

## Homeless numbers will keep rising until governments change course on housing

Written by Gavin Wood, Emeritus Professor of Housing and Housing Studies, RMIT University

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Ten years ago the Australian government launched a National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness ( [NPAH](#) ). It injected A\$800 million into homelessness services and A\$300 million to build 600 new homes for people experiencing homelessness. It was later announced that another A\$400 million would be available under the National Affordable Housing Agreement ( [NAHA](#) ) to build new housing and supported accommodation for the homeless. Total recurrent expenditure (at 2016-17 prices) on homelessness services has [increased by 28.8%](#) , from A\$634.2 million in 2012-13 to A\$817.4 million in 2016-17.

But despite this, the number of people experiencing homelessness and the rate of homelessness have both increased. Our research points to problems in the public housing system as one of the more important causes of these increases.

[According to census figures](#) released on Wednesday by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the number of homeless people in Australia has risen by 14% to 116,427. The rate of homelessness has increased from 47.6 people per 10,000 of the population in 2011, to 49.8 per 10,000 now. (The ABS defines homelessness [here](#) .)

There is some good news: the numbers of Indigenous homeless and homeless children and youth (aged 12-18) have declined by 26%, 11% and 7% respectively since 2011. But on the downside, increases are particularly pronounced in New South Wales (where the homelessness rate [rose by 27%](#) and among people aged over 65 (by just over 30%) and overseas-born migrants (by 40%).

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**Read more:** [\*\*More and more older Australians will be homeless unless we act now\*\*](#)

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## Why are we still going backwards?

Changes in Australian housing and welfare systems and wider social and economic

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developments appear to have more than offset any benefits from the NPAH and NAHA. [Our research](#)

sheds some light on the role played by Australia's housing system. Using the internationally recognised and unique

[Journeys Home](#)

longitudinal survey, we find that public housing is the most important factor in preventing homelessness among vulnerable people.

Public housing is particularly effective because it is affordable. It has also traditionally offered a long-term refuge for precariously housed people. This is because public housing leases provide the benefits of security of tenure commonly associated with home ownership.

It is perhaps no accident that NSW was one of the first states to introduce fixed-term tenancies in public housing. This eroded one of the major attributes of tenure, in a state that has seen relatively large increases in homelessness numbers.

The empirical evidence also suggests that community housing fails to provide the same protection for people at risk of homelessness. While community housing is affordable, the security of tenure is weaker, which may explain these findings.

Despite such evidence, the stock of public housing continued to decline between the 2011 and 2016 censuses. State government-initiated transfers of stock to the community housing sector accelerated this trend. In 2013 Australia had a public housing stock of 325,226 dwellings. This declined by 3.2% to [314,864 usable dwellings in 2017](#).

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**Read more:** [Australia needs to reboot affordable housing funding, not scrap it](#)

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## Where are the additional homeless coming from?

One of the more alarming changes is a sharp increase in the number of homeless people over

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65. This partly reflects Australia's ageing population. However, the increase is such that the elderly's share of the total homelessness count has also risen.

Furthermore, our [research](#) suggests that this trend could become protracted. This is because the homeless elderly have much less chance of escaping into formal housing than younger people experiencing homelessness. We have little understanding of the reasons for this, but [gaps in service provision](#) to the aged could be partly responsible.

The other group who feature prominently among the homeless are overseas migrants. They now make up 46% of the homeless, despite representing just 28% of the Australian population. The number of homeless overseas-born migrants has soared by 40% since the 2011 Census, from 38,085 to 53,606 people.

It turns out that homeless overseas-born migrants are concentrated among those living in severely overcrowded dwellings – a little over half of those living in these conditions were born overseas. We know little about these homeless people. [Discrimination could be a factor](#), though some [characterise this group as students living in group households](#) who should not be considered homeless. But this is speculation and further study is certainly required.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*Ghost-hunting: will the census reveal the true scale of homelessness in Australia?\*\*\*](#)

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In view of the latest census results, it is clear to us that governments need to reassess their approach to what is turning into an intractable social problem.

We do not deny that situational factors, such as drug abuse, domestic violence and so forth, are important here. But equally, there is strong evidence that structural problems in our housing

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market are a significant cause of growth in the numbers of homeless people.

Until these problems are resolved, service provision and support will remain a band-aid masking deeper social and housing system issues.

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*Rosanna Scutella was Deputy Director of the Journeys Home study, which was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Social Security.*

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**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/homeless-numbers-will-keep-rising-until-governments-change-course-on-housing-93417>