

# Bleak House in Paradise

Leonie Bessant, National Alliance of Seniors for Housing (NASH) Co-ordinator,  
Housing for the Aged Action Group

Airbnb<sup>1</sup> has changed the global rental scene, by increasing prices and removing properties from long-term rental. In Australia, there was an estimated 346,581 Airbnb listings between 2016 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> Areas such as coastal New South Wales (NSW), Southern Queensland and Tasmania that attract tourism but also have large permanent renting populations are experiencing housing pressure as a result.<sup>3</sup> The Northern Rivers (Northern Rivers) region of NSW, that nudges Southern Queensland and includes seven local government areas (LGA), is one such place.

Northern Rivers has a large older population: Twenty-three per cent are 65 years and older compared to the NSW average of 16 per cent, with a predicted increase in the aged population of 36 per cent by 2036. In 2016, Northern Rivers households had a third less income than the NSW average, including a high proportion of very low-income households (below \$650 per week). However, property prices can be as expensive for purchasers and renters as inner Sydney prices.<sup>4</sup>

Northern Rivers is also a hotspot for storms and floods which are increasing in frequency and severity, causing extreme housing disruptions.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Northern Rivers is well known for a range of illegal dwellings, additions, sub-divisions, and converted garages,<sup>6</sup> with illegal conversions under houses being euphemistically called 'studios' where tenants often cannot claim government rent allowance as landlords will not declare the income or the dwelling.

People have moved to Northern Rivers seeking alternative lifestyles since the days of the Nimbin Aquarius Festival in 1973. Fifty years on, many of those

attracted to this idyllic part of Australia, and many born and working there, find themselves no longer able to afford rents in the ever-diminishing pool of long-term rentals. Up to 67 per cent of renting households experience rental stress, with few social housing options. Only 3.3 per cent of the total housing stock is social housing, compared to 4.9 per cent for NSW.<sup>7</sup> In a recent Byron LGA study, 42 per cent of participants who rented had recently been asked to leave, with 64 per cent of these reporting that their rental property was about to be listed on Airbnb.<sup>8</sup> Even a local estate agent, says, *'Airbnb should be banned up here, the cost of living is insane. I've lived in all sorts of places here, and it's not uncommon to pay at least 50 per cent of your wage in rent.'*<sup>9</sup>

Older single women living on government payments are highly vulnerable in this housing environment. 'Home' can become a house share, a 'studio', staying with relatives, couch surfing, house sitting, dog sitting, living in sheds, camping, living out of cars and vans, and endlessly moving on. 'Home' can be hazardous and unhealthy, have no tenancy, no privacy or personal control. 'Home', rather than a refuge, becomes a wellspring of deep and ongoing insecurity and stress. To stay in their communities, many constantly move and downgrade until they are technically or unambiguously homeless.

Here are three snippets from the lives of older women which illustrate many of the housing issues in Northern Rivers.

## Hanna\*

Hanna (66 years old) came back to her hometown in early 2018. *'I came back to do a dog sit. The owner went away for a month to India. He put me*

*under the house, it was a makeshift studio, but the kitchen was functional, it was nice. The weather was warm, and I thought I'll give it one last chance to see if I can find something affordable, accommodation, because this is my heart home. I'd even tried (a depressed and low SES inland Queensland town) last year for three months, but nupp.'* Hanna, as a single aged pensioner, considered living in an economically depressed outback town purely because it provided some of the last 'affordable' rent left in Australia.<sup>10</sup> After three months, she preferred short-term dog sitting and 'roofed' homelessness to be back in her own community.

## Enid\*

Enid (70 years old): *'I changed dwellings six times in six years because it's so expensive, every time I just came to the point, I'm going to have to get something cheaper... I'm going to have to get something cheaper. It is exhausting. You can never claim rent allowance in the studios, so I have a cheap mobile phone that I tell Centrelink is my landlords. They have never rung'*. Enid is now in a lovely but too expensive studio. To make the rent on her pension she lives very frugally and cannot afford to socialise. She has no tenancy and still has her special mobile phone.

## Denise\*

Denise (67 years old) came back to her hometown to help her homeless son, but the rental environment had changed since she last lived there four years earlier. *'The price of rentals is off the charts and I blame Airbnb unequivocally. It was ridiculous that my son and his partner were living in cars and tents with their baby, in their own hometown'*. Upon her return, the 2017 floods hit. *'We couldn't get the government help because we were homeless, you know, they were*

giving out money, \$1,000, but no fixed address, so we were [couch] surfing and camping and sleeping in cars. How many places have we had?

'After the flood the community spirit lasted a month or so, people doubled their rents, me and the kids were in a shed for six months, \$600 a week... water keep coming up through the ground because it was illegal. Now we're underneath a house. Now we're all in together in one-and-a-half-bedroom studio with my son and his partner and my two grandkids. Between being with the kids I sleep in my car just to get a rest. Because I'm pretty exhausted. I can't do it, too old for this shit. So, I just kind of stay in the background have no space, no life, to read or play music or anything and just engage with my granddaughter. I am virtually like a ghost.'

At the beginning of the Covid pandemic many Airbnb hosts pulled out to find cheaper long-term tenants or offered '14-day isolation suites'. There was hope that this would result in cheaper and more

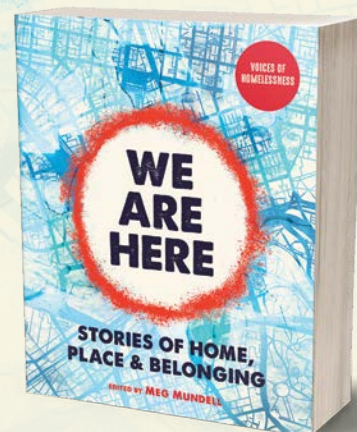
supply of long-term rent for locals in Northern Rivers.<sup>11</sup> However, since Covid restrictions have eased, there has been a strong resurgence of demand, driven by overseas travel bans and people avoiding hotels due to virus concerns. By July, demand for holiday rentals in the Byron Shire was up 150 per cent, occupancy was reaching pre-Covid levels, and prices for holiday rentals across Australia had increased by 60 per cent since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

\* pseudonyms

#### Endnotes

1. Airbnb is an online marketplace that connects people who want to rent out their homes with people who are looking for short-term/holiday accommodations in that locale.
2. Watson M April 6th 2020, 'Disrupting the disruptors: how Covid-19 will shake up Airbnb'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/06/disrupting-the-disruptors-how-Covid-19-will-shake-up-airbnb>
3. Anglicare Australia 2018, *Rental affordability snapshot 2018*. Canberra: Anglicare Australia. <http://www.anglicare.asn.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final---rental-affordability-snapshotb811d9309d6962baacc1ff0000899bca.pdf?sfvrsn=4>
4. Gilmour T 2018, *Housing Needs Northern Rivers Housing Study*. North Coast Community Housing. <http://www.ncch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NCCCH-regional-housing-study-2018.pdf>
5. University Centre for Rural Health 2017, *After the flood*. <https://ucrh.edu.au/after-the-flood/>
6. Shand A 2020, Exploring the risks of illegal dwellings. *Echo*. <https://www.echo.net.au/2020/09/exploring-the-risks-of-illegal-dwellings/>
7. *Northern Rivers Regional Affordable Housing Strategy 2012*, Clarence Valley Council.
8. Che D, Muschter S, Von der Heide T and Caldicott R 2019), *Airbnb in the Byron Shire — Bane or Blessing? An investigation into the nature and range of impacts of Airbnb on a local community*. Southern Cross University School of Business and Tourism (SBAT) Tourism Research Cluster Project. [https://www.scu.edu.au/media/scueduau/news/images/Airbnb\\_Byron\\_Community\\_Report-March-2019.pdf](https://www.scu.edu.au/media/scueduau/news/images/Airbnb_Byron_Community_Report-March-2019.pdf)
9. Watson M April 6th 2020, op cit.
10. Anglicare Australia 2018, op cit.
11. Watson M April 6th 2020, op cit.
12. Kelly M (July 9th 2020, Special Report — short-term rentals bounce back, Byron Bay leads the way. *Travel Trends*. <https://www.traveltrends.biz/ttn55-Special+Report+-+decimated+%2C+smashed+and+challenged+during+the+Covid+crisis+%2C+short+term+rentals+bounce+back+%2C+Byron+Bay+leads+the+way>

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