



09 AUG, 2025

The impossible choices being made

Warrnambool Standard, Warrnambool

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HOMELESSNESS OR VIOLENCE We need more affordable housing

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COMMENT

Jodie Hill

THIS week is Homelessness Week. It is well documented that homelessness and an inadequate supply of public and affordable housing are ongoing challenges across our region, and indeed, across the country.

Homelessness in Australia is at the worst levels in living memory, according to Homelessness Australia, Australia's peak body for homelessness.

In late July Homelessness Australia released new data and a renewed call for action on our homelessness emergency. The data reveals some disturbing facts around the national levels of homelessness:

In 2023-24, more than 280,000 people accessed specialist homelessness services and those services are overwhelmed and under-resourced.

An additional 72,000 people were turned away - three in four were women or children.

Research shows at least 48,000 more couldn't even access the system, because overwhelmed homelessness services were forced to go on 'bypass'.

More than 12 per cent of people seeking homelessness support are working people with an income.

The national homelessness crisis is exacerbated by both climate change and the housing crisis; 5.6 million homes are at bushfire risk, nearly one million at flood risk, and 23,000 people are displaced annually due to severe weather events. Victims of severe weather events often gain access to housing ahead of those who were already homeless or at risk, and each major weather event has the potential to significantly increase the number of people experiencing homelessness.

The gendered perspective

Trends over the past three years show that women and girls are very much at the forefront of this crisis;

■ The number of women and girls accessing

services increased 14 per cent

■ Those already homeless when they sought help rose 20 per cent

■ Nearly half of women and girls seeking help were fleeing family violence

■ First Nations women and girls seeking help increased 19 per cent

Homelessness in Victoria

Closer to home, Safe and Equal teamed up with Council to Homeless Persons to deliver the Bridging the Gap between Homelessness and Family Violence Services report in July. This report focuses on the Victorian experience of homelessness.

Shockingly, the state has the lowest proportion of social housing in the country at just 2.9 per cent and one third of people seeking homelessness assistance in Australia, live in Victoria.

What is social, affordable housing?

While there is often general community support for taking positive action around social and affordable housing, it is not always supported when it's close to home.

Community concern about social and affordable housing plans has been significant across our communities, with the "not in my backyard" sentiment creating barriers for some initiatives. It raises the question, does everyone truly understand what affordable housing means?

Affordable housing is housing, including social housing, that is appropriate for the needs of very low, low, and moderate income households, as defined by the Planning and Environment Act 1987.

To be eligible for affordable housing a tenant must meet income thresholds and rent is set at least 10 per cent below market rent. Affordable housing properties are not eligible for Commonwealth rent assistance.

Social housing includes public housing and community housing. Public housing



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is owned and managed by the state and tenants are charged 25 per cent of their income as rent. Public housing tenants are not eligible for commonwealth rent assistance. Community housing is provided by not-for-profit organisations. Tenants are charged up to 30 per cent of their income as rent and are eligible for commonwealth rent assistance.

Who lives in affordable housing?

Affordable housing tenants are working but have low incomes. People will either come from the local community or be coming to the community to work and contribute to the economy.

Social housing tenants will also already be living in the community and will be people with very low incomes - those on job seeker, pension or disability benefits.

Tenants are drawn from the Victorian Housing Register and people often wait many years before being allocated a property. In recent years there has been a large increase in people escaping family violence who are being housed in social housing.

Violence and homelessness

The Bridging the Gap report from Safe + Equal shows that domestic and family violence is the single biggest driver of homelessness in Victoria. The report found that 20 per cent of women and children leaving family violence in Victoria are "ping-ponged" between family violence and homelessness services without ever receiving crisis accommodation.

During the 2023-24 year, more than 60,000 women sought help from homelessness services across the state, representing 58 per cent of all support seekers. More than half of these report that they have experienced family violence.

Homelessness or violence - no one should have to choose

A woman is killed every three weeks in a domestic and family violence-related incident in Victoria. Women and children are disproportionately affected by homelessness brought on by this kind of threat to their physical and psychological safety.

The inability to access accommodation, either crisis accommodation or ongoing housing, creates a situation where it is

harder for women and children to escape from a violent home, putting them at significant risk.

So, what can be done?

The Bridging the Gap report calls on the Victorian government to commit to building around 8000 new social homes each year for the next decade, as well as boosting funding for both Specialist Homelessness Services and Family Violence Services to fund more frontline staff.

Other recommendations include doubling the capacity of family violence refuges to reduce reliance on motels for emergency accommodation, as well as boosting investment in Safe At Home responses which focus on finding alternative accommodation for the perpetrator rather than the victim survivor and children.

Homelessness Australia's report points out that while the government has made welcome social housing investments and increases to Commonwealth Rent Assistance, the overall proportion of social housing continues to fall while rents continue to rise. In combination, this means that more people are ultimately pushed into homelessness.

They call for three critical actions addressing the need for long-term investment in both social housing infrastructure and the income supports that prevent poverty:

- A national plan to end homelessness
- New investment in homelessness services, and,
- Major growth in social housing and income support.

Even taken in full and driven with commitment and funding, it is hard to see how the recommended actions can be delivered at the scale and speed required to support the many people currently experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless.

That said, as a community we must surely understand the absolute need to increase access to affordable and social housing - as well as crisis accommodation and services - across our communities.

Perhaps the role we can play is to step away from the "not in my backyard" reaction and show support for initiatives that can help keep members of our community safer, healthier and housed.



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Homelessness in Australia is at the worst levels in living memory, according to Homelessness Australia. Inset: Women's Health and Wellbeing Barwon South West chief executive officer Jodie Hill.