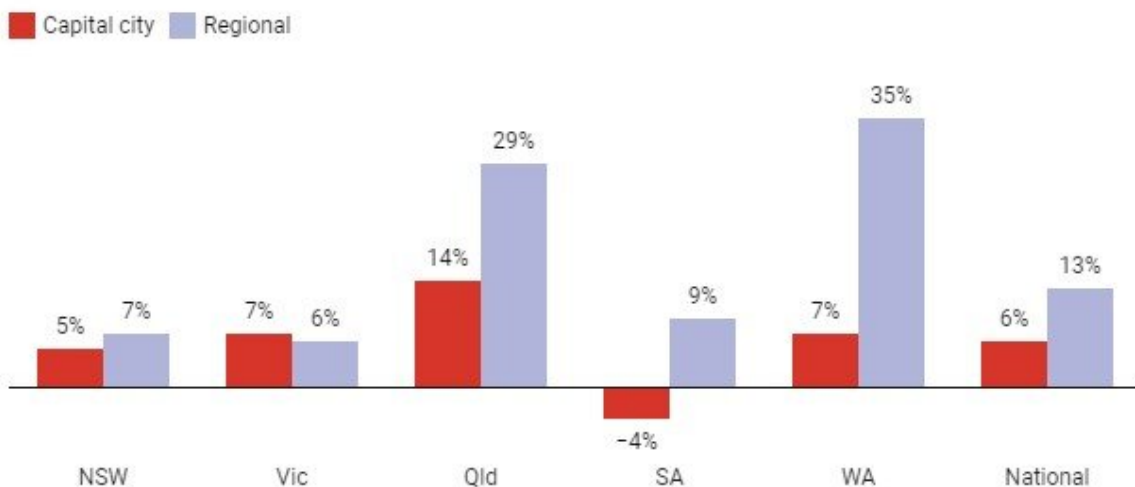


Homeless numbers have jumped since COVID housing efforts ended. And the problem is spreading beyond the big cities

December 5 2022, by Hal Pawson and Cameron Parsell

Changes in homelessness service caseloads over 4 years

Percentage changes in specialist homelessness service case numbers in capital cities and regional Australia from 2017-18 to 2021-22



Figures based on monthly average figures for the two cited financial years
 Credit: Chart: The Conversation Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection

The numbers of people who are homeless have risen sharply across Australia, with soaring housing costs emerging as the biggest driver of

the increase. The [Australian Homelessness Monitor 2022](#), released today, reports that the average monthly number of people using homelessness services increased by 8% in the four years to 2021–22. That's double the population growth rate over that period.

Just [as in other countries](#), the 2020 COVID-19 emergency accommodation programs achieved sudden reductions in rough sleeping in cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. But these remarkable gains were only temporary.

In the first major homelessness analysis spanning the COVID crisis years, we also show numbers have been rising in some parts of the country at rates far above the national trend. The problem has been growing especially rapidly in non-metropolitan areas. This trend is consistent with the boom in regional [housing prices](#) and, more especially, [rents](#) sparked by the pandemic.

The homelessness that has long been a sad feature of our biggest cities has clearly spread to regional and rural Australia.

Many other patterns in the changing scale and nature of homelessness in Australia are ongoing trends that pre-date the 2020–21 public health emergency. This period appears to have had relatively little effect on these trajectories, which include a growing proportion of older adults, as well as First Nations peoples and those affected by mental ill-health.

As the chart below shows, [unaffordable housing](#) is playing an increasing role in people becoming homeless.

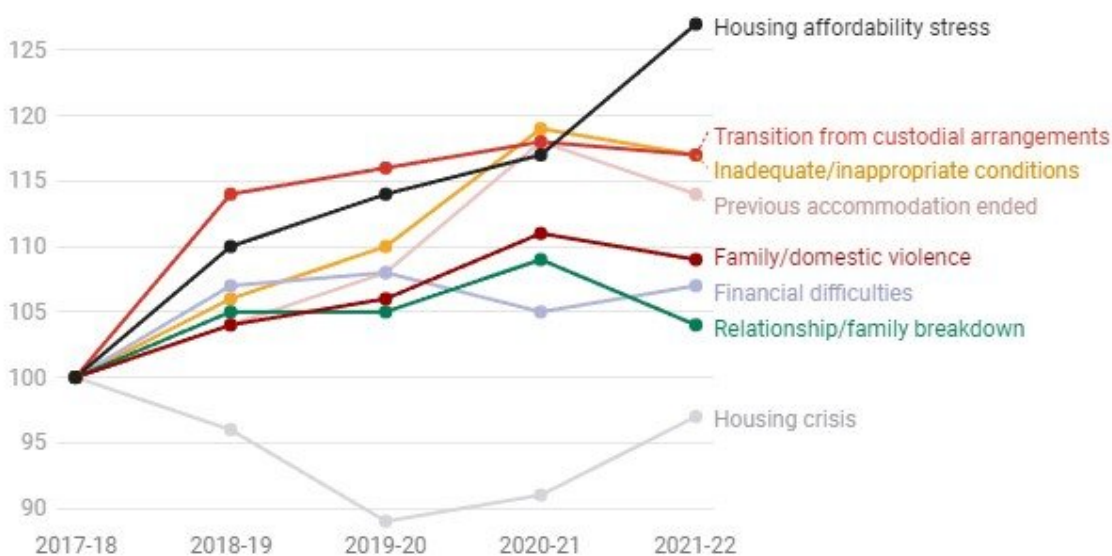
Social housing programs are welcome but overdue

The pandemic triggered significant and welcome commitments to social [housing](#) programs by the new federal government and some state

governments. The recent federal budget confirmed funding for [20,000 new social housing dwellings](#) over five years.

Reasons people seek homelessness services help

Breakdown of homelessness services caseloads (persons) by "reason(s) for seeking assistance" from 2017-18 to 2021-22.



Note: Baseline value from 2017-18 is 100. Service users may select more than one ‘trigger factor’. Figures based on average monthly service user numbers for each financial year. Credit: Chart: The Conversation Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection

Several states had already announced a set of [self-funded programs of a similar scale](#) as part of their post-COVID economic recovery measures.

Social housing offers secure tenancies at below-market rents. It's [a crucial resource](#) for both preventing and resolving homelessness.

Together, these new programs will—at least temporarily—halt the long-term decline in [social housing](#) capacity. The sector's share of the nation's housing stock has been [shrinking for most of the past 25 years](#).

By our reckoning, the government programs should deliver a net increase of about 9,000 social rental dwellings in 2024. This will be the first year for decades in which enough dwellings will be built to maintain the sector's share of Australia's occupied housing stock.

But sustaining this achievement will require more funding beyond the current commitments. Otherwise, the decline will resume.

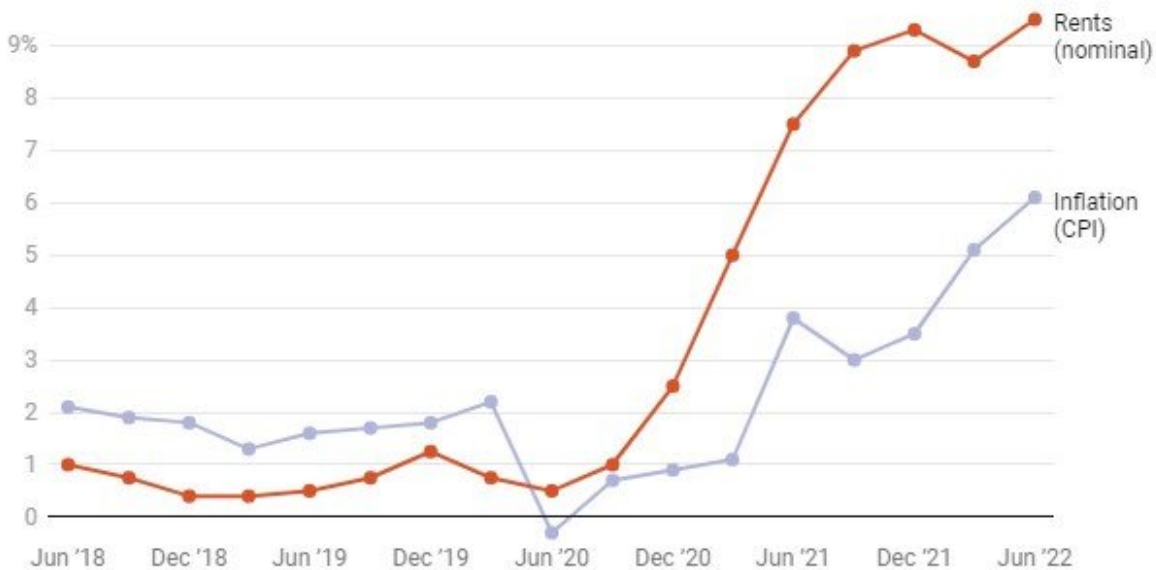
Affordability is the big issue, but some need other help

As a recent Productivity Commission [report](#) acknowledged, homelessness is primarily a housing problem. In [its words](#), "fundamentally, homelessness is a result of not being able to afford housing."

While other reasons do contribute to some people becoming homeless, most people experiencing homelessness have no long-term need for personal support. And many who do have high support needs can access and keep tenancies when suitable affordable housing is available.

Increases in advertised rents and inflation, 2018 to 2022

Year-on-year percentage change for each quarter based on national averages



Credit: Chart: The Conversation Source: Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

At the same time, the most disadvantaged rough sleepers may require a great deal of help to overcome their problems. The widely acclaimed "housing first" model successfully does this. As [other recent research](#) emphasizes, for many chronic rough sleepers helped into secure housing, withdrawing such support—even after three years—markedly increases their risk of becoming homeless again.

Australian governments need to better recognize the case for expanding the supply of permanent supportive housing. This involves integrating long-term affordable housing with ongoing support services where required.

Only a few such projects operate in Australia. There is no general framework to fund them, especially the support services.

Lengthy rough sleeping is typically a symptom of societal failure. All too often, for those affected, this failure starts from infancy.

Housing the chronically homeless pays for itself

The Productivity Commission report [advocated](#) a "high-needs-based [social] housing subsidy to ensure housing is affordable and tenancies can be sustained." Logically, since this is essentially a [social work](#) (not social security) responsibility, it is the states and territories, and not the Commonwealth, that should bear the cost.

This may sound like a big ask for underfunded governments. But state and territory budgets stand to benefit from avoiding the costs that recurrent and chronic homelessness imposes on departments such as health and justice. As our previous research shows, we spend enormous amounts of public money responding to the consequences of leaving people in a state of chronic homelessness.

A model for funding permanent supportive housing needs to be developed. Ideally, this process should involve all Australian governments, perhaps as part of discussions to advance the [National Housing and Homelessness Plan](#). Federal Labor pledged this project will take shape in 2023.

More broadly, these deliberations must be underpinned by recognition that our current ways of developing, operating and commodifying housing produce homelessness. A plan to end homelessness requires a plan to overhaul our housing system so it produces enough suitable and affordable housing for all Australians.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Homeless numbers have jumped since COVID housing efforts ended. And the problem is spreading beyond the big cities (2022, December 5) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-12-homeless-covid-housing-efforts-problem.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.