

Australian report shows growing homelessness

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The Australian Homelessness Monitor 2022 report, released last month by the Launch Housing group, revealed that the rate of homelessness is increasing faster than Australia's overall population growth. It found that the monthly average of people using homelessness services rose by eight percent from 2017–18 to 2021–22, nearly double the increase in Australia's population over that same period.

The report used statistics provided by specialist homelessness services (SHS) through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). Nationally, it found that the average monthly number of people seeking support from the SHS increased from 84,800 people in 2017–18, to 91,300 people in the 2021–22 fiscal year.

The report stated that based on a population-wide survey “evidence suggests that two-thirds of people experiencing homelessness do not in fact seek support.” This indicates that real levels of homelessness could potentially be as high as 270,000 people.

The report pointed to an increase in “unassisted demand.” A homeless support worker from the Salvation Army said that homelessness services have been overwhelmed, explaining: “[O]ur family and domestic violence service in Karratha has reported having to turn away individuals on 600 occasions in the last 12 months, while the family accommodation program is currently turning away five to ten families a week and has closed the waitlist as they do not want to give families a false hope.”

In an indication of the intensifying cost of living crisis, up to 67 percent of service providers in regional areas observed notable changes in the profiles of those seeking out homelessness services. In particular, there was “an increase in the representation of low to moderate wage earners experiencing homelessness for the first time.”

An online survey respondent wrote: “We are getting more families and low to middle wage earners... The price

brackets for rental stress [have] reached families receiving government payments and low to middle income wage earners... we are seeing people seeking assistance who have not accessed homelessness services previously, people who were working and maintaining housing but have lost jobs or been forced out of the private rental market.”

The report provides the reasons people gave for accessing homelessness services. Some 26,121 said it was because of “housing affordability,” up from 20,545 in 2017–2018, a 27 percent increase. 30,315 said they had experienced “financial difficulties;” 30,595 said they had gone through a “housing crisis,” such as eviction, and 13,703 reported that it was because previous accommodation had ended.

These figures are limited, as respondents could identify two or more factors that led to their homelessness. Regardless, the overwhelming cause of the rise in homelessness has been the dramatic increase in rents across the country, skyrocketing inflation and housing shortages.

In November, SQM research reported that rents in Sydney had increased by 28 percent over the previous year to an average of \$709 per week. Similar rent rises were recorded in capital cities throughout the country, with a 24 percent rise to \$574 per week in Brisbane.

In an indication of the rental affordability crisis, among the 46,000 private rental properties advertised in March 2022, only 1.4 percent would have been affordable for a couple on the aged pension. Similarly, for a single person on the minimum wage, just 1.6 percent of all houses were affordable.

For a single adult with a child over the age of 8 on the Centrelink JobSeeker payment, no houses were affordable last year. That is in part a result of the decision of the previous Labor government to force hundreds of thousands of single parents off family benefits and onto

the poverty-level unemployment payment.

Figures from the state of Victoria underscore the trend. In the five years to June 2022, the number of available homes deemed affordable for low-income families decreased from 17 percent to 11 percent.

The report noted the decline in affordable housing across regional areas in the state, dropping from 58 percent in 2017 to just 24 percent this year.

This has been compounded by an overall collapse in rental vacancies. The report noted that in regional areas across the country, private rental vacancies were at historic lows of 0.6–0.7 percent and vacancy rates in the capital cities sat at 1.1 percent in June this year.

According to recent data compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics from 2019–20, even before the pandemic and the inflation crisis, approximately 58 percent of all low-income renters spent more than 30 percent of their household income on rent. Approximately a fifth of low-income private renters, or some 185,000 households, “were paying rents equating to more than half of their household income.”

Another indication of the growing social tensions and the economic pressures is the number of those who identified domestic violence as a trigger for homelessness. This accounted for 31,732 of those who applied for the SHS, up 8.8 percent over the past four years.

Aboriginals, the most impoverished and exploited section of the working class, saw the fastest growth in accessing SHS services over the four-year period, increasing by 23 percent. Moreover, indigenous people account for 27 percent of all those who had approached the SHS. This was followed by a cohort of people suffering from mental health issues which had increased by 20 percent.

A correspondent wrote that “many real estates will not even answer/return our call (as they have 80-100 applicants for every property). The waitlists for social housing have increased, availability of housing is reduced (due to the rental crisis).”

The report pointed to the continued dwindling of Australia’s social housing stock. From 1991 to 2021, leases available from social housing providers had decreased from 52,000 to 30,000, a decline of 42 percent. Proportionate to the population increase over the same period, this equates to a fall of over 61 percent in social housing stock.

According to figures cited in the report from the Productivity Commission, social housing stock increased from 420,000 to 431,006 between 2016 and 2021, an

increase of only 2.6 percent.

The architects of the gutting of public housing were the Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments. Beginning in 1983 they imposed a market-driven model, providing cash subsidies to those on welfare benefits if they were not able to secure public housing. The purpose of this was to channel low-income households into the private rental market away from public housing. Public housing was subsequently bought up by private firms through joint venture partnerships, torn down and replaced with private dwellings.

Between 1990–91 and 2000–01, real funding for public housing construction was slashed by 25 percent. By 2008, public housing properties constituted only 4.9 percent nationally of all properties. By 2018, it was just 4.6 percent.

The report promotes illusions in the new Labor government’s pathetic promises to provide \$350 million to build up 10,000 new homes, with state and territory governments expected to pitch in to build an additional 10,000 homes. The Labor government claims the new National Housing Accord will construct 40,000 new “affordable homes” over five years beginning in mid-2024.

This “commitment” will do nothing to resolve the social housing crisis. Maiy Azize, a spokesperson for Everybody’s Home, told the *Guardian* earlier this month that there was an “enormous social housing shortfall of 500,000 homes.”

No trust can be placed in Labor to resolve the housing and homelessness crisis, it is a loyal servant to the needs of big business. The budget unveiled in October indicated that it would cut funds going to the “National Housing and Homelessness Agreement,” which provides public housing and accommodation for people with special needs, by 14.6 percent. In 2021–22 approximately \$4.1 billion was allocated to these housing programs, a figure that is expected to fall to \$3.28 billion by 2025–26.

The growth of homelessness and the broader housing crisis is one expression of the incompatibility of capitalist society, which subordinates everything to the private profit interests of the ruling elite, with the most basic needs of ordinary people.



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