

May 2016

What Australian voters are saying about homelessness and housing



Launch
HOUSING

IT'S TIME TO END
HOMELESSNESS

launchhousing.org.au

Launch Housing

Launch Housing was established in July 2015 following a merger between Hanover Welfare Services and HomeGround Services. We have an unambiguous mission – to end homelessness in Melbourne and beyond.

Launch Housing is Melbourne's largest independent provider of homelessness services, delivering programs across 14 Melbourne sites. This includes crisis accommodation; transitional housing; support for people experiencing homelessness; Education First Youth Foyers; and *HomeGround Real Estate*, one of the first not-for-project real estate agencies in Australia.

You can find more information about Launch Housing by visiting www.launchhousing.org.au.

Executive Summary

A national survey conducted for Launch Housing has found that Australians are concerned about homelessness and worried about meeting housing and living costs. They are also worried about their children's ability to afford housing, a finding that reflects growing concern about rising property prices and declining rental affordability across many parts of Australia.

Survey participants believe that governments should do more to end homelessness. State and federal governments were identified as having primary responsibility for ending homelessness, ahead of homeless people themselves, local governments and local communities. When survey participants were asked if the government was doing enough to address homelessness, only 14% agreed. By contrast, 57% disagreed with this view.

A lack of affordable housing is a leading cause of homelessness. Nearly two-thirds survey participants believe that more people are at risk of homelessness today than in the past. This view is backed by Census data, which shows that homelessness grew by 17% from 2006 to 2011.

While Australians are concerned about homelessness, the survey found that many people believe drug addiction, family violence, mental illness and alcohol use are the key reasons why people experience homelessness. With the exception of family violence, the reality is quite different: data collected by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows the shortage of affordable housing and family violence are the leading causes of homelessness in Australia.

There is also a misconception about how long people remain homeless for. Only 13% of survey participants believe that homelessness is normally for short periods in people's lives, while 44% disagreed with this view. Again, the reality is different: 26% of people who seek assistance from a specialist homelessness service only require support for up to five days. A further 31% require support for between six and 45 days, while just 14% require assistance for six months or longer.

Recommendations for the next federal government

The survey shows that Australians are concerned about homelessness, housing and living costs, and their children's ability to afford housing. It also shows that Australians believe governments should do more to end homelessness.

But so far, neither of Australia's major political parties have offered a comprehensive plan to end homelessness or to improve access to affordable housing. This includes a commitment to the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, which is due to expire in June 2017.

Launch Housing recommends the next federal government should:

1. Expand the supply of social and affordable rental housing.
2. Boost rental support for low income households in the private rental market.
3. Reform negative gearing and capital gains tax discounts and direct savings to social and affordable housing.
4. Ensure national housing and homelessness agreements meet rising demand for services.
5. Ensure that women and children escaping family violence have access to safe and secure housing.

Introduction

This report summarises the results of a national survey administered in February 2016 to gauge Australians' perceptions of homelessness¹ and housing.

The survey was conducted by [Forethought](#) on a pro bono basis for [Launch Housing](#). Forethought worked with LightSpeed [GMI](#) (who also provided their expertise on a pro basis) to survey 1,022 Australian residents aged 18 years and older. LightSpeed GMI invited members of its online panel to complete the survey.

Survey participants completed a self-administered online questionnaire covering their beliefs, attitudes and experiences about homelessness. Participants were also asked about their ability to meet housing and living costs and whether they were worried about their children's ability to afford housing.

The survey used quotas based on ABS data to make the sample nationally representative with regard to age, gender, state and metro-versus-regional living. In addition, a small weighting correction was applied to make the proportion of 18-24 year-old survey participants representative of the population.

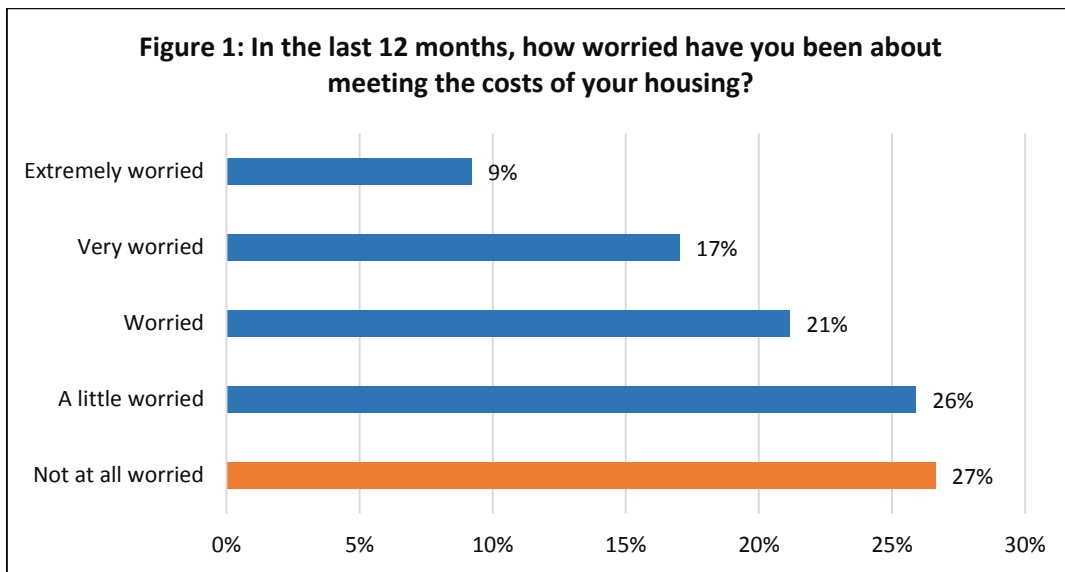
¹ The ABS definition of homelessness is summarised in the Appendix.

Findings

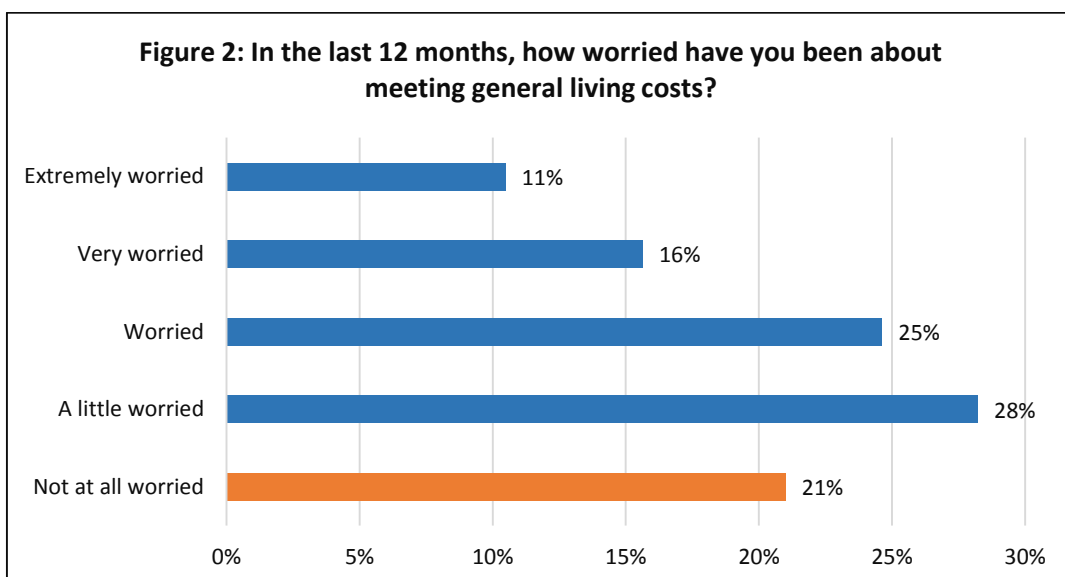
1. Meeting housing and living costs

Survey participants were asked if they had concerns about meeting housing and living costs during the 12 months prior to completing the survey. They were also asked if they were worried about their children’s ability to afford housing.

As Figure 1 shows, nearly three-quarters of those surveyed said they have been worried about meeting the costs of housing over the past 12 months. Nine percent (9%) said they were extremely worried, 17% were very worried, 21% worried, and a further 26% said they have been a little worried. Just 27% of survey participants said they had no worries about meeting the costs of housing over the past 12 months.

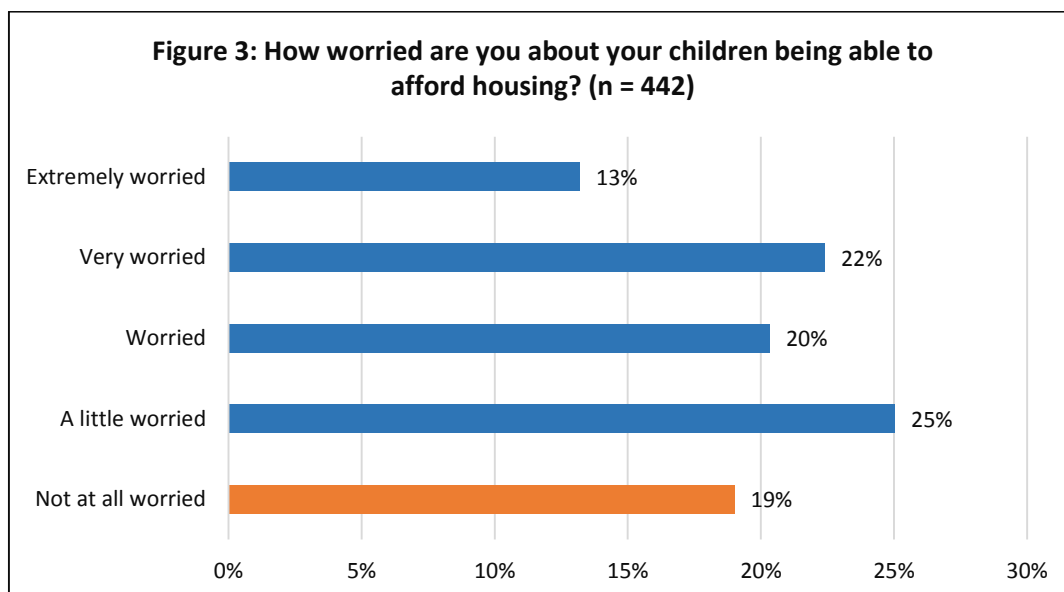


More than three-quarters of survey participants said they have been worried about meeting general living costs over the past 12 months. As Figure 2 shows, 11% said they were extremely worried, 16% very worried, 25% worried, and 28% said they were a little worried. Just 21% of those surveyed said they had no worries about meeting general living expenses over the past 12 months.²



² Due to rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100%.

Survey participants with children under the age of 35 years were asked if they were worried about their children’s ability to afford housing. Figure 3 shows that the vast majority were worried, with 13% saying they were extremely worried, 22% very worried, 20% worried, and 25% a little worried. Only 19% of people surveyed said they were not worried at all about their children being able to afford housing.²



2. Homelessness in Australia

Survey participants were asked to identify who they thought experienced homelessness in Australia. As Figure 4 shows, a high proportion (43%) of participants thought that it was lone adults who experience homelessness while another 20% of participants thought it was families. These results are quite different to the data from the Specialist Homelessness Collection³ which shows that:

- Families, including sole parents and couples, are the biggest group seeking support from specialist homelessness services, representing 47% of the total client group.
- Adults on their own represent 29% of the total client group seeking support.

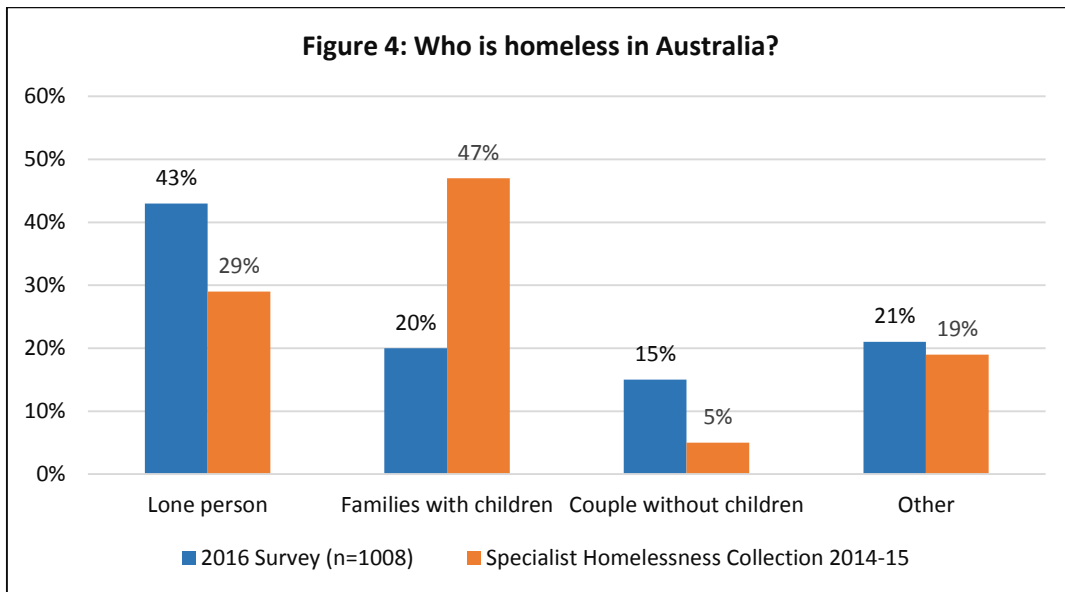
The same data also shows that 16% of all clients seeking help from specialist homelessness services are under the age of 10 years, representing about 40,900 young children.

The extent of children’s homelessness is also highlighted in the 2011 Census figures,⁴ which shows that of the 105,237 people who are homeless on any given night:

- 17% are children aged under 12 years.
- 26% of the more than more than 21,200 people supported in specialist homelessness services each night are children under 12 years.
- And each night, some 402 children are sleeping rough.

³ See Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Specialist homelessness services 2014–15’, Available from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/>.

⁴ ABS, 2049.0 – Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011, November 2012, Available from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2049.02011?OpenDocument>.

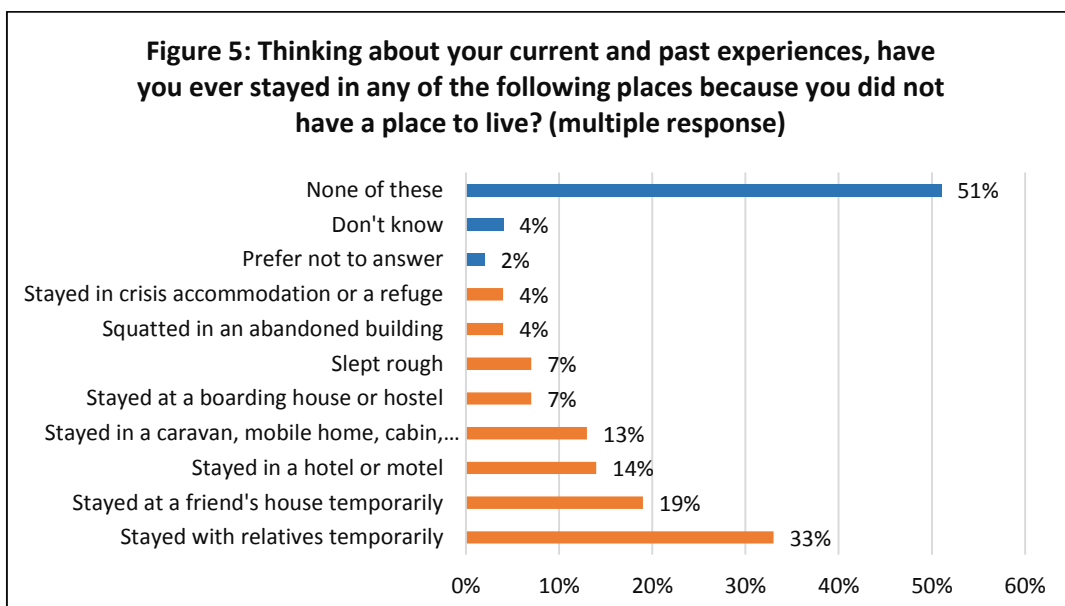


3. Lived experience of homelessness

To explore survey participants' current and past experiences of homelessness, they were presented with a list of different types of accommodation and asked to identify the places they had stayed in because they had nowhere to live.

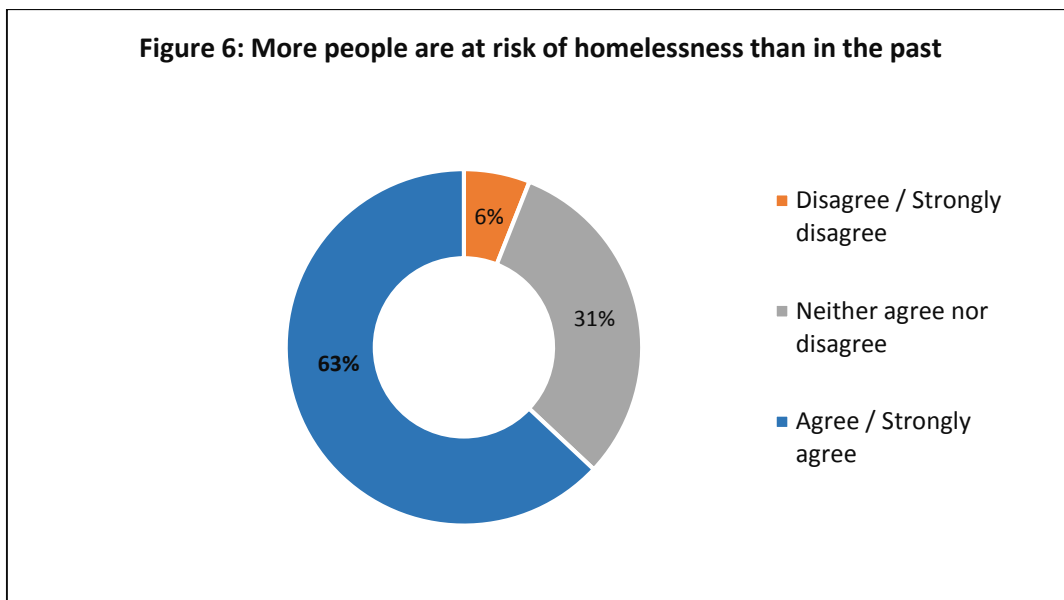
As Figure 5 shows, just over half (51%) said they had never stayed in any of the accommodation options listed, which suggests they had not experienced homelessness.

Nonetheless, a sizable proportion of those surveyed indicated they have stayed in other forms of accommodation because they had no place to live, whether currently or in the past. Staying with relatives temporarily (33%) was most common response among those who have experienced homelessness, followed by a friend's house (19%). Fourteen percent (14%) of those surveyed said they had stayed in a hotel or motel, while 13% had stayed in a caravan, mobile home, cabin or houseboat. A smaller number of participants had stayed in a boarding house or hostel (7%), slept rough (7%), squatted in an abandoned building (4%), or stayed in crisis accommodation or refuge (4%).



4. Risk of homelessness

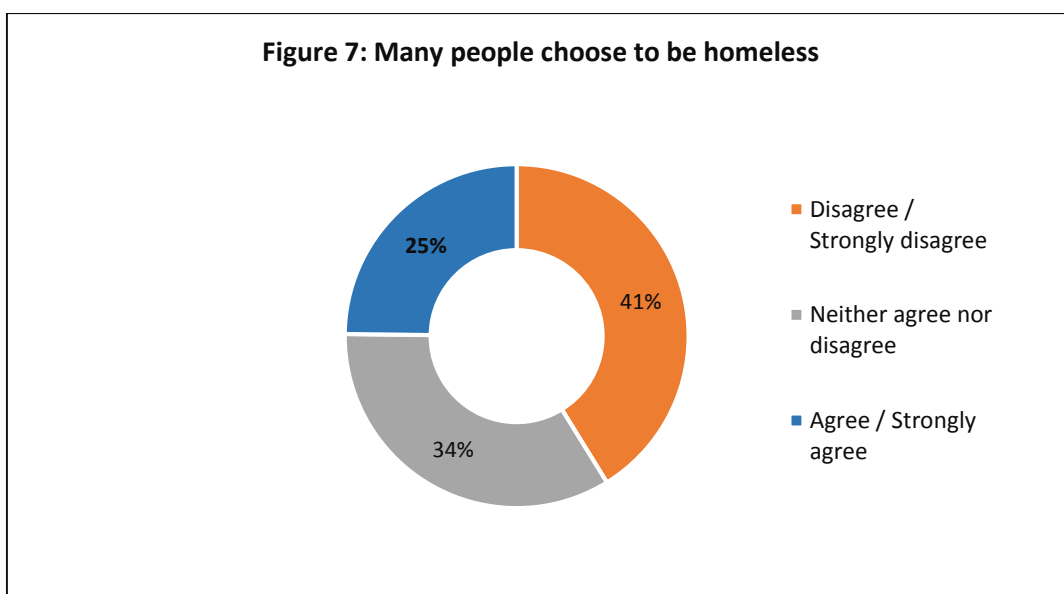
Survey participants were asked whether agreed or disagreed with the statement that 'more people are at risk of homelessness than in the past'. As Figure 6 shows, the majority (63%) of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that more people are at risk of homelessness than in the past. By contrast, 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed while 31% were undecided.



5. Myth: people choose to be homeless

One of the more enduring myths about homelessness is that people choose to be homeless. As Figure 7 shows, 25% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'many people choose to be homeless'.

By contrast, 41% of people disagreed or strongly disagreed with this view, while 34% neither agreed nor disagreed that many people choose to be homeless.



6. The causes of homelessness

There is a considerable difference between broader community perceptions of the causes of homelessness and the reality of people's circumstances. Survey participants were asked to select from a list of possible causes of homelessness. Responses are shown in the blue bars in Figure 8 and compared to official data³ for why people seek support from specialist homelessness services. These reasons are shown in the orange bars in Figure 8.

Health

Overall, 21% of clients who sought support from specialist homelessness services reported drug use, mental illness, alcohol abuse or medical issues as a reason for seeking support. People who participated in our survey also believe these health issues are a cause of homelessness, however, the perception is far greater than the reality. For example:

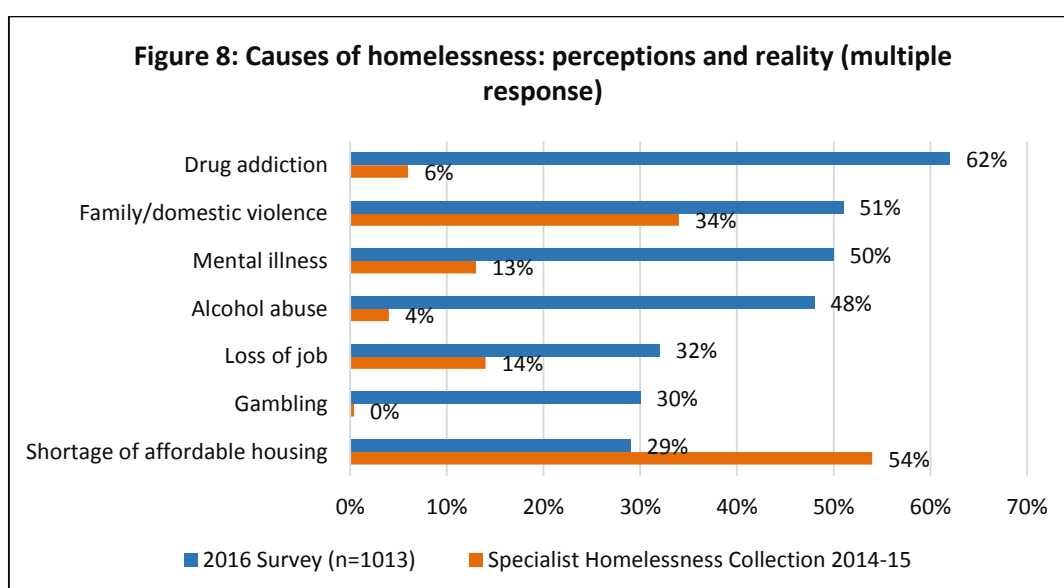
- 62% of survey participants perceived *drug addiction* as a cause of homelessness. By contrast, this was a factor for just 6% of people seeking help from a specialist homelessness service.
- 50% of people surveyed perceived *mental illness* as a reason for homelessness compared to 13% who accessed support from a specialist homelessness service.
- 48% of survey participants highlighted *alcohol abuse* as a reason for homelessness compared to 4% of people accessing homelessness support.

Family and domestic violence

Family and domestic violence has received extensive attention in recent months, particularly following Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence. Therefore, it was not surprising that 51% of survey participants perceived family/domestic violence as a cause of homelessness. This is greater than the reality, with 34% of clients citing family/domestic violence as a reason for seeking support.

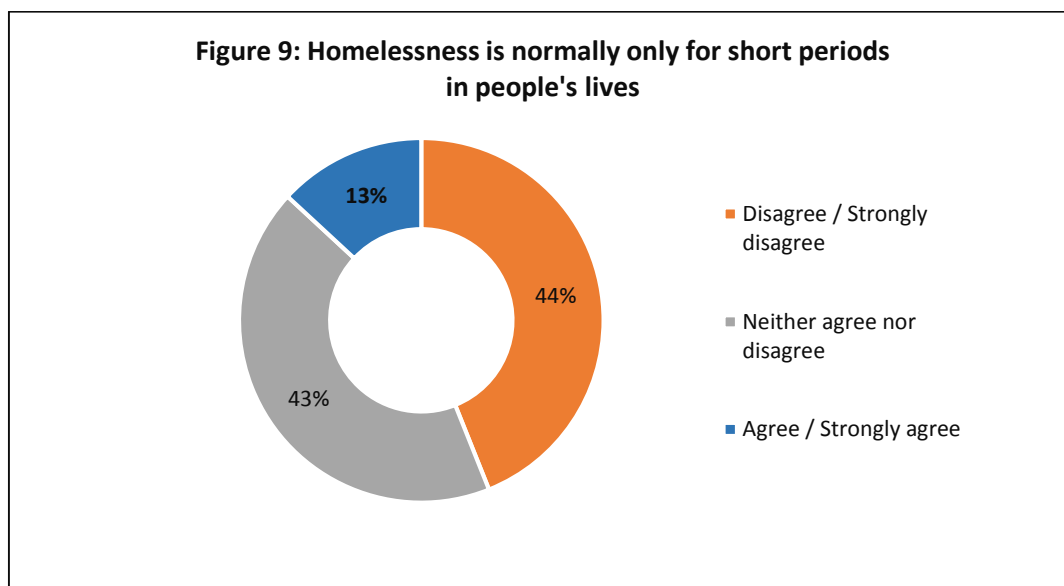
Affordable housing

The lack of affordable housing has been a prominent issue in the media for a significant period of time. But despite this, only 29% of those surveyed perceived it as a cause of homelessness. By contrast, more than half (54%) of those who sought support from a specialist homelessness service cited difficulties with housing – including housing crisis, inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions, or previous accommodation ending – as a reason for why they sought support.

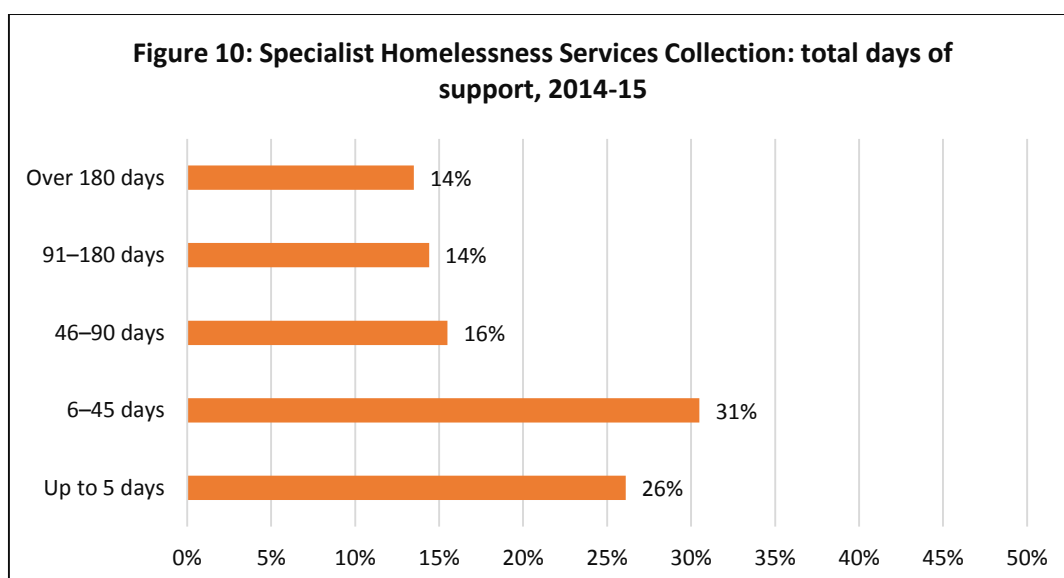


7. Homelessness is generally short lived

Survey participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that 'homelessness is normally only for short periods in people's lives'. As Figure 9 shows, only 13% agreed or strongly agreed with this view. Forty three percent (43%) of survey participants neither agreed nor disagreed, while 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed that homelessness is normally only for short periods in people's lives. This suggests that many Australians regard homelessness as a long term predicament.



While some people, particularly those dealing with difficult or complex issues, may experience homelessness for long periods of time, the latest figures from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection³ suggest that homelessness is for a relatively short period for most people. Figure 10 shows that 26% of all clients received support for up to five days, while 31% received support for between six and 45 days. By contrast, 14% received support for between 91-180 days, while only 14% of clients were supported for 180 days or longer.²



8. Ending homelessness

Survey participants were asked if they thought homelessness could be ended in Australia. Figure 11 compares survey responses with the same question asked in a similar survey in 2009 and shows there a level of pessimism today that was not present in 2009:

- In 2009, nearly two-thirds (61%) of participants believed that homelessness could be ended compared with 38% in 2016. This means that today, around two-thirds (62%) of participants do not believe that homelessness can be ended.

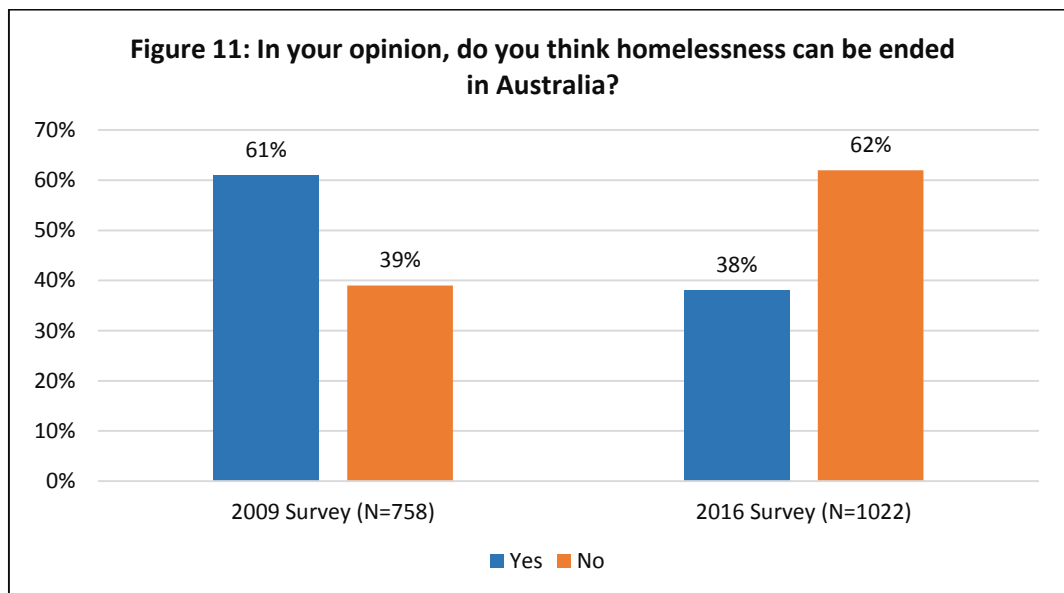
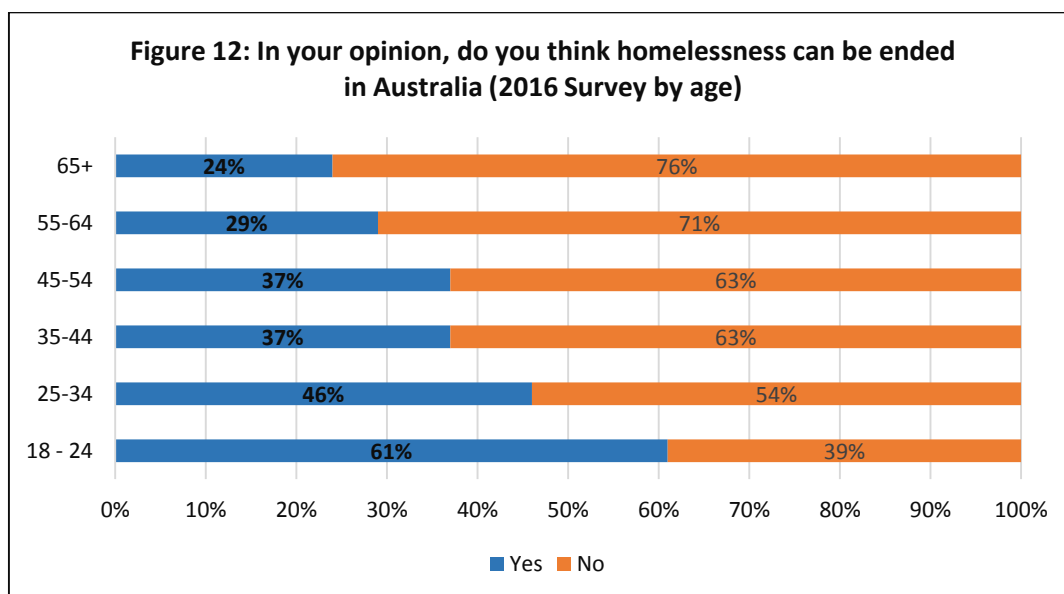


Figure 12 shows that young Australians aged 18 to 24 are mostly likely to believe (61%) that homelessness can be ended. As people get older they are less optimistic, with just 24% of people aged over 65 years believing that homelessness can be ended in Australia.



9. Responsibility for solving homelessness

Survey participants were asked to nominate who they thought should be responsible for solving homelessness and whether they thought the government was doing enough to achieve this. (Survey participants were able to make more than one choice when answering the first question.)

As Figure 13 shows, 65% of those surveyed nominated the state government as being responsible for solving homelessness, while 57% said the federal government was responsible.

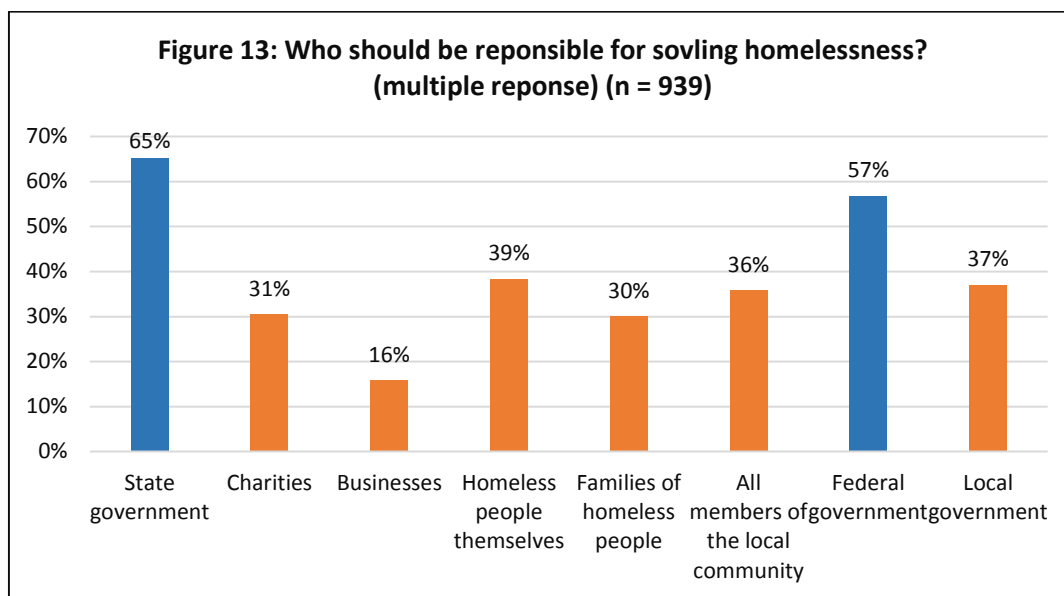
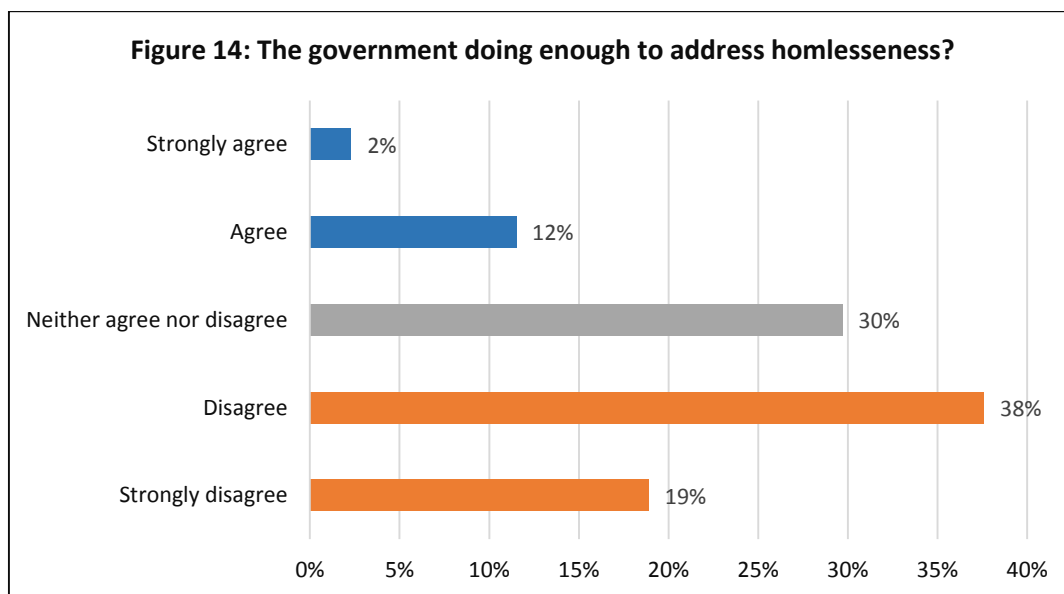


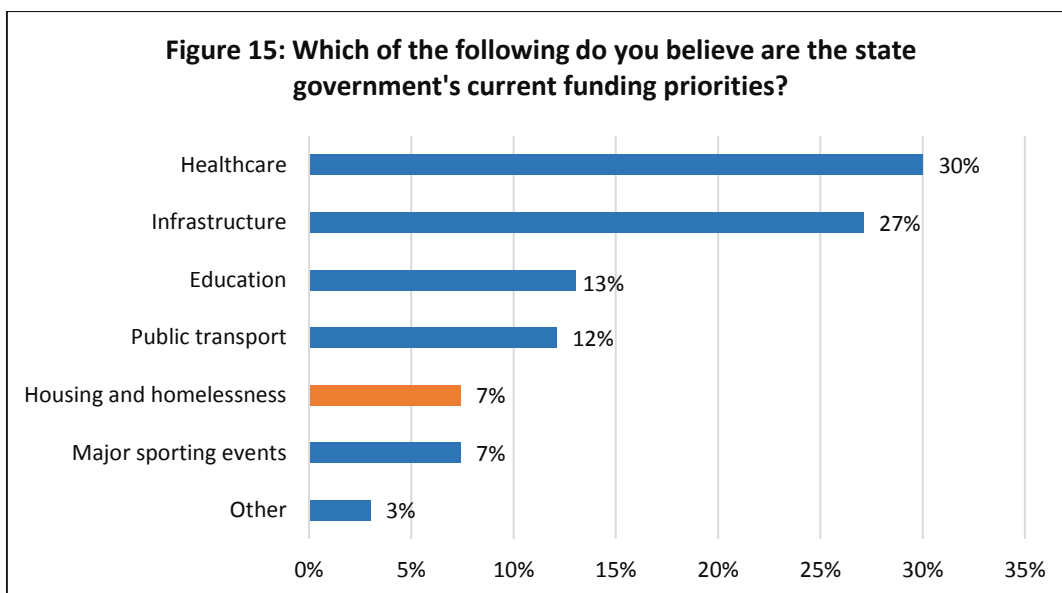
Figure 14 shows people's responses when they were asked if they thought the government was doing enough to address homelessness. Only 14% of people surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed that the government was doing enough to address homelessness, compared to 57% who either strongly disagreed or disagreed. Just under one-third (30%) of people surveyed neither agreed nor disagreed when asked if they thought the government was doing enough to address homelessness.²



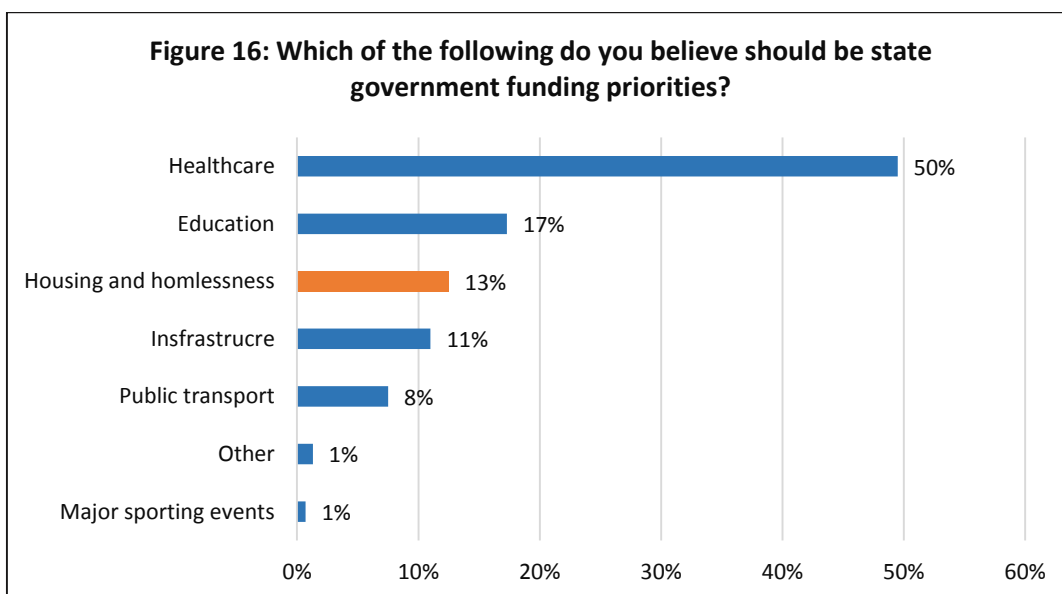
10. Government funding priorities

Survey participants were asked to nominate what they believe are current state government funding priorities and what they believe should be state government funding priorities.

As Figure 15 shows, only 7% of people surveyed believe that housing and homelessness is a current funding priority for state governments. This ranked equal fifth alongside major sporting events and was much lower than healthcare (30%), infrastructure (27%), education (13%) and public transport (12%).²



When people were asked what should be the funding priorities for state governments, housing and homelessness ranked third (13%). As Figure 16 shows, this was behind healthcare (50%) and education (17%). Just 1% of survey participants said that major sporting events should be a funding priority for state governments.²



Conclusion

A national survey of 1,022 Australians aged 18 years and older found that people have a range of perceptions about homelessness. This includes different views about its causes and the length of time people experience homelessness.

The survey also revealed that Australians are concerned about homelessness, housing and living costs, and their children's ability to afford housing.

Survey participants believe governments have a responsibility to end homelessness and an expectation that governments should do more.

As a federal election draws near, demand for homelessness services is increasing yet funding remains uncertain beyond June 2017. At the same time, Australia's housing market – including rental market – is becoming increasingly unaffordable.

But despite this, neither of Australia's major political parties have a comprehensive plan to end homelessness or to improve access to affordable housing.

Launch Housing recommends the next federal government should:

1. Expand the supply of social and affordable rental housing.
2. Boost rental support for low income households in the private rental market.
3. Reform negative gearing and capital gains tax discounts and direct savings to social and affordable housing.
4. Ensure national housing and homelessness agreements meet rising demand for services.
5. Ensure that women and children escaping family violence have access to safe and secure housing.

Appendix: Defining homelessness

The ABS defines⁵ a person as homeless if they do not have suitable accommodation options and their current living arrangement:

- Is in a dwelling that is inadequate, or
- Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations (ABS 2011, 2049.0)

Anyone can be considered homeless if they are:

- Sleeping in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out;
- Staying in supported accommodation for the homeless;
- Staying temporarily with other households;
- Staying in boarding houses;
- Staying in other temporary lodgings; or
- Living in severely overcrowded dwellings.

⁵ ABS, 4922.0 – *Information Paper – A Statistical Definition of Homelessness, 2012*, 2012, Available from www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4922.0Main%20Features22012?opendocument&tab=n.