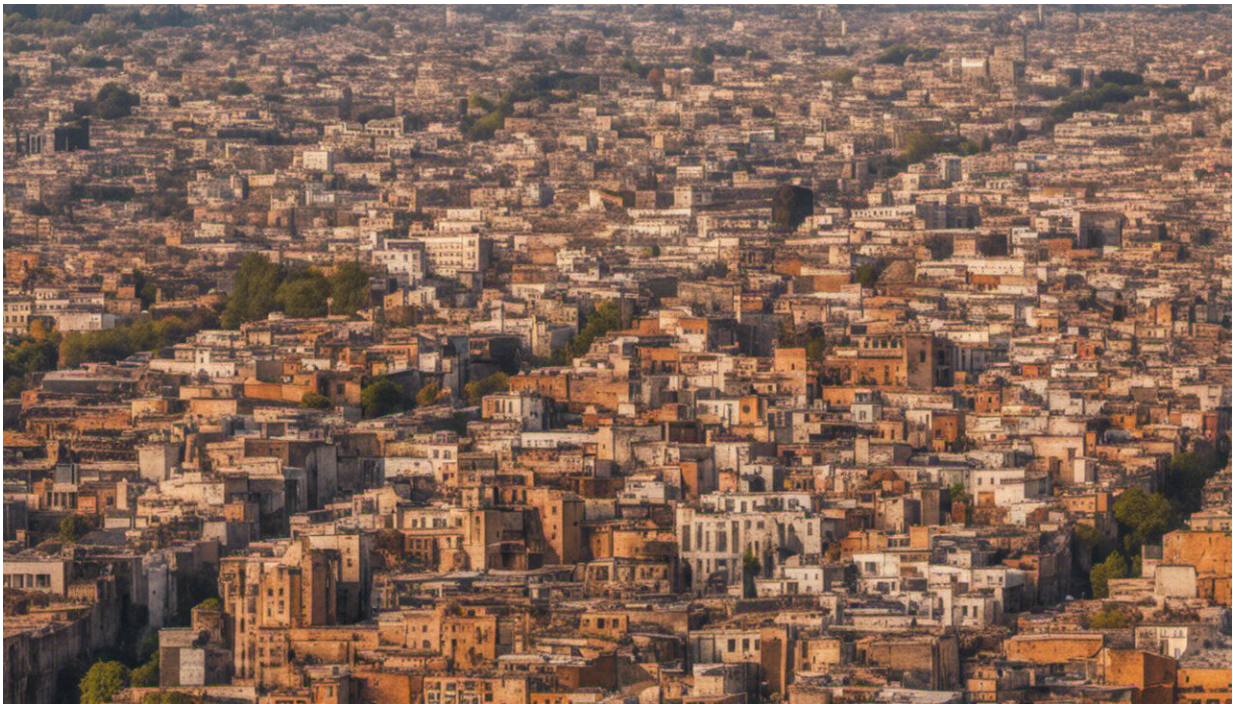# Growing number of single-person households presents challenges for cities

October 24 2017, by Jaz Hee-Jeong Choi

Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Two social trends that pose imminent challenges – and require policy responses – to sustainable futures in our cities are the rise of single-person households and homelessness.

One in four Australians **live alone**, either voluntarily or circumstantially.

The ageing population is one factor. The rise of younger people choosing to live alone is another, and it's historically and distinctively a new phenomenon.

The number of pension-aged people living alone has grown because that population itself has increased. However, the number of younger people living alone has grown in proportion to multi-adult households of working age in Australia and across the globe. We still have very limited understanding of this latter group.

The proportion of single-person households is expected to grow to 30-40% or more of households in most developed countries, including Australia, by 2030. At the same time, more people are dying alone.

Evidence suggests that these trends have significant health, sociocultural, economic and environmental implications. Japan, where these trends are further advanced, is already having to deal with these.

Lessons from Japan

Kodokushi (lonely death), genkai shuraku (village on the edge of extinction) and chihotoshi shometsu (the disappearance of regional towns) are major problems in Japan today. New services are emerging in Japan to cater to the needs of people who live alone. For example, one service plans and carries out the cleaning of someone's home should they die alone.

For this reason, Japan is referred to as kadai senshin koku (frontier in solving global problems). Australia will soon need to face these problems too.

Digital and networked technologies, especially artificial intelligence and robots, are being explored as support mechanisms in homes, care homes

and hospitals. Increasingly, though, the crucial role of human creativity and connection in care is becoming evident.

In neighbouring South Korea, cultural trends like mukbang (eat-casting) are said to have their origins in "the loneliness of unmarried or uncoupled Koreans, in addition to the inherently social aspect of eating in Korea."

In this case, technologies are being used even to jeopardise people's health, as individual "BJs" (Broadcasting Jockeys) are paid to broadcast themselves eating – often excessively – while interacting with their audience. Many of them are also eating alone while watching the show.

Problems associated with living alone will have an even more damaging impact on those without homes. In Australia, one in 200 people are homeless. Most of them are people under 35 or, increasingly, women over 55.

We must acknowledge the diversity of the homeless population, and the different factors that cause and sustain the experiences of living alone or being homeless. Such diversity will increase with the growing number of single-person households, income inequality, broader participation in the gig economy, and loss of jobs to automation.

What role for government?

Policy and regulatory measures to decrease housing prices will help. Australia ranks high for unaffordable housing among OECD nations.

The government could also play a central role in enabling collaboration among diverse stakeholders to seek new ways of creating and applying knowledge. This could be used to ask and answer difficult questions about even some of the most widely accepted concepts, like what is

"home" for those living alone and homeless.

The answers should then guide us as we create data, tools and systems for care and with care.

It will be critical to ensure the focus is not predominantly driven by a technocentric vision. We need to consider the sociocultural implications that existing and often celebrated technocratic discourses – around smart cities, for instance – might have.

To avoid a technocratically determined fate, we must develop diverse and enduring narratives of Australian cities. This requires what this year's Boyer lecturer, Genevieve Bell, might call a "bolshie" move. Part of that could involve bringing together interests and capacities across the public, private, community and research sectors to place urban futures as a key intellectual and social agenda.

We need comprehensive, transdisciplinary research and development for short to long-term goals. This must include ambitious innovation in research and practice, supported by new and emerging technologies, but most importantly, creative engagements beyond the usual suspects. This cannot be gesticulatory "co-design" workshops that are exclusive to certain participants.

Instead, we need inclusive engagement to produce new kinds of knowledge relevant to complex present and future urban conditions.

The Australian government's role in the future development of cities should not be about cleaning up the technological hubris or proliferation of "feral" technologies that we're generating. Rather, it should be about building individual and communities' capacity to question and co-create "the wisdom or propriety of a particular developmental direction" of Australian cities.

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