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# **Ending homelessness in Australia**

## **What is the problem?**

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## Research Summary

### Why was the research done?

Despite substantial evidence that there are solutions to homelessness, and that there are many good reasons to want it solved, homelessness continues to both persist and increase. This literature review explores how homelessness is currently understood and responded to, with the intention of identifying the factors that might prevent it from being effectively ended in Australia.

### What were the key findings?

The currently available research appears to provide clear direction for effective interventions to address homelessness. There is compelling evidence that permanent supportive housing, where permanent housing is offered alongside a range of supports, is effective. In Australia, however, interventions guided by permanent supportive housing principles have failed to ensure the inclusion of the necessary housing. Further, government investment into housing and homelessness services currently falls short of the presenting need. There are also unanswered questions about who is responsible for ending homelessness and about the ways in which ideas of 'housing readiness' might impact on access to suitable housing. Overall, this literature review identified that not all barriers to addressing homelessness are accounted for in the current literature. Critically, much of the literature fails to engage with the agency and knowledge of the people that homelessness affects. As such, this literature review suggests that future research must engage with the ways in which lived experience involvement might contribute to more effectively addressing, and ending, homelessness in Australia.

### What does this mean for policy and practice?

This literature review provides an overview of the current evidence for solving homelessness. Policy and practice will benefit from reviewing their alignment with the evidence: Is there adequate investment into the interventions that are demonstrably successful? Are the known pitfalls avoided? This literature review also identifies currently unanswered questions and, therefore, suggestions for future research, leading to the end of homelessness in Australia.

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We need a better solution than moving us on!

To Nowhere

The next footpath ain't a home either!

(Anonymous 2023)

The issues of homelessness are neither new nor under-researched. Homelessness also exists in mainstream awareness and care, featuring regularly in the news and as the central concern of longstanding and high-profile fundraising activities (e.g. the Vinnie's CEO sleepout and StreetSmart's DineSmart campaign). Despite this, homelessness continues to increase.

This literature review investigates why homelessness has not yet been ended in Australia, and where future research efforts might be directed. To do this, it overviews current understandings of homelessness and the people it impacts. It then provides a brief description of the relevant Australian policy and the services sector responsible for responding to homelessness, including how these fit with current evidence related to effectively addressing, and ideally ending, homelessness. Finally, it explores some of the factors which appear critical to effectively addressing homelessness, including those that might impede the end of homelessness in Australia.

## **Understanding homelessness**

### *What is homelessness?*

Despite, or perhaps because of, the prevalence of homelessness as a global issue 'occurring in all socioeconomic contexts ... in prosperity as well as in austerity' (UN Human Rights Council 2015, p. 3), homelessness continues to evade simple understandings and solutions. This is likely due, at least in part, to the diversity of persons affected by homelessness, and their many different circumstances. Furthermore, homelessness currently has no standard or universal definitions and measures (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2016). Internationally, understandings range from 'rooflessness' to 'a lack of physical housing and a loss of sense of social belonging' to a lack of 'a regularized plot of land as well of a roof overhead' (in rural Bangladesh, for example) (UN Human Rights Council 2015, p. 4). The United Nations Human Rights Council report of the Special Rapporteur (UN Human Rights Council 2015) distils homelessness down to 'an extreme violation of the rights to adequate housing' (p. 3), but acknowledges that identifying

its incidence is necessarily contextual, with localised social norms and individual perceptions essential to any proper understanding.

An official understanding of homelessness is used in Australia for the purpose of estimating its incidence from Census data. This approach is based on Mallett's (2004) critical review of the 'dominant and recurring ideas' representing 'complex and diverse lived experience[s] of home' (p. 64) as they were appearing across multidisciplinary academic literature. With reference to Mallett's (2004) findings, the Australian Census acknowledges 'home' as necessarily including 'a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, p. 11). As such, the Australian Census' 'statistical definition of homelessness' includes people living in improvised dwellings, crisis accommodation, temporary arrangements (such as couch surfing), and substandard or overcrowded housing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). In considering notions of 'home' beyond those of shelter, Australia utilises an 'extended definition' (Pacholski 2021, p. 1012) of homelessness which has resulted in relatively high, but possibly more reliably measured, proportions of the Australian population being identified as experiencing homelessness compared to other national counts (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2016; Pacholski 2021).

Acknowledging the inclusivity of the Australian homelessness counts does not, however, diminish the scale of the concern. In 2006, the United Nations Special Rapporteur described the situation in Australia as a 'serious national housing crisis' and 'concluded that Australia was violating its obligations under international law' (Bell & Allain 2021). That said, Australia is not unique in its high rates of homelessness; homelessness remains a significant and increasing issue globally (Aubry et al. 2020; Busch-Geertsema et al. 2016; UN Human Rights Council 2015).

### *Who is homeless?*

The last Australian Census count estimated over 122,000 persons were experiencing homelessness (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). This was the third consecutive Census to show an increase in the number of persons estimated to be experiencing homelessness. In terms of demographics, almost one quarter of the persons identified as experiencing homelessness in the 2021 Census count were youth (71 per 10,000 of 12- to 24-year-olds) and one in seven were elderly (26 per 10,000 of over 55-year-olds). While over half of those identified as experiencing homelessness were male, the last Census showed a proportionate decrease for males (from 58



to 55 per 10,000 persons between 2016 and 2021) and an increase for females (from 41 to 42 per 10,000 persons between 2016 and 2021). First Nations persons were strikingly over-represented (307 per 10,000 persons), making up one in five of the persons identified as homeless in the 2021 Census count. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) caveats this data by drawing attention to potentially relevant cultural perspectives, affecting understandings of homelessness and home, and to an overall increase in the number of persons identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in the 2021 Census. Even so, the disproportionate incidence of homelessness amongst First Nations populations is a known issue in Australia and has been identified as a national homelessness priority for some time (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019a).

Beyond basic demographic generalities, the Census data on homelessness tells us no more about the individuals it involves than would similarly reporting on the persons currently living with a home. While persons experiencing homelessness have been historically treated as a readily identifiable categorical group, these representations do not hold up to scrutiny, particularly when allowing for the persons affected to speak for themselves (Parsell 2018). Parsell (2018), for example, identifies fundamental inconsistencies in the ways that the category of ‘homeless people’ is ascribed to persons without shelter, with homelessness due to natural disasters (e.g. flood, bush fire) being ‘decouple[d] ... from the identities we impose upon [those affected]’ (p. 49). Further, Parsell’s (2018) research with ‘119 people staying in shelter and transitional homeless accommodation in Australia’ found that almost half of them were ambivalent about being categorised as homeless or outright rejected the label ‘on the basis that there were people worse off than they were’ or that ‘they had [other] places they could stay’ (p. 50). Overall, homelessness is a considerable concern, both in Australia and globally, but one that evades neat understandings at both demographic and individual levels.

### *What causes homelessness?*

Continuing the theme of ‘no easy answers’, the causes of homelessness are themselves complex and contextual (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2010; Institute of Global Homelessness 2019; Johnson et al. 2015; Spinney et al. 2020; UN Human Rights Council 2015). Johnson et al. (2015) weave individual and structural factors together in their comparative analysis of homelessness and housing outcomes in Australia. They identify multiple structural factors, such as housing costs and employment conditions, alongside individual factors, such as male gender, being over 45

years, having low education, and having experiences of unemployment, violence, and/or incarceration. Overall, however, it is the *interactions* between the factors that is significant:

If you have risky behavioural traits, such as recent incarceration, regular use of drugs, and so on, your chances of becoming homeless are invariably higher regardless of housing and labour market conditions. On the other hand, if these risky behavioural traits are absent, the chances of becoming homeless are greater in regions with higher median rents. For example, you are in good health and have no risky behavioural traits, but experience bad luck such as an emotionally stressful relationship break up combined with a family row that results in unexpected departure from the parental home. The expensiveness or otherwise of housing in the neighbourhood does seem to matter in such circumstances. (Johnson et al. 2015, p. 3)

In this, one can see that homelessness needs to be understood both in terms of broad trends, albeit with multiple contributing factors and interacting complexities, and in terms of the individual stories.

While Johnson et al.'s (2015) predictive modelling demonstrates the truism that 'homelessness could happen to any one of us', it is important to understand that not all persons are equally at risk of homelessness. As already noted, there is a disproportionate incidence of homelessness affecting First Nations peoples. Additionally, there are other marginalised and/or vulnerable groups who are more likely to experience homelessness: people seeking asylum or from a refugee background, persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons, and, as evident in the Census data but not yet highlighted, young people (Bell & Allain 2021). Importantly, these are not discrete groups and the combinations of marginalisation, along with the other individual and structural factors identified by Johnson et al. (2015), continue to increase the risk of homelessness for any given person. Additionally, as Bramley and Fitzpatrick (2018) emphasise in their systematic account of homelessness risk in the UK, in addition to 'the odds of experiencing [homelessness being] systematically structured around a set of identifiable individual, social and structural factors, most of which ... are outside the control of those directly affected' (p. 112), there are protective factors which *reduce* the risk of homelessness such as active support networks, particularly those that provide opportunities to live in multi-adult homes (e.g. with a partner or as an adult with one's parents). Overall Bramley and Fitzpatrick's (2018) research explicitly concurs with Johnson et al.'s (2015) finding that the factors that lead to homelessness are complex but broadly predictable.

It is also important to note that the factors that lead to homelessness are not evenly weighted in their effect. The United Nations Special Rapporteur (UN Human Rights Council 2015), for example, emphasises issues of housing availability, and foregrounds the role of governments, stating simply that homelessness ‘is symptomatic of the failure of governments to address growing inequalities’ and ‘occurs when housing is treated as a commodity rather than as a human right’ (p. 3).

## **Interventions and Evidence**

In Australia, the responses to homelessness are enacted through constellations of government and non-government organisations and programs, with funding and regulation coordinated through various levels of government and through various intergovernmental agreements (Spinney et al. 2020). Primarily, these intergovernmental agreements are underpinned by the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), a funding and strategic partnership between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, however this agreement currently operates in the absence of a national framework to end homelessness in Australia (Spinney et al. 2020). The NHHA identifies housing priority policy areas and cohorts which states and territories must address in their homelessness and housing strategies, alongside a requirement to contribute dollar matched funding and to submit data to the centralised data collection and reporting systems (Department of Social Services 2022).

In terms of homelessness intervention, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) are funded under the NHHA and regulated by the states and territories (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023). SHSs vary considerably in terms of size (assisting fewer than 100 to over 1500 clients per year), the services provided (ranging information, referral, material aid, crisis accommodation, and so on), and ethos (for example, services can be provided in a not-for-profit or a for-profit financial structure; services can be charity founded, welfare based, and/or entrepreneurial) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023). SHSs do not directly provide stable housing and therefore their role in ending homelessness is additionally reliant on the availability and accessibility of suitable housing options for persons experiencing homelessness (Spinney et al. 2020).

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s (2019b) 2018-2019 report (that is, the report from the financial year prior to Covid-19) the Victorian SHS network, for example,



assisted fewer than 30% of those who presented as homeless into housing. Preventing homelessness was apparently more successful with homelessness prevented for over 90% of the service users who presented at risk (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019b). There were significant changes to homelessness interventions during the early years of Covid (2020-2021) with underutilised (because of travel restrictions) hotels and student accommodations being used to accommodate persons experiencing homelessness at a previously unseen scale (Parsell et al. 2023a). One of the impacts of this response was that the most recent Census identified a decrease in the numbers of persons identified as sleeping rough and in ‘severely’ crowded dwellings alongside an increase of persons staying in crisis accommodation (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). This shift in the particular conditions of homelessness was not, however, accompanied by a reduction in the incidence of homelessness. In fact, the number of persons experiencing ‘persistent homelessness’ (that is, more than 7 months of homelessness over a 24-month period) across Australia had increased by almost 20% between 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023). Additionally, the proportions of successful assistances reported by the Victorian SHS system during the 2021-2022 period maintains the 2018-2019 rates; that is, 90% assisted to sustain housing and 29% assisted out of homelessness and into housing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023).<sup>1</sup>

### *Do we know what works in addressing homelessness?*

The proportionately low success rate in the Victorian SHS’s addressing of current experiences of homelessness, in comparison to prevention interventions, is likely to be due to multiple factors. It might be that the ‘at risk’ presentations were less complex than those currently experiencing homelessness and were therefore effectively assisted by more limited or direct interventions. It is also possible, considering SHSs do not provide housing directly, that persons experiencing homelessness have accessed housing independently through social housing or the rental market, or with the assistance of non-SHS supports. However, a more likely explanation is the lack of availability of long-term, affordable housing options, an issue that has been repeatedly identified by both service providers and service users as a critical barrier to addressing homelessness in Australia (Spinney et al. 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria’s assistance figures are reasonably typical of the SHS performance across the states and territories, with a range of 24% of homelessness clients assisted into housing in Western Australia to 49% in South Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023).

The international research into ‘what works’ in addressing homelessness largely speaks to permanent supportive housing models, such as Housing First. In this, persons experiencing homelessness are offered permanent housing alongside support to sustain the tenancy and to address any other issues that may arise. Boland et al.’s (2018) systematic review of the ‘determinants of tenancy sustainment following homelessness’ primarily identified the Housing First model as a demonstrably successful intervention for addressing homelessness. This finding is reinforced by Aubry et al.’s (2020) ‘systematic review, meta-analysis, and narrative synthesis’ which found that permanent supportive housing, along with income assistance, appears to be effective in successfully addressing homelessness and that the ‘[p]ermanent supportive housing stability outcomes remained statistically significant at 6 years of follow-up’ (p. 356), this being as far as the research base extended.

Permanent supportive housing models have been implemented in Australia with varying success. Critically, the implementation of this model has not always been resourced with readily available housing, resulting in mismatches between the allocation of housing and the allocation of support, and thus undermining the principles of Housing First (Bullen & Baldry 2019; Clarke et al. 2020a; Clarke et al. 2020b). Even where permanent supportive housing has been adequately resourced and provided, this does not necessarily present as a definitive solution to an individual’s experience of homelessness. For example, Parsell et al.’s (2023b) research overviewing ten years of tenancy data from a Brisbane permanent supportive housing program demonstrated that, while 75% of the tenancies had positive outcomes (that is, sustained housing or voluntary exits into other housing options), 25% of tenancies had been lost, with a return to homelessness and/or with unresolved tenancy issues.<sup>2</sup> Overall, permanent supportive housing models show promise in Australia, but they are not the only factor at play in ending homelessness.

Boland et al.’s (2018) systematic review of tenancy sustainment also found that having an active social support system made up of other housed persons was a relevant success factor identified across the international literature. This determinant could be considered less closely connected to homelessness services provision and more individually determined, the availability and the degree of positive influence from any person’s networks being related to

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<sup>2</sup> Noting that this falls short of ending homelessness but, from a statistical perspective, this possibly still represents a success of permanent supportive housing intervention, as per Aubry et al. (2020).

many personal and situational variables. There is, however, evidence across the literature that services for persons experiencing homelessness which include peer support interventions provide measurable benefits including improved relationships and general supports; a sense of belonging and decreased loneliness; *and* possible reductions in the periods of time spent homeless (Barker & Maguire 2017). The final determinant identified by Boland et al. (2018) was both entirely individual and outside individual control: namely, being older.

One of the individual factors not adequately addressed by the research is that of individual agency (Parsell et al. 2014). Parsell et al.'s (2014) Australian research with persons accessing services from the experience of sleeping rough, 'the most vulnerable people experiencing unsheltered homelessness' (p. 303), found that, even in the context of receiving assertive outreach services (that is, services characterised by proactive engagement in the places that people are sleeping or having basic needs met) connected with concrete secure housing offers, the research participants consistently described themselves as having a 'central role in determining whether or not they would pursue housing' (p. 307). These decisions, in accepting support and housing, were rationalised in the context of broader life changes and priorities, such as opportunities for family reconnection or health needs and increasing age. This research is a reminder that the policy and research can risk, at times, neglecting the centrality of human life in all considerations of addressing homelessness. This being important not only in terms of the gravity of the matters being discussed, but also in terms of the very important, and very human, aspects of personal agency and choice.

### **Ending homelessness: what is the problem?**

The research into addressing homelessness appears to be reasonably clear: provide permanent supportive housing options and consider the inclusion of peer support interventions. However, in Australia we see increasing incidence of homelessness and a service system that is demonstrably not responding to the presenting need. This section considers the factors which might contribute to this.

#### *Housing*

As noted above, service users, service providers, and researchers have named the availability of suitable and affordable housing as a critical issue in addressing homelessness in Australia (e.g. Clarke et al. 2020a; Spinney et al. 2020). Further, the lack of housing resource has

undermined the implementation of the evidence-based Housing First model in Australia (Clarke et al. 2020a; Clarke et al. 2020b). The inability of services to secure housing for persons experiencing homelessness has not only frustrated their attempts at Housing First interventions, but it has also resulted in demonstrably ‘negative effects on the homeless people’ they purport to serve (Bullen & Baldry 2019, p. 126).

This lack of available housing resources is due, in part, to a reduction over recent decades of social housing options in Australia. From 1981 to 2021, the proportion of social housing in the broader housing market has decreased from 4.9% to 3.8% (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute 2022). This is comparable to the Canadian and New Zealand levels (4.2% and 4.0%, respectively), but far lower than England’s 17% and the European Union median of 6.0%. While the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute’s (2022) brief analysis stops short of concluding that the current social housing availability in Australia is insufficient, it does recognise that 6.1% of households have a demonstrated need for social housing (through approved application or current tenancy) leaving a shortfall of 2.3%, or over 200,000 households. This shortfall is additional to the housing supply failures in implementing Housing First interventions, as already discussed.

Further to social housing shortages, the private rental market in Australia is distinctly, and increasingly, unaffordable. Anglicare Australia’s (2023) rental affordability snapshot ‘recorded the worst ever result for a person on the minimum wage’ (p. 10) with fewer than one per cent of the available rental listings nationally assessed as affordable at this income level. This proportion was even lower for persons relying on government assistances, and with many of the listings in this range being for rooms in share housing (Anglicare Australia 2023). Across Australia, affordable housing availability is a marked barrier to ending homelessness.

### *Responsibility*

The availability of affordable housing is evidently a barrier to ending homelessness but who is responsible for addressing this? As cited above, the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UN Human Rights Council 2015) identifies nation governments as responsible for addressing the inequalities that lead to homelessness and for the necessary mitigation of the harms of ‘housing [being] treated as a commodity rather than as a human right’ (p. 3). This position might also be broadly in line with the expectations of the Australian public. The Melbourne-based Specialist Homelessness Service, Launch Housing, found in their public perceptions survey that over 70%

of respondents saw the government as holding responsibility for addressing homelessness, with the top two priorities identified as emergency housing (70.3%) and ‘providing more affordable/social housing for everyone’ (68.0%) (Forethought 2020).

These expectations of the United Nations and of the Australian public might not, however, align with that of the Australian governments. As already noted, addressing homelessness in Australia is a shared responsibility between the Commonwealth and the state/territory governments, in line with the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). While the NHHA determines housing policy priorities for the states and territories to address, it does not appear to speak to a specific target for affordable housing availability (Department of Social Services 2022) and the investments into social housing have been evidently decreasing over time (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute 2022). There have been recent commitments, nationally and by states/territories, to increase funding for the expansion of social housing however these projects are expected to fall short of the present, and the anticipated, need (Pawson et al. 2022). Similarly, the homelessness sector is currently underfunded. Specialist Homelessness Services report a shortfall of around fifteen per cent for service provision (that is, it is around 85% government funded), which has required them to diversify their funding streams through individual and philanthropic donations (Flatau et al. 2017). Services report that this is still insufficient to meet presenting need (Flatau et al. 2017). In terms of financial investments, it does not appear that the governments have taken on full responsibility for ending homelessness in Australia.

One possible explanation for this shortfall of government investment could be in the intricacies of the NHHA, and the relationship between the Commonwealth and the states/territories. In response to the recent *House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs report: Inquiry into homelessness in Australia final report*, the Commonwealth’s stated position was that the ‘state and territory governments (states) are primarily responsible for delivering housing and homelessness services’ (Australian Government 2022, p. 1) with many of the responses to the 35 inquiry recommendations commencing with the statement: ‘States are responsible for [the relevant aspect]’. Further to this, the Commonwealth did not support the recommendation of a ‘ten-year national strategy on homelessness’ stating that ‘flexible and targeted responses [enacted by the individual states] better address[es] homelessness when compared to one size fits all centralised strategies’ (Australian Government 2022, p. 25). While the Commonwealth holds the responsibility in terms of international human

rights obligations, it appears to defer to the states/territories for all practical responsibility considerations. Overall, the terms of government responsibility for addressing homelessness in Australia are not entirely clear.

Beyond government responsibility, Launch Housing's (Forethought 2020) public perceptions survey found that responsibility for addressing homelessness was also expected of the wider community (39.5%), charities (35.5%), the families of homeless people (34.4%), and the people experiencing homelessness themselves (31.6%). In the high-level reporting of these results, it is not entirely clear how and when the respondents believed the responsibilities should be shared. For example, it is possible that the approximately one-third of respondents who identified the people experiencing homelessness and their families as responsible are largely distinct from the over two-thirds who saw the government as responsible. In this, respondents might be speaking to individual responsibilities and the need for persons to solve their own concerns using their own resources. These attitudes have been evident in Australian political rhetoric (Parsell 2018) and have influenced homelessness intervention in countries such as the Netherlands where the 'traditional welfare state [is being transformed] into a "participation society" ... [where] citizens are expected to support each other ... [and rely on their own] resources, such as a social network or money' (Rutenfrans-Stupar et al. 2020, p. 597). That said, these attitudes of responsibility being shared by persons experiencing homelessness could also be a recognition of personal agency. This would be in line with Parsell et al.'s (2014) findings, discussed above, that people leaving homelessness saw their own choices as primary to their taking up offers of housing. In this, it might be that the end of homelessness is contained in the union of government funded services and the influence of individual life choices.

### *Conditionality*

One element of individual responsibility not discussed above is the impact of individual behaviour on tenancy attainment and sustainment. Persons experiencing homelessness have, at times, described their circumstances as the consequences of individual choice; that is, as a result of 'their decisions to consume alcohol, use substances, gamble, or avoid these behaviours' (Parsell 2018, p. 75). Further, in one Brisbane permanent supportive housing program, 25% of the tenancies were lost, over a ten year period, to homelessness and/or with unresolved tenancy issues as a result of behaviours such as a failure to pay rent or 'making other tenants feel fearful or intimidated, especially through violence or threats of violence' (Parsell et al. 2023b, p. 23).



As Parsell et al. (2023) highlight, these tenancy risks ‘underly the complexity of the work undertaken [in permanent supportive housing] to sustain tenancies ... [and that] on some occasions breaches for behaviour problems – which may ultimately lead to an eviction – may be the necessary means required to ensure other tenants’ right to a safe and secure environment’ (p. 12).

A concept that provides a different lens on that of individual responsibility, when considering these factors, is conditionality. Conditionality, as it relates to homelessness interventions, generally refers to the offer of housing following the achievement of indicators of ‘housing readiness’ (Clarke et al. 2020b). Prior to the development of permanent supportive housing models, where housing and support are offered alongside each other, more conditional models of homelessness intervention, where clients ‘progressed’ through a ‘staircase’ of service-based achievements that displayed their capacity for housing (e.g. addressing addiction, sustaining crisis accommodation, and demonstrating living skills) before receiving an offer of a home, were the norm. (Clarke et al. 2020b) argue that Australia still has a legacy of conditionality in its homelessness service provision, and that this is evidenced in both policy and service provider priorities. Further to this, the culture of conditionality might also be evident in the attitudes of some individuals experiencing homelessness in their linking of choices between money on addiction or money on rent, as noted above. Parsell (2018) queries whether these choices can be taken as an indicator of preferences, and yet they are being presented by the persons experiencing homelessness as a reasonable trade-off, between housing and addiction.

In practice, however, this trade-off is inseparable from the distinct lack of available and affordable housing in Australia, which complicates the concept of choice and how this might relate to individual responsibilities or notions of housing readiness. Similarly, with homelessness services, Clarke et al. (2020b) identify great challenges in understanding their attitudes and practices when viewed in the context of housing scarcity. They refer to accompanying research (Clarke et al. 2020a) demonstrating that ‘even service providers overtly committed’ to the provision of housing without prior demonstrations of readiness ‘continue to rely on the practices and logics of the staircase approach out of necessity’ because of the ‘lack of secure and affordable housing in Australia’ (Clarke et al. 2020, p. 97).

In this way, a critical issue in ending homelessness becomes evident. Institutional responsibility and resources are inseparable from understandings of individual responsibility and sector

culture. As a result, we encounter an investigative circularity with the understandings themselves becoming conditional; for example, ‘if there were sufficient housing resources *then* individual responsibility might be the necessary key to ending homelessness?’ As demonstrated throughout this paper, in trying to gain an understanding of homelessness and the barriers to its end, nothing is simple.

### *Lived experience knowledge*

While the barriers to ending homelessness might be complex there are aspects that appear to be reasonably clear: there has been an inadequate resourcing of the interventions that are known to be effective, and a related imposition of barriers to access. This resourcing issue does not, however, account for the 25% of tenancies lost over ten years in permanent supportive housing, as noted above (Parsell et al. 2023b), nor does it engage with important ideas of agency and choice for the persons who experience homelessness. All of which lead us to the question: what are we missing?

Revisiting the United Nations Special Rapporteur’s (UN Human Rights Council 2015) suggestion that homelessness needs to be contextually understood and defined by the persons directly affected, so it might be with solutions. This position is supported by a number of researchers and advocates who have argued for the necessity of involving those with lived experience when trying to solve complex social problems, such as homelessness and housing insecurity (e.g. Ife 2016; Parsell et al. 2023b; Phillips & Kuyini 2018; Seal 2009; Stonehouse et al. 2022; Whiteford 2011), particularly when considering culturally specific aspects of the concern (Tually et al. 2022).

In Australia, listening to lived experience is typically enacted through ‘consumer participation’ activities. Beyond the acquisition of knowledge to inform services or policy, consumer participation speaks to the rights of persons to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives (Baum 2015). In looking to the end of homelessness in Australia, it might be that these lived experience understandings, and opportunities for involvement in the solutions, are currently a critical missing or, at least, underutilised piece.

## **Conclusion**

The issues of homelessness are undeniably complex. Both its causes and its solutions evade simple understandings. What is evident is that Australia is currently failing in its international human rights obligations *and* to the people of Australia, an increasing number of whom are experiencing homelessness. Any of the above barriers to ending homelessness merit further research and frank discussion. Critically, however, we need to pursue the question of whether we know what we need to know from the persons with direct experience, and whether engaging with that knowledge represents an opportunity for the development of systems that can help end homelessness in Australia.

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