

Research Summary: Migration, Housing and Health

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Housing is a basic human right and a social determinant of health

Housing insecurity (including homelessness) presents risks for a range of mental and physical health issues, social exclusion and discrimination.^{1,2}

Homelessness occurs when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives if their “*current living arrangement is in a dwelling that is inadequate; has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.*”³

2016 Census findings

On census night in 2016, 116,000 people experienced homelessness in Australia, of which 9,000 were reported in Western Australia (WA).⁴ WA has the highest proportion of people born overseas in Australia (32%) and on census night in 2016, 12.7% of people who accessed homelessness services were born overseas.⁷

Factors contributing to housing insecurity and homelessness in Australia

- Family and domestic violence
- Housing unaffordability
- Unemployment
- Mental illness and drug use.³

15%

Of those born overseas or who had arrived in Australia within the past 5 years were estimated to be homeless.⁴

Although Australia is ranked third in the world for its resettlement commitments:

74%

Of those born overseas/arrived in Australia within the past 5 years were living in severely crowded dwellings.⁴⁻⁶

13%

Of those born overseas/arrived in Australia within the past 5 years were living in boarding houses.⁴⁻⁶

Top 3 regions of origin:

sub-Saharan Africa
(563 people)

Oceania and Antarctica
(508 people)

Southeast Asia
(444 people).⁷

Although these data provide some insights it is worth noting that homelessness data in the census is likely under reported, as information about rough sleepers are often not adequately captured.

1. Stafford A, Wood L. Tackling Health Disparities for People Who Are Homeless? Start with Social Determinants. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2017;14(12).
2. Ziersch A, Walsh M, Due C, Duivesteyn E. Exploring the Relationship between Housing and Health for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Australia: A Qualitative Study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2017;14(9):1036.
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016 2018 [Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@nsf/Latestproducts/2049.0Appendix12016?opendocument&tabname=Notes&prodno=2049.0&issue=2016&num=&view>.
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016 2016 [Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/mf/2049.0>.
5. Fozdar F, Hartley L. Refugee Resettlement in Australia: What We Know and Need to Know. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*. 2013;32(3):23-51.
6. Chen W, Wu S, Li L, Renzaho A. Impacts of social integration and loneliness on mental health of humanitarian migrants in Australia: evidence from a longitudinal study *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. 2019;43(1):46-55.
7. Government of Western Australia. Directions Paper for the 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness Western Australia 2019–2029 2019

Asylum seekers and refugees are more likely to experience poor mental health outcomes which can increase the risk of homelessness.⁸

Factors increasing risk of poor mental health:

- Settlement processes in Australia^{8,9}
- Loss of connection with country of origin^{8,9}
- Stress associated with seeking asylum^{8,9}
- Family separation⁶
- Discrimination¹⁰
- Loss of death of a family member⁶
- Compromised living conditions⁶
- Deprivation of basic necessities⁶
- Stigma¹⁰

Evidence suggests that asylum seekers and refugees are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression.⁶ Stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health illness can prevent people from securing housing.¹⁰

There are additional factors contributing to housing insecurity risk for people from CaLD backgrounds in Australia.



8. Couch J. 'Neither here nor there': Refugee young people and homelessness in Australia Children and Youth Services Review. 2017;74(1).

9. Speak S. Point of no return: Exploring the issues which trap migrants in a state of homelessness in the city International Development Planning Review. 2010;32(3):225-43.

10. Multicultural Mental Health Australia. Homelessness amongst culturally and linguistically diverse people with a mental illness. 2011.

11. Dawes G, Golpalkrishnan N. Far North Queensland Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD) Homelessness Project 2014.

12. Flatau P, Carson G, Miller J. The housing and homelessness journeys of refugees in Australia. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute at UWA; 2015. Report No.: AHURI Final Report No. 256.

13. Savic M, Chur-Hansen A, Mahmood MA, Moore VM. 'We don't have to go and see a special person to solve this problem': Trauma, mental health beliefs and processes for addressing 'mental health issues' among Sudanese refugees in Australia. International Journal of Social Psychiatry. 2016;62(1):76-83.

14. Wali N, Georgeou N, Renzaho AMN. 'Life Is Pulled Back by Such Things': Intersections Between Language Acquisition, Qualifications, Employment and Access to Settlement Services Among Migrants in Western Sydney. Journal of Intercultural Studies. 2018;39(1):85-101.

Interventions

The Australian Government funds a range of support services to address homelessness. Services are typically delivered by non-government organisations (NGOs) to specific target groups.¹⁵

Those more likely to utilise homelessness services and experience increased housing needs in WA include:

- young people;
- older people;
- people experiencing mental health issues;
- people experiencing domestic and family violence; and
- people with disabilities.¹⁶



Services are centred on crisis and transitional accommodation, providing tenancy support to those at risk, specialised support services and transition to permanent housing.¹⁶

Other initiatives include:

Volunteering opportunities assisting migrants to integrate into Australian culture, improve social inclusion and provide opportunities to practice language skills.¹⁴

Financial literacy courses combined with no interest finance programs that enable people to take out small loans and purchase household items, cars and pay for health services.¹¹

Housing models that provide long term accommodation and access to onsite services and engagement with support services.¹⁷

Collaboration between NGOs, government organisations and housing services to provide refugees and asylum seekers with resources, ongoing support and safe, long-term housing.¹⁸

Long-term housing provision for people experiencing poor mental health, drug and alcohol issues, trauma and violence.¹⁹

Programs to assist those seeking asylum and have exited detention centres to find suitable accommodation.²⁰

15. City of Perth. Homeless Sector Review 2017 [Available from: https://dropin.org.au/homelesssectorreview-perthv.1.2_0.pdf]

16. Kaleveld L, Flatau P, Thomas L, Cull O, Knight J. The Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness: Ending Homelessness in Western Australia Report 2019 [Available from: https://www.csi.edu.au/media/WAAEH_Report_2019_FINAL.pdf]

17. University of Queensland. Brisbane Common Ground - Evaluation 2013 [Available from: <https://issr.uq.edu.au/brisbane-common-ground-evaluation/>]

18. Burns J. Asylum seekers and refugees: another pathway to homelessness and social exclusion in Australia. *Parity*. 2010;23(4):43-5.

19. Wood L, Vallesi S, Kragt D, Flatau P, Wood N, Gazey A, et al. 50 Lives 50 Homes: A Housing First Response to Ending Homelessness. First Evaluation Report. Perth, Western Australia: University of Western Australia; 2017.

20. Refugee Council of Australia. The home stretch: Challenges and alternatives in sustainable housing for refugees and people seeking asylum 2014 [Available from: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/home-stretch-sustainable-housing/>]

Renters programs to provide new arrivals with information about how to apply for rental properties, their rights and responsibilities as tenants and evidence to provide to real estate agents in lieu of rental references.²¹

Collaborations between real estate agents, homelessness service providers and government agencies to highlight the importance of supporting tenants at risk of eviction to prevent people from unnecessarily entering the homelessness service system.²²

International studies cite the link between homelessness and health.²

A number of interventions are in place in countries such as Canada, the UK and the USA including:

- education for homelessness service providers;
- prioritising the reduction of discriminatory barriers in the housing system and increased structural support such as transitional housing, rental supplements and housing allowances;²³
- private sponsorship programs for refugees including providing information regarding language classes, schools and places to live;²⁴
- shelters providing holistic care, support and advocacy for those experiencing housing insecurity;
- assistance and subsidised housing through one-on-one counselling; and
- services for families in their first year in host country that assist with settling in, becoming part of their community and rebuilding their lives in safety and peace.

Intervention and service evaluation indicates they may not meet the needs of refugees, migrants and people from CaLD backgrounds.^{5, 6, 25}

While housing and social services provided by the Australian Government are more likely to be successful in securing long term tenancies for refugees;

Approximately:
25% experience housing affordability issues following settlement¹²

Less than:
10% of refugees access public housing services within 18 months of resettling in Australia²⁶

21. Refugee Council of Australia. Housing issues for refugees and asylum seekers in Australia 2013 [Available from: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/1309_HousingLitRev.pdf.]

22. Settlement Services International. NSW Settlement Partnership In focus 2017 [Available from: https://www.ssi.org.au/images/stories/documents/publications/NSP_InFocus-screen.pdf.]

23. Murdie R. Precarious beginnings: the housing situation of Canada's refugees Canadian Issues. 2010:47-51.

24. Agrawal S. Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Programs: Experience of Syrian Refugees in Alberta, Canada. Journal of International Migration and Integration. 2018:1-22.

25. Bow M. Elizabeth Street Common Ground Supportive Housing. Parity. 2011;24(7):24.

26. Couch J. A new way home: Refugee young people and homelessness in Australia. Journal of Social Inclusion. 2011;2(1):39-52.

Barriers to service use

- Unfamiliarity with services and lack of cultural sensitivity by staff
- A reluctance to utilise interpreting services, all of which can lead to discrimination, racism and service avoidance.¹⁰
- Language barriers may mean that refugees, migrants and people from CaLD backgrounds are unaware of services available, highlighting the need for accessible services in the initial period of migration to Australia.¹⁴

Although many organisations provide appropriate models of care for some groups, service provision is often limited by funding.¹⁸ Specialist CaLD services may compete with “mainstream” services for resources. People from CaLD backgrounds may be reluctant to access mainstream services, increasing vulnerability for housing insecurity. In addition to potential cost savings, there are improved physical and mental health outcomes due to increased self-determination once residents feel they have been removed from the stigma associated with homelessness. Specialist service organisations may facilitate this.¹⁷

Evaluation found that governments can save up to \$13,000 per year per tenant by providing secure housing to people who are homeless.¹⁷ In WA, the potential health system cost saving associated with public housing is \$4,846 per person per year.²⁷

Recommendations

- There are limited statistical data regarding refugees, migrants and people from CaLD backgrounds resulting in challenges determining the extent of homelessness within these populations, and likely under-reporting.⁸
- For example, reporting by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) on the health, social and economic benefits of providing public housing and support to homeless people omit refugees, migrants and CaLD backgrounds from their evaluation and recommendations.²⁸
- The AHURI research progresses priority areas identified by the National Mental Health Commission to provide more housing and improved services for people with lived experience of poor mental health, but does not include recommendations for refugees, migrants and people from CaLD backgrounds.²⁹
- Refugees, migrants and people from CaLD backgrounds are not included in the WA Alliance to End Homelessness 10 Year Strategy³⁰ and in limited form in the WA State Government’s 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020–2030.³¹
- Refugees, migrants and people from CaLD backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to homelessness in WA and are often excluded from reporting.

27. Kaleveld L, Seiwright A, Box E, Callis Z, Flatau P. Homelessness in Western Australia: A review of the research and statistical evidence 2018 [Available from: https://www.csi.edu.au/media/Homelessness_in_WA_Report_Web.pdf]

28. Wood L, Flatau P, Zaretzky K, Foster S, Vallesi S, Miscenko D. What are the health, social and economic benefits of providing public housing and support to formerly homeless people?: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute; 2016. Contract No.: AHURI Final Report No. 265.

29. Brackertz N, Wilkinson A, Davison J. Housing, homelessness and mental health: Towards systems change. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute; 2018.

30. Zanella D, Flatau P, Hunt A, Glasson M, Berger J, Gregory K, et al. The Western Australian Strategy to End Homelessness. Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (WAAEH); 2018.

31. Government of Western Australia. All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia’s 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030. In: Communities Do, editor. 2019.

Overall, not enough is known about, or done, regarding housing issues, needs and experiences for people from CaLD backgrounds in Australia.¹¹

Indicators relating to people from CaLD backgrounds need improving to further understand and identify specific needs given the interlinked issues of homelessness and poor mental health.³²

Further research recommended examining the following:

1.

Strategies and services that overcome migration stressors, with emphasis placed upon social environments, cultural factors and psychosocial interventions that promote connectedness and inclusivity in a culturally appropriate way.⁶

2.

Efforts should be directed towards improving housing affordability for people from CaLD backgrounds to improve health and wellbeing and particular consideration directed towards links between housing and mental health outcomes.²

3.

Individual risk assessments should be conducted to identify those at greater risk of housing stress and tailored strategies should be developed.¹² Specialised services should be available to meet the diverse needs of people from CaLD backgrounds. Services addressing mental health issues, domestic violence, youth issues or disability should be consistent with the values of people from CaLD backgrounds.³³

4.

People from CaLD backgrounds require “choice and control” when accessing services and housing options, and interventions and services for people from CaLD backgrounds should be co-designed with their participation.³³

For more information on the Journey to Home Project findings refer to the other research summaries located on the Journey to Home website.

32. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australia's Health 2018 [Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-welfare-overview/australias-health/glossary>.]

33. Mental Health Commission. Draft Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Accommodation and Support Strategy 2018-2025. Government of Western Australia; 2018.