

# Housing and support options for older people who are homeless

**THE HOUSING SOLUTIONS SOUGHT BY OLDER HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF THE OLDER POPULATION AT LARGE: THEY VALUE INDEPENDENT LIVING AND SECURITY OF TENURE. OF PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE IS THE TARGETED PROVISION OF PUBLIC HOUSING AND COMMUNITY HOUSING WHICH PROVIDES SECURITY OF TENURE, AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY.**

## KEY POINTS

- Understanding the housing outcomes sought by older homeless people and their views on what makes service supports effective is a critical feature in designing effective preventative and early intervention programs.
- Secure, affordable and appropriate housing needs to be matched by appropriate supports, such as help with activities of daily living, to maintain 'independent living'.
- Programs are required to help identify those older people at greater risk of homelessness. The early warning signs include living in insecure private rental housing and boarding houses, which are least effective because of the lack of security, high costs and inappropriate accommodation, and a lack of informal and formal support.

## CONTEXT

In 2001, 8,580 older people accessed Supported Accommodation and Assistance Programme (SAAP) homelessness services nationally – representing 9.3% of all SAAP clients. However, estimates in a 1996 report (Alt Statis and Associates, 1996) suggest there may be in excess of 250,000 older people at risk of homelessness because the number of older people on fixed incomes and relying on insecure housing is increasing.

## METHODOLOGY

The definition of homelessness used in the research was consistent with Chamberlain and McKenzie's (1992) definition. While there is considerable debate in the literature concerning definitions of homelessness, Chamberlain and Mackenzie's (1992) cultural definition with its primary, secondary, tertiary and marginally housed categories is widely accepted in Australia as an operational definition of homelessness. It includes older people without conventional

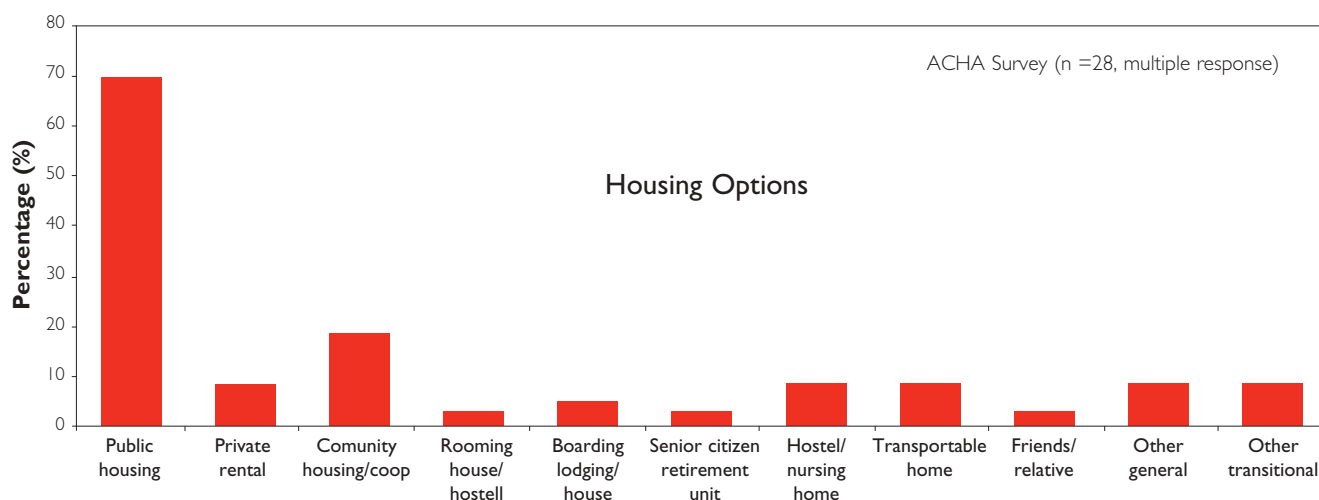
*This research by **Bruce Judd, Kay Kavanagh, Alan Morris and Yuvisthi Naidoo**, at the AHURI UNSW-UWS, Swinburne-Monash and Southern Research Centres, uses a national survey and in-depth interviews to examine the views of older homelessness clients about their housing and support options, complemented by the views of providers of the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) program.*

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**FIGURE I. BEST HOUSING OPTIONS FOR BREAKING THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS**



accommodation (living rough), to those marginally housed and takes into account the premature ageing of older homeless people. The age classifications for 'older' homeless people used in the research is 50 years and over for the general population and 45 years and over for Indigenous people. This is consistent with the literature and takes into account lifestyle related disabilities and premature ageing due to harsher living circumstances.

The Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) program was established in 1983 by the Commonwealth Government. A defining feature of the program, unlike SAAP, is that it focuses specifically on the needs of older homeless people. ACHA client and agency profile data from the survey was used to select five agencies from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia for in-depth interviews with 59 clients (selected in consultation with the agencies). Slightly more males (N=31) than females (N=28) were interviewed. The age range of interviewees was 44 to 89 years with an average age of 68 years. A range of origins were represented in the sample – 17% of clients interviewed were from European backgrounds, 10% were from United Kingdom/Ireland, 10% were from Asia, 8% were from Africa countries and 2% were from Oceania. Just over half (53%) of the clients interviewed were Australian born. Seven of the 31 Australian born interviewees were Indigenous.

The study also conducted a national survey of staff from 40 of the 46 ACHA agencies and undertook in-depth interviews with 15 managers.

## **FINDINGS**

### **HOUSING**

Two key themes were found to underlie the housing and support needs of older homeless people, the need for security and the desire for independent living. The desire for independent living was expressed as a desire for privacy, freedom to do as one chose and having the

facilities to support independent living. Independence was a critical factor in how they viewed their ideal housing:

*"I like my freedom. I like my independence. And if I moved in with them (family) that would mean that I have to more or less live by their rules...that wouldn't suit me...I don't like to be restricted. I want to do what I want, when I want – if I want to go out I'll go out. If I don't want to go out, I won't go out. I like my own company."* – Australian born, female, 69 yrs.

The form of housing assistance that most readily provides this package of housing outcomes is, in the opinion of the older homeless people interviewed, public housing, because of its qualities including security of tenure, affordability and location that provides access to required services (see figure 1).

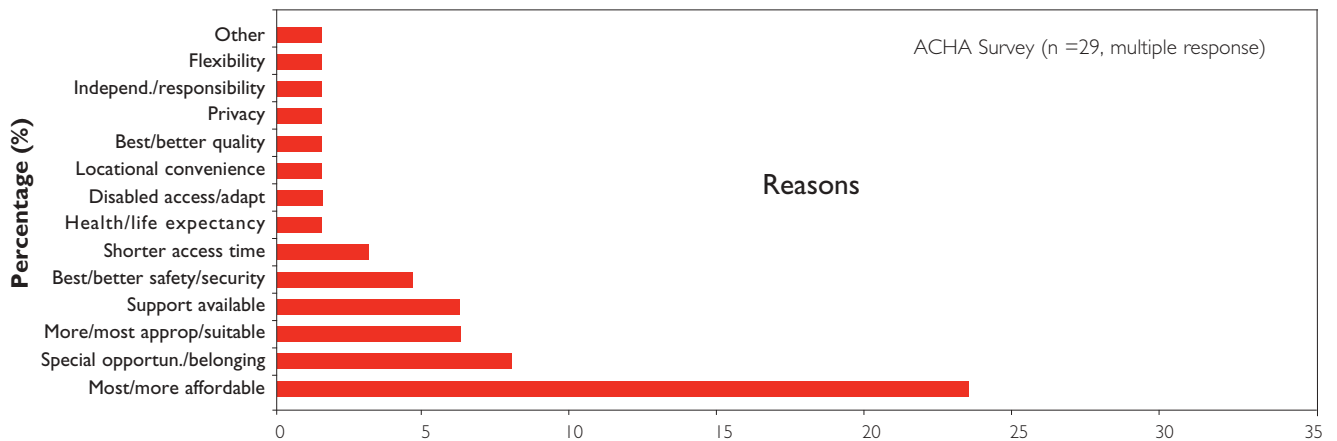
Conversely, private rental was the least preferred of all housing options by ACHA clients due to lack of security of tenure, affordability, control and maintenance, conflict with agents and landlords, and poor accessibility for disabled clients:

*"When you rent private, you can never be sure what's going to happen the next day, when the rent goes up or when the boss comes down and the agent says, look you've got three months to get out because this is no longer available."* – Southern European born, male, 65 yrs.

Likewise, boarding houses were not preferred by ACHA clients because of perceived exploitation, intimidation and eviction, and the minimal facilities for independent living. As too were mobile homes in a caravan park, which as the following quote illustrates, were claimed to result in lack of control:

*"But the thing is, you never feel as if it's your own, if you know what I mean, because they sort of watch every move everybody makes. And you're not allowed to do this, and you're not allowed to do that. I always felt as if it wasn't mine...because they were stipulating this and that and the other."* – Australian born, female, 66 yrs.

**FIGURE 2. PUBLIC HOUSING – REASONS WHY FOR BREAKING THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS**



Similar to the expressed preferences of ACHA clients, ACHA agency managers regarded public housing as the best option to break the cycle of homelessness for older people. Community and cooperative housing was regarded as being effective by some ACHA agencies for the same reasons, particularly if linked to support (see figure 2).

In the view of agency managers, for most ACHA clients private rental was not affordable even with rent assistance:

*“I think the private rental market is very hard for older people because of the insecurity. A lot of rental properties are sold without notice and that sort of thing and then people are stuck in the same position of having to find housing again. The cost, is prohibitive...these people are all on a pension (being on a pension it’s \$200 a week) and if you’re looking at private rental for a single person particularly, it’s very hard because you’re looking at \$140 at the very least to spend on rent per week. – ACHA Manager.*

Residential aged care (hostels and nursing homes) is generally not preferred due to cost, regulations, routines and lack of privacy. Though hostels with flexible rules are seen as more effective. Residential care was only thought appropriate if a client required constant care.

Over two thirds of agencies identified gender differences in housing and support needs and preferences. Female clients placed more emphasis on safety, personal space, neighbourhood and proximity to friends, while men stressed the importance of being close to shops and transport. According to ACHA agencies, housing appearance and quality were more important to women who had a greater dislike of boarding houses and caravan parks and required more emotional support, whereas men were seen as requiring more physical support.

**SUPPORTS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING**

Most clients referred to ACHA agencies were in need of both housing and support. The strong desire for independence and control over daily living was also central to support preferences with clients wanting to do their own cooking, shopping and housework wherever possible. Support services were most successful when they were flexible, tailored to the needs of individuals, and where there was trust and regular contact between the agency worker and client.

Services that assist older homeless people to sustain independent living are: help with tenancy application forms; relocation to a dwelling with better access to required services; and help with activities of daily living including housework, home maintenance, shopping, meals, transport and money management. Some also relied on continuing emergency relief through charitable agencies in order to make ends meet, such as hot meals, food parcels, shopping vouchers, help with paying bills and obtaining furnishings for the home.

Assistance with health needs was also in evidence, particularly making medical, dental, optometrist and hearing services appointments. Many ACHA clients had experienced a health or housing crisis in later life that placed them at risk of homelessness. Fully 85% of ACHA clients interviewed reported a disability or problems with physical health related to lifestyle and premature ageing, accidental injury, war experience or heavy drinking and smoking. Mental health problems were also common.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Demographic ageing implies that the demands upon housing assistance for ‘independent living’ and ‘security of tenure’ will grow. Currently, ‘independent living’ and ‘security of tenure’ are best met through the targeted provision of public and community housing. Other forms of

housing, especially rooming houses and caravan parks, contribute to the risk of homelessness for older people and are not a solution to homelessness.

There is a need for a variety of housing options and support services that best meet the individual housing and support needs for financially disadvantaged older people who are non-homeowners, and which expresses their preferences for independence and security. A particular policy challenge is the creation of those features of security of public and community housing for other tenures. Options to consider are longer-term leases and head leasing arrangements for older private tenants.

There is also the need to build on current preventative and early intervention strategies, such as improvements in program coordination, to ensure older people in need of housing and support services are identified and do not 'slip through the net'. The major gaps in support services relate to the hidden group of older people exemplified in this study who have constant low-level support needs but are unknown to mainstream services until a crisis occurs.

## REFERENCES

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 70135 entitled *Housing options and independent living: Sustainable outcomes for older people who are homeless*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website ([www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)) by typing the project number into the search function.

The following documents are available:

- Final Report
- Positioning Paper

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.



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