



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 5

Secure and affordable housing

A place to call home is an essential part of life. It provides a secure environment where we can grow and develop, go to school, maintain employment and be part of a community. An increasing number of Australians, however, are struggling to find or stay in affordable and adequate housing. An unacceptable number of women and men, children and families are homeless. There is a pressing need to provide disadvantaged individuals and families with a range of accommodation options which suit their needs and promote their participation in community life.

Why this is important

While many Australians currently enjoy a decent standard of living and a place to call home, over the past decade a growing number of individuals and families have struggled to find and keep secure, affordable accommodation. More people are homeless and more people are living under significant 'housing stress' than there were ten years ago. The effects of the recent global economic downturn are also likely to contribute to housing stress.

Despite our relative wealth and small population, a recent UN report found that Australia is in the middle of "a serious national housing crisis", with "reductions in public housing stock, soaring private rental rates, an acknowledged housing affordability crisis and no real reduction in the number of homeless"¹.

A lack of affordable and secure housing has the greatest impact on vulnerable members of the community: individuals and families living in poverty, Indigenous people, young people, older renters, people with disabilities and mental health problems, new migrants and refugees.

Inadequate or temporary housing can compound existing social disadvantage. It can make it much harder for people who are already on the margins to find and retain work, access education or training, get the health care they need, develop and maintain supportive relationships and be involved in community life.

This sets up a cycle that can entrench poverty and insecure living arrangements and can be a significant contributing factor in eviction and homelessness. On any one night in Australia, 105,000 people have no place to call home².

In recent years the amount of social housing (public housing, community housing, Indigenous housing and crisis accommodation) has reduced, with the demand for dwellings far outstripping supply.

There are currently around 380,000 social housing dwellings in Australia. However, there are more than 230,000 applicants on the waiting list³. It is not uncommon for people in some states to wait up to ten years for a place to become available. Both funding and supply of public housing have decreased in the last decade.

The problem of affordable housing has also begun to affect a greater number of people, a result of the rapidly rising cost of private rental

Families and young children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises housing as being an essential part of children's wellbeing.

When children are homeless or living in inadequate housing the effects can be far-reaching. Poor social and economic circumstances impact on children's lives in a number of ways, including the quality of their family relationships and their educational, developmental and health outcomes.

The high cost of housing in Australia's major cities is pushing low and middle income families into 'satellite towns' and regional areas where the cost of buying and renting a place to live is more affordable.

Our own research on young families re-locating to non-metropolitan areas highlights that there are often significant costs associated with re-locating. While more affordable housing was cited by most participants as a reason for moving, dislocation from informal networks, inadequate local transport systems and inadequate services were a fact of life in all four study sites⁷.

dwellings in Australia's capital cities and house prices that have increased four-fold in the last 20 years⁴.

According to the latest census data, around 1.2 million Australian households – or one in seven – are facing 'housing stress', which occurs when more than 30 per cent of gross income is spent on recurrent housing costs. This is a rise of 20 per cent over the past ten years⁵.

Over half of all individuals and families in housing stress are private renters⁶, many of whom spend more than half their income on housing.

Many other owners, purchasers and renters must live in unsuitable housing – inadequate or poorly maintained dwellings, properties which are unsuitable for frail older people or those with disabilities, or in locations with limited access to jobs, services, transport or supportive social networks – in order to avoid unaffordable rent or mortgages.

These 'hidden' victims may out-number those individuals and families living in housing stress.

What should be done?

Adequate housing is not a privilege; it is a basic human right. It provides a solid base that supports a range of other rights, including health, education and employment.

Individuals and families enjoy a better quality of life when they have strong social connections with their community and good relationships with their neighbours. The Benevolent Society recognises the importance of building capacity and promoting social cohesion in disadvantaged communities and appropriate housing with ready access to transport and services is an essential part of this.

The Benevolent Society welcomes the steps initiated by the Australian Government to address the problems faced by low income Australians in finding affordable and appropriate housing, such as establishing the Housing Affordability Fund and a National Rental Affordability Scheme.

These schemes can be strengthened by state and local governments tying development approval to affordable housing targets in all new developments, as well as ensuring that appropriate services and public transport are accessible.

We are also pleased that the issue of homelessness is now firmly on the public agenda. Prime Minister Rudd has described homelessness as a 'national obscenity' and recently the Australian Government released a homelessness White Paper setting out a number of goals to halve homelessness by 2020 and offer accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it by 2020¹³.

A coordinated, 'joined up' approach involving all levels of government and the non-profit sector is essential if we are to make a real difference in ensuring that disadvantaged Australians have access to secure, adequate accommodation.

The Benevolent Society welcomes the Australian Government's recent announcement that it will invest in social housing. The National Affordable Housing Summit Group has recommended that 250,000 new dwellings be built by 2020. New dwellings must be located in areas that are close to health and family services, public transport and other amenities that promote social inclusion.

Older people

Older people who rent are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion. On average they pay a third of their gross income on housing – the highest proportion of any age group or tenure type. Five percent of pensioners receiving rent assistance spend more than half of their income on rent⁸.

The combination of low income, high rents and lack of secure tenure contribute to higher rates of social isolation – as frequent moves can disrupt social networks – as well as poorer health and sometimes homelessness.

The number of older people who rent privately is projected to rise sharply in the coming years. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute estimates that the number of people aged 65 years or over living in low-income rental households will more than double from 195,000 in 2001 to 419,000 in 2026⁹.

For older owners and renters, the design and location of their

housing greatly affects their ability to remain independent as they age and become more frail.

Most of Australia's housing stock does not allow for the changing needs of older people. The lack of housing that is both affordable by older people and suited to their changing health and mobility, results in people having to move away from their support networks and contributes to premature moves into residential aged care.

The Benevolent Society's proposed Apartments for Life project in Bondi, New South Wales, is a new form of housing, care and support for older people that is fully integrated into – and in tune with – the local community. Apartments for Life aims to directly address the issue of housing affordability, with 10 percent of the apartments allocated to disadvantaged older renters and 30 percent allocated to low income home-owners¹⁰.

Women experiencing domestic violence

Domestic violence is a major factor contributing to homelessness in Australia, especially for women.

However, the lack of affordable housing and timely access to public housing, and the inadequate provision of long-term housing, particularly in rural areas, can force women to either remain in, or return to, situations of domestic violence¹¹.

While legal provisions mean that violent men can be excluded from the home, most women are unaware of this option and police and magistrates can be reluctant to recommend it. As a result, women are often forced to leave violent situations without financial support or safe, alternative accommodation¹².

There is also a chronic lack of available refuge space for women leaving violence, as well as suitable emergency accommodation for women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, disabled women and Indigenous women.

The impact of homelessness on children leaving violent households can also be profound, with negative impacts on their physical and mental health, schooling and friendships. Further, being homeless as a child makes homelessness as an adult more likely.

The Benevolent Society will also continue to focus on understanding and responding to the broader structural issues that contribute to inequality and social exclusion.

Our approach to housing is centred on the importance of promoting social inclusion and the need to enlarge, rather than restrict, people's life choices and opportunities.



Endnotes

1. United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, **Report on Mission to Australia: 31 July to 15 August 2006** (2007); p2
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, **Counting the Homeless** (2008); pvii
3. National Shelter, Housing Australia **Factsheet: A quick guide to housing facts and figures for workers in the media** (2007); p8
4. Ibid; p3
5. National Shelter, **Australian Housing: A Fair Share?** (2007); p2
6. Ibid; p3
7. Healy, K., Rawsthorne, M., Canigula, F., Donnett, A., Hampshire, A., Michaux, A. (in press). **Families on the Fringe: Promoting the Social Inclusion of Families who Move to Non-Metropolitan Areas.**
8. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007, **Older Australians at a Glance**, 4th edition, AIHW cat. no. AGE 52
9. Jones A, Bell M, Tilse C, and Earl G (2008) **Rental housing for lower-income older Australians**, AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin 96, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
10. For further information on Apartments for Life go to www.bensoc.org.au
11. United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, op cit; p26
12. Ibid, p27
13. Australian Government, **The Road Home (Homelessness White Paper)**, December 2008

Other sources of information

Australian Government, **Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness** (Green Paper), May 2008

Disney J., **Affordable Housing in Australia: Some Key Problems and Priorities for Action**; speech to conference organized by the Australian Housing and Research Institute conference, April 2007

St Vincent de Paul Society, **Don't Dream it's Over: Housing Stress in Australia's Private Rental Market**; July 2007

Shelter NSW, **Background Paper: National Housing Advocacy Day Housing for a Fairer Australia** 24 September 2008 <<http://www.shelternsw.infoxchange.net.au/docs/rpt08nathousadvocday-background.pdf>>

Snapshot: Housing in Australia

- A total of 1.2 million households in Australia are in 'housing stress' – up 20 per cent over the past decade – and 400,000 households are in extreme housing stress.
- The cost of buying a house has increased four-fold in the last 20 years.
- Vacancy rates for dwellings in the private housing market are extremely low, creating greater competition and forcing up rental prices without any corresponding improvement in quality.
- There are over 230,000 Australians currently on the waiting list for social housing.
- Around 105,000 people in Australia are homeless, including over 12,000 children under the age of 12; 7,400 people over the age of 65; and almost 7,500 families.
- A lack of available space means the average daily turn-away rate by refuge services for women escaping domestic violence is around 50 per cent.

Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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