



Homelessness in Australia: it does not have to exist

Homelessness is accepted as an unfortunate social fact in Australia. The questions we ask are about how to reduce homelessness? Or how to better serve those who are homeless? The question of why we have over 122,000ⁱ homeless people in the country is not asked enough. It is an important question to ask, because while a lack of housing is certainly a huge contributing factor, it is not the only cause, nor is it the only solution. Homelessness is about poverty, chronic disadvantage, and social and policy systems that are not working.

Homelessness in Australia has ebbed and flowed from the policy agenda. In the late 1980s, youth homelessness became a national issue with the 'Burdekin Report'ⁱⁱ exposing the scale of the issue. Kevin Rudd put homelessness back on the Federal agenda in his first term as Prime Minister when he initiated Australia's first ever White Paper on homelessnessⁱⁱⁱ. Rudd also committed to halving homelessness by 2020. This was a lofty goal that was not achieved: but that was because of a lack of ongoing political will rather than the issue being too complex to solve.

In the almost 20 years since Rudd's White Paper, homelessness has fallen out of the limelight as the country has been faced with the sharpened reality of a housing crisis. Those who are homeless have received less policy attention as policy makers have focused their attention to housing insecurity. Housing insecurity is relevant to homelessness in that increasing people's housing security stems the number of people entering homelessness. However, addressing housing insecurity is not the same as addressing homelessness.

The Australian Homeless Population

Characteristic	Estimated figure
Total population experiencing homelessness	122,494 people
Men and boys	About 56%
Women and girls	About 44%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people	About 17–20%
Children and young people	Around one-quarter
People aged 55 and over	Around one in five
People sleeping rough	7,636 people
People in severely crowded dwellings	53,868 people
People in supported accommodation	24,291 people
People staying temporarily with other households	19,392 people
People in boarding houses	17,304 people

Data from Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census

Housing First is necessary, but it is not the entire solution

Housing First is a widely accepted approach to homelessness that recognises that while there are many contributing factors to someone becoming homeless, none of them can be solved until a person first has housing. The lack of housing stock means that the homelessness service system is currently congested as there is little movement through crisis and short-term accommodation services. This means that approximately 350 people are turned away from homelessness services every day^{iv}, and many do not even bother.

Housing is a necessary part of the solution, but people do not become homeless without reason. Homelessness is inextricably linked to poverty, family breakdown, educational disadvantage, trauma, mental health issues, substance abuse, and crime.

Crime, drugs, and mental illness: what is the link with homelessness?

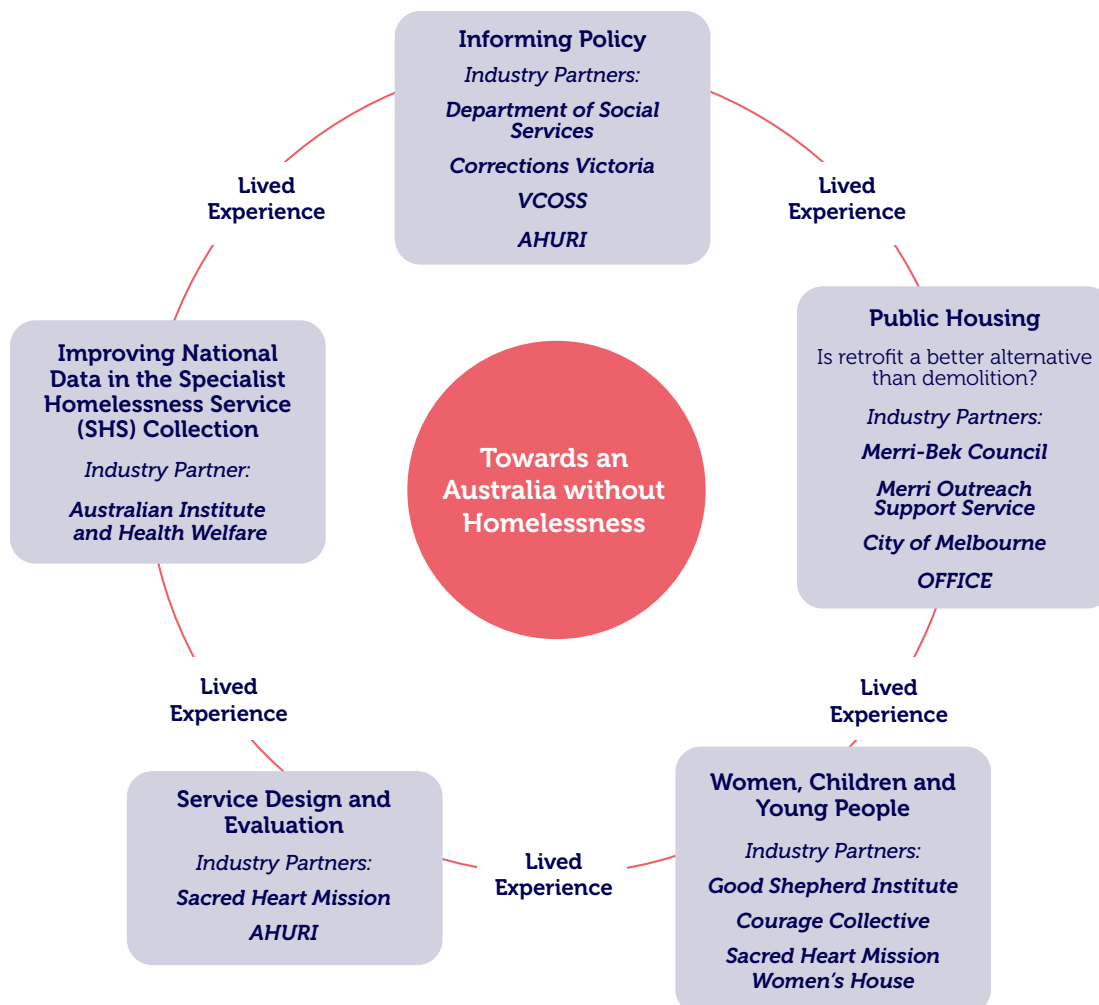
While there are high rates of substance abuse, crime and mental health issues among those who are homeless, none are predictive of homelessness and many who are homeless experience none of these. Recent research has shown that while almost half the population of people accessing Homelessness Services have a mental health issue, this factor alone is not discriminatory of a person's pattern of service use^v. Poverty and crime are related, and a criminal record or substance use problem are barriers to both housing and employment. But these are all issues that arise *after* significant childhood disadvantage. *Addressing* homelessness requires housing and service system response. *Preventing* homelessness requires supporting families, children and young people at the earliest signs of hardship.

The role of research and advocacy

Homelessness is a multi-factored social issue, but it is not especially complex to solve. It requires investment and whole of society responses. Data collection is important, so too is lived experience, practice wisdom and research translation. The homelessness sector is strong and undertaking excellent service provision and advocacy. Our work at the Social Equity Research Centre involves collaborating with industry partners to improve data quality and reporting, provide policy advice, propose housing solutions, highlight vulnerable groups, and support service design and evaluation. This is always embedded with lived experience.

If you are interested in hearing more about this or connecting with one of our research team, please contact: serc@rmit.edu.au

Social Equity Research Centre Projects working to address homelessness



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i Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021. [Estimating Homelessness: Census](#).
ii HREOC 1989. *Our Homeless Children: Report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children*.
iii Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra
iv Homelessness Taskforce 2008. *The Road Home*. Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs: Canberra.
v AIHW (2025) [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024–25](#), AIHW, Australian Government.
vi Kavaarpoo, G., and Daley, K. 2026. *Rethinking Support Allocation: Mental Health and Patterns of Homelessness Support Utilisation*. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*.