

Ending homelessness in Australia: A redesigned homelessness service system



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 347: Ending homelessness in Australia: A redesigned homelessness service system

What this research is about

It has long been recognised that a more connected, integrated and responsive service system is required to address homelessness in Australia. 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 context of this research

The existing Australian homelessness service system has known strengths, but its effectiveness is constrained for different population groups who experience 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.

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The key findings

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.

Importantly, SHSs are funded by diverse sources: state and territory governments, the Australian Government, charitable organisations and other sources, including local governments. This has resulted in a highly fragmented system.

Key levers for creating a balance between early intervention, prevention and crisis services

Despite some innovative prevention and early innovation strategies and projects, in Australia the existing homelessness service system is still mostly orientated towards dealing with crisis through the provision of temporary accommodation. The following levers can help transition the homelessness system to prevention and early intervention:

- An important finding is that the changes required to create more effective homelessness services go beyond the work of SHSs and include changes in other interrelated service systems, as well as in the prevailing culture in society around homelessness and gender.
- One of the main problems identified was that the homelessness service system is crisis-driven but does not provide rapid long-term rehousing. Early prevention is about redirecting the flow of people who would otherwise go into homelessness. For some groups, such as young people, it can be almost impossible to enter social housing and unaffordable and insecure private rental accommodation can be their only post-crisis option. This can cause a cycle of relapse into homelessness.
- Lack of access to early intervention that does not include the provision of rental income protection for landlords makes it very difficult to prevent the reoccurrence of homelessness. Support is needed to prevent a return to homelessness for many clients of services even after they have been rehoused. Governments and government agencies can create the necessary levers to do this through a national homelessness initiative.
- Assertive outreach is effective in preventing young people, families and older people from losing their homes. This can be achieved by involving mainstream welfare agencies in asking people about their housing security, and can include schools, medical services, aged care assessments and Centrelink. It is vital that there is clear transfer of information to relevant agencies, or that the screening agency itself acts on the information received.
- Person-centred, rather than service-centred, approaches were called for by people who experience homeless. There are some notable examples of how such work is helping to reduce the numbers of young people becoming homeless in Geelong, Victoria. This is done using a place-based approach, where services work together in the same location.

- Improved data collection and measurement of who is at risk of becoming homeless is needed in order for sufficient early intervention and for prevention workers to be available, rather than services becoming involved when crisis accommodation is needed.
- In order to be effective, sustained support for families and individuals is needed at all stages, including preventing homelessness from occurring; intervening early once homelessness has occurred; providing crisis and transitional accommodation; and when a long-term housing solution is achieved.
- Despite systemic challenges, local networks and interagency collaboration can work well together to meet families' needs. Agencies reported they worked together to solve problems, drawing on whatever resources were available in the different services. Close relationships between sectors facilitated collaboration.
- Co-location is an effective existing strategy for collaboration, supporting referrals and allowing staff to take clients from one agency to the next.
- Participants also said that improved service provision could arise from integrated services that provided: models of care based on developing long-term relationships between service providers and homeless persons; a greater number of service points, and distribution in a variety of locations; and involvement of local government, state housing providers and the local Centrelink office.

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Culturally appropriate support for Indigenous Australians

There is sometimes a mismatch between Western systems and the needs of Indigenous Australians. Service providers need to recognise the importance of learning about and understanding Indigenous family practices, particularly that what non-Indigenous people see as 'extended' family is 'close' family to Indigenous Australians.

The effectiveness of flexible brokerage funding for Indigenous Australians was stressed by participants. Homelessness due to poverty brought about by large utility debts, often caused by overcrowding, can be prevented using flexible brokerage funding that can help pay debts and rent arrears. Brokerage can also help cover the costs of travel for 'sorry business', to assist clients to travel to a funeral and to assist people moving home or location.

For real improvements to occur, Indigenous Australians must be included in the planning, provision and delivery of services and responses to homelessness. Such involvement is consistent with the concepts of reciprocity and reflexivity that are a vital part of Indigenous research methodologies.

International homelessness solutions

The shift from crisis-oriented service provision to prevention and early intervention is a developing international trend in European countries such as Sweden, Norway and Finland, as well as in Wales, Scotland and England.

In developing integrated strategies to reduce and end homelessness, five factors are important:

1. starting with the rights and needs of each person
2. prevention and early intervention
3. a Housing First approach
4. strategic funding; a continuous and constant initiative
5. multi-level governance.

By adopting a Housing First approach, Finland and Norway have dramatically reduced the number of homeless people in their jurisdictions.

A key lesson from the United Kingdom's innovations is to focus on developing prevention as a multi-layered set of services that range from basic, generic housing advice through to a range of specialist support services designed to meet the needs of specific groups.

In Canada, advocacy around a 'duty to assist' homeless young persons lays the basis for the role of universal welfare services in homelessness prevention, and a similar approach could be developed in Australia.

What would a successful homelessness system include?

A fundamental system change, based on findings from Australia and from overseas, is proposed 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
- actively involve existing homelessness services in reshaping the sector to deliver agreed outcomes for, and on behalf of, governments
- develop long-term plans for an adequate supply of social and affordable housing.

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What this research means for policy makers

A reimagining of the Australian homelessness service system is proposed, with the primary elements being:

- a new national homelessness initiative—a funding arrangement that will give effect to a fundamental change in approach to homelessness and a reconfigured homelessness service system
- 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 a 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
- focus on prevention and early intervention rather than a crisis-driven response.

We propose a reconfiguration of the Australian homelessness service system, with the primary elements being:

- a changed role for universal welfare services and SHSs, such that universal welfare services instigate a 'duty to assist' and screen for risk of homelessness, provide brokerage funding to assist clients to maintain existing housing or access new housing, and refer to an SHS and Housing First agency, when necessary
- an explicit acknowledgement that governments—state, territory and federal—are just one part of the system seeking to reduce the impact of homelessness on affected individuals. There is a need for genuine dialogue between governments, the not-for-profit sector and other stakeholders
- state and territory governments developing local alliances comprising providers of purchased homelessness services and government (following the example of Glasgow, Scotland).

Methodology

This research Inquiry includes 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, Indigenous Australians and older people.

The research included reviews and analysis of Australian and International literature, and interviews with key policy and data stakeholders.

To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

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