



## Women and Homelessness

Homelessness is one of the most potent examples of disadvantage in the community, and one of the most important markers of social exclusion.<sup>1</sup> Women's exposure to homelessness is strongly linked to gender-based social and economic inequalities, including their experience of family and domestic violence.<sup>2</sup>

Homelessness is not just the result of too few houses. Factors that contribute to homelessness include family and domestic violence, a chronic shortage of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, economic and social exclusion, family breakdown, mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>1</sup>

Estimating the homelessness population is a complex undertaking; however, data collected at each Census show that on any given night in Australia, 1 in 200 people are homeless.<sup>2</sup> These are people without suitable alternatives to sleeping rough (i.e. in improvised dwellings or tents), or who are staying in supported accommodation, boarding houses, temporary lodgings, severely overcrowded dwellings, or other households on a temporary basis.<sup>1</sup>

Women make up 44% of the estimated homeless population.<sup>2</sup> There are patterns to women's homelessness experience that make a gender neutral approach to the problem grossly inadequate. Men who experience homelessness are more likely to sleep rough on the streets or stay in boarding houses. Women who experience homelessness are more likely to be accompanied by dependent children in their care; and more likely to explore options other than sleeping rough. While many women seek support through specialist homelessness services, others stay with friends or family, or couch surf. Others manage their homelessness risk by remaining in relationships that are violent or abusive, or repartnering with violent or abusive partners, to maintain their housing security. All of this makes women's homelessness less 'visible' than men's, and the number of women experiencing homelessness is likely to be an underestimate of reality.<sup>3</sup>

### Women experiencing family violence

Family and domestic violence is a significant cause of homelessness among women. When family violence happens, it is generally women who flee rather than perpetrators who leave.<sup>1</sup> Women might be with children in their care, or without children. Data from specialist homelessness services tell us that:

- of the total number of Australian women with children receiving specialist homelessness services, the most frequently cited reason for seeking help is interpersonal relationships (in 61% of support periods) and family violence in particular (45%);<sup>4</sup>
- for more than half of Victorian women with children receiving specialist homelessness services, the main reason for seeking support is family violence;<sup>5</sup> and
- of the total number of Victorian women who seek support (i.e. with and without children), more than one-third are fleeing family violence.<sup>5</sup>

Homelessness impacts on many basic human rights including privacy, health, education, work, freedom of movement, personal safety, voting, freedom of expression, non-discrimination and social security.<sup>6</sup>

Not all women who experience family violence will become homeless, as some have greater access to financial and social resources such as income and housing. Poverty and financial insecurity can nonetheless compound the lived experience of family violence for many women, putting them at increased risk of homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

Refuge accommodation is available to women fleeing family violence; however, this is typically for short periods of time, posing ongoing risks to homelessness. With the chronic shortage of affordable housing in the private rental market, a lack of public housing, and inappropriate crisis accommodation, women fleeing family violence often find they are living in unsafe and temporary housing situations for extended periods of time.<sup>7</sup>

For more on violence against women, see Women's Health East's [website](#) (fact sheets series).

## Other groups of women at increased risk of homelessness

While chronic shortages in affordable housing put many Australians at risk of homelessness, gender-based economic and social inequalities make women particularly vulnerable. Over the life course, women are more likely than men to work part time in paid employment, be paid less for work of comparable worth, do more hours of unpaid primary caregiving and household chores, and have fragmented paid work histories.<sup>8</sup> These material circumstances and lived experiences, shaped by gender norms, leave women financially insecure throughout the life course and put them at risk of homelessness, including later in life. For more on women and financial security, see Women's Health East's [website](#) (fact sheets series).

Older single women are a growing cohort in Australia's homelessness population, with many women having no previous experience of homelessness until they reach their older years. Some have gone through a relationship breakdown; others have been forced out of employment due to ill health, age or changes in skill requirements. Private rental is unaffordable to them, and public housing waiting lists are extensive.<sup>9</sup> Given the ageing population, women's life expectancies, and women's financial insecurity in the older years, it is expected that homelessness among older women will become an even bigger problem in the years to come.

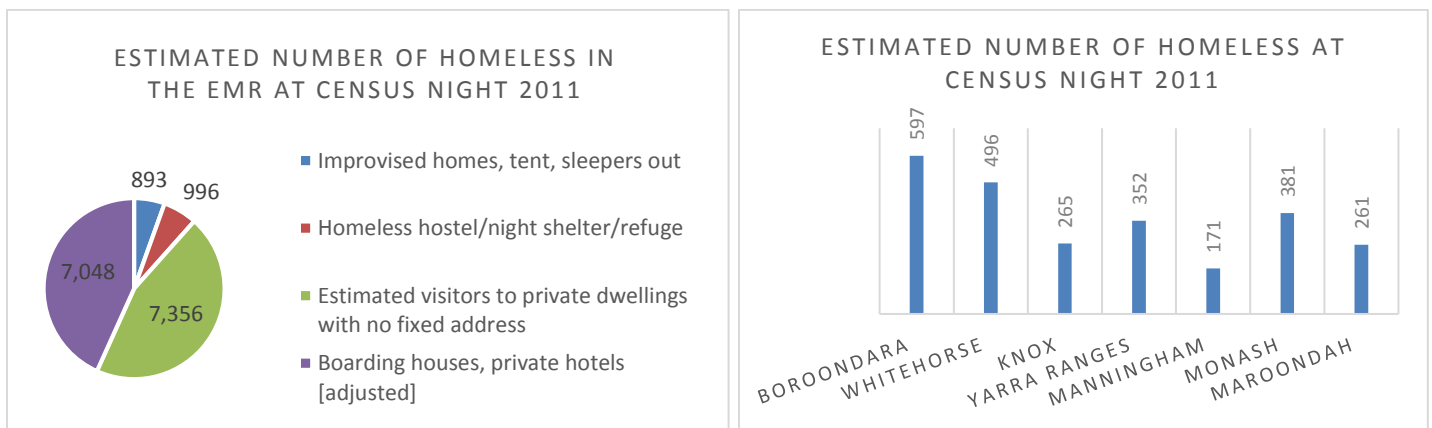
One of the most disadvantaged demographic profiles for a person to have is to be old, single, poor, female and in private rental accommodation.<sup>9</sup>

Homelessness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be understood without reference to the legacy of colonisation and dispossession. A history of physical and cultural displacement leaves many Indigenous people living in overcrowded conditions and at increased risk of homelessness.<sup>10</sup> Indigenous women face barriers to obtaining secure affordable housing, including the need for larger houses to accommodate extended family and discrimination in the housing market.<sup>2</sup> They also experience violence at more than twice the rate of non-Indigenous women.<sup>11</sup> Data from specialist homelessness services show that:

- 40% of the Indigenous clients of specialist homelessness services are women escaping domestic violence;
- 21% of women seeking support from specialist homeless services because of domestic violence identify as Indigenous.<sup>10</sup>

Women's homelessness has implications for dependent children in their care. A child's education can be disrupted and their physical and mental health and wellbeing negatively impacted through the homelessness of their caregiver.<sup>2</sup>

## Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR)



The charts above illustrate the number of persons in the EMR who indicated they may have been homeless on Census night 2011, based on the type of accommodation recorded\*. Overall, Yarra Ranges recorded the highest number of rough sleepers, and Monash the highest number of people in hostels and refuges.<sup>1</sup>

Local governments in the region have recognised the need for affordable housing and appropriate housing stock to meet the changing needs of their community, particularly women, across the life course.<sup>12</sup>

\*EMR data will be updated following the release of the 2016 Census data on this type of accommodation.

# References

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- <sup>3</sup> Syngajewski L, O'Leary D, Koch J, Flynn D & Owens H 2007, 'Women who are single and homeless: Myths and realities', *Parity*, vol. 20, no. 7, pp. 6-8
- <sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2016, *Specialist Homelessness Services 2014–15*, retrieved 10 May 2016, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/contents/the-policy-framework-for-reducing-homelessness>
- <sup>5</sup> Council to Homeless Persons n.d., 'Family violence and homelessness,' retrieved 15 January 2018, <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Family-violence-fact-sheet-FINAL.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission 2008, 'Homelessness is a human rights issue', retrieved 14 May 2016, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/homelessness-human-rights-issue>
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- <sup>8</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2015, *Women's Economic Security in Retirement: Perspective paper*, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, retrieved 20 December 2017, [https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/PP\\_womens\\_economic\\_security\\_in\\_retirement.pdf](https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/PP_womens_economic_security_in_retirement.pdf)
- <sup>9</sup> McFerran L 2010, 'It Could be You: Older, single, female and homelessness', Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, retrieved 14 May 2016, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.arc-125188>; and see also 'Single women face a frightening future of homelessness in Australia', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 9 2017, retrieved 15 January 2018, <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/news-and-views/opinion/single-women-face-a-frightening-future-of-homelessness-in-australia-20170808-gxrw3s.html>
- <sup>10</sup> Homelessness NSW n.d., 'Indigenous people and homelessness', retrieved 15 January 2018, <https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/indigenous-people-and-homelessness>
- <sup>11</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety 2014, 'Fast Facts – Indigenous Family Violence', retrieved 26 November 2017, <https://anrows.org.au/publications/fast-facts-0/indigenous-family-violence>
- <sup>12</sup> See for example, Boroondara <https://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/Residents/health-wellbeing/housing-homelessness/older-women-on-the-margins>, Knox [http://www.knox.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.aspx?Page\\_Id=1057](http://www.knox.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.aspx?Page_Id=1057), and Maroondah [http://www.maroondah.vic.gov.au/common/files/PlanningSustainability/Maroondah\\_Housing\\_Strategy\\_fact\\_sheet\\_4.docx](http://www.maroondah.vic.gov.au/common/files/PlanningSustainability/Maroondah_Housing_Strategy_fact_sheet_4.docx)