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Financial and life ‘shocks’ contribute to a surge in the number of homeless older Australians

- One in every seven Australians experiencing homelessness is aged 55 years or over
- 32 per cent of Australians over 55 years old live on less than \$400 personal weekly income (the 2014 OECD poverty line)
- Life ‘shocks’ later in life such as the death of a spouse, relationship breakdown or a decline in health are key reasons older people become homeless
- Out of more than 1,500 homelessness services nationally only three are specialist services for older people

With the number of homeless older Australians aged over 65 jumping by 30 per cent between 2011 and 2016, new AHURI research examines the life ‘shocks’ and other factors behind these sobering, rising numbers.

The research, ‘An effective homelessness services system for older Australians’, undertaken for AHURI by researchers from University of South Australia and Swinburne University of Technology examines the issues that affect older Australians who are experiencing homelessness.

‘Poverty is a root cause of homelessness. Having a lower income than needed to sustain a decent, healthy and secure life creates a marginal position in the housing market that can result in the loss of safe, affordable accommodation, which can then lead to homelessness,’ says Professor Andrew Beer of the University of South Australia, one of authors of the report. ‘With an ageing population and a decline in home ownership, we can expect further growth in rates of homelessness amongst older Australians.’

The report identified three broad groups of older Australians who become homeless:

- those with conventional housing histories who experience a financial or other ‘shock’ late in life, such as eviction from rental housing, relationship breakdown, the death of a spouse, or a decline in their health
- those who had experienced long-term social exclusion and had previously experienced homelessness
- people with transient work and housing histories.

The research identifies that the current system of supporting older people who experience homelessness is fragmented, too poorly resourced and unable to provide long-term solutions. According to the report, out of 1,518 homelessness services nationally only three are specialist services for older people.

The research also reveals that services set up to provide welfare support for people are difficult to navigate, particularly the online welfare system which acts as an impediment to older homeless people gaining access to the support they need.

'These life shocks lead many older Australians into homelessness, and into contact with the income support system for the first time,' says Professor Beer. 'For some, learning to deal with Centrelink and its policies and processes is an additional challenge that exacerbates the grief and shame of finding themselves without a secure home'.

The report identifies the provision of affordable, secure and appropriate housing must be central to any solution to homelessness amongst older Australians. Other solutions include funding to enable aged-care providers to build specialist facilities for older homeless clients, and reviewing, increasing and indexing the Homelessness Supplement for aged-care providers.

The report can be downloaded from the AHURI website at <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/322>

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