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Crisis accommodation in Australia: now and for the future

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Please note that in this report 'Aboriginal' generally refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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Executive summary

Key points

- Despite crisis accommodation being a significant and well established part of the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system in Australia, much remains unknown about the key elements of effective crisis accommodation models.
- In this study we use the term crisis accommodation to refer to the different forms of short-term accommodation used by SHS's in responding to homelessness. This includes the following types of crisis accommodation: generalist homelessness crisis accommodation services (including shelters or crisis supported accommodation services (CSAS)), family and domestic violence refuges and youth refuges. We also consider various purchased crisis accommodation options such as: boarding and rooming houses, hotels/motels, hostels, backpackers and caravan parks.
- This research provides a review of the grey and academic literature on crisis accommodation models and practices, as well as drawing together perspectives on crisis accommodation from people with living and lived experiences of crisis accommodation, frontline staff and key stakeholders in each Australian state and territory. It also includes analysis of administrative data from a large SHS in Melbourne, Victoria and the South Australian Housing Authority (SAHA).
- A key challenge across jurisdictions is the lack of exit options from crisis accommodation, which creates a range of issues, including prolonging homelessness and exacerbating trauma, backlogs and extended waiting times in the system, and exits to unsuitable accommodation or back into homelessness. While all participants agreed that the main goal of crisis accommodation should be an exit to long-term housing and resolution of homelessness, only a minority of people currently exit crisis accommodation to longer-term housing.

- **There is significant unmet demand for SHS provided crisis accommodation across jurisdictions and particularly in regional and remote areas. Unmet demand results in prolonged periods of homelessness and over-reliance on purchased crisis accommodation, which is often unsuitable and comes with inadequate support.**
- **Analysis of administrative data reveals that people accessing crisis accommodation have a wide range of support needs. The range of presenting and unmet needs reflects the diverse client cohorts accessing support, as well as the breadth and complexity of work undertaken by specialist homelessness services operating in the crisis space.**

The report demonstrates that a number of elements are needed for effective and appropriate crisis accommodation, including:

- flexible length of stay
- well trained and supportive staff
- staff with lived experience and Aboriginal workers to support cultural safety
- trauma-informed care
- support for a broad range of needs
- a built form that is trauma-informed
- accommodation should be self-contained with kitchen facilities and private bathrooms, and there should be options that allow people to keep pets with them.
- ongoing support should be provided to people after exiting crisis accommodation to long-term housing to ensure tenancy sustainment. This is an important tertiary prevention measure, working to minimise the risk of someone returning to homelessness.

The study also demonstrates factors that don't work in crisis accommodation:

- poor quality accommodation
- lack of respect or judgement from staff
- services or environments that are unsafe
- excessive house rules or a complete lack of rules
- unreasonable conditions to search for housing options which are not available
- unaffordable co-contributions to crisis accommodation
- short stays without support (especially in purchased accommodation)
- short stays with no pathways to long-term housing or ongoing support.

Crisis accommodation is an established part of the specialist homelessness services (SHS) system in Australia. Demand for such accommodation is high. Despite calls for a reorientation of the homelessness services system towards prevention and ending homelessness, there remains a need to provide short-term emergency or crisis accommodation for people in acute housing need. Within this context, this research project responds to identified gaps in our knowledge about crisis accommodation, as well as clear opportunities for building evidence and understanding about what works in crisis accommodation based on local and international practice.

The project is guided by the overarching policy question:

> **What are the key elements of effective and appropriate crisis accommodation models now and for the future?**

The following additional research questions (RQs) have been used to address this policy issue:

- **RQ1:** What are the different crisis accommodation practice frameworks and service models operating nationally and internationally?
- **RQ2:** When does and doesn't crisis accommodation work well and why?
- **RQ3:** How do client needs and outcomes vary across key cohorts?

Despite crisis responses forming the bulk of SHS work in Australia, and the numerous crisis accommodation facilities provided, a clear definition of crisis accommodation does not exist at the national level. To capture the diversity of practices in relation to short-term accommodation for people experiencing homelessness in the SHS sector nationally, the study is underpinned by a broad conceptualisation of crisis accommodation. Functionally, this includes SHS provided congregate crisis supported accommodation services (CSAS), family and domestic violence and youth refuges, as well as purchased crisis accommodation in hotels, motels, caravan parks and boarding houses.

The study uses mixed methods, drawing on a review of the academic and grey literature on crisis accommodation, interviews with stakeholders and people with lived experience of crisis accommodation, case studies of current service models, focus groups with frontline staff working in crisis accommodation, and analysis of customised administrative data from two states.

This research provides policy makers with an overview of the different models of crisis accommodation operating in Australia, as well as the different approaches to case management used and key principles for ensuring a supportive built environment. The research documents what works and what doesn't work in crisis accommodation, the needs and outcomes for those in crisis accommodation and how needs and outcomes vary for key cohorts. Drawing on these elements, the research provides a list of key elements of effective and appropriate crisis accommodation now and for the future.

Please note that this report focusses on current and past users of specialist homelessness services, and does not capture the growing demand for short-term accommodation from people impacted by climate change driven natural disasters and public health emergencies. Though our findings are relevant for this broader group.

Key findings

Challenges for crisis accommodation

Private rental is unaffordable and inaccessible for people experiencing homelessness and has become further constrained in the aftermath of COVID-19. At the same time social housing wait lists and wait times are prohibitively long. This lack of exit options from homelessness creates a range of issues for people caught up in the system, including prolonging homelessness and exacerbating trauma, backlogs and long wait times, and exits to unsuitable accommodation or back to homelessness.

Crisis accommodation is concentrated in capital cities and major towns, with limited options available in regional and remote areas. Across all areas there is significant unmet demand for SHS provided crisis accommodation. Lack of capacity in SHS provided crisis accommodation results in reliance on purchased crisis accommodation, which is often inappropriate and provides inadequate support for those who receive it.

It is difficult to ascertain the capacity of SHS provided crisis accommodation across jurisdictions, or the number of people placed in purchased crisis accommodation and the associated expenditure. There are many more people experiencing homelessness on a given night than there are crisis beds available. For those jurisdictions where data are available—New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (Vic) and South Australia (SA)—at least as many households are in purchased crisis accommodation, as are in SHS provided crisis accommodation. This indicates a significant shortfall in the availability of SHS provided crisis accommodation.

What works and what doesn't in crisis accommodation

Our research suggests a range of elements contribute to effective crisis accommodation:

- flexible length of stay that is sensitive to client's circumstances yet provides some level of certainty that people will not be exited back to homelessness
- caring and supportive staff, staff with lived experience (including but not limited to peer support workers), and Aboriginal workers to support cultural safety
- trauma informed support offering a suite of options, particularly mental and physical health supports, a pathway to permanent housing, Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) counselling and supports, material aid, support navigating Centrelink and other government services, access to legal advice, and support with child protection issues
- physically and culturally safe accommodation, particularly for children.
- accommodation of an adequate quality standard, including provision of kitchen facilities and private bathrooms
- all groups should have self-contained accommodation, but this is especially important for families
- crisis accommodation options that allow people to keep their pets with them for comfort and support, particularly as leaving pets behind is often cited as a reason for people not to move away from unsafe relationship and housing circumstances
- ongoing support after exiting crisis accommodation to long-term accommodation to promote tenancy sustainment.

What doesn't work in terms of crisis accommodation is also clear from the study:

- poor quality accommodation without kitchen facilities and bathroom facilities
- lack of respect or judgement from staff
- services or environments that are unsafe, excessive house rules or a complete lack of rules
- unreasonable conditions to search for housing options which do not exist
- co-contributions to the cost of crisis accommodation that stretch people too far and jeopardise future housing (such as saving for a bond or rent in advance)
- short stays without support (especially in purchased accommodation) and short stays with no pathways to long-term housing or ongoing support.

These things exacerbate the stress and trauma of homelessness, and further compound people's struggles making it more difficult to exit homelessness.

Needs and outcomes

The needs of those accessing crisis accommodation across key cohorts are numerous and broadly consistent with the needs of these same cohorts accessing SHS at the national level. This highlights the complex nature of work undertaken by SHS operating in the crisis space.

Analysis of administrative data reveals that age, disability or being Aboriginal meant people had specific SHS and support needs. Medical considerations were a key issue for people living with a disability; a group of people who were less likely to exit to long-term housing and more likely to exit to rent-free arrangements.

Aboriginal clients were slightly less likely to exit to long-term housing and were more likely to transition to a rent-free arrangement at the end of support. They also had shorter average tenancies in crisis accommodation than the overall group.

Young people presenting alone were more likely to need a wide range of supports, indicating their significant vulnerabilities. Children on care and protection orders were far more likely to need a range of services compared with the overall group, including (but not limited to): drug/alcohol counselling; family/relationship assistance; assistance with trauma; assistance for sexual assault; assistance with behaviour problems; and child protection services.

Overall, there was little variation in housing outcomes across cohorts and data sources, with less than a third of clients exiting crisis accommodation to long-term accommodation (31.2% and 19.5% in the two administrative datasets analysed). Other appropriate exit options were found for some, such as aged care or disability support. However, many continued in some form of homelessness, such as temporarily moving in with friends and family, or moving into a boarding house. This data demonstrates a need for greater focus on appropriate and sustainable housing exit options for people moving on from homelessness. Anything less sets people up for repeated tenancy failure, compounded trauma, and is an inefficient use of resources or environment for supporting stability, inclusion and participation.

Policy development options

Our research confirms the important role of crisis accommodation services for the foreseeable future across Australian jurisdictions; this, in tandem proves that there is significant need for such services. In fact, the multiple sources of data collected and considered suggests that crisis accommodation services need to be expanded due to significant unmet demand—at least until an adequate supply of affordable and appropriate private and social rental housing is available for all Australians.

While we strongly support a shift towards housing-led and housing first approaches to ending homelessness, such approaches require rapid access to housing that, at present, does not exist. Further, people escaping family violence, those affected by natural disasters, and those in housing crisis who need time to source new accommodation will continue to need access to crisis accommodation. There is an ongoing and permanent need for crisis accommodation in Australia's homelessness service system and our findings can be used to ensure such accommodation is as effective as possible.

The physical aspects of crisis accommodation

Study findings about the physical aspects of crisis accommodation inform a series of priority policy changes. Quality and safety standards are needed for crisis accommodation, specifying such things as provision of private bedrooms and bathrooms, kitchen facilities and self-contained accommodation as the standard for families and other cohorts. Minimum standards should be developed and enforced to ensure all accommodation is accessible for people with disabilities and specific health needs. Standards should also promote safety within the physical environment, facilitated through 24/7 access to staff. Services should have mechanisms to accommodate pets.

Support offering

The range of needs that crisis accommodation providers meet is wide and increasing. Some of the service offerings needed sit outside the capabilities and resourcing of the SHS sector, necessitating conversations with other programs, agencies, sectors and systems.

Cultural safety within services is a specific area of challenge and opportunity. Policy attention must be focussed on cultural safety to ensure commitment and resourcing for clients and to build an Aboriginal workforce that is well supported and understood in terms of their roles, cultural obligations and training.

Policies and access

A basic set of rules and policies is needed for crisis accommodation services to ensure the safety and comfort of clients, without such rules being too excessive and arbitrary. Policy makers and service providers should consider determining a ceiling for co-contributions towards crisis accommodation as part of such rules to ensure affordability.

Coordinated allocation and entry processes would simplify access, helping to ensure that people know how to access crisis accommodation. Mutual obligation requirements to search for private rental properties should be reviewed in light of the incredibly low number of affordable private rental options across jurisdictions. Such measures will help to minimise trauma for people who are in crisis.

Dedicated low barrier options are needed to provide support to people with complex needs such as problematic AOD use and anti-social behaviours, as well as people with mental and physical health conditions.

Responses for particular cohorts

Our findings highlight that a number of cohorts have needs in the medical/health category. Policy makers should consider enhanced integration of primary and allied health services with crisis accommodation. Policy and practice work in this space requires conversations outside the SHS system, with the aim of better integration and coordination between sectors and systems delivering the supports people need.

Our research highlights the specific needs of children on care and protection orders and young people presenting alone. These cohorts are extremely vulnerable and there is a need for targeted and dedicated responses for these groups.

A number of cohorts experience both mental health and problematic AOD use. This co-morbidity, referred to as dual diagnosis, requires a specialised response. In addition to working with existing services, there is need for specific training for SHS staff in mental health and AOD, especially if services are prioritising more complex clients for assistance.

Measuring capacity to inform responses to insufficient supply

A clear sense of the existing capacity of the sector is needed to help policy makers understand how much extra capacity needs resourcing, as well as where and how offerings should be structured. In light of the difficulty in gauging the capacity of the crisis accommodation sector, policy makers should consider mandatory reporting requirements for states and territories. These advancements would provide a clear picture of the capacity of the SHS managed crisis accommodation sector, as well as the capacity added by purchased accommodation, at what cost, for whom and with what outcomes.

Purchased crisis accommodation

A raft of issues was identified in relation to the quality of purchased crisis accommodation and the lack of support provided to those accessing it. Policy makers and service providers must consider ways they can collaborate to ensure:

- safer, better quality accommodation
- the provision of case management services to those in purchased crisis accommodation
- that placement in purchased crisis accommodation links to positive outcomes for people and families.

Policy makers may wish to consider quality standards that prohibit the use of certain providers deemed to fall below such standards. Policy makers should consider ways to coordinate access to purchased crisis accommodation, rather than leaving entry points or local services to broker access as is the case in Victoria.

The COVID emergency responses rolled out nationally demonstrated that purchased crisis accommodation can work well under some circumstances, especially when higher quality venues are used, the usual mutual obligation requirements (co-contributions and property search requirements) are relaxed, and services are resourced to engage with clients in accommodation settings with a focus on assisting people into more permanent housing.

Documenting and evaluating service models

There is immense value in documenting and systematically evaluating models of different services. Making the results of these evaluations and service models public would facilitate sharing of good practice and learnings to support continuous improvement. There is a role for the Australian government in providing resources for such documentation and evaluation, alongside resourcing a public platform or clearinghouse where it can be accessed.

Exit options

Crisis accommodation, and the specialist homelessness system more broadly, is hampered by the lack of suitable exit options for people experiencing homelessness. This lack creates a range of issues including prolonging homelessness and exacerbating trauma, backlogs in the system, and exits to unsuitable or unsustainable accommodation or back to homelessness. The depth of our current crisis accommodation challenge around housing outcomes is reflected in the low percentage of people exiting crisis accommodation to long-term housing.

Interim measures that may help improve exit options out of crisis accommodation include increasing the rate of Centrelink payments and the rate and eligibility for Commonwealth Rent Assistance to make private rental housing an affordable option. Supported access through private rental access programs and ongoing subsidies for private rental housing may also be another interim solution. However, considerable work is needed to rapidly bring significant new supply of appropriate and affordable rental housing to market, both social and private, thereby increasing the pool of suitable exit options for those in crisis accommodation.

Conclusions

There are opportunities now to make significant improvements in Australia's crisis accommodation sector: for the current system, and especially in shaping an effective future system. Crisis accommodation should be focused on meeting a person's immediate needs and moving people into longer-term housing as quickly as possible, with aligned wraparound support drawing from different sectors and sources as needed. However, even with additional resourcing to improve crisis accommodation, outcomes will remain constrained without high levels of investment to expand the suite of appropriate and affordable exit options for people experiencing homelessness. Fundamentally, homelessness cannot be resolved without access to housing and the support people need to sustain it.

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