HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA

FACT SHEET

**Rough sleepers**

In Australia people who are counted as homeless include those who have no accommodation or shelter at all and may be sleeping in streets, parks, in squats (derelict properties) or in cars (often referred to as ‘rough sleepers’). The people in this situation form a relatively small proportion of the total number of people who are counted as homeless in Australia. In the most recent census by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) this group of homeless people totalled 6,813 (or 6% of the total number of people counted as homeless).

**People counted as homeless in Australia**

The total number of people counted as homeless in the 2011 Australian Census was 105,237. This represents 49 people out of every 10,000 people in the population (or 0.5% of the Australian population).

People classified as homeless in the ABS census of 2011 were:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Rough sleepers (as described above) | 6 813 |
| Staying in supported accommodation services | 21 258 |
| Staying temporarily with other households | 17 369 |
| Living in boarding houses | 17 721 |
| Living in severely overcrowded dwellings | 41 390 |
| In other temporary lodgings | 686 |
| Total | 105 237 |

**Causes of homelessness**

Poverty and unaffordable housing is the primary reason that people become homeless. Australia has a shortage of affordable housing, especially in capital cities.

The availability of permanent affordable housing solves homelessness for the majority of individuals and families who find themselves homeless. However, there is a smaller number of homeless people who have additional support needs due to illness or disability. As well as needing affordable housing, they may also need ongoing health and other community support to help end their homelessness.

**Poverty**

People who are unemployed and receive income support from the Commonwealth Government, through Centrelink, have to live on $35 a day. There is a shortage of housing options for people on such limited incomes.

People with serious illness or disability are often unable to work and live for long periods on limited income support such as the disability pension.

**Chronic homelessness**

It is estimated that perhaps about 20% of people counted as homeless may be experiencing ‘chronic homelessness’. Chronic homelessness means that people have been homeless for 6 months or longer or they have had multiple episodes of homelessness over a 1-year period. People who experience chronic homelessness often have disabilities, including mental illness and brain injury.

**Women and homelessness**

Many women who are counted as homeless have become homeless because of domestic violence. This means that their home is an unsafe place for them to remain because a family member has abused or threatened to abuse them. They need to seek assistance from either a women’s refuge or other safe place to live.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and homelessness**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly over-represented in Australia’s homeless population. This is a tragic situation which has been created through past public policy that separated families as well as generational unemployment, poverty and inadequate and over-crowded housing.

**Common myths about homelessness**

No one ever chooses to be homeless, although this is a common misconception in the community. However, some people who are homeless for long periods do adapt to being homeless. Being homeless is unsafe and over 50% of homeless rough sleepers have reported being the victim of violence and assault.

Another myth about homelessness is that most people who are homeless are drug addicts or alcoholics. The majority of homeless people are not. However, they are over-represented in the population of people counted as homeless. There is also some evidence that the experience of homelessness is so traumatising that some people become addicted to substances after becoming homeless.

**Ending homelessness in Australia**

Although offering food and short term shelter to homeless people are well meant and often needed types of assistance, on their own they won’t end homelessness in our nation. Ensuring an adequate supply of affordable and public housing, appropriate community support services and job opportunities are the long term answer to ending homelessness.

**More information about homelessness in Australia:**

[www.mercyfoundation.com.au](http://www.mercyfoundation.com.au)

<http://www.abc.net.au/interactives/homeless/>

[www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au](http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au)

<http://yfoundations.org.au>

[www.shelter.org.au](http://www.shelter.org.au)

