MYTHS AND FACTS

HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA

**myth 1: people choose to be homeless.**

**fact 1:**

* People do *not* choose to be homeless.
* Homelessness is often the result of many inter-connected factors. Some of these are family breakdown, abuse, trauma, disability, addictions, illness and poverty.
* Around 15 – 20% of the homeless population experience chronic homelessness. A person experiences chronic homelessness if they have been homeless for 6 months or more, or experienced multiple episodes of homelessness over 12 months or more. People who are chronically homeless often have complex needs, such as a developmental disability, traumatic brain injury, serious physical health problems, history of abuse or trauma, mental illness or disorder, psychiatric disability or addictions.
* Some people who become chronically homeless may ‘adapt’ to homelessness and may appear to be making a choice to remain homeless. This is very different to ‘choosing’ to be homeless.
* Some people may remain homeless because they are waiting to access affordable housing.
* Homelessness can be very unsafe and many people who experience chronic homelessness are vulnerable. It is important to acknowledge the stress and difficulties inherent in becoming and remaining homeless.

**myth 2: homelessness cannot be solved**

**fact 2:**

* Homelessness can be solved. For most people, affordable, safe, appropriate and long term housing solves homelessness
* Some people may require ongoing support services to help them stay in housing, particularly people who have experienced chronic homelessness. Support services may include the help of a case manager or counsellor, help in building living skills, budgeting skills, assistance with integrating into the local community, linking up with training or employment services and making connections with health care providers.
* In most cases, permanent, supportive housing solves chronic homelessness.

**myth 3: all homeless people live on the streets or in parks.**

**fact 3:**

* 105,237 people are homeless on any given night in Australia. Of that total, 6% are ‘rough sleepers’ (ie sleeping in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out).[[1]](#endnote-1)
* The majority of people who become homeless remain so for short periods. In practice, most long-term homeless people *move frequently* from one form of temporary accommodation to another, often spending occasional nights in the rough sleeping population.[[2]](#endnote-2)
* Most of the increase in homelessness between 2006 and 2011 was reflected in people living in severely crowded dwellings, up from 31,531 in 2006 to 41,390 in 2011

**myth 4: we have adequate income support in Australia, so no one should be homeless.**

**fact 4:**

* There is not enough affordable housing in Australia, especially in the major capital cities.
* Private rental housing is often beyond the budget for people reliant on Government income support such as Newstart or the Disability Support Pension.

**myth 5: all homeless people have a mental illness.**

**fact 5:**

* Mental illness, such as schizophrenia, tends to first occur when people are young, at a stage when people are completing education or starting a career. Mental illness can seriously disrupt this process and lead to unstable job and housing careers. This can then lead to a lifetime of living in poverty.
* The majority of mentally ill people live in their own homes in the community and usually receive support from families and community health services.
* A recent study has shown that only 30% of homeless respondents had mental health problems prior to becoming homeless.
* There is evidence to suggest that being homeless impacts badly on people’s mental health, with 53% of homeless people in a recent study reporting that they developed mental health problems *after* *becoming homeless.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

**myth 6: the vast majority of homeless people are men.**

**fact 6:**

* Census night 2011: the counted homeless were 56% men and 44% women.[[4]](#endnote-4)
* Women are less likely to sleep rough and their homelessness is less visible.

**myth 7: homelessness only occurs in cities.**

**fact 7:**

* Homelessness is over represented in regional, rural and remote areas. Almost 70% of Australia’s population lives in major cities, yet only 58% of the total homeless population was counted in major cities. (Of the 105,234 people counted as homeless on Census night, 60,541 were counted in cities and 44,693 were counted outside of cities)[[5]](#endnote-5).
* Most rough sleeping occurs outside of major cities. Only 39% of people counted as rough sleepers were counted in major cities and 61% were counted outside of cities. Given that 70% of Australia’s population lives in major cities, rough sleepers are over-represented in regional, rural and remote areas.

**myth 8: there will always be homeless people and it is nonsense to make statements about ending homelessness.**

**fact 8:**

* As a community, we can agree to put an end to chronic homelessness. It is unacceptable in a developed and wealthy nation such as Australia.
* Britain successfully reduced its rough sleeping population by two thirds within a few years – once the Blair Government put in place initiatives to solve that type of homelessness.
* Many cities in North America have made plans and commitment to end homelessness locally. Already many of those cities have increased affordable housing and increased support services and this has resulted in reductions in homelessness.[[6]](#endnote-6)

**myth 9: homeless people are just lazy and don’t want to get a job.**

**fact 9:**

* It is really difficult to apply for jobs and present well once you become homeless. Stable housing is usually required before people can re-join the workforce.

**myth 10: all homeless people are alcoholics.**

**fact 10:**

* Some homeless people have addictions to drugs and/or alcohol. They are not the majority. Some people begin using or consuming drugs or alcohol after they have become homeless.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**myth 11: why bother solving homelessness?**

**fact 11:**

* Chronic homelessness is a social injustice as well as being economically irresponsible.
* It costs significant amounts to sustain someone in a state of chronic homelessness. Use of crisis services, emergency departments, acute hospital admissions, mental health crisis care, detoxification centres as well as police responses, ambulances, court and prison costs all add to the total cost and tragedy of chronic homelessness.
* Research has shown that it can cost the same amount or less to provide people with suitable housing and good support to sustain that housing as it does to provide crisis services (such as those noted above).[[8]](#endnote-8)

**myth 12: if a young person gets kicked out of home it is always their fault and they deserve to be homeless.**

**fact 12:**

* Many teenagers experiencing homelessness have left their homes for a range of reasons. These sometimes include family breakdown or violence.

**myth 13: people experiencing homelessness remain homeless for years.**

**fact 13:**

* The majority of people who become homeless experience it quite briefly. It is estimated that only 15 – 25% of homeless people are long term (or chronically) homeless.

**myth 14: homelessness can never happen to me.**

**fact 14:**

* No one is immune from potentially becoming homeless. Studies have shown that just a few unfortunate events can turn someone’s life around completely. It may be the loss of a partner, an unexpected expense or an eviction at short notice.

**myth 15: families don’t become homeless.**

**fact 15:**

* Families *do* become homeless, as a result of loss of job, low income, eviction on short notice, unaffordable living expenses and housing.

**myth 16: No older people are homeless.**

**fact 16:**

* Recent reports show an increase in older people who are becoming homeless, specifically there has been an increase of older women seeking accommodation.
* It is difficult for older people to sustain payment in a private rental market, especially when the pension amount they receive is not enough to cover this expenditure.[[9]](#endnote-9)

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Media Release 105,000 people homeless on Census night 2011. www.abs.gov.au [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Chamberlain, C., Johnson, G. & Theobald, J. 2007, *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the challenge*, Centre for Applied Social Research, RMTT University, p.14 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Chamberlain, C., Johnson, G. & Theobald, J. 2007, *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the challenge*, Centre for Applied Social Research, RMTT University, p.6 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ABS Estimating Homelessness 2011 Summary of Findings [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ABS Estimating Homelessness2011 Remoteness by State and Territory of usual residence 2011; Cloke P.J., Milbourne P. & Widdowfield, R. 2010, Homelessness Australia, , *Rural and Remote Homelessness*, [www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au](http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) 2010, *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness :: 2010,* [*http://www.ich.gov/PDF/FactSheetChronicHomelessness.pdf*](http://www.ich.gov/PDF/FactSheetChronicHomelessness.pdf) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Chamberlain, C., Johnson, G. & Theobald, J. 2007, *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the challenge*, Centre for Applied Social Research, RMTT University [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Reynolds, F. 2008, *Churchill Fellowship Report*, The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia, p.8 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. McFerran, L. 2010, *It could be you: female, single, older and homeless*, collaborative project: Homelessness NSW, Older Women’s Network NSW, St Vincent de Paul Society, UNSW [↑](#endnote-ref-9)