

Social Justice Expo Elective: Violence and Homelessness- Overview of the Issues

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Introduction

- The theme of the Social Justice Expo, building a culture of peace, came from the Seven Circles of Peace, part of the Decade to overcome Violence, an activity of the National Council of Churches. The seven circles of violence and peace has as its outer circumference the ecological ring, moving inward to the international, the national, the local community, the religious/ cultural, family and personal.
- The issue of homelessness has relevance for each of these circles. In this presentation there is an emphasis on homelessness and the international in terms of international data and approaches to the issue plus relevance to international human rights instruments and frameworks, national data, understandings and approaches, looking at the problem at a State level and in regard to its impact on families and individuals.
- However what is meant by homelessness? and how do we define violence? and what are the levels on which these concepts relate to each other? This presentation will deal with these issues before moving on to provide information on the size of the homeless population, its characteristics, a brief consideration of the causes and effects of homelessness and an overview of the way that governments in Australia are responding to homelessness, including the programs that exist to address it.

What is violence?

- Violence takes many forms: family violence, domestic violence, racist violence, homophobic violence, hate crimes, work-related violence, politically motivated violence, just to name a few.
- Halstead, in the report *Young People as Victims of Violence*, makes the point that some level of violence is considered acceptable within social and cultural norms under certain circumstances. For example she notes that a “higher level of violence may be accepted in some contact sports than in normal social contact, [and the] presentation of violence in the media is a common form of entertainment”

In her view “the problem is not just violence per se, but levels of violence which are damaging to the individual, group or society” (Halstead: 1992: 1). However, such a view is not definitive- some might say that the levels of violence we tolerate as a community are too high and violence in one sphere, say the sportsfield, is related to other forms of violence, such as violence against women.

- Definitions of violence vary from the more narrow, such as an act of physical or sexual assault or the threat of such, used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in publications such as *Women's Safety Australia*¹, to broader definitions which encompass verbal and emotional abuse, used by the National Committee on Violence Against Women (1991) and the NSW Government Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women (1996)². The definition of Family Violence in the Family Law Act also includes violence against property and places emphasis on the threat of violence³.

- In understanding violence in the lives of the homeless, violence must be viewed as both a cause of homelessness and a consequence of it, in the sense that homelessness increases vulnerability to violence. This is discussed in further detail below. Violence is a cause of homelessness because domestic violence and family violence, which includes violence against women, children and young people in the home are major contributors to homelessness for these groups.

- Violence against the homeless is best understood as going beyond an act of assault to encompass broader notions of violence. In this context violence can be understood to include physical and sexual assault, verbal abuse, sexual, verbal and emotional harassment, the threat of such abuse, conduct whether actual or threatened towards one's property and family, and conduct which leads to fear for one's personal safety.

¹ The ABS in *Women's Safety Australia* defines violence against women as:

“any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault. Physical assault involves the use of physical force with the intent to harm or frighten a woman. ...Sexual assault includes acts of a sexual nature carried out against a woman's will through the use of physical force, intimidation or coercion, or any attempts to do this...Sexual threat involves the threat of an act of a sexual nature which the woman believes is able and likely to be carried out”

(www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookupMF/B62DEB3AC52574CA2568 10/02/04).

² - “stalking and intimidation
 - hate-related violence
 - sexual, verbal, emotional and other forms of harassment
 - physical violence
 - sexual assault and
 - domestic violence, including emotional, social and financial abuse as well as sexual and physical violence.” (1996 NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women, www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/cpd.nsf/pages/more_info accessed 15/04/04).

³ Family violence is defined under the Family Law Act (Section 60D) as “conduct, whether actual or threatened, by a person towards, or towards the property of, a member of the person's family that causes that person or any other members of the person's family, to fear for, or to be apprehensive about, his or her personal well-being or safety” (www.csa.gov.au/guide/6_10.htm#top 15/ 04/04).

Violence against the homeless

As a population, homeless people are vulnerable to the following types of violence:

- Physical assault
- Sexual assault and harassment
- Verbal abuse and intimidation
- Murder
- Robbery- stealing directly from the person and stealing in the person's absence.

- If these forms of violence are targeted against homeless people as a consequence of a hatred of this group, this form of action can be regarded as a hate crime. In the United States, hate crimes against homeless people as serious as murder are not uncommon. According to the United States National Coalition Against Homelessness, in 2002 there were 123 homeless persons murdered by non-homeless persons and another 89 violent attacks, which did not result in death. As the police may also harass homeless people, these crimes may go unreported.

- 38% of homeless people in the United States had something stolen directly from them and 41% had been the victim of a theft in their absence, 22% had been physically assaulted and 7% had been sexually assaulted (UNCHS: 2000).

- While such attacks are normally the work of private individuals, most frequently young men, in some countries there are organized, orchestrated campaigns of violence against the homeless, particularly homeless children, which are alleged to have the unofficial approval of states. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) reports that in some Latin American countries, elements of the judiciary, the police, the media, business, and society in general believe that homeless children and young people, referred to by the UNCHS as street children, "represent a moral threat to a civilized society".

- This attitude underlies the emergence of death squads who hunt down and kill homeless children. An average of three street children are said to be killed everyday in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, by death squads (UNCHS: 2000: 87-88).

- While the problem of hate-crimes and other forms of violence against homeless children and adults in Australia might not be as extreme, there is also less information about this issue and awareness of it.

- A 1998 study commissioned by five of Sydney's major charities, *Down and out in Sydney: prevalence of mental disorders, disability and health service use among homeless people in inner Sydney*, found that "93% of homeless people in the inner city have experienced at least one major trauma event in their lives; 100% of women and 91% of men." These trauma events include "serious physical assault, rape and witnessing someone being killed". A high proportion of homeless people reported several traumatic experiences.

- The authors found that 58% of the 210 homeless people interviewed, who were chosen at random, had been seriously physically attacked or assaulted and 68% of women had been indecently assaulted and 50% had been raped. 10% of the men had also been raped. The study did not identify whether the traumatic events occurred before or after these people became homeless. The authors did conclude that “life for homeless people [in Australia] has been or is a generally violent and threatening reality (Hodder, Teesson & Buhrich: 1998: 7). They also linked the traumas experienced to the prevalence of mental health problems among the homeless people interviewed: 75% had at least one mental disorder, compared with only 18% for the population as a whole (www.aspin.asu.edu/hpn/archives/APR98/0108.html 10/02/04).
- Intra-group violence is also a factor in the lives of homeless people, particularly young homeless people due to the lack of safety and security of their living situations, proximity, opportunity and poverty. In a study of the mental and emotional health issues of marginalised young people in outer western Sydney in the early 1990s, homeless young people reported theft by peers and indicated they felt they had to carry a knife for protection. Homeless young women indicated that involvement in sexual relationships was not so much a positive choice, but something they did for protection when living on the streets. It was considered preferable to sleeping “with a knife under your arm” (Whittington: 1994: 209).

Homelessness as a human rights violation

- Homelessness can also be regarded as a form of violence in the sense that it is a violation of a universally recognized fundamental human right. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, describes homelessness as the “most obvious and severe manifestation of the unfulfillment of the human right to adequate housing”, (cited in UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 2). They note that among all the components of basic human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the other major human rights instruments, the right to adequate housing is among the most frequently violated (UNCHS (Habitat): 2001: 1).

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights states that the “human right to adequate housing which is ... derived from the right to an adequate standard of living, is of central importance for the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights” (CESCR General Comment 4, [www.unhcr.ch/+us/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/CESCR+General+comment+4.en?](http://www.unhcr.ch/+us/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/CESCR+General+comment+4.en?)).

Homelessness can also be regarded as compromising most of the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to right to life, liberty and security of person (Article 3); Article 16 (3), which entitles the family to protection by society and the state; Article 22, which entitles everyone “ to realization...of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for ... dignity and the free development of his [sic] personality”; Article 24, the right to rest and leisure, and in addition compromises the right to work, to participate in education and the cultural life of the community.

- The most significant international human rights instrument that recognises the right to housing is Article 11(1), of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966, which states that:

“The State Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself [sic] and his [sic] family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The State Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.” (cited in UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 177).

- Explanatory notes on the above indicate that this right should not be interpreted in a narrow sense, as merely a roof over one’s head, or shelter viewed exclusively as a commodity, “rather it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity”. This right also refers to the notion that housing be adequate. Flowing on from the inherent dignity of the human person, from which the rights in the Covenant are said to derive, the “right to housing should be ensured to all persons irrespective of income or access to economic resources”.
- In addition to the above the right to adequate housing is also recognised in the following international instruments: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1959) and the International Convention on the protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990).
- Issues relating to housing rights have also received attention in a number of other international declarations and policy recommendations. These include the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), International Labour Organisation Recommendation No. 115 concerning Worker’s Housing (1961), Declaration on Social Progress and Development (1969), Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975), Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements and Action Plan (1976), UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (1978), the Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000 (1988), the Programme of Action of the World Summit on Social Development (1995)

and most importantly, the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements and the Habitat Agenda (1996).

- Several of these documents refer specifically to the issue of homelessness. For example the Agenda 21 calls upon governments to create social infrastructure in order to reduce hunger and homelessness, and the Programme of Action of the World Summit on Social Development identifies homelessness as one of the manifestations of poverty, and stresses that governments should ensure that special measures are taken to “protect the displaced, the homeless, [and] street children...and to ensure that they are integrated into their communities”.
- The Habitat Agenda (1996) addresses the issue of homelessness more extensively. The Preamble notes that “...a large segment of the world’s population lacks shelter and sanitation... We recognize that access to safe and healthy shelter and basic services is essential to a person’s physical, psychological, social and economic well-being and should be a fundamental part of our urgent actions for the more than one billion people without decent living conditions...” (UNCHS (Habitat): 2001: 11).

Paragraph 11 notes that “Inadequate shelter and homelessness are growing plights in many countries, threatening standards of health, security and even life itself”, while paragraph 39 commits Governments to “improving living...conditions...so that everyone will have adequate shelter that is healthy, safe, secure, accessible and affordable and that includes basic services, facilities and amenities...”. It also commits governments to “promoting shelter and supporting basic services and facilities for education and health for homeless people...women and children who are survivors of family violence...and people belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups...” (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000:180-181).

Defining Homelessness

Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

- The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), is the key means by which Australian governments seek to directly address homelessness, through the provision of various forms of housing with support, targeting people who are homeless and at risk of becoming so, including men, women and children, single women and young people.
- Under SAAP a person is considered to be homeless if they do not have adequate access to safe and secure housing. Inadequate housing is said to be housing that damages or is likely to damage the person’s health, threatens the person’s safety, marginalizes the person through failing to provide adequate access to personal amenities, economic and

social supports, or places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security, and affordability of that housing, (Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1999-Section 4, www.austlii.edu.au/legis/cth/consol_act/saaa1994359/s4.html accessed 4/05/2004).

Australian Bureau of Statistics 'Counting the Homeless' definition

Primary Homelessness

1. "Primary homelessness accords with the common sense assumption that homelessness is the same as 'rooflessness'. It includes all people without conventional accommodation, such as people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter. "

Secondary Homelessness

2. "Secondary homelessness includes people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another. On census night, it includes all people staying in emergency or transitional accommodation provided under the SAAP [Supported Accommodation Assistance Program] Secondary homelessness also includes people residing temporarily with other households because they have no accommodation of their own. Secondary homelessness also includes people staying in boarding houses on a short-term basis, operationally defined as 12 weeks or less".

Tertiary Homelessness

3. "Tertiary homelessness refers to people who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis, operationally defined as 13 weeks or longer. They are homeless because their accommodation situation is below the minimum community standard.". This is because they do not have the security of tenure provided by a lease and they do not have kitchen and bathroom facilities of their own (Chamberlain & Mackenzie: 2003: 1-2).

Other useful definitions of homelessness

A homeless person is someone "without a conventional home and lack[ing] most of the economic and social supports that a home normally affords. She/ he is often cut off from the support of relatives and friends, she/he has few independent resources and often has no immediate means and in some cases, little future prospect of self-support"

(Wesley Mission, 'Wesley Mission Homeless persons Services, Definitions of Homelessness', <http://www.wesleymission.org.au/centers/homeless/defn.asp>
Cited in UnitingCare Australia, *Homelessness and Poverty*, Poverty Briefing Paper No 4).

Homelessness thus encompasses:

- *"The absence or threat of loss of shelter;*
- *Constant moving from place to place*
- *Physically inadequate accommodation*
- *Lack of social and familial support networks*

- *Restrictive access to alternative housing.*”

Homelessness is thus much more than rooflessness, since the attributes of a home are:

- security of tenure
- security against threats
- physical characteristics which do not undermine health or create further disadvantage,
- affordability,
- living with people of one’s choice,
- privacy and autonomy and control” (Neil C and Fopp R: 1994: 3-4 cited Council of Homeless Persons).

Home has been described as “a very rich concept. It embodies ideas of comfort, belonging, identity, security... [and it] may be defined as a place where a person is able to establish meaningful social relations” (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 15).

Social exclusion, which is in an “absence of affiliative bonds that link persons to a network of interconnected social structures” is thus a major component of homelessness (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 16).

Patterns of homelessness

- People become homeless for different lengths of time depending on their circumstances. Homelessness may represent “a single acute episode in a person’s life, or a condition into which individuals enter and exit repeatedly over the course of their lives” (Neil et al: 1992: 8).
- Kuhn and Culhane (1998) also use typologies based on time to understand homelessness, referring to the transitionally homeless (80% of users of emergency Shelters in US, tending to be younger & less likely to have health problems such as substance abuse and mental health problems), the episodically homeless and the chronically homeless (about 10% of homeless population).
- The latter, the most visible homeless group, are those for whom homelessness has become a persistent way of life. They often have chronic illnesses such as drug and alcohol problems, mental health problems and physical illnesses compounded by the effects of street living (cited UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 52).
- Homelessness can thus be said to represent ‘a continuum of experience including ‘rooflessness’, as well as unsafe and inadequate housing conditions, and unstable tenancy arrangements’ (Memmott P, Long S & Chambers C, 2003 cited in *UnitingCare* Australia: 2003: 4).

Who are the homeless?

- Homelessness affects a diverse range of people, both men and women, people of all ages and family and household types, including couples, families with children and single people, and people from all cultural backgrounds.
- Certain groups in the Australian community are particularly vulnerable to homelessness: indigenous people, people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, people with high and complex needs and people living in rural and remote areas (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003).
- Historically the homeless population was considered to be largely comprised of older single men. Men still make up a large proportion of the homeless, including young men without education or job history and middle aged men who have lost jobs due to recessions and technological changes.
- However the homeless also include children and young people estranged from their families, often as a consequence of violence in the home. Women, often accompanied by children, escaping domestic violence are another major group. People with mental health problems, with other disabilities, those with drug and alcohol problems and chronic illnesses are highly represented among the homeless.

How many people are homeless?

Globally

- There are currently about 100 million homeless people in the world.
- However there are 1.1 billion people living in inadequate housing conditions in urban areas alone: if people in rural areas are included the number may be double.
- There are between 30-170 million homeless children worldwide: in the USA children constitute about 20% of the homeless population, or 600,000 people (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000).

Australia

- The number of homeless individuals in Australia was 99,900 in 2001 (based on Australian Bureau of Statistics Census night count, cited in Chamberlain and Mackenzie: *Counting the Homeless*: 2003).
- This group was composed of 58,116 homeless single person households, 9,420 homeless couple households and 6,745 homeless family households. Single person households comprised 78% of homeless households.
- Based on Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) data, homelessness in Australia appears to have increased noticeably between 1996-7 and 2002-03, since there was an increase of 19,800 SAAP support periods over this period, a rise of 11.2%.

Number of Homeless people by State and Territory

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT
2001	26 676	20 305	24 569	7 586	11 697	2 415	5 423	1 229
1996	29 608	17 840	25 649	6 837	12 252	2014	9 906	1 198

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003.

- Between 1996 and 2001, the number of homeless people increased in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT. The change in census counting rules in remote communities had its greatest impact in the NT, resulting in a decrease in the number of indigenous people counted in improvised dwellings.

Rate of Homelessness per 10,000 of the Population

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT
2001	42.2	43.6	69.8	51.6	64.0	52.4	288.3	39.6

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003.

- Rates of homelessness were very high in the Northern Territory, perhaps reflecting the over-representation of the indigenous among the homeless, followed by Queensland and Western Australia, and lower in the Southern States.

Characteristics of the homeless population

Sectors of the Homeless Population

Table 1. Persons in Different Sectors of the Homeless Population

	2001 (Year)	%
Boarding houses	22 877	22.9
SAAP accommodation	14 251	14.3
Friends and relatives	48 614	48.7
Improvised dwellings, sleepers out	14 158	14.1
Total	99 900	100

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003

- The largest single group of homeless people in all States and Territories were the group staying with friends and relatives on census night, followed by those living in boarding houses.
- Homelessness is a process: people may start out staying with friends and relatives and move to a boarding house or caravan park further down the track after exhausting other options, before or after approaching SAAP (Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003: 53).
- This continuum is also referred to as 'homeless career', (for example *Homeless Careers: Pathways in and out of Homelessness*, Mackenzie & Chamberlain, 2003).

Household Types

Homeless Single Person, Couple and Family Households, Census night, 2001

	No.	%
Single Person	58,116	78
Couple	9 420	13
Family	6 745	9
Total	74 281	100

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003

- The majority of homeless households are single person households.
- The 6745 family households comprised 23,000 people, made up of 9,500 parents and 13,400 children, which was in fact approximately one-quarter of the homeless population. In 1999-2000 over half of the 31,600 children using SAAP services accompanying clients were aged under 5 (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003: 93).

- The National Homelessness Strategy identifies families with children as a growing proportion of those accessing homelessness services, particularly sole parent families. Intergenerational homeless is described as an issue of concern, as people who experience homelessness as children are more likely to experience it as adults.

Age

Age breakdown of homeless population

Years of Age	Number	Percentage %
Under 12	9 941	10
12-18	26 060	26
19-24	10 113	10
25-34	11 567	17
35-44	12 992	13
45-54	10 349	10
55-64	7 883	8
65 or older	5 995	6
Total	99 900	100

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003

- In 2001, just over half (54%) the homeless population was aged 25 years or older, including approximately one quarter who were 45 years or over. Only 6% were aged 65 years or older.
- However 36% were young people aged 12-24 years and a further 10% were children under 12 years accompanying adults. Young people aged 12-18 years were disproportionately represented among the homeless, comprising 26% of homeless people (n = 26, 060).
- SAAP data from 2002-03 indicates that the average age of female clients was 30 and the average age of male clients was 33. People aged 18-19 had the highest rate of SAAP service usage at 145 clients for every 10,000 persons in the general population (AIHW: 2003).

Males and Females

Sex by Different Segments of the Homeless Population

	Boarding House (N = 22 877)	Friends or relatives (N = 48 614)	SAAP (N = 14 251)	Improvised Dwellings (N = 14 158)	All (N = 99 900)
	%	%	%	%	%
Males	72	53	47	61	58
Females	28	47	53	39	42
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003

While there are more males in the homeless population, women are now a substantial minority (42%).

Among homeless people aged 12-18 years there are slightly more females than males: this pattern reverses in the age group 19-24 and in the 35 years and over group men outnumber women almost 2 to 1.

Males significantly outnumber females as residents of boarding houses and as residents of improvised dwellings, while women are more highly represented in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) and are more likely to live with friends and relatives, following SAAP, than in the other categories set out above. Chamberlain and Mackenzie note that homeless people sleeping out in capital cities are more likely to be male, but the occupants of improvised dwellings in rural locations are more likely to be families or couples with both males and females.

In 2002-03, 42% of users of SAAP services were male and 58% were female.

Indigenous people

Indigenous status by different segments of the homeless population

	Boarding House (N = 22 877)	Friends or relatives (N = 29 439)	SAAP (N = 14 251)	Improvised Dwellings (N = 14 158)	All (N = 80 725)
Non-Indigenous	92.9%	96.6%	89.0 %	81.1%	91.5%
Indigenous	7.1%	3.4%	11.0%	18.9%	8.5%
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003

- Indigenous people are significantly over-represented among the homeless, in all of the above sectors of the homeless population. While they comprise only 2% of the general population, on the basis of the above 9% of the homeless were indigenous.

- The indigenous comprised 11% of SAAP clients in 2001, rising to 18% in 2002-03. A higher proportion of female than male clients of SAAP services were indigenous, (21% compared to 13%).
- Indigenous people had the highest number of support periods under SAAP, (2.1), while the figure for all service users was 1.8.
- Indigenous clients were highly represented in SAAP in certain states and territories (55.7% Northern Territory; 36.5% in WA; 17.2% in NSW). Among this group, indigenous women are very highly represented (NSW 22.3% female; 12.1% male; WA 36.5% female; 13.6% male; NT 55.7% female, 30.6% male), (AIHW: 2003: 20).

People from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Background

- 2002-03 SAAP data indicates that 86% of SAAP clients were born in Australia: the next most common place of birth was Oceania (3%).
- People from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background are more at risk of homelessness if they are ineligible for income support (currently the federal government imposes a 2 year waiting period on new arrivals); have little or no family to provide assistance; do not speak English and have difficulty accessing housing, employment and support services due to discrimination (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003).

Marginal residents of caravan parks

Marginal Residents of Caravan Parks and Number of Dwellings

	NS W	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australi a
Persons	6 8881	3 407	7 989	932	2 503	271	775	110	22 868
Dwellings	4 531	2 307	5 132	599	1506	179	437	82	14 773

Source: Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003

- Marginal residents of caravan parks were defined as people who were renting their caravan but no one in the dwelling had a full-time job and they were at their usual address. They are not included in the ABS definition of the homeless. The above Table shows that numbers of marginal caravan park residents were particularly high in Queensland, NSW, Victoria and Western Australia.
- Caravan parks replace boarding houses as a form of low cost housing in regional centers, country towns and the outskirts of major cities. SAAP workers sometimes refer homeless people to caravan parks if there is no emergency housing available, and a lack of other

options.

Duration of Homelessness

- The type of homelessness experienced affects the duration of homelessness. It has been estimated that “60-70% of people in improvised dwellings, boarding houses and SAAP experience a sustained period of homelessness (six months or longer), as do half of the adults staying temporarily with other households” (Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003: 8).
- Making a transition from homelessness is difficult for the unemployed and people without an income. It is less likely that people living in improvised dwellings, tents and sleepers out can move from homelessness and are likely to remain in this state longer, due to the high proportion that are unemployed. People in boarding houses for longer than 12 weeks are also a low turnover population, experiencing a lack of transition from this form of tenure. However people staying with other households, who are more likely to have at least one family member employed, are a medium turnover group.
- A recent survey of 812 clients of SAAP services indicated that almost half (48%) had been homeless for one year or longer (of the remainder, 9% homeless under 1 month; 17% 1-3 months; 14% 4-6 months; 12% 7-11 months). Although people tend to stay in SAAP services for relatively short periods, the median length of support provided to SAAP clients in 2002-03 being 5 days (AIHW: 2003: xxi), many clients are homeless before going to SAAP. After support 48.9% remained homeless, compared to 55.5% prior to support, while another 12% were marginal, that is, they were staying with another family, often short term.
- Younger age groups are thought to experience shorter periods of homelessness

Impact of Homelessness

Homelessness has a detrimental impact on all aspects of a person's life:

- It “*creates instability, leaves people vulnerable to chronic unemployment and ill health, and with limited or no ability to participate in the social and economic life of their community.*” (Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations, (AFHO: 2003). It has “*devastating consequences for child development, education, family formation and maintenance, mental and emotional health and capacity to work and live independently and with dignity*” (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003: 7).

- Homeless people live in extreme poverty and deprivation, insecurity and vulnerability. Their circumstances are insecure in regard to the basics of life such as where the next meal is coming from. In the US, 20% of homeless people were reported to eat only one meal per day or less, (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 62).
- They are more vulnerable than the non-homeless to addiction to drugs and solvents. They have nowhere to relax and lack privacy. They are reduced to the status of virtually non-person or non-citizen, often without papers and capacity to participate in the normal processes of a democratic society, such as voting. Non-receipt of government income support payments and non-access to other social services is fairly common.
- It is not always easy to clearly distinguish the effects of homelessness from its causes. People who have been victims of violence, people with mental health problems, other chronic health problems and disabilities, and drug and alcohol issues are highly represented among the homeless, and it seems likely that these problems both contributed to their homelessness and are exacerbated by it.

Causes of homelessness

Conceptual Frameworks

- Homelessness is a complex and multi-dimensional problem and its causes can be examined on a number of levels. It can be understood to occur as a consequence of big picture factors such as structural inequalities⁴ and of factors related to the experiences of families and individuals.
- The failure of government to adequately address social inequality can be viewed as the primary cause of homelessness. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements identifies a political analysis of homelessness as one which views political institutions as unresponsive to the needs of the most vulnerable people since they have not been successful in achieving an equitable distribution of housing. Homelessness is thus viewed as arising from a government's failure to achieve or maintain an effective social justice policy (UNCHS: 2003).

Structural Causes

The Council to Homeless Persons has identified the following as the major structural causes of homelessness:

- Lack of access to affordable housing
- Lack of or insecure employment
- Inadequate income support and

⁴ Structural inequality can be understood as entrenched inequity in the operation of economic, political and social systems that creates and perpetuate disadvantage.

- Poverty

The ways that each of these factors contributes to homelessness is explained in more detail below:

Government Economic and Social Policy

- There is general agreement in the literature on the causes of homelessness, and of the reasons for the growth in homelessness over the last 20 years. In industrialized Western countries like Australia, structural change in the economy under the influence of neo-liberal political and economic policy is a key factor. As discussed below resultant low wage employment, lack of income security and unemployment are among the key causes of homelessness.
- The United Nations Centre for Human Settlement (UNCHS) notes that changes to economic and industrial structures and technologies, including globalisation, has led to a considerable reduction in the number of stable, full-time jobs, with the employed increasingly relying on temporary, insecure or part-time work. In Australia in 2002, 27% of jobs are casual: this is predicted to rise to 33% by 2010 (Watson et al: 2003). Not only is such work insecure, the benefits can be insufficient to enable people to afford adequate accommodation in the private market.
- Structural economic change has also led to the loss of jobs in regional centers, the reduction in unskilled jobs and of entry level positions for young people.
- The UNCHS identifies homelessness in America as “the culmination of policies that have either ignored or misdiagnosed the adverse impact of economic shifts, the lack of affordable housing, ...and ... [the] physical health and mental health problems of those who are the most vulnerable in ...society” (UNCHS: 2000: 51).
- In the United States and increasingly with the ascendancy of neo-liberalism in Australia, a lack of support for homeless people is justified on the basis of what the UNCHS refers to as an ideology of self-reliance. In the USA there is little public funding for homeless shelters: these are funded and operated primarily by the non-profit sector. There is an aversion to the idea that higher taxes may be necessary to alleviate homelessness and related problems such as poverty, unemployment and lack of affordable housing, and a tendency to rely on short term stop gap approaches rather than meaningful long term solutions.
- This approach is rationalized as encouraging self-reliance, “implying that homeless people have sufficient resources available to them to resolve their dilemmas, and that they must be responsible for alleviating their poor living situations” (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 95). Housing is also viewed as a ‘private good’ that should not need special heavy public intervention and the market is viewed as an efficient provider.

- The UNCHS (Habitat) in *Strategies to Combat Homelessness*, identifies unemployment as one of the most important reasons why people become homeless and therefore argues that national policies should be directed towards the goal of full employment and to establishing and strengthening safety nets as major components in combating homelessness. Furthermore they note that governments should facilitate an adequate supply of affordable housing. In summary, there is a need for a public policy framework that incorporates employment policy and housing policy as well as social safety nets and housing allowances in order to combat homelessness.

Poverty and Unemployment

- Poverty and unemployment are among the key causes of homelessness⁵, and the homeless are correspondingly a major group experiencing poverty. The Programme of Action of the World Summit on Social Development, identifies homelessness and inadequate housing as one of the main manifestations of poverty globally (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 9).
- In the United States, single homeless people receive 12% of the median monthly income of all American households, living at about half of the federal poverty level in 1999.
- Although there is not agreement in Australia about how poverty is best measured, one of the most common measures is the Henderson poverty line, which places those in poverty below half of average income. On this basis poverty has increased since the mid-1970s, and 2.4 million Australians or 13.3% of the population currently live in poverty (Harding and Szukalska: 2000). One aspect of this phenomenon has been the growth of the number of ‘work-poor’ families with no members in paid employment. Chamberlain and Mackenzie conclude that the “increase in low income households underpins the increase in homelessness over the past two decades” (Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003: 64).
- One of the key causes of poverty is unemployment. Between “1978 and 1999, the unemployment rate in Australia generally ranged between 7-10% and was never less than 5% (Chamberlain and Mackenzie: 2003: 64).

⁵ 10% of persons staying in SAAP services in 2002-03 gave financial difficulty as their main reason for seeking assistance. The real level of financial difficulty among this group is likely to be higher than this, since approximately 90% also indicated that they were unemployed.

- 2002-03 SAAP data on clients using services over this period indicates that 11% cited financial difficulty as their primary reason for seeking assistance. In 2000-01, over 90% of SAAP clients were unemployed or not in the labour force, and unemployment was identified by this group as a key problem (AIHW cited in *UnitingCare Australia: 2003*).

Overall there was little difference in the profile of clients' employment status before and after receiving support, suggesting that unemployment is an intractable problem for this group. In fact it is estimated that people who are homeless comprise 20% of the long term unemployed (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003).

Unemployment is one of the more intractable problems of clients of SAAP services and one of those least effectively addressed by such services.

- A significant proportion of the homeless have no income whatsoever. In 2003-03, before receiving support from SAAP, 16% had no income and were not awaiting a government payment (AIHW: 2003: xix). Although it is likely that most would have been eligible for some form of income support, as discussed below, Centrelink administrative systems are not appropriate to homeless people and result in people missing out on benefits.

Problems with the Income Support System

- UNCHS (Habitat) notes that the risk of homelessness has increased in high-income industrial countries due to the general trend towards reducing public expenditure on social services, including income support. This has occurred through strategies such as the tightening of eligibility for income support payments and breaching regimes.
- Problems in obtaining and retaining income support can lead to homelessness and be a consequence of it. Homeless people do not have access to amenities such as a telephone, an address to receive mail, may not have identification documents, and thus can experience difficulty obtaining benefits and meeting mutual obligations imposed by Centrelink. Problems obtaining income support and Centrelink administrative practices such as breaching recipients, that is withholding or reducing benefits for a period, can lead to inability to meet rental payments or mortgage and result in homelessness. The National Homelessness Strategy also identifies policies that require applicants to exhaust their savings before they can receive income support as problematic.
- Furthermore income support may not itself be adequate to meet living expenses, especially for people with high costs associated with poor health, or living in locations where rents consume a high proportion of income. The low level of income support payments places beneficiaries marginally above, or below the Henderson Poverty Line, depending on the type of benefit received. Even with rent assistance, housing costs are not affordable for many. In addition certain groups in the community are ineligible for income support: migrants who have been in Australia for less than two years and young people deemed ineligible on the basis of the parental means test (Commonwealth

Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003).

Access to Affordable Housing

- Failure of Australian governments to adequately address the need for affordable housing for purchase, in the form of social housing (public and community housing), affordable private rental housing and to adequately fund the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, significantly contributes to homelessness.
- At the time of the 2001 Census 63.7% of low-moderate income private renters in NSW were in housing stress, paying more than 30% of their income in rent in the private rental market. A 2003 report by ACOSS and National Shelter has shown that one third (35%) of Commonwealth Rent Assistance recipients remained in housing stress after receiving this benefit. Public housing waiting lists are long (223,300 Australia, 2002) and waiting times considerable, and this form of tenure is declining due to government disinvestment.

The federal government's National Homelessness Strategy observes that people on income support or on low wages are often unable to obtain appropriate housing in competitive markets and if breached by Centrelink are at risk of losing social housing. The authors note that demand for social housing and other forms of affordable housing is increasing and far outweighs supply.

- Urban regeneration, renewal and gentrification of inner city housing stock has reduced the supply of low-cost urban housing. More affordable housing is increasingly being concentrated in areas with low employment, resulting in disadvantaged people moving to such areas away from capital cities such as Sydney that offer better employment opportunities (UnitingCare Australia: 2003).
- The private rental market does not provide adequate security of tenure, nor is it accessible to the low income for reasons such as requirements for bond and rent in advance. Eviction from rental housing, whether public or private, is one of the commonest pathways to homelessness. Of persons staying in SAAP services in 2002-03, 11% gave 'eviction/ previous accommodation ended' as the main reason for seeking assistance.
- Tenancy management and letting practices of real estate agents and landlords such as the operation of Residential Tenancy Databases, which are largely unregulated in all states of Australia apart from Queensland, are used to vet prospective tenants by real estate agents and some private landlords. The blacklisting of tenants on these databases has been directly identified as a cause of homelessness among homeless people living in SAAP services.

Social, familial and personal causes

Violence in the home, family instability & breakdown

- Domestic violence is the primary cause of use of SAAP services by women: 44% of single women over 25 and 52% of women with children identified domestic violence as their main reason for seeking assistance in 2002-03 (AIHW: 2003). Women from CALD backgrounds are over-represented in crisis accommodation for women escaping domestic violence.

- Unaccompanied young people most commonly cite family conflict as their main reason for seeking assistance from homelessness services. Other significant reasons were physical, sexual and emotional abuse, feelings of depression and anxiety, violence between family members, a desire for independence, being told to leave or thrown out of home. Young people leaving care and protection systems and the juvenile justice system are highly represented among the homeless (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003).

- The Council to Homeless Persons notes that “inadequate housing, financial stress and forced mobility can contribute towards growing conflicts and pressures within households” and that once broken “coherent family ties may be difficult or impossible to reestablish, especially where family members have been forced to move to different temporary accommodation” (McCaughey, 1992, cited by Council to Homeless Persons 2004).

- Lack of family and friends from whom low-income people can obtain assistance is a further factor that significantly contributes to homelessness. The federal government’s National Homelessness Strategy explains that people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness “are generally isolated socially, with little or no access to family and community supports”. Increasing access to community support services and informal social support is identified as one way to help reduce the risk of homelessness and provide pathways out of it (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003).

- Changes in Australian families and their relationships are also placing some at greater risk of poverty and homelessness. The National Homelessness Strategy explains that Australian families “are becoming smaller, more isolated from extended family networks, more often headed by a single parent and are increasingly prone to fragment when relationships end” (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003: 50).

Personal Factors:

Health

- Poor health can be both a cause and a consequence of homelessness. Chronic health problems such as diabetes and HIV/ AIDS are more common among the homeless. Other health problems associated with homelessness include poor nutrition and hygiene, conditions associated with substance abuse such as liver disease, blood-borne infections and respiratory complaints, poor dental health, eye problems, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, viral hepatitis, sexually transmitted diseases, pneumonia and infestation disorders resulting from self-neglect and no facilities to maintain personal hygiene (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003). People with mental health disorders are highly represented in the homeless population. For example a large homeless crisis services in Melbourne reports that between 19% and 26% of their clients have psychiatric problems, (Hanover Welfare Services and Ozanam House, cited Council to Homeless Persons).
- Substance abuse has been identified as both a trigger and consequence of homelessness. Data on SAAP clients from 2002-03 indicates that 5% gave drug and alcohol abuse as their primary reason for seeking assistance. According to data gathered by a Victorian based welfare service, people who are homeless are 10 times more likely to be addicted to heroin than the general population (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003).
- Homelessness is likely to worsen any existing health problem because people “who are homeless are less able to look after themselves, follow self-care regimes or access health services” (UnitingCare Australia: 2003: 6). Barriers accessing health services are related to lack of transport, lack of financial resources, negative responses of staff and lack of information about health services, (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness: 2003). There is a need for specialist health services for homeless people, since many people who are homeless have a combination of these issues, sometimes referred to as having complex needs.
- The homelessness of people with disabilities and mental health problems is directly related to the lack of adequate housing options for this group, and of support to assist them to maintain their housing. In the last 20-30 years the shift to deinstitutionalisation has not been followed by the provision of appropriate housing and support in the community. The National Homelessness Strategy recognises this situation as problematic, particularly the fact that people with mental health problems are increasingly turning to SAAP for assistance, when SAAP generally lacks the funds and trained staff to assist them. The authors of the Strategy note that SAAP is not designed to provide the ongoing supported accommodation required by people with ongoing mental health problems.

People with Disabilities

- The National Homelessness Strategy identifies people with disabilities (physical disabilities and cognitive impairments) as highly vulnerable to homelessness. This is related to the fact that they are more likely to experience poverty, abuse and social isolation and are more reliant on family members and service providers for support in order to establish and maintain safe and appropriate housing. Data from SAAP services indicates that people with psychiatric, physical or intellectual disabilities are highly represented in SAAP (1992 survey placed them at 13% and 11% of clients respectively).

Ex-prisoners

- Ex-prisoners have been found to experience “severe housing problems with a large group of participants cycling in and out of prison, progressively becoming homeless and more socially isolated” (UnitingCare Australia: 2003: 7). This issue is also identified in the federal government’s National Homelessness Strategy. The latter notes that there is a large body of international research on the link between incarceration and homelessness, which reveals that a large proportion of prisoners can not return to their former home. Families of prisoners are also identified as at risk of homelessness because of loss of a bread-winner.

Responses to Homelessness

International

- The best way to address homelessness is by preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place. Prevention is achieved by poverty alleviation and eradication, improving the housing stock available to people living in poverty, improvements in security of tenure to prevent eviction, provision of services and care, and especially measures to overcome poverty. Once people become homeless, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) notes that a combination of the availability of services and a process of appraisal as to people’s needs, abilities, aspirations and problems is an absolute requirement.
- An initial critical step in reaching out to homeless people is outreach, in its most basic form this includes, soup kitchens, emergency responses in very cold weather and night shelters. It can also include streetwork programs targeted at children and young homeless people. The next step is often to move people on to supported housing, which is housing linked with supportive services, providing a range of different services to people with different needs, such as single homeless men and women and children escaping domestic violence. Re-integration strategies may also need to be developed at this point.
- The next stage is to move people onto permanent housing, which should be subsidized until the formerly homeless person achieves stable economic circumstances. Interagency

coordination is also required for a strategic response that avoids gaps, service barriers and duplication.

- This has also been expressed as a continuum of care in which one mode of accommodation and assistance seamlessly translates into the next, as set out below:
 1. Provision of emergency shelter and assessment to identify needs;
 - Transitional or rehabilitative services for those who need them. This may involve substance abuse treatment, provision of mental health services, assistance with development of independent living skills and case management, to ensure that necessary services are provided. The aim of these strategies is to reintegrate homeless people into the community.
 - Permanent housing arrangements for all (which may involve continued provision of housing with support for those unable to live independently).

Other initiatives and modes of service provision said to be required are:

- Financial support including assistance in obtaining government income support.
- Enterprise development and skills training, possibly accompanied by micro-finance for self-employment, and for others assistance in obtaining employment.
- A range of other social support strategies such as medical support.
- Specific initiatives for homeless children such as street based outreach programs providing food and medical support, and possibly also educational, psychological and legal support. Models of informal street education programs in the area of healthcare may focus on drug and alcohol abuse and HIV infection.
- Supportive housing for homeless children and young people may include provision of counseling, case management, medical and dental care, schooling and social and job skills.
- Integrated strategies and better co-ordination: This involves effective collaboration and partnerships between government and non-government agencies, described as a cross-cutting approach, recognizing the linkages between factors that lead to homelessness. Interagency cooperation needs to occur in problem definition, resource mobilization and funding, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation.
- Prevention: Education programs for schools students before they leave the family home, in addition to the major preventive strategies in area of alleviating poverty, providing affordable housing and meeting the needs of people with health problems, particularly

those with mental and emotional health problems.

- It is worth noting that the UNCHS (Habitat) encourages governments to create enforceable rights for homeless people to “adequate, self-contained affordable land or housing space which is consistent with human rights standards” (UNCHS (Habitat): 2000: 12). Unlike Australia, some European countries have enshrined the right to housing in their national constitutions.

Australia

- There is consensus that “addressing and preventing homelessness requires improvements in a range of social policy areas such as housing, income, employment, health, social security, violence and discrimination” (AFHO: 2003). It is important that preventive strategies address domestic violence as a major cause of homelessness for women and children, for example through family counseling, removing the perpetrator, provision of secure accommodation and public campaigns on violence against women.
- *UnitingCare* Australia has recommended that Australian governments develop and implement a national housing strategy that recognises the relationship between homelessness and other causes and effects of poverty and incorporates prevention, early intervention, crisis and transitional programs for homeless people.
- The Federal Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) is currently in the process of developing a strategy incorporating elements of this approach. FACS launched the National Homelessness Strategy in 2001, producing a document in 2003 that established policy and program priorities for population groups at risk of homelessness. A Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, which reports to the Minister of FACS, and is responsible for the Strategy, is currently developing action plans to address some of the key factors identified.

The four key elements of the NHS are:

- Prevention
- Early Intervention
- Working Together
- Crisis Transition and Support.

The Strategy recommends the implementation of the following initiatives:

- A whole of government approach, integrating all of the policies, programs and agencies that influence income, employment, health, family relations and housing of the vulnerable.
- Education and training programs designed to cater to the needs of homeless people of all ages, with an emphasis on educational retention of young homeless people and effective labour market and adult education programs for the adult homeless.

- Specialist mental health, drug and alcohol treatment services and dental health services to be made available to the homeless. Drug and alcohol treatment and prevention programs should address accommodation and mental health issues
- Identification and removal of barriers to accessing entitlements to free & subsidized government medical & pharmaceutical services.
- Programs that address the risk of homelessness experienced by ex-prisoners, who may have no home to return to and no job upon leaving prison.
- The Strategy also emphasizes the need for people who are homeless to be involved in service planning and evaluation, and for the rights of vulnerable service users to be protected through a consistent national system of accreditation or licensing.

In addition to the above, which is in development phase, a range of Commonwealth and State government funded programs and services currently exist to assist homeless people. However most are not preventive in nature, and have not proven to be adequate in addressing homelessness for a significant proportion of clients.

- The primary government program for directly addressing homelessness is the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). SAAP is a Commonwealth/ State program which funds 1,238 agencies across Australia to deliver supported accommodation and related support services to homeless people. SAAP clients are people who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless due to a crisis. The overall aim of the Program, specified in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994 is to “provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services to help homeless people achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence” (AIHW: 2003:1).
- Although not a program exclusively for homeless people, the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement provides the funding basis for social housing (public and community) across Australia.
- Commonwealth Rent Assistance is available to people on an income support payment when rents exceed 20% of income. Under the Rent Assistance program, the Commonwealth and States and Territories provide additional assistance such as loans to cover the cost of rental bond and one-off payments to cover costs such as relocation expenses.
- Commonwealth Emergency Relief Program: \$26 million annually to 1200 welfare and community organizations so they can assist individuals and families in immediate short-term financial crisis. The program is designed to provide one-off crisis support, not ongoing assistance, for example with the cost of food, accommodation, electricity and transport costs.

Suggested Additional Government Responses to Homelessness

The following recommendations of additional steps Australian governments should take to address homelessness are put forward by a range of sources, including the Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations and Australian Council of Social Service.

Australian Governments have been called upon to develop and implement a National Housing Strategy, which must do the following:

- Invest in social housing (over 200,000 people on the waiting list nationally).
- Review the adequacy of Commonwealth Rent Assistance.
- Assist to increase the supply of low cost housing for rent and purchase, by developing incentives for private investment.
- Improve funding for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program-especially emergency and crisis housing
- Tax reform such as freezing or tightening negative gearing.
- Abolish or regulate tenancy databases on a consistent basis across Australia.
- Provide adequate landlord and tenant legislation. In NSW the Residential Tenancies Act should be amended to provide basic legal protections to boarders and lodgers, including protection from unfair eviction.
- Strengthen government planning policies to prevent the redevelopment of boarding houses providing affordable housing.
- Provide support for people with mental health problems to live in boarding houses. They are not eligible for residential Aged Care or for Community Aged-Care Packages because their disabilities are not age-related.
- The following alternatives have been suggested for homeless people with disabilities and mental health problems:
 - “An allocation of funding for Aged-Care Facilities designed specifically for formerly homeless people with age-related disabilities, mental illness, intellectual disability or alcohol related brain damage.
 - The provision of mental health Community Care Packages with an outreach component to enable workers to enter boarding houses, facilitating greater integration into the community and less hospitalization.

- The reinstatement of weekly psychiatric clinics at the large inner city hostels and the establishment of a proactive, team approach to the case management of homeless people”
(www.erc.org.au/netact/election_kit/homelessness_and_the_mentally_ill.htm, accessed 15/04/04).
- Some tenants of social housing, including those with mental health problems, require appropriate support to maintain their tenancies, so that they do not return to the ranks of the homeless.
- Community regeneration and renewal of many public housing estates is vital to make them better places to live, however any dwellings lost should be replaced, preferably in areas of high need.

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Other Sources of Information on Homelessness

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www.sheltermsw.infoxchange.net.au
- National Shelter
www.shelter.net.au/
- Australian Federation of Homeless Organisations
www.afho.org.au
- Council to Homeless Persons
www.chp.org.au