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Ending homelessness in Australia: A redesigned homelessness service system

From the AHURI Inquiry: An effective homelessness services system

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Related reports and documents

Thredgold, C., Beer, A., Zufferey, C., Peters, A. and Spinney, A. (2019) *An effective homelessness services system for older Australians*, AHURI Final Report No. 322, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/322>, doi:10.18408/ahuri-7318601.

MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., Zufferey, C., McNelis, S., Spinney, A. and Tedmanson, D. (2020) *Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people*, AHURI Final Report No. 327, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/327>, doi:10.18408/ahuri-5119101.

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Each AHURI Inquiry is supported by a panel of experts drawn from the research, policy and practice communities.

The Inquiry Panel provides guidance on ways to maximise the policy relevance of the research and draw together the research findings to address the key policy implications of the research. Panel members for this Inquiry:

- Jenny Smith, Council to Homeless Persons
- Bryan Lipmann, AM and Michael Deschepper, Wintringham, Victoria
- Sally Kubiak and Nat Smith, Aboriginal Housing Office, New South Wales
- Dr Michael Coffey, Catholic Care Diocese of Broken Bay, New South Wales
- Sherri Bruinhout, Victorian Government, Department of Health and Human Services
- Natasha Boyle, Queensland Government, Homelessness Programs
- Sidesh Naikar and Paul Hardcastle, Australian Government, Department of Social Services

Executive summary

Key points

- Homelessness is a complex social problem that intersects with a range of other social, economic, health and justice issues.
- As such, homelessness requires a more integrated cross-sectorial response, involving mainstream systems and specialist services.
- The existing Australian homelessness service system has known strengths but its effectiveness is constrained for different population groups.
- Notwithstanding this, homelessness is a solvable problem. Overseas experience shows that homelessness can be prevented and virtually ended.
- Homelessness in Australia can be reduced and ultimately ended, but the existing status quo of systems and programs needs major reform.
- An emerging trend nationally and internationally is to reorient homelessness service systems towards prevention and away from a largely crisis response.
- This report lays out some guidelines for how Australia could virtually end homelessness through a redesign of the homelessness service system.
- A fundamental system change is proposed in the approach to homelessness in Australia that would:
 - focus on prevention and early intervention rather than a largely crisis response

- ensure every person is quickly provided with appropriate assistance via a ‘duty to assist’ protocol
- incorporate a Housing First response for people experiencing homelessness so that they can move as quickly as possible into needs and age appropriate long-term housing options
- develop long-term plans for an adequate supply of social and affordable housing.
- **A new, integrated national homelessness initiative and funding arrangement is proposed that will give effect to a fundamentally changed approach to homelessness and a reconfigured homelessness service system.**
- **A reimagining of the Australian homelessness service system is proposed, with the primary elements being:**
 - a changed role for universal welfare services and Specialist Homelessness Services (SHSs) such that universal welfare services instigate systematic screening for risk of homelessness, operate a ‘duty to assist’ policy, provide brokerage funding to assist clients to maintain existing housing or access new housing, and referrals to SHSs and Housing First agencies, when necessary
 - encouragement and support from state and territory governments for place-based collaborations and alliances of the providers of homelessness services, mainstream welfare services and institutions and governments as the focus of a reimagined response to homelessness.

The study

The homelessness service system in Australia comprises national intergovernmental agreements around homelessness services, state and territory strategies, and over 1,500 Specialist Homelessness Services (SHSs) that provide a range of services to support clients who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Australian governments fund a range of SHSs to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These services are delivered by non-government organisations including agencies specialising in delivering services to specific target groups (such as people escaping domestic violence), as well as those that provide more generic services to people facing housing crises. SHSs support those who have become homeless and those who are at imminent risk of homelessness. Importantly, SHSs are funded by diverse sources: state and territory governments, the Australian Government, charitable organisations and other sources, including local governments (Flatau, Zaretsky et al. 2017). This has resulted in a highly fragmented system. Addressing this complexity is one essential step in ending homelessness in Australia.

Australia does not have a national homelessness strategy. It does, however, have a funding agreement between the Australian Government and the state and territory governments. This agreement recognises the Commonwealth and the states' mutual interest in improving outcomes across the housing spectrum, including outcomes for Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and the need to work together to achieve those outcomes. It has long been recognised that a more connected, integrated and responsive service system is required to address homelessness. A system with improved links between homelessness services and mainstream or universal welfare services is desirable.

This Inquiry into an effective homelessness service system addressed the overall research question:

How can the homelessness service system be redesigned and implemented to be effective for different groups across the life course?

The research undertaken in this Inquiry and the chapters of this report are based on three supporting research questions:

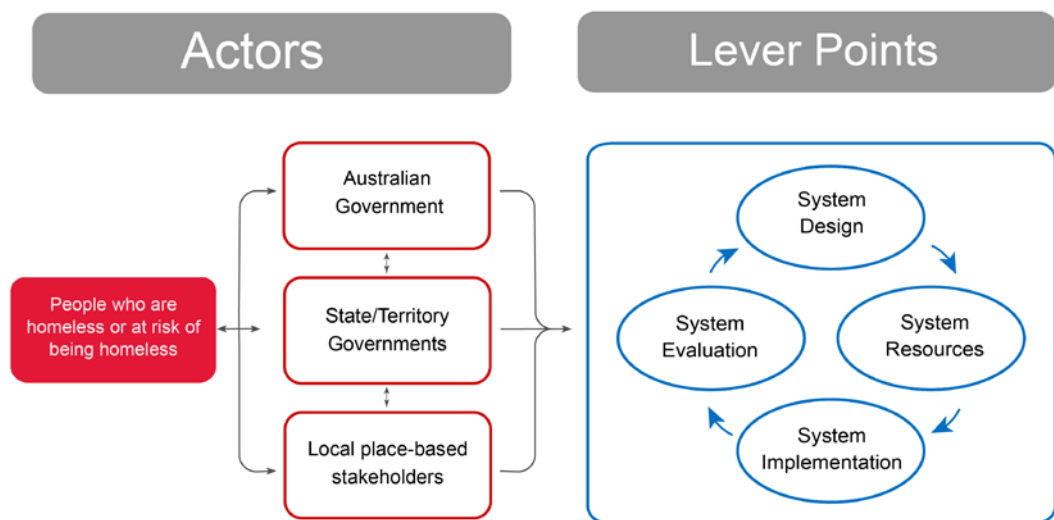
1. What can we learn from national and international homelessness service systems for the future?
2. What are the key levers for creating an effective homelessness service system?
 - regarding the balance of early intervention, prevention and crisis provision?
 - regarding funding and commissioning arrangements of Specialist Homelessness Services?
 - regarding the relationships between specialist and mainstream services?
3. How might Australia reconfigure our homelessness service system in order to effectively support the prevention and minimisation of homelessness across the life course?

The Inquiry included three projects that examined the Australian homelessness service system from the perspectives of different groups of homeless people at different life stages – young people, families and children, and older people. All projects focussed on the particular needs of Indigenous Australians. In seeking to answer the overall Inquiry research question, each sub-project had its own set of research questions and its own method of research. Yet, they all worked together to answer the overarching Inquiry research question.

Our application of a systems thinking approach generated new insights into the effectiveness of the homelessness service system through a focus on the levers that can create influence. The Inquiry brought together—for the first time—the principles of systems thinking and concepts of Indigenous knowledge as a methodology throughout the Inquiry. The Inquiry was driven by these principles as a way of utilising Indigenous and Western knowledge and research methodologies, and acknowledging how both can exist, inform and complement each other to ensure a robust, authentic and fruitful process.

In Figure 1, we outline the major actors and lever points in Australia's homelessness service system. Our analysis is underpinned by this analytical lens in order to propose a potential reconfiguration of the Australian homelessness service system. This includes an enhanced focus on homelessness prevention and Housing First measures, a proposed system of alliances between governments and purchased services, and a 'duty to assist' role for universal welfare services. Levers can be defined as actions or interventions that actors or agents can put in place within a system to break existing negative feedback loops and prompt change in how a system functions (Maani and Cavana 2007). The actors or agents within a system are the people or organisations who have the capacity to either progress or block change on a problem (Abercrombie, Harries et al. 2015).

Figure 1: Actors and lever points in the homelessness service system



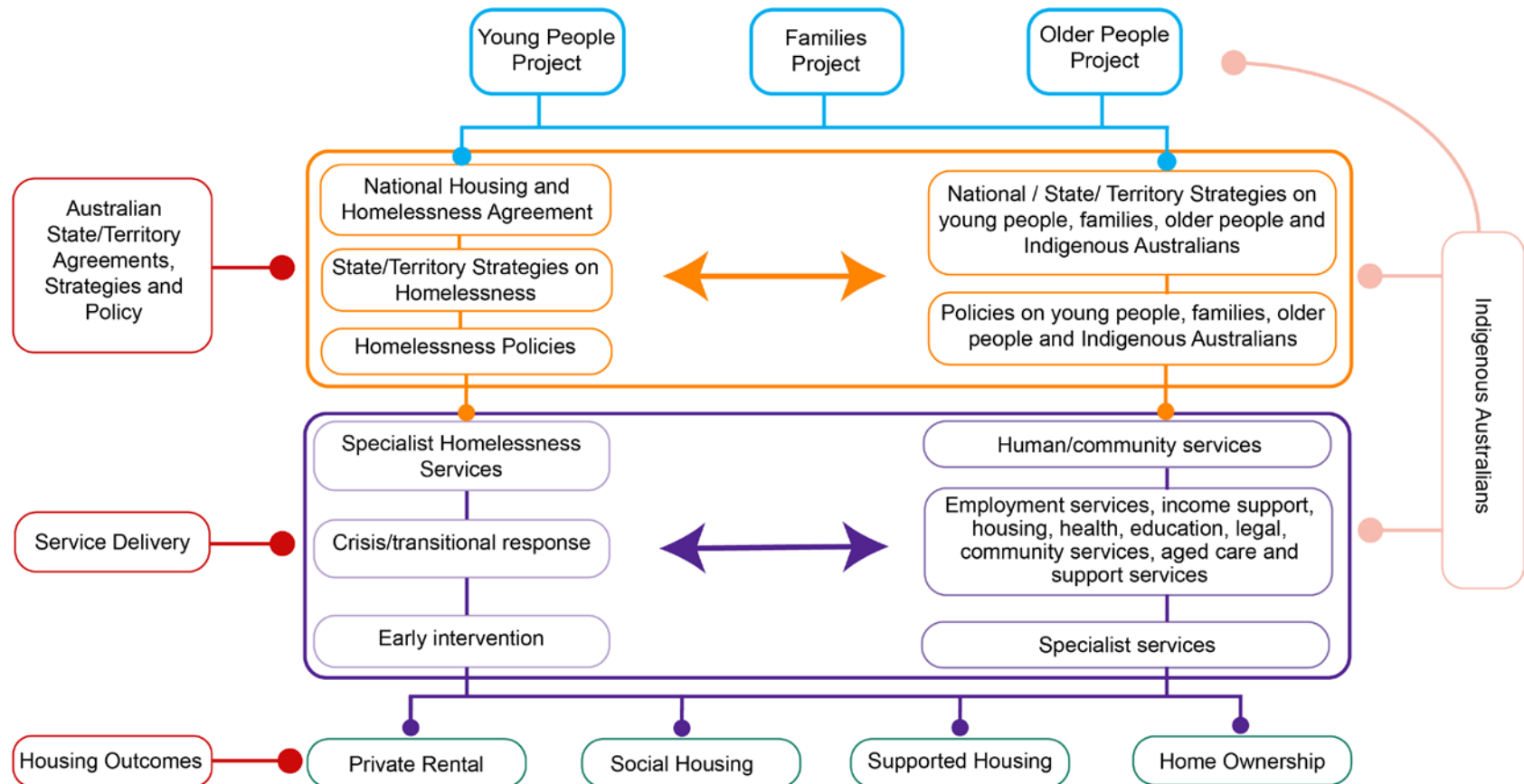
Source: Authors.

In Figure 2, we present the initial policy and practice framework that guided our investigation of the existing national homelessness service system as a fundamental component of the research design. The relationships between specific homelessness policies, strategies and services and more general interventions by governments are indicated by arrows. The relationships between the different levels of government indicated by arrows.

This framework serves two ends. It is:

- a framework for a comprehensive mapping of the existing homelessness service system in Australia
- a framework for analysing the policy and practice proposals considered in the report that would improve the linkages and ways of working between different parts of the currently siloed homelessness service system – these are linkages which include not only SHSs but also the planning and delivery of other mainstream human services to prevent and assess homelessness.

Figure 2: Initial policy and practice framework



Source: Authors.

Key findings

Homelessness is a complex social problem that intersects with a range of other social issues, particularly poverty, income support, housing, health, and access to jobs, training and education. As a complex social problem, homelessness requires a place-based response, not only from SHS agencies but also from universal welfare services, such as income support, housing, health, mental health, justice, community aged care, employment and education providers.

Homelessness can be prevented despite its persistence and complexity as a social problem in Australia. Prevention and early intervention are emerging as key policy imperatives in several Australian jurisdictions and in other comparable countries. In general terms, this will mean a shift away from a focus on the provision of crises services. Instead, responses that arrest the flow of different cohorts into homelessness, rapid rehousing, and appropriate housing options for different cohorts in the homelessness population will become key.

The starting point for a national homelessness initiative is attention to the rights and needs of homeless people. A rights-based approach to service provision involves self-determination and a voice in the assistance being provided to clients of services. While this is a general principle, it is especially important for the response to Indigenous homelessness, where Indigenous communities need to be included in the planning, provision and the delivery of services to Indigenous communities.

Successfully reducing and ending homelessness will require a high level of commitment from all tiers of government, from universal welfare services, from SHSs and from the Australian community. This is a long-term project requiring a continuous and constant integrated approach over many years.

This research found that the existing Australian homelessness service system is mainly oriented towards crisis responses. However, many countries are now orienting their wider service systems towards prevention.

We found relevant examples of innovation were:

- Housing First approaches
- integrated place-based strategies to reduce homelessness
- innovative practices in homelessness prevention and reduction in Australia, as well as overseas in Norway, Finland and three of the four countries of the United Kingdom
- the 'duty to assist' role for universal welfare services proposed in the Canadian roadmap to end youth homelessness
- examples of contractual alliances of purchased services that integrate homeless service provision and improve access to services (such as in Glasgow, Scotland).

Some of the key levers we discovered through our fieldwork are appropriate to all users of the Australian homelessness service system. Others are interventions that would be more effective for some cohorts than others. We used these findings to establish the key levers influencing the effectiveness of the Australian homelessness service system overall. These are:

- creating prevention and early intervention platforms through flexibility of approach and simplicity of access to services
- innovative and affordable housing options and a rethinking of social housing
- recognising the needs of Indigenous Australians
- collaboration between different service sectors and better system integration between service systems
- increasing financial supports, greater employment opportunities and increasing economic security
- improving relevant education, training and awareness for people at risk of homelessness.

Different priorities are relevant to different life stages, as follows:

- young people tend to keep to a fairly tight geographical area, and place-based solutions are needed
- domestic and family violence continues to be a major cause of homelessness for families
- older women are a new, emerging cohort to face homelessness, and action to arrest this trend is needed.

The research found a need for a reconfigured homelessness service system that provides:

- assertive outreach
- easier access into the homelessness service system
- the building of prevention and early intervention platforms
- cross-sectoral system integration
- local services to keep people in place
- culturally appropriate services for Indigenous Australians.

Policy development options

This report lays out a blueprint for how Australia could reduce and end homelessness by reorienting the Australian homelessness service system towards early intervention and prevention of homelessness, including:

- a new national homelessness initiative
- new cross-sectoral partnership funding arrangements
- an enhanced role for universal welfare services in their 'duty to assist', where they adopt a 'first to know, first to act' approach by:
 - screening all clients to assess for risk of homelessness
 - seeking to prevent homelessness through the use of assistance and brokerage funding
 - referring to an SHS when necessary for assistance into Housing First or, if necessary, crisis accommodation.
- developing local place-based alliances between governments and purchased services
- providing exit points from crisis services and the support required to sustain their tenancies and lives
- adopting a 'Housing First' approach which, for any homelessness service system to work effectively, requires an adequately planned supply of long-term affordable and social housing that is appropriate, secure and safe.

Implementation

As this is the first time a suite of policy development options for the reconfiguration of the homelessness service system has been brought together in Australia, further research is required to establish how the suggested key levers could work together (or against each other) to ensure the homelessness service system is more effective.

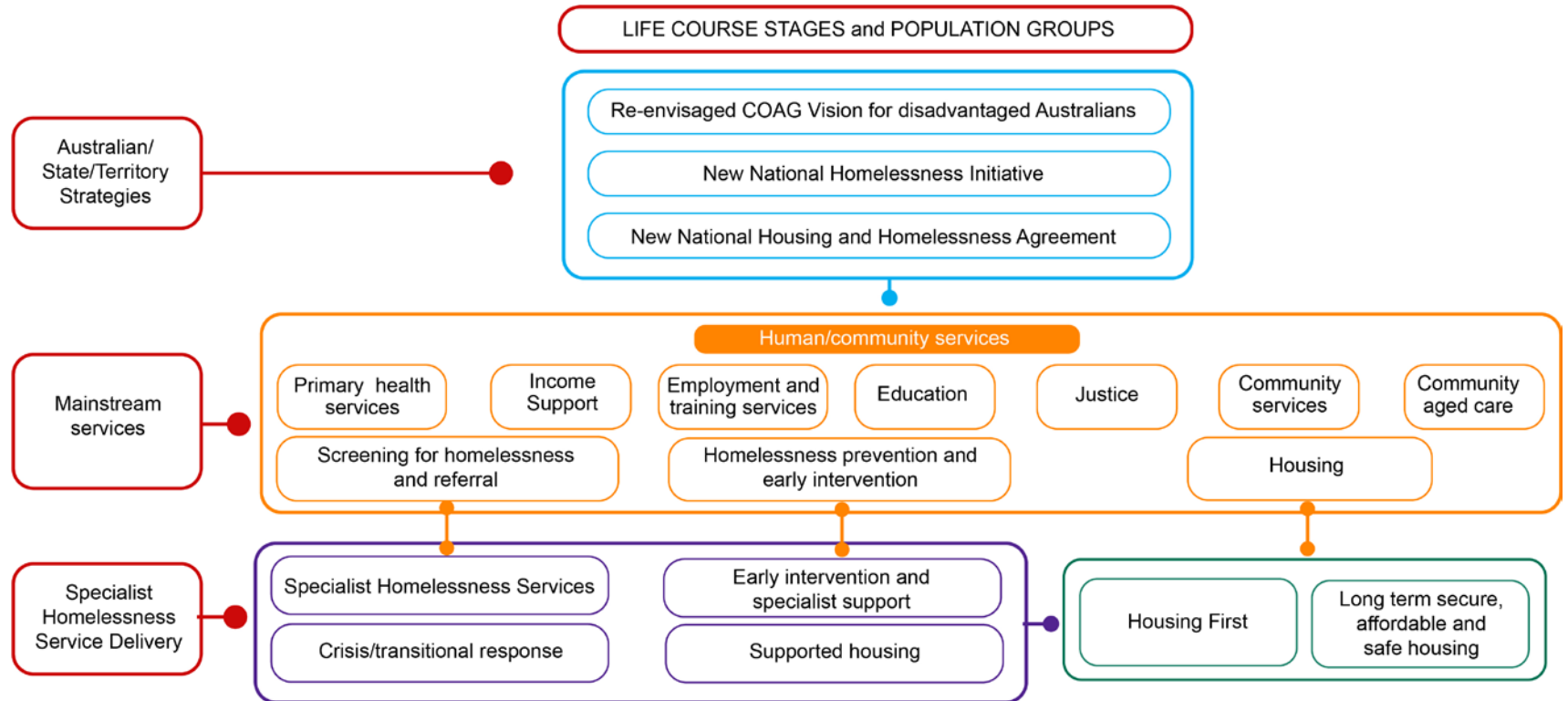
One of the ways this could be achieved is by piloting a series of organisational alliances to end homelessness in each state and territory. Likewise, specific geographical locations could pilot universal welfare agencies trialling the proposed 'duty to assist' by screening, and assisting, their clients at risk of homelessness, and referring those who they are unable to help through brokerage funds and housing advice. Targets could be set for each state and territory, and key performance indicators set for government agencies.

This report proposes a potential reconfiguration of the Australian homelessness service system. As illustrated in Figure 3, this reconfiguration includes:

- a new, integrated national homelessness initiative
- new cross-sectoral partnership funding arrangements
- adopting a 'Housing First' approach which, for any homelessness service system to work effectively, would require an adequate supply of long-term affordable and social housing that is appropriate, secure and safe
- an enhanced role for universal welfare services in their 'duty to assist' where they adopt a 'first to know, first to act' type of approach by:
 - screening all clients to assess for risk of homelessness
 - seeking to prevent homelessness by use of assistance and brokerage funding
 - referring to an SHS when necessary for assistance into Housing First or, if necessary, crisis accommodation.

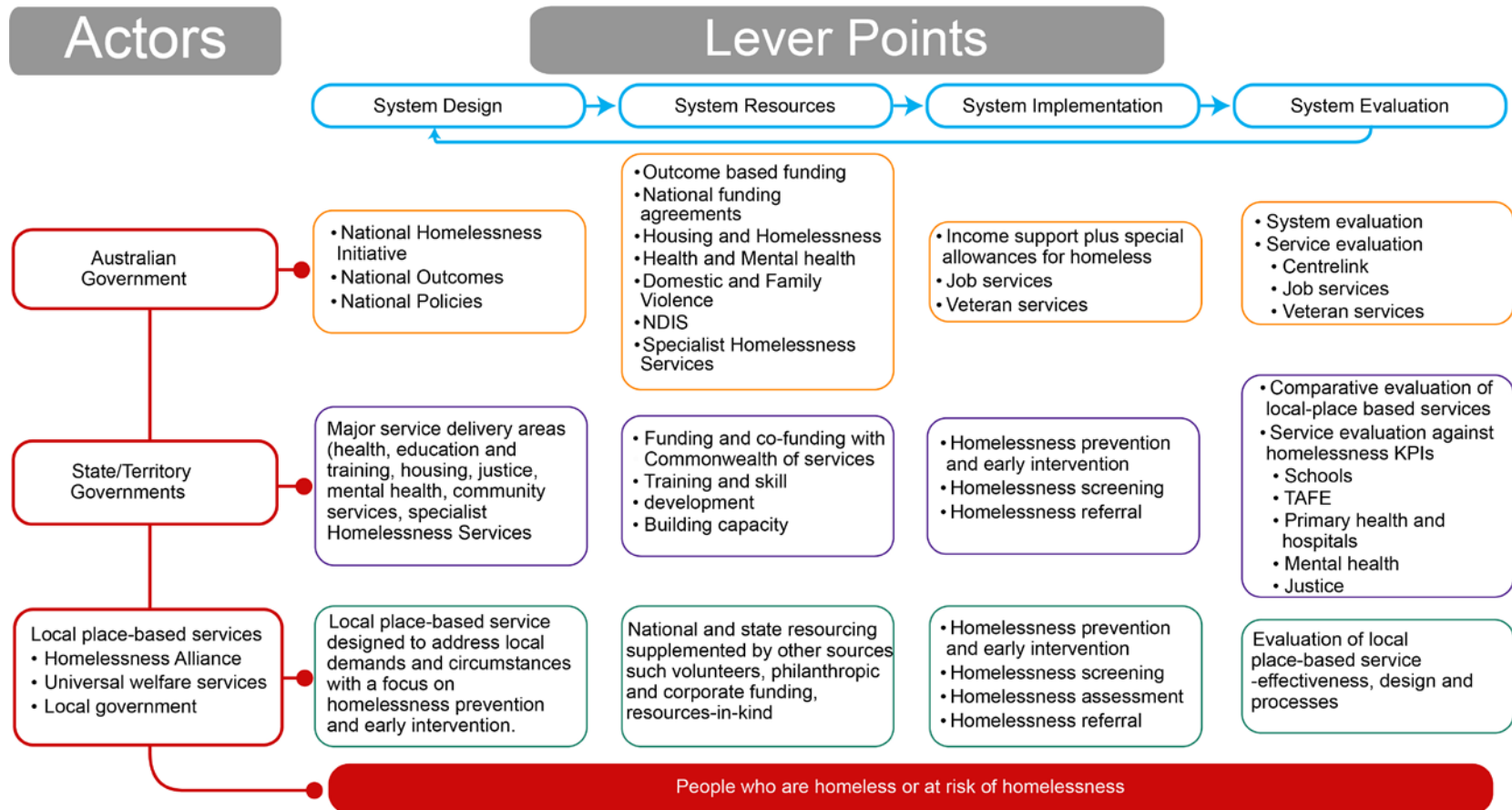
Figure 4 illustrates in more detail our proposed reconfiguration of the homelessness service system. It outlines the actors (the Australian Government, state and territory governments and local service delivery organisations) and the lever points (system design, system resources, system implementation and system evaluation). Each actor will use the lever points differently depending upon their role in the homelessness service system. Figure 4 also locates the development of local place-based alliances between government and purchased services.

Figure 3: A blueprint for reconfiguring the institutional structure of the homelessness service system



Source: Authors.

Figure 4: A blueprint for a reconfigured homelessness service system detailing actors and lever points



Source: Authors.

Indigenous research methodologies

An important finding of this Inquiry is that Indigenous research methodologies can be effectively augmented with system thinking approaches to provide both improved qualitative research methodologies and improved research outcomes. This dual approach should apply to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous homelessness and housing research.

Indigenous research methodologies can help everyone, not just Indigenous Australians. This can be achieved through recognition of the key elements of Indigenous methodologies, such as connection, reflexivity and reciprocity.

Acknowledgment and recognition of the important role of culture throughout the whole process of shaping and implementing a redesigned homelessness service system is vital in order for it to work effectively.

This report is the latest in a series on how effectively the homelessness service system works for people at different stages of the life course. Together, they build up the case for major change to the existing homelessness service and provide a blueprint for effective change. What is true of Australia, as elsewhere, is that the cost of providing crisis accommodation is often more expensive than providing housing support. However, it must also be recognised that in order for any homelessness service system to work effectively there needs to be an adequate appropriate supply of long-term affordable and social housing.



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