Understanding changes in Australian homelessness

AHURi

Australian Housing
and Urban Research Institute

Based on AHURI Final Report No. 313:
The changing geography of homelessness:
A spatial analysis from 2001 to 2016

What this research is about

This research examines the changing geography of homelessness. It outlines the extent to which homelessness is becoming more spatially concentrated over time; where it is rising and falling; and the importance that housing affordability, poverty and labour market opportunities play in reshaping its distribution.

The context of this research

The risk and experience of homelessness is shaped by the places in which people live and gravitate to, either by choice or necessity. Researchers know very little about how changing inequality in incomes, work and housing opportunities shape the changing spatial composition of homelessness, and to what extent policy and services are well placed to respond to this change.

Defining homelessness

The research uses the ABS definition of homelessness which includes six categories: people in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (rough sleeping); people in supported accommodation; people staying temporarily with other households (including with friends and family); people in boarding houses; people in other temporary lodging; and people living in severely crowded conditions.

The key findings

The national per capita rate of homelessness has been more or less stable from 2001–2016, although the number of people experiencing homelessness has increased by more than 20 per cent over this time.

Where homelessness is greatest

On a per capita basis homelessness remains highest in very remote areas. Indigenous background remains the strongest determinant of homelessness in remote areas and much of this is accounted for by severe crowding.

The largest share of homelessness in 2016 was in New South Wales, followed by Victoria and Queensland—a pattern in line with overall population distribution.

NSW has increased its share of national homelessness—from roughly one-quarter to one-third over 15 years. Most of this share is located in Greater Sydney. Most of the smaller states and territories have a falling *share* of the national count. In both the Northern Territory and Western Australia there is a sharp decline.

The biggest change is the increase in the share of people in severely crowded dwellings, accounting for

Figure 1: Different types of homelessness (ABS homelessness operational groups)

Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out

Persons in supported accommodation

Persons staying temporarily with other households

Persons living in boarding houses

Persons in other temporary lodgings

Persons living in severely crowded dwellings
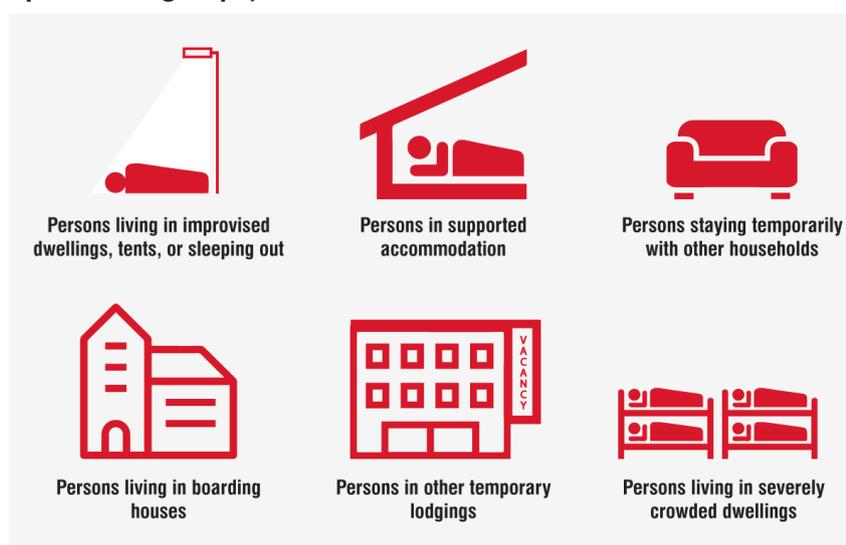
Figure 2: National shares (%) of homeless persons and population by area type: 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016
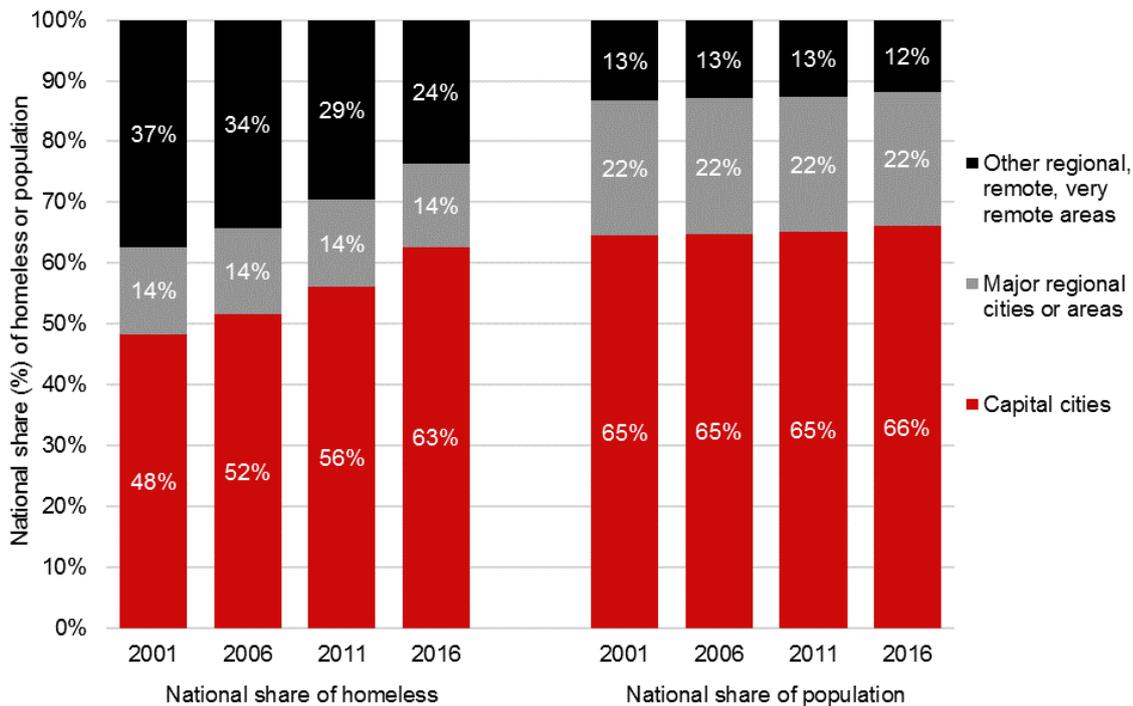
44 per cent of all homelessness by 2016—a little over 50 per cent higher than in 2001. People living in boarding houses was the second most prominent operational group in 2001, followed by people staying temporarily with other households. However by 2016, persons staying in supported accommodation had overtaken both of these other homelessness types.

People rough sleeping represent only a small fraction of national homelessness (7% in 2016), and this share has declined slightly since 2001. At the national level, rough sleeping has also declined using the per capita measure. Rough sleeping has transformed in to an urban phenomenon. In 2001, roughly one-third of rough sleepers were located in capital cities, but in 2016 rough sleepers in capital cities had reached nearly one-half of all rough sleepers.

Homelessness increasing in cities

Homelessness is becoming more concentrated in major cities, particularly in the most populous states of NSW and Victoria.

In 2001, capital cities accounted for 48 per cent of national homelessness, well below their share of the national population (at 65%). By 2016 the national share for capital cities had increased to 63 per cent, or nearly two-thirds of all homelessness.

Every state capital has lifted its *share* of national homelessness. Every 'rest of state' area accounts for a falling *share* of national homelessness. These patterns are responsible for an increasingly urbanised Australian homelessness profile.

Where homelessness is rising in cities

The capital cities show a high rate of homelessness in CBD and adjacent areas. However, moderate to high rates of homelessness are also dispersed across the metropolitan areas in middle to outer suburbs.

In Sydney, a corridor of high homelessness rates stretches from the inner city westward, through suburbs such as Marrickville, Canterbury, Strathfield, Auburn and Fairfield (more than 30 km from the CBD).
In Melbourne, high homelessness rates are found in Dandenong (around 25 km south-east of the CBD), Maribyrnong and Brimbank to the west of the city centre, Moreland and Darebin to the north and Whitehorse (about 15 km to the east of the CBD).

Characteristics of areas with increasing severe crowding

In 2001, 'other regional and remote' areas held 70 per cent of those experiencing severe crowding, yet in the 15 years to 2016 that share was halved (to 34%) and the capital city areas' share rose from 27 per cent in 2001 to 60 per cent in 2016. In a short 15-year period, the spatial character of severe crowding has transformed from one largely confined to regional and remote areas, to one dominated by urban regions.

Despite this, when expressed as a per capita rate, severe crowding still remains far more prevalent in 'other regional, remote and very remote areas'.

"The biggest change is the increase in the share of people in severely crowded dwellings, accounting for 44 per cent of all homelessness by 2016—a little over 50 per cent higher than in 2001."

Figure 3: Share of severe crowding by area type, 2001–2016
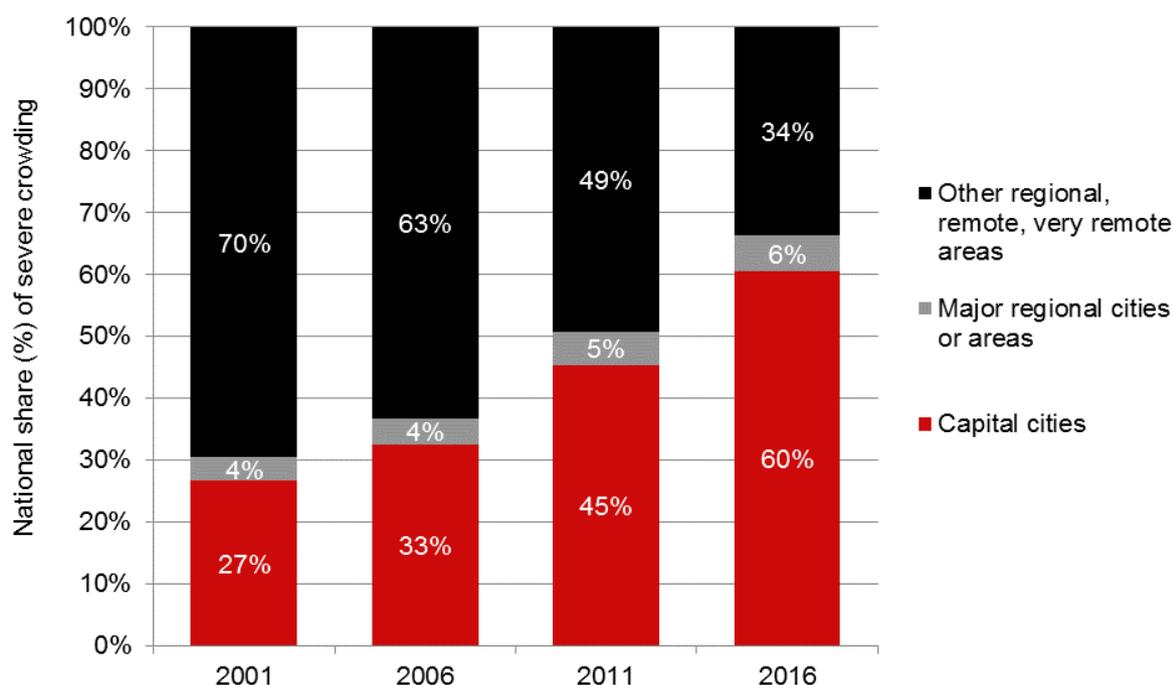
Local changes of homelessness

The research examines three types of factors that contribute to geographic changes in homelessness: national factors such as recessions; factors to do with change in different homeless groups (i.e. those sleeping rough, staying in supported accommodation, severe crowding); and the share due to other area-specific or region-specific factors (such as housing and labour market conditions, local service capacity or demographic factors).

In the areas where homelessness grew the fastest or the slowest, the effects of area-based factors are most important (at 83% and 157% respectively)—that is, differences in the characteristics of areas such as housing markets, policy interventions, service capacity or demographic profiles are the most important factors driving geographical differences in the growth rates of homelessness.

These findings suggest that the importance of drivers of homelessness may differ between capital city, regional cities and other regional and remote areas.

Change in concentrations of homelessness

There has been a slight decline in the concentration of homelessness between 2001 and 2016. The 20 regions across Australia with the highest numbers of homelessness accounted for around one in three people experiencing homelessness in both 2001 (36.4%) and 2016 (33.6%).

"For capital city areas where median private rents increased above capital city rates between 2001 and 2016, corresponding rates of homelessness also increased more rapidly—by 29 per cent compared with a 16 per cent increase for areas with growth below the city median."

Understanding spatial changes of homelessness

In capital cities and regional towns, rates of homelessness (apart from those in supported accommodation, which tends to be located closer to inner capital city areas) are significantly associated with poorer areas with weaker labour markets. However, this relationship does not hold in remote areas, which may potentially relate to the larger geographical expanse of these areas.

In capital cities rates of homelessness are strongly associated with areas that have high concentrations of males, and this effect increases significantly for severe crowding.

Nationally and in capital cities, severe crowding is more typical in areas with young children aged less than 14 years, but for other forms homelessness rates are elevated in areas where those aged between 25 and 40 years are more prevalent. In regional and remote areas, rates of all forms of homelessness are elevated where there are higher concentrations of young children less than 14 years.

Areas that are more culturally diverse—whether due to Indigenous status or being from non-English-speaking backgrounds—have higher observations of homelessness and severe crowding.

Homelessness rates, including severe crowding, are significantly lower in areas where the concentration of married people is highest.

Increases in median rents and reduced supplies of affordable rental housing have had a marked impact on rates of severe crowding. For capital city areas where median private rents increased above capital city rates between 2001 and 2016, corresponding rates of homelessness also increased more rapidly—by 29 per cent compared with a 16 per cent increase for areas with growth below the city median. This pattern is not evident when comparing growth in homelessness rates and median rents across 'rest of state' areas.

Spatial mismatch between homelessness and specialist homelessness services

Spatial mismatch of service capacity has been improving in regional and rural areas and worsening in major capital city areas between 2001 and 2016. In major capital cities, most specialist homelessness services (SHS) are located in and around inner capital city areas but homelessness rates, particularly severe crowding, are also increasing within middle and outer suburbs. Both outward migration and more targeted interventions to address severe crowding in remote areas are likely to be shaping this trend.

What this research means for policy makers

Policy makers and SHS providers need to plan for and direct additional resources to address the increasing urbanisation of homelessness between capital cities, regional and remote areas, as well as the concurrent suburbanisation of homelessness within capital cities.

A continued and expanded affordable housing supply-side response is critical to making inroads into preventing and resolving homelessness. The supply of affordable housing needs to match areas of population growth among lower income individuals and households in a way that also provides access to broader services, employment and amenities.

Flexible models to rent and purchase housing should be further explored and scaled up to overcome difficulties gaining access to affordable private rental in middle and outer suburbs and non-capital city areas.

Specialist homelessness services are vital in both the prevention and first responses to homelessness. It is critical that they are well located to respond in areas where demand is highest.

There is a need to gain more detailed insight into the service needs of those who are living in severely crowded dwellings, including more targeted and culturally appropriate service responses for individuals and households from culturally diverse backgrounds.

While rates of severe crowding remain highest in remote areas, targeted responses are required to combat the growth in crowding in major cities.

Methodology

This research draws on the 2001–2016 Census Homelessness Estimates; the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Time Series Profile dataset; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Specialist Homelessness Service Collection (SHSC) data; and special request data from the ABS on the supply and demand for affordable private rental housing.

Further information

TO CITE THE AHURI RESEARCH, PLEASE REFER TO:

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