

At the crossroads in retirement: Older people at risk of homelessness



OLDER PERSONS' HOUSING INFORMATION
AND SUPPORT SERVICE



Housing for the Aged Action Group

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At the crossroads in retirement - older people at risk of homelessness

Australia is facing a large increase of older people who do not have housing security

Key trends

- **An ageing population with 25% of the population over 65 by 2050**
- **Reductions in home ownership and public housing expenditure**
- **44% increase in older people in insecure private rental housing over 5 years**
- **Older people paying on average 65% of their pension in rent**
- **Thousands of older people at risk of homelessness, facing a downward spiral to crisis housing, hospitalisation and premature entry into residential care**

Plus

- **The housing system is complex and impossible for older people to navigate**

Older people on low incomes can't cope

Older people are the least able to cope with these trends.

A new report from Housing for the Aged Action Group's Home at Last service, describes the housing crisis older people are facing every day.

The hidden face of homelessness: women over 55 years old, living in private rental, on a fixed income

Housing for the Aged Action Group have just released data on the first two years of their Home at Last service – Older persons housing information and support

This report is an analysis of the first two years of the Home at Last service and the thousands of older people who have sought help because they are at risk of homelessness.

The data shows that a large number of older people in Victoria are struggling to cope with their day to day living and are constantly on the edge of homelessness. Most clients have lived conventional lives, working for many years, bringing up families, and generally coping for decades with life's pressures and demands. Their major problem is that they have become part of a growing group of older Australians who have not attained home ownership due to factors such as low wages, illness or family changes that can inhibit wealth creation and the ability to get on the home ownership ladder. They often face a cross-road in their lives when they reach retirement and wonder how they will attain any form of housing security and affordability as they seek to retire and live on the age pension.

Most of these people have never needed to access social services in their lives until they reach this crisis point and often feel quite shocked at their predicament. They are equally devastated to find that affordable rental housing is in extremely short supply and that the process of accessing public and social housing can be a navigational minefield.

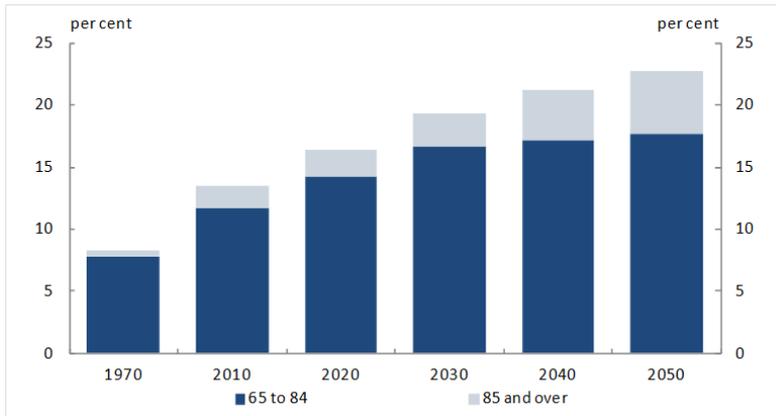
The good news is that the Home at Last service is able to address the needs of many people who seek assistance. Whilst governments need to urgently increase funding to build housing to assist this group, the immediate problem is that there is a severe lack of services that can help this huge wave of older people who are now emerging as the first of the retiring baby boomers.

Home at Last is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services under the National Partnership on Homelessness. The data collected for this report is submitted to a national collection administered by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).

Older Australians need help to escape from the poverty trap of private rental and navigate their way through the complex housing system

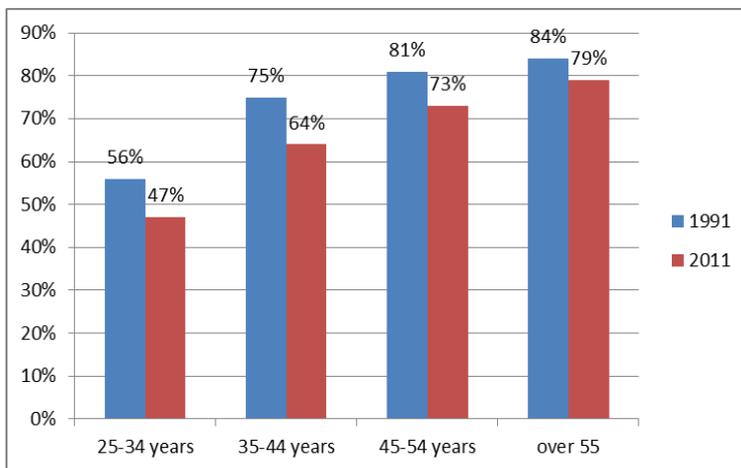
Key trends¹

An ageing population



Australia has an ageing population. The proportion of people aged 65 and over is expected to increase from around 13.5 per cent to over 22 per cent by 2050. In particular, the number of people aged over 85 is expected to quadruple. However, Australia has a problem housing this booming ageing population.

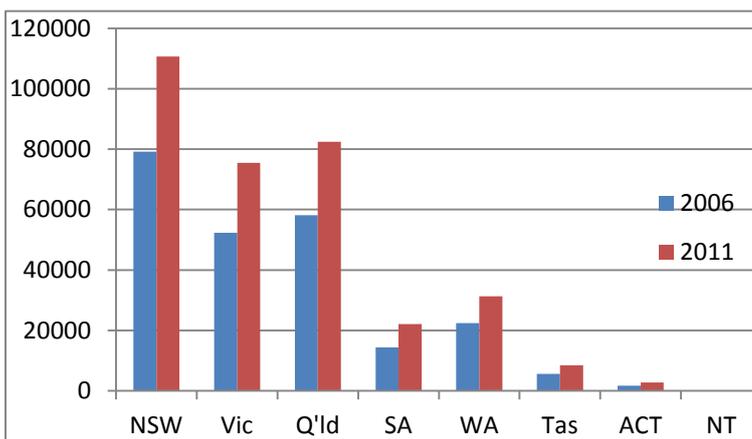
Decreasing rates of home ownership 1991-2011



Rates of home ownership are steadily declining. However this issue is not one that just affects younger people. Many older people, particularly older women, have never achieved home ownership. This trend means that many older people are in housing crisis or at risk of homelessness, as rents skyrocket.

In addition, more people are retiring with a mortgage, with a 3.2% increase between 2006 and 2011 in people over 55 with a mortgage

More older people in private rental



Between 2006 and 2011 there was a 44% increase in the number of people over 55 years of age in private rental. With the average rent for a one bedroom unit in Melbourne at \$329/week, older people living on the aged pension can be paying 75% or more of their income on rent.

Reduced expenditure on public housing replaced by private rental subsidies

Between 1996 and 2007 the number of public housing units declined by 23,000, while the population rose by 2.8 million people. The critical change in public housing expenditure occurred between 1990 and 2001 when Commonwealth public housing funds declined by 26 per cent (*What future for public housing?* AHURI, 2010). Since that time there has been gradual reductions in public housing in real terms.

¹ All statistics from ABS Census 2006 and 2011, and the Australian Housing Research Institute

Who seeks help from Home at Last?

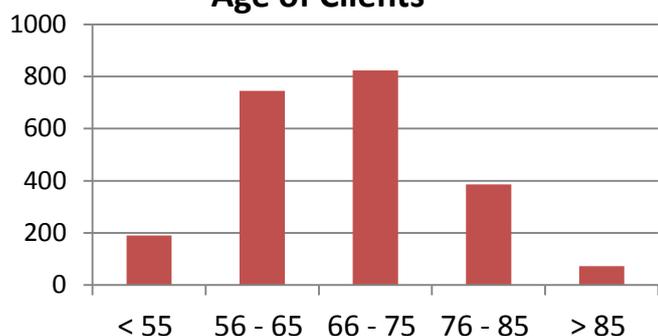
60%
female

Older women are the new face of homelessness. Often, women have had a lifetime of living on lower incomes than men. They may have looked after their families or been out of the workforce and have low levels of superannuation and savings. Elder Abuse may also contribute to risk of homelessness. The number of people receiving support from the service who have experienced a housing crisis due to elder abuse is about 60 per year.

44%
CALD

A high proportion of Home at Last clients come from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background (CALD). Many migrants may experience a lifetime of renting, especially those who have arrived more recently. An expectation of living with family can lead to a housing crisis if family relationships unexpectedly break down. The high proportion of CALD clients, often with complex needs, can require intensive support from the casework team.

Age of Clients



The majority of people accessing the service are on the aged pension and many are becoming frail in health. Finding help and navigating the system can become very difficult as people age. Then finding a home and moving house can be almost insurmountable for many older people, without adequate support.

52% were renting in the private rental market

26% had already been evicted and were relying on friends and family for shelter

Private rental housing is:

- expensive (average 1 bedroom flat requires 75% of the age pension)
- insecure (6 or 12 month leases force older people to be evicted, sometimes with as little as two weeks notice)
- unadaptable (a fall or a stroke can mean loss of your home if there are steps or shower over the bath)

Government policies are forcing older people into the private rental market but it is totally unsuitable for ageing-in-place.

In more detail, the key reasons why older people contact the service are:

1. Housing unaffordability and financial stress (36%)

Nearly 90% of people coming to the service are paying more than 30% of their pensions on rent, and over half are paying up to 60%. This combined with the cost of living is putting older people in housing stress.

2. Inadequate or inappropriate housing (25%)

As people age, they are more likely to be living in inadequate or inappropriate houses. This is often due to landlords being reluctant to agree to housing modifications for older people. Tenants are usually not allowed to make alterations to their Private Rental to help them age-in-place.

3. Housing crisis (21%)

Private rental is insecure. Tenants can be given a Notice to vacate, where they must leave the property in 120, 90, 60, 30 or even 14 days. Older people then might find it hard to compete in the rental market and have nowhere else to go.

We need more public housing but first we need services to help older people navigate what is a scarce and complex housing system.

In 2014-15, the Australian and State and Territory government recurrent expenditure on specialist homelessness services was \$707 million to 1500 services, yet there are only two specialist older persons homelessness services in Australia: Home at Last and a regional service by Wintringham.

Consequently, very few older people are assisted by homelessness services, with only 4.5% of clients aged 55-64 and only 2.5% of clients 65 years and over.

Case study: Older women in housing crisis

Two women in their late 60's and early 70's attended a Home at Last community education session. Both women were living in very expensive, run down private rental housing. Neither of the units had heating and both women were unable to run any portable heating due to the cost. The units also had showers over the bath making the bathroom unusable for one of the older women who suffered from multiple health problems and had poor mobility due to a stroke.

Home at Last assisted both the women to apply for social housing in their area. One woman received a ground floor unit with disability modifications and moved in six months later. The other woman moved into an upstairs unit in only three weeks after her application.

The women were thrilled that they could stay within the community and that there was no further stress about being able to pay the rent or worried about being asked to leave if the landlord wants to sell or move in.

What does Home at Last do for people?

1. Provide information and referral

2111
Assisted

We help people understand the housing system, their housing options and services available to them. Referrals can be made to housing, health and aged care services. The unique structure of Home At Last means that people have access to specialist information to help them plan for the future, as well as basic housing information. 73% of people who contact the service require intensive Housing Support so referrals are made into the appropriate provider, depending on their location. Other people will receive Home at Last's Outreach Housing Support (ACH) Service.

2. Find people long-term affordable housing

312
Housed

Since the service began in 2015, there have been an average of 12 per month who have been housed in long-term and affordable housing, in a highly case intensive and complex housing system. Home at Last can make multiple housing applications per person, across various housing types depending on what people want. 66% of HAL housed clients were housed within 3 months.

98% of clients rehoused by Home at Last were placed into accommodation that cost no more than 30% of their income (Public Housing, Social Housing or Independent Living Unit).

3. Help people move and set up their new homes

Pensioners and people on low incomes often don't have the money to pay the rent in advance for new properties, or to set themselves up with essential items such as bedding. Around 50% of people were in temporary accommodation or homeless when they presented to the service so often lack these essential items.

This can mean that without financial support, people don't seek, or refuse opportunities to move into more suitable accommodation and can even opt to stay with abusive people or in unhealthy environments. On average it costs around \$1100 to relocate a client into secure, affordable, appropriate housing

4. Assist with tenancy issues

Home at Last can give advice on issues with landlords and tenancy issues, such as urgent repairs, rent increases, and notices to vacate (evictions). While our tenancy service is working on legal issues, the housing support service can start to look at finding more appropriate secure housing options for people. This holistic approach helps people in housing crisis have a long term solution.

5. Provide retirement housing advice

Home at Last assists people living in residential parks and villages and not for profit retirement villages. It also provides Information for people considering moving into retirement housing. We support groups of people in specific types of housing, such as Caravan Parks and Independent Living Units. If someone has an issue with this form of housing and wished to seek alternative long-term accommodation, they will be supported by both the Retirement Information and Outreach Housing Support.

Why does it work?

The Home at Last model is multi-faceted, individually tailored and holistic, and that's why it works.

1. We know the housing system

By knowing the eligibility criteria of different housing options, what is required of applicants and the general wait lists of areas, workers can work very effectively with people on what they want, to ensure no time is wasted and no option is overlooked.

2. We help people navigate

Finding older persons housing is complex and the last thing you need when you are in housing stress. Home at Last does all the hard work in searching, applying and advocating for each person.

Workers help people understand the housing system, housing options and services available to them.

Referrals can be made to housing, health and aged care services to ensure integrated support is in place.

3. Face-to-face support

With big changes occurring, many services are moving to providing information and access online. Yet many older people do not have access to computers or the internet and find this difficult. People with additional barriers, such as low incomes, disability or language barriers, find it even harder to access the support they need. Home at Last provides face-to-face drop-in and outreach support for older people, and a friendly and familiar face for a person in housing stress is very valuable.

4. A one-stop-shop

The unique structure of Home At Last means that new clients have access not only to basic housing information but also to specialist services such as Tenancy Advice and Retirement Housing Information. If someone has an issue with their landlord or an increase in rent, the tenancy advice service will address the tenancy issue, while housing support works with the person to find alternative accommodation. Advice and referrals to other services mean that the person is supported holistically.

5. No time limits

There is no limit on the time workers are able to spend with each person. Everyone's situation is unique and therefore comes with its own set of constraints and issues to work through if a suitable, long lasting housing is to be found. People are invited to recontact the service if they experience problems in their new accommodation, or need to relocate again.

This complete care package can be the difference between a person maintaining their tenancy long enough to move into alternative accommodation and a person ending up on the street.

6. We work with other services

We work to integrate our service with other services, so that people don't have to repeat their story. People who need other services can be assisted to access them. We try to maintain and expand our networks and ways of working so that older people benefit.