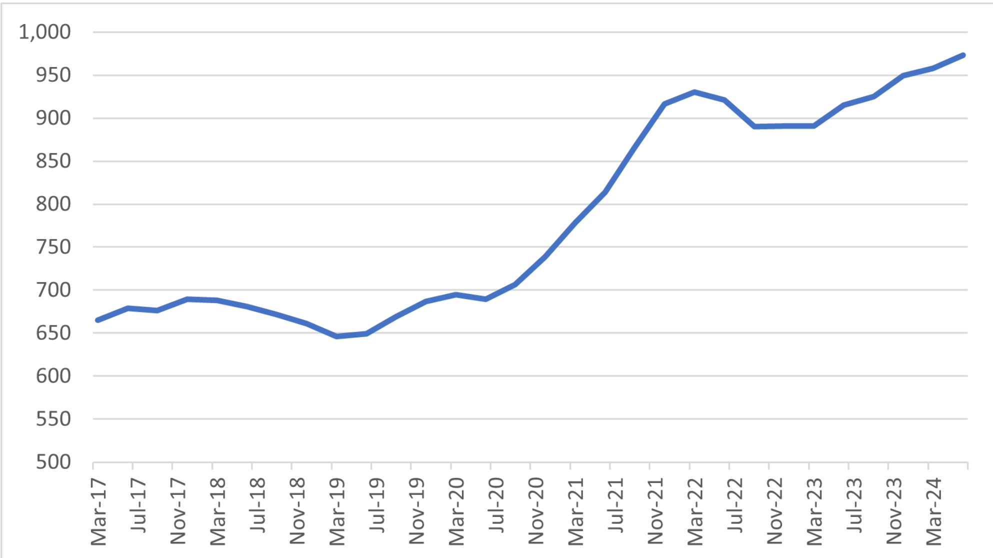
Our analysis is informed by a wide variety of published statistics, including data originating from both government and private sector sources. This is complemented, in Section 2.4, by brief reference to the recent experience of SHS agencies, as drawn from our online SHS provider survey (see Section 1.4).

The chapter is structured as follows. Although our analysis is largely focused on rental housing, the main body of the chapter begins in Section 2.2 with a brief review of the house sales market. Additional pressure on rental housing due to blocked home ownership aspirations is one factor influencing rent inflation which raises homelessness risks for low-income tenants. In Section 2.3, we analyse private market rent trends over the past few years, at both national and sub-national scales. Complementing this, Section 2.4 summarises recent patterns in private rental property availability. To complete our coverage of the rental housing market, Section 2.5 examines change in social housing sector capacity. Section 2.6 then assesses the impacts of recent market trends on rental affordability for low-income renters potentially vulnerable to homelessness. Finally, drawing on the preceding evidence Section 2.7 concludes the chapter with a summary overview and brief contemplation on future prospects.

2.2 The house sales market

Home ownership affordability is not a direct influence on homelessness. Importantly, however, because the housing system is highly interconnected, there is some indirect relevance. Crucially, over the past 20-30 years, rising income and wealth thresholds for access to home ownership has contributed to the growing size of the population cohort dependent on rental – predominantly private rental – housing. Moderate income earners with a prospect of attaining home ownership have been needing to spend longer and longer waiting periods before this becomes financially feasible. This, in turn, puts upward pressure on that residential market sector that also accommodates most of Australia's lower income population (Productivity Commission 2019). Hence, the logic of including within this chapter a brief consideration of home ownership affordability trends.

Figure 2.1: Mean residential property prices, Australia, 2017-24 ($000s cash)

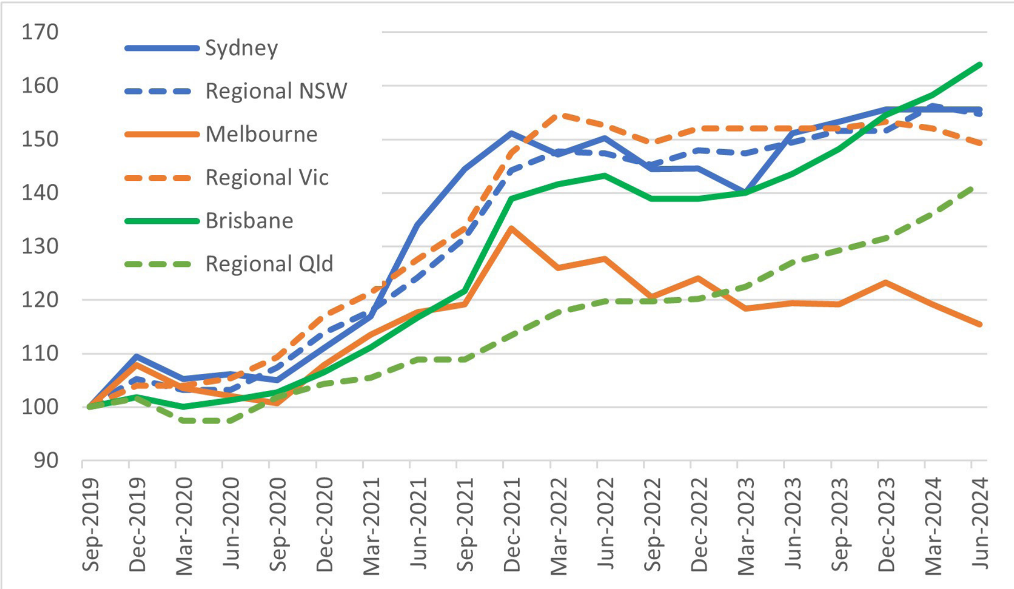


Source: ABS Total value of dwellings, Table 1 *https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/total-value-dwellings/latest-release#data-download*

Residential property prices rose rapidly during the middle years of the last decade. As shown in Figure 2.1, this was followed by a period of relative stability, 2017-19. Contrary to most expectations at the start of the pandemic, however, prices once again escalated sharply from mid-2020, with mean residential property values 36% higher in March 2022 than at the beginning of the public health crisis two years earlier. Moreover, defying the impact of sharply increased interest rates, a price growth trend was re-established during 2023. As a result, by June 2024 the mean national price of housing had escalated by 51% in just five years.

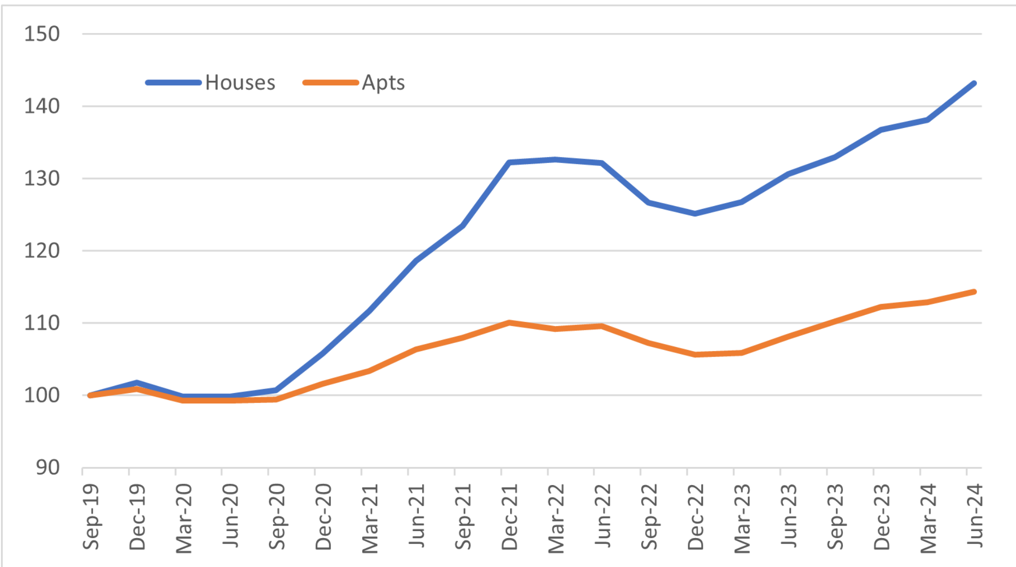
Nevertheless, as shown in Figures 2.2 and 2.3, property price trends were significantly diverse during the COVID-19 emergency and/or its aftermath. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, prices in five of the six geographies included escalated rapidly during 2020 and 2021 – the height of the pandemic when two years of international border closure saw population growth sink to almost zero. Even in the exceptional area, regional Queensland, prices began to rise during the period, albeit more gradually. During 2022 and 2023, however, it was Queensland – both Brisbane and the regions – that saw the strongest price growth trend. By Q2 2024, established house prices in the former were up by 64% on their level in Q3 2019. The most notable exception during this period was Melbourne, where a declining trend set in from the end of 2021.

Figure 2.2: Median price, established houses, NSW, Vic, Qld, 2019-24, indexed (Sep 2019=100)



Source: ABS Total value of dwellings, Table 2 ***https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/total-value-dwellings/latest-release#data-download***

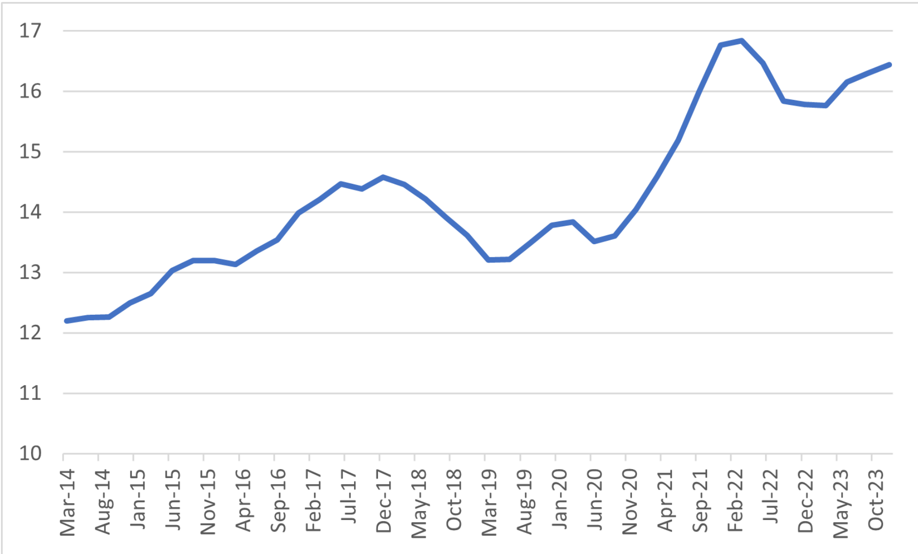
Figure 2.3: Median residential property prices, Australia (eight capital cities), 2019-2024, indexed (Sep 2019=100)



Source: Domain House Price Reports ***https://www.domain.com.au/research/house-price-report/***

The past five years also saw a marked, and growing, price divergence between houses and apartments. Thus, as shown in Figure 2.3, capital city houses were being traded in Q2 2024 at a median price 43% higher than at the start of the pandemic, as compared with only 14% for apartments. These patterns have been in part attributed to changing housing consumer preferences, influenced by pandemic lockdowns and working from home – developments that placed an additional premium on indoor and outdoor private residential area – the so-called 'race for space' (Pawson et al. 2022a).

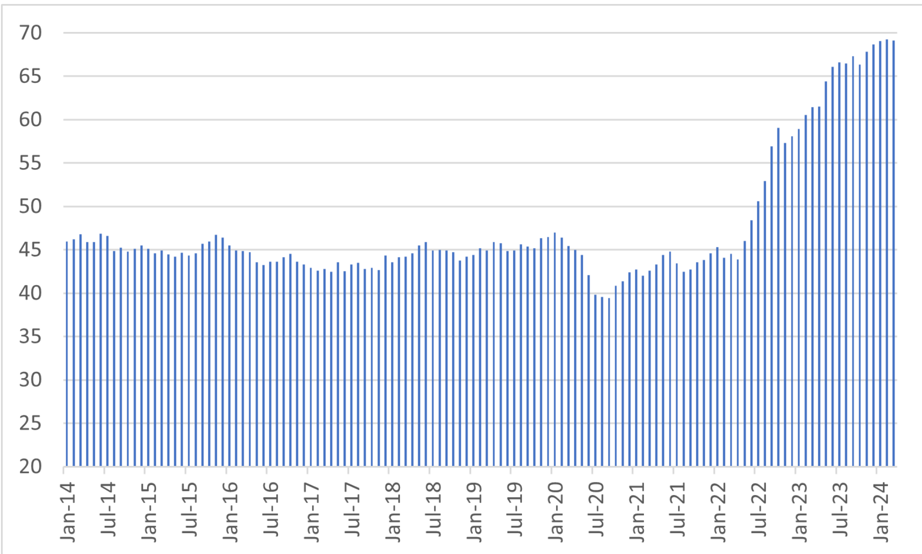
Figure 2.4: Ratio of average residential dwelling price to annual household disposable income per capita, Australia



Source: Jericho (2024a) – original data from ABS (2024 a, b and c)

The way that generally rising prices have affected house purchase affordability over recent years is illustrated by Figure 2.4 which indicates a substantial increase in prices relative to incomes in the period 2019-2022. While this trend peaked in early 2022, the ratio has subsequently remained at a historically high level.

Figure 2.5: Mortgage payments as a proportion of household disposable income, Australia



Source: Jericho (2024b) – original data from ABS (2024c and d).

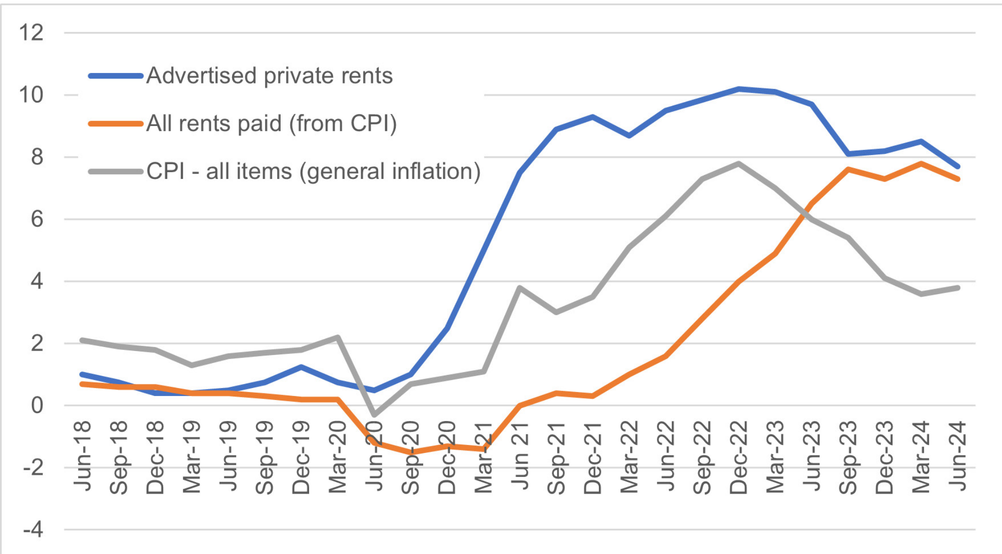
A different aspect of recently declining home ownership affordability is evident from statistics tracking the relationship between mortgage payments and household incomes. Largely reflecting the impact of sharply higher interest rates from mid-2022, mortgage payments as a proportion of household disposable income increased from 39% in August 2020 to 69% in March 2024 (Jericho 2024b). For some mortgage payers, especially recent first home buyers, resulting financial pressures will lead to forced sales and a return to renting, further compounding rental housing demand and rental price pressures.

2.3 Private rent levels and trends

National trends[5]

Following on from a period of unusually low growth in the period immediately preceding the pandemic, the past four years (2020-2024) have seen a dramatic spike in private market rent inflation, as shown in Figure 2.6. Rental prices have risen at rates unseen since 2008, with SQM Australia-wide figures for the former indicating a 51% increase in the period March 2020-September 2024. Having continued to run well ahead of general inflation throughout this period (see Figure 2.6), advertised rents also registered a substantial real terms increase during this time. Meanwhile, annual inflation in all rents paid[6] exceeded general inflation from mid-2023 (see Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6: Annual percentage change in advertised rents, rents paid, and all consumer prices, 2018-24



Sources: Rents – CoreLogic monthly chartpack series; All rents paid and CPI (all items) – ABS Consumer Price Index, Australia *https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release#data-download*

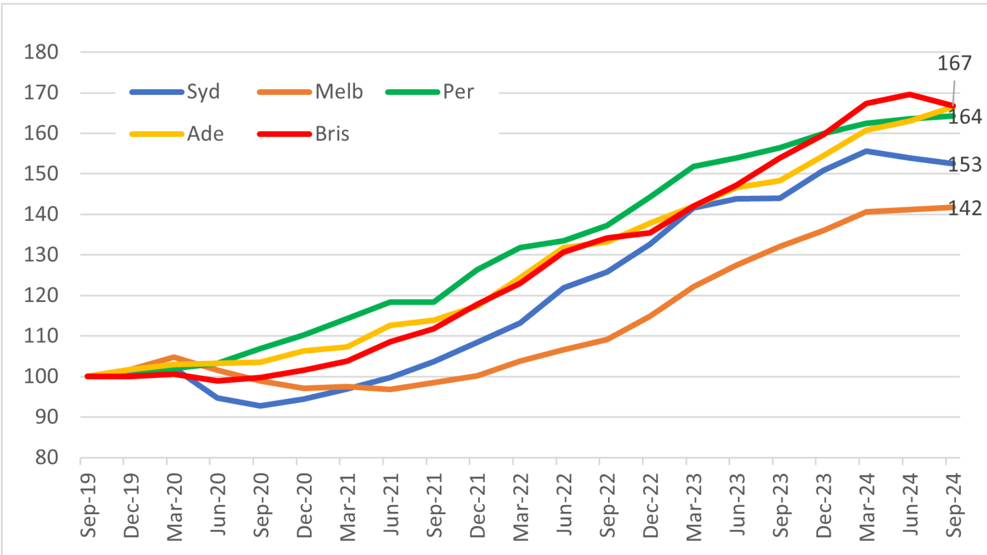
5 There are several different ways of calibrating private rent levels and, thus, rent inflation (or deflation). Firstly, there are 'asking rents' statistics that refer to the advertised rent for properties available to let. This is the rents metric commonly reported by property data firms (e.g. CoreLogic, Domain, SQM). For clarity, this report uses the term 'advertised rents'. Secondly, there are 'agreed rents', the rents actually contracted at tenancy commencement, as recorded in rental bond lodgement; these data are published by some state governments. Both of the above are usually presented in terms of a median or quartile value. Both measure 'entry rents' for new tenancies at (or just before) their initiation. In this way, these metrics contrast from the third rent monitoring statistic: mean or median rents actually charged/paid across the full cohort of existing tenancies at any one time (e.g. as recorded in the ABS consumer prices index)

6 It should be noted that the 'all rents' series drawn from the ABS Consumer Prices Index dataset relates to capital cities only. Also, because of the treatment of Rent Assistance in the CPI calculation methodology, the extraordinary 15% and 10% increases in RA maximum rates enacted by the Commonwealth Government in 2023 and 2024 will have had the effect of dampening recorded levels of rent inflation in 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Capital city trends

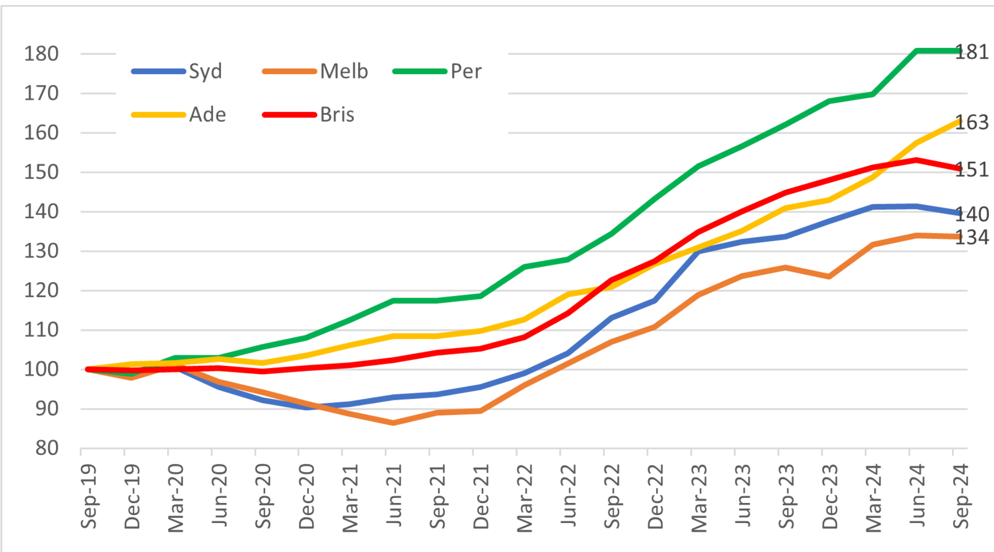
The differential economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic across Australia are apparent in 2020-21 rent trends for the five main capital cities. Unlike the other cities, Sydney and Melbourne saw significant city-wide reductions in median advertised rents during 2020 in relation to both houses and apartments – see Figures 2.7 and 2.8. The especially marked impacts in these two cities likely reflect their greater vulnerability to the two-year international border closure. This refers to disproportionately large role of Sydney and Melbourne in accommodating overseas students, working holiday visa holders and other new migrants – groups that traditionally form substantial rental housing demand components in Australia.

Figure 2.7: Advertised rents for houses: capital cities, 2019-24 – indexed trends (Sep 2019=100)



Source: SQM free property data ***https://sqmresearch.com.au/weekly-rents.php***

Figure 2.8: Advertised rents for apartments: capital cities, 2019-24 – indexed trends (Sep 2019=100)



Source: SQM free property data ***https://sqmresearch.com.au/weekly-rents.php***

Over the graphed period as a whole, large or very large increases in advertised rents were recorded for both main property types across all five cities. At the same time, for both houses and apartments, the largest percentage rent price hikes were in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, rather than – as might be expected – in Sydney and Melbourne. In absolute terms, however, Sydney (but not Melbourne) median rents remained far above those of other cities at the end of the sequence (September 2024).

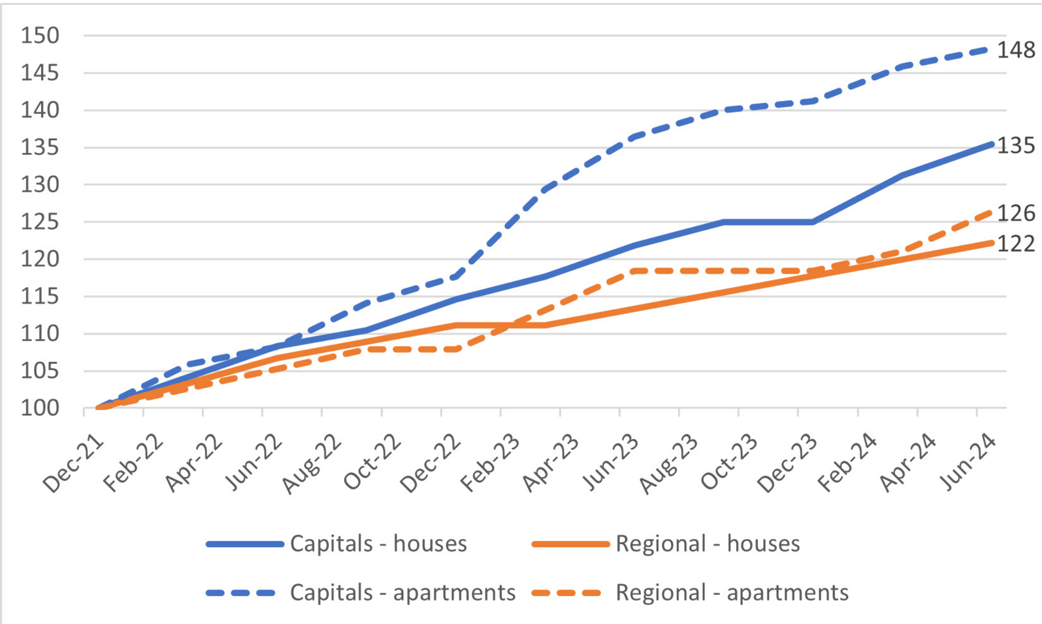
Cities versus regions

While the period 2020-24 saw substantial inflation in advertised rents across Australia (see Figure 2.6), marked property type and inter-city variations have already been documented above. There have also been marked contrasts between metropolitan and regional rent trends. Earlier research noted particularly rapid rent growth in the regions in the early phase of the COVID-19 rental market upswing in 2020-21. Thus, according to CoreLogic's index, market rents across 'combined capital cities' increased by 6.4% in the 12 months to August 2021, whereas the comparable 'combined regional' figure was a remarkable 12.4% (CoreLogic 2021 – as cited in Pawson et al. 2021b). This was particularly true in NSW, Victoria and Queensland.

Unfortunately, published statistics that would inform a more complete picture of comparative rent trends differentiating metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia throughout the 2019-24 period are thin on the ground. Referring to recent editions in the Domain quarterly series, however, post-2021 trajectories can be traced on this basis. As shown in Figure 2.9, these suggest that in this post-COVID period, capital city rent inflation tended to outpace that recorded for regional Australia. For example, while capital city apartment rents escalated by 48% in the period covered by Figure 2.9, the comparable figure for regional markets was only 26%.

At least to an extent, these trends probably reflect the geography of the net overseas migration bounce-back that occurred in 2022 and 2023, with international students and other migrants flocking back to Sydney, Melbourne and other cities. The disproportionate rent increases seen in the capital cities during this period will have at least partially restored the relative rent levels of metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia prevailing prior to the pandemic.

Figure 2.9: Median rent trends, capital cities versus rest of Australia, 2021-24, indexed (Dec 2021=100)



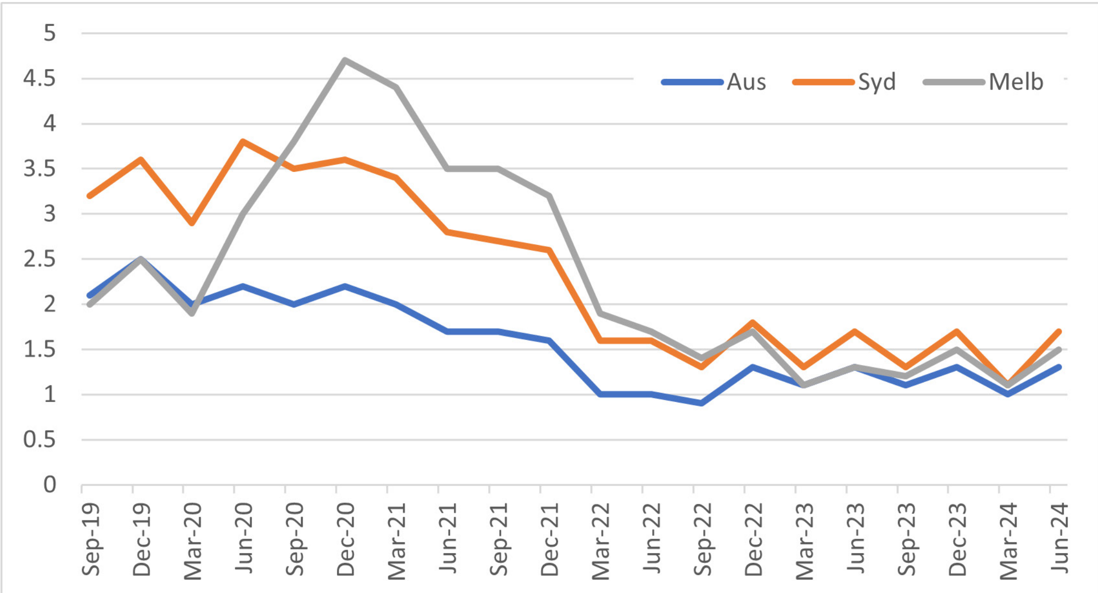
Source: Domain quarterly rental reports - ***https://www.domain.com.au/research/rental-report/***

2.4 Private rental property availability

Another indicator of rental market pressure is the rental property vacancy rate. This gauges the number of properties available to let as a proportion of the total stock of rental properties at any given time. Low or falling vacancy rates are typically associated with rent inflation since, unless the number of people seeking tenancies also falls in tandem with property availability, the laws of supply and demand dictate that rent prices will rise as a result.

At the national level and in Australia's largest cities, vacancy rates trended steeply downwards in the period 2020-22 (see Figure 2.10). Perhaps most notably, Melbourne saw a dramatic increase in vacancies early in the pandemic, followed by sharp reductions in 2021-22. Likewise, Sydney's vacancy rate declined fairly steadily from the second half of 2020. While somewhat less volatile, the national vacancy rate halved to under 1% during 2021 and the first three quarters of 2022, its lowest level on record (Domain 2022). As also evident from Figure 2.10, rates across Australia and in the nation's two largest cities have subsequently remained at close to rock bottom levels.

Figure 2.10: Private rental percentage vacancy rates, 2019-24



Source: SQM free property data h*ttps://sqmresearch.com.au/free-statistics.php*

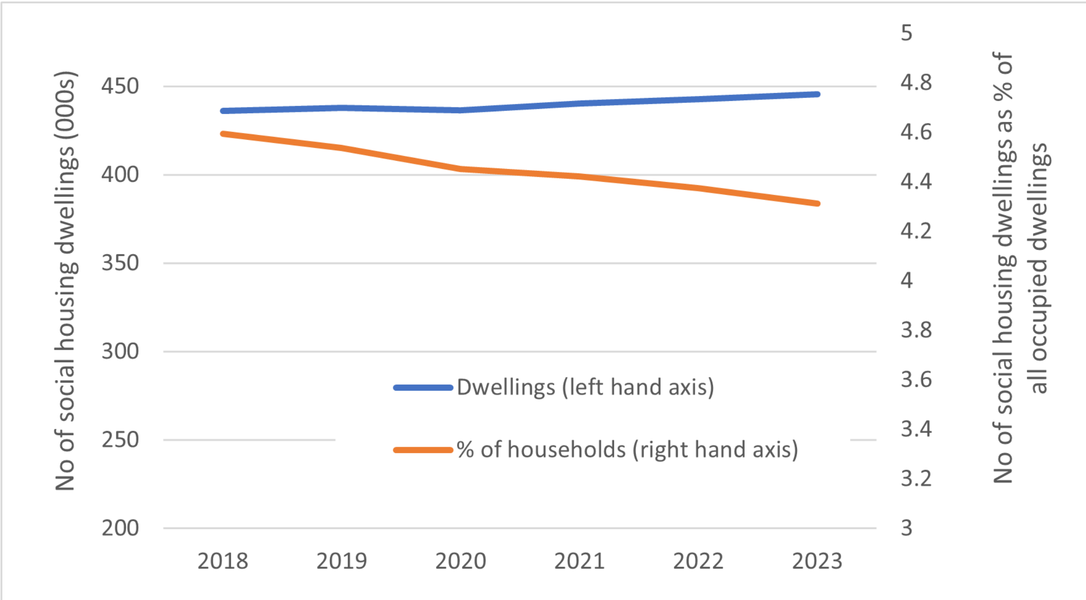
Complementing all of this evidence, and emphasising the particular pressures affecting the lower end of the private rental market, evidence from our online survey indicates the growing challenges recently faced by many SHS providers in securing accommodation for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. More than three quarters of our respondents (76%) said it had become 'much harder' to find suitable housing for clients over the past year, with another 19% saying this was now 'somewhat harder'.

2.5 Social housing supply

Given its role in providing relatively secure tenancies usually priced well below market rates, social housing has special importance in accommodating socio-economically disadvantaged households who would be placed at risk of homelessness in the private rental market. In the Australian context, social housing refers to dwellings managed by state governments, not-for-profit community housing organisations, and Indigenous rental providers.

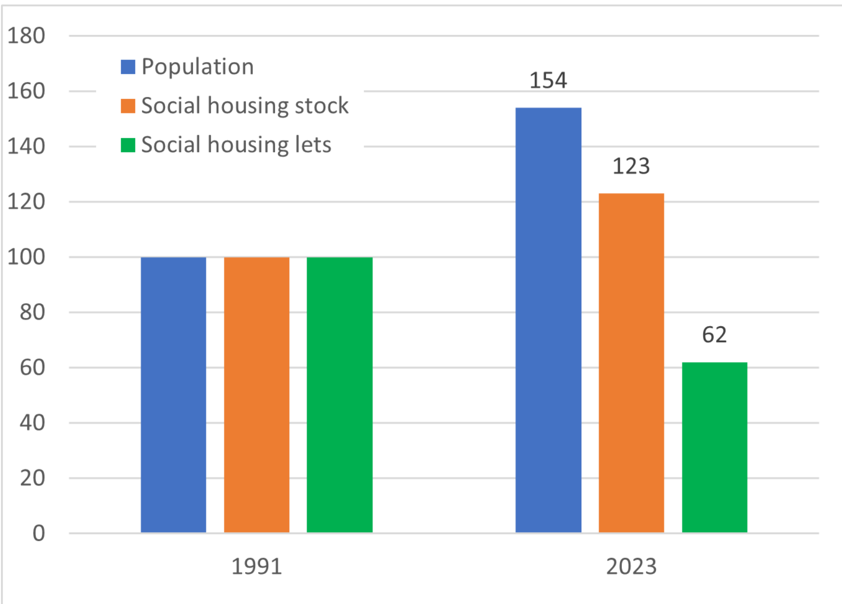
According to official figures, the past five years (2018-2023) saw marginal growth in Australia's social housing stock from 436,000 to 446,000 (AIHW 2024). This reflects the fact that new construction narrowly exceeded property sales and demolitions. However, this rate of increase (2.3%) is far below that of population (6.8%) for the equivalent period (ABS 2024f). Consequently, the proportionate share of social housing has recently continued to drift downwards, as shown in Figure 2.11. This represents a continuation of a process ongoing since the 1990s, only briefly interrupted in the period 2009-11 by Commonwealth Government stimulus investment to stave off the threat of economic recession.

Figure 2.11: National social housing portfolio, 2018-2023



Sources: AIHW (2024), ABS (2024g). Note: Social housing as a proportion of all occupied dwellings calculated according to total social housing stock in relation to total households.

Figure 2.12: Population, social housing stock, social rental lets: Percentage change over time (1991=100)

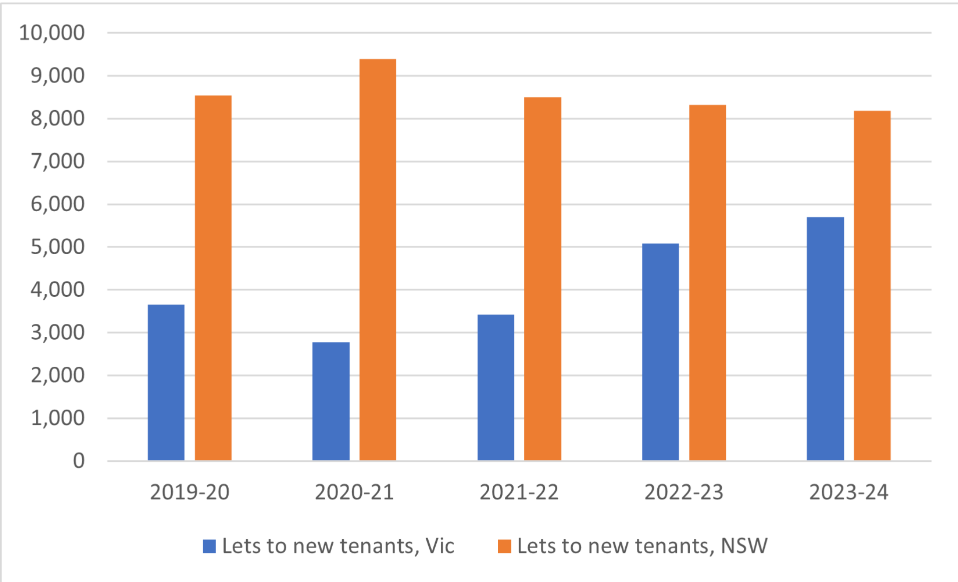


Sources: ABS (2024f); AIHW (1993); Productivity Commission (2024) Tables 18A3, 18A5, 18A6, 18A7

A more direct measure of social housing supply is the annual flow of lettable vacancies (i.e. newly built homes being let for the first time plus existing dwellings being relet after falling vacant). In the period 1991 to 2023, for example, published figures indicate that lettings by social housing providers declined from 52,000 to 32,000, a reduction of 38%[7]. Proportionate to population, this equates to a decline of 60%[8]. As shown in Figure 2.12, calibrating social housing sector capacity in this way paints a far starker picture than with respect to simple stock numbers.

Since the main focus of this chapter relates to the past five years we would ideally graph the national trend on social housing lettings over this period and compare patterns for key states. Unfortunately, the annually released national statistics for this period are subject to imperfections[9] that compromise their utility for this purpose. However, meaningful official statistics specific to Australia's two largest jurisdictions, NSW and Victoria, are published by those states.

Figure 2.13: Social housing lettings to new tenants, NSW and Vic, 2019-20 - 2023-24



Sources: Victoria – Social housing allocations statistics *https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/social-housing-allocations* NSW – DCJ quarterly statistical report on housing delivery *https://tinyurl.com/2t4a824h*
Note: 2023-24 NSW figure is an estimate based on the first three quarters of the year.

As shown in Figure 2.13, recent trends in total social lettings have significantly contrasted between the two states. The marked increase in Victoria's supply (up 55% in the four years to 2023-24) compares with the largely static number in NSW. This probably reflects the recent flow-through of additional newly built homes in Victoria, a lagged impact of the state's Big Housing Build program, pledged in 2020. In NSW, however, it was only in the state's 2024 budget that the government announced any similar commitment – albeit of a smaller order than Victoria's program. As a result, NSW has needed to maintain overwhelming reliance on reletting existing homes, whilst Victoria has been able to supplement its equivalent resource with a growing pipeline of newly built dwellings since 2022-23. Only in future years can it be expected that NSW will begin to see expanded new build supply feeding through into a rising annual volume of lettings.

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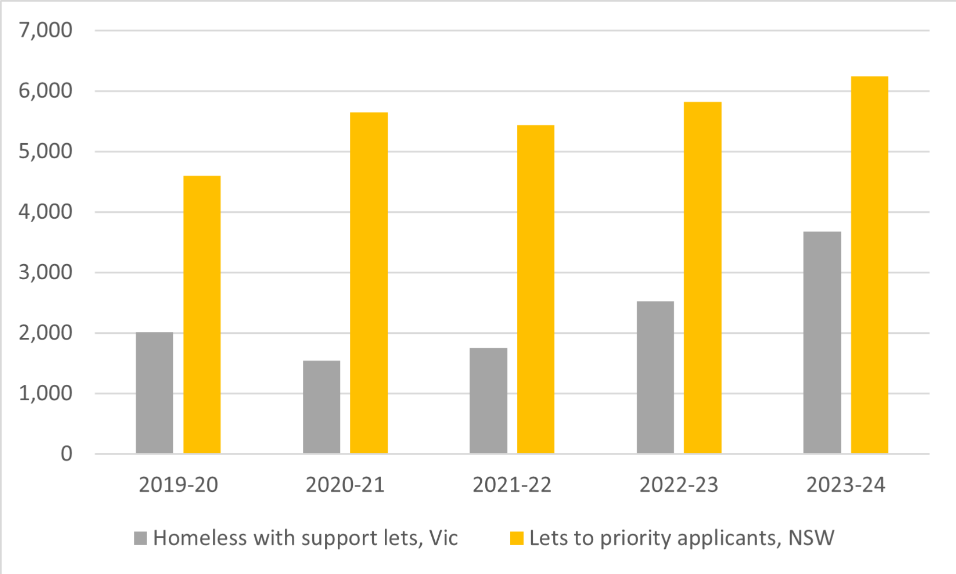
7 Sources: 1991: AIHW (1993) Table 3.22; 2021: Productivity Commission (2022) Tables 18A5, 18A6, 18A7

8 Making reference to ABS estimated resident population statistics, social housing lettings declined from 30 per 10,000 people in 1991 to 12 per 10,000 people in 2020-21 – a drop of 60%

9 In particular, conventions used in the data collection that informs the relevant tables within the annually published Report on Government Services include the curious practice of recording as a community housing letting, every tenanted dwelling received by CHPs via public housing transfers. Inclusion of Indigenous housing sector lettings in the series is also incomplete and inconsistent.

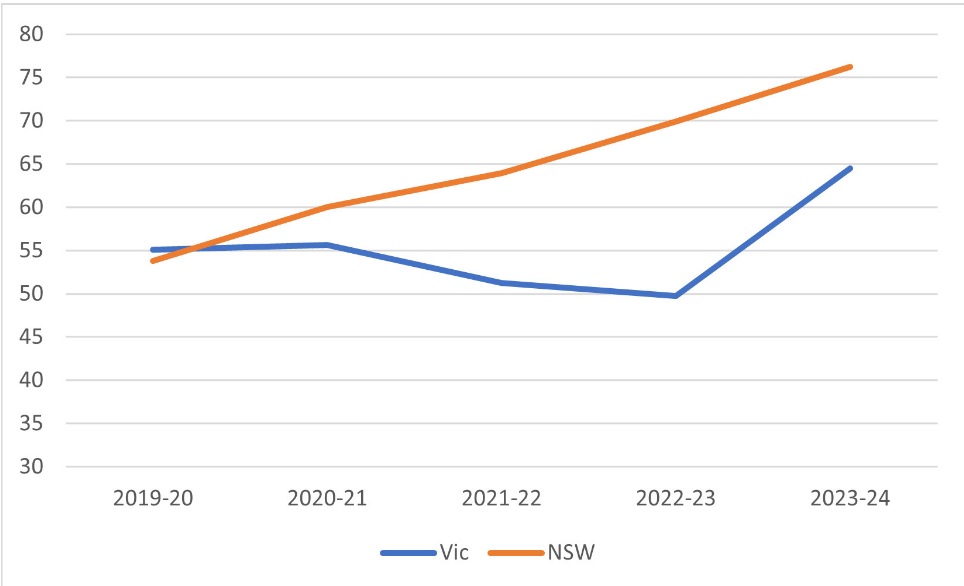
Figure 2.14: Social housing lettings to homeless households, NSW and Vic, 2019-20 - 2023-24



Sources: Victoria – Social housing allocations statistics *https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/social-housing-allocations* NSW – DCJ quarterly statistical report on housing delivery *https://tinyurl.com/2t4a824h*
Notes: 1. NSW lets to priority applicants used here as a proxy for lets to homeless households. Under NSW policy, priority designation is strongly influenced by an applicant's assessed status in terms of being homeless or at risk of homelessness. 2. 2023-24 NSW figure is an estimate based on the first three quarters of the year.

As demonstrated by Figure 2.14, recent years have seen markedly rising numbers of social housing lettings to homeless households in both NSW and Victoria (albeit noting Note 2 to the graph). In the four years to 2023-24, lettings classed accordingly grew by 36% in the former and by 82% in the latter. Such is the Victorian benefit of investment-boosted social housing supply.

Figure 2.15: Social housing lettings to homeless households, NSW and Vic, as % of total lets, 2019-20-2023-24



Sources and notes: see Figure 2.13

Given the absence of any general increase in available capacity, recent NSW efforts in channeling more lettings to homeless households have necessarily involved a substantial increase in the proportion of total lettings devoted to priority applicants. As shown in Figure 2.14, priority lettings increased from 54% to 76% of all lets to new tenants in the four years to 2019-20.

2.6 Housing affordability

Affordability impacts of rising rents

Albeit to varying degrees depending on property types and locations, all of the preceding rent trend analyses have indicated significant rent inflation since 2021 – and, in most parts Australia, since mid-2020. During the period March 2020-June 2024, SQM figures show the median advertised weekly rent for all property types across all cities and regions rose from $413 to $624 – a 51% increase. Allowing for inflation (CPI, all items, Australia), this amounted to a real terms increase of 29%. Referring back to Figures 2.7 to 2.8, real terms rent escalation will have been generally higher than this in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth while lower in Sydney and (especially) Melbourne.

Incomes also generally grew during the four years to 2024, but by far less than rents. ABS statistics show average weekly earnings (total earnings, all adults) rising from $1,748 in May 2020 to $1,996 in May 2024 – a (cash terms) increase of only 14% (ABS 2024e).

Recently published modelling that relates recent change in rents and incomes suggests that by late 2024, the number of households across Australia experiencing rental stress had increased by 141,000 or 18% since the 2021 Census (Impact Economics and Policy 2024).

While relatively crude in nature, the above calculations confirm that the early 2020s have seen very marked increases in market rents, by comparison with both the changing price of other goods and services, and with earnings. The resulting increase in the ratio of rents to earnings implies a general, and quite substantial, decline in rental affordability affecting those needing to find a new rental home during this period.

Meanwhile, as shown in Figure 2.6, rising advertised rents began to wash through the entire rental market from late 2021. By 2023 annual rent inflation rates for this much larger body of tenancies exceeded general inflation, meaning that real terms rent escalation was now occurring. By June 2024, notwithstanding the brief deflation seen during mid-2020, the CPI index value for rents was 15% higher than in March 2020. While this closely parallels the 14% growth in average earnings over the equivalent period (see above), it is apparent from Figure 2.6 that this rent trend is likely to continue in evidence for some time, progressively eroding affordability across the entire market.

All of the trends discussed above will have been tending to ratchet up pressure on household finances across Australia's renter population during the early 2020s. Some tenants will have responded by downsizing, by moving from self-contained to shared accommodation or by retreating to parental homes. At the margin, however, the market conditions seen since 2020 will have exposed many low-income Australians to an increased risk of homelessness.

Affordability stress for lower income renters

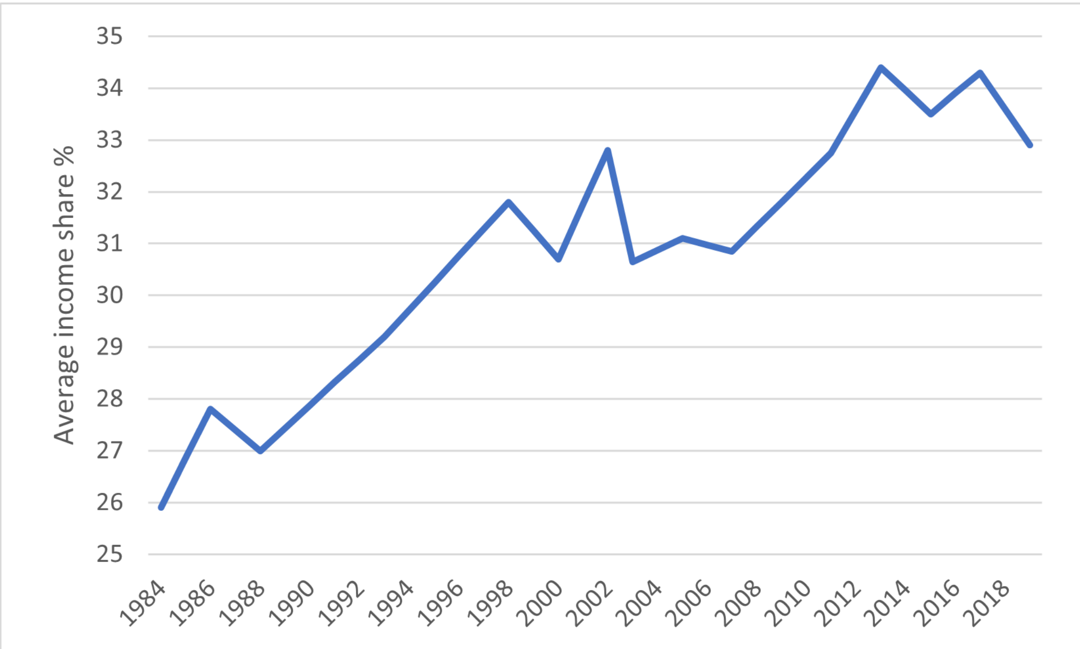
In the preceding sections we have presented market-wide analyses of for-sale and rental sectors as these have functioned over the past five years. We now move on to examine associated trends in the incidence of housing affordability stress experienced at the lower end of the private rental housing market. A focus on low-income renters (by custom defined as households in the lowest two quintiles of the income distribution) is particularly relevant to the central purpose of this chapter in concentrating attention on that part of the overall population more vulnerable to homelessness due to housing market pressures. Because it is likely to mean having to juggle between paying for housing and for other essential expenditures, a low-income tenant having to contend with an 'unaffordable rent' is at a higher risk of incurring rent arrears that could ultimately lead to tenancy termination and – for some of those affected, homelessness.

The incidence of rental affordability stress

Latest available official survey data (ABS 2022) show that, across Australia, nearly a fifth of low-income private renters (19%) were paying rents equating to more than half of their household income in 2019-20. It would be expected that this group – numbering some 185,000 households – would be especially exposed to the risk of homelessness.

Employing the more commonly used measure where 30% of household income is taken as the maximum tolerable share of income payable in rent for a low-income household, this was the situation experienced by some 58% of all such private tenants in 2019-20. As shown in Figure 2.16, this situation has developed as an outcome of a longer-term trend in relation to housing costs as fraction of household income for low-income households across all tenures. In most cases members of this population cohort will be private renters. Unfortunately, because of an interruption to the ABS Survey of Income and Housing series resulting from the pandemic, more recent statistics on this crucial measure will become available only in 2025.

Figure 2.16: Low-income renters: housing costs share of disposable income (%), 1984-2019-20



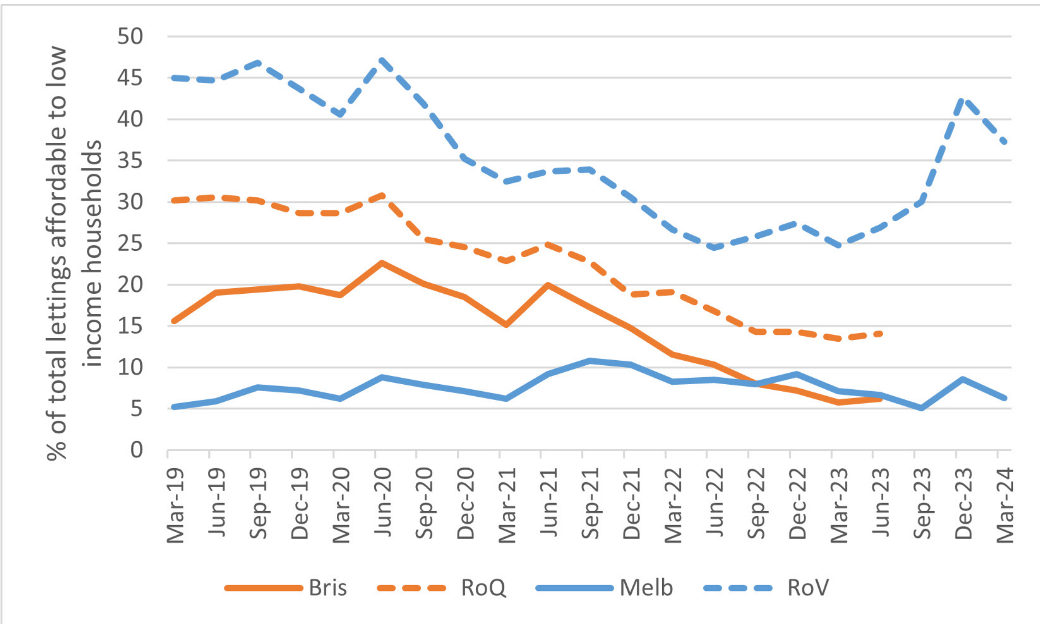
Source: Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee (2023) – original data from ABS Survey of Income and Housing. Note: 'Low income'=bottom 40% of income distribution

A distinct, and conceptually simple, way of calibrating rental housing affordability for low-income populations involves gauging the extent to which advertised rental properties are offered by landlords at prices (rents) within the means of households on statutory incomes (e.g. Age Pension or JobSeeker benefit) or in low-waged employment. Here, for each household type in scope, affordability is calibrated on the basis of 30% of household income. Thus, for each household type, the analysis enumerates the proportion of available (and suitable) rental properties advertised at a rent equal to or less than that amount.

Figure 2.17: Percentage of advertised private tenancies affordable to (selected) low-income household types, 2019-2024

Source: Anglicare annual Rental Affordability Snapshot - *https://www.anglicare.asn.au/research-advocacy/rental-affordability/* Note: Because there have been some changes in Anglicare's household typology, 2019 entries are not available for all of the selected 2022-24 categories.

Figure 2.18: Rental affordability rates for lower income households, private tenancies let in Queensland and Victoria



Sources: Victoria – Homes Victoria (2024) Figure 8 *https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report*; Queensland – Pawson et al. (2024). Notes: Queensland method, emulating Victoria model – Rent affordable to low-income households calibrated on the basis of social security rates for archetype households matched to rent for relevant size properties, assuming maximum affordable rent = 100% of maximum payable Rent Assistance + 30% of other social security income. Household archetypes matched to rent levels as follows: 1 bedroom/Studio – single person on JobSeeker; 2-bedroom – single parent with one child; 3-bedroom: couple on JobSeeker, two children; 4-bedroom+ – couple on JobSeeker, four children.

Using the approach described above, Anglicare's annual survey showed that, of the 45,000 properties being marketed for let across Australia in March 2024, just 1% would be affordable to a couple on the age pension – see Figure 2.17. As shown here, the already minimal share of private rental properties affordable to the low-income groups identified has tended to shrink steadily over the recent years as advertised rents have run ahead of social security benefit rates and minimum wage incomes.

Employing a similar approach, where private rental affordability is calibrated in relation to statutory incomes, state-level statistics demonstrate that low-income renters in Queensland saw a period of growing cost pressures during the period 2019-23, both in Brisbane and the regions (see Figure 2.18). In the former, for example, the proportion of new tenancies affordable to low-income households fell from 23% in Q2 2020 to only 6% in Q2 2023 (more recent figures are unavailable). In Victoria, meanwhile, affordability in Melbourne drifted down from 2021-24, but the overall trends have been less clear cut. These contrasts appear somewhat consistent with Figures 2.7 and 2.8 showing rent inflation in Brisbane substantially outpacing Melbourne in recent years.

2.7 Chapter conclusion

The disruptive economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have importantly included a 2020-24 boom in both house prices and rents, as seen across most parts of Australia. Especially concerning in relation to homelessness has been the spike in rental prices associated with the exceptionally low vacancy rates recorded during this period. While this will have led to deteriorating rental affordability for low-income tenant populations, low vacancy rates are also likely to act as a direct contributor to homelessness, through their impact on dwelling availability.

Importantly, however, recently worsening rental affordability for low-income earners cannot be solely attributed to the pandemic. Certainly, the problem has been aggravated by the public health crisis during this period. But data for Australia as a whole (e.g. from Anglicare's annual survey) demonstrates that this in fact represents only the continuation of a longer running trend. Similarly, while the generally higher rent inflation recorded in regional Australia in 2021 and 2022 will have inflicted particular damage on housing affordability in these areas, there is evidence that here, too, recent experience only extends an already established pattern.

A detailed analysis of factors underlying recent rent inflation and declining affordability for low-income tenants is beyond the scope of this report. However, while much has been made of the post-2021 surge in migration-fuelled housing demand, it would appear that rapidly rising rents have also substantially reflected unusually depressed supply – as measured in terms of the volume of properties being made available to let.

Looking to the future, it would be hoped that the modest expansion of non-market rental housing supply set to come onstream during the mid-late 2020s will slightly ease rental price pressures at the lower end of the market, especially in Queensland and Victoria which pledged substantial self-funded social and affordable housing investment programs early in the decade (Pawson et al. 2021). These should coincide with the Commonwealth Government's Housing Australia Future Fund and National Housing Accord programs set to underpin construction of 40,000 new units from 2025-2029. All of these developments may be expected to help consolidate the moderating rental price inflation trend beginning to emerge during late 2024.

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3. Recent social housing and homelessness policy developments

Key points

- The Commonwealth Government's pledged ten-year National Housing and Homelessness Plan is a potentially critical development in the Australian policy landscape; the first comparable federally-led homelessness policy initiative since 2009.
- In re-asserting a national housing leadership role, the current federal government has re-instated national funding for new social housing development via a suite of investment programs announced since 2022:
    - ◊ The $10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF)
    - ◊ The $2 billion Social Housing Accelerator program
    - ◊ Jointly with the Northern Territory Government, the $4 billion remote NT Indigenous housing investment scheme.
    - ◊ National Housing Infrastructure Facility refreshed by designation of an additional $1 billion in grants and concessional loans.
- In total, these projects are projected to add around 25,000 new homes to the national social housing portfolio by 2029 (completed or under construction by that time). Additionally, Commonwealth funding should underpin construction of 20,000 affordable rental homes by 2029.
- Recent federal social housing investment commitments compound a notable post-2020 upswing in state/territory government self-funded program pledges, notably by Victoria, Queensland and, in 2024, NSW.
- Although the regrettable absence of nationally co-ordinated monitoring impedes definitive quantification, it is likely that state/territory initiatives will generate 30-40,000 new social housing dwellings during the 2020s, over and above those funded by the Commonwealth.
- The combined impact of Commonwealth and state/territory-funded programs would be expected to generate around 60,000 additional social housing units during the 2020s; a net stock addition of potentially around 50,000 after allowing for demolitions and sales, equating to an increase of circa 11% on the 2023 national portfolio
- At least for a few years during the late 2020s these programs may generate sufficient construction activity to halt the decline in social housing as a proportion of all housing. Yet they will remain both small relative to the scale of unmet need, and liable to be framed as one-off initiatives rather than foundational components of enduring programs calibrated to longer-term targets.
- The five-year National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH) replaced the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) from 1 July 2024, but without any enhancement of Commonwealth funding for social housing and homelessness services over and above inflation indexation.
- Under the NASHH, the Northern Territory receives a seven-fold increase in Commonwealth funding, reflecting the partial adoption of needs-based – as opposed to simple population-based – funding distribution. Since the NASHH budget contains no new money, however, this is at the expense of other jurisdictions

- The 45% increase in Rent Assistance maximum payments since May 2022 will have very substantially softened the effect of rent inflation for eligible households. This will have tempered the impact of rising rents in exposing more Australians to the risk of homelessness over this period.
- Evaluations of the COVID-19 pandemic state government emergency accommodation (EA) programs in NSW and Victoria credit these with a number of positive outcomes in facilitating safe, secure and supported housing pathways for a cohort of former rough sleepers with complex needs. Equally, termination of post-tenancy support has prompted concerns on repeat homelessness affecting some of those assisted.
- Important innovations in homelessness policy have been developing in recent years, notably including widening professed adherence to Housing First principles and expanded permanent supportive housing provision in certain jurisdictions.
- Aspirations to 'end homelessness' are increasingly widely voiced, albeit that this commitment generally remains lacking in precise definition and also implies the availability of ongoing funding for support as needed, and a marked increase in social and affordable housing provision.

3.1 Chapter introduction and overview

This chapter details some of the key developments in the Australian homelessness policy space since 2022. Given its crucial significance in preventing and relieving homelessness, the chapter includes a review of new commitments on social housing investment, as well as an investigation of specialist homelessness service system refinements. These measures are to be understood in the context of and in response to the current housing market conditions and affordability stress outlined in Chapter 2. Identified measures are analysed in terms of their extent, their (claimed or demonstrated) strengths and their limitations in helping to meet the needs of Australians excluded from housing and in addressing the structural drivers of homelessness. These policies and funding commitments also underpin homelessness practice and have implications for workforce conditions, which we discuss next in Chapter 4.

This chapter covers three main areas of housing and homelessness policy development. First, in Section 3.2, we outline the status of the forthcoming National Housing and Homelessness Plan – a potentially significant development, pledged as part of the Federal Labor 2022 election platform. In Section 3.3, we discuss new social housing investment commitments – encompassing both the recent Commonwealth Government's re-entry into this field, as well as development funding pledged by state and territory governments. Then, in Section, 3.4, we consider the new homelessness initiatives in Australia over the past two years and the policy objective of 'ending homelessness', which has been taken up broadly across the homelessness sector and some Australian governments. Finally, in Section, 3.5, we reflect on these recent developments in some concluding remarks.

Our review, as described above, is largely informed by our analysis of recently published grey literature, relevant government websites and similar, and by the key stakeholder interviews undertaken as part of this research in all eight Australian jurisdictions (see Section 1.4).

3.2 National Housing and Homelessness Plan

As flagged in AHM 2022, a key development in the homelessness policy landscape in recent years has been the Commonwealth Government's re-engagement in housing and homelessness policy and in development funding. Progressing its 2022 election pledge to establish a National Housing and Homelessness Plan has formed a focus for the Albanese administration's re-assertion of a national leadership role in this area. As declared by the Housing Minister, the Plan will be a ten-year strategy, developed in collaboration with state and territory governments, to 'set out a shared vision to inform future housing and homelessness policy' (Australian Government, 2024a).

An Issues Paper, released in August 2023, provided an overview of the focus areas for the Plan (Australian Government, 2023). Subsequently, via a national consultation process, industry stakeholders and members of the public were invited to input to the process by contributing suggestions on how to improve housing affordability and access to social housing, and reduce homelessness. According to the Government's summary of these contributions, key themes included the need for:

- More funding to deliver housing solutions and homelessness services
- Stronger government coordination with NGOs and the private sector, and
- An innovative and holistic housing and homelessness system that provides support alongside housing – with a shift from managing homelessness to preventing and eliminating it.

However, identified shortcomings of the 2023 Issues Paper prompted concerns that the resulting Plan might fall well short of expectations. Not only was the Paper lacking in any analysis of housing system performance, but it failed to propose any overarching goals, objectives or missions for the Plan. While listing current government initiatives it left undiscussed vast areas of policy directly relevant to housing and homelessness, including, migration and settlement policy, income support, and financial regulation, the role of urban development and city growth, and the intersection of outcomes in homelessness with policy developments in domestic and family violence, disability and mental health.

At the time of writing, months after the Plan's officially mooted publication date, it remains unreleased. This opens up the possibility that the version under development since 2022 might be permanently shelved. Bearing in mind the process inadequacies noted above, and provided that the Commonwealth's commitment to producing a meaningful and coherent long-term strategy for housing and homelessness remains intact, that could be no bad thing. But it would be essential for a restarted 2025 Plan development process to be more firmly founded and more purposefully led than the 2022-24 effort.

3.3 Social housing investment commitments

The capacity of Australia's private rental system to affordably accommodate low income households has been in long term decline. In the 25 years to 2021, the national shortfall in the number of private tenancies affordable to low income private renters increased from 48,000 to 255,000 (Pawson et al. 2020; Reynolds et al. 2024). With the vast majority of specialist homeless services providers reporting growing difficulty in assisting clients into private rental homes (see Chapter 5), the situation has recently become more acute.

Especially within this context, social housing is a critically important resource in affordably and securely accommodating low income and/or vulnerable households, and in preventing and relieving homelessness. As demonstrated by research evidence, being granted public housing has a quantifiable protective effect on vulnerable people otherwise at risk of recurrent homelessness (Johnson et al. 2018). Despite the now widespread stated adherence to Housing First as an organising principle for homelessness interventions, scope for genuine Housing First practice is hugely constrained in countries like Australia where private rental housing is insecure and social housing provision is inadequate (Kuskoff et al., 2024).

More broadly, among eligible people registered as seeking social housing, those deemed homeless or at risk of homelessness are generally accorded a high priority. In contemporary Australia these groups typically account for a large proportion of the high priority applicants who dominate the cohort of newly accommodated in public or community housing each year (Pawson and Lilley 2022). The housing prospects of this cohort are highly dependent on the adequacy of social housing provision. Such prospects have been damaged by the almost constantly declining proportion of social housing in the housing market in Australia since the 1990s (as detailed in Chapter 2).

Commonwealth Government initiatives

However, after more than a decade of generally minimal activity (see Section 2.5) the early 2020s have seen significant new funding pledged to social housing investment by a number of Australian governments. Part of this has involved a resumption of funding by the Commonwealth Government elected in 2022. This has included:

- The Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF), a program to subsidise the construction of 20,000 social housing units and 10,000 affordable rental dwellings by 2029 (Australian Government, 2024b).
- The National Housing Accord (2022) to fund 10,000 affordable rental homes program (Australian Government, 2024c) – to be matched by state and territory governments .
- The Social Housing Accelerator program, a $2 billion one-off initiative announced in 2023 to fund the rapid construction of around 4,000 new social homes (Australian Government, 2024e)[10].
- A 10-year $4 billion investment in social housing repairs and construction in Northern Territory remote communities, jointly funded with the NT Government and estimated as supporting the delivery of up to 270 new homes each year (Albanese et al., 2024).
- $1 billion in low-cost loan finance and grants through the National Housing Infrastructure Facility (NHIF) to support transitional housing projects[11] targeted to women and children fleeing family and domestic violence, and to young people facing homelessness (Housing Australia, 2024b).

Framed in relation to the absence of new national funding for social housing construction since 2011, the flow of new units to be generated by the HAFF and other above-cited programs is significant. However, the approximately 25,000 additional social rental dwellings to be developed under the HAFF, Social Housing Accelerator and NT partnership programs during the second half of the 2020s (5,000 units per year) will expand the national social housing portfolio by less than 6%[12].

State government commitments

Historically, there has been a general expectation that social housing development in Australia would be mainly funded by the Commonwealth Government, rather than by state/territory governments. Given the far greater financial firepower available to the federal level of government, thanks to far superior tax raising and borrowing powers, there is a rationale for this orthodoxy. During the early 2020s, however, a number of state governments broke with this custom; moves which may have been partly prompted by a recognition that the federal government of the day was immovably unwilling to resume the Commonwealth's historic role in this respect. Triggered by the COVID-19

10 Although, since affordable rental units are targeted mainly towards non-vulnerable low wage workers, it is the funding commitments specific to (lower priced) social rental provision more directly relevant to Australia's ability to prevent and relieve homelessness.

11 Noting that, strictly speaking, such provision does not equate to social housing – because it involves on temporary rather than permanent accommodation for the households concerned.

12 Especially bearing in mind that net additions to the stock will be lower due to the demolition of existing public housing involved in clearing sites for some new development projects.

emergency, several state governments chose to include social housing construction within post-pandemic economic recovery programs. By late 2021, these investment commitments totalled almost $10 billion, promising to add over 23,000 new social homes to the national stock of public and community housing by the mid-2020s (Pawson et al., 2021).

Particularly notable funding pledges contributing to this development were those under the Victorian Government's 2020 $5.3 billion Big Housing Build (BHB) program, and the Queensland Government's 2021 Housing Investment Fund (HIF) and Queensland Housing Investment Growth Initiative (QHIGI) totalling $2.9 billion.

Subsequently, since 2022, a number of jurisdictions have announced new or additional self-funded social housing investment commitments as detailed below (jurisdictions listed alphabetically).

In **ACT**, the Government's 2024/25 budget includes $285 million for housing initiatives to boost social housing assistance and homelessness services and to extend the Rent Relief Fund (ACT Government, 2024). The ACT share of HAFF and NHA approvals will support the delivery of at least 1,375 social and affordable homes in the territory (Australian Government, 2024b, 2024c).

The **New South Wales** Government's 2024 state budget included $5.1 billion in social housing investment to fund 8,400 social homes (including 6,200 new builds) over four years – half of which will be prioritised for survivors of domestic and family violence (Minns, 2024). There is also an additional $1 billion for repairs to bring social homes back into use (ibid.).

Queensland announced $2.8 billion for social and affordable housing in the state's 2024 budget (Dick et al., 2024). These funds will contribute to the state's announced intention to ramp up new social housing production to 2,000 per year by 2027, consistent with a declared longer term objective of adding 53,500 units to the state's portfolio by 2046 (Pawson et al., 2024). This target would expand the stock of public and community housing by 73% over the period. Like other states and territories, it will receive a proportionate share of funding from federal schemes, e.g. the HAFF. It is presumed that associated assumptions have been factored into the 2027 pledge. Notably, the long-term new supply target was reportedly informed by housing needs analysis which, in a country where service planning of this kind is unknown for social housing, would make Queensland a national leader in this space (ibid).

The **South Australian** Government has created a $844 million housing package to deliver 2,383 social and affordable homes between 2023-28, including the upgrade of existing social housing (Government of South Australia, 2024a).

The **Tasmanian** Government reports having set aside $1.5 billion to deliver its housing strategy target of 10,000 additional social and affordable homes by 2032 through the delivery body, Homes Tasmania – with around $550 million allocated over the next four years to meet this goal (Tasmanian Government, 2024).

While continuing to roll out various schemes under its BHB initiative, in 2023 the **Victorian Government** announced an additional $1 billion Regional Housing Fund to underpin development of 'more than 1,300 new social and affordable homes' in regional areas (Victorian Government 2023). The Government has also announced a long-term program to redevelop 44 Melbourne high rise housing sites over 20 years, with the process involving the replacement of existing social housing provision with a 10% additional increment (ibid).

By 2024 almost 10,000 BHB social and affordable homes had been completed or were under construction (Victorian Government, 2024). The program, overall, includes 2,000 new homes for Victorians living with mental illness – a recommendation as part of the government's response to the 2021 report of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (Victorian Government, 2021). However, as noted by a Victorian stakeholder interviewee, funding for the mental health support attached to these homes has yet to materialise. As reported in Chapter 2 (see Figures 2.13-2.14) BHB additions to the social housing stock appear to have made a significant positive impact on overall letting supply and on the state government's ability to rehouse homeless households.

In **Western Australia**, the state government committed $1.1 billion for housing and homelessness initiatives in its 2024 budget (Western Australia Government, 2024a), bringing total state-funded investment since 2021-22 to $3.2 billion. An additional $400 million pledged to the state's Social and Affordable Investment Fund (SAHIF) will reportedly bring the total number of new social homes delivered 2021-2027 to 5,000 – of which more than 2,100 were already completed by 2024 (ibid.). The Government has simultaneously streamlined the planning and development process for CHPs, to reduce procurement times and costs, with the aim of accelerating social and affordable housing delivery (WA Government, 2024b).

Reflecting on recent social and affordable housing investment commitments

The social and affordable housing expenditure commitments listed above post-date our earlier estimate that recently pledged funding by 2021 could add 23,000 state/territory-funded social rental units by the mid-2020s (Pawson et al., 2021). Therefore, while the present research has not extended to systematically quantifying the additional homes to be generated as a result of these post-2021 announcements, it is likely that these will push the 23,000 figure into the 30-40,000 range by the latter part of the decade. Thus, the combined output of Commonwealth and state/territory-funded development committed in the period 2020-24 could add around 60,000 dwellings to Australia's total social housing portfolio by the early 2030s (25,000 Commonwealth funded plus 35,000 state/territory-funded). Perhaps as many as 50,000 could be net additions, after allowing for the loss of obsolete public housing demolished in the course of redevelopment. That could equate to an increase of around 11% in the 2023 national portfolio (c. 440,000 dwellings).

Viewing the gross addition in terms of flows, rather than stocks, at least for a few years during the mid-to-late 2020s, currently committed new development pipelines could see social housebuilding activity coming close to the 8-10,000 dwellings per year needed to stabilise social housing as a proportion of total housing[13]. At least temporarily, this could halt the sector's decline from over 6% of all occupied dwellings in the mid-1990s to only 4% in the early 2020s. At the same time, even if Australia's social housing stock can be expanded by 50,000 homes (net) during the 2020s, that remains a relatively modest number in the context of estimated unmet need in 2021, totalling 437,000 (van de Nouwelant et al., 2022). Informed by such research[14], housing and homelessness advocates have called for social housing to grow to 10% share of all homes (Everybody's Home, 2023). Fulfilling this aspiration would require recently committed investment levels for the late 2020s to be not only maintained but substantially expanded in the 2030s.

The need for ongoing social housing investment was expressed in the interviews, with one NSW stakeholder asserting that 'ongoing funding is needed':

13 Given that social housing now accounts for some 4% of occupied dwellings, and assuming that annual residential construction output may be running at around 200,000 dwellings in the late 2020s, the maintenance of the current share of all housing would crudely necessitate net annual additions to the stock of some 8,000 units. Because, realistically, a significant proportion of new social housing schemes involve the redevelopment of existing public housing estates, the necessary gross development output would need to be somewhat higher to compensate for the associated loss of obsolete units involved.

14 For reference, across OECD countries social housing averages 7.1% of all housing (OECD 2024)

> *It can't just be a happy announcement, like for a one-off, like they do need to commit to it ongoing, and their lack of committing to funding social housing in the past decade is why they have to invest so much now. So yeah, we can celebrate the win, but it's still not going to, it's not going to make a huge dent. In my opinion, I think it's not really affecting the system as much, kind of some backfilling.*

Regrettably, routine statistical monitoring frameworks are woefully inadequate to properly quantify social and affordable housing development activity in Australia[15]. Relevant metrics are included in neither the Productivity Commission's annual Report on Government Services, nor in any of the statistical series published by the ABS or AIHW[16]. While this deficiency is nothing new, it seems especially remarkable that it persists at a time when both the Commonwealth and most state/ territory governments have recommitted to social housing growth as a policy priority, not only at the level of rhetoric, but in budgetary decision-making.

Fundamental in providing an adequate basis for informed policy making in this area is the development of a framework to monitor social and affordable housing construction, not only according to its total scale (i.e. gross funding, starts and completions), but also broken down in relation to key factors including:

- Social versus affordable rental housing
- Additional versus replacement units (to be derived with reference to data on annual stock losses via demolition or sale)
- Public versus community versus Indigenous housing.

However, notwithstanding uncertainties on the exact scale and the nature of the resulting pipeline, post-2020 commitments of Australian governments on new social housing investment are encouraging. Both in its new funding commitments and in the re-assertion of a national leadership role, the Commonwealth Government's recent stance represents an opportunity to tackle the increasingly stressed housing situation typically experienced by low income Australians. As international research has recently reconfirmed, the population-level availability of accommodation affordable to people on low incomes is a core determinant of homelessness rates (Colburn & Aldern, 2022).

The recent upswing in official commitments on social housing investment was welcomed with enthusiasm by many of our stakeholder interviewees. However, as also noted, there are challenges in delivering these programs according to their announced timeframes and portrayal.

First, as observed by the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council (2024), there are challenges with labour and resourcing, and these challenges mean that on-schedule completion of committed new social housing is anything but certain.

15 One unusual source of data on social and affordable housing development activity current as at September 2023 is the suite of Social Housing Accelerator implementation plans submitted to the Commonwealth by state and territory governments at that time (Australian Government Treasury 2023). These indicate each government's existing funded development commitments alongside planned developments underpinned by SHA funding. However, in informing national estimates, these data are somewhat compromised by inconsistencies in presentation and content (e.g. in relation to the sometimes uncertain distinction between social and affordable housing).

16 Thanks to our own one-off research the pipeline of state/territory-funded new units already committed by 2021 was not only quantified in terms of the total social (rather than affordable rental) housing units involved, but also according to whether newly built dwellings were to replace or complement existing provision. Thus, while the pipeline at that time totalled 23,000, the net addition to the national social housing stock was only 15,600 (Pawson et al., 2021).

Second, there is an inevitable time lag between commitments and housing delivery. As noted above, having commenced in 2020, Victoria's Big Housing Build only began to flow through into social housing lettings in 2022-23.

A third concern relates to the sometimes rather elastic definitions employed by some governments in enumerating social and affordable housing stock additions. For instance, Tasmania along with other states and territories (below) combines tenure types within targets: 'We're not just looking at social housing in Tasmania, but we're also looking at things like key workers accommodation and homeownership and affordable rentals and land release' (TAS Gov). A Tasmanian Government scheme, for example, involves the sale of public housing on a shared equity basis, although these transactions are counted as new 'social housing' stock. Furthermore, according to one non-government stakeholder interviewee, Tasmania is 'counting some crisis accommodation in that term [new social and affordable housing], which we would argue is not long-term housing'. A Tasmanian stakeholder used the phrase 'fairly loose' to describe the definitions of social/ affordable housing: 'we still haven't seen a proper definition within the plan'.

Similarly, a Victorian NGO interviewee spoke about needing more communication and 'accountability about what government is actually delivering', and while the 2024 Victorian Housing Statement includes a target for 800,000 new homes in the next decade, the Statement does not include any targets for social or affordable housing growth.

> *It's done some good things [the Victorian Housing Statement] … but it hasn't anywhere in the document articulated an aspirational target or a target at all around social housing. So, if you look at it, social housing is not in the mix. So, you think this is your fundamental policy platform, and you actually aren't naming what needs to be named, then we've got a problem.*

In Queensland, meanwhile, government-cited statistics on social housing stock additions in some cases include forms of temporary accommodation (Queensland Government, 2024a). In our view this is misleading. People residing in temporary accommodation are classified as homeless by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2023) – including within the ABS Census – reflecting the judgement that this does not accord with prevailing national-cultural standards of what counts as a home. It is a problematic contradiction if a group of people who are counted by the Census as 'homeless' are officially considered by the Queensland Government as already occupying 'social housing'.

3.4 Recent Homelessness Programs and Policy Development

In addition to activity related to social housing investment, recent years have seen stepped-up homelessness policy and program development work ongoing within most Australian governments. In a number of cases – including NSW, Victoria, and NT, as well as the Commonwealth (see Section 3.2) – this has centred on the preparation of broad-ranging homelessness strategies, whether updates of existing plans, or entirely new products. Similarly, in Queensland, a root and branch homelessness policy review has been ongoing during 2024. However, in all of the cases named above, resulting strategy/review documents remain unpublished at the time of writing. Table 3.1 nevertheless demonstrates that – notwithstanding this unfortunate timing – numerous new initiatives have been recently announced and/or implemented under every Australian government.

Following on from the tables, and drawing on stakeholder interviews and other material, the remainder of this section elaborates and discusses some of the table entries.

Table 3.1: Homelessness policy developments/actions, 2022-24 – summary

Jurisdiction/ govt	Policy development(s)	Policy development(s) - summary
Australian Government	Rent Assistance boosts, 2023 and 2024	The maximum rate of Rent Assistance was increased by 15% in 2023 and by a further 10% in 2024
	National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness	From 2024-25 the National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH) replaced the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). The NASHH is a five-year funding agreement designating Commonwealth Government funding to state/territory governments for social housing and homelessness services.
NSW	Homelessness Innovation Fund	$100 million grant program open to NGOs proposing ideas for homelessness service reform and innovation.
	Modification of temporary accommodation (TA) eligibility/access rules	People needing emergency housing enabled to access up to five nights crisis accommodation (e.g. motels) instead of two; removal of 28-day limit on TA per person per financial year; asset cap for eligibility raised from $1,000 to $5,000; asset requirement eliminated for individuals fleeing domestic or family violence; removal of requirement for clients to demonstrate active property search (via rental diary).
	Rentstart scheme	A range of financial assistance targeted at private renters (eligible for social housing) to maintain a tenancy in the private rental market. Including bond loans, advance rent, and tenancy assistance for those at risk of becoming homeless due to rent arrears (up to four weeks rent).
	Extension of SHS contracts	Extended existing contracts for SHS providers and Homeless Youth Assistance Program services by two years, bringing the current contract term to five years, ending on 30 June 2026.
	Together Home	1,092 former rough sleepers and other vulnerable homeless people provided with emergency accommodation during the pandemic assisted in accessing stable housing with two years of wrap-around support.
ACT	Rent Relief Fund	Fund providing grants for up to 4 weeks rent capped at $2,500 for households experiencing rental stress or in severe financial hardship.

Western Australia	Homelessness Commissioning Plan	New homelessness services commissioning model to improve design and integration of homelessness services
	Rental Relief Grant program	$24.4 million program to assist households manage rent arrears and at risk of homelessness (to assist up to 4,500 households) - co-designed by Anglicare WA, Vinnies WA and partner agencies.
	NRAS spot purchases	Spot purchasing of ex-NRAS properties for social and affordable housing, in conjunction with community housing providers.
Victoria	Expanded provision of supportive housing	Expansion of supportive housing provision – including 50-bed facility for rough sleepers in Melbourne CBD[17] and two regional supportive housing projects, reportedly contributing to state-wide portfolio of around 1,000 beds by 2026.
	Homelessness to a Home	1,845 former rough sleepers and other vulnerable homeless people provided with emergency accommodation during the pandemic assisted in accessing stable housing with support
	Homes for Families	170 highly vulnerable homeless families provided with emergency accommodation during the pandemic assisted in accessing stable housing with support
	Rental Stress Support Package	Program to provide information and advice, advocacy and legal assistance to assist renters to avoid homelessness for three years from 2024
Queensland	Homelessness system review 2024	Independent review tasked with developing a better understanding of the homelessness problem (prevalence, geography, precipitating factors, etc); reviewing existing systems, practices and fundings arrangements; and identifying best practice approaches in Australia and overseas.
	Immediate Housing Response (IHR) program	Brokerage funds to SHS providers for families, couples and individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
	Supportive housing framework	New supportive housing policy and framework, developed in consultation with frontline services.
	Expansion of short-term crisis accaommodation	Acquisition of hotels and retirement villages for emergency accommodation.
	NRAS spot purchases	Spot purchasing of ex-NRAS properties for social and affordable housing, in conjunction with community housing providers.

17 Whilst officially labelled ‘supportive housing’, this initiative imposes 12-month time limits on tenancies and is thus better described as ‘transitional housing’ in our view.

South Australia	Aspire Homelessness Program - extension	Program extension to 2027, providing housing and tenancy sustainment support for people experiencing chronic homelessness
	Private Rental Assistance Program	SA Housing Trust provides support for tenancy sustainment by way of bond guarantees and rent assistance.
	Introduction of Alliances homelessness services commissioning framework	From July 2021 five regionally-based ‘homelessness alliances’ replaced what was previously a network of 70 programs delivered by over 30 organisations, each separately funded by government.
Tasmania	Rapid Rehousing	$1.5 million funding for ‘up to 100’ more Rapid Rehousing homes for women and children escaping family violence to provide transitional accommodation with leases up to 12 months at subsidised rent, to assist transition to independent living.
	Private Rental Incentive Scheme	Government secures private rentals at market price and provides them to eligible low-income Tasmanians at a reduced rent. $7.2 million over two years to expand the scheme by another 200 homes.
	Private rent assistance	Private rental financial assistance towards rent, bond or moving costs.
	Housing Connect reform	Expansion of Housing Connect entry-points, options and personalised support, as delivered by Anglicare. Model also includes: Connections Coaches to link people experiencing housing crisis and stress to community supports and resources, to build their capabilities to live independently, and Key Development Coaches to provide intensive support to help people experiencing homelessness to secure and maintain a tenancy.
Northern Territory	Domestic and Family Violence housing pathways pilot program	Small scale head leasing program in Darwin and Alice Springs; community housing provider acts as landlord with specialist agency commissioned to provide survivor support.
	Sustaining tenancies program	Financial assistance with rent arrears plus access to support worker to help with interactions with essential services such as banking.
	Re-commissioning homelessness services	New service commissioning framework incorporating enhanced performance management dimension

Sources: Government websites; media releases; stakeholder interviews. Note: some of the listed initiatives involved the re-funding or refreshment of programs established prior to 2022. Others initiated just prior to this timeframe (e.g. South Australia's 2021 Alliance homelessness services commissioning structure) are included for completeness.

National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness

In 2024 the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) was replaced by the National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH), running through to 2029 (Australian Government, 2024f). Under this compact between the Commonwealth and state/territory governments, the former commits to annual payments to the latter on the basis of agreed policy priorities.

For its five year term NASHH funding totals $9.3 billion. While apparently representing a material increase over the equivalent NHHA budget, this is effectively a continuation of previously operative funding levels, up-rated for inflation. The higher headline budget allocation simply reflects the incorporation of homelessness services funding previously provided by the Commonwealth on a temporary basis outside the main Agreement. This was financial assistance enabling services to meet increased wage costs arising from the SACS Equal Remuneration Order dating from 2012. In 2023-24 these funds were accounted for as a 'one-off' investment of $67.5 million.

Like its predecessor agreements, the NASHH specifies the breakdown of annually provided Commonwealth funding across the states and territories. A notable development in the NASHH is the use of updated data based on the 2021 Census reflecting relative rates of homelessness in the distribution of the dedicated homelessness funding[18]. Thus, the Northern Territory’s 2024-2029 allocation represents a large increase over its NHHA funding due to its extraordinarily high rate of homelessness as calibrated by the 2021 Census. However, since the overall NASHH funding envelope remains unchanged (other than via inflation-indexing) these additional funds to the Territory are ‘paid for’ by a real terms reduction in allocations to the other jurisdictions, by comparison with the amounts which would have been otherwise received.

A Northern Territory Government homelessness and housing strategy for allocating these additional social housing and homelessness funds is imminent at the time of writing and was viewed by stakeholder interviewees as an opportunity for stronger collaboration and cross-departmental responses. NGO stakeholder testimony also highlighted the need in the Territory for culturally led approaches; and made the case for additional youth-focused programs and foyers (to address overcrowding); increased community housing provider capacity; and additional crisis/short-term accommodation while awaiting new permanent housing. Another stakeholder observed that the Territory’s unique circumstances, including remoteness, extreme weather, historic low- and poor-quality housing stock, along with minimal homelessness funding, required that the new funding and related strategy caters to the local context:

> *[We’ve] got to look at something that's totally unique, there's nowhere else in the world, so you can't copy…it's a societal issue, not just a lack of housing issue.*

The issues in the Northern Territory are complex and encompass broader structural challenges as well as a lack of social and affordable housing, which requires a joined-up response across sectors, for example housing, health, education, and justice.

Boosts to Commonwealth Rent Assistance

In contrast with its standstill funding allocated under the NASHH, Commonwealth Government budgets in 2023 and 2024 committed significantly increased expenditure on Commonwealth Rent

18 The NHHA used general population for general housing funding, and rates of homelessness for the homelessness funding, both based on the 2006 Census.

Assistance. This followed from above-inflation increases in CRA maximum rates sanctioned in these budgets, and which came into force in September 2023 and September 2024.

CRA is an income supplement payable to eligible lower-income private tenants and community housing tenants. It is available to Centrelink recipients paying rent above a minimum rent threshold, and qualifying for another social security payment (e.g. age or disability pension) or Family Tax Benefit A. CRA is payable at the rate of 75 cents for every dollar of rent above the rent threshold applicable to the claimant (depending on household size and type), up to the applicable maximum amount.

CRA threshold and maximum rates are indexed twice yearly according to the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Because, over decades, actual rents have increased in real terms, the value of CRA relative to actual rents has declined. In 2023 and 2024, however, the Commonwealth Government partially restored this relativity through two increases in CRA maximum rates by 15% and 10%, respectively. Consequently, in combination with routine indexation, by September 2024 when the second of these extraordinary increases took effect, maximum payments had increased by 45% on equivalent rates in March 2022 – e.g. for a single adult up from $145.80 to $211.20 per fortnight (DSS 2024).

As reported in Chapter 2, the national median advertised rent rose by 51% 2020-24. However, in the period March 2022-September 2024 the all-property increase in the national median rent was 25% (from $504 to $630) - (SQM Free Property Data - ***https://sqmresearch.com.au/free-statistics.php***). Rent increases experienced by existing tenants have been typically lower than this (see Figure 2.6), although the impact of rising advertised rents has been washing through the wider market and will continue to do so into 2025, even if advertised rent inflation continues to slow in late 2024 and into 2025. This analysis in any case indicates that, extraordinarily, CRA-eligible tenants are likely to have been very substantially protected from worsening rental affordability in the period 2022-24.

A final observation on this topic is that recent Commonwealth Government initiatives on CRA have left the payment's structure entirely untouched. More fundamental flaws in this structure as observed by the Henry Tax Review (Henry 2010) and more recently in AHURI research (Viforj et al. 2020) remain unaddressed. While 'topping up' maximum payment levels was a welcome and long overdue measure witnessed in 2023 and 2024, there is a case for structural reform to tackle issues including:

- The standard twice-yearly indexation formula (see above)
- The one-size fits all payment thresholds model which ignores the diversity of rental market conditions across Australia
- The restriction of eligibility to persons qualifying for other social security payments or Family Tax Benefit A. This is a stipulation that largely excludes from CRA entitlement adult-only low income worker households experiencing rental stress, thus contributing to the fact that one in five low-income renters receive no such help (Patterson-Ross 2024).

Progression of COVID-19 era special programs in Victoria and NSW

As reported in AHM 2022, state government emergency accommodation (EA) programs enacted early in the COVID-19 pandemic saw a reduction in street homelessness to near zero in some capital cities, exemplifying political and practical scope for decisive intervention on a scale previously unimaginable. By early 2021, through state government action, more than 12,000 rough sleepers and others had benefited from such programs (Pawson et al., 2022; Pawson, 2024). In Victoria and New South Wales state governments also pledged to enable pathways to longer-term housing for some formerly homeless EA residents. However, highly restricted social housing system capacity and inadequate rent allowance provision meant that such help was strictly rationed to the most disadvantaged.

These two initiatives, as discussed in AHM 2022 (Pawson et al., 2022), were the Homelessness to a Home (H2H) program in Victoria and Together Home (TH) in NSW. People assisted through these efforts included a significant number of chronic rough sleepers whose housing prospects were effectively enhanced during the COVID-19 crisis – when the cost of transitioning EA residents into longer-term housing was one component of pandemic expenditure committed by these state and territory governments in extraordinary funding.

H2H supported 1,845 households experiencing homelessness during and beyond the pandemic to access head-leased properties in the private sector and social housing with support for two years (Gower et al., 2024). The expanded social housing supply brought on via the Big Housing Build provided a long-term housing solution for some. As shown in Figure 2.14 (Chapter 2), Victoria social housing lettings classed as 'homeless with support' rose by 82% in the three years to 2023-24. However, one stakeholder participant stressed the challenges encountered by the Program in seeking to accommodate people in private tenancies; the need to contend with low vacancy rates and households exiting into homelessness following headlease expiry.

A program evaluation indicated that H2H produced a number of positive outcomes – including, reduced use of emergency homelessness services and cost-savings across government when compared to standard service provision over the same period (Gower et al., 2024). That said, the H2H program was being wound down in 2024, with post-tenancy support provision coming to an end in the absence of recurrent funding for such assistance. As a result, according to one stakeholder 'a lot of people who had gained housing security [via the Program] are now homeless again', an outcome at odds with the positive tone of the evaluation report.

Another stakeholder acknowledged the expense involved in delivering the program but explained that 'it's expensive because it's the right model for a really complex problem' and further commented that:

> *'Open ended support seems to be the hardest thing to get across the line in terms of the Housing First funding model'.*

In NSW, meanwhile, the Together Home (TH) initiative, was established in 2020 to provide a pathway into longer term housing for selected pandemic EA service users (NSW Government, 2024b). A Program evaluation (Brackertz, 2024) found that 81% of participants were helped to access accommodation with support (1,092 people). At the same time, the program's reliance on head-leasing proved problematic within the context of unusually low vacancy rates in the post-COVID private rental market (mirroring experience in Victoria). CHPs were, therefore, expected to house more program participants than originally anticipated. In contrast with the situation in Victoria, NSW Government staff faced the unenviable challenge of implementing TH without the prospect of any social housing net growth to help accommodate program participants:

> *My concern was always that these were leasehold properties…so if we get to a situation now where rents are getting higher … [the] owners of those units or buildings would be like…I can get double... I think it's served a purpose. I do get concerned sometimes where [head leasing] gets touted as this great model that we need to keep going with, because I think it's very [vulnerable to] market conditions (NSW stakeholder).*

TH has one more year to wrap up support for existing clients as no new funding was announced in the 2024/25 budget, to the disappointment of some homelessness advocates. As with the termination of Victoria's H2H, the absence of ongoing funding for permanent supportive housing in New South Wales from 2025 leaves a gap that seems likely to exacerbate repeat homelessness in the future – as further discussed in the next section.

3.5 Housing First and supportive housing

Once again linking back to AHM 2022, a recurring theme from our 2022 stakeholder interviews was the urgent need for Australia to develop a coherent policy towards Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). This term can be understood as the close integration of long-term affordable housing with the capacity for ongoing support. In this way, Housing First is a specific type of PSH[19].

At a fundamental level, both of these concepts include long-term and affordable housing with an integrated model that includes health and psychosocial supports, while access to and continuation of housing is not conditional on anything other than compliance with tenancy obligations. There is also an intention to target people who are most vulnerable in the homeless population. Many frame these approaches in terms of a right to housing and the right for people to choose how they live, thus harm minimisation is routinely advocated. There are lots of different ways that these approaches are delivered in terms of housing type, integration with support, and specific cohorts targeted, but the evidence concludes that they effectively end long-term homelessness for the vast majority of individuals who access them (Padgett et al., 2016).

PSH and Housing First models have been piloted in Australia. These have included Street to Home initiatives, and the Journey to Social Inclusion program (Johnson et al., 2014; Parsell et al., 2014). However, as we argued in that report, Australian governments need to better recognise the case for expanded provision of PSH, and the associated need to develop a funding framework to enable this.

Since publication of AHM 2022, approaches of this kind have been attracting growing attention – in some cases backed by significant funding. Recent policy asserts Housing First as fundamental in ending homelessness, and indeed, some jurisdictions link Housing First to the 'rare, brief and non-recurring' mantra discussed below. In the Tasmanian Government's recent Housing Strategy, for example,

> *Objective: Addressing primary homelessness with a Housing First approach that directs policy and interventions to make instances of homelessness brief, rare and non-recurring (Tasmanian Government, 2023, p. 24).*

Similarly, the NSW Government affirms commitment to Housing First, as reflected by its recently established Homelessness Innovation Fund 'to develop and support better responses to homelessness, aiming to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring' (NSW Government, 2024a). The Western Australian Government committed almost $140 million to homelessness initiatives in 2024. It also established a homelessness commissioning plan said to be guided by Housing First principles to improve the design and integration of homelessness services and to deliver 'collaborative evidence-based outcomes across the Western Australia's homelessness service system' (WA Government, 2024).

Arguably, however, Australian homelessness programs genuinely consistent with Housing First principles have been few in number. Often such schemes have been operated only as one-off

19 For a review of these concepts and their relationship to one another, see Padgett et al. (2016) and Rog et al. (2014).

pilots or small-scale initiates that work – albeit sometimes highly successfully – with very small populations. Many purported Housing First projects in fact rely heavily on conditional and short-term accommodation responses (Clarke et al., 2020).

Recent history in Queensland has seen controversy around the Government's failure to build on the observed successes of Brisbane Common Ground by scaling up statewide supportive housing provision. In 2024, however, the government published a supportive housing policy (Queensland Government, 2024c). Positively, this defined such provision as long-term affordable housing with integrated supports to meet the needs of vulnerable people. It also acknowledges supportive housing as a necessary part of the housing and support landscape required to meet the housing needs of the population (ibid.). This is a step in the right direction towards a nationally coherent PSH policy.

Our stakeholder interviews, meanwhile, reinforced the need for recurrent operational funding to provide ongoing support to clients in long-term affordable housing. As a Queensland Government stakeholder explained:

> *'It all comes down to the cost, and there's a really big cost to the public purse, because… a lot of these people need support. So, it's not just the accommodation costs, it's the support costs as well'.*

Similarly, a Tasmanian Government stakeholder also expressed concerns about the operating costs associated with a 'true' Housing First model:

> *If we increase in supply, which you need to have supply [of housing] for Housing First, how do we bring in a Housing First model, a true model, into Tasmania? and that's where I think I worry about the operating costs not being there because otherwise, it's really just a housing-led response, rather than a house first, absolutely.*

The problematic absence of any national framework for support funding was also highlighted in AHM 2022, where we discussed how this might be addressed. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was identified as one potential ongoing funding source enabling the growth of PSH, including Housing First initiatives. However, there are limitations around the application of NDIS funding that would necessitate program-wide amendments. PSH and Housing First also require dedicated investment in long-term, affordable housing options to replicate the highly positive outcomes identified in the international research; it is not sufficient, as is common amongst Australian initiatives, to simply reproduce discredited transitional housing models and call them Housing First/PSH. Evidently, there needs to be ongoing sector-wide dialogue and lobbying of government to secure the ongoing support funding of PSH and Housing First affiliated models – and to achieve the scaling up (at a national level) of programs truly consistent with their core principles. The absence of progressing a system wide PSH framework will leave many vulnerable people excluded from housing whereby they are in a state that exacerbates their vulnerabilities. Social housing alone will not meet the housing needs of this small cohort. PSH is housing policy and not a homelessness program. As housing policy the implementation requires partnership with other service systems to provide the healthcare and support services tailored to the tenants needs across all population groups, including individuals and families.

3.6 'Ending homelessness' as a policy objective

Finally in this section, a notable recent development in the homelessness policy space that emerges from our 2024 policy review and stakeholder interviews is the increasingly widely-cited aspiration to 'end homelessness'. This is sometimes further described as a situation where 'homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring'. In addition to – and sometimes in parallel to – local based Zero projects which we examine in the next chapter, most Australian governments have recently asserted, in various forms, that their homelessness service systems are, or will be, geared toward 'ending homelessness'. Exactly how this is defined and measured is, of course, crucial when pledging such an apparently ambitious objective.

There are multiple meanings to the aspirations to end homelessness through the service system. In some jurisdictions, 'ending homelessness' is officially presented as a vision to be realised by a set date. The Tasmanian Housing Strategy (Tasmanian Government, 2023) for example, asserts that,

Evoking a clear normative argument that homelessness constitutes a moral failure contrary to fundamental human needs, the Strategy concludes that aiming for anything less than ending homelessness would be tantamount to believing 'that some Tasmanians do not deserve a home' (Tasmanian Government, 2023, p. 3). It is argued that ending homelessness ought to be an

> *Our Government's vision is to end homelessness by 2043 (Tasmanian Government, 2023, p. 3).*

unambiguous commitment in the way governments pledge the objective of eliminating road fatalities. However, as one NGO interviewee contended, the realisation of such an objective dependeds on official willingness to address the structural drivers of homelessness, including the inadequate provision of social housing, income support, mental health services, drug and alcohol treatment opportunities and other services.

A slightly more cautious phraseology employed by the Queensland Government pledges to 'work towards ending homelessness' (Queensland Government, 2024a). It seems reasonable to expect that a more precise statement of intent, as well as a credible plan for its realisation, will be included in the currently ongoing review of the Queensland homelessness services system.

In the Northern Territory, a peak body stakeholder interviewee spoke of the 'unique opportunity' they now have (owing to the additional homelessness funding) to look at their existing service system, 'identify the holes', and 'think big':

Elsewhere in Australia, 'ending homelessness' aspirations are officially presented specifically in relation to a 'functional zero' methodology and framing (as further discussed in Chapter 4). Many local initiatives that form part of the Zero homelessness movement strongly identify with the 'rare,

> *Let's think about ending homelessness. Sure, that might be a very far off goal, but how can we refocus the conversation on prevention?*

brief and non-recurring' aspiration. According to stakeholder testimony, the NSW Government's homelessness strategy, currently 'in development', will cite such an objective. Similarly, the Victorian Government's 2024 budget referred to a new funding allocation of $103.9 million for 'evidence-based services that make homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring' (MHRAG, 2024b

p. 2). However, while Victoria's Council to Homeless Persons asserts 'there are solutions and with smart action we can make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring' (Council to Homeless Persons, 2023, p. 2), the state government is rather coy in spelling out how it believes this could be specifically defined and achieved.

For its part, in a 2023 report, the NSW peak, Homelessness NSW, argued that homelessness is solvable; that solving homelessness requires a whole of system view and indeed transformation; and that transformation should lead to creating a 'future where homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring' (Homelessness NSW, 2023, p. 5). Usefully seeking to operationalise steps towards the realisation of this aspiration, the report outlined a range of relevant impact measures (ibid., p. 29). However, the population level data to inform these measures is unavailable and it is likewise unclear how some of them would work. For example, it is noted that data on 'number of alcohol related hospitalisations', or data on 'number of people on/rate of income support payments' is a measure of whether making homelessness rare is achieved (ibid. p. 29). We are unconvinced that, even if available, such statistics could convincingly demonstrate whether homelessness is 'rare'.

The commitment to end homelessness, as noted in AHM 2022, goes hand in hand with a marked increase in the supply of social and affordable housing – which for many will also require access to the necessary long-term support.

3.7 Chapter conclusion

Housing functions in Australia as a complex, inter-connected system in which relevant policy levers are fragmented across all levels of government, and across multiple departments within each level. Measures targeted at select aspects of that system are therefore unlikely to have a major impact on homelessness and require a joined-up strategic approach.

A meaningful national housing plan has been absent in Australia since the post-war reconstruction era, with the pledged National Housing and Homelessness Plan being the first comparable national homelessness policy initiative since 2009. Only through a nationally co-ordinated approach can Australia begin to redress the damaging social and economic impacts of housing stress that continue to grow, as outlined in Chapter 2.

The Commonwealth Government's return to its crucial role as funder of social and affordable housing is a welcome development. The Commonwealth is the level of government with the greatest revenue raising and borrowing capabilities and is therefore best placed to play the primary role in funding social housing provision in the medium to long-term. However, whilst recent announcements are to be welcomed, committed funding remains insufficient to meet the levels of unmet housing need that currently exist in Australia. Moreover, with the solitary exception of Queensland, none of these initiatives is framed in terms of a long-term evidence-based social housing provision target.

Similarly, a needs-based commitment to increased recurrent Commonwealth funding under the NASHH is a necessary measure for preventing and ending homelessness in our view.

There are also unanswered questions around how social and affordable housing are being defined by governments and what is included within these targets, not to mention the broader market challenges in relation to the delivery of the new committed social housing – with concerns around labour capacity, resourcing of materials, and resultant construction delays.

The inadequacy of statistical monitoring as a basis for informed investment policy-making is rather astonishing given the level of federal and state/territory commitment to the expansion of social housing. Furthermore, fit-for-purpose homelessness policy responses also depend on effective collaboration across sectors, availability of adequate sustained support, and a long-term vision for a well-functioning service system. While the COVID-19 pandemic triggered extraordinary expenditure for homelessness emergency responses, and an openness towards new approaches in homelessness policy and practice (including successful housing and support programs in Victoria and New South Wales), the vision of ending homelessness requires a longer-term commitment, that begins with ambitious and well-founded strategies at both federal and state/territory levels.

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4. Recent progress and challenges in the homelessness services sector

Key points

- There are significant workforce challenges in the homelessness sector that are largely attributable to increasing demand and resource challenges to meet demand. These challenges include increased client complexity, higher caseloads, lower staff morale, and difficulty retaining skilled staff (due to burn-out and better pay for similar work in other sectors).
- The unprecedented government funding and system-wide response to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic is referenced by SHS staff as exemplifying how they could actually make a difference to people's lives. Meanwhile, their current inability to assist all among a growing number seeking help detracts from workers' job satisfaction and commitment to remain in the sector.
- A sector funded by government at a level inadequate to meet demand, yet also assessed by government on whether this demand has been met, risks alienating the workforce. The SHS workforce not only needs to be resourced to meet demand, but also contracted and assessed on measures that can directly and realistically be achieved.
- Key challenges posed in attempting a truly preventative approach to homelessness, include the sufficiency of government funding, the adequacy of social housing provision and the functionality of the private rental market. In the absence of these conditions service providers are forced into a crisis-driven and reactive approach to homelessness.
- Despite the resource challenges impeding prevention efforts, there is nevertheless engagement in preventive and early intervention work for people at risk of homelessness, for instance educating real estate agents about the risk signs of tenancy failure.
- The dominant form of prevention in Australia involves assisting people at risk of entering homelessness in sustaining existing housing, with most jurisdictions having some type of state government funded intervention to prevent homelessness through private tenancy sustainment and tenancy access models.
- There is an urgent necessity for SHS staff to adapt their work, including models of homelessness prevention, to respond to growing and changing need illustrated in our SHS survey. Increasingly unaffordable rents are creating cohorts of private tenants placed at risk of homelessness, many of whom are presenting to SHS providers, seeking assistance due to financial problems.
- A number of new and ongoing state and territory initiatives seek to foster Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led homelessness and housing responses. 81% of our SHS survey respondents report having culturally safe measures in place, including training, engagement with local First Nations led organisations, and employing First Nations staff in leadership positions. It is critical that such efforts succeed in disrupting this stark injustice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing deprivation.
- Australia has seen a steady up take of Advance to Zero (AtoZ) homelessness projects in recent years, with well over 20 AtoZ communities now operating in capital cities and elsewhere. In its commitment and its methodology the AtoZ movement brings value to its affiliated communities by way of collaboration, locally determined and owned responses, and a systems understanding of homelessness (which is drawn on to use data to advocate for systems change).

- However, at a time when SHS capacity is at full stretch, there are concerns around the resource input implications of AtoZ data collection, and doubts on whether the practical benefit of the additional information justifies the effort involved in acquiring it.

4.1 Chapter introduction and overview

Chapter 4 provides an overview of recent practice and progress in Australia's homelessness sector, alongside some of the key challenges faced by agencies and their staff. This includes examples of best practice work being undertaken by SHS providers across the country, as well as workforce issues in the sector. Indeed, homelessness practice is greatly influenced by the health and wellbeing of the SHS workforce, and also underpinned by the policies and funding commitments previously outlined in Chapter 3.

This chapter covers four crucial areas of progress and challenges in the sector, drawing again on our stakeholder interviews in all eight Australian jurisdictions (see Section 1.4), and triangulated with our SHS survey data. We also draw on both academic research and grey literature (e.g. policies and reports) in our review.

First, in Section 4.2, we discuss the significant workforce challenges in the homelessness sector and their implications for meeting increasing demand for services. Next, in Section 4.3 we consider how prevention approaches are being enacted across Australia and the challenges posed by a truly preventive approach. Culturally led services and culturally appropriate practices are described in Section 4.4, with reference to endeavours to grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led homelessness and housing responses. In section 4.5 we map the development of the Advance to Zero (AtoZ) movement – and the expanding adoption of its methodology across the country – drawing on key stakeholders' assessments of its value and limitations; before closing the chapter in Section 4.6 with our final thoughts on the progress challenges and concerns, in relation to Australia's contemporary homelessness policy and practice landscape.

4.2 Sector workforce issues

In 2012, just over a decade ago, a landmark study of the Australian specialist homelessness workforce found a generally satisfied and content workforce (Martin et al., 2012). Almost half of the homeless workforce intended to stay in the sector for at least three years, reporting that a strong desire to help people motivated their work. Martin and colleagues' (2012) research also recognised that for Australia to deliver effective responses to homelessness the workforce required appropriate staffing, skills, and resources. This pivotal study concluded that for the sector's future sustainability, there must be clear strategies extending beyond exploiting the altruistic motivations of staff, to ensure they maintain a work/life balance and flexibility, and do not experience overwork and burnout.

More recently, James and colleagues (2023) identified a starkly different picture of the Australian homelessness agency workforce. James et al. (2023) articulated the increasingly complex work undertaken in the sector – work that places high demands on staff, presenting new psychological and other staff welfare problems for agencies. Moreover, they found that the SHS workforce was facing significant challenges with retention, and that the capacity of SHS organisations to address the workforce concerns were limited (James et al., 2023). The study observed that providing the resources and appropriate supports to underpin a well-functioning homelessness workforce relied upon government commitment to the sector – including the duration of contracts and resourcing to attract, train, and retain the professionalism required.

Extending the findings of James et al. (2023), this Monitor has identified growing stress experienced by SHS staff due to the increasing scale and complexity of the service user cohort, as demonstrated by the survey data in Chapter 5. Although more focused research would be required to quantify this, these problems are reportedly impacting on staff morale, as they struggle to meet rising demand for services.

Thus, while national homelessness services expenditure has recently continued to increase (see Chapter 1), it would appear that the pace of spending growth has remained insufficient to contain intensifying pressures experienced by agency staff battling to meet demand. This is evidenced by agency staff comments (from our SHS survey):

> *Our case managers are overwhelmed. The complexity of homelessness has increased, and we don't have the resources to provide the intensive support many of our clients require.*
>
> *We are seeing more people with more complex challenges, people are experiencing homelessness for a longer period of time which exacerbates mental ill health, physical health, AOD use. All services in the system are stretched which means that people aren't receiving timely interventions.*

It is evident that – consistent with the findings from Martin et al. (2012) – people are both drawn to the homelessness sector out of a desire to help people, by providing resources and support to meet clients' housing needs. Indeed, despite the workload pressures brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (as highlighted in AHM 2022), the unprecedented government funding and system-wide response to homelessness was referenced as exemplifying how SHS staff felt they could actually make a difference, as reported by a NSW Government interviewee:

> *Taking people off the street and putting them into temporary accommodation (TA) and straight out giving them 28 days did a whole range of things. It showed our staff that they can actually help people … housing staff do want to help people, that's why they're in the job, and they found they could do that in COVID in the context of TA.*

Qualitative evidence from our SHS survey illustrates that what many staff perceive as their growing inability to fulfil service applicant needs devalues the meaning they derive from their work and their identification with the sector as an ongoing career path:

> *Staff are experiencing high levels of burnout, which has impacted their ability to provide continuous support.*
>
> *The sector is in crisis and [it is] getting very difficult to maintain a skilled, qualified and resilient workforce.*
>
> *The stress on workers is huge and is taking its toll... People are in so much despair.*
>
> *We all need a break. The sector is very tired.*

Such perspectives reinforce stakeholder interview testimony as recorded in AHM fieldwork in both 2022 and 2024 indicating that such stresses have been especially acute during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Victorian stakeholders, in particular, spoke about this:

> *It's really hard to get people, but then to keep people. COVID burnt a lot of people out. So we've had a lot of people exiting. And with the complexity of people experiencing homelessness, when you've got new workers coming in, unless you've got those really experienced people that have been around for a little while and understand the landscape, then that can be really daunting.*
>
> *We got a recent report [showing that] … we're losing $20 million every year in the sector… the retention rates of people is really low… someone said to me; 'six years ago', this is all anecdotal, 'I used to come into work, I loved it, I could provide someone with a housing pathway. Now I have to say, 'I can't give you anything, there's actually nothing available…'*
>
> *[The CHP report] tells you that we've got a number of issues at play… we need retention in the workforce and recruitment. Those are the two things. How do we get people to see the homelessness service system is actually a career pathway. This is a really great place to work…it's high pressure now, so they're working in a service system that's broken… six out of 10 are leaving homelessness and the sector altogether and going to other sectors and not coming back, right? So that's a big problem.*

Competitive pay may also play a role in staff retention rates, 'where there are other like sectors that … remunerate people at a higher rate for similar jobs' (Victorian Government stakeholder). It is worth noting, however, that while a Sydney stakeholder reported a huge loss of experienced frontline homelessness staff, this was a phenomenon believed to be recently parallelled within the police force and health sector.

A South Australian NGO stakeholder argued that states and territories are sometimes reluctant to push or challenge the sector from a policy perspective

> *[Because] as soon as you do that from a government arm, you need to back it up with resourcing, as we've seen in like Queensland and WA and other areas, where that appetite to understand what's happening a bit better is followed up with resources'.*

Real-terms funding cuts have reportedly imposed stress on the sector in South Australia, with agencies striving to reduce overhead costs in order to protect frontline services:

> *The government's tried to create efficiencies and through bringing this alliance together, and what it's actually done is, on the one hand, reduced funding in real terms through the Alliance mechanism, and then on the other, the actors within the Alliance, the non-government actors, have actually then responded to the unmet demand because of a lack of government funding by investing their own money [NGO, South Australia].*

Aside from the challenges of reconciling rising demand with static or declining resources, workforce issues can be problematic even with adequate funding. A Tasmanian Government representative explained that they had received staff resourcing to deliver a project's objectives, yet a shortage of specialist staff meant that the funded project could not be delivered:

> *'It's the same thing with the mental health sector as well as the homelessness sector, you don't have the people there to actually deliver it. There were just millions of dollars that just basically got given back to Treasury. And it was the saddest thing because they just could not recruit people'.*

Important dynamics that impact the homelessness workforce in ways beyond increasing demand were also identified in fieldwork for this Monitor, with SHS providers responding to housing and societal problems resulting from forces far outside the sector's capacity to influence. A sector funded by government at a level inadequate to meet demand, yet also assessed by government according to whether this demand has been met, risks alienating the workforce, and undermining their commitment to working in partnership with government as part of a broader system. This sense of the sector being held accountable (and judged) for structural problems outside of its control was illustrated in a qualitative response to the SHS survey in relation to meeting demand:

> *Unreasonable accountability is placed with homelessness services ... the housing crisis has not been factored into our targets or funding obligations.*

The SHS workforce not only needs to be resourced to meet demand, but also contracted and assessed on measures that can directly and realistically be achieved within the sector.

4.3 Homelessness prevention approaches

Building on our observations and discussion on early intervention and prevention of homelessness in AHM 2022, this Monitor has further sought to understand the work conducted in these areas in the SHS sector. We examined the broad ways that these are conceptualised and progressed, including prevention at the higher structural level along with early intervention for groups of people deemed to be at risk of homelessness.

Forms of prevention and their prioritisation

The homelessness literature is clear. Preventing homelessness, like preventing any social or health problems before they occur, is unambiguously positive. Given the harms to human life inflicted by homelessness, it is clear that prevention is a normatively positive aspiration. The literature nonetheless also points to challenges and debates. An important body of work seeks to typologise prevention according to three categories:

- Primary prevention is focused at a universal level on the broader population, and includes policies that reduce risk of homelessness for all, such as income support, and social and affordable housing.
- Secondary prevention focuses on intervening for people at risk of entering homelessness, for example because of rental arrears, or life transitions, such as exiting out of home care.
- Tertiary prevention focuses on specific cohorts because of identified risks of returning to homelessness, such as long-term experiences of homelessness with co-morbidities (Culhane et al., 2011).

More recently, Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2021) developed a five-fold typology of homelessness prevention, including ‘upstream’ and ‘emergency’ prevention.

This critical and conceptual work provided a useful framework for reviewing some of the key prevention activities conducted in Australia. Three key learnings emerge from our fieldwork here:

1. Prevention is liable to be de-prioritised out of the necessity to respond to the overwhelming demand at the crisis level
2. There is a disparate body of significant intervention that works to achieve prevention through a range of tenancy sustainment strategies, and
3. The private rental sector assumes a significant role in both producing risks of homelessness while also being engaged to mitigate risks of entering homelessness.

The first of the above points chimes with the statistical evidence suggesting a growing tendency to de-prioritise persons at risk of homelessness (as opposed to already homeless) when rationing agency resources already at close to saturation – see Chapter 5.

Despite localised work to prevent homelessness, evidence from more than one jurisdiction suggests that homelessness prevention is not always prioritised at the funding level. In South Australia, for example, a stakeholder reported that government directives for the Alliance model to focus on prevention, were unmatched by funding for systematic preventative activity. Thus, while prevention work is undertaken on an unfunded basis, this ‘comes at the expense of pivoting resources away from your crisis responses, which is also always a high-risk strategy’.

Similarly, historical low levels of funding have meant that the Northern Territory has been ‘very much a place where crisis prevails’ according to an NGO stakeholder:

> *At the moment, we've got about 15% of funds, just under, focused on prevention in the Territory, and the rest is crisis. And those preventative funds are purely for tenancy support programmes. …. You know, there's all these type of preventative programs that, in all honesty, we haven't even heard of in the Territory because we're a thousand steps behind.*

But now with additional funding (as detailed in Chapter 3) the Territory has the opportunity for increased prevention: ‘we've been in crisis for so long because we didn't have the money to do anything preventative, that'll be the biggest opportunity for us’ (NT Government stakeholder).

Similar challenges to realising prevention were reported by interviewees in other jurisdictions. A stakeholder with a national homelessness services portfolio observed, for instance:

> *There's no prevention work. There's no capacity for prevention work, because we're all focused on, you know, as they say, the people jumping in the river.*

Some NSW interviewees complained that prevention had been recently de-prioritised by government. In the recent NSW budget for example, a stakeholder said there was ‘pretty much nothing in there around prevention’. The NSW interviewee went on to say, prevention ‘has really dropped off’. Similarly:

> *I would say that there is very little emphasis on prevention, and I feel like it's a real challenge. I mean, certainly, as someone working in the policy and advocacy space, when I try to initiate discussions… it's really hard to engage people or engage interest in discussions about those intersections between things like child protection and legal systems and health systems, and, you know, the classic social determinants and all of those sorts of things (NGO stakeholder, NSW).*

Despite the resource challenges that make it difficult for the sector to dedicate efforts towards prevention, many agencies nevertheless engage in prevention and early intervention work for people at risk of homelessness. For example, 87% of SHS survey respondents reported that they provided housing advice for this cohort.

Tenancy sustainment support

Housing advice can take a range of forms. Indeed, stakeholders observed that, although the notion of homelessness prevention was positively regarded by both government and the sector, it was frequently conceived in a non-precise way. Specifically, 'early intervention and prevention is mentioned [in] every single thing I've been to, every single state everywhere' (Tasmanian stakeholder). When unaccompanied by precise recommended targeting and actions, the mantra that 'it is better to prevent rather than relieve homelessness' can be little more than a motherhood statement.

Notwithstanding this observation, the dominant form of prevention that does exist in Australia involves assisting people at risk of entering homelessness to sustain existing housing. Virtually all jurisdictions have some type of state government funded intervention of this kind, even though it is often not funded or framed as explicitly homeless prevention. These include:

- Tenancy Plus and the Private Rental Assistance Scheme in Victoria
- Tenancy Assist in NSW
- Rent Connect and tenancy sustainment programs in Queensland
- Tenancy sustainment programs delivered through the Alliance model in South Australia, and
- Western Australia's Rental Relief scheme.

Assistance delivered through these and other schemes is often applied flexibly to meet individual needs. This flexibility is sometimes enacted through brokerage funding that enables the provision of a range of different supports, or indeed brokerage is even used to access temporary accommodation as a means to avoid rough sleeping – such as when a tenancy ends and there is a period of time before a new tenancy can be accessed (Parsell et al. 2024).

Within the adaptive ways that these prevention initiatives operate, the type of intervention can be categorised in three ways, including:

1. Case management that can involve assistance with daily living, property clean, tenancy set-up (furnishings), advocacy with landlords or eviction tribunals, and financial counselling
2. Financial support to pay rental arrears, and
3. Subsidies to access private rental (including head-lease arrangements and motels or other short-term accommodation).

The latter two types of intervention can also be delivered as part of a broader suite of case management.

In a recent study of tenancy sustainment programs in Brisbane, Parsell and colleagues (2024) found that sustaining tenancies support workers play a mediating role, in helping tenants at risk of losing their housing to avoid homelessness by complying with tenancy and related obligations (e.g. income support, statutory child protection). They can simultaneously advocate, share information, and use their institutional authority to help systems adapt, so that they can better meet the at-risk tenant's needs. This research located the problems that place vulnerable tenants at risk of entering homelessness beyond the exclusive focus of vulnerable tenants, thus drawing attention to the importance of preventing homelessness by influencing the housing and other systems that produce risks (Parsell et al. 2024). This type of preventative work at the systems level draws on ideas consistent with primary prevention

In South Australia a stakeholder interviewee described a similar pilot initiative that commenced in July 2024, which seeks to prevent homelessness by educating real estate agents about the risk signs of tenancy loss, on the one hand, and the tenancy sustainment available through the Adelaide Alliance, on the other. This prevention work is supported by the findings from the SHS survey reported in Chapter 5 that illustrates the changing nature of people presenting in need, including people engaged in employment who are at risk of homelessness because of housing unaffordability.

Private market accommodation

Our stakeholder interviews also demonstrated the role played by the private rental sector as both producing risks of homelessness, as well as being a source of intervention to prevent homelessness.

In addition to providing residential tenancies, the private sector plays a large role in terms of motel and hotel accommodation. Governments fund SHS providers to use motels and hotels as a means of preventing rough sleeping, including when there is no SHS accommodation available. However, residing temporarily in motels and hotels because one has no housing, is a form of homelessness as defined by the ABS (for Census enumeration purposes) – as discussed in Chapter 3. Whether it can be accurately termed 'homelessness prevention' is therefore debatable.

A government housing authority stakeholder lamented the significant funding spent on motels and hotels to accommodate people who are homeless in their state. But until more social and affordable housing stock is built, this was a regrettable necessity, despite being both expensive and not fit-for-purpose. The paradox is that a long-term national failure to invest in social housing has meant that people are reliant on an increasingly unaffordable private rental sector (as demonstrated in the housing market analysis presented in Chapter 2), meanwhile the unaffordability in the private rental sector constitutes a homelessness risk.

In the absence of adequate social housing provision, SHS organisations have no choice but to use government funding to assist people either to stay in or access a private rental sector that is responsible for their presentation to a homelessness service provider in the first place.

4.4 Culturally-led services and appropriate practices

This Monitor has identified several state and territory initiatives which provide the funding and policy environment to foster Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led homelessness and housing responses. Likewise, a large majority of SHS organisations responding in our survey (81%) reported having specific measures in place to ensure their practices are 'culturally safe'. This recent work follows the national priority for federal as well as state and territory governments to reduce the incidence of homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ABS, 2021).

This policy focus responds to the disproportionate rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness. In the most recent Census in 2021, 24,930 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were estimated to be homeless out of the entire homeless population of 122,494 people. In other words, although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were 3.8 percent of the Australian population, they represented 20.4 percent of the population of people estimated to be homeless (ABS, 2023). Triangulating this overrepresentation, the rate of requesting SHS assistance has been recently increasing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a greater rate than for non-Indigenous people (as evidenced in Chapter 5).

It is thus urgent that the recent initiatives succeed in disrupting this stark injustice and create the conditions to meet the housing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A noteworthy recent development is the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework (Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2020). Developed in partnership between the Aboriginal community and the Victorian Government, the Framework – 'Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort' (every Aboriginal person has a home) – aims to rebuild the Aboriginal homelessness service system from the ground up. A Victorian stakeholder conveyed the significance of this framework document:

> *State government has adopted that framework as essentially the policy blueprint for Aboriginal housing and homelessness services in the big housing build. Ten percent of the funding was allocated for Aboriginal Housing.*

The first principle of the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework is Aboriginal self-determination. Self-determination is articulated as 'housing responses are designed for and delivered by Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people are the arbiters of good practice' (Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2020). One of the ways that this principle is progressed is through Aboriginal community-controlled housing providers. And indeed, the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria has recently provided support for some community-controlled organisations to become formally registered as housing providers. Despite the principle of self-determination and the work to support Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (referred to as ACCOs), a Victorian stakeholder interviewee reported that there are systematic barriers that prevent more prospective Aboriginal community-controlled organisations from becoming registered 'because of the way the funding is structured and required'.

Outside of Victoria there are a range of high-level strategies and schemes that seek to support ACCOs to grow capacity. Queensland for example, has also allocated $61.3 million between 2024-27 for its Our Place: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Roadmap to 2031 (Queensland Government, 2024a) – delivered through two consecutive four-year action plans. The first Action Plan sets out 27 actions, including growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled housing and homelessness sector, and developing a 'First Nations Housing and Homelessness Practice Standards to guide culturally safe service delivery' (Queensland Government, 2024b).

In NSW there are likewise state government initiatives that target homelessness reduction efforts towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and have lately succeeded in increasing the number and growing the capacity of ACCOs. In 2021 the NSW Government launched the Aboriginal Homelessness Sector Growth Project with the aim of increasing the number of ACCOs within the homelessness system – with $12 million in funding for a broad suite of homelessness workforce development. In 2022, the NSW Government also developed a draft Aboriginal Homelessness Services Sector Development Action Plan 2022-2027 (forthcoming) with the intention of improving access to homelessness services for Aboriginal people. One of the key priorities in the draft is to grow the number of ACCOs delivering homelessness services. However, the final draft of the Action Plan has faced significant delays and is now scheduled for release in 2024 alongside a new homelessness strategy. Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and the ACT all have similar aspirations for building the capacity and capability of ACCOs, through strategies, partnership working, and grant programs.

The funding to increase the number and capacity of ACCOs to deliver housing and homelessness services reflects movements in other key areas of society that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as action in Victoria and Queensland to empower ACCOs to use legislative authority to care for children in the child protection system. This positive progression is likewise reflected in the establishment of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association (NATSIHA) and is consistent with the principles of the Closing the Gap strategy.

In addition to the momentum currently observed in the ACCOs, there are important examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations playing critical roles in homelessness service provision. The Adelaide Alliance has made a commitment for parity in funding to match need. A South Australian stakeholder pointed out that 24% of the entire funding envelope for the Adelaide Alliance is ‘channelled into our Aboriginal specific service delivery arm, which has a very, very high Aboriginal workforce’, aiming to reflect the prevalence of homelessness within this cohort in greater Adelaide.

Other important examples include traditional owner corporations designing and delivering homelessness responses. In Alice Springs for example, an NGO stakeholder explained how a traditional group, the Lhere Artepe, have developed and operate an assertive outreach program. Because of the knowledge held by the traditional owners and because of their custodial authority, the assertive outreach programs help people sleeping rough understand which areas they can and cannot camp in. In Western Australia, the Noongar Housing First principles were developed to create culturally appropriate homelessness and housing responses to Noongar people (singles and families) experiencing homelessness. The principles have multiple dimensions and are grounded in the concept of DOYNTJ-DOYNTJ KOORLINY – Going Along Together. The principles are motivated to create collective impact and meaningful relationships to promote housing outcomes for people who are homeless (Harben 2021).

Other reports of innovation and traditional owner-led responses from the Northern Territory include culturally appropriate housing. A Northern Territory stakeholder interviewee described the pioneering work of Norman Frank Jupurrurla. Norman is an Elder and Warumangu Traditional owner (near Tennant Creek):

> *There's some great stuff happening in Tennant Creek. If you look up Wilya Janta… Dr Simon Quilty is a GP from the Territory, and he's working with Norm Frank, who's a Senior Cultural Aboriginal man from Tennant Creek. I think he's Warumungu, and they're working together to build houses that … have cultural awareness, and … they're building … cheaper than what the government's using to build public housing. So, they found this model that could work.*

The Wilya Janta website explains that it works with community and industry to design and build homes that are both culturally and climate safe (Wilya Janta, n.d.). A recent paper by Paul Memmott and colleagues (including a representative of Wilya Janta) stressed that housebuilding in remote Australia must address the disproportionate rates of homelessness, must deeply engage with the values, beliefs, and practices of First Nations people (Memmott et al. 2024).

It is the failure to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, so that they can determine what is desirable housing or homelessness, that perpetuates myths about homelessness as a cultural preference or way of living (Parsell & Phillips, 2014). As a stakeholder interviewee from the Northern Territory remarked, overcrowding in the Northern Territory 'gets passed off as a cultural preference'. This perception, it was explained, is based on both a lack of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and an inadequate understanding of housing supply. Referring to remote homelessness in the Northern Territory and the need for knowledge and responses to be led by First Nations people, they pointed out:

> *It's not a cultural preference if you got nine families living in [the one house] because there's nowhere else.*

This AHM 2024 is cautiously optimistic about the direction of homelessness (and housing) policy and funding in Australia that increasingly recognises the critical urgency to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, so that they can determine both the nature of the problems and the solutions. Our survey with SHS organisations also identified that the majority had measures in place to promote cultural safety for First Nations people.

81% (n=97) of SHS agencies participating in our online survey had culturally safety measures in place. Respondents indicating that their SHS organisation had culturally safe practices in place were asked to briefly describe those practices. Five themes emerged:

1 Training and awareness: Nearly all responses emphasised the importance of cultural safety training for staff, which is frequently integrated into employee induction processes.

2 Partnerships and engagement: Many respondents highlighted their agency's collaborations with local ACCOs and other First Nations-led community groups to enhance service delivery. These partnerships often involved co-case management and shared service planning.

3 Symbolic acknowledgements: The inclusion of First Nations artworks and symbols in service environments is common, aiming to create welcoming spaces.

4 RACS and other internal policies: Some organisations have formalised their commitment to cultural safety through policies like Reconciliation Action Plans or other internal frameworks.

5 Employment: There were numerous responses highlighting efforts to employ First Nations staff, particularly in leadership positions.

These practices are critical components in creating the conditions to meet the housing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

4.5 Advance to Zero (AtoZ) projects

The steady uptake of Advance to Zero (AtoZ) projects since the publication of AHM 2022 is an important development in the Australian homelessness practice space. AtoZ is a social movement and methodology introduced to Australia by the US homelessness advocacy organisation, Community Solutions. Beginning with Adelaide Zero in 2017 and two years later in Perth (where they built on the 50 Lives 50 Homes initiative), AtoZ projects have since been established in over 20 communities across Australia. These initiatives exist in most Australian capital cities. There are eight initiatives in Victoria alone. This concluding section of Chapter 4 provides an overview of the

AtoZ initiatives, including what they aim to achieve, how they are used, or at least intended to be used, and their reported strengths and limitations.

Functional zero and by-name list databases

As the name suggests, AtoZ is a movement geared explicitly towards ending homelessness. Moreover, as explained below, this objective is defined in a specific way. At an in principle level, according to AtoZ thinking, homelessness is ended if it is 'brief, rare, and once-off' (AAEH website, n.d.). Within this, the notion of 'functional zero' (FZ) is a crucial component, as discussed in detail in AHM 2020. It denotes that 'homelessness is ended' when the inflow of people into rough sleeping in a defined locality is exceeded by the outflow of former rough sleepers into housing. Thus, FZ is achieved if '[the homelessness] system is routinely housing more people than are coming into it' (AAEH website, n.d.). Capacity to assert that FZ has been achieved relies on the adequacy of data measuring these flows in, and out of homelessness.

More fundamentally, though, as noted in AHM 2020, FZ is viewed by some as definitional sophistry (Ehrlenbusch 2015). In part, this critique follows from the recognition that FZ could be fulfilled even though many people are still sleeping rough provided that the number entering rough sleeping is equal to that exiting (Pawson et al. 2020 p42). From this perspective, a preferable benchmark in relation to 'ending homelessness' aspirations would be derived from the simple rough sleeping point-in-time statistics also generated and published by some AtoZ projects (see Section 5.7).

Others are critical of the foregrounding of rough sleeping over other, less visible, forms of homelessness, such as couch surfing or living in temporary or unsafe forms of accommodation, such as hotels or boarding houses.

Setting such concerns to one side, detailed data about every newly homeless person logged in an area is a core dimension of the AtoZ model. Person-specific records are established on a database termed a by-name list (BNL), produced through an assessment of each individual in the homeless population within the designated AtoZ community. Some AtoZ initiatives use the VISPDAT Vulnerability Index tool or more recently the newly adapted AVHTT (Australian Vulnerability Homelessness Triage Tool). As contended by AtoZ advocates, a key benefit of common data is that it enables a shared understanding of a person's needs in order to match, and not prioritise, housing and support. The specific relevance of these arguments is that people sleeping rough will frequently engage with multiple forms of assessment – e.g. for government financial assistance, or primary and mental health services. Data on an individual's support needs could potentially relate to their engagement in the health system, income support system, or NDIS.

As the case is presented by AtoZ advocates, BNL data has four functions: (i) to determine whether functional zero has been achieved, including whether people are re-entering homelessness, (ii) to inform triaging (prioritising those most in need of services), (iii) to enable the matching of housing and support requirements to individuals' needs, and (iv) as an advocacy tool. Advocacy, as we show below, can be progressed in two ways. On the one hand, data is used to advocate for the needs and urgency of a particular individual based on their assessment. And on the other, aggregated data on the by-name list can be used to advocate to government or other institutions by a) illustrating the nature or trend of homelessness, and b) evidencing the need for change.

AtoZ project working practices

The Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) aims to amplify the efforts of local communities and provide support and resources to deliver on the methodology. They present AtoZ as part of a broader suite of interventions to end homelessness that extend well beyond the assessment, data, matching, and measurement of functional zero:

> *Through AtoZ, we support communities to utilise a range of proven solutions including real-time by-name list data, the Housing First approach, coordinated systems, prevention, improvement science, advocacy, and other activities to ensure that their local housing and homelessness system is able to support more people into permanent housing than are coming into that system – not just at a point in time, but over time (AAEH website, n.d.).*

Coupling AtoZ within a framework that includes other solutions, such as the Housing First model and prevention work, underscores the way in which the AtoZ approach can include a diverse set of activities and ideas. Indeed, stakeholder interviewees emphasised that AtoZ should be tailored to respond to the community in which the project operates. However, a unifying principle across the AtoZ movement is the objective of ending homelessness. A strength of the movement is the explicit framing of homelessness as solvable. Irrespective of any questions about the measure of functional zero, the explicit framing of ending homelessness as an aspiration is important. Ending homelessness appears drastically superior to tepid policy aspirations such as to 'help address homelessness' as cited in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper (Australian Government, 2023, p. 9).

Another laudable aspect is the AtoZ focus on bottom-up collaboration. Important here is the understanding that homelessness is produced and sustained through the failings of multiple systems. Ending it, therefore, requires the collaboration of numerous actors at the systems level. A national stakeholder described how, in their view, the AtoZ approach had helped build valuable collaborations at the systems level. With AtoZ, they commented:

> *You have to have the whole ending homelessness system there. Not just the specialist homelessness system. And so, the ending homelessness system involves justice, primary health, drug and alcohol, mental health, you know, family and domestic violence. So, you get all the people around the table, and that's what all the AtoZ initiatives do, they get them all around the table, and do your service coordination better, so that when you've got housing, you make sure you provide the support.*

The argument that the AtoZ model valuably prioritises building collaborations is supported in a recent study of Brisbane Zero and Logan Zero (GCSI, 2024). These projects were found to have contributed to a 'thickening of collaboration networks'. The authors concluded that these collaborations indicated that 'real collective responsibility for outcomes is starting to develop' (2024, p. 5).

Data-aided advocacy

Advocacy is a further promising opportunity for AtoZ projects to add value. Under the AtoZ model, advocacy is progressed via data that is presented as a critical ingredient in the progression to end homelessness at both the individual and societal level. AtoZ leaders present the role of data-informed advocacy at two levels.

First, data is described as useful to advocate for the needs of individuals or families experiencing homelessness; as it quantifies on 'an objective basis' the urgency of their situation, as well as specifying their precise housing and support needs. For its functionality, this system requires collaboration, whereby affiliates holding BNL data can meet and share information with housing (and support) providers to advocate on behalf of clients. In some Zero communities, for example, BNL curators meet routinely (e.g. weekly or fortnightly) with state and community housing providers for this purpose. As one Western Australia based stakeholder described:

> *All the different agencies, multi agencies, that come together to discuss, we will look at your needs on the by-name-list and also your vulnerability needs, and go right, let's get X into one of those houses….so we use it very much.*

Another AtoZ affiliated interviewee considered the merits of the data generated through their Zero project, explaining that:

> *'In simple terms, it's about understanding the needs of the individuals and understanding the resources of the system, and what's the information you need to match them'.*

Stakeholders involved in AtoZ projects in various parts of Australia emphasised the value of BNL data in determining a client's assistance needs, including the nature and extent of any support requirements prior to and post tenancy allocation.

Second, local data is presented as a crucial resource within the AtoZ objective to end homelessness through advocacy for systems change and improvement. Reflecting the understanding that ending homelessness requires change at a systems level, the data generated and held within AtoZ movements was viewed by some stakeholder interviewees as a resource to underpin evidence-informed advocacy about precisely what societal changes are required, as expressed by the following stakeholder:

> *The data gives you the opportunity to point to the other systems that are causing the problem, a lack of affordable housing, a lack of access to income support, or a lack of access to the mental health support or aged care support or whatever else people need.*

Reflections on the AtoZ model and its operation

This homelessness monitor is not an evaluation of the extent to which projects run under the AtoZ banner fulfil their stated objectives. A more focused research study would be required to inform definitive judgements on that. Rather, this is a study that maps new developments in homelessness practice nation-wide, and this mapping has identified key actors in homelessness services sector who have shared their views on the AtoZ model, its benefits and limitations. It is worth noting, however, that a stakeholder closely involved in the AtoZ movement reported their belief that resulting advocacy was influencing governments, although perhaps not in the intended way:

> *You can push governments to do things well, some of them recognise that and then start getting a bit uncomfortable about it, because they kind of, oh, we're funding you to develop this by-name list. And then the by-name-list is getting used to beat us in the media with every day.*

Since the model's original Australian emergence in 2017, AtoZ projects have proliferated across the country, engaging many committed volunteers and some paid workers, and acquiring a rising public profile. However, while some of the principles championed by the model are well supported across the homelessness services sector, the AtoZ model has its critics. Some of our stakeholder interviewees were sceptical of the approach, highlighting concerns on certain aspects.

A critical challenge for the movement and its methodology is evidence of impact. Like many of the valuable principles noted above, difficulty in evidencing impact is not unique to AtoZ. Both supporters and critics of AtoZ in Australia acknowledged the challenges of substantiating the impact of AtoZ projects and their contribution towards ending homelessness in a community; in particular, when the local incidence of homelessness remains considerable. Substantiating impact according to the AtoZ model must overcome practical hurdles including:

1 Whether the correct data can be accessed

2 Attribution or causality questions

3 The length of time for which success should be reasonably achieved

4 The structural forces beyond the capacity of the AtoZ projects to influence, for example the labour and property market, and

5 What part of the projects are assessed.

On this latter point, given that AtoZ involves many dimensions, there are multiple ways that success or failure could be measured.

A report commissioned by the Western Australia Alliance to End Homelessness (Flateau et al., 2022) concluded that homelessness outcomes were 'not improving' across the state, and that the Alliance had 'a long way to go' before achieving its targets and 'the overall goal of ending homelessness in Western Australia' (p. 130).

However, a stakeholder interviewee closely affiliated with AtoZ argued that the movement actually had contributed to improvements in the system:

> *[But] the inflow of just the housing crisis and the cost of living crisis and everything else in Australia, the dysfunction in the other service systems like disability or aged care… is just swamping any progress we can make.*

The complicated challenges that exist in demonstrably evidencing impact vis-à-vis wider societal drivers of homelessness are linked to a view held by some stakeholders that the AtoZ movement and methodology place excessive faith on data collection and are overly focused on people sleeping rough as opposed to people who might be defined as 'sheltered homeless'.

Other stakeholders expressed concerns that efforts to engage people in their AtoZ community and to obtain and compile data did not benefit those individuals. A stakeholder from Tasmania explained how the 'Zero thing just fell over' in the state, exclaiming: 'my frustration with the by-name list is you get a list, but what are you doing with it?' This sentiment, which was similarly expressed by other stakeholders in explaining scepticism, was further articulated by the stakeholder:

> *'What are they gonna have a by-name list to find out there's no housing?'*

This illustrates some of the core challenges of conveying the value of AtoZ.

Responses to this challenge from stakeholder interviewees and from AtoZ written material (AEEH website, n.d.) highlight factors such as collaborative working, locally determined and owned responses, and a systems understanding of homelessness with the potential to inform advocacy for systems change.

Stakeholders sceptical of the AtoZ model expressed doubts about the case for expending scarce agency resources on data collection and data entry, given their lack of confidence that this could generate practical benefit. As a Northern Territory stakeholder interviewee pointed out, their SHS services are at capacity and staff are just 'too busy' to collect all of the data required under the standard BNL suite:

> *We don't have data on where people are coming from, and part of that is because people try to access services and they're turned away because services are overstretched, and services don't have the ability to capture a lot of that data because they're too busy.*

The increasingly unaffordable housing market and rising demand for homelessness services has demonstrated the urgency of an ending homelessness agenda in Australia. There is little doubt, as AtoZ advocates argue, that ending homelessness requires deep inter-agency collaboration and that accurate in-depth data on client needs has the potential to facilitate their more appropriate treatment. Additionally, and fundamentally, however, systems change involving policy – and political – choices are necessary. How AtoZ data-aided advocacy can help to bring this about is less clear. Whatever the mechanism is that progresses change, be it the AtoZ movement or something else, a broad section of the homelessness sector and society will be required to support it. The challenge is bringing this diversity together to progress a unified and practical vision of ending homelessness.

4.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has identified recent developments in homelessness practice that give grounds for both optimism and concern. For instance, there has been ongoing support and funding to enable the growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). In both the homelessness and housing domains, it is recognised that these organisations represent an important innovation that must be progressed to disrupt the disproportionate rates of homelessness and inadequate housing experienced by First Nations peoples.

Although the height of the COVID-19 pandemic saw funding to the homelessness sector that enabled staff to feel as if they could actually help people and make a genuine difference, growing service demand has created great challenges for the homelessness sector workforce in recent years. In the wake of COVID-19, there is significant pressure in terms of increasing demand for support, as well as a limit on the resources and structural capacity to meet this demand. Indeed, the homelessness workforce is a critical component of the objective to end homelessness in Australia, and the stress that the workforce is under needs to be resolved as a priority. The resource constraints experienced by the workforce are connected to an additional challenge that the sector faces in terms of progressing a systematic approach to intervening early and preventing homelessness. Despite a wide recognition of the value of this approach to ending homelessness, the demand for services among people in extreme need dictates that a crisis and reactive response tends to take priority over early intervention and prevention.

Increasingly unaffordable rents have been expanding the cohort of private tenants placed at risk of homelessness, many of whom are presenting to SHS providers, seeking assistance due to financial issues. At the same time, the chapter documented a number of interventions that seek to forestall private rental evictions. These include not only tenancy sustainment activities and government subsidies for rental arrears, bond loans and advanced rent, but also intervention with real estate agents in terms of education and advocacy. Thus, somewhat ironically, significant funding and SHS expertise is targeted at intervening in a private rental sector to mitigate the risks of homelessness when those risks are produced by the sector itself.

Finally, building on a movement that commenced more than a decade ago, we discussed the expanded role that Advance to Zero (AtoZ) projects have recently come to play in many localities across Australia. Although there is an absence of evidence on the effectiveness of AtoZ projects, we acknowledge that the explicit objective of ending homelessness is a creditably ambitious aspiration. Indeed, perhaps even more encouraging, the strength of the AtoZ approach may be found in the way that it facilitates a collective of community organisations in coming together to innovate in what is an otherwise unimaginative policy landscape of often vague homelessness commitments – and to push governments beyond their meagre offers of help to 'address' the problem. Through using data with the aim of both matching housing and support to individual need and to advocate for structural change the AtoZ movement can contribute significantly. The value is also apparent in the framing of homelessness as solvable rather than provoking the idea that homelessness is a wicked problem (and thus something inevitable).

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5. Recent homelessness trends

Key points

- National survey evidence collected in this research indicates that, as experienced by service provider agencies and local government authorities (LGAs) in most parts of Australia, homelessness had risen to well above pre-pandemic rates by 2023-24
- More than three quarters of services (77%) and nearly two thirds of LGAs (62%) reported that homelessness had 'significantly increased' since 2019-20, with well over half of the former (59%) also reporting 'significantly increased' numbers in Q1/2 2024 compared with Q1/2 2023.
- Across Australia, homelessness services have also seen continuing increases in typical monthly caseloads – up by 12% since 2019-20
- Despite this, the number of persons receiving SHS help each year has slightly declined since 2019-20. The same pattern is observed for the monthly flow of service users (people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness) newly assisted by SHS agencies.
- The apparent inconsistency of the above trends reflects people stuck in homelessness for longer; subject to longer periods of support, and/or more repeated periods of short-term support – as confirmed by the increase in the median duration of SHS support periods, up 44% in the five years to 2022-23
- Both quantitative and qualitative research evidence indicate that the 2022-24 period has seen homelessness pressures beginning to extend to a broader cohort within the general population
- The conflict between rising homelessness demand pressures and increasingly 'silted up' service capacity also implies that a growing number of people seeking help are finding it impossible to secure it.
- Recent years have seen growing representation of Indigenous people and older age groups within the 'newly assisted SHS service user' cohort. However, while their numbers remain relatively small within the overall SHS intake, the most marked increases have involved older males.
- Despite a generally declining monthly flow of new SHS service users overall since 2019-20, newly assisted applicants classed as homeless (as opposed to 'at risk of homelessness') rose in 2023-24 for the third year in succession. During this period the number of 'newly homeless persons' assisted by agencies rose by 9% to more than 10,000 per month.
- This shift is also reflected in people undergoing harsher experiences of homelessness prior to gaining support, with persons newly assisted by agencies and having recently slept rough increasing by 22% in the three years to 2023-24 – from a monthly average of 3,808 to 4,636 persons.
- Those classed as experiencing rough sleeping at the point of starting their support period increased by 28% in just two years to 2023-24 – from 2,551 to 3,276 per month.
- NSW 'point in time' rough sleeping numbers meanwhile increased by 51% in the period 2020-24, driven by growth in many regional areas of the state.
- Housing affordability stress is the factor triggering homelessness that has most markedly increased in recent times. In the four years to 2023-24, the flow of new service users reporting this as the main factor prompting their application jumped by 21%. Conversely, persons citing family and domestic violence as the main factor, while numerically the largest single cohort, saw a decline of 20%.

5.1 Chapter introduction and overview

This chapter reviews the latest statistical data on homelessness across Australia, both as broadly defined to encompass the wider homeless population, and as narrowly defined to focus specifically on people literally roofless at a point in time – i.e. sleeping rough.

Consistent with the report's central emphasis on investigating recent change in the scale and nature of homelessness in Australia, most of our analyses here focus on the period since 2019-20. This is chosen as a (largely) pre-pandemic base year for the time series.

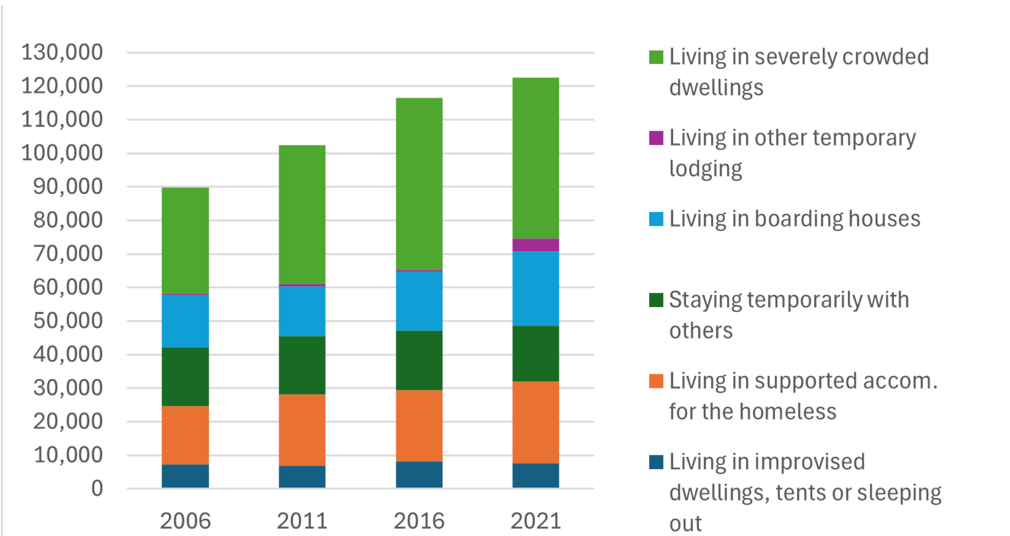
Following this overview, the chapter is structured in seven sections. First, in Section 5.2, we discuss the key sources of statistical data on homelessness in Australia, explaining the strengths and limitations of those used in this report. Next, in Section 5.3, we review the changing incidence of homelessness at the national scale. This leads to Section 5.4 which analyses sub-regional trends. Sections 5.5 and 5.6 then discuss homelessness causes and recent changes in the mix of households affected. Then, preceding our chapter conclusion, Section 5.7 focuses on rough sleeping numbers and trends.

5.2 Data sources

Census statistics and service user data – pros and cons

The five-yearly ABS Census remains the most authoritative and comprehensive source of statistical evidence on the incidence and profile of homelessness in Australia. According to the (relatively broadly scoped) ABS definition of the phenomenon (ABS 2012) the Census generates a set of five-yearly homelessness 'stock' or 'point-in-time' estimates. Thus, the latest census demonstrated that, in the decade to 2021, the number of persons classed as 'homeless' had increased by 20% to 122,494 – see Figure 5.1. Since this increase outpaced the growth in Australia's overall population, it also represented a (modest) increase in the incidence of homelessness from 47.6 persons per 10,000 population to 48.2 persons per 10,000 population. A longer-term Census-informed analysis of changing Australian homelessness geography has been recently published by AHURI (Batterham et al. 2024).

Figure 5.1: Homelessness census estimates, 2006-21



Source: ABS (2023). Note: ABS category 'people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out' is approximately analogous to 'sleeping rough'

However, given the central focus of this report on recent changes in the scale and nature of homelessness, the latest Census is a somewhat imperfect source for our purposes. Not only are Census 2021-derived statistics now becoming dated, but as a periodically published indicator of longer-term trends, their value was in any case impacted by the coincidence of Census fieldwork timing with the COVID-19 public health emergency (August 2021). There is reason to believe that, together with contemporary housing market disruption, extraordinary pandemic response actions by Australian governments (Pawson et al. 2022; Pawson 2024) may have somewhat suppressed homelessness numbers during the height of the crisis.

Partly given these considerations, the 'broader homelessness trends' analysis reported in this chapter is largely based on data about people being provided with homelessness services, as monitored by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) via the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC). The SHSC originates from records of service user/service provider interactions where someone seeks and receives some form of 'homelessness service' from one of the many hundreds of non-government agencies tasked to provide such help – or where such requests remain unmet. Such interactions can be regarded as an indicator of 'homelessness expressed demand'.

SHS statistics can provide some meaningful impression of homelessness rates and trends, as well as informative insights on the cohort characteristics of people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. They also have certain important advantages over the Census. Firstly, being constantly updated, SHS statistics are capable of indicating trends over time that are not limited to five-yearly snapshots. Secondly, being drawn from homelessness services that collect operationally relevant information from people seeking help, the SHS data about people experiencing or at risk of homelessness is much richer than that available from the Census. Importantly, these statistics also provide some indication of the experiences and situations prompting the need for help – i.e. 'homelessness triggers' or immediate reasons for homelessness, as reported. No such data are collected by the Census.

At the same time, as a proxy measure of 'homelessness expressed demand', it is acknowledged that SHSC data have significant limitations. Firstly, like all statistics that enumerate service recipients, they are liable to be influenced by the constraints of SHS organisational capacity. Unlike, for example, Rent Assistance, the SHS sector is not a demand-driven system. At any given time there may be some marginal scope to more fully utilise existing sector capacity, but any significant capacity expansion is subject to government funding decisions[20]. Most of the figures analysed in this chapter relate to those both seeking, and provided with, some form of 'homelessness service' during the relevant time period. They therefore exclude people seeking help but unable to access a service or turned away due to lack of service provider resources.

Secondly, not everyone presenting to a service provider agency is actually without accommodation when they make that application – most are in fact classed as 'at risk of homelessness' at that juncture. To some extent this parallels the way that ABS Census-based homelessness statistics include housed people in highly unsatisfactory conditions, and therefore arguably at high risk of becoming roofless, as well as those literally unsheltered on Census night (see Figure 5.1). Classification of both these groups as 'homeless' in the Census reflects the fact that having 'a home' is a broader concept than being 'beneath a roof'.

20 As noted in Chapter 1, government expenditure on homelessness services rose from under \$1.1 billion in 2018-19 to \$1.4 billion in 2022-23 (constant 2022-23 dollars), a 31 per cent increase. At the national scale, and in certain jurisdictions, this probably implies some expansion of SHS funding, and SHS system capacity (e.g. in Queensland). In some jurisdictions however, recent years have seen SHS funding reductions – e.g. in South Australia where the three years to 2024-25 saw a cut of \$5m across the five specialist homelessness/DFV alliances, reportedly prompting frontline service reductions year on year.

Thirdly, since SHS caseload statistics are reported in terms of the numbers assisted (or denied assistance) during a period of time (month, year), they are not directly comparable with the Census-derived point-in-time homelessness statistics. As cited in this report, however, the claimed significance of service user caseloads is not so much their numerical scale but more their change over time. Fourthly, it must also be acknowledged that, unlike figures generated by a 'survey type approach' (e.g. the ABS Census), administratively-derived social statistics like these are susceptible to administrative priorities, procedures and decisions.

Finally, many people at risk of homelessness, or even already in this situation, may seek no SHS agency assistance – thus remaining uncounted via this framework[21]. That is, they may not 'express demand' for such help, perhaps because there is no homelessness service operating in their area, or they lack of confidence that meaningful assistance will be offered. Strikingly, population-wide survey evidence suggests that two-thirds of people experiencing homelessness do not in fact seek support (ABS, 2015).

Service user data – special tabulations

While this report makes some reference to published AIHW SHS service user statistics, it places greater emphasis on AIHW custom-generated tabulations provided to the research team. As noted above, most of the routinely published AIHW statistics focus on persons assisted (or unassisted) by SHS agencies during a given time period (month, year). However, this will include a mix of persons receiving continuing help as well as those newly assisted within the relevant time slot. As published, therefore, resulting statistics represent a hybrid stock/flow measure. Their validity as a measure of 'homelessness expressed demand', is compromised not only by the factors discussed above, but also by the fact that caseload size is a product of assisted client outflow (i.e. existing clients 'signed off'), as well as inflow (new clients offered assistance).

In commissioning custom-designed tables from AIHW, we therefore sought to explore scope to utilise SHSC data to inform analysis of homelessness flows; defined as persons beginning a new SHS support period in any given month. SHS caseload data analysed on this basis informs most of our national analyses reported in this chapter. In our view, this metric may provide a more meaningful indication of changes in underlying homelessness expressed demand. Also, by relating quantified homelessness flows to the standard 'total caseload' statistics a better understanding of SHS system dynamics can be gained.

To iron out seasonal fluctuations, and for presentational simplicity, data are generally reported in terms of average monthly flows in each identified financial year.

Other 'broader homelessness' data sources

In charting the changing incidence and profile of homelessness at the national scale, the chapter also draws on our online surveys of SHS agencies and local government authorities undertaken as part of the research itself – as detailed in Section 1.4 (Chapter 1). Albeit that these relate to subjective judgements on the part of survey respondents, we believe they represent a valuable means of triangulating the statistical evidence largely informed by SHS agency service user data. Importantly, unlike the latter, survey-derived estimates of this kind are free from the potentially distorting impact of SHS system capacity constraints.

Finally, as an indirect indicator of broader homelessness change – albeit only in a single state – we briefly refer to trend over time data on 'priority housing' applicants as published by the New South Wales (NSW) Government. Because this involves a very tightly defined component of the broader

21 A particular issue here may be the geographical distribution of SHS services; i.e. the absence of any such organisation in the home area of a person in need of such help.

social housing register (or ‘waiting list’) cohort, this series can arguably provide some indication of homelessness trends in New South Wales.

Data sources: rough sleeping

With relevant 2021 Census statistics both dated and potentially unrepresentative of longer term trends (see above), this edition of the Monitor is once again necessarily reliant on other less comprehensive and less consistent sources that can provide only partial indications of rough sleeping numbers and trends across the country.

Firstly, we draw on point-in-time rough sleeping statistics annually collected by the NSW Government since 2020; a series initiated in connection with the State’s officially pledged rough sleeping reduction target; a statewide 50% cut in 2019 rough sleeping numbers, to be achieved by 2025 (NSW Government 2020). In the latest such survey, for example, it is reported that this was undertaken ‘in 400 towns and suburbs in 76 local government areas (LGA) across NSW’ (NSW Government 2024). In undertaking this work it appears that the NSW Department of Communities and Justice has attempted to apply consistent methodology capable of generating meaningful comparisons between localities and across time for specific places or geographies (NSW Government 2024).

A second potential source of data on the incidence of rough sleeping has emerged in recent years in the shape of local homelessness services consortia operating pooled service user data systems to produce what are generally termed ‘by-name lists’ (BNLs). These are effectively local databases shared across homelessness services providers containing records on the local population of service users. Such records detail applicant characteristics, vulnerabilities, housing histories and current circumstances – ideally, updatable by any participating agency. BNL collaborations have been set up in numerous localities, notably those covering inner city areas in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

While the primary purpose of BNL systems is the operational objective of effective service co-ordination and targeting, they also have the potential to generate valuable statistical data on caseload size and profile. Thus, as stated by one important local government authority playing a BNL co-ordinating role:

> *The By Name List is the most accurate, complete and timely list possible of all individuals experiencing rough sleeping in the City of Melbourne. It is an efficient method for monitoring outcomes for people experiencing rough sleeping homelessness (City of Melbourne 2022).*

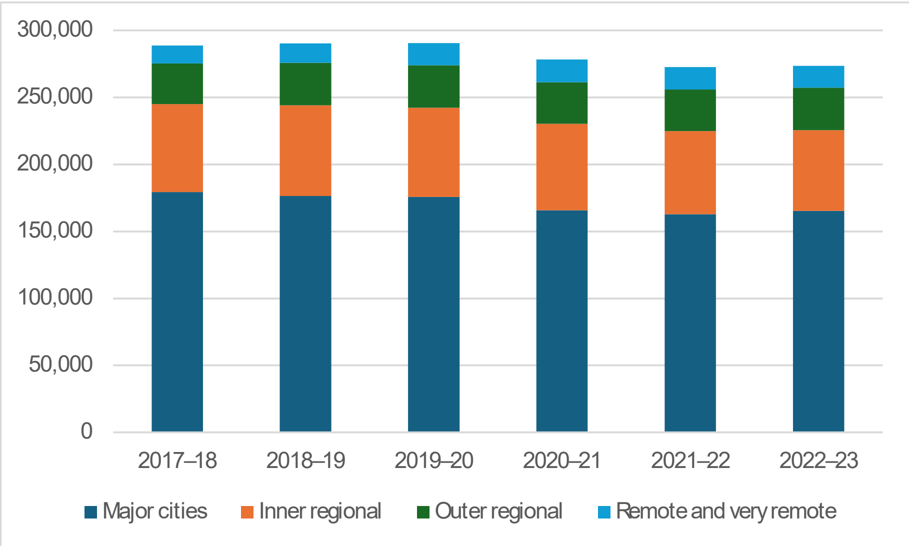
Fulfilment of this potential will, of course, depend on the extent to which such databases are routinely, consistently and comprehensively utilised by all SHS organisations operating in a given locality. When this has been achieved and maintained for a substantial period it will become possible to generate meaningful time-series statistics. In practice, most of Australia’s BNL systems have been initiated only fairly recently, with a ‘bottom-up’ aspiration for organic growth in their home locality, progressing towards the involvement of all local service providers. Thus, with the possible exceptions of established collaborations operating in inner Adelaide and the City of Brisbane, the comprehensiveness of BNL coverage remains uncertain in most cases, even for fairly tightly defined localities (e.g. City of Sydney, City of Melbourne).

5.3 Broader homelessness trends at national scale

Metrics drawing on SHS service user statistics

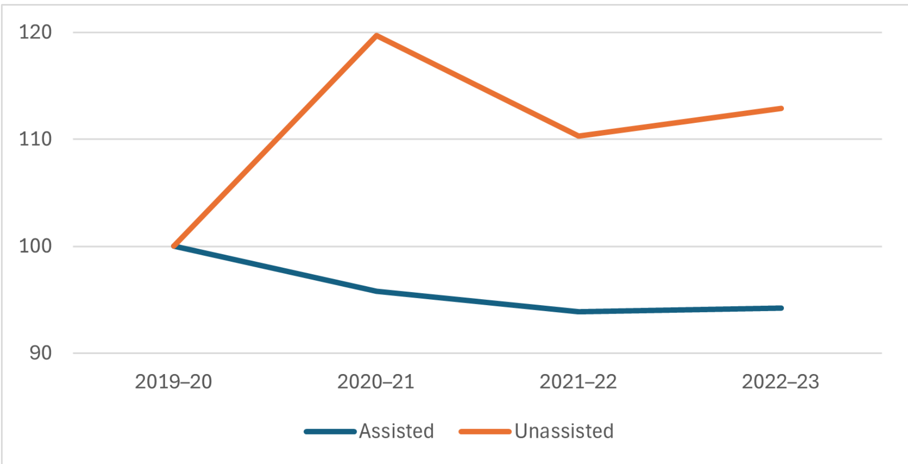
A logical starting point for this analysis is AIHW's published SHSC Annual Report series, the most recent of which (published December 2023) covers the period 2022-23 (AIHW 2023). These reports present a detailed analysis of persons assisted by SHS agencies in each financial year, their personal characteristics and the circumstances of their application for help. They also include annual summary statistics recording persons seeking SHS help but recorded as 'unassisted'. In 2022-23, for example, there were 105,520 persons recorded as 'unassisted applicants', as against 273,648 persons assisted at some point during that year. However, since the former relate to instances of service denial, while the latter refer to persons helped for some period during the year – in some cases for two or more – the numbers cannot be justifiably summed.

Figure 5.2: SHS service users, persons assisted annually, 2017-23 (published statistics)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – Annual reports

Figure 5.3: SHS service users and unassisted applicants, 2019-23, indexed (2019-20=100) (published statistics)

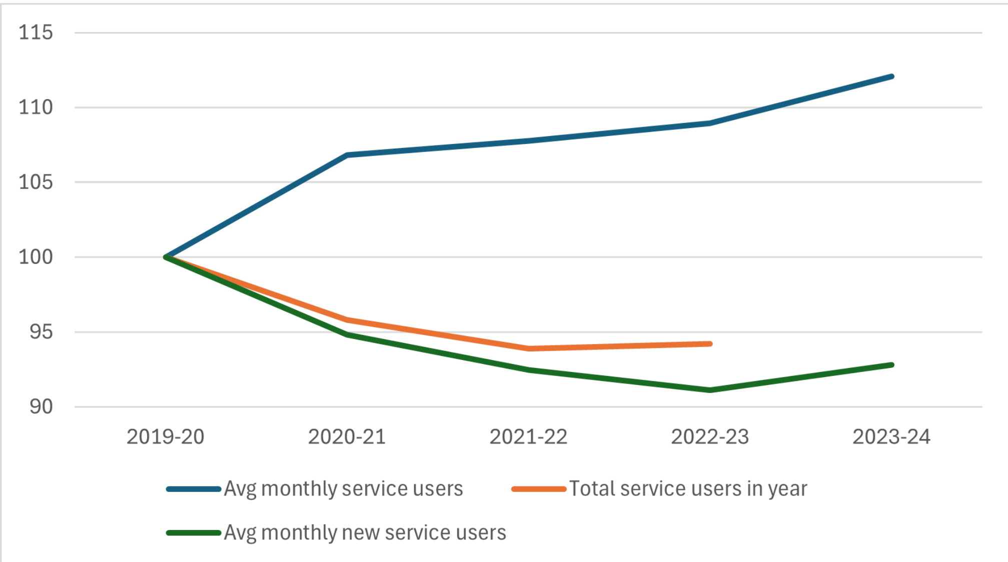


Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – Annual reports

While assisted person totals fell slightly from 2019-20, unassisted applicant numbers (as recorded) increased sharply in 2020-21, before falling back somewhat – see Figures 5.2 and 5.3. However, while included here for the sake of completeness in relating our analysis to AIHW published statistics, we would caution against attributing undue significance to 'unassisted applications' figures. For one thing, it is understood that SHS agency recording practice on this aspect of their activities varies markedly across jurisdictions. This is apparent from the huge variations in published 'unassisted persons' between different states and territories[22]. Of equal or greater importance is the understanding that workers at the front door of homelessness services do not always make a record of people turned away, and it seems unrealistic to imagine that they can be relied upon to do so consistently in circumstances where demand is increasing to overwhelming levels[23]. Also relevant here is the recently published research finding that such pressures have been increasingly resulting in services being forced to close their doors and/or leave telephone requests for help unanswered (Impact Economics and Policy 2024). As that report observed: "To be counted as 'unassisted' individuals have to have been able to make contact with a service" (ibid p.16).

Figure 5.4 relates three measures of recent homelessness trends, each derived from cutting the SHSC records in different ways. Two of these come from analyses of published statistics as set out above. Introducing an additional dimension to the analysis, the graph also includes our customised 'homelessness flow' metric – persons starting new support periods – as explained in Section 5.2.

Figure 5.4: Total SHS service users in year vs average monthly service users, 2019-24, indexed (2019-20=100)



Sources: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – Annual reports; AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – Monthly statistics; AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

22 For example, as published by AIHW, unassisted persons in 2022-23 totalled some 27,000 in WA compared with 850 in SA. One important variable here is the presence or absence of central intake intake models, or service application clearing houses. Where systems of this kind are operated, persons recorded by agencies as subject to 'unassisted applications' are liable to be far fewer in number.

23 The imperfection of SHSC 'unassisted applications' statistics as a measure of unmet demand is evident from a study undertaken in by the Adelaide North West Homelessness Alliance in conjunction with the SA Government, as reported to the research team in the course of our fieldwork. This showed that 1,400 individuals who sought help from a specialist homelessness service during 2023-24 were unrecorded in the SHSC. This was believed likely to have resulted from either (a) individuals not proceeding to full case plan, or (b) services being unable to establish contact with individuals referred by other agencies. While no directly comparable SHSC 'unassisted applications' statistic for 2023-24 is available at the time of writing, the 2022-23 total for the entire state of SA was only 540.

The first point to note in relation to Figure 5.4 is the re-iterated observation that while total annual service user numbers declined post-2019-20 (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3), average monthly service user numbers saw a continuing increase – up by 12% in the four years to 2023-24. While recent years have witnessed a slight reduction in the number of individuals using services at some point in each year, by implication, these have typically involved significantly longer service use periods within each year. In line with this is AIHW's published analysis that the national median support period increased from 39 days in 2017-18 to 56 days in 2022-23 – a 44% increase (AIHW 2023 p18). This trend appears to be a stark reflection of the growing difficulty experienced by SHS agencies in resolving cases, such that an applicant's relevant problems are eased to the extent that they can be 'signed off' as a service user. That would be consistent with the intensifying rental affordability and availability stress affecting many parts of Australia during this period, as demonstrated in Chapter 2.

Also consistent with this interpretation, and likewise revealed in Figure 5.4, is the declining average monthly flow of new service users (persons starting a support period irrespective of whether they have previously used homelessness services) in the three years from 2019-20. This could be partly a consequence of agency capacity constraints due to slowed service user throughput. In a perfect world, one might expect this to be reflected by markedly rising 'unassisted application' flows. However, while this is only partially borne out by the published statistics (see above), the latter are likely to be undercounting the scale of 'turn-away' instances. Key stakeholder comments appear consistent with this understanding:

> *Turn-away rates from SHS [are] significantly higher than they've been and they're underrepresented, because people who might refer into an SHS generally know that's not going to be easy (NSW Gov)*
>
> *Turn away straight rates are really strong (TAS, Shelter).*

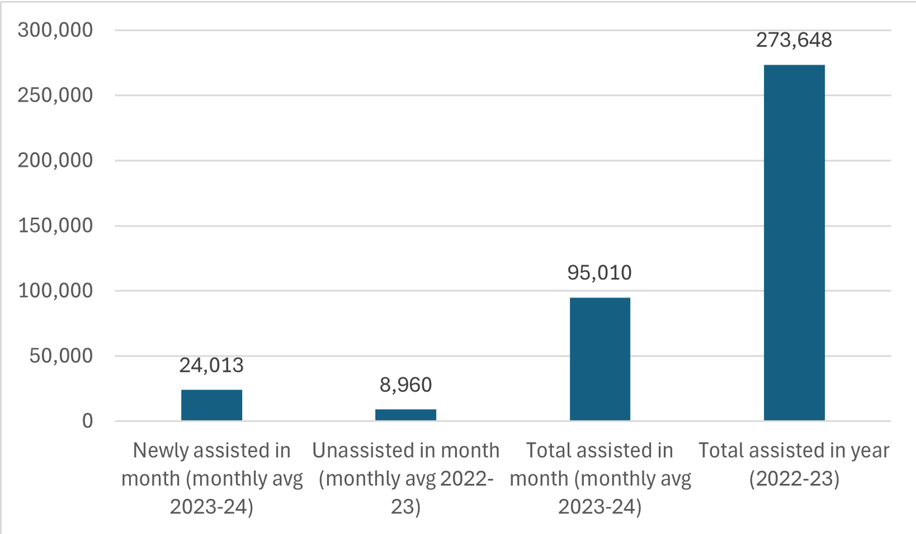
All of this seems in line with the sense of declining agency capacity to take on new service users during a period when average monthly caseloads have been enlarged due to growing difficulties in enabling clients to transition into suitable accommodation. This, in turn, fits with the increasingly stressed condition of the private rental market in the period 2021-24, as demonstrated in Chapter 2.

Consistent with these interpretations were comments by some key stakeholder interviewees and SHS survey respondents:

> *From when we talk to … [SHS agency] members … it's that bottleneck that we hear about a lot, that people are just getting stuck in temporary accommodation for months and stuck in medium-term accommodation, stuck in long-term accommodation, and they can't get social housing, so it's like a clogged kind of system that kind of feeds back through (Homelessness NSW).*
>
> *The crisis accommodation system is overburdened. Clients who were supposed to stay for six weeks are now stuck for up to a year because there's no transitional housing available [SHS survey respondent].*
>
> *Our transitional housing options are limited, and the long wait times for public housing are leaving people in limbo. The system is clogged, and we can't move clients through fast enough [SHS survey respondent].*

Moreover, as noted in Section 2.4, some 95% of SHS respondents in our online survey reported that it had become harder to find suitable accommodation for service users in the previous year, with 76% judging this to be 'much harder'.

Figure 5.5: SHS service users and unassisted client cohorts (persons), 2022-23 and 2023-24



Sources: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – Annual reports; AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – Monthly statistics; AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

Expressing the three 'service use' metrics in a different form, Figure 5.5 once again relates the various measures of SHS service usage to one another[24]. The number of persons newly assisted in any given month (persons starting support period) during 2023-24 (24,013) was around a quarter of all those assisted each month during the year (95,010). Thus, the bulk of assisted persons each month are ongoing, rather than new, service users.

Similarly, the total number of persons assisted in any given month (averaging 95,010 in 2023-24) is around a third of the total number assisted annually (273,648 in 2022-23), implying that people typically interact with homelessness providers for around four months.

As shown in Figure 5.4, the number of persons starting support periods has been in gradual decline since 2019-20. Disaggregating this trend, Figure 5.6 indicates that this mainly reflects a post-2019-20 reduction in new support periods involving persons with no pre-existing service usage history (i.e. no previous SHS services received since the system's establishment in 2011).

As noted in recently-published research on longer-term homelessness trends, a growing tendency for service users to be persons with a previous history of service use is, to some extent inevitable, since 'the longer the collection continues, the more opportunities there are for clients to re-present for assistance' (Batterham et al. 2024 p.63). However, the evident non-linearity of the recent trend revealed in Figure 5.6 suggests that this is not the only factor at play. The point to note here is that the period since 2021-22 has seen a clear levelling off in the previously declining share of applications involving persons with no previous service user record. This is a change which defies the underlying tendency toward ongoing decline as explained by Batterham and colleagues. Thus, allowing for this expectation, the recent plateauing trend seems to suggest that homelessness pressures in the 2022-24 period have begun to extend to a broader cohort within the general population.

24 A limitation here is that figures on total persons assisted/unassisted in year are for 2022-23, but it is probably safe to assume that the equivalent 2023-24 numbers will be similar.

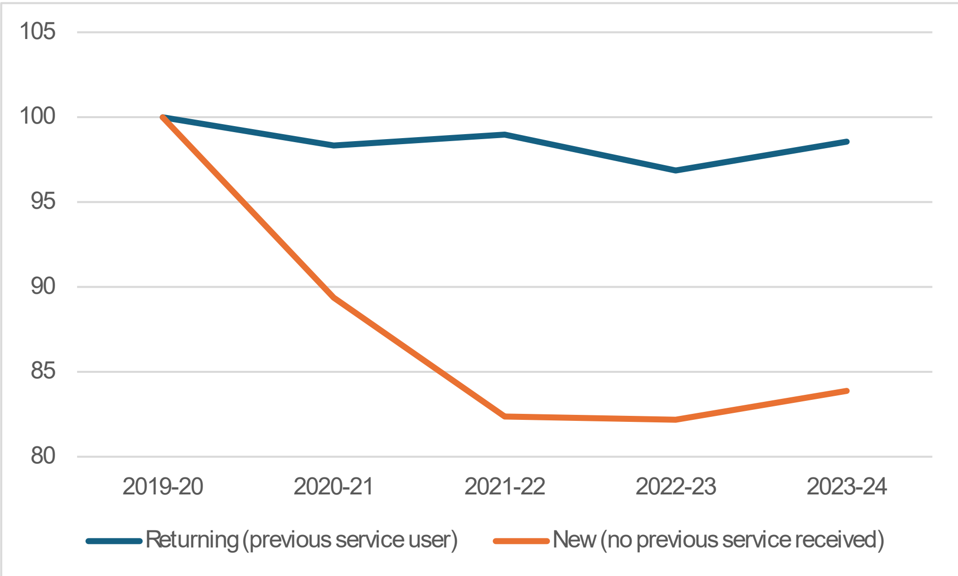
In other words, the number of persons recently assisted for the first time (at least since 2011) has been increasing relative to the number that might have been otherwise expected.

Consistent with the underlying implication of Figure 5.6 (regarding the 2022-24 period) was a Victorian stakeholder observation that:

> *'We're seeing more and more people coming to the homelessness system that have never needed help before, [including] working Victorians which, again, we've never [seen before]'*

More broadly, as detailed in Section 5.6 below, most SHS agencies perceive notable recent shifts in the profile of the homelessness services applicant cohort – one aspect of which may involve growing representation of groups previously little represented.

Figure 5.6: SHS service users starting support periods, 2019-24, mean monthly no. indexed to 2019-20 (2019-20=100)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

While the overall flow of newly assisted SHS service users (persons starting support periods) tended to decline in the four years from 2019-20 (see Figure 5.7), this pattern conceals a marked and very possibly significant divergence between recent trends for new service users classed as 'homeless' as opposed to those classed as 'at risk'[25]. Numbers of new SHS service users classed as homeless rose in 2023-24 for the third year in succession, an apparently accelerating trend (see

25 The distinction between 'homeless' and 'at risk of homelessness' is determined according to the applicant's recorded dwelling type, housing tenure and conditions of occupancy.

Applicants are defined as 'homeless' if they are living in any of the following circumstances:

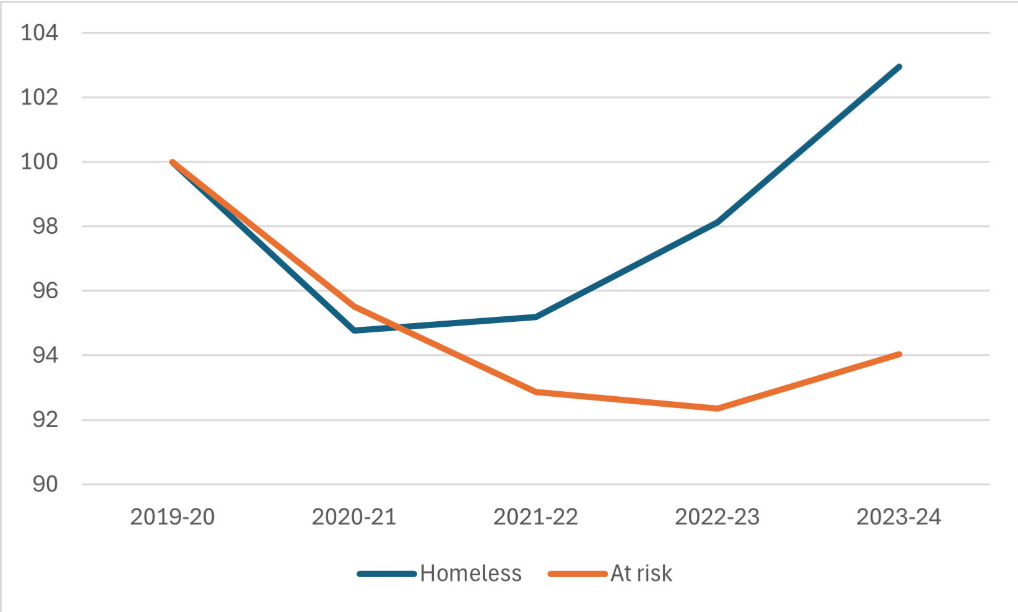
(a) No shelter or improvised dwelling: includes where dwelling type is no dwelling/street/park/in the open, motor vehicle, improvised building/dwelling, caravan, cabin, boat or tent; or tenure type is renting or living rent-free in a caravan park; (b) Short-term temporary accommodation: dwelling type is boarding/rooming house, emergency accommodation, hotel/motel/bed and breakfast; or tenure type is renting or living rent-free in boarding/rooming house, renting or living rent-free in emergency accommodation, or renting or living rent-free in transitional housing; (c) House, townhouse or flat (couch surfing or with no tenure): dwelling type is House/townhouse/flat, and tenure type is no tenure or conditions of occupancy is couch surfing.

Applicants are considered as 'at risk of homelessness' if living in any of the following circumstances:

(a) Public or community housing (renter or rent free): dwelling type is house/townhouse/flat and tenure type is renter or rent-free

Figure 5.7). During this period the number of 'newly homeless persons' assisted rose by 9%. This may indicate that, in seeking to reconcile rising homelessness demand and constrained agency resources, agencies are increasingly triaging or rationing assistance to those in greatest immediate need. While this makes perfect sense, it has an overall system impact or 'cost' of decreasing homelessness services potential contribution to preventing – rather than relieving – homelessness.

Figure 5.7: New SHS service users, homeless vs at risk 2019-24, indexed (2019-20=100)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

Homelessness change over time: primary research evidence

While shedding new light on the dynamics of homelessness service provision, the preceding analysis provides no clear and unambiguous answer to the question 'has homelessness in Australia recently increased, and if so, by how much'. This may reflect the limitations of reliance on what are effectively proxy measures of the underlying problem, measures that more directly measure system capacity rather than need for that capacity.

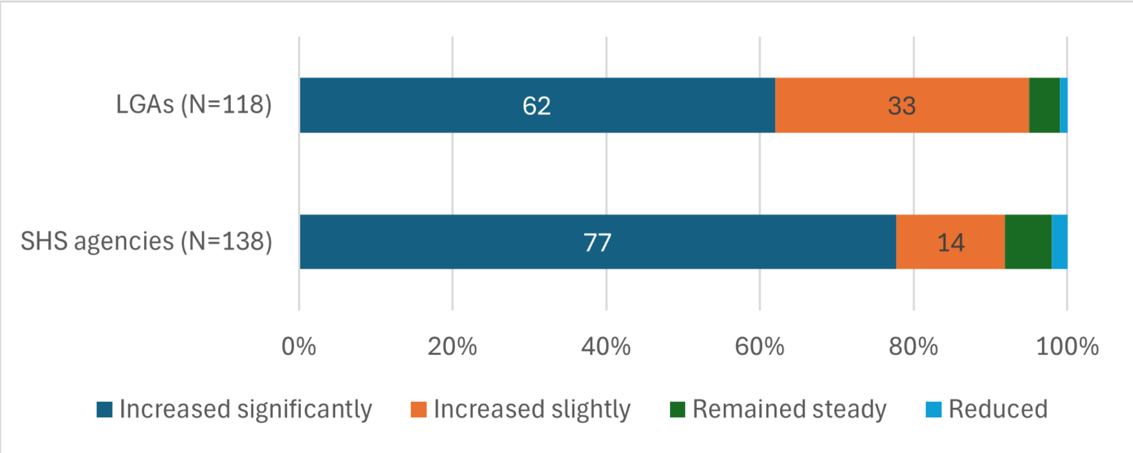
However, a more decisive conclusion is yielded by our survey data from SHS agencies and LGAs (see Chapter 1 for fieldwork details). Albeit that responses were subjective in nature, these data leave little room for doubt that homelessness in 2024 was running at rates markedly higher than in 2019, prior to the pandemic. No fewer than 91% of SHS respondents believed that the scale of the problem[26] had increased over this period, with more than three quarters (77%) reporting that it had grown 'significantly' (see Figure 5.). The collective judgement of LGA respondents was similarly emphatic, with 95% reporting an increase, and 62% a 'significant increase' over this period.

in public housing, or renter or rent-free in community housing; (b) Private or other housing (renter, rent-free or owner): dwelling type is house/townhouse/flat and tenure type is renter or rent free in private housing, life tenure scheme, owner – shared equity or rent/buy scheme, owner – being purchased/with mortgage, owner – fully owned, or other renter; or dwelling type is house/townhouse/flat, tenure is other rent free, and occupancy type is not couch surfing; (c) Institutional settings: dwelling type is hospital, psychiatric hospital/unit, disability support, rehabilitation, boarding school/residential college, adult correctional facility, youth/juvenile justice correctional centre, aged care facility or immigration detention centre

26 In interpreting these data it should be noted that our surveys allowed respondents to define 'homelessness' according to their own personal judgement. SHS survey participants probably conceptualised this in terms of the cohort of people seeking help from their agency. LGA survey respondents will have likely interpreted the questions more in relation to the 'visible homelessness' – the probably narrower cohort embodied by people sleeping in shelters, in cars or on the streets.

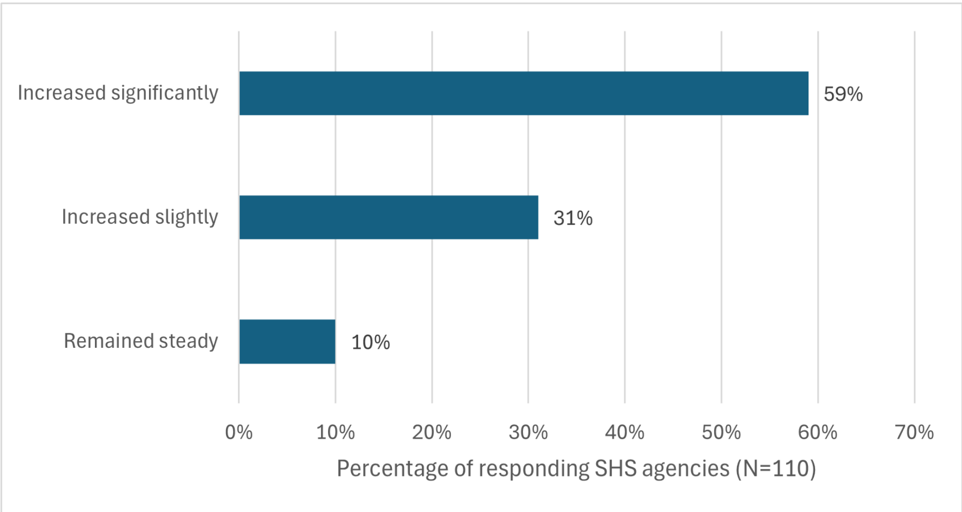
Moreover, the overwhelming majority of SHS survey respondents (90%) reported that the incidence of homelessness in the first half of 2024 had increased in the previous 12 months (see Figure 5.9). Some 59% had observed a 'significant' increase over this period.

Figure 5.8: Perceived change in incidence of homelessness, 2019-24



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

Figure 5.9: Perceived change in incidence of homelessness, 2023-2024 - SHS agencies (N=110)



Source: Authors' survey

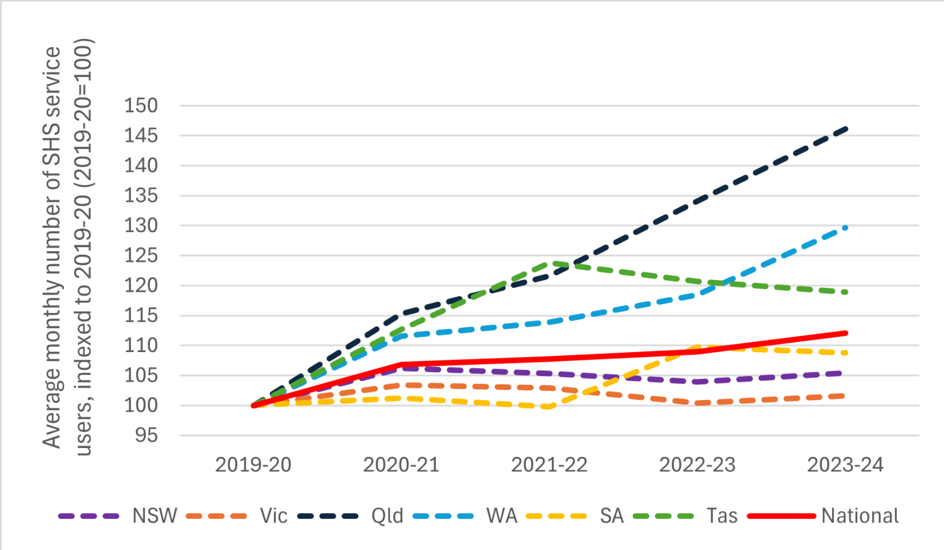
5.4 Sub-national homelessness trends

In this section we disaggregate some of the preceding national trends to look at recent change at state/territory level, and to compare capital city and regional trends.

As shown in Figure 5.4, AIHW's published monthly SHS statistics suggest generally growing, rather than declining, agency caseloads at the national level over recent years. From Figure 5.10, however, it can be seen that rates of change have varied substantially across Australia. In the four years to 2023-24, the average monthly caseload increased most markedly in Queensland (46%)

[27]and Western Australia (30%). Even in Victoria, at the lower end of this ranking, average monthly caseloads were 2% higher in 2023-24 than in 2019-20.

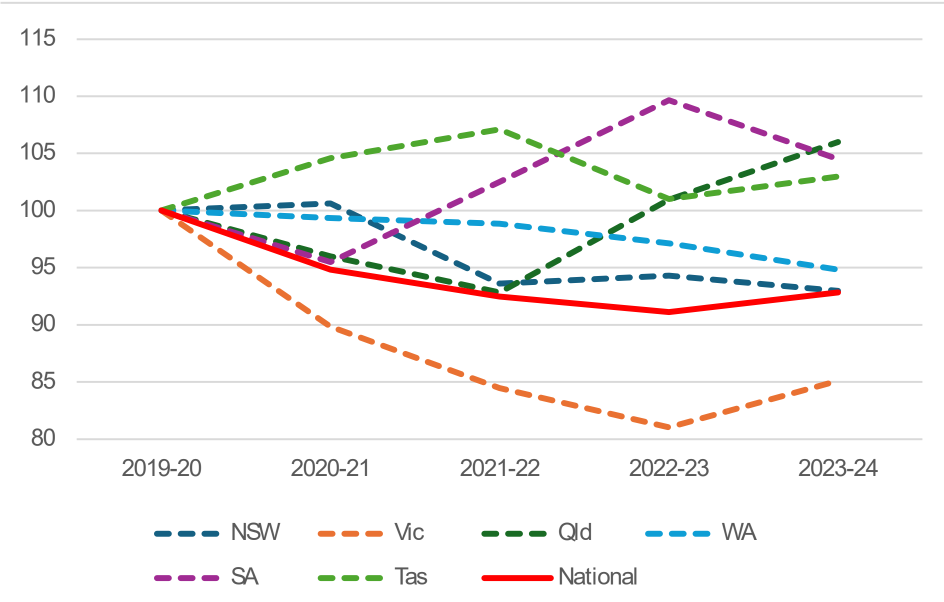
Figure 5.10: Average monthly SHS service users, 2019-24, indexed (2019-20=100) (published statistics)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – Monthly statistics

On the other hand, measured according to the flow of service users beginning new support periods, the period since 2019-20 has seen a general decline in homelessness. As graphed in Figure 5.11, this has seen declines of as much as 15% in Victoria. Only in NT (not shown), Tasmania and SA were the numbers of persons starting new service periods in 2023-24 higher than in 2019-20 – and in these instances only by 3-5%.

Figure 5.11: SHS service users starting support periods, 2019-24, mean monthly no. indexed (2019-20 indexed to 100)

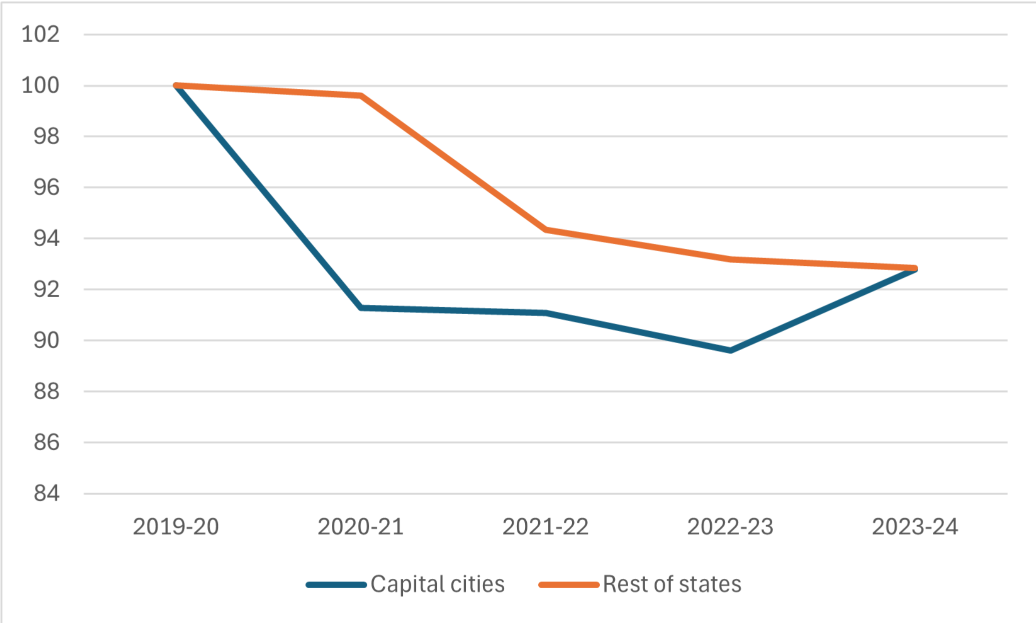


Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – unpublished. Note: 2021-22 reading for South Australia interpolated because of administrative changes in that year which distorted the number of new support periods recorded.

27 Although it is understood that part of the Queensland increase likely reflected state government decisions to fund additional services during this period.

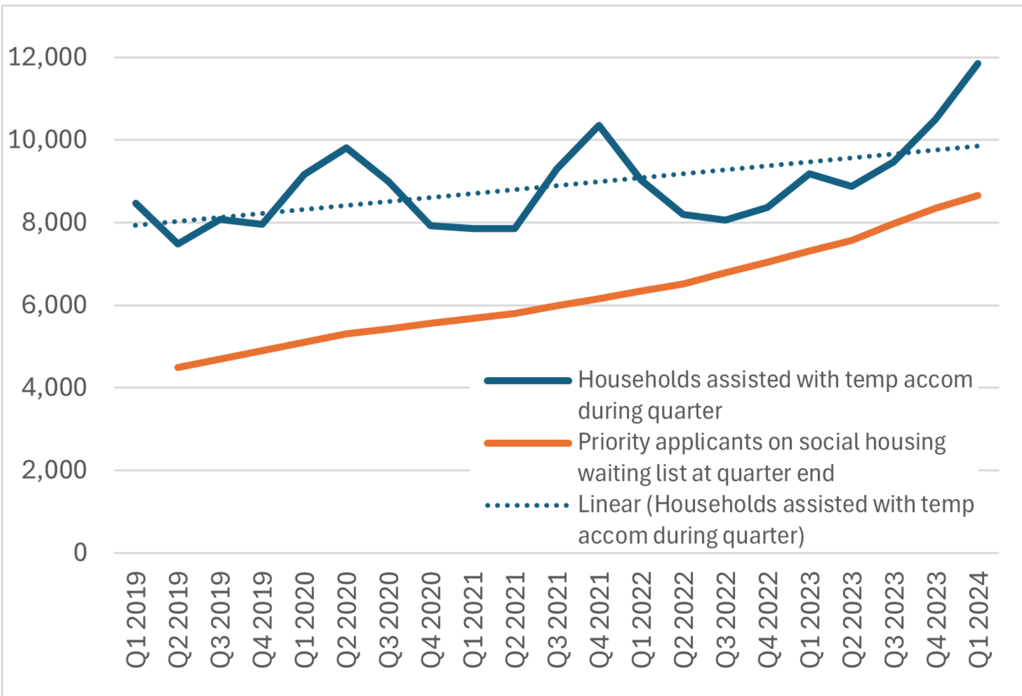
The recently declining trend in persons starting new support periods saw numbers down by 7% in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in the period 2019-20 – 2023-24 (see Figure 5.12). However, the decline coinciding with the onset of COVID-19 was much sharper in the capital cities where housing market impacts of pandemic disruption were probably generally greater.

Figure 5.12: New SHS service users, breakdown by metro/non-metro areas 2019-24, indexed (2019-20=100)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

Figure 5.13: Homelessness indicators, NSW Government statistics



Sources: NSW Government statistical report on housing delivery *https://tinyurl.com/fuvu4xxz* Social housing applicant households on the NSW Housing Register *https://tinyurl.com/yvftu82f*

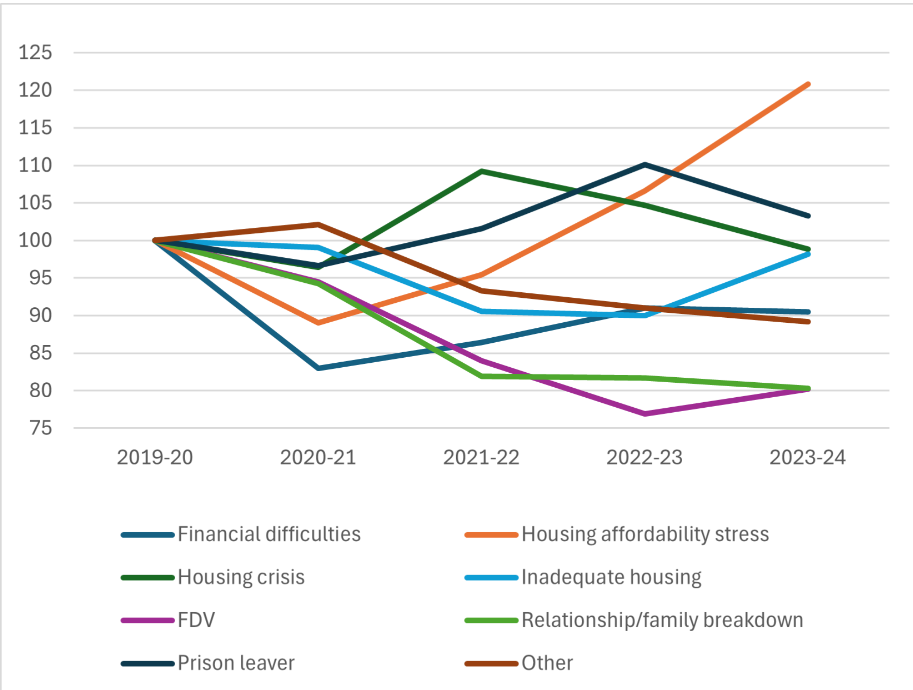
Albeit that they relate only to a single jurisdiction, two statistical series published by the NSW Government provide additional evidence on recent homelessness change over time in Australia's largest state (by population). As shown in Figure 5.13, the number of households assisted via (NSW Government) temporary accommodation placements increased by 58% in the period June 2019 to March 2024, while priority applicant households on the social housing waiting list rose by no less than 110% over the period to June 2024.

5.5 Homelessness triggers and immediate causes

This section once again draws on our analysis of AIHW customised tabulations focused on the flow of persons starting SHS support periods.

The predominance of most of the 'main reasons for seeking help' declined for new service users since 2019-20, with the exception of housing affordability stress, which increased by 21% - from 1,815 to 2,193 persons (see Figure 5.14). Indeed, in the three years from its low point in 2020-21 to our latest reading in 2023-24, the flow of new service users reporting affordability stress as the main factor prompting their need for help increased by 36%. Conversely, while more people identified family and domestic violence as the main reason for needing help than any other reason, these numbers reduced from 2019-20 to 2023-24 (monthly average down 7,489 to 6,004 persons).

Figure 5.14: New SHS service users, main reason for seeking help 2019-24, indexed (2019-20=100)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

In support of a general perception of recently rising homelessness, stakeholder interviewees and SHS survey respondents tended to attribute this to:

- Cost of living pressures, including declining rental affordability
- Lack of social (or other affordable) rental housing
- Growing incidence of mental ill health, often in combination with other factors such as family and domestic violence.

As independently voiced by two stakeholder interviewees, the recent confluence of such issues had created ‘perfect storm’ conditions.

> *As we all know, cost of living pressures, housing crisis, rental crisis … Job insecurity is another factor. People don’t want to give a rental to someone who’s on a casual employment contract (Vic Gov).*
>
> *The housing crisis, the shortage of affordable, safe, secure, appropriately located housing, that's really a major cause, and it's a strong cause in Tasmania (Tas Shelter).*
>
> *Cost of living, including rent increases have seen a new cohort present for support. We are seeing a steady increase of people and families that have previously never required or sought assistance from a support agency. Cases can include working couples (with or without children) that have long histories of renting without issue [SHS survey respondent]*
>
> *We have seen previous clients who have been homeless, in refuge, gain employment and secure housing, become homeless again due to rent increases and cost of living.*

Intensifying rental affordability challenges were noted as pushing tenants into deprivation, due to the overriding need to prioritise rent over other household essentials:

> *[People are] mak[ing] … sacrifices on food, heating, transportation, education, medication…So you're not just having demand in terms of people are homeless coming to you for accommodation, but also people are in private rental coming to you saying, I need food (Salvos).*

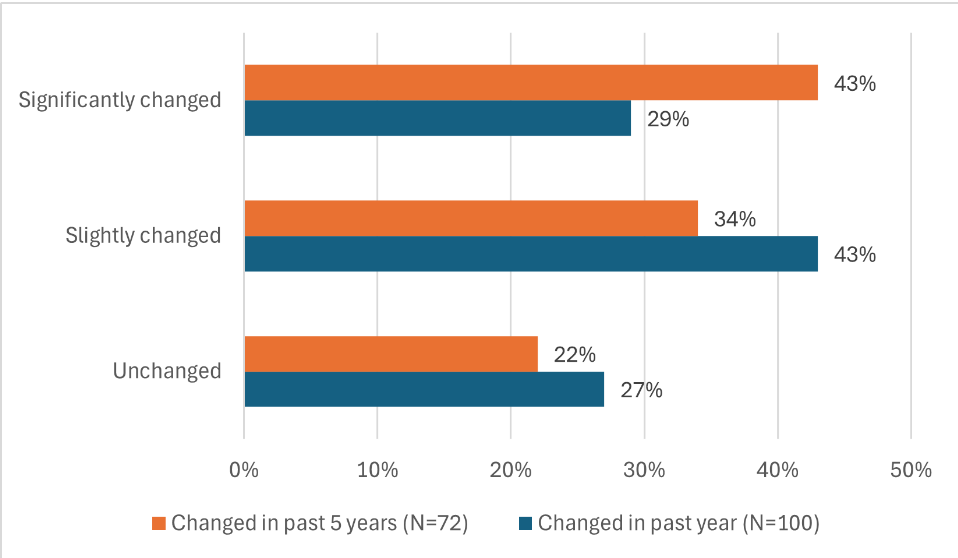
Declining availability of both social housing and affordable private tenancies was highlighted as a growing problem by many SHS survey respondents:

> *There are increases in numbers of older single people on aged pension and DSP [Disability Support Pension] facing homelessness due to evictions from private rentals. Also increase in single people who are working but on low incomes facing evictions from private rentals. Both categories being unable to afford the increases in rent and unable to compete in the current private rental market [SHS survey respondent]*
>
> *The lack of affordable private rental means people are coming who would normally have managed in the private rental market. People who we have not been able to assist keep coming back as they are desperate for help [SHS survey respondent].*

5.6 The changing profile of homelessness

Along with a focus on the changing scale of homelessness in Australia, a key objective for the AHM series is to monitor and interpret changes in the nature of the problem. Part of this is about the profile of persons affected. From the perspective of many SHS survey participants, this profile has seen significant change in recent years. More than three quarters of participants (77%) reported notable change over the past five years, with almost half (43%) perceiving 'significant change' – see Figure 5.15.

Figure 5.15: Perceived change in mix of people seeking SHS agency assistance



Source: Authors' survey. N=100.

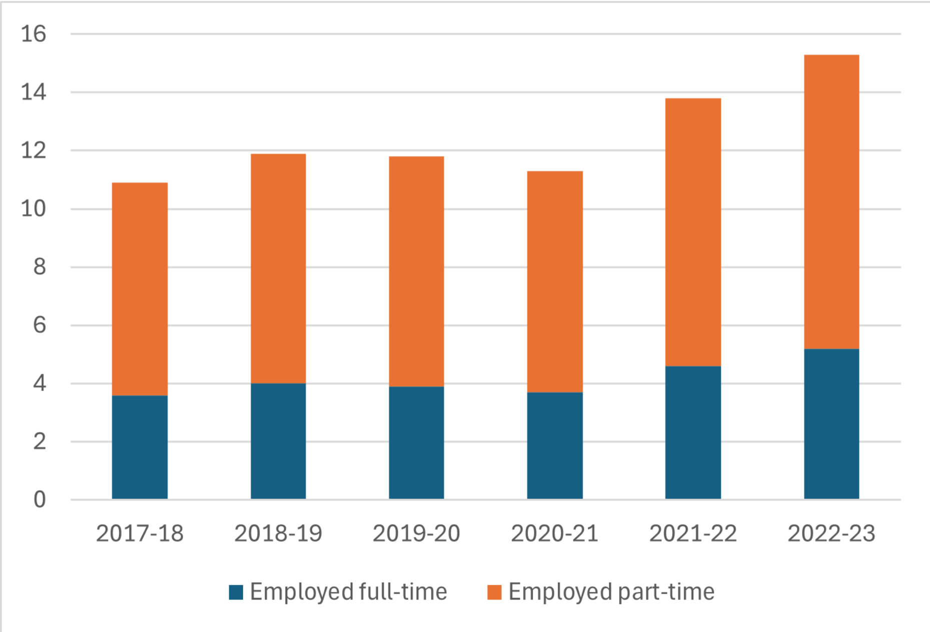
Growing representation of persons in employment

Along with some stakeholder interviewees, survey respondents described perceived recent changes as reflecting impacts of housing insecurity extending across a widening group within the general population:

> *We're seeing a new wave of homelessness from people who have never accessed services before. Low and middle-income earners, who used to manage on their own, are now seeking help due to rising rents and cost-of-living pressures [SHS survey respondent].*
>
> *[Homelessness is affecting] people who are higher income [more] than previously, so in New South Wales, in particular, people with jobs are experiencing homelessness more … So people who might have otherwise had that kind of protective factor of a job now the job isn't actually protective factor [stakeholder interviewee, NSW].*

As discussed earlier in the chapter, our analysis of persons starting new SHS support periods has already revealed hints that homelessness has begun to affect a widening cohort of people over the past 2-3 years – see Figure 5.6 and accompanying text. Reinforcing this evidence, Figure 5.16 shows a modest but noticeable recent increase in the proportion of employed persons receiving homelessness services – from 10.9% to 15.3% - over the five years to 2022-23.

Figure 5.16: Persons aged over 15 assisted by specialist homelessness services annually, 2017-23: Percentage in employment



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Reports (various years).

Other profile changes

According to others, groups disproportionately represented among those accessing homelessness services for the first time included families, people with a disability, persons in work, and older women. Growing representation of these groups was seen as compounding pressures faced by SHS agencies often facing demand for services far exceeding funded capacity.

More presentations from older people and in particular, older women were reported in Vic, SA and NSW:

> *[We]… are seeing a lot more mature women, women, 55 [plus] who've raised a family and … have limited assets. So yeah, and there has been a lot of focus on that cohort (Salvos)*

Services in Victoria reported that there had been a noticeable decline in the number homeless women and children escaping domestic violence situations since new 'Orange Door' services were opened across the state in 2022 as 'a single visible and accessible entry point for Victorians to access family violence, child and family services and Aboriginal services' (Vic Gov).

Young people are another group about whom there was no clear consensus. Stakeholder interviewees from various jurisdictions believed that, partly reflecting successful intervention measures, school-age homelessness had been in decline. As a result:

> *It's very rare that we come across someone under the age of 16 sleeping on the street' (City of Sydney).*

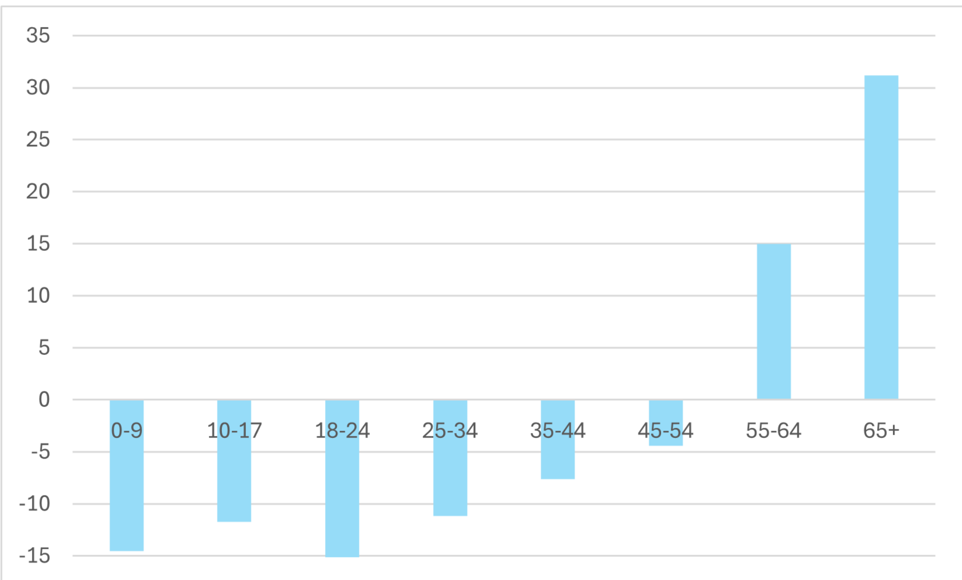
Victorian participants believed that some credit for reduced levels of youth homelessness could be assigned to youth housing capital grant programs complemented by revenue funding for support services and youth family reconciliation interventions. Reforms and funding that now deliver ongoing support to people transitioning from out of home care up to age 21 was also noted as having importantly contributed.

As perceived by many SHS survey respondents, however, rising youth homelessness was a significant contributor to recent increases in homelessness, overall. Cited underlying factors included the increasing complexity of challenges nowadays facing young people and the growing incidence of mental health issues. Similarly, in the somewhat unique conditions of the Northern Territory, a stakeholder interviewee reported youth homelessness – particularly involving unaccompanied young people – as generally increasing at a disproportionate rate.

Echoing a feature of inner city homelessness that came to the fore during the pandemic, meanwhile, it was reported that people whose residency status renders them ineligible for social housing or temporary accommodation had continued to feature prominently among those experiencing homelessness in Sydney. According to one local stakeholder, this group nowadays accounts for around 20% of the rough sleeper population (City of Sydney). SHS survey respondents similarly highlighted the position of women on temporary visas escaping violence and who, being ineligible for government services, become stuck in the homelessness system.

Consistent with previous analyses – both Census-based and SHSC-based – Figure 5.17 indicates notable age-related contrasts in recent homelessness trends. While they continue to account for a relatively small proportion of the entire 'newly assisted cohort', older age groups (55-64 and 65+) have bucked the general trend of decline over this period. As a result, those aged 55+ increased their representation from 8.3% to 10.9% of average total monthly caseloads during the period. In contrast with earlier analyses, however, the largest percentage increases were for males (rather than females) within the 55-64 and 65+ age groups. In line with this, the representation of males within the total 'newly assisted' cohort slightly increased over the period, from 38.7% to 40.6%.

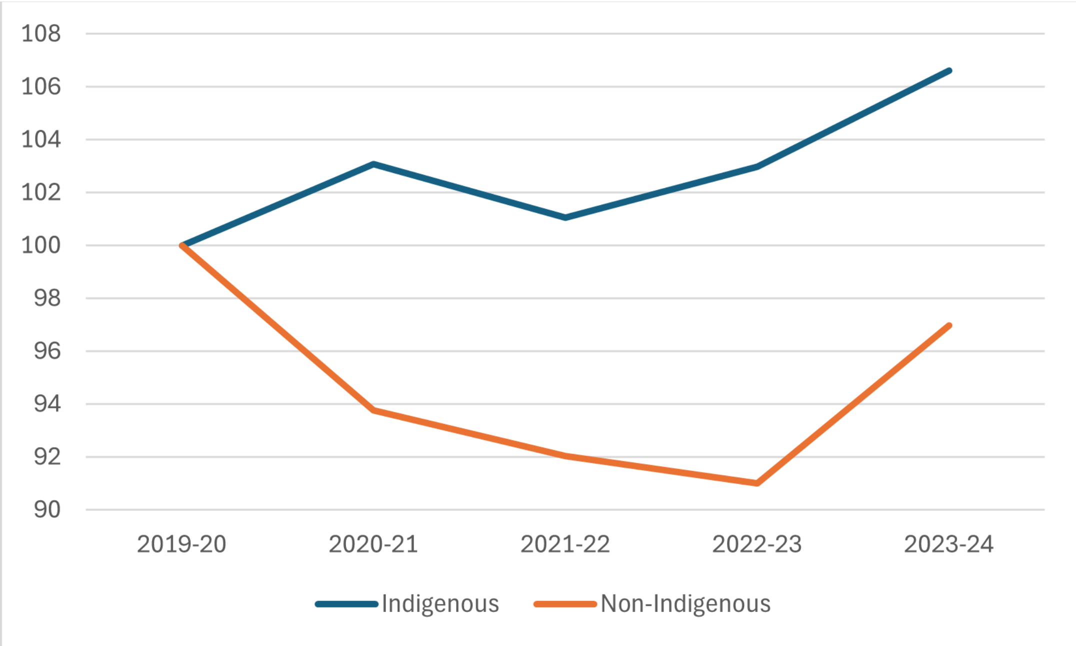
Figure 5.17: New SHS service users broken down by age group, % change 2017-18 – 2023-24



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection – unpublished. Notes: 1. Figures relate to average monthly new SHS service users. 2. So as to capture longer term trends of demographic change which are typically slow-moving, analysis encompasses entire period since AIHW initiated monthly statistics publication in 2017-18.

Whereas the number of non-Indigenous persons starting new support periods declined sharply in 2020-21 and 2021-22, the recent trend for Indigenous service users has been generally upward (see Figure 5.18).

Figure 5.18: New SHS service users, Indigenous vs non-Indigenous 2019-24, indexed (2019-20=100)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

5.7 Rough sleeping

Rough sleeping (sometimes termed 'street homelessness') is the most visible form of homelessness, and has consequently gained much attention in the media and among policy makers in Australia. As noted above, according to the ABS Census 7,636 people were recorded as experiencing rough sleeping on Census night 2021[28].

However, Australian and international evidence demonstrates that the population who sleep rough for at least one night during any given time period (month/year) is far greater than the number of people sleeping out on any specific night (see AHM 2020 p74). In other words, street homelessness involves a shifting population that usually includes a proportion of long-term chronic rough sleepers, alongside others lacking settled housing cycle in and out of actual rooflessness.

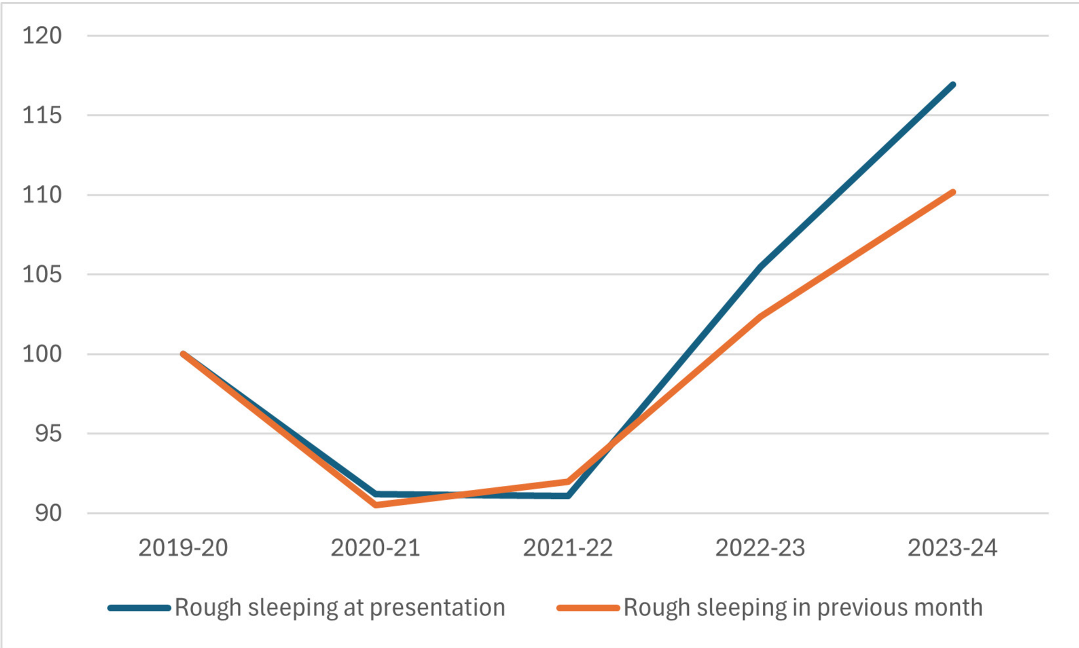
In gauging the recent incidence and changing scale of rough sleeping in Australia, the following section makes use of three main data sources, as discussed in Section 5.2:

- Customised analysis of SHS service user data
- NSW Government rough sleeper annual count statistics
- Central city-specific trend data derived from local rough sleeper counts and By Name List databases.

28 That is, classed by ABS as 'living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out', a recognised proxy for rough sleeping.

Figure 5.19 draws on two related metrics about SHS service users collected via the SHSC, and each bearing on the number and trend over time in persons starting new support periods who had experienced rough sleeping. New service users who had slept rough during the previous month fell back in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, but subsequently escalated substantially. Over the three years to 2023-24, the size of this cohort increased by 22% - from a monthly average of 3,808 to 4,636 persons. Those classed as experiencing rough sleeping at the point of starting their support period increased even more rapidly during this timeframe. This latter group grew by 28% in just two years to 2023-24 – from 2,551 to 3,276.

Figure 5.19: New SHS service users, rough sleeping status, 2019-24, indexed (2019-20=100)



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection - unpublished

Meanwhile, state level statistics for NSW suggest that rough sleeping numbers have risen substantially in recent years, with the 2024 total (2,041) representing a 51% increase on the equivalent number for 2020 – see Figure 5.20. Moreover, there appears to have resulted from a dramatic escalation in parts of regional NSW. According to the more detailed breakdown published in the Government's report, this has been especially marked in Illawarra, Shoalhaven and southern areas of NSW.

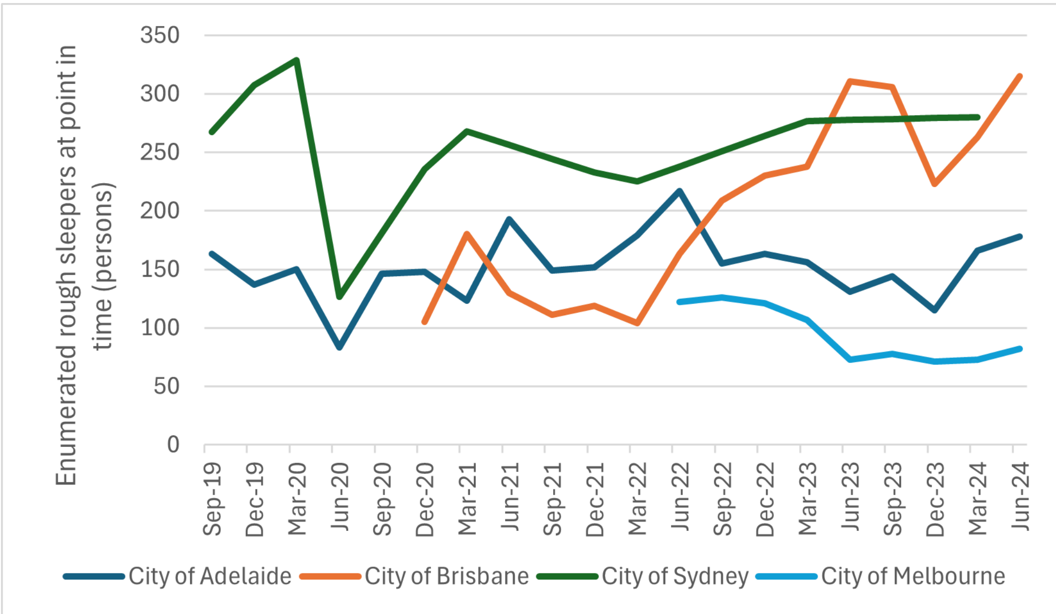
Finally in this section, Figure 5.21 presents rough sleeping statistics for four local government areas where these are published by local Advance 2 Zero (A2Z) projects or by the LGA. While the comprehensiveness and reliability of the A2Z counts is unknown, trends derived from these are included here as possibly meaningful indications of recent levels and changes in street homelessness.

Given that the cities of Brisbane and Sydney cover substantially larger territories than their Adelaide and Melbourne equivalents, it seems plausible that – at least over the past two years – recorded rough sleeping numbers in the former two areas have been substantially higher than those for the latter two areas. However, other than the marked reductions seen in Sydney and Adelaide at the start of the pandemic, there are no clearly evident common trends across the four localities over this time period.

Figure 5.20: NSW Government homelessness street count statistics, 2020-24

Source: NSW Government (2024). Note: Published statistics adjusted to allow for missing values for certain areas in certain years.

Figure 5.21: City-specific rough sleeper count/BNL-derived statistics



Sources: City of Adelaide - *https://saaeh.org.au/azp-monthly-dashboard/* City of Brisbane - *https://www.brisbanezero.org.au/reduce* City of Sydney - *https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/public-health-safety-programs/street*-counts City of Melbourne - *https://www.melbournezero.org.au/melbourne_zero*
Note: City of Sydney trend includes interpolated numbers for inter-survey quarters.

Notably, however, the relative stability of rough sleeper numbers in the City of Sydney since 2021 as shown by the City of Sydney street count appears highly consistent with the Sydney trend shown by the NSW Government's statewide count series – see Figures 5.19 and 5.20 (although note that the latter refers to the much larger Greater Sydney region). Reflecting on this relative stability, a stakeholder interviewee commented that:

> *I think that comes down to the fact that we're it's a very mature sector in the City of Sydney is very well coordinated. We've got a wealth of resourcing (City of Sydney)*

Equally, it was argued that disproportionate growth in rough sleeping in many regional locations reflected a lack of service capacity and affordable housing in those affected areas:

> *I think communities have changed a lot since COVID in regional areas, and people might not have the same local support structures that were once within a small community, and there's a lot more new people in those communities that might not have that sense of community, that can kind of capture people that struggle, that might not be able at that point to have a service, or maybe there's no services in that area (Homelessness NSW)*

While statistical evidence on rough sleeper numbers comparable to that for NSW does not exist in Queensland, stakeholder interviewees considered rough sleeping to be a growing problem in areas of the state. This was believed to result from growing competition in the private housing market, with middle-earners unable to buy an entry-level property due to rising house prices, displacing lower-income households who would have ordinarily managed to find an affordable private rental:

> *I think what we're seeing is that kind of the squeeze of the market, so that people who typically wouldn't have been homeless in the past because they would have found their way in the private rental market' (Queensland Government).*

5.8 Chapter conclusion

As reflected by the Albanese Government's commitment to develop a national plan to address the issue, homelessness is increasingly recognised as posing a policy challenge for Australia that is both important and urgent. Any official effort to address the problem in the spirit of evidence-based policy must begin by asking 'what is the current scale and nature of the problem and what recent trends can be observed?' To a degree, thanks to the Census, this is a question that can be answered every five years – albeit that the relevant figures are invariably 12-18 months old by the time of publication. Also, while generally agreed as more meaningful than any other Australian measure of homelessness, even Census statistics on this issue are sometimes controversial (e.g. d'Abrera 2018).

At the time of writing the most recent Census statistics are not only already more than three years old, but compromised in their value by unfortunate 2021 Census fieldwork timing, as noted above. Perhaps significantly, there has been a recent hint of official recognition that this is an unsatisfactory situation. Earlier in 2024 Australian governments signalled an intent to 'investigate the feasibility of producing more frequent [than 5-yearly] estimates of homelessness based on administrative data' (National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness p34). While it is understood that the scope and nature of what that might involve has yet to be decided, it may perhaps generate better and more timely data on this topic going forward.

Until any resulting development process bears fruit, however, we can only seek to piece together the fragmentary and/or indirect evidence on the changing scale and nature of homelessness as has been collated in this chapter. The national homelessness data source that has been most frequently used as an alternative to the ABS Census is the AIHW's SHSC. This body of statistics is, without question, a valuable quantified expression of homelessness in Australia. However, as clearly indicated by the AIHW itself, these data mainly relate to a cohort of persons provided with various kinds of 'homelessness service assistance' during a given period and do not constitute a direct measure of the underlying problem.

In this chapter we have, nevertheless, sought to triangulate measures drawing on the SHSC and various other sources to inform hypotheses about recent change in the scale and nature of homelessness in Australia, as well as on the operation of the homelessness services system. While this is not immediately apparent from headline SHSC statistics (total annual caseloads), we conclude from our multi-source analysis that homelessness has undoubtedly increased since its pre-pandemic level, and that it has continued to do so in the post-COVID period.

Linking back to our Chapter 2 analysis, we know that Australia's housing market has been recently enduring intensifying stress with rising rents and record low vacancy rates squeezing more people into homelessness. As this chapter has indicated, this has been generating more people needing homelessness services, but at the same time it also means agencies have been finding it harder to rehouse people without homes.

The result is people stuck in homelessness for lengthier periods and (if they are lucky enough to secure it) experiencing longer episodes of support, and/or more repeated periods of short-term help. More people stuck in homelessness and cycling in and out of services means higher monthly caseloads, but less people assisted across a year, and less new people at risk able to gain access to support until their situation is critical and homelessness becomes unavoidable. Australian policymakers must face up to the need for interventions that can break this-unhealthy cycle.

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6. The local government role

Key points

- As custodians of the local public realm, local governments face increasing pressure to respond to the visible manifestations of homelessness.
- 'Homelessness active' councils are responding to these pressures by taking advantage of their pervasive presence in the public realm and intimate knowledge of local services systems to help augment and facilitate local homelessness responses. To do this, they have developed a set of unique functions, including:
    - ◊ Surveillance and referral
    - ◊ Coordination actions
    - ◊ Facilitation of new accommodation and service options.
- Performing these functions has required councils to transform how staff across their organisations approach homelessness, partially diverging from the compliance-oriented responses of the past.
- Despite their positive impact on local homelessness responses, homelessness active councils face multiple barriers and challenges. These include resourcing and statutory limitations, lack of a clear mandate, and difficulties balancing local amenity with the needs of people on the street whilst long-term affordable housing options remain scarce.

6.1 Chapter introduction and overview

This chapter investigates the role of Australian local governments in contributing to homelessness responses. Lacking any official mandate for addressing the problem, and excluded from the intergovernmental agreements that distribute responsibility and funding for relevant interventions, local government has been historically overlooked in homelessness research and policy debates. Yet, councils are facing increasing pressure to respond to the visible presence of homelessness in public spaces they manage. These pressures have intensified significantly in the post-pandemic period, as the worsening housing crisis of the early 2020s has seen homelessness emerge as an issue in areas beyond, as well as within, the capital cities.

Reflecting these pressures, there has been a recent flurry of research and policy interest in what 'homelessness active'[29] councils are doing to respond to the issue and what other jurisdictions can learn from their experience. In addition to our own brief commentary on the capital city responses in the AHM 2022 (Pawson et al, 2022, pp. 66-67), 'local government and homelessness' has been the topic of an influential report from former local government homelessness manager and Churchill Fellow, Leanne Mitchell (2023); a 'local government community of practice' symposium hosted in Melbourne in August 2023 (CCCLM, 2023); and a special issue of homelessness sector magazine Parity, edited by Mitchell (2024). Similarly in 2024 the present authors contributed to research on the contribution of Queensland councils in addressing homelessness and housing affordability challenges recently affecting that state (van den Nouwelant et al. 2024). Homelessness has also been a formal focus of the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors since 2019.

29 We use this term to refer to councils who are actively involved in local efforts to address homelessness, both in general and as reported in our survey.

We contribute to these emerging discussions in this chapter by presenting findings from our survey and case study fieldwork with Australian councils and their collaborators throughout 2024. The survey covered all 537 LGAs across the country, with 167 of these responding (31%). More in-depth case study work was undertaken in three ‘homelessness active’ council areas:

1 A capital city LGA in a major metropolitan region with a history of homelessness challenges

2 A regional city with a de-industrializing economy and emerging but acute homelessness challenges

3 A coastal city with high levels of tourism and amenity migration and emerging but acute homelessness challenges

For further details of research methods see Section 1.4 (Chapter 1).

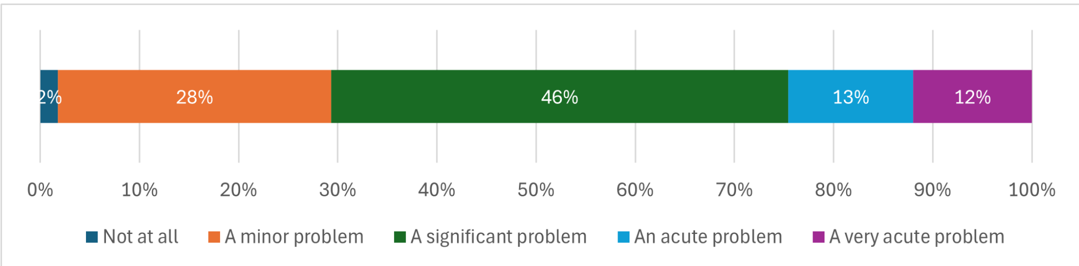
The remainder of this chapter presents findings from our fieldwork, organised under three key themes: 1) the homelessness challenges confronting local governments; 2) how councils are currently responding to these challenges; and 3) the challenges/barriers that councils face in contributing to homelessness responses and how these might be overcome.

6.2 Homelessness challenges confronting local governments in 2024

A growing problem

The homelessness challenges facing Australian local governments are in many cases significant in scale and growing in intensity. Over two thirds of councils responding to our survey (67%) identified homelessness as a significant, acute or very acute problem in their area (see Figure 6.1). These challenges are felt particularly acutely by councils located in capital and regional cities, with 80% of the former and 88% of the latter reporting that homelessness was a significant or greater problem (see Figure 6.2).

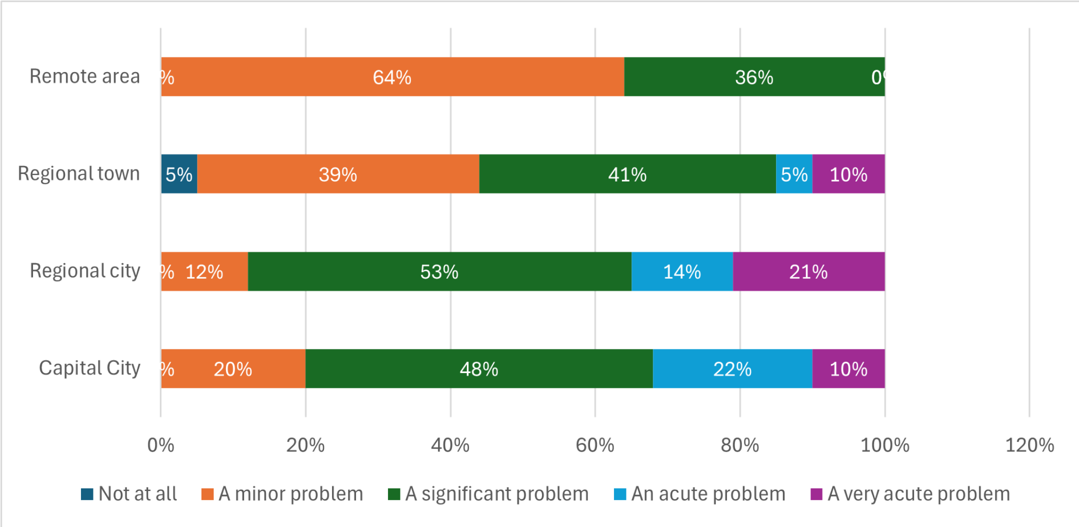
Figure 6.1: Significance of the homelessness problem across all (participating) councils



Source: Authors' survey. N=167

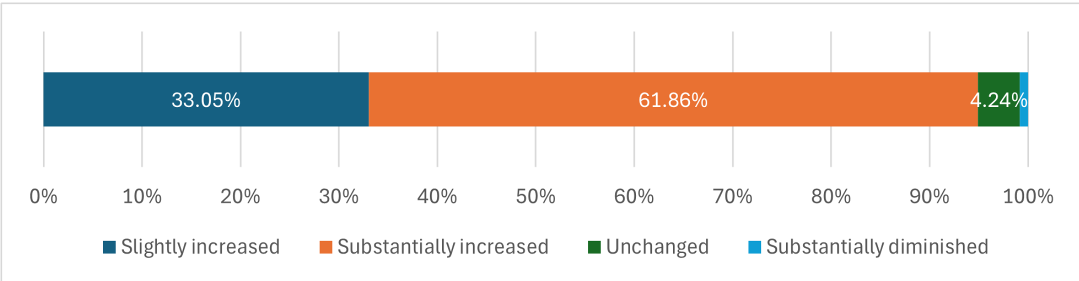
Of the councils that recognised homelessness as a significant or greater problem in their LGA, 95% reported that its scale had increased slightly or substantially over the previous five years (see Figure 6.3). Only one council reported that homelessness substantially decreased in their LGA. Of the councils that recognised homelessness as a significant or greater problem in their LGA, 95% reported that its scale had increased slightly or substantially over the previous five years (see Figure 6.3). Only one council reported that homelessness substantially decreased in their LGA.

Figure 6.2: Significance of the homelessness problem across all (participating) councils: geographical breakdown



Source: Authors' survey. N=167

Figure 6.3: Councils reporting homelessness as a 'significant' problem: changing scale of homelessness in past five years



Source: Authors' survey. N=167

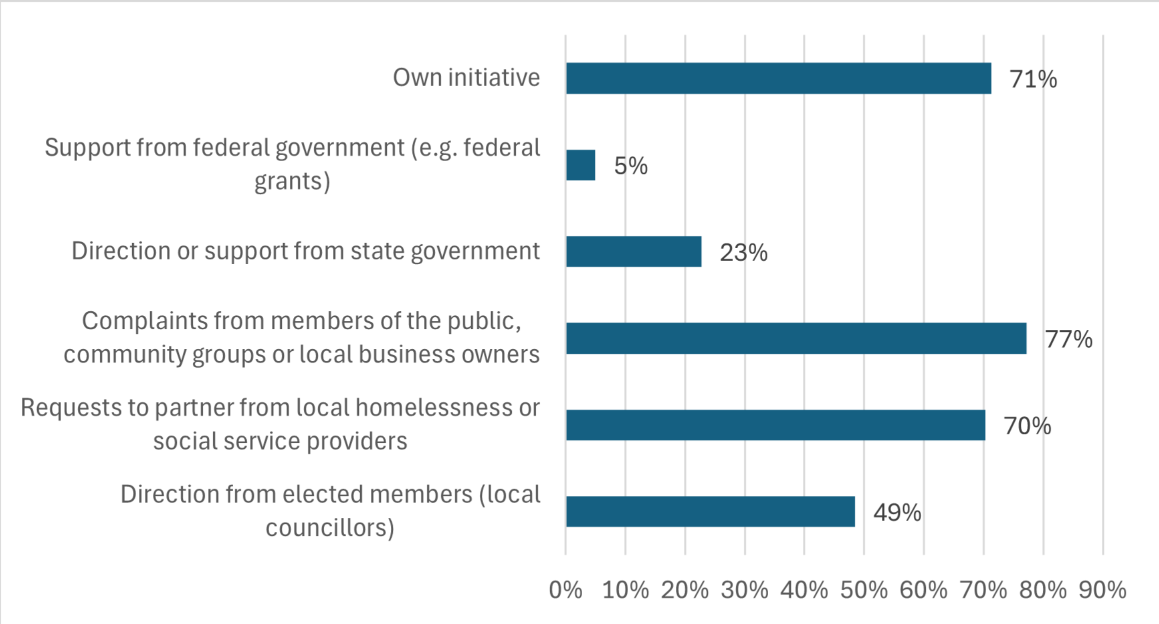
Community expectations

As noted above, rising homelessness numbers often translate into significant pressures on councils to actively address the problem. Much of this pressure comes from local communities. As Figure 6.4 shows, the most common reason reported by surveyed councils for responding to homelessness was 'complaints from members of the public, community groups, or local business owners'. The influence of community complaints/concerns also came through strongly in our case study interviews:

> *I'm certainly aware that [council] receive a lot of correspondence from local residents… around the homelessness problems. So I think… a lot of time is spent managing those expectations (SHS participant, regional city).*
>
> *Definitely some councillors [are] getting more contact from the community, in particular high tourist areas, which there is a neighbourhood centre in that area [too] (Council participant, coastal city).*

The fact that some of these complaints are channelled through local elected members likely accounts for our survey finding that 49% of homelessness active councils identify 'direction from elected members' as a driver of their homelessness responses (see Figure 6.4).

Figure 6.4: Councils active in addressing homelessness (self-reported): key factors prompting responses



Source: Authors' survey. N=118

Beyond constituent initiated correspondence/complaints, community expectations around homelessness are also registered through council consultation activities.

> *It's one of the number one things our community expects us to act on… [Our colleagues] pushed out a survey and actively engaged people in a discussion on the things that were of top priority to them… The number one priority across all neighbourhoods was affordable housing and support for people experiencing homelessness (Council participant, capital city).*

In other cases, community concern is amplified or exacerbated by local media outlets, as was experienced in our capital city case study:

> *'It kicked off, there was some pretty ugly reporting. There was three back-to-back, front page… articles, which was a real flash point for the city' (Council participant, capital city).*

Whatever the medium of transmission, it was clear from our fieldwork that many councils have been experiencing significant pressure from their communities to 'do something' to address the homelessness visible in their local areas.

Custodianship of the local public realm and rough sleeping focus

The growing homelessness challenges widely faced by local governments during the early 2020s need to be understood in relation to the council role as primary custodian of the local public realm. Councils manage a diverse range of local public spaces and assets, ranging from parks to roads, footpaths, libraries and community centres. When community members encounter people experiencing homelessness in these spaces, it is natural for them to turn to councils for a response, even though homelessness is not officially a local government responsibility.

Local councils' custodianship of public spaces also means that, while performing their day-to-day duties, council staff themselves often come into contact with people experiencing homelessness. These staff often feel compelled to respond to the issue—whether out of empathetic concern or because it is impeding their usual duties—yet they often lack the relevant knowledge and expertise to intervene appropriately. As a local government interviewee reflected:

> *All those frontline customer-facing roles and teams in council, I was getting a lot of contact from. So libraries, customer response, parks and gardens, local laws, et cetera. I remember getting one email or contact saying there's somebody in the car park that's pushing a trolley around. She's got a full trolley of stuff, can you respond or something like that. What should we do?*

As discussed below, this proximity to local homeless populations helps us understand both councils' unique capacity to contribute to homelessness responses and the inherent limitations of their contributions.

An important implication of this custodian role is that local governments' concerns around homelessness are primarily about visible rough sleeping. Whilst people sleeping rough make up a small minority within the broader homeless population, their noticeable presence in public spaces means that they are the group most likely to be encountered by local governments and their constituents.

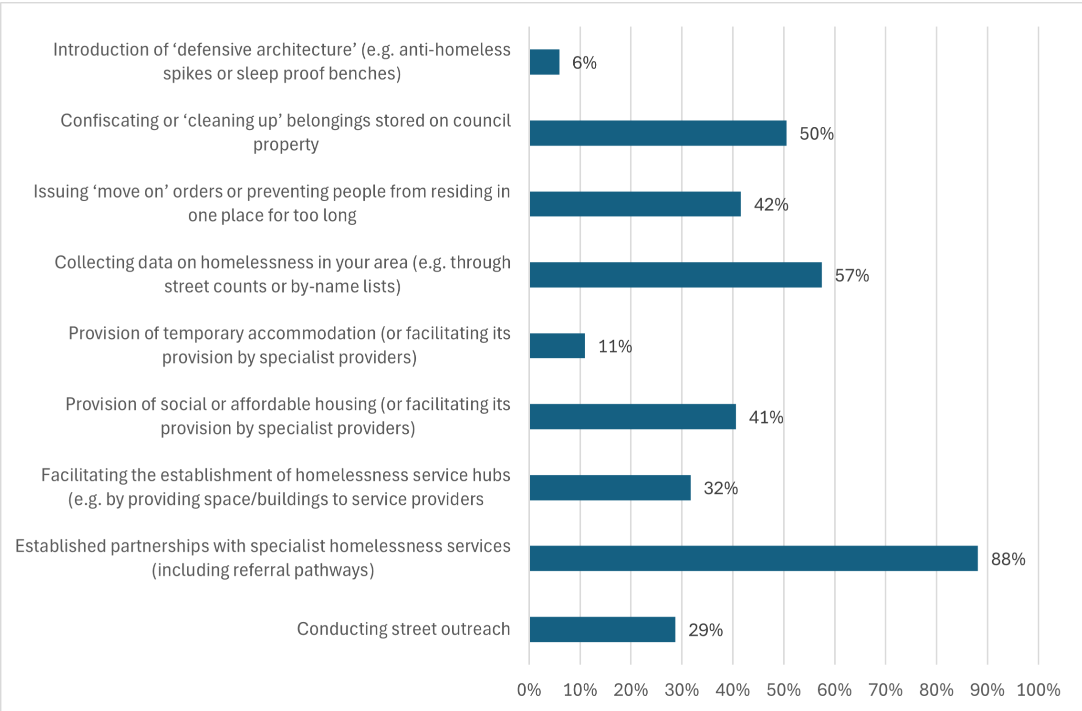
> *The way that we have been forced, as an organisation, to be responsive is in that really high acuity end of the homelessness spectrum. Which is very much focused on the tip of the iceberg: those people who are sleeping rough. (Council participant, capital city).*
>
> *[W]e have many touchpoints in the public domain for those who are rough sleeping. This doesn't necessarily factor in… what I would deem to be more invisible homelessness, which is overcrowding in boarding houses and all the rest. This is principally [about those] within our public domain. (Council participant, regional city).*
>
> *The issues relating to people sleeping rough tend to be where the focus of local government is. It requires a constant response as it is very visual and attracts community attention seeking council intervention. (Survey respondent, capital city).*

There are some efforts to broaden the focus of councils to include other forms of homelessness, including through the identification of people at risk of homelessness. This is a core recommendation of Mitchell's (2023) research and something that has resonated with some councils (see below). However, the nature of the homelessness pressures faced by local governments means that rough sleeping remains the dominant concern and will likely continue to do so.

6.3 How are local governments responding?

Whilst homelessness is not an official responsibility of Australian local governments, the pressures outlined above mean that a significant number have developed measures to help address homelessness in their LGA. Of the survey-responding councils recognising homelessness as a significant (or greater) problem in their area, 85% reported actively contributing to local homelessness responses. These contributions take diverse forms and vary from place to place. Figure 6.5 lists a range of common homelessness interventions and shows the proportions of councils that have adopted them. In what follows, we use these survey findings and our qualitative case studies to identify the key functions performed by homelessness active councils and reflect on their contribution to homelessness responses in their LGAs.

Figure 6.5: How do homelessness active councils address the issue?



Source: Authors' survey. N=118

Surveillance and referral function

One of the most common ways that local governments contribute to homelessness responses is by performing what we call a 'surveillance and referral' function[30]. Councils' role as the primary custodians of the local public realm mean that they particularly well placed to identify instances of visible homelessness, like rough sleeping. As noted above, councils have myriad customer-facing roles wherein staff either encounter people experiencing homelessness directly or respond to complaints about homelessness from community members. Councils use these encounters as an opportunity to connect people experiencing homelessness to local SHS providers (e.g. outreach teams) and other supports.

30 N.B whilst the term 'surveillance' may evoke images of a coercive 'big brother', that is not how we are using it here. In the social sciences, surveillance is recognised as central feature of the administration of complex modern societies (Giddens, 1991). The impact of this surveillance can be both positive and negative. In relation to homelessness, research has shown how surveillance is a 'double-edged sword' for people who are homelessness: it has the capacity to link them to important services and resources but also exposes them to harassment and unhelpful interventions from police and other authorities (Clarke & Parsell, 2019; Clarke et al, 2021).

> *We've got the partnership with [state government's] Assertive Outreach team, which then dovetails as well with a funded specialist homeless service… So, our communities and our staff members… can advise of a rough sleeper through phone call or an email – we have a set process for that. Then the Assertive Outreach team then engages with those who are on the streets sleeping rough, or in a Council asset, et cetera. (Council participant, regional city).*

As this quote suggests, these identification and referral practices often entail the establishment of partnerships with local SHS providers. As shown in Figure 6.5, the overwhelming majority of homelessness active councils (88%) reported developing partnerships with SHS providers. It is fair to assume that most of these are at least in part to facilitate the kinds of referral practices described above.

For their part, local SHS providers reported that councils' surveillance and referral activities augmented their capacity to respond to homelessness in their LGA. This includes by assisting in the identification of people who might otherwise 'slip through the cracks' or 'hot spots' where people are likely to gather.

> *I was receiving calls from the council, they'd identify rough sleepers that had been isolated, needed to get accommodation… They'd send us a rough map of a bush area in a creek in a circle and a dropped pin, and I'd go out and look for them… We'd just go out and see them. (SHS participant, coastal city).*
>
> *Council have been really, really successful. They're out and about across the [LGA] all the time. They're aware of hotspots and individuals… They've got their hands and feet on the ground a fair bit more than us and communicate pretty quickly on any hotspot. (SHS participant, coastal city).*

Further still, SHS providers discussed how council personnel are often able to share useful information about the people they've encountered that enables service providers to engage them in a more effective way:

> *They're a great source of information in terms of where people are rough sleeping, how they're rough sleeping, and providing a bit of background on how the client might be behaving, so if we need to be concerned about drug and alcohol or mental health issues that might affect their ability to access a service. So that, I think, impacts the way that we will then plan to engage with that client. (SHS participant, regional city).*

In these ways, the surveillance function performed by local governments can facilitate and augment local service delivery efforts.

In addition to the identification of homeless individuals, local governments' surveillance capacities also contribute to the monitoring of homelessness at the population level. This monitoring may include participating in periodic street counts, as was the case for our regional city case study, or, in the case of our capital city case study, the establishment and maintenance of a by-name list (which is a source of both individual and population level data – see Chapter 4).

> *We also get involved with the street count that happens annually here. Our Parks, Recs and rangers staff, along with ourselves, get involved with that to then communicate with [state government] and the Assertive Outreach team as to where we have located [people]. (Council participant, regional city).*

More than half (57%) of the councils that responded to our survey reported that they contribute to the collection of data on homelessness in their LGA via these means (see Figure 6.5).

As can be seen in the above examples, and consistent with our more general observations in the previous section, local government surveillance activities are primarily targeted at people sleeping rough. Their prime aim is to leverage councils' ubiquitous presence in public spaces to identify homeless people sleeping in, or otherwise using, those spaces and linking them to available services who can then provide a supportive response. However, there are also emerging efforts to utilise local governments' surveillance capacities to contribute to the proactive prevention of homelessness through the identification of people at risk.

This interest in prevention is being driven in large measure by the work of Leanne Mitchell, who advocates for greater attention to prevention in her research and in her consultancy work with local governments across the country. Based on her observations of councils overseas, Mitchell (2023, p50) argues that, because 'councils reach into many parts of the community with a broad health and wellbeing focus and also carry community planning and development responsibilities', they have a unique capacity to contribute to local homelessness prevention efforts. In our fieldwork, prevention practices were most fully developed in our capital city case study:

> *I think the other element… is around our role in prevention. So, while we are very focused on the pointy end… of rough sleeping… [there is work] around acknowledging the breadth of work that councils do, that isn't formally considered homelessness prevention but plays a really important role. So, things like youth services… providing a range of recreational, social, support… That's part of it. The role that our maternal and child health nurses play in detecting the risk, potentially, of say a new mother becoming homeless, due to intimate partner violence, and the trigger points that they locate in their screening of new parents. The role that our library service plays, as one of the last remaining free, publicly accessible environments. (Council participant, capital city).*

Local libraries, in particular, have been highlighted as key spaces where councils' routine encounters with members of the public can be leveraged to support homelessness prevention. Consistent with Mitchell's (2023) recommendations, our capital city interviewee reported that it is piloting the employment of social workers in its libraries to assist with the detection of people at risk of homelessness.

Whilst the councils in our other case studies were not yet engaged in homelessness prevention, both cited this as an area they intended to explore:

> *We had Leanne Mitchell come up and run some workshops for us last year… She's advocated really strongly for those preventative measures, what we can be doing as a council in the prevention space. It isn't something that I've been able to step into yet but hoping to because we have lots of touch points in council that members of the public will have. (Council participant, coastal city).*

Given this, it is likely we will see an expansion of local governments' surveillance functions to this end in the near future.

Coordination function

Another common local government homelessness response involves helping to coordinate local services and resources available to people experiencing homelessness. Coordination is a perennial problem in devolved welfare systems like Australia's, where interventions are delivered by a variety of nongovernment actors ranging from professional community service providers to grassroots charity initiatives (Bevir, 2011). Homelessness responses are no exception to this, with urban areas in particular hosting a complex mix of state-funded programs and bottom-up initiatives. Given these challenges, as indicated by our fieldwork, some councils are stepping in to help link up and coordinate available supports and thus make local responses more efficient and effective. Along with the establishment of referral pathways, such coordination activities are likely another contributor to the high proportion of councils reporting they have 'established partnerships with specialist homelessness service providers' in our survey (88%, see Figure 6.5).

Council coordination efforts are significantly diverse in terms of their aims, functions and level of formality. In some cases, councils are involved in establishing and overseeing formalised service coordination programs that bring together local agencies to provide an integrated responses to individual rough sleepers. Our capital city case study provides an example of this:

> *That initial partnership [was] set up in [mid 2010s], to try and address the ships in the night scenario. So, lots of service engagement, very little coordination, huge amounts of confusion… [A] jointly funded role was established, funded in part by the city and in part by [local foundation]. It created a… position, which brought together front-line services on a weekly basis, and subsequently developed a bit of a governance structure with multiple tiers attached to it. (Council participant, capital city).*

The initiative has recently adopted an adapted Advance to Zero methodology (see Chapter 4) and uses a by-name list to help coordinate service responses to people sleeping rough in the LGA.

Our regional city case study also leads a service coordination initiative, but on a less intensive and more ad hoc basis. As a council interviewee explained, when initial referral interventions fail to achieve an outcome:

> *Then we then stand up the [LGA name] homelessness working group – that just exists on paper – in regards to pulling people together to work on that location… We engage with mental health, we engage with Assertive Outreach, and we just facilitate that group to bring people together – our rangers, whomever, particular police within the area.*

Whilst more reactive than the regular meetings conducted in the capital city, this model aims to perform a similar function of bringing together and coordinating service agencies to respond to the needs of particular homeless individuals.

Importantly, our interviewees highlighted that local government is particularly well-suited to leading service coordination initiatives like these, due to councils' detailed knowledge of local service systems and their capacity to act as an 'honest broker' for local collaboration efforts:

The partners at the time, I think there was about 11 organisations around the table, nominated the [council] to be the lead, with the view that we're a good honest broker... We were seen as a good intermediary, because we're not a specialist homelessness service or organisation. We're not going to compete for funding and other sorts of opportunities with the other members of the partnership. (Council participant, capital city).

They're like an honest broker in a way. They know all the services in their area and it's no different in any LGA, whether it's capital city or regional. They'll know every single service in their area… So once you do a system mapping and go, right, what are the ones that matter for homelessness, then they help to bring everyone together. (NGO Participant, capital city LGA).

Thus, whilst local governments are not the only actors capable of brokering service coordination partnerships – indeed, some states fund specific SHS providers to perform this role (e.g. Queensland) – their proximity and status within local service systems mean this is an area where they can make a positive contribution to local homelessness responses.

Local governments also contribute to the coordination of local homelessness responses in other ways. Our coastal city case study, for instance, helps run regular homelessness sector networking and information meetings. These provide a forum wherein local agencies can gain a better understanding of their respective roles and service offerings, and learn about policy and other developments affecting the sector:

So [council], along with two other services, collaborate and support the [LGA] Housing and Homelessness Network… So workers from child services, or family services, or whoever wants to come to that… Financially, [council] support us as well… I think the feedback from the sector is that it's really beneficial because they're getting information they wouldn't normally have time to access. It also gives them an opportunity to network amongst each other (SHS participant, coastal city).

Whilst these kinds of initiatives do not directly benefit homeless individuals in the way that service coordination does, they can enhance the capacity of local providers to collaborate and thus improve their homelessness responses.

Yet another way that councils contribute to the coordination of homelessness responses is by monitoring and regulating grassroots charity initiatives. Across Australia, concerned citizens and church groups donate time and resources to help alleviate the visible suffering they see in their communities. These initiatives play an important role in enabling people who are homeless to meet their basic needs and, in some case, experience a level of interpersonal recognition (Parsell, Clarke & Perales, 2021). However, their bottom-up nature means that the resources and support they provide are not always delivered in the most efficient and effective way. Recognising this, some councils play an active role in regulating and coordinating the activities of these charities. Our regional city council case study was particularly active in this space. As stated by a local service provider:

> *Council, I think, does coordinate with charities to make sure that they're not stepping on each other's toes, and they're right where they're needed.*

In addition to limiting duplication, the council also seeks to coordinate charities in a way manages the impact of homelessness on particular locations or public spaces:

> *Year-round we're trying to promote that message of reduce duplication, not draw people into one hub where there's then concerns about perceptions of safety… (Council participant, regional city LGA).*

In these ways, local government can help optimise the energies and resources voluntarily provided by members of the community.

Finally, there are some incipient efforts to coordinate the actions of mainstream service providers with local homelessness systems. For example, our capital city case study advocates for coordinated discharge planning from hospitals to prevent people from being released into street homelessness.

As with the surveillance and referral practices described above, the various coordination functions performed by local governments have the capacity to augment local service responses. Coordination is thus an important way that local councils can contribute positively to local homelessness responses.

Facilitation function (accommodation and services)

Whilst local governments have no official responsibility for housing or homelessness service provision, many play an active role in this space. This rarely entails the direct delivery of housing or services by councils in isolation – although this does sometimes happen. Instead, local governments play a more faciliatory role, using their regulatory powers or control of key resources, or through partnerships with other actors.

In some cases, local governments support temporary accommodation provision in their LGAs. Our survey findings show that this is a relatively rare practice, with only 11% of councils reporting that they provide or facilitate provision of temporary accommodation (see Figure 6.5). Amongst our case studies, the capital city council has been most active in this space (likely reflecting the superior resources that capital cities command). Here, the council is arranging redevelopment of a council-owned building for use as a large transitional supportive housing project. The council's homelessness team oversaw the project's business case and conceptual design, consulting with intended end-users and ensuring conformity with best practice principles, including provision of secure, independent living spaces and ensuring its suitability for its target cohort (rough sleepers with complex needs). The project also draws inspiration from Housing First principles (see section 3.5); however, it eschews the most important of these – immediate access to long term, stable housing – and is therefore unlikely to replicate the positive outcomes associated with the Housing First approach (see AHM 2022, pp49-50).

Reflecting the faciliatory orientation of local governments, the project is being delivered in partnership with a range of other actors. It receives funding from the state government and has been supported by 'considerable' philanthropic donations (council participant, capital city); a local community housing provider will provide tenancy management services and a community health provider will provide support to residents; and the council's coordination project has been positioned as a primary referral pathway into the service. Our coastal city case study council had also contributed to the establishment of a new transitional accommodation facility in their LGA. However, its role was limited to providing financial support (alongside state government) for a project initiated by a private landowner and local SHS providers. The council was not involved in the design or management of the project.

Whilst transitional housing models have been shown to be less effective than projects providing long-term housing (Padgett et al, 2016), our interviewees saw them as the most effective use of councils' limited resources (relative to other levels of government) in responding to local homelessness pressures:

> *The rational there is that council's got a pretty finite asset base, and this is an acute support for people who are in crisis, and they didn't want to lock the resource up in perpetuity with 50 individuals. They want to see some throughput, and use it as a springboard into other forms of housing, which are more appropriately offered by the [state] government. (Council participant, capital city).*

Unlike state and particularly federal administrations, local governments are not resourced to deliver social housing on any significant scale. Many councils are nevertheless contributing to the delivery of these long-term housing options in other ways.

Just under half (41%, see Figure 6.5) of homelessness active councils either provide or (more likely) facilitate the provision of social and affordable housing – a much higher proportion than provide/facilitate temporary accommodation. This likely reflects councils' capacity to encourage and facilitate the delivery of such projects through the planning system (van den Nouwelant et al, 2024). Two of our case study councils published housing strategies that set targets for affordable housing, either across their LGAs or in specified growth areas (e.g. 25-30% of all new housing). Measures adopted to meet these targets include 'voluntary inclusionary zoning' (capital city case study), where developers include affordable dwellings in a development in exchange for planning concessions such as height bonuses. They also include partnering with CHPs or state government to delivery affordable housing developments on council owned land:

> *The Affordable Housing team is looking at use of council owned land. So, they're currently investigating two council owned carparks… They would—if approved by the councillors—then be released through an EOI process, and a proponent proposal focused on community housing providers… Because the biggest constraint that CHPs identity is the cost of land in central city areas. (Council participant, capital city).*
>
> *About social and very low-income housing… we have relationships with [state government], where we're looking at what land we might be able to work with them on or how we might be able to subsidise rates to deliver on some of that housing. (Council participant, regional city).*

Much of what is delivered through such schemes is so-called 'affordable housing' targeted at low-to-moderate income households and thus beyond the means of most people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Some schemes do include a portion of social housing, which is accessible to these groups, but the volume is typically quite low. In recognition of their own limited capacities in this space, many councils are committed to advocating for greater investment in social and affordable housing in their LGAs by their state and federal counterparts. Indeed, two of our case study councils listed advocacy as a key action in their housing and/or homelessness policies. An interviewee stated 'Councils and particularly mayors hold a large microphone. They need to use it more (for good)' (non-government participant, capital city). The interviewee also highlighted the capacity of councils to educate 'communities and elected councillors' so that they are 'better informed and less likely to oppose efforts to introduce more social and affordable housing into communities'.

Finally, local governments may also facilitate the establishment or delivery of homelessness services through the provision of grants or space for local service hubs. Around a third of our survey respondents reported engaging in the latter activity (32%, see Figure 6.5). Amongst our case study councils, the regional city reported providing 'annual community grants' where they 'fund homelessness services, particularly non-profits, to deliver a range of initiatives' (council participant). For the most part, however, the funding and delivery of homelessness services is left to state governments.

6.4 Shifting modes of engagement

The adoption of the functions outlined above has required local governments to engineer significant shifts in their organisational capacities and mode of engagement vis-à-vis homelessness. There is an emerging view amongst homelessness active councils that homelessness is 'everybody's business' (Mitchell, 2023) and requires a whole-of-organisation response. This is reflected in the surveillance and referral functions outlined above, where council staff in diverse roles (from park rangers to librarians) are tasked with identifying and reporting instances of homelessness. To facilitate this, many councils are developing homelessness strategies or frameworks to coordinate and guide the activities of staff across their organisations.

Strategies and training

Around half of the homelessness active councils in our survey reported they had developed a homelessness strategy, either as a standalone document or as part of a broader housing strategy (51%). Amongst our case studies, only the capital city council had a strategy as such; however, the other two councils had developed structured frameworks or guidelines that performed similar functions. A council interviewee from our capital city case study described their strategy as aiming to:

> *coherently bring together the disparate parts of the work we do at [name of council] into a collaborative approach to both preventing and aiming to, as the document says, end homelessness.*

In addition to coordinating the activities of different work areas, council homelessness strategies/frameworks aim to provide guidance to staff with limited experience or training in engaging with people experiencing homelessness. For instance, our coastal city council has developed 'a policy and a guideline around responding to homelessness' and distilled this into a simple 'flow chart' so that 'anybody in customer response or at a venue or a library could pick that up and know how to respond' (Council participant, coastal city). In both our regional and coastal city case studies, these guidelines were accompanied by training for staff on how to engage with someone who they suspect is homeless:

> *We also delivered some staff awareness – homeless awareness training… [M]yself and a couple of other community development officers in other councils in [the region] co-designed [it] with our peak body... Then we delivered that training for 50 of our frontline staff. (Council participant, coastal city).*

The coastal city council had also taken the innovative step of employing a team of lived experience experts to consult on initiatives like its homelessness guidelines and to participate in the delivery of training:

> *The idea being that people with lived experience are included in community education strategies in terms of raising awareness and deepening that understanding and that empathy [regarding] the impacts and the causes [of homelessness], but also a seat at the table on policies, responses, solutions that affect them. (Council participant, coastal city).*

This team's development had involved establishing paid positions for people with current or past experiences of homelessness and providing them with training and support needed to undertake the role safely. The initiative is considered highly beneficial by local stakeholders and the lived experience team now also provide consultation services to external stakeholders, including other councils in the region.

From compliance to support

Another aspect of these efforts to shift modes of engagement around homelessness is a desire to minimise homelessness responses that are punitive or exclusionary in nature. Until relatively recently, homelessness was predominantly treated as a compliance issue by local governments, both in Australia and internationally (see, for example, MacLeod, 2002; Smith, 1998; Young & Petty, 2019). Responsibility for responding to community complaints often fell to staff in compliance roles, whose toolkit for responding was limited to enforcement measures: asking people to move on or 'keep mobile'; issuing fines (e.g. for illegal camping); and/or confiscating or 'cleaning up' personal belongings stored in public places. Some councils also embraced 'defensive architecture' (e.g. sleep proof benches, anti-homelessness spikes) to deter people sleeping rough from occupying certain public spaces.

These enforcement measures do little to alleviate homelessness and have been shown to exacerbate the marginalisation of experienced by people who are homelessness (Herring, Yarbrough & Marie Alatorre, 2020). In recognition of this, many homelessness active councils are trying to reduce their reliance on enforcement measures. This is often reflected in the frameworks and training discussed above, where protocols and guidelines are provided to staff (including compliance staff) for how to engage with people experiencing homeless in respectful and supportive ways. For example, a council interviewee from our regional city case study explained:

> *[We] developed some guidelines… for the staff… to make sure that we respect the rights of people in the public spaces who are experiencing homelessness… The advice is to leave that person alone unless they look like they require assistance or… they're engaging in some other way that's a danger to themselves or others… Where it's impacting other people or where they ask for assistance… we're just encouraging our staff to refer that to the [local SHS] outreach team.*

In the coastal city case study, staff homelessness guidelines state that enforcement measures should be limited to instances where a local or state law is being breached or where people's actions or belongings are 'caus[ing] a threat to public health and safety'. This reflects a general attitude in our interviews that enforcement should be a 'last resort' invoked only after more supportive measures have proved ineffective.

In some cases, including our coastal city case study, councils are creating new 'public space liaison officer' (PSLO) roles to replace compliance staff as the first responders to visible homelessness. Trained to take 'a relational approach as opposed to a compliance approach' (council participant, coastal city), PSLOs aim to work with people sleeping rough to access available services and stay on the right side of local laws (see van den Nouwelant et al, 2024 for a detailed example of a PSLO program).

It is important to recognise that this shift is a partial and ongoing one. Councils retain their capacity to deploy enforcement responses, even if they endeavour to use them less. Indeed, as shown in Figure 6.5 above, many councils continue to rely on these measures even as they seek to augment local SHS responses: in our survey around half reported confiscating or 'cleaning up' belongings (50%) and 42% reported sometimes issuing move on orders or otherwise preventing people from residing in one place for too long. Positively, only 6% acknowledged introducing defensive architecture. Case study interviewees attested that shifting the culture of enforcement within councils was an ongoing process, although most recognised that these efforts were having a positive effect:

> *There is some internal dialogue that happens between people saying, we'll just keep fining them, versus the whole point of fining them is ridiculous because you're just creating more hardship and trauma for them, and we're unlikely to get that payment. (Council participant, regional city).*

Nevertheless, it is clear that encouraging and enhancing supportive responses is the preference and priority of most homelessness active councils today.

6.5 Barriers and ongoing challenges

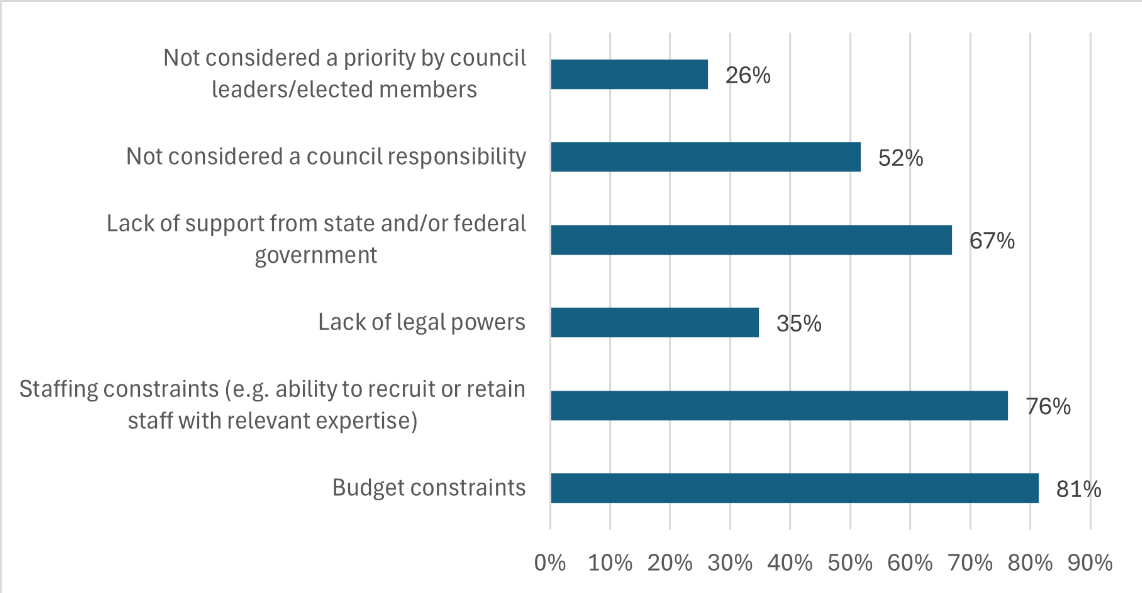
It is clear from our fieldwork that many local governments are playing a positive role in local homelessness service systems. The SHS providers we interviewed were unanimous that partnering with their local councils had improved their capacity to identify and engage with people sleeping rough, and to do so in a coordinated way. They also confirmed and commended the shift within councils away from a culture of compliance/enforcement in enabling this to happen. Yet, our fieldwork also revealed some significant barriers to, and limitations in, local governments' homelessness activities.

Capacity limitations

As Mitchell (2023) argues, a key challenge for councils is that there is often a disjuncture between what communities expect of them and what they have the capacity to achieve within their prescribed powers and resourcing levels. This contradiction came through strongly in our survey and interview responses. As Figure 6.6 shows, the barriers to doing more to address homelessness most commonly cited by our survey respondents were 'budget constraints' (reported by 81%) and 'staffing constraints' (76%). One survey respondent elaborated that:

> *There is a general sense that it is a local government responsibility to manage homelessness in public space but in our city there is not the resources to support the action that is required. (Survey respondent, capital city).*

Figure 6.6: Barriers to councils' contributions in tackling homelessness



Source: Authors' survey. N=118

Whilst less highly ranked by survey respondents than resourcing issues, the lack of a formal mandate or responsibility for homelessness also clearly constitutes a barrier to council action. Around half (52%) of survey respondents who identified homelessness as a problem in their LGA reported that it is 'not considered a council responsibility' and about a third (35%) indicated that they 'lack the legal powers' required to address it adequately. A council interviewee from our capital city case study stated simply: 'The Local Government Act doesn't explicitly stipulate a role for councils'. Any suggestion to change this would, of course, evoke justifiable demands for additional funding commensurate with defined new responsibilities.

As the findings presented in this chapter show, the absence of legally mandated responsibilities has not prevented councils from contributing to homelessness responses. Nevertheless, without clarifying the role of local governments in national and state homelessness strategies, and ensuring they have the necessary resources to fulfil the role thus constituted, the capacity for local governments to effectively contribute to ending homelessness is curtailed.

Lack of affordable housing

Beyond these capacity issues, an arguably more fundamental challenge to local government efforts (just as for SHS colleagues) is the critical lack of secure, affordable housing in most parts of Australia (see Chapters 2 and 3). Many of the local government contributions outlined above, including their surveillance, referral and coordination functions, presuppose that connecting people with an SHS provider will place them on a pathway to resolving their situation. Yet, we know the SHS providers across the country struggle to achieve long-term housing outcomes due to the shortage of housing suitable and affordable for their clients. According to the AIHW's (2023, n.p.) Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2022–23, in 2022-23 the number of people who were homeless at the end of a period of SHS support (over 59,500) was only about 25% lower than the number homeless at the beginning (78,800). The challenges SHS providers face in achieving long-term housing outcomes was well recognised by our interviewees, one of whom stated:

> *You can sense their [SHS providers'] frustration and the lack of options. Where's the transition? They're not seeing the transition to stable accommodation happening for people (council participant, regional city).*

Others highlighted the capacity limits of SHS providers, themselves related to difficulties in achieving housing outcomes for clients (see Section 4.2 above), noting that council referrals are sometimes left unaddressed for 'two to three weeks' because 'under-funded, staff-stretched services have very limited ability to respond' (council participant, capital city).

The difficulties in achieving housing outcomes for people on the street has important implications for local government efforts to reduce their reliance on enforcement measures. For when a housing outcome cannot be achieved in a timely manner, councils face pressure to use their compliance powers to restore local amenity. This tension also came through strongly in our interviews:

> *In a situation where there isn't enough housing you start to get these tensions playing out. In every single local government area there is the tension between amenity and human rights of people sleeping rough. (SHS participant, capital city).*
>
> *If the complaints build up, that tension to ask them to… pack up your stuff during the day. You can sleep here at night, but you need to pack up and not be visible during the day which I personally struggle with. (Council participant, coastal city).*

In this way, local shortages of affordable housing, particularly social housing, can undermine councils' positive efforts to reshape how they respond to homelessness.

As shown above, councils can play a role in facilitating the delivery of social and affordable housing through their planning powers and the repurposing of council land and assets. However, as we have also shown elsewhere (van den Nouwelant et al, 2024), the scope for delivering housing through such measures is relatively modest. The most effective means of delivering the housing required remains through the direct funding of new supply by state and federal governments (Lawson et al, 2018). Many councils realise this, as reflected in their increasing advocacy for greater state and federal investment in social housing in their LGAs. Arguably, this advocacy remains one of the most important ways that local governments can contribute to addressing Australia's homelessness crisis.

6.6 Chapter conclusion

There is growing recognition of local governments' capacity to contribute to addressing Australia's housing and homelessness crisis. This chapter has outlined some of the key functions performed by homelessness active councils, including augmenting, coordinating and facilitating local service responses. It has also shown how many councils are transforming their approach to engaging with homelessness to prioritise these more supportive responses over the compliance approach that dominated historically. Whilst councils face major barriers in meaningfully helping to redress homelessness in their communities, it is clear that they are already playing a significant role in helping address Australia's homelessness crisis.

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7. Conclusions

7.1 Homelessness: the problem

Homelessness is a complex phenomenon. This presents challenges in measuring its incidence and change over time. However, the balance of Australian evidence laid out in this report clearly indicates that homelessness has recently escalated significantly. This has likely been aggravated by the disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in triggering a sustained period of low rental vacancy rates and extraordinary rent inflation. Having emerged during the height of the public health emergency in 2020, this trend was showing possible signs of moderation only in 2024. As discussed in Chapter 2, national median advertised rents saw a 51% increase in the period March 2020-September 2024; an escalation of 29% over and above the significant increases in general inflation over the same period.

For lower income Australians in need of accommodation, market conditions have therefore become increasingly stressful, not only because of rapidly escalating rent prices, but also because of the sheer scarcity of available tenancies that has persisted during much of this time. Unusually low tenancy turnover within the market has co-existed with a downturn in newly built homes being put up for rent. Housing market conditions are producing homelessness.

For homelessness services agencies, these conditions have created something of a perfect storm, as rising underlying need for assistance has been accompanied by declining scope to provide such help. This is graphically illustrated by the coincidence of recently rising agency monthly caseloads with a declining intake of new assistance applicants, as detailed in Chapter 5, and by strongly rising average support episode durations as also noted there. These trends suggest that sector capacity has become increasingly 'silted up' over this period. Increasingly, agencies must ration their scarce capacity by triaging applications to prioritise those already homeless rather than at risk of homelessness. And while such practice is perfectly defensible in the circumstances, it means that agencies will be playing a declining role in preventing as opposed to relieving homelessness.

Market dynamics giving rise to these stresses result from unusual rental market conditions that have continued to intensify, well over two years after Australia's post-COVID re-opening. Thus, as reported in Chapter 2, more than three quarters of SHS agencies (76%) were finding it 'much harder' to find suitable housing for clients in mid-2024 than a year earlier, with another 19% finding it 'somewhat harder'. These problems would have been yet more acute in the absence of the significant boosts to Rent Assistance sanctioned by the Commonwealth Government in 2023 and 2024 (see Chapter 3). Without these changes, the task of helping people experiencing homelessness into suitable and affordable housing would have been even more challenging over the past year.

Increasingly, agencies must ration their scarce capacity by triaging applications to prioritise those already homeless rather than at risk of homelessness. And while such practice is perfectly defensible in the circumstances, it means that agencies will be playing a declining role in preventing as opposed to relieving homelessness.

However, while exacerbated in the early 2020s by the housing market impacts of COVID-19 disruption, rising homelessness during this period is only the latest phase in a much longer-term trend. Fundamentally, the housing market drivers that underlie the problem are structural, not (only) cyclical. With housing demand and market supply perpetually out of sync for decades, the price of housing has continued to increase, relative to incomes. With access to home ownership increasingly out of reach for median income earners, blocked progression from private renting to first home acquisition inflates overall demand for tenancies, stressing sector-wide rent prices and pre-empting lower income tenant access to the most affordable homes (Reynolds et al. 2024). As they have continued to ramp up, these housing market dynamics have, at the most basic level, acted as an underlying driver for rising rental housing stress and homelessness.

All the while, as argued more fully elsewhere (Pawson et al. 2020), these tendencies have been underpinned by key tax and other policy settings that have continued to inflate housing demand and constrain supply; policy settings that must be acknowledged, analysed and reconsidered in any National Housing and Homelessness Plan worthy of the name (Martin et al. 2023).

7.2 Homelessness: policy and practice responses

As argued in AHM 2020 and 2022, signs of stepped-up official engagement with homelessness as an acknowledged policy priority began to emerge as early as 2016 in states like NSW and Victoria. This followed highly visible and politically embarrassing protest encampments in central Sydney and Melbourne at that time. Discernibly growing government commitment was initially exemplified by expanded homelessness services budgets committed in certain states and territories and by the adoption of more pro-active approaches to rough sleeping in some central cities. In NSW, as recounted in AHM 2020 and 2022, it also included the adoption of well-specified rough sleeping reduction targets previously unseen in Australia. More recently, as recounted in Chapter 4, state/territory efforts to address the problem have been compounded in some localities by an upsurge in philanthropically-supported and citizen-powered activity under the AtoZ banner.

As has been widely celebrated by social justice advocates, several state governments implemented large-scale pandemic emergency accommodation (EA) programs for people sleeping rough and others experiencing homelessness during 2020 and 2021. NSW and Victoria once again stand out in their actions to design funded pathways towards long-term housing for the most disadvantaged assisted EA service users, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this report.

Adequate provision of social housing is crucial in reducing homelessness because of its effect in shielding low income and vulnerable people from rental stress and insecurity in the private market.

More importantly, though, most Australian governments – including, since 2022, the Commonwealth – have pledged significant investment in long-term social housing during the early 2020s, funding commitments largely absent throughout the 2000s and the 2010s[31]. Adequate provision of social housing is crucial in reducing homelessness because of its effect in shielding low income and vulnerable people from rental stress and insecurity in the private market. Consequently, as recently re-confirmed by indepth statistical analysis, there is an inverse relationship between homelessness and social housing provision at the local scale (Batterham et al. 2024).

31 Albeit with the brief exception of the Commonwealth Government's 2009-11 Social Housing Initiative and a few (usually very modest) state/territory schemes, the most significant of which was the NSW Government's 2016 Social and Affordable Housing Fund.

Thus, the significance of the Chapter 3 finding, that by the end of the current decade, post-2020 investment programs will have appreciably expanded capacity within the nation's flagging social housing sector. At least for a few years, state/territory and NGO homelessness services staff will see a marked uptick in scope to assist people experiencing homelessness into secure and affordable homes: a surge of newly built units supplementing existing homes being re-let. More formerly homeless people will be enabled to transition into secure housing, and for more of those helped as such, these will be homes designed and built to modern standards.

The combined impact of state, territory and Commonwealth efforts may, at least for a short period, push the annual output of new social units into the 8-10,000 range necessary to halt the long-term decline in sector representation, a trend ongoing almost unbroken for 25 years. This is unquestionably to be celebrated.

At the same time, it must be recognised that these developments have come about through incremental and disconnected policymaking and have largely lacked any explicit rationale, strategic framing or evidence-based scaling[32]. In most cases they are accompanied by no explicit recognition or acknowledgement of the necessity for continuing investment in social housing on a scale far exceeding that of the recent past. Investment that is, at the very least, sufficient to prevent the resumption of sector decline, but ideally adequate to expand social housing representation in line with quantified long term need. A statement of aspiration along these lines should be logical for inclusion within the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

However, while we believe it an essential part of the solution, investing sufficiently in social housing is only one aspect of the multi-dimensional policy reform strategy needed to tackle Australia's homelessness challenge. Accompanying measures including enhanced tenancy rights and adequate social security payment rates will be likewise vital. Addressing the broader structural causes of rising homelessness will, however, call for more far reaching reforms on property taxation and market intervention to be phased in over time (Pawson et al. 2020).

Also crucial will be clearly defined policy objectives on homelessness. It is within that context that the increasingly widespread stated adherence to the aim of 'ending homelessness' is relevant. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, this is sometimes qualified by the statement that this would equate to a situation where homelessness is 'rare, brief and non-recurring'. But although these principles are uncontroversial and to be supported, it is difficult to precisely conceptualise or measure whether a system can be said to have achieved them.

Some associated with the AtoZ movement advocate 'functional zero' as a measure to determine whether homelessness has been ended, that is, whether homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring. This measure relies upon a complex analysis of inflow (into unsheltered homelessness) and outflow (into housing) data over a period of time and within a local system. A

while we believe it an essential part of the solution, investing sufficiently in social housing is only one aspect of the multi-dimensional policy reform strategy needed to tackle Australia's homelessness challenge. Accompanying measures including enhanced tenancy rights and adequate social security payment rates will be likewise vital.

32 With the possible exception of recent Queensland Government commitments – see Pawson et al. (2024)

systematic location-specific focus is important, although it is difficult to imagine an area where systematic data is readily available on all people moving in and out of homelessness to establish whether functional zero has been achieved. The data and measurement limitations are further challenged by sector voices rejecting the premise of functional zero because of the exclusive focus on rough sleeping at the expense of the broader homeless population.

As recognized by some AtoZ advocates, however, the movement's objectives can only be realised through broader societal change to end homelessness, however that is defined. Equally, it must be acknowledged that the AtoZ movement is pushing governments to think about how that is to be achieved – through, for example, identifying flaws in existing systems and providing data to underpin systems change. Despite the conceptual and data limitations of functional zero, AtoZ is part of a movement that is challenging Australian governments to progress more optimistically beyond their unambitious and/or insufficiently defined homelessness policy objectives. As we see it, governments should commit to ending homelessness, with a clear definition of what this means. They must, at the same time, ensure that progress towards the realization of this objective can be unambiguously monitored to facilitate accountability.

7.3 Better data to inform housing and homelessness policy: recommendations

We do, however, concur with advocates and many others that 'better data' on homelessness – and relevant aspects of housing – is essential to inform properly grounded policymaking.

Monitoring overall expressed demand by state/territory governments

As noted in Chapter 5, it is encouraging that Australian governments have recently signalled an intent to investigate the scope for generating more frequent estimates of homelessness than those available from the five-yearly Census count. This might possibly involve state/territory governments reporting annually to AIHW:

- The total number of households seeking housing/homelessness assistance – e.g. as processed via central intake models – and, of these:
- The number offered/provided with each form of help – e.g. registered for social housing, allocated social housing tenancy, offered bond loan, offered one-off rental grant – as well as the number unassisted[33].

Differentiating high needs social housing applicants via AIHW annual collections

There is also a need for Australian governments to authorize the AIHW to overhaul the way it requests state and territory governments to enumerate 'high needs' social housing applications among those registering for social housing and those granted tenancies. These are currently termed 'greatest need' applicants. This term appears to be very diversely interpreted by different state and territory governments (Pawson and Lilley 2022). This is partly attributable to the breadth (or looseness) of the concept as defined by AIHW. Ideally, a much more specific 'priority status' indicator would be developed to replace this metric. This would separately identify applicants deemed as subject to complex needs and/or urgency that attracting preferential status in state/territory applicant ranking frameworks – e.g. eligible, no additional priority/eligible, additional priority/eligible, maximum additional priority.

Identifying households in the SHSC collection

We also support the recent AHURI research recommendation to enhance the SHSC through the addition of a unique identifier for households (Batterham et al. 2024). When it comes to the housing needs associated with people experiencing homelessness, these are more meaningfully understood in terms of households rather than persons.

33 The AIHW's annual 'Housing Assistance in Australia' collection currently records only some of these outcomes.

Enumerating social and affordable housing production and portfolio dynamics

Above all, it is essential for the AIHW (or the ABS) to establish a national framework to better monitor the production of social and affordable housing. As argued in Chapter 3, this must – at a minimum – enumerate, on an annual basis, the total scale of social and affordable housing development and acquisition activity (i.e. gross funding, starts, completions, acquisitions), but also broken down in relation to key factors including:

- Social versus affordable rental housing
- Additional versus replacement units (to be derived with reference to data on annual stock losses via demolition or sale)
- Public versus community versus Indigenous housing.

The social housing stock statistics published in the ROGS report should also be supplemented by an indicator on social housing stock enumerating dwellings in public or community housing ownership lying vacant for more than six months – e.g. due to the capital cost of making it fit for habitation.

7.4 Better policies for addressing homelessness: recommendations

a) The Commonwealth Government should progress a National Housing and Homelessness Plan (NHHP) that is underpinned by legislation and has a clear ambition for all Australians to have a decent home.

b) The National Plan should include homelessness reduction targets to drive policy development. Jointly formulated by Commonwealth, state and territory governments, targets should be clearly defined and include agreed definitions, timescales and indicators.

c) The National Plan should initiate a fundamental review of Rent Assistance – its structure as well as its level – with the aim of significantly decreasing housing stress for low-income tenants.

d) Australian governments should jointly commit to ensuring ongoing investment in social housing at least to the level necessary to stabilise social housing as a proportion of all housing – that is, sufficient to enable construction of around 10,000 dwellings per year.

e) The National Housing Supply and Affordability Council should be commissioned to identify social housing supply targets informed by a rigorous needs assessment.

f) Legislation to underpin the National Plan should include the creation of an advisory committee to inform Plan development and progress monitoring. Membership should include people with lived experience of precarious housing and homelessness, industry representatives and other external experts.

g) Australian governments should remedy the inadequate provision of permanent supportive housing needed to sustainably end and prevent homelessness among the small cohort of people who do not have their needs met through the mainstream housing and support system. In addition to developing an agreed PSH definition, this would include formulating the funding and policy mechanisms to enable the flexible provision of ongoing care and support alongside housing that is fundamental to the concept.

h) State and territory governments should commit to reducing homelessness among populations identified as at high risk of homelessness, and develop targets and action plans for reducing homelessness in each population, including children being discharged from out-of-home care, and people exiting prisons, mental health services, and AOD services.

i) Jointly with the states and territories, the Commonwealth Government should increase homelessness service capacity, and commission research to monitor service capacity gaps over time.

j) Australian governments should commit to continue growing the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled housing and homelessness services organisations to meet the housing and support needs of First Nations people who are homeless or insecurely housed.

k) To facilitate evidence-informed social housing and homelessness service innovations, Australian governments should pledge capacity building investment to enable social housing and homelessness organisations to more systematically use and learn from service provision data.

7.5 Final word

If we want to measurably reduce homelessness at the societal level and to prevent it in the future the only way to do so is through reducing poverty and expanding access to suitable and affordable accommodation. Just as the current situation has come about thanks to mistaken policy choices of the past, these are challenges that could be squarely addressed by course corrections today.

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Appendix 1: Australian Advance to Zero projects

State	Zero Projects	Year est.	Description
SA	Adelaide	2017	Adelaide was the first city in 2017 to commit to Functional Zero street homelessness by 2025 and the project was officially launched in 2018. ***SA Alliance to End Homelessness*** worked with the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness to develop the Advance to Zero (AtoZ) Campaign. Monthly homelessness statistics for tracking progress are published on the ***Adelaide Zero Project Dashboard***.
SA	Port Adelaide Enfield	2024	The ***Adelaide North West Homelessness Alliance***, together with the South Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (SAAEH) and the ***City of Port Adelaide Enfield*** (PAE), are excited ***to announce the launch*** of a second Zero Project in South Australia: the ***Port Adelaide Enfield Zero Project***.
WA	Perth Zero	2019	50 Lives 50 Homes (the WA Housing First program) transitioned into the WA Zero Project in around 2019, rolled out by WA Alliance to End Homelessness using Advance to Zero methodology, with the aim to end rough sleeping in Perth and the regions by 2025. The Zero Project is also responsible for the Housing First coordination in WA. ***Ruah is a dedicated partner organisation***. Progress is tracked on their ***monthly dashboard***.
WA	Fremantle	2021	Perth was deemed too large a geographical area and ***broken down to Fremantle and other locations***.
WA	Geraldton	2021	By December 2023, Geraldton became the third Australian community to achieve a measurable reduction in street homelessness as part of the Advance to Zero campaign, a national initiative of more than 30 communities working to address homelessness. ***See press release***. And ***website***.
WA	Mandurah	2021	Ruah's Zero Project has been funded under the State Government's Housing First Homelessness Initiative (HFHI) to undertake a systems coordination role to support the Zero communities in WA. ***Mandurah*** is one of these.

WA	Bundbury	2021	Bundbury was selected for a ***Connections Week event*** as it is one of the targeted communities that will receive additional resources from the State Government's Housing First Homelessness Initiative (HFHI).
WA	Rockingham	2021	The City of Rockingham and City of Kwinana are ***MOU partners represented on the Advance to Zero Project*** in both the Grassroots Working Group and the Rockingham, Kwinana, Mandurah Improvement Team. Both groups are coordinated and facilitated by Ruah Community Services, supported by all agencies represented.
WA	Kwinana	2021	The Rockingham, Mandurah, Kwinana Improvement team is a strategic working group aimed to develop innovative and collaborative responses to address gaps or needs identified by the grass roots working group.
Vic	Port Phillip	2019	The first Zero project in Victoria, led by the City of Port Phillip and Launch Housing to achieve Functional Zero by Dec 2024. Achieved By Name List status in Sep 2020. Progress shown ***here***.
Vic	Melbourne	2020	Aims to end rough sleeping in Melbourne by 2030. Melbourne Service Coordination Project (MSCP) is convened through Homes Melbourne and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The MSCP project brings together 17 agencies to deliver coordinated tailored support and housing for people sleeping rough in the City of Melbourne. Progress shown ***here***.
Vic	Frankston	2021	Initiative of the ***Frankston City Strategic Housing and Homelessness Alliance*** and is led by Frankston City Council and Launch Housing. Progress shown ***here***.
Vic	Stonnington	2021	The project is funded by the City of Stonnington which, with Launch Housing, has brought together local partners such as Better Health Network, Alfred Health, Uniting Care, Housing First and the Avalon Centre. Progress shown ***here***.
Vic	Dandenong	2022	In July 2022, the City of Greater Dandenong and Launch Housing launched Dandenong Zero. Progress shown ***here***.
Vic	Geelong	2022	Geelong Zero was officially launched on 14 October 2022 to reduce homelessness in central Geelong and end rough sleeping by 2025, and is a community-led initiative supported by Neami National.
Vic	Yarra	2023	Led by Yarra Council and Launch Housing. Progress shown ***here***.

Vic	Merri-bek	2024	Merri-bek Zero is spearheaded by VincentCare and the Merri-bek Council, with essential support from local service organisations including Merri Outreach Support Service, Hope Street Youth Refuge, Bolton Clark HPP, and Launch Housing.
Qld	Brisbane	2022	Brisbane Alliance to End Homelessness has built on the Brisbane 500 Lives 500 Homes campaign (2014-17) with the Brisbane Zero Campaign, formally launched in 2022 to end rough sleeping in Brisbane by 2032, and guided by a Housing First approach. The ***interactive dashboard*** utilises survey data from the Vulnerability Index Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT)
Qld	Gold Coast Zero	2022	Campaign is led by the ***Gold Coast Homelessness Network*** – uses the VI -SPDAT shared assessment tool.
Qld	Logan Zero	2022	Led by Logan's YFS the Logan Zero aims to make the experience of rough sleeping homelessness in Logan LGA rare, brief, and non-recurring by achieving functional zero rough sleeping by the year 2025. Project ***dashboard*** uses real time data.
NSW	Sydney Zero	2023	NSW End Street Sleeping Collaboration was established in 2019 with a mission to end rough sleeping in NSW and ***Sydney Zero*** was launched in 2023 in partnership with the City of Sydney, the Dpt of Communities and Justice and homelessness services. BNLs and case coordination are the key to the projects success.
NSW	Northern Rivers Zero	2024	According to the latest street count figures, the total number of people sleeping rough in the Northern Rivers has increased more than 50% from 309 to 710 in the past three years. To address this crisis, a range of stakeholders from the homelessness, housing, health and community sectors, both Government and non-Government, have come together to create a collaborative impact project with the goal of ending rough sleeping in the Northern Rivers. This project – ***Northern Rivers Zero*** – will use local knowledge, combined with internationally proven "Advance to Zero" methodology to ensure rough sleeping becomes rare, brief and non-reoccurring in the Northern Rivers.

***Note: to our knowledge there are no Advance to Zero Projects in NT, ACT and Tasmania (there is a Greater Hobart Homelessness Alliance)**