

UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS: A GUIDE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

What is homelessness?

Homelessness is a contested term in Australia (and globally). There is no one universally accepted definition (Homelessness Australia 2023). Arguably the most widely used definition is that used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2012):

'When a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered 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.*

The ABS definition of homelessness is informed by an understanding of homelessness as 'home'lessness, not rooflessness. It emphasises the core elements of 'home' in Anglo American and European interpretations... a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. Homelessness is therefore a lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home'.

The definition has been constructed from a conceptual framework centred around the following elements:

- *Adequacy of the dwelling;*
- *Security of tenure in the dwelling; and*
- *Control of, and access to, space for social relations.'*

Other definitions offer typologies of homelessness: primary homelessness (sleeping rough or in an improvised dwelling), secondary homelessness (living in/moving between temporary accommodation) and tertiary homelessness (living in accommodation that does not meet minimum community standards, i.e. boarding house or severely overcrowded dwellings).

Homelessness is more than being without shelter, proven in the Australian context by the fact that we talk about people *experiencing* homelessness or *at risk of* homelessness, i.e. someone's housing is under pressure for a range of reasons putting tenancy sustainability and/or their safety at risk.

An important starting point in community efforts to end homelessness is finding a shared definition of homelessness. From this agreed position, communities can set out to understand the local face of homelessness and set shared aspirations and approaches around preventing and ending it.

What are the drivers of homelessness?

There are a number of drivers of homelessness (and risk of homelessness). Drivers are fundamentally structural and relate to the ways our social and economic systems are structured and operate. Personal factors and (changing) circumstances also contribute to risk or magnify the situation people face in terms of their safety, housing or support needs.

The biggest drivers of homelessness in Australia are:

- poverty and unemployment (manifest as financial insecurity);
- domestic and family violence, particularly among women and First Nations women and children; and
- unaffordable housing.

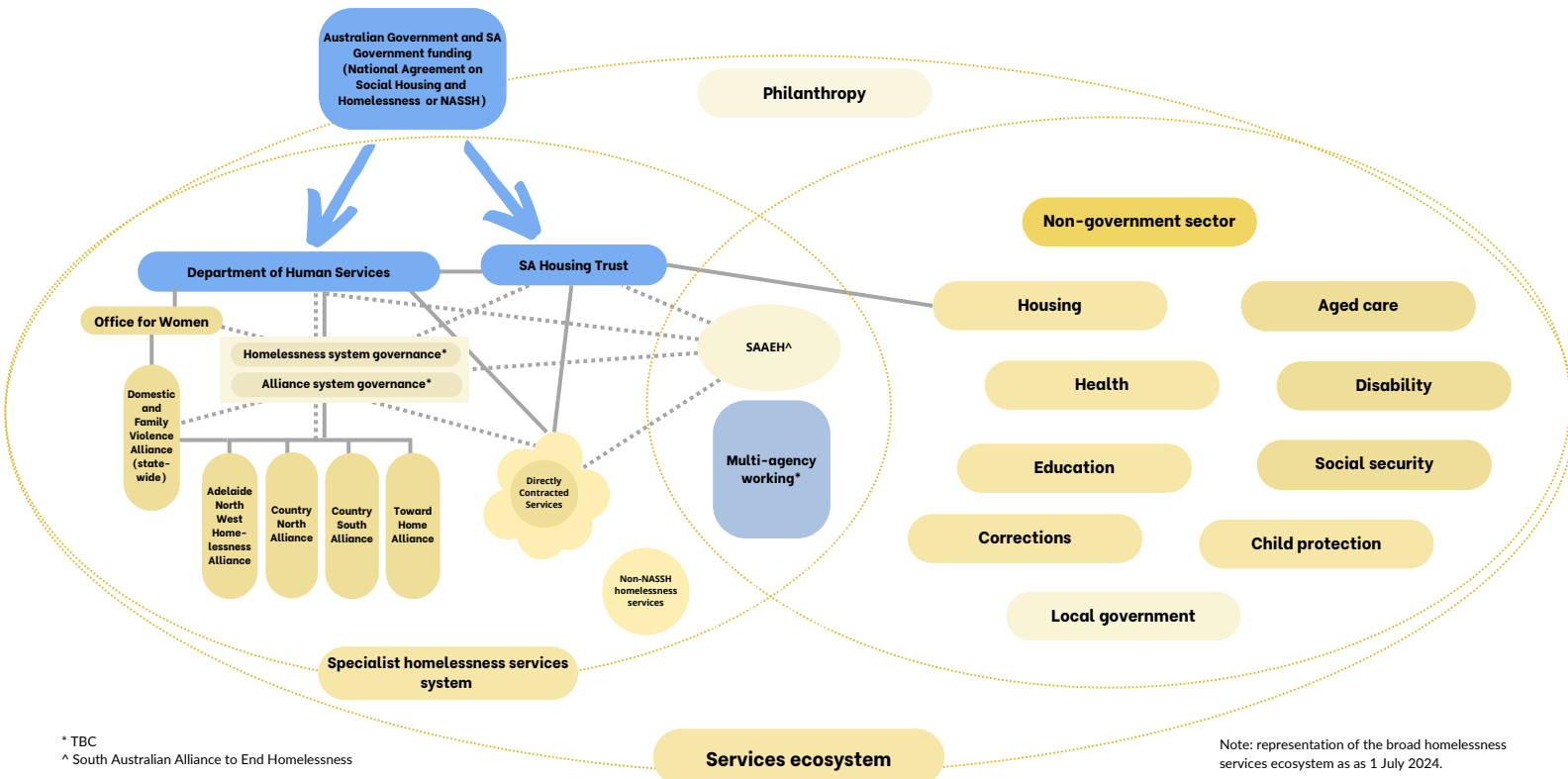
High housing costs, poverty and unemployment impact on people’s ability to afford their basic needs and to buffer against crises.

Other risk factors for homelessness include: family breakdown; overcrowding, especially among First Nations kinship groups; unstable home/living environments and not feeling safe at home; sudden changes in life circumstances (e.g. death of a partner, sudden job loss); violence and abuse, trauma, intergenerational trauma, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect; physical and mental health challenges, disability, chronic health conditions; substance misuse, alcohol and other drugs dependence or addiction and risky behaviour; discrimination on the basis of gender, race, age, sexual orientation and disability; incarceration and contact with state institutions (prison, juvenile justice, out-of-home care, health facilities); gambling; and history of parental/family/carer homelessness, mental health and misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

The South Australian homelessness services landscape

SA’s homelessness landscape was reformed from 2020. Five homelessness alliances were established as the key vehicles for delivering government-funded homelessness services, alongside several directly contracted services. Other agencies across the human services (broadly defined) also deliver services to people experiencing and at risk of homelessness. Work is ongoing to secure robust connections across systems in order to ensure best-for-client outcomes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Further change occurred in the homelessness services ecosystem in mid 2024, when specialist homelessness services moved to the Department for Human services from the SA Housing Trust. The diagram below provides an indication of how the homelessness services landscape looks at 1 July 2024 and is subject to change/review.



* TBC
^ South Australian Alliance to End Homelessness

Note: representation of the broad homelessness services ecosystem as of 1 July 2024.

How and where might local governments encounter homelessness?

Homelessness can have a very visible presence in communities. It can also be hidden.

Council staff and elected members can and do encounter homelessness in many places. The scale of the current housing crisis means that councils are seeing more people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in places and spaces across their jurisdictions.

Council staff encounter people experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness on the street, in parks and reserves, in car parks and caravan parks, at neighbourhood and recreation centres and in libraries – any place where people might find shelter, refuge or the services they need (e.g. food, showers, social interaction, wifi). They may also be places where they feel relatively safe or can be anonymous or unobvious, as some people want; or obvious and included in community life, as others want.

Some people experiencing homelessness are sleeping rough, living on the streets, in shop or other doorways or alcoves, sleeping out in parks, camping near waterways or, sometimes, seeking shelter in industrial bins. Some people sleeping rough are highly visible; others hide away. Rough sleeping is more common in metropolitan areas and especially inner city locations. People sleeping rough are also found in rural and regional communities, often in secluded places.

No council should ever assume they do not have people sleeping rough within their community.

Most people experiencing homelessness in Australia are hidden to some extent, or completely, from public view. Council staff may or may not see many of the people experiencing homelessness or at serious risk of homelessness in their communities.

Alongside the hundreds of people in crisis or temporary accommodation, hotels/motels or other supported accommodation services for the homeless within SA communities, are women and children who are homeless because their home is not safe. Other individuals or families may be living in inappropriate accommodation due to overcrowding. Sometimes homelessness comes to council attention via residents raising neighbourhood issues, in the conversations people have with council staff at community facilities and at council-run social programs or groups, or, in more extreme cases, because of hoarding or environmental neglect (squalor).

How can local government help?

Fact sheet 2: *Ending homelessness: Roles for local government* details some of the ways in which local councils can work to end homelessness within their communities. Other fact sheets in the toolkit provide examples of ways of working and other approaches.

'On Census night in 2021 122,494 people were estimated to be experiencing homelessness in Australia, including 7,428 people in South Australia.'
(ABS 2023)

Some key data

Experiencing homelessness



122,494 people nationally
56% male, 44% female

7,428 people in SA
53% male, 47% female



Source: ABS 2023

Rough sleeping



7,636 people nationally
6.2% of all homeless people
66% male, 34% female

323 people in SA
70% male, 30% female



Source: ABS 2023

Key demographics

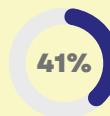


In South Australia:
19% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples
18% aged 12 and under (1,345 children)
25% aged 12-24 years (1,906 youth)
13% aged 55 and over (977 older people)
6% need for assistance with core activities

Source: ABS 2023

People presenting to Specialist Homelessness Services

Male



In South Australia:
19,400 clients (7% of clients nationally)
49% homeless at presentation
26% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples
17% received accommodation

Top three reasons for presentation to SHS:

- Housing crisis (56%)
- Family and domestic violence (25%)
- Inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions (20%)

Female



Source: AIHW SHS collection 2022-23 (AIHW 2024a, 2024b)

Relevant resources (see also References)

Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) (2023) *advance to zero*.
Pearson, D. (2023) *Homelessness is solvable: How we can end it in Australia*, Winston Churchill Fellow research report.
SA Housing Authority (2020) *Future Directions for Homelessness, South Australia's Homelessness Alliance*.

References for fact sheet 1

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) *Estimating Homelessness: Census* (including data tables).
Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) *4922.0 - Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness*.
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024a) *Specialist homelessness services 2022-23: South Australia* (web report, state and territory summary).
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024b) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022-23* (web report, Cat. no: HOU 333).
Homelessness Australia (2023) *About Homelessness*.

About *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government*

This fact sheet is one in a suite which together makes up *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government*. *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government* has been funded by the LGA South Australia as a practical resource for councils across South Australia to refer to in supporting community and council efforts to end homelessness.

The toolkit has been developed in consultation with the LGA, councils and stakeholders advancing end homelessness efforts in SA, nationally and beyond. The fact sheets synthesise what we know from the ever evolving academic and practice evidence about homelessness and how we can end it. The toolkit has been designed with both regional and metropolitan councils in mind. The fact sheets are sensitive to the different contexts in which councils operate, the ways in which homelessness presents for people and within communities and knowing that councils and communities are all at different stages in their ending homelessness journeys.

Other fact sheets in *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government*

Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government comprises nine fact sheets that work together to provide a practical guide for councils interested in or working towards ending homelessness with their communities.

- Fact sheet 1: Understanding homelessness: A guide for local government
- Fact sheet 2: Ending homelessness: Why and how?
- Fact sheet 3: Partnering in efforts to end homelessness: Making and having collective impact
- Fact sheet 4: Ending homelessness brightspots
- Fact sheet 5: Ending homelessness: Culturally safe practices
- Fact sheet 6: Local governments, advocacy and ending homelessness
- Fact sheet 7: Local government, disaster resilience and homelessness
- Fact sheet 8: The role of local government in preventing homelessness
- Fact sheet 9: An ending homelessness glossary

This project has been supported by the Local Government Research and Development Scheme administered by the LGA South Australia.

<https://doi.org/10.25957/gnky-sc45>