



Homelessness in the Central Highlands

December 2019

This summary report has been compiled by the Central Highlands Regional Partnership as a direct response to community calls to better understand homelessness in our region.

At each of the three Regional Assemblies that the Central Highlands Regional Partnership has hosted since 2016, our community called for a better understanding of, and more action on, homelessness.

We hope the community finds this report useful in their ongoing discussions about how best the region can respond to homelessness – as community members, service providers and government. After all, homelessness is a community issue, so it requires a whole-of-community response.

The Central Highlands region spans the east-west transport corridor connecting Melbourne to western Victoria and comprises the following municipalities: Ararat Rural City, City of Ballarat, Golden Plains Shire, Hepburn Shire, Moorabool Shire and Pyrenees Shire. It is home to a population of almost 200,000 and has a Gross Regional Product of \$8.8 billion, with around 20 per cent of jobs in the accommodation, food service and retail trade industries.

To inform this summary report, we commissioned research on the scale and drivers of homelessness in the Central Highlands. The data and most of the discussion found in this report is taken from that work:

Brackertz, N. (2019) Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area, report prepared by AHURI Professional Services for the Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

The Partnership has chosen not to publish the original research in order to protect individual identities of those in our community who contributed to the research. However, the central findings of the work are presented in this summary report.



George Fong
Chair of the Central Highlands Regional Partnership

What is homelessness?

In Australia, homelessness is usually understood to be relative to broader community standards. Having a home is understood to mean having at least one room to sleep in, one room to live in, one's own bathroom and kitchen and security of tenure.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) definition of homelessness reflects this understanding and goes even further to define three types of homelessness - primary (rough sleeping), secondary (temporary accommodation), and tertiary (inappropriate housing). The ABS definition is underpinned by the notion that homelessness is not 'rooflessness'. A person is considered homeless if they are occupying a dwelling that is inadequate, has no or very short tenure, does not provide security, stability, privacy, safety, or the opportunity to utilise space for social relations (this includes overcrowding).

Aboriginal homelessness

Aboriginal understandings of homelessness can differ from those described above and can refer to an inability to access appropriate housing that caters to an individual's particular social and cultural needs. Aboriginal homelessness does not necessarily relate to a lack of accommodation and can include 'spiritual homelessness' (the state of being disconnected from one's homeland, separation from family or kinship networks or not being familiar with one's heritage) and 'public place dwelling' or 'itinerancy' (usually used to refer to Aboriginal people from remote communities who are 'sleeping rough' in proximity to a major centre).¹

¹ Brackertz, N. (2019) *Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area*

Homelessness in the Central Highlands

At the time of the most recent Census in 2016, the ABS identified 601 homeless persons in the Central Highlands Area (including those in transitional housing). In addition, 259 persons were marginally housed in either crowded dwellings, caravan parks or other improvised dwellings.²

Reporting from within the region suggests the incidence of homelessness is increasing. In Ballarat, where the majority of housing services are located, there has been a rapid rise in the number of requests for housing support since 2015/16. Over a two-year period (2015/16 to 2017/18), housing services report:

- a 43% rise in requests for long-term housing assistance (from 1,350 to 1,926 requests); and
- a 31% rise in requests for short-term housing assistance (from 1,330 to 1,748 requests).³

² ABS Census 2016 as quoted in Brackertz, N. (2019) *Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area*

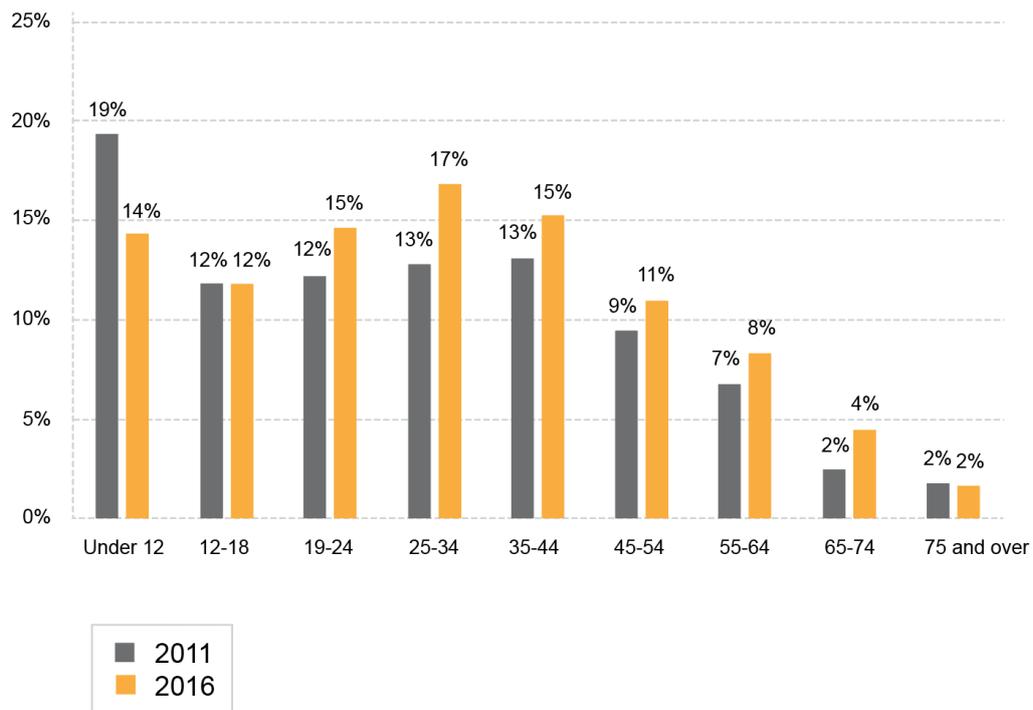
³ *Specialist services requested by clients at SHS agencies in CHA, 2015–16 to 2017–18 as quoted in Brackertz, N. (2019) Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area*

A person's age seems to have a bearing on the type of homelessness they experience in our region. Table 1 shows that according to the 2016 Census, in the Central Highlands:

- no children or youth were sleeping rough in 2016, but a significant proportion of homeless adults aged 55–64 (30%) and 35–44 (8%) were sleeping rough;
- most homeless children (87%) and homeless youth (72%) and many homeless people aged over 65–74 (37%) were accessing supported accommodation;
- a high proportion of homeless people aged 35–44 (35%) and aged 45–54 (41%) lived in boarding houses; and
- a high proportion of homeless young people aged 19–24 (39%) and 25–34 (26%) lived in severely crowded dwellings.

Experiences of homelessness impacts people's wellbeing. Long-term rough sleeping is associated with chronic health effects and reduced life expectancy. The finding that a high proportion of rough sleepers are in the older age group highlights an area of concern, while even short periods of homelessness can be disruptive to a child's social and emotional wellbeing.

Figure 1: Homeless age distribution in the Central Highlands 2011 and 2016 ⁴



⁴ ABS Census 2011 and 2016 as quoted in Brackertz, N. (2019) *Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area*

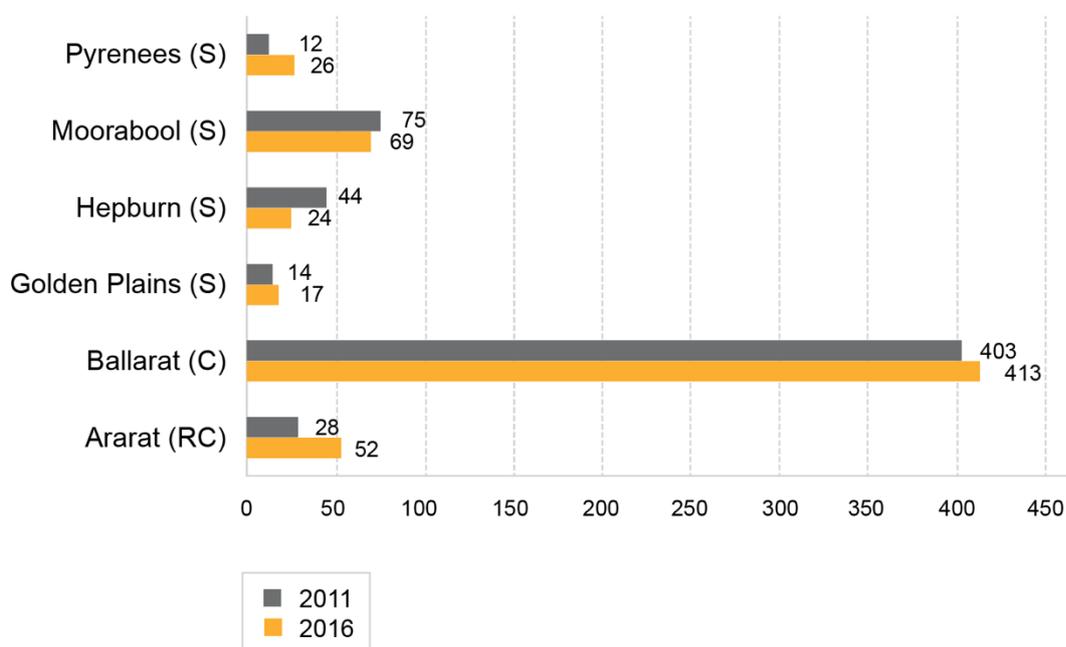
Table 1: Number of homeless persons in each age category, Central Highlands 2016 ⁵

	Age									Total
	<12	12-18	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	>75	
Persons living in improvised dwelling, tents, or sleeping out	0	0	0	3	7	0	15	0	0	25
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless, or sleeping out	75	51	46	32	38	10	4	10	3	272
Persons staying temporarily with other households	3	3	10	25	9	12	17	4	0	98
Persons living in boarding houses	0	6	3	16	32	27	18	0	7	111
Persons in other temporary lodgings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings	8	13	34	26	7	7	5	3	3	97
All homeless persons	86	71	88	101	91	66	50	27	10	601

⁵ ABS Census 2016 as quoted in Brackertz, N. (2019) *Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area*

ABS Census data shows that homelessness in the Central Highlands tends to be concentrated in areas where supported accommodation is available. Sixty-nine percent of people experiencing homelessness in Central Highlands (or 413 persons) were in Ballarat. The remainder tended to be in other areas with supported accommodation (Moorabool, Hepburn and Ararat) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Numbers of homeless persons in the Central Highlands by local government area, 2011 and 2016 ⁶



⁶ ABS Census 2011 and 2016 as quoted in Brackertz, N. (2019) *Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area*

What causes homelessness?

To help understand the role for community in preventing homelessness, we must understand the common causes of homelessness. Homelessness is caused by a combination of individual and structural risk factors, chief among which are housing affordability, family violence and poverty.

Individual risk factors driving homelessness

Domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is the most frequent cause of homelessness in Australia, affecting women, young people and children. People experiencing DFV may leave their home and seek insecure or unsuitable alternative accommodation options to escape the violence. The loss of a relationship in general, be it through DFV, divorce or the death of a partner, increases the likelihood of homelessness and places older people, women and children most at risk.

Intergenerational homelessness

Children who experience homelessness are at significant risk of experiencing homelessness later in adult life. Studies suggest that almost half of all adults experiencing homelessness first experienced it as a child. This indicates an urgent need for a focus on early intervention and prevention to break the cycle of intergenerational homelessness.

Mental health

Mental health and homelessness are strongly associated. Mental health issues can precipitate homelessness, due to factors including difficulty attaining employment and discrimination in the rental market. Conversely, the isolation and trauma of being homeless can lead to the onset of mental health issues. People experiencing mental health issues are a growing priority in the Central Highlands where nearly a third of people seeking housing assistance (31.5%) indicated they had a prior mental health diagnosis ⁷.

The lasting impact of trauma

Experiences of homelessness and domestic and family violence cause trauma. Trauma is the response to overwhelming psychological distress, resulting in feelings of being unable to cope, make rational decisions or feel the normal range of emotions. Recurrent or sustained episodes of trauma (known as Complex Trauma) can cause lasting damage to a person's sense of self; their relationships; and their physical and mental health. This is particularly true for children, whose developing brains are uniquely vulnerable to trauma. Children experiencing Complex Trauma can have an inability to manage behaviour or respond appropriately (leading to misdiagnoses of Autism and ADHD), poor educational outcomes and difficulty making friends.

Source: Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance

⁷ Uniting Ballarat Entry Point Data 2017-18. Note that Entry Point Data counts requests for assistance only and does not include any people experiencing homelessness who did not seek assistance.

People leaving institutional settings

People leaving institutions, such as hospitals, prisons and out of home care can often face immediate barriers to employment and housing. If discharge processes insufficiently plan for appropriate and sustainable housing for these people, it becomes a common pathway into homelessness.

Aboriginal Australians

Aboriginal people are vastly overrepresented among the homeless population. Records for people seeking assistance for homelessness in the Central Highlands during 2017-18 showed that 6 percent identified as Aboriginal⁸. This is well above the representation of Aboriginal people in the Central Highlands (1.4%)⁹.

Older people

Older people comprise a growing proportion of the Australian population, and the number and proportion of older people accessing housing services is increasing significantly. Older people, particularly older women, are at increased risk of homelessness due to factors such as divorce, separation, loss of partner, ill health, disability or employment insecurity.

⁸ Uniting Ballarat Entry Point Data 2017-18. Note that Entry Point Data counts requests for assistance only and does not include any people experiencing homelessness who did not seek assistance.

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019). 2016 Census QuickStats: Ballarat.

Young people

Young people are most likely to become homeless due to domestic or family violence (DFV) or family breakdown. Young people are overrepresented in people accessing homelessness services relative to their proportion of the general population. In 2016, 41% of those experiencing homelessness in the Central Highlands were children and young people aged under 25. This is higher than for Victoria (39%) and Australia (37%)¹⁰.

Evidence shows that the instances of homelessness and housing crisis could be avoided through earlier support and tenancy sustainment services.

Providing early support for people experiencing homelessness is a vital aim of homelessness services. The longer an individual experiences homelessness, the worse their physical, social and emotional health outcomes. By intervening early, services can work with an individual to stop a housing crisis negatively affecting family relationships, placing the safety of children at risk or affecting employment. To effectively offer early support, services need to have good working relationships with other community organisations, and to be resourced to effectively meet the needs of clients before their situation reaches crisis point.

Raising community awareness of homelessness services, and what a typical homelessness response looks like, can potentially increase the effectiveness of early support.

Source: Central Highlands Homelessness Alliance

¹⁰ ABS Census 2016 as quoted in Brackertz, N. (2019) *Risk factors for homelessness in the Central Highlands Area*

Structural risks factors driving homelessness

Lack of affordable housing

There is a mismatch between of the type housing available in the Central Highlands and the housing needed. There is a need for more of all types of housing, but most urgent is the need for affordable, long-term rental housing. Many households who would previously have been able to find and afford private rental on their own, or with minimal support, are now not able to. In December 2018, the Real Estate Institute of Victoria recorded a vacancy rate in Ballarat of 0.7 per cent for rental properties, showing an unprecedented increase in competition to rent.

A lack of affordable, private rental houses puts strain on the region's stock of short-term crisis and transitional housing. If tenants of short-term housing are unable to find affordable private rental housing, they cannot move out to long-term, sustainable homes.

More housing - particularly one-bedroom affordable rental properties - will help address homelessness

Rather, they must wait until public or community housing becomes available. This creates a 'bottleneck' downstream, with people eligible for short-term crisis or transitional housing not able to access it.

Single people make up the largest group of people experiencing homelessness in the region (48%) and there is a large shortage of one-bedroom dwellings to accommodate them. This primarily impacts young people, the elderly, and single men and women.

Employment

Employment markets are significant contributors to homelessness. A one percentage point increase in the unemployment rate raises the likelihood of homelessness by one percentage point. Furthermore, when people move to an area with greater job opportunities (such as cities or regional centres) they also face greater competition for housing and, therefore, a higher risk of homelessness.

Unemployment, and more significantly an absence of employment history, increases the risk of homelessness. Data for the Central Highlands over 2017-18 shows that the vast majority (88%) of housing support services provided were to clients who were receiving government income support. Newstart was the main source of income for 34 per cent of clients, followed by Disability support pension (25%) and Parenting payment (15%). This demonstrates that many people receiving government payments struggle to afford appropriate and sustainable housing.

Sustaining employment is not necessarily enough to prevent homelessness however. In 2017-18, 4.7 per cent of clients seeking housing assistance were in paid employment ¹¹.

Nearly 1 in 20 requests for housing assistance came from people with a job

Some clients report having no income. These are likely to include people who have had welfare payments suspended or migrants who have experienced domestic or family violence. Both are highly vulnerable groups, with limited options to support themselves.

¹¹ Uniting Ballarat Entry Point Data 2017-18. Note that Entry Point Data counts requests for assistance only and does not include any people experiencing homelessness who did not seek assistance.

Experiencing homelessness in a regional or rural area

A lack of housing options, access to specialist services and public transport in regional or rural Victoria can exacerbate homelessness.

Compared to metropolitan centres, there are far fewer housing options available in regional and rural areas. This holds true for all forms of housing, including private rental, transitional housing, crisis accommodation and social housing. Affordable housing is often in locations that require a person to have their own transport, making that housing either unsuitable or leading to social isolation.

Options are also more limited in terms of access to specialist services. This is exacerbated by limited or non-existent public transport options.

Compared with metropolitan areas, regional and rural areas have smaller communities. This produces positive effects, in terms of people looking out for one another. However, anecdotal results highlighted that small communities can also be judgemental of people experiencing homelessness.

The role for community in addressing homelessness

Alongside the efforts of the Victorian Government and homelessness and housing services in our region, many community members in the Central Highlands told us that they want to be part of the response to homelessness.

Where possible, preventing homelessness before it occurs has far better outcomes for people. Some actions community members or groups may wish to consider include:

Building skills and awareness

For example:

- mentoring young renters to help avoid tenancy failure (a major driver of homelessness).
- building financial literacy.
- building awareness across the community of specialist services and community supports available.

Building inclusion

For example:

- providing opportunities to participate in activities that people with low or no income would struggle to join – shows, sports, community events.
- providing practical support, such as driving people with limited transport to services and events.

Encouraging more house building

For example:

- campaigning for more affordable and social housing.
- increasing rental housing stock on private property.
- looking at how we can provide more appropriate housing - such as more single bedroom housing.

For more information on the Central Highlands
Regional Partnership see:

www.rdv.vic.gov.au/regional-partnerships/central-highlands

To tell us about what you are doing to address homelessness
in the Central Highlands, email:

central.highlands.partnership@rdv.vic.gov.au