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Life after Homelessness

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Life after Homelessness

Anyone in society can experience a period of homelessness at some stage in their life. Adverse life events or circumstances, such as illness or being the victim of violence, may trigger an episode of homelessness that, for some, may only be short lived. However, others experiencing homelessness may have struggled with considerable personal disadvantage throughout their lives.¹ In such circumstances there may be less personal, family or community resources at their command to either avoid or quickly recover from an episode of homelessness.

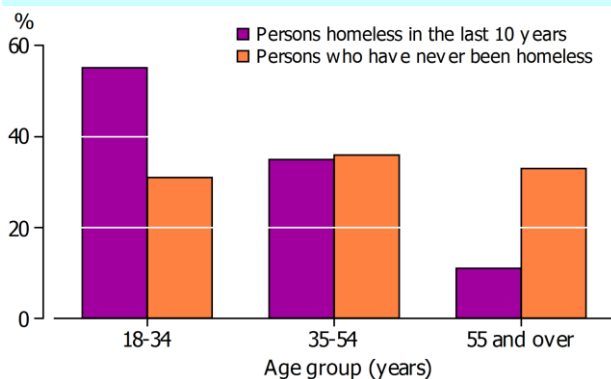
People who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness can be disconnected from employment and education institutions, be socially excluded from support networks, and are more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health.¹

This article examines a range of socio-economic indicators of those who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the last 10 years, but were no longer homeless. It does not examine causal relationships between homelessness and people's circumstances.

Who has been homeless?

In 2010, 1.1 million adults (7% of the 16.8 million adult population living in private dwellings) had experienced homelessness at some time in the previous 10 years. There were a similar number of men and women in this group.

Age distribution –2010(a)(b)



(a) Age reported at time of survey.

(b) Excludes persons who had been homeless more than 10 years ago.

Source: ABS 2010 General Social Survey

Data sources and definitions

Data in this article are from the ABS 2010 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS provides a very wide range of information about people who, at the time the survey, were living as usual residents of private dwellings in Australia (excluding very remote areas). The GSS, therefore, does not include people who, at the time of the survey, were staying in homeless shelters; sleeping rough; staying temporarily with other households; or staying in boarding houses. Therefore very few people who may have been experiencing homelessness at the time of the survey will have responded to the survey. See ABS [General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2010](#) (cat. no. 4159.0).

In this article, *Homelessness* is defined as a reported period in the past when the respondent had no permanent place to live as a result of: violence/abuse/neglect; tight housing market/rental market; family/friend/relationship problems; financial problems; alcohol or drug use; mental illness; gambling; job loss; eviction and natural disasters. While there were 965,000 adults whose most recent period of homelessness had been more than 10 years ago, this article focuses on the 1.1 million people who had at least one episode of homelessness in the last 10 years.

Never been homeless refers to people aged 18 years and over who had never experienced homelessness. It includes both people who had never been without a permanent place to live, or for whom the only reasons for being without a permanent place to live were: travelling/on holidays; work related reasons; just moving back/into town or city; house sitting; saving money; and building or renovating a home.

Age standardisation removes the effect of age when comparing socio-economic characteristics between the population who had experienced homelessness in the past 10 years with those who had never been homeless.

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) summarise different combinations of the social and economic information from the Census of Population and Housing to allow ranking of regions/areas, by the level of social and economic well-being in each region. The SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage includes attributes such as low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and jobs in relatively unskilled occupations. The index refers to the on average population of the area in which a person lives, not to the socio-economic situation of any particular individual. The first quintile represents the areas of most disadvantage and the fifth quintile represents the areas of least relative disadvantage.

...age

People who reported experiencing homelessness in the last 10 years were generally younger than those who had never been homeless. While one third (32%) of the general

adult population were aged 18-34 years, this age group accounted for 55% of those who had been homeless. In contrast, while those aged 55 years and over also accounted for one third (32%) of the general adult population, only 11% of those who had experienced homelessness were 55 years or over.

...education

People who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years reported lower levels of educational attainment. After standardising for age, of adults who had been homeless, one third (33%) had not gone beyond Year 10 at school nor obtained a non-school qualification above Certificate II level, compared with 23% of those who had never been homeless. Having been homeless was also associated with a lower likelihood of having obtained a Bachelor degree or higher (17% compared with 24% of those who had never been homeless).

...disability and long-term health condition

Adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years were much more likely to report having a disability or long-term health condition (64%) compared with those who had never been homeless (37%). People who had a disability or long-term health condition and had been homeless in the last 10 years were four times as likely to report that they had a disability type or restriction which was psychological (22% compared with 5%).

Living Conditions

...employment

Being employed has many benefits aside from financial ones, such as providing the opportunity to build networks and have social interaction. It can also assist with building confidence, developing a sense of pride and achievement and motivating people. People who are unemployed or not in the labour force may be more vulnerable to missing out on these opportunities.

More definitions

A person has a *disability* or *long-term health condition* if they have a limitation, restriction, impairment, disease or disorder, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and/or restricts everyday activities.

Unemployed people are those aged 18 years and over who were not employed, but were actively looking for work in the four weeks prior to the survey and available to start work in the week prior to the survey.

Not in the labour force refers to people aged 18 years and over who were not employed and who were not actively looking for work in the four weeks prior to the survey.

People reporting a disability or long-term health condition or restriction type(a)(b)

	Homeless in the last 10 years (b)(c)	Never been homeless
	%	%
Sight, hearing, speech	23	13
Physical	47	24
Intellectual	6	2
Psychological	22	5
Head injury, stroke or brain damage	2	1
Other condition which restricts every day activities(d)	32	18
Has no disability or long-term health condition	36	63

(a) A disability or long-term health condition type or restriction may be reported more than once and / or a person may report more than one condition, hence categories may not add to 100%.

(b) Excludes persons who had been homeless more than 10 years ago.

(c) Adults who experienced homelessness in the last 10 years.

(d) Other condition which restricts every day activities includes any other long term condition that requires treatment or medication and any other long term condition such as arthritis, asthma, heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, dementia etc.

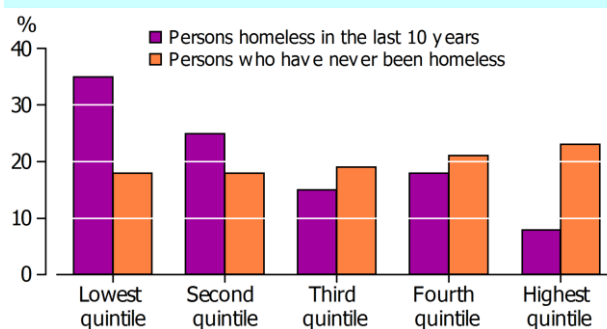
Source: ABS 2010 General Social Survey

In 2010, adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years were more likely to report being unemployed (9%) than those who had never been homeless (3%). They were also more likely to not be in the labour force (41% compared with 31%).

...income

Adults who had been homeless were twice as likely to report that their main source of personal income was a government pension or allowance compared with those who had never been homeless (48% compared with 24%).

Household income—2010(a)(b)(c)



Equivalised gross weekly household income

(a) Age standardised.

(b) Excludes persons who had been homeless more than 10 years ago.

(c) Totals exclude 'not known' or 'not stated'.

Source: ABS 2010 General Social Survey

Selected cash flow problems(a)(b)(c)(d)

	Cash flow problems reported within the last 12 months	
	Homeless in the last 10 years(e)	Never been homeless
	%	%
Household could not pay electricity, gas, or telephone bills on time	38	10
Household could not pay mortgage or rent payments on time	11	4
Household could not pay for car registration or insurance on time	14	5
Household could not make minimum payment on credit card	12	5
Household pawned or sold something because cash was needed	11	2
Members in household went without meals	11	1
Members in household were unable to heat home	5	1
Members in household sought financial help from friends or family	22	5
Members in household sought assistance from welfare /community organisations	12	1
Households reporting three or more cash flow problems	23	5

(a) In the 12 months prior to the survey.

(b) Age standardised.

(c) Excludes persons who had been homeless more than 10 years ago.

(d) Excludes not known or not stated.

(e) Adults who experienced homelessness in the last 10 years.

Source: ABS 2010 General Social Survey

Adults who had experienced homelessness were more likely to live in a lower income household than those who had never been homeless. In 2010, three in five (59%) of the adults who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the 10 years prior to the survey were in the bottom 40% of the household income distribution (after adjusting gross household incomes for household size and composition), compared with 36% of those who had never been homeless.

...living arrangements

Adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years were more than twice as likely to be in a one parent family (17% compared with 8%) and much more likely to be living alone (28% compared with 12%) or in a group household (9% compared with 3%) than adults who had never been homeless.

Adults who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years were five times more likely to be living in public housing than those who had never been homeless (10% compared with 2%).

They were also twice as likely to be renting privately (45% compared with 20%), and much less likely to live in an owner occupied dwelling (38% compared with 74%).

...financial stress

Adults who had experienced homelessness within the last 10 years were more likely to live in households constrained in their activities because of a shortage of money.

In the 12 months prior to being surveyed, almost one quarter (23%) of people who had experienced homelessness lived in households which reported having three or more different types of cash flow problems (compared with 5% of people who had never been homeless).

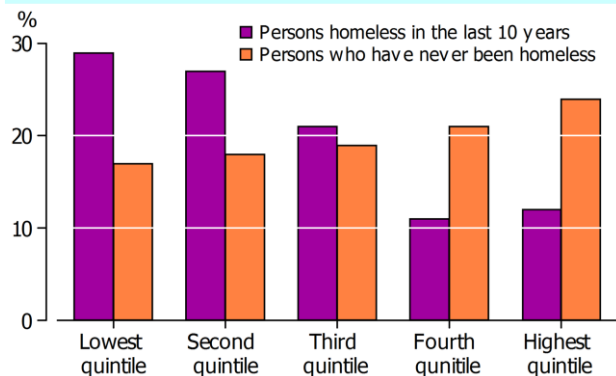
Of adults who had been homeless in the last 10 years, 38% reported being unable to pay electricity, gas or telephone bills on time, compared with 10% of people who had never been homeless, while one in ten (11%) of the adults who had been homeless reported that a member of their household went without meals, compared with 1% of people who had never been homeless.

Where do they live now?

Compared with persons who had never been homeless, in 2010, people who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years were more likely to be currently living in more disadvantaged areas.

People who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years were more likely to report neighbourhood problems than people who had never experienced homelessness. Of those reporting problems, they were twice as likely to report that using or dealing drugs was a local neighbourhood problem (28% compared with

Relative disadvantage of area—2010(a)(b)(c)(d)



(a) Age standardised.

(b) Excludes persons who had been homeless more than 10 years ago.

(c) Excludes not known or not stated.

(d) SEIFA Index of Relative Disadvantage.

Source: ABS 2010 General Social Survey

13%). They were also more likely to report people being insulted, pestered or intimidated in the street (32% compared with 18%) and that there were higher instances of offensive language or behaviour in their local area (41% compared with 29%).

Living in areas of social disadvantage with limited community cohesion can place people at greater risk of crime victimisation.² In 2010, people who had been homeless within the last 10 years were almost three times as likely to report being a victim of physical or threatened violence in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with those who never had been homeless (25% compared with 9%).

Seeking assistance

While there are services available to assist people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, 60% of the 1.1 million adults who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness in the previous 10 years reported that they had not sought assistance of formal services when homeless. Most (81%) of those who did not seek assistance felt that they had not needed it.

Of the 460,000 people who had been homeless and sought assistance from a service provider for their most recent experience of homelessness, over half (56%) had approached housing service providers. Two-thirds (66%) of those adults who did seek assistance from services felt that the services were helpful.

Looking ahead

The experience of homelessness is not the same for all people. The reasons people were homeless in the last 10 years differed, as did the length of time they had been homeless, the number of episodes of homelessness that they experienced, and whether or not they had sought assistance to move out of homelessness.

The 2008 Australian Government White Paper *The Road Home, A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* set an ambitious target to halve homelessness by 2020 and offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it.¹

The measures in the White paper were targeted to both help prevent more Australians from becoming homeless each year, and to strengthen the provision of services for those Australians who do become homeless.

Endnotes

1. Australian Government, 2008, *The Road Home. A national approach to reducing homelessness*, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, Australia, <www.fahcsia.gov.au>
2. Lee, M.R., 2000, 'Community cohesion and violence predatory victimization: A theoretical extension and cross-national test of opportunity theory', *Social Forces* 79(2), pp.683-706.

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