

Guide one

AN OVERVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS

A well-developed understanding of the causes and impacts of homelessness underpins the delivery of housing-focused support. Assisting individuals and households to access and sustain housing, requires workers to address a broad range of personal and structural issues that have contributed to housing crisis and homelessness. An overview of homelessness is designed to provide a brief summary of homelessness in Australia to frame the activities and interventions involved in delivering housing-focused support.

Who is homeless?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics says people are homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

In order to work out how many people are homeless, the ABS count people who are living somewhere temporarily, in a boarding house, living in supported homelessness accommodation, sleeping out (or in improvised dwellings or tents) and living in 'severely' overcrowded dwellings.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) also acknowledges Aboriginal Australians' experience of spiritual homelessness, where people have been separated or removed from their traditional land and disconnected from their cultural networks due to colonisation. Refugees may also experience spiritual homelessness as a result of displacement and lack of connection to community.

How big is the problem?

An estimated 105,000 Australians were recorded as homeless on census night in 2011. They include:

- Families with children
- Young people
- Older people
- Single adults
- People with disabilities
- People in remote, regional and rural areas
- People in urban neighbourhoods.

Why do people become homeless?

Homelessness is not a choice. People can become homeless as a result of:

- Long-term financial disadvantage
- A history of trauma (physical and sexual abuse and/or neglect or other traumatic events)
- A financial crisis (unemployment, significant bills or debt)
- Family violence
- A personal or family crisis (illness, divorce, family breakdown)
- Mental illness
- Substance misuse
- Discrimination

Most often, homelessness is caused by a subtle interaction of a number of these things. Several

structural factors have contributed to the steady increase in homelessness over time:

- Housing is less affordable in Australia than ever before for low income earners
- Inadequate supply of housing across all tenure types
- Incomes from employment and government benefits and pensions have not kept pace with housing costs
- The community supports that households need in order to remain well and stable are under-resourced, harder to access and do not always focus on keeping people housed.

What are the impacts of homelessness?

Homelessness can have an impact on people in a number of ways. Research shows that homelessness can seriously and adversely affect:

- Mental health
- Physical health and physical safety
- Education and employment
- Personal safety
- Substance use.

These impacts can prolong homelessness and make resettlement harder. In addition, the longer homelessness persists, the more acute these issues become.

The impact of trauma

There is a growing body of evidence about the links between trauma and long-term homelessness. The Trauma and Homelessness Initiative (THI) found that those with a history of trauma prior to homelessness were likely to experience homelessness for a longer duration. These consumers require a specialized practice response and the THI produced an excellent worker guidebook. In addition, trauma can be linked to increased substance misuse, poor mental health outcomes, and a person's interpersonal skills.

Homelessness can also cause trauma. Research has increasingly found that children and families who experience homelessness have likely experienced traumatic events, or are exposed to trauma as a result of homelessness. This can include loss of social connection (friends, family, social networks), displacement and issues with parental attachment due to a caregiver's experience of trauma. As such, it is essential for workers to be aware of and responding early to trauma, to minimize long-term issues.



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011. *A profile of homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. Cat. no. IHW 43. Canberra: AIHW.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2011*, Australian Government, Canberra.
- Cash, R., O'Donnell, M., Varker, T., Armstrong, R., Di Censo, L., Zanatta, P., Murnane, A., Brophy, L., & Phelps, A. (2014). *Worker Guidebook*. Prepared by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission, Mind Australia, Inner South Community Health and VincentCare Victoria
- O'Donnell, M., Varker, T., Cash, R., Armstrong, R., Di Censo, L., Zanatta, P., Murnane, A., Brophy, L., & Phelps, A. (2014). *The Trauma and Homelessness Initiative*. Report prepared by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission, Mind Australia, Inner South Community Health and VincentCare Victoria.



ABOUT THE HOUSING-FOCUSED SUPPORT PRACTICE GUIDES

The guides to providing housing-focused support were developed by the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) to assist workers in the specialist homelessness sector (SHS) gain and maintain housing for consumers. They articulate good worker practice in providing housing-focused support to consumers, and are informed by a literature review, focus groups and consultations with consumers and advanced practitioners. The development of these guides was made possible by a grant from the Mercy Foundation. This guide is the first in the series of five.

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