



# Perceptions of homelessness in Australia

## **How to make our compassion count**



May 2018

**‘Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.’**



# Foreword

## It's time for a fresh understanding of homelessness

The 2016 Census figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which showed a marked increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness contains a sobering and timely message for our nation.

Between 2011 and 2016 the number of people who experienced homelessness grew from 105,237 to 116,427. It represents 50 people for every 10,000 Australians. For some people the increase came as a shock but for those of us who work alongside disadvantaged people it came as no surprise.

I have been watching, listening and reading media and public reaction to these disturbing figures as people attempt to define the causes of homelessness and articulate solutions to the problem. It has even been more fascinating to see people grapple with the definition of homelessness and the lived experience of people who journey that path.

A common but inaccurate depiction equates homelessness exclusively with rough sleeping. Such assertions ingrain negative views of people experiencing homelessness and calibrate our responses rather than addressing the underlying issues.

Such a position perpetuates the myth that only people living on the streets are deserving of our support, while ignoring the fact that nine out of ten people experiencing homelessness are couch surfing, living in massively overcrowded conditions or in caravan parks or residing in insecure lodgings such as boarding houses or a relative's garage.

Unfortunately, such perceptions are widely held in the community as this Wesley Report based upon a McCrindle Omnibus study of more than 1,000 Australians reveals.

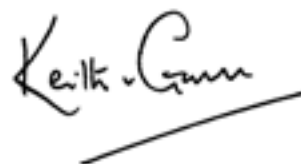
The study found nine out of ten Australians believe people living on the streets should be counted as homeless. Only 20 per cent thought that sleeping on the floor at a friend's home was a form of homelessness, families living in a shed or garage (15 per cent), or

people staying in a shed medium to long term (9 per cent), staying in hotels medium to long term (3 per cent) or a boarding house (3 per cent).

Sadly such perceptions shape public views on the causes of homelessness: the vast majority of those surveyed believing the major contributors to homelessness are drug and alcohol addiction, unemployment and mental health issues. It is significant that people saw housing/rental affordability and household debt as less important factors. Such strongly held beliefs not only discriminate against people experiencing homelessness but have the potential to define and regulate community and government responses.

At Wesley Mission we believe that homelessness can only be truly addressed when perceptions change. It is too convenient for the community, media and governments to confine homelessness to the street: this only entrenches disadvantage and does not provide lasting solutions or outcomes. The media has a role to play: the contemporary experience of homelessness is diverse but media stereotypes for the majority of the time are still stuck on a park bench in the 1970s.

Please take time to read this important report and its recommendations. There is no doubt that Australians want to see an end to homelessness but we must get our fundamental considerations right if we want our compassion and sense of justice to be effective in the long-term.



Rev Dr Keith V Garner AM  
CEO/Superintendent  
Wesley Mission



**6 in 10 people  
accessing  
homeless  
services are  
female**

# Contents

|                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| Executive summary .....      | 6  |
| Compiling the report .....   | 6  |
| Findings .....               | 8  |
| Policy recommendations ..... | 16 |
| Media recommendations .....  | 18 |
| Conclusion .....             | 19 |

# Executive summary

## No one chooses to be homeless, it can happen to anyone, and its causes are many.

A survey was conducted for Wesley Mission to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of Australian residents on what defines being homeless, pathways to homelessness and how to overcome homelessness.

The survey shows the perceptions to be wide ranging, that there are some universal misconceptions about homelessness and that there is clearly a lack of public awareness as to what homelessness really looks like.

The data released by the ABS reveals that homelessness has increased during the last five years since the last census with more than 116,000 people now homeless in Australia. New South Wales (NSW) has witnessed the biggest increase of any State or Territory with the number of people experiencing homelessness jumping from 28,191 in 2011 to 37,718 in 2016.

Ninety per cent of NSW respondents to the survey consider a person sleeping on the streets as experiencing homelessness, which although accurate, is at odds with the fact that those sleeping rough make up only about 15 per cent of people who are homeless in the State. The increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness has been driven largely by those living in severely crowded dwellings. This figure has jumped to 51,000 nationally and increased by 74 per cent in NSW. This reality however is not reflected in the survey responses; only 19 per cent of NSW respondents would characterise sleeping on the floor of a friend's place as homelessness.

Homelessness is a complex issue and can be the result of a combination of social, economic and personal factors, including domestic violence and family breakdown, unemployment, mental illness and financial stress. A shortage of affordable housing is one of the key drivers of homelessness in Australia; however only 36 per cent of NSW respondents believe this to be the case. Those surveyed were more likely to fall prey to the stereotypes of homelessness, with drug and alcohol addiction cited as the predominant cause of homelessness (54 per cent) followed by mental health issues (47 per cent).

Where there does seem to be a correlation between policy and perception is when it comes to solutions for homelessness. New South Wales respondents were most likely to indicate that providing more permanent, public or social housing would be a highly effective way to help people overcome homelessness. However, the

survey also revealed that providing financial support/ counselling is considered to be the least effective solution, which suggests a lack of awareness of the complexities of homelessness.

## Compiling the report

Wesley Mission has a long history of being committed to supporting people experiencing homelessness. Wesley Homeless Services helps individuals and families, who find themselves without a safe place to stay or at risk of losing their home access short to long term accommodation, rent assistance and other services to help get them back on track, as well as advocating on their behalf with governments.

This report summarises the findings of a survey carried out in November 2017, investigating perceptions of homelessness of NSW residents in comparison to nationally. Wesley Mission commissioned McCrindle to conduct this omnibus study, who deployed a quantitative online survey of three questions.

1,002 completed responses were obtained nationally including 503 in NSW. The survey sample was a national representation of Australians over the age of 18 across the different generations, genders and states.

Survey participants completed the online questionnaire themselves and were asked their opinions on the definition of homelessness, its causes and solutions.

### A note on the generations

Reference to the generations throughout this report correspond to the following age categories:

- Generation Z: 18-22 year olds (those born from 1995-1998)
- Generation Y: 23-37 year olds (those born from 1980-1994)
- Generation X: 38-52 year olds (those born from 1965-1979)
- Baby Boomers: 53-71 year olds (those born from 1946-1964)
- Builders: 72+ year olds (those born before 1945)



**Youth (aged 12–24)  
make up 24% of  
people who  
are homeless**

# Findings

## 1. Who experiences homelessness?

Survey respondents were asked who they would consider to be a person experiencing homelessness. The overwhelming response to this was:

### People sleeping rough are considered to be experiencing homelessness

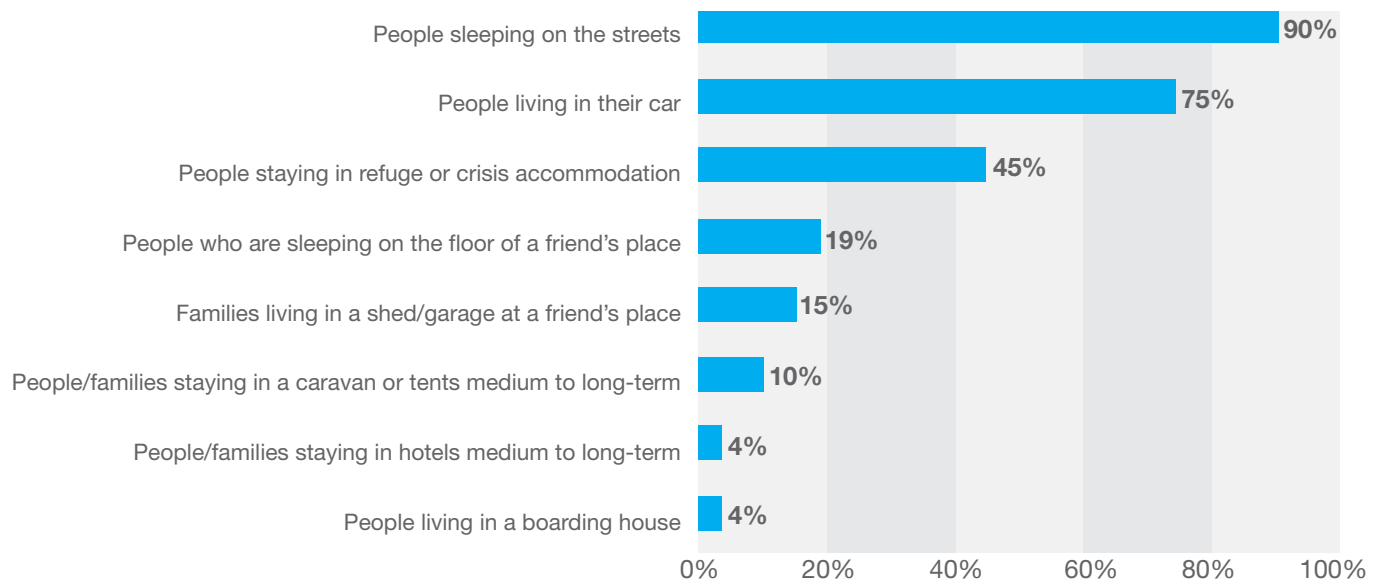
As Figure 1 shows, nine in ten NSW residents (90 per cent) would consider a person sleeping on the streets as someone experiencing homelessness. Other common perceptions of homelessness include people sleeping in their car (75 per cent) and people staying in refuge or crisis accommodation (45 per cent).

New South Wales residents are least likely to consider people living in a boarding house (4 per cent) and people/families staying in hotels medium to long-term (4 per cent) to be people experiencing homelessness.

### Figure 1: NSW perceptions of homelessness

#### Question: Who would you consider to be a person experiencing homelessness?

Please select up to three responses (n=503)



### NSW generational insights

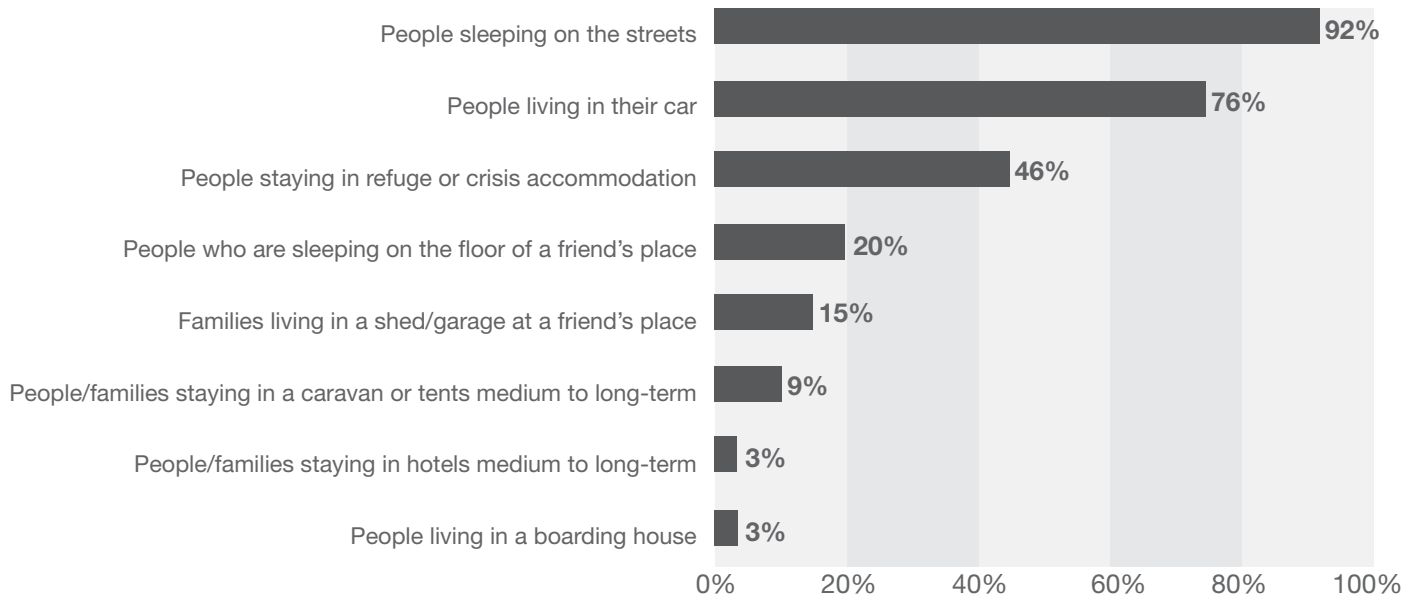
Older generations are more likely to consider people living in their car as someone experiencing homelessness in comparison to younger generations (88 per cent Builders, 81 per cent Baby Boomers cf. 77 per cent Gen X, 64 per cent Gen Y and 65 per cent Gen Z).

The results and perceptions of NSW respondents are largely mirrored by the wider Australian population, as shown by Figure 2.

## Figure 2: Australian perceptions of homelessness

Question: Who would you consider to be a person experiencing homelessness?

Please select up to three responses (n=1002)



## 2. What causes homelessness?

Survey respondents were asked to identify why people experience homelessness.

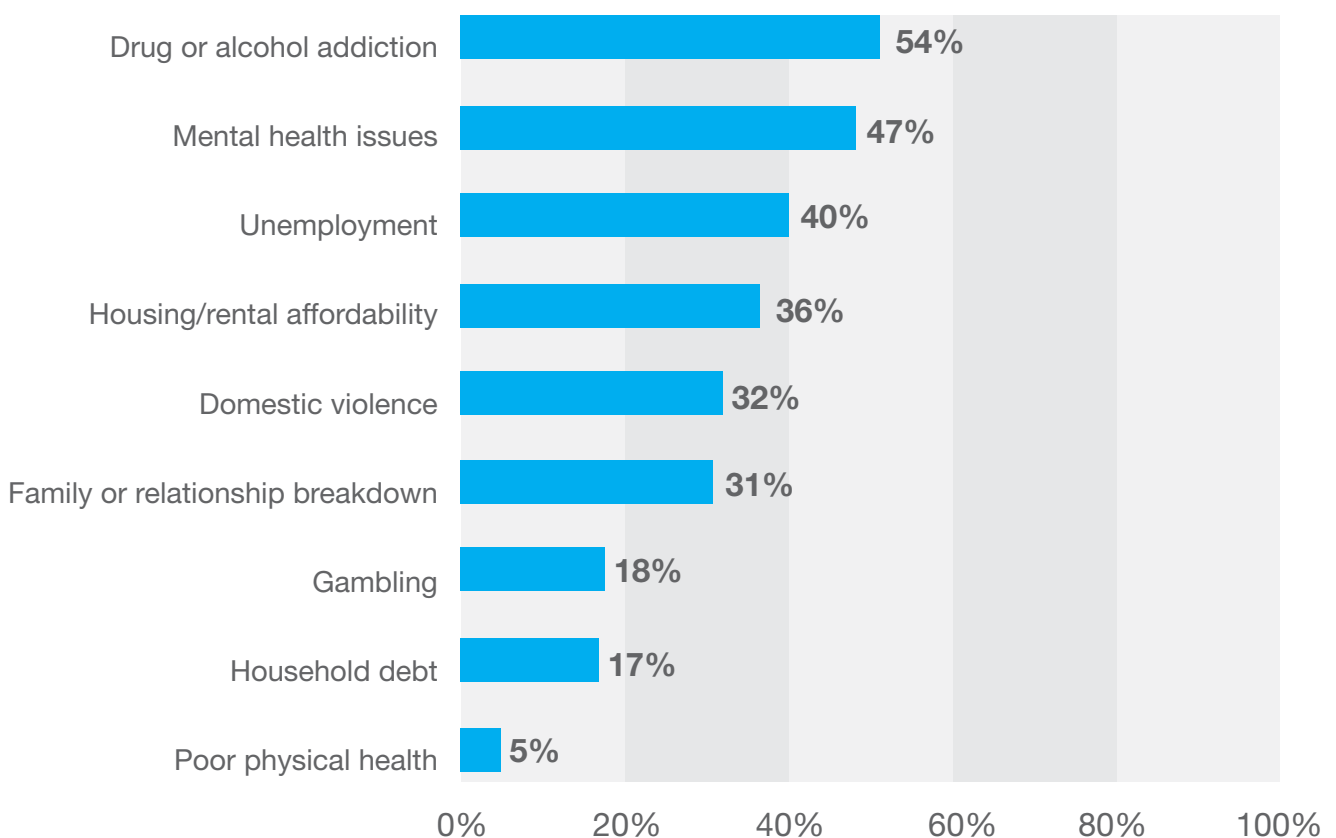
### Drug and alcohol addiction is considered the main cause of homelessness

As displayed in Figure 3, residents of NSW predominantly identify the causes of homelessness to be drug and alcohol addiction (54 per cent), mental health issues (47 per cent) and unemployment (40 per cent).

To a lesser degree, NSW residents see housing/rental affordability (36 per cent), domestic violence (32 per cent), family or relationship breakdown (31 per cent), gambling (18 per cent), and household debt (17 per cent) as reasons why people experience homelessness. These respondents were least likely to indicate poor physical health (5 per cent) as a reason for someone to experience homelessness.

### Figure 3: NSW perceptions of causes of homelessness

**Question: Which of the following best describes why you think people experience homelessness?** Please select up to three responses (n=503)



### NSW generational insights

Unemployment is one of the top three perceived causes of homelessness across the younger generations (Gen Z, Gen Y and Gen X). Conversely, older generations (Baby Boomers and Builders) do not consider it to be one of the top three reasons for homelessness.

## Figure 4: Top three perceived causes of homelessness across generations in NSW

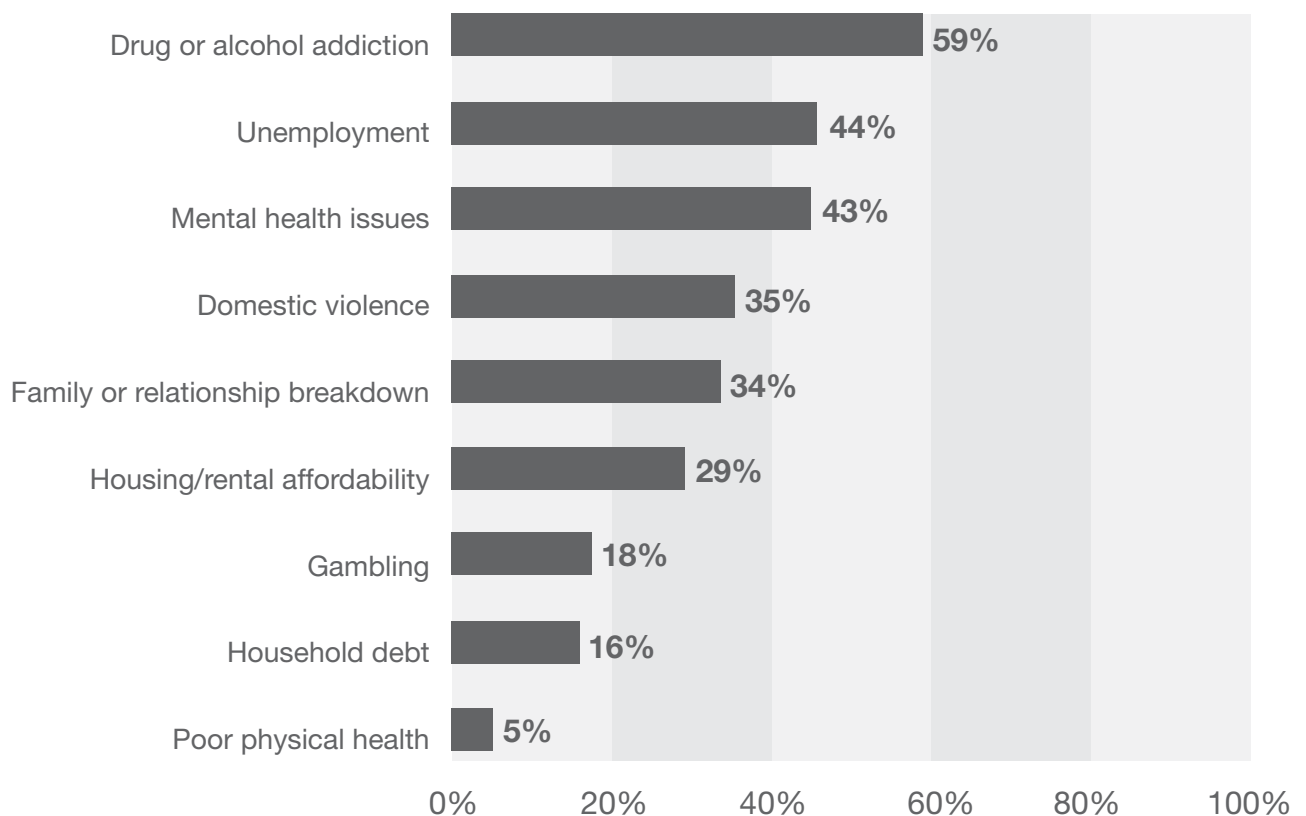
Which of the following best describes why you think people experience homelessness?

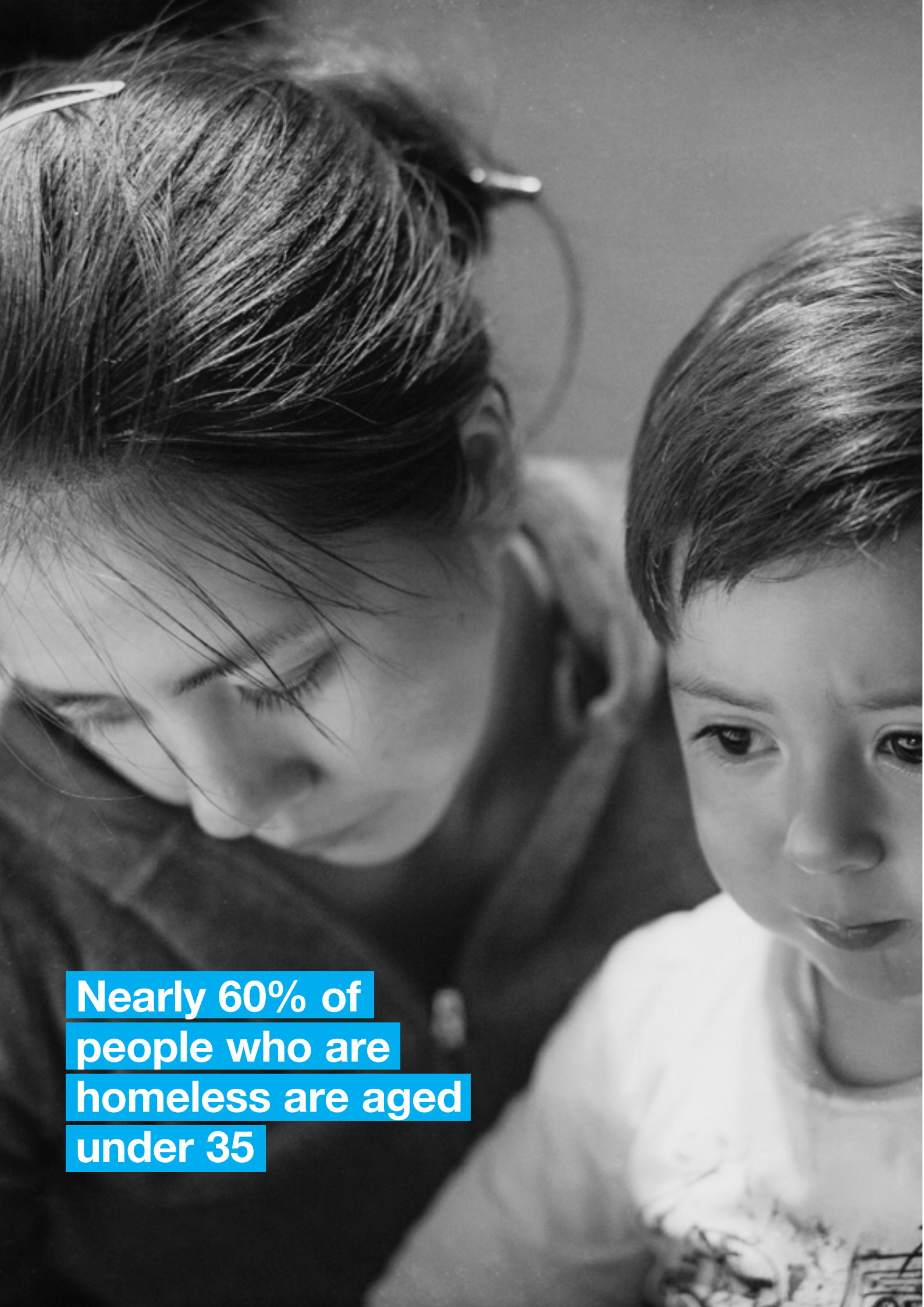
| Gen Z                              | Gen Y                           | Gen X                              | Baby Boomers                    | Builders                               |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Unemployment (60%)                 | Drug or alcohol addiction (56%) | Mental health issues (52%)         | Drug or alcohol addiction (57%) | Drug or alcohol addiction (75%)        |
| Housing/rental affordability (47%) | Mental health issues (46%)      | Housing/rental affordability (43%) | Mental health issues (48%)      | Mental health issues (47%)             |
| Drug or alcohol addiction (37%)    | Unemployment (39%)              | Unemployment (43%)                 | Domestic violence (41%)         | Family or relationship breakdown (36%) |

While the wider Australian population also aligns with the older generations of NSW respondents and considers drug and alcohol addiction (59 per cent) to be the main cause of homelessness, they are more likely to suggest unemployment causes homelessness, compared to NSW residents (44 per cent cf. 40 per cent). On the other hand, NSW residents are more likely to suggest mental health issues cause homelessness (47 per cent cf. 43 per cent Australians). This is shown in Figure 5 below.

## Figure 5: Australian perceptions of causes of homelessness

Question: Which of the following best describes why you think people experience homelessness? Please select up to three responses (n=1002)





**Nearly 60% of  
people who are  
homeless are aged  
under 35**

### 3. How can we help people overcome homelessness?

The final question answered by respondents was in relation to what the solutions are to homelessness. Survey participants perceive that:

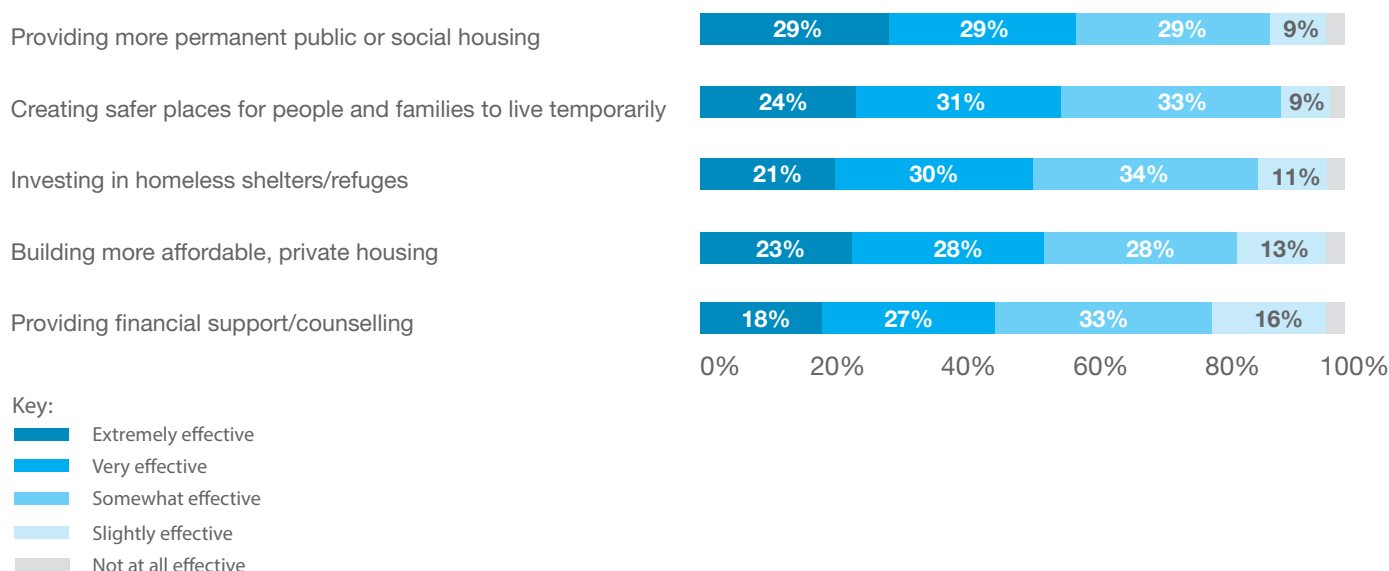
## Housing is the most effective initiative in overcoming homelessness

As shown in Figure 6 below, NSW residents were most likely to indicate that ‘providing more permanent, public or social housing’ is an effective initiative to help those experiencing homelessness. Approximately three in five (58 per cent) identified housing as an extremely or very effective initiative.

Providing financial support/counselling’ is considered to be the least effective initiative (just 45 per cent of NSW residents felt this was extremely or very effective).

### Figure 6: NSW perceptions of solutions to homelessness

**Question: How effective do you think each of the following initiatives are, in helping people who are experiencing homelessness? (n=503)**



### NSW generational insights

Overall, younger generations (Gen Z and Gen Y) are more likely to consider each of the suggested initiatives as either extremely or very effective when compared to the older generations (Gen X, Baby Boomers and Builders). This trend is particularly highlighted in ‘providing financial support/counselling’ with a 40 per cent difference between Gen Z and Builders as shown in Figure 7.

## Figure 7: Generational perceptions of initiatives to solve homelessness in NSW

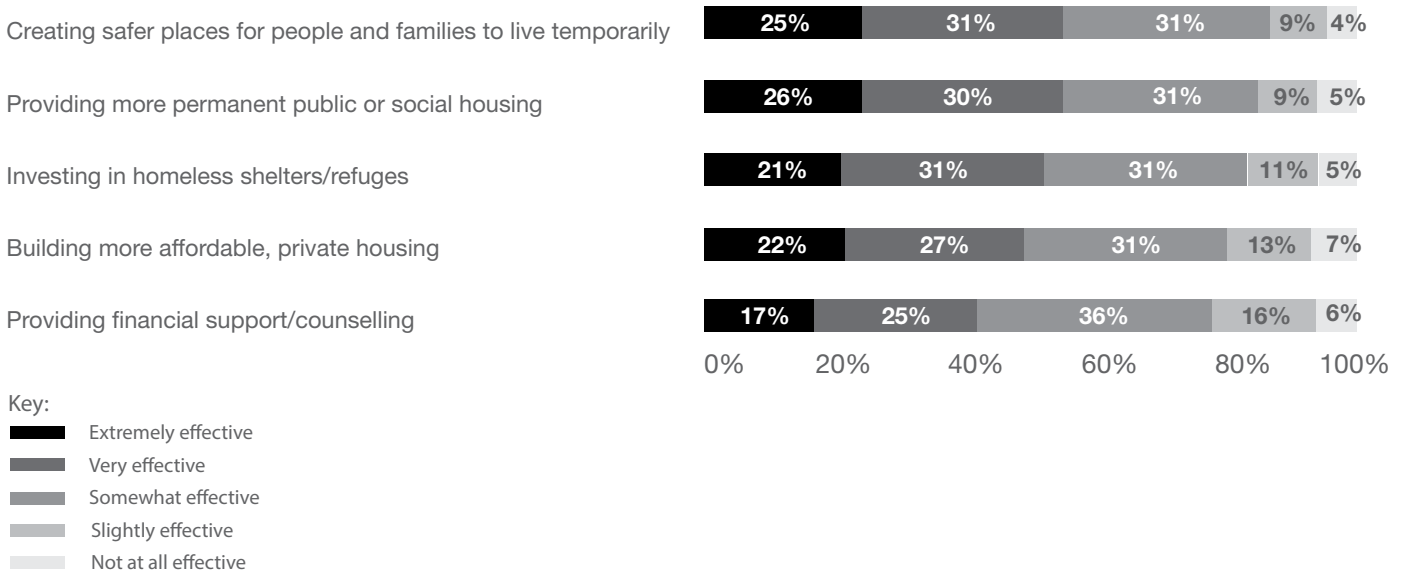
Question: How effective do you think each of the following initiatives are in helping people who experience homelessness?

| Extremely or very effective                                       | Gen Z | Gen Y | Gen X | Baby Boomers | Builders |
|---|-------|-------|-------|--------------|----------|
| Building more affordable, private housing                         | 60%   | 56%   | 50%   | 49%          | 47%      |
| Investing in homeless shelters/refuges                            | 60%   | 57%   | 49%   | 51%          | 34%      |
| Providing more permanent, public or social housing                | 67%   | 57%   | 54%   | 59%          | 56%      |
| Creating safer places for people and families to live temporarily | 60%   | 62%   | 50%   | 53%          | 52%      |
| Providing financial supporting/counselling                        | 70%   | 52%   | 47%   | 39%          | 30%      |

The opinion of Australians in relation to the effectiveness of proposed solutions reflects the suggestions of NSW respondents. Figure 8 displays that Australians also suggest that creating safer temporary housing options (56 per cent) as well as providing more permanent housing options (56 per cent) are extremely or very effective initiatives.

## Figure 8: Australian opinions of solutions to homelessness

Question: How effective do you think each of the following initiatives are in helping people who are experiencing homelessness? (n=1002)



# Policy recommendations

In light of this survey, 2016 Census data and extensive experience, to combat homelessness Wesley Mission recommends the following:

- Increased availability of social and affordable housing which is safe, suitably located and affordable.
- The creation of a Department of Housing and Homelessness with a dedicated Minister, to implement a 'housing first' strategy.
- Long term wrap-around services to support people to permanently leave homelessness.
- Solutions that take into account the prevalence of domestic violence and family breakdown which accounts for a high rate of homelessness.
- Flexible and sensitive housing facilities to meet the needs of all families and individuals including those with pets.
- Homeless services staff to support clients throughout and after the establishment of stable accommodation.
- Assistance to include a long-term recovery plan with quick access to counselling and support.
- Implementation of a 'tell us once' policy and information sharing between government and community organisations to minimise trauma and produce better co-ordinated and holistic outcomes. This also empowers community service staff to make the necessary links to help individuals and families recover from their crises.
- Simpler and more accessible systems and processes, along with more flexible and inclusive service models, among agencies, service providers and businesses engaged in activities related to family homelessness.
- A broadening of funding sources to meet diverse service demand. This will allow for greater flexibility and discretion in meeting service outcomes.
- Better and more consistent analysis of the social return on investment (SROI) of secure, affordable housing in quantifying social outcomes such as improved education, social connectedness, health, family stability and improved relationships social participation.
- Getting people into supportive housing as quickly as possible: a housing first approach has been shown to reduce demand on crisis health, mental health and emergency accommodation services, a decline in criminal behaviour and reoffending rates, and the amount of time people who are experiencing homelessness spend in police custody.

A black and white portrait of an Indigenous woman with dark, curly hair pulled back. She is wearing a patterned top with geometric and floral designs and large hoop earrings. She has a thoughtful expression, looking slightly to the right. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a bookshelf.

**23,437 Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander  
peoples are homeless**

# Media recommendations


The media has an important role in portraying people experiencing homelessness and in explaining the diversity and complex nature of its causes and prevention. Therefore Wesley Mission recommends the following:

- Improved media reporting of people experiencing homelessness: too often newsrooms use video footage or photographic images of people sleeping rough to depict homelessness. Rough sleepers only comprise six per cent of Australia's homeless population and do not give a true indication of the complex experiences of homelessness. Media stereotypes can therefore calibrate heartfelt public responses to the issue that subsequently define what is and what is not a worthy cause requiring public support.
- The development of practical media guidelines for covering the issue of homelessness and people experiencing homelessness, such as the use of imagery, language, discourse, and terminology relating to concepts, people and resources. These guidelines could be formed in conjunction with the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance.
- A more nuanced approach by the media to the social and economic causes of homelessness: by perpetuating rough sleeping as the face of homelessness this stereotype inevitably distances the public from the real and underlying issues that need to be addressed.
- A movement away from the 'streets to success' stories that perpetuate the myth that all people can overcome homelessness. This discourse can draw the polar opposite response: homelessness is self-inflicted, or that people choose to be homeless.
- Guidelines for social media: people experiencing homelessness constantly have their privacy invaded. A recent trend for people to take 'selfies' with rough sleepers, with or without their permission, has become a fad in the western world, particularly in large cities. This not only dehumanises people experiencing homelessness but continues to objectify homelessness as rough sleeping. Young people in particular reinforce an inter-generational response to an old stereotype by the use of new technology and social media.

## References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness 2016, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/2049.0?OpenDocument>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2017. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/contents>



**51,088 people  
are living  
in 'severely'  
overcrowded  
dwellings**

## Conclusion

The survey of 1,002 Australians (including 503 New South Wales residents) aged 18 and older shows that people have a range of perceptions regarding homelessness. A variety of views were evident as to what defines homelessness, its causes, and the effectiveness of initiatives to combat homelessness.

There are some common misconceptions throughout Australia about what constitutes 'homelessness' and the intricacies of experiencing homelessness. The majority of respondents still perceive homelessness to be simply individuals sleeping rough, there seems to be little awareness of the less visible types of homelessness. There is a broader range of views on what causes homelessness, however the 'addict' stereotype remains prevalent.

Interestingly, despite NSW having the worst result of any State or Territory in Australia with the growing homelessness crisis, there was little difference overall between NSW respondents and Australian respondents regarding the issue. This again suggests that more needs to be done to raise awareness of the reality of homelessness.

When it comes to solutions, respondent's views that providing more permanent, public or social housing would be extremely effective is a positive reflection of public perception of the necessity of policy change. However the lack of faith in the effectiveness of wrap-around services such as counselling suggests respondents view homelessness as a transient state, rather than a cycle or longer term trauma.



## Get involved

To volunteer, donate or leave a bequest visit  
**wesleymission.org.au**

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Wesley Mission is a part of the Uniting Church in Australia.

**Do all the good you can**  
because every life matters