

Effective accommodation models to reduce rough sleeping

As the peak body for homelessness in Victoria, Council to Homeless Persons seeks to promote evidence-based solutions to homelessness. As the most visible form of homelessness, rough sleeping is an issue that attracts a lot of public attention, and stimulates public debate about solutions. It is also an issue that has benefitted from considerable Australian and [international research](#) about 'what works'.

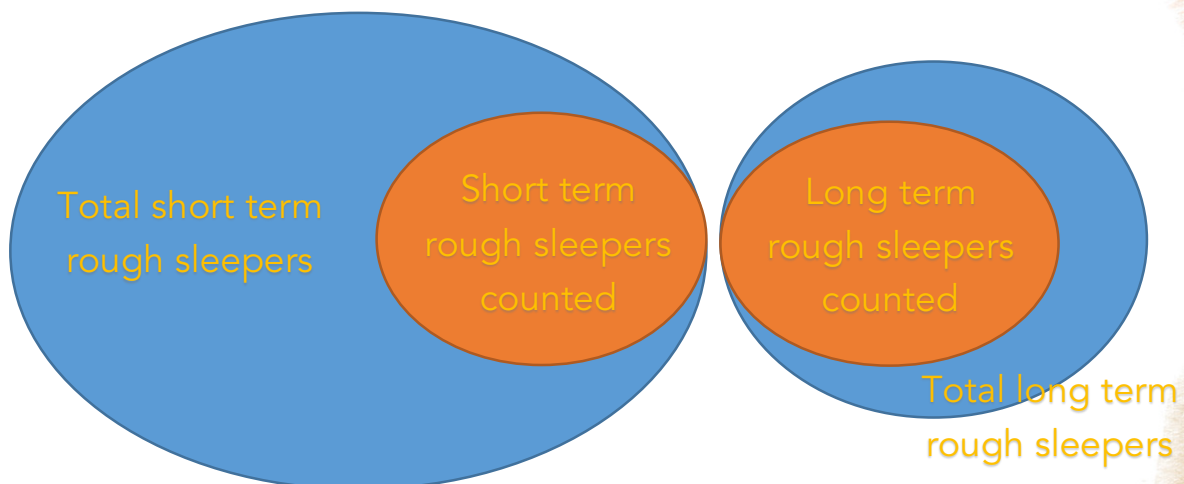
This research, summarized in the paper [Ending Street Homelessness: What works and why we don't use it](#), demonstrates the importance of provision of suitable long term housing options and ongoing flexible support, in providing permanent pathways out of rough sleeping. The report also discusses how the popular option of homeless shelters is both ineffective at ending homelessness, and commonly rejected by people experiencing homelessness.

This paper draws on this international research, and local practice experience in Victoria, to explore the forms of accommodation that will have the most impact on achieving an absolute reduction in people on the street.

Clarifying the nature of the problem

Counting the number of people sleeping rough is a complex exercise because most people who sleep rough do so for only a short time. This means point in time counts, like [StreetCount](#) and [the Census](#), capture a snapshot of a highly transient population, people who are typically moving between multiple forms of homelessness and marginal accommodation, including rooming houses, couch surfing, crisis and emergency accommodation options.

The images below shows the relationship between total number of people sleeping rough and those captured in a point in time count, with people experiencing differing durations of sleeping rough.



The distinction between short and long-term rough sleepers and their prevalence on the street at a point in time is important, because short- and long-term rough sleepers tend to have different levels of need, and need different forms of accommodation to sustain their exits from rough sleeping.

People who sleep rough for a short time

Most people who sleep rough for a short time do so because of sudden crisis in their housing situation or income. Family breakdown, sudden unemployment, and/or eviction are all common precursors to short periods of rough sleeping. For this group, pathways back to housing are relatively simple, and longer-term help is usually not needed. Some will still retain enough social capital to secure accommodation or support from family or friends and are likely to exit rough sleeping into couch surfing, or to a secure tenancy. This group share most of the same characteristics as people experiencing other forms of homelessness.



A proportion of people who sleep rough will become entrenched in homelessness and end up sleeping rough for an extended period. People with histories of trauma, those who have left out of home care, or those who have psychosocial disability or serious substance addiction, are most vulnerable to becoming entrenched in homelessness.

People who enter homelessness without these complexities can also become entrenched in homelessness if they cannot secure a pathway to housing, and instead become trapped in a cycle of short-term accommodation and rough sleeping. This group often acquire complexities, such as mental illness or drug addiction, after experiencing homelessness.

People who sleep rough for an extended time

Research has consistently shown that people who sleep rough for an extended period have significantly more complexity in their lives, than people who are homeless for a short time. They are more likely to have health issues, including psychosocial disability, chronic

diseases and addiction, and are least likely to have the social capital that may help sustain an exit from homelessness.

Importantly for the process of designing solutions, this group is also most likely to have had a history of childhood trauma leading them to experience homelessness at an early age. Terrifying experiences in institutions, out of home care, rooming houses and crisis accommodation can mean this group are less likely to accept offers of places in shelters or congregate accommodation, than are people who are recently homeless.

Congregate, or shared, spaces are not ideal for people who have experienced complex trauma. Chronic hyper arousal, learning problems, being in abusive power relationships and significant difficulty with managing emotions, can often mean people experiencing these vulnerabilities may either present a risk to others, and/or be highly vulnerable to exploitation or violence in these environments.

What works to sustain exits from homelessness for people who sleep rough for an extended time?

Considerable international and Australian research has demonstrated that even highly vulnerable people with extended periods of sleeping rough, can sustain exits from homelessness if they have appropriate housing and wrap around support. This model, called Housing First, has taken several forms in Melbourne, each of which has demonstrated success.

While individuals experiencing long term homelessness have differing needs that translate to different types of housing, people who have experienced trauma and who have serious mental illness, usually do not want to live with other people who share the same issues.¹ This makes sense when we consider that many people in this group will have had multiple experiences of violence in their lives. Being in an environment where conflict is common, puts people in a heightened state that compromises their recovery and mental wellbeing.

This group need access to housing in which they can control their living environment and be both physically and emotionally safe. Often this means they need "ordinary" scattered site housing, with a relatively low intensity of other vulnerable tenants, and with outreach support to a level consistent with their needs.

Some people who have experienced long-term homelessness need, or prefer, a congregate option of self-contained units in a single site. This option can provide a sense of community and a higher level of support.

The experience at Common Ground in Melbourne was that the initial attempt to house only people with the most complex needs, created an environment that was very difficult to manage, with challenging behaviours compromising the wellbeing of many residents. The levels of staffing required to manage this complexity would be substantial.

The best option to meet the needs of people experiencing long term rough sleeping is to have access to choice between supported housing options with other residents and staff

¹ P Mackie, S Johnsen & J Wood, Ending Street Homelessness: What works and why we don't do it

on site and more independent scattered site housing with outreach support. Having both types of housing and support available also means people can move between housing forms as their needs, or the needs of their neighbours, change.

What does this mean for solutions in Victoria?

Over recent years, Victoria has had an increasing number of people sleeping rough. This growing need for homes, has stimulated the development of several proposals to create new single site developments to accommodate large numbers of people who are without shelter.

While new housing that can accommodate people who are sleeping rough is needed, the critical decision that will affect success, is the form of this accommodation.

Impact of shelter with shared sleeping areas

New forms of accommodation that can shelter large numbers of residents range from traditional 'shelters', where people all sleep together in a single space, to rooming house or hostel type options where people have their own room for sleeping, but may share kitchens, bathrooms and lounge areas with other residents.

Large shelters where many people share a room used to be common in Victoria. However, the frequent violence, and other challenges common in these services, meant that these were largely replaced with accommodation options that provided private sleeping places and bathrooms. Jane Barnes and Bryan Lipman, worked together at Gordon House, a large shelter operating in Melbourne until the 1980s, with a mix of shared and single bedrooms, and shared bathrooms. In this Blog Post, they discuss the issues they experienced at Gordon House. Similar issues have been identified in numerous international studies, which consistently indicate that "many (and perhaps the majority of) homeless people find hostels and shelters intimidating and unpleasant environments".

Impact of large-scale short-term 'hostel' options

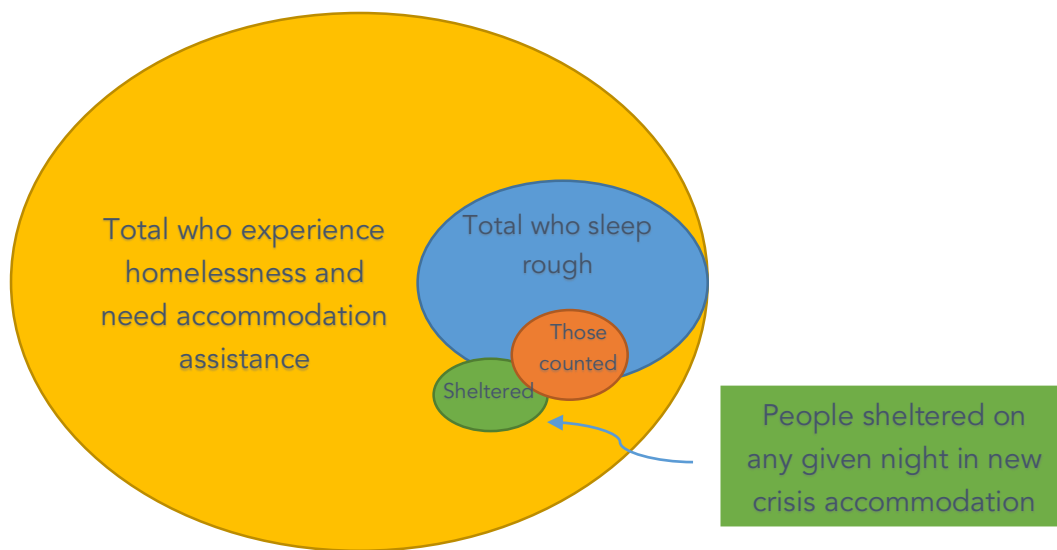
Another option often proposed is the creation of large rooming houses or hostels to provide short-term crisis accommodation. While these are somewhat safer than shelters with shared sleeping areas, they present similar risks for residents in the hostel's shared spaces. Large hostels, with lots of residents and visitors coming and going, also create a viable environment for an entrenched culture of problematic drug use. This presents particular challenges for people seeking to recover from addiction. It is also problematic for residents who were previously not drug users, but become inducted into a drug culture within a hostel environment – a serious risk for young people experiencing homelessness.

To the extent that hostels provide only short-term accommodation, they also fail to provide a permanent pathway out of rough sleeping. It is common for people who sleep rough to move into and out of rooming houses and crisis accommodation, often leaving as a consequence of conflict or violence within these settings.

So, while new hostels would add to the availability of similar rooming house and crisis accommodation in Victoria, and provide an option for people without other

accommodation, the expected impact on people sleeping rough is likely to be minimal. This is because this kind of option is *least* likely to be used by people sleeping rough for extended periods, and *most likely* to be used by people experiencing short-term homelessness. To the extent that hostels create a forum for an entrenched drug culture to flourish, they also risk actually increasing the population of people with significant health issues, who may also sleep rough.

As illustrated below, a new hostel would meet an accommodation need, but is unlikely to make any appreciable difference in the number of people sleeping rough on any given night.

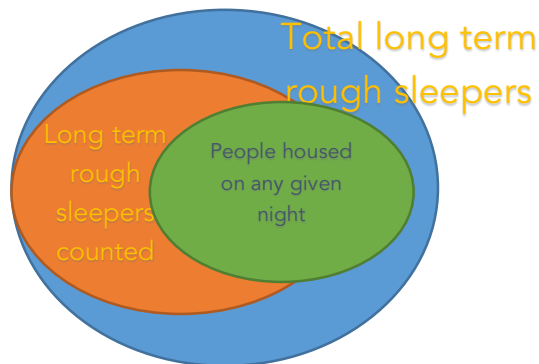


Impact of permanent supportive housing options

Provision of a smaller number of long-term homes on a single site to people who have experienced long term homelessness, is another option that avoids many of the challenges of large hostels. Housing targeted to highly vulnerable residents can also be blended with low cost housing for a less vulnerable group, to reduce the intensity of complex interactions among residents.

To create a safe environment, and provide necessary supports for residents, staffing would be necessary on site to provide security at entry (concierge) and some support to tenants. However ideally, most support to tenants would be the kind of flexible support that follows the tenant, like Street to Home, rather than being tied to the site.

While this smaller but permanent option would provide less “beds” for accommodation, it would make a far more significant impact on the number of people sleeping rough on any given night, as it would better meet the need of the group most present as rough sleepers, those experiencing long term homelessness.



Impact of scattered site housing options

The greatest impact on numbers of people sleeping rough could be achieved by complementing single site type options, with smaller projects offering scattered site or smaller groupings of homes for rough sleepers. This would provide permanent housing options for people who are unsuited to single site options, or who have a strong preference for independent accommodation. Having a diversity of suitable housing also enables people to move to an alternative home if a tenancy fails.

Other issues to consider

Challenges of managing large scale crisis accommodation

A single site with a large number of rooms for people in homelessness crisis, in which people can come and go, presents significant safety issues for people staying in the accommodation, and for workers on site. The presence of large numbers of people with complex needs, living in a stressful environment, means there will inevitably be challenging behavior to manage in hallways, entrances common spaces, and in the vicinity of the building.

Residents will also inevitably include both people who have histories of using violence, as well as those with histories of having experienced violence. This of itself presents challenges.

Tensions would be present around race, sexuality, religion and age that are likely to often escalate to conflict.

As indicated above, it should also be expected that some occupants will be actively using illicit drugs, which would attract the presence of dealers in and around the accommodation site. The larger the number of residents, the more the traffic in visitors, friends, and hangers-on, that will present challenges for the surrounding neighbourhood.

A large crisis option would inherently include many fresh faces new to homelessness, hence it would also attract people who seek to exploit the naivety of those who are less street wise and/or more vulnerable than themselves. This creates particular risks for young people experiencing homelessness.

The heavier the staffing ratio, the more these challenges can be managed, but the greater the expense.

Conclusion

Achieving a significant reduction in the number of people sleeping rough cannot be achieved without providing accommodation options that meet the needs of people experiencing long-term homelessness. Both international and local evidence demonstrates that this means providing safe and affordable long-term housing with flexible support that provides an environment for people to build a happy and healthy life.

By contrast, provision of short-term congregate options like shelters and hostels, perpetuate homeless people's exposure to violence and trauma, and make it almost impossible for people with histories of drug use, or susceptibility to induction into a culture of drug use, to escape from a cycle of homelessness.