

## Homelessness in the ACT

Homelessness is a real and growing challenge for the ACT.

There is a common perception that homelessness primarily affects older, single men and is caused by alcoholism.<sup>i</sup> In reality, any person can find themselves homeless. Women and children escaping family violence, young people who cannot live at home, and anyone earning a low income but struggling to pay high private rental prices are among those most at risk. This includes families as well as single people.<sup>ii</sup>

Homelessness includes the following:

- **Primary homelessness** means rough sleeping, sleeping in a car, or sleeping in improvised dwellings.
- **Secondary homelessness** involves having no permanent home and staying temporarily with friends, family or other people - until the welcome wears out. Sometimes this is called couch surfing. People are also considered secondary homeless if they are staying in emergency accommodation.
- **Tertiary homelessness** is living in accommodation that is well beyond the minimum acceptable standard. It can include, for example, living in a poor quality boarding house with no legal security of tenure.<sup>iii</sup>
- **Severe overcrowding** is also considered a form of homelessness.<sup>iv</sup>

All of these forms of homelessness are extreme experiences. They are accompanied by deteriorating mental and physical health, poverty, and vulnerability to violence. It is not uncommon for people to cycle between primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness, for example staying with other people for a couple of nights then sleeping rough when there is nowhere left to go.

ACT Shelter's view is that counts of homeless people tend to underestimate the real situation. This is because it is very difficult to identify and enumerate this population. However, the most reliable data we have tells us that the problem is real and growing.

In the ACT in 2011 approximately 1,785 people are homeless on any given night – that equates to one in 40 ACT residents. This is an increase on previous data (in 2006 the figure was 1,360<sup>vii</sup>).

The people identified as homeless in the ACT are in the following situations:

- living in severely crowded dwellings – 280
- in other temporary lodging – 5
- staying in boarding houses – 50
- staying temporarily with other households – 316
- in supported or emergency accommodation for the homeless – 1105
- in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out – 29<sup>vii</sup>

Although this suggests a quite small number of people were sleeping rough it is important to remember that this is the most difficult group to identify and count because they are often out of sight.

More than half of all people who seek emergency accommodation each night are turned away because services are at full capacity.<sup>viii</sup> In addition there is simply not enough housing available that is affordable, permanent, safe and secure: social housing is limited and private rental in the ACT is expensive and difficult to access for people with experiences of homelessness.

So what can be done to assist the reduction of homelessness in the ACT?

- The provision of affordable, safe and permanent housing that offers secure tenure is essential to resolving homelessness.
- Expanding social housing: including public housing, to a minimum of 10 per cent of total housing stock in the ACT, and the further development of community housing.
- Further investment in specialist housing models that offer permanent accommodation with personalised support to people leaving homelessness.
- There is an urgent need to invest in homelessness crisis accommodation so that people are not turned away from the assistance they require.
- Adoption of a preventative approach that assists people at risk to maintain tenancies.
- The broader community accepting that homelessness is not just a problem for housing services: every agency with which people come into daily contact can play a role in identifying when someone is homeless or at risk, and helping them to consider options and find solutions. This includes schools, GPs and other health professionals, and all government agencies.

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<sup>i</sup> Batterham D, Hollows, A and Kolar, V (2011) *Attitudes to Homelessness in Australia* Australia Social Policy Journal No 10

<sup>ii</sup> Homelessness Australia (2013) *Homelessness and Women, Homelessness and Young People, Homelessness and Families*, [<http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/fact-sheets>]

<sup>iii</sup> Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D (2008) *Counting the Homeless 2006*, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Catalogue No. 2050.0

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (August 2011) *Position Paper - ABS Review of Counting the Homeless Methodology* 2050.0.55.002

<sup>v</sup> Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D (2008) *Counting the Homeless 2006*, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Catalogue No. 2050.0

<sup>vi</sup> A new method of counting homelessness in the 2011 Census. Had the 2006 methodology been used in 2011, the increase in numbers between 2006 and 2011 would most likely have been even greater.

<sup>vii</sup> (ABS Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness 2049.0 2011, p16)

# Fact Sheet

<sup>viii</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011 People turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation 2010-2011 cat no HOU 260 p4