

December 2021

Research Report

The experience of people without Australian permanent residency accessing emergency accommodation in inner city Sydney



*stock photo

“For me I've been in a very bad situation and very hard situation... **I don't know how many days 4, 5 that I did not eat anything at all**, that was one of the hardest times when I was homeless.”

“... the accommodation makes a huge difference, to be able to go and safe and I'm sleeping normal hours again, that is a huge difference. I have hygiene. I wash myself every day...And, you know, those are the things that, you know, **you start becoming human again.**”

“... some of the people when they were entering were **crying because they never had any kind of assistance before.** And it was just such a relief.”

“...for them to be able to access the accommodation to feel that people cared but also just to have that space to feel comfortable and then **begin to work on the sort of systemic barriers that they're facing in a space that's safe**, in the space where they can get a good night's rest, I think made a huge difference.”

Quotes from lived experts without permanent residency currently staying in emergency accommodation and staff working with this cohort

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Key recommendations

This report recommends assisting people without permanent residency (PR) in Australia experiencing homelessness in NSW with the following key service and policy changes:

1. No exits into rough sleeping for people currently residing in the inner-city Sydney Emergency Accommodation program
2. Funding of a medium term supported accommodation service with employment and support services
3. Exemptions to access social housing including people without work rights or ability to work
4. Access to social housing products including private rental subsidies and Temporary Accommodation
5. Funding a Housing First model accommodation program for people without permanent residency rough sleeping longer term or with multiple support needs

Introduction

A crisis of homelessness has taken place for people without permanent residency (PR) in Australia. Pre-existing barriers to housing assistance and support services have been brought into sharp relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without access to Centrelink entitlements or housing and homelessness support such as Temporary or Crisis Accommodation, many people have fallen into rough sleeping or longer-term homelessness because there is no safety net available to them.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a Temporary Accommodation program in NSW moved thousands of people rough sleeping into hotel-motels. The inner-city Sydney homelessness sector became aware of many people without PR were still rough sleeping due to their residency status making them ineligible for housing assistance.

Homelessness sector advocacy and collaboration in inner city Sydney with the Department of Communities and Justice enabled people without PR access to Emergency Accommodation for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic in August 2021.

With the assistance of support services, the Emergency Accommodation program has accommodated and assisted approximately 33 people without PR in inner city Sydney. While some people exited due to the short-term nature of the service or because they had higher support needs than the Program was able to provide, many people have stayed in the accommodation. Some people had previously been sleeping rough for 7-9 years and are now accommodated. However, without exit options into housing they now face a return to sleeping on the streets when the program ends on 10 January 2022.

This report draws on evidence from interviews with lived experts accommodated in the current Emergency Accommodation program and staff members supporting this cohort. It aims to understand the support needs and best possible exit options to prevent re-entry into homelessness for this vulnerable group of people.

Research method

Homelessness NSW conducted interviews with five staff members across four services and with three people with lived expertise of homelessness without Australian permanent residency staying at the Emergency Accommodation.

Although clear de-identified data for the entire program was not accessible at the time of research for the report, evidence from interviews with staff and lived experts is used to analyse the demographics and homelessness pathways of people without permanent residency experiencing homelessness in inner-city Sydney and assisted into the Emergency Accommodation Program.

All personal identifying factors including names, organisations and photos have been de-identified.

The term people without Australian permanent residency (PR) is used to describe a diverse group of people including people seeking asylum, people holding temporary work visas, student visas, expired visas or people holding no visa.

Demography of people sleeping rough without PR in inner city Sydney

People without PR make up a significant proportion of people rough sleeping

According to staff interviews, people without PR are a high proportion of those sleeping rough across inner city Sydney. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sector led work to assist this cohort sleeping rough resulted in collation of data on people without PR for known to be rough sleeping in inner city Sydney for the first time.

During this period, the highest number of people known to be rough sleeping in inner city Sydney without PR was 50-60 people. Given that the Street Count counted 272 people sleeping rough in February 2021, it is estimated that approximately 20% of sleeping rough in inner city Sydney do not have PR.¹

Country of origin, age, and gender

Staff estimated that approximately 50% of people rough sleeping in inner city Sydney without PR are permanent residents or citizens of New Zealand. The other 50% of people include those from a diverse range of different countries within Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Notable sections of this cohort include:

1. asylum seekers waiting for refugee status determination, particularly people on bridging visas without ability to work
2. a smaller number of people on expired student visas
3. women leaving domestic and family violence

People without PR sleeping rough in inner-city Sydney and now in emergency accommodation are commonly 40–55-year-old males. There are only five or less women in this group.

Limitations of demographic findings

There are important contextual factors impacting on demographic findings. Whilst people known to be rough sleeping are largely single males, it is commonly acknowledged that secondary homelessness is often hidden particularly for women and children leaving domestic and family violence and for young people both cohorts are often staying in cars, with friends or 'couch surfing'. The cohort breakdown relies on people *known* to be rough sleeping by staff. As a result, some people experiencing homelessness and without PR may have been under-counted.

¹ City of Sydney, 'Street Counts', (February, 2021), accessed online in November 2021: <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/public-health-safety-programs/street-counts>

The Emergency Accommodation Program during COVID-19 – a unique opportunity

This report draws upon evidence from interviews with staff and lived experts accessing the Emergency Accommodation program in inner city Sydney which is funded by the Department of Communities and Justice (DC).

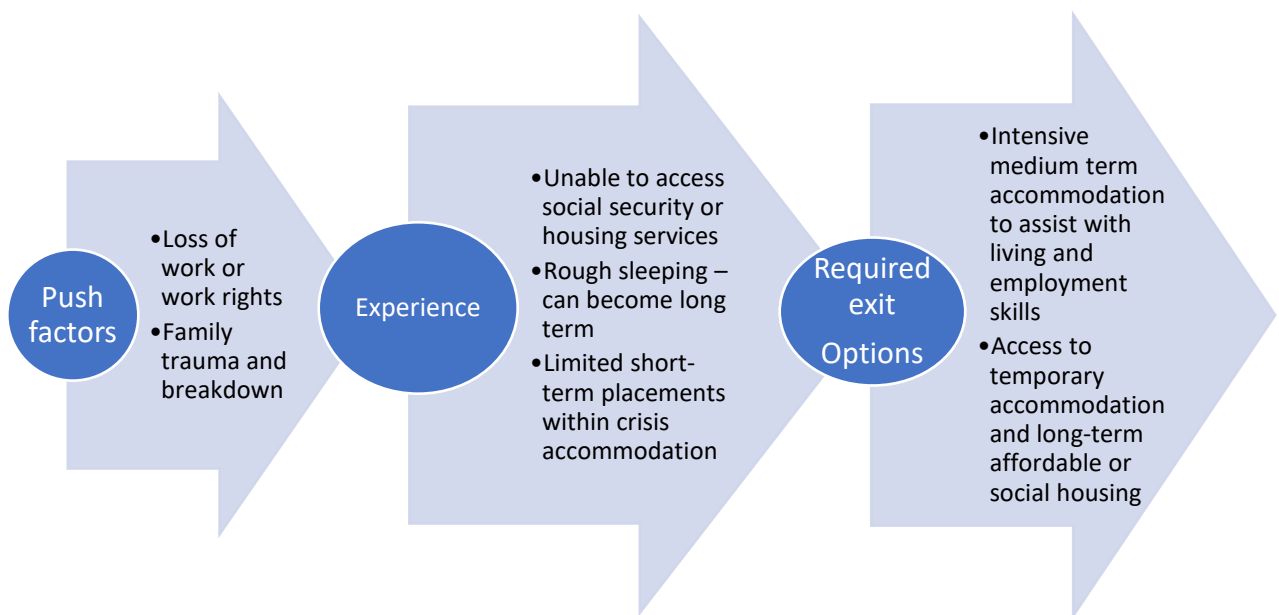
This program is available from August 2021 – 10 January 2022. The NSW Government allocated \$6.5 million to assist people without PR with accommodation and other needs for the duration of the 2021 stay-at-home orders.

Emergency and Temporary Accommodation is generally not available to people without PR, with some limited exceptions for women and children leaving domestic and family violence who are able to access 2-3 days accommodation.

The homelessness sector advocated for the current Emergency Accommodation program for people without PR. Specialist Homelessness Services negotiated to find a hotel for the program and provided support to people entering accommodation. An inner-city case coordination group which met regularly during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to assist with locating and referring people without PR known to be rough sleeping into the program. Approximately 33 people without PR have accessed Emergency Accommodation. Staff communicated that while they were still looking at options, there were little to no exit pathways available for long-term accommodation for this cohort after funding for the Emergency Accommodation program ends on 10 January 2022.

Homelessness pathways for people without PR

Figure 1: Homelessness pathways for people without PR during the COVID-19 pandemic



Push factors into homelessness

Lack of safety net when unable to work

During the period of the research project from October-November 2021, the main push factor for people without permanent residency (PR) entering homelessness was the inability to work, either because they lost the right to work or due to business closures during stay-at-home orders. On top of this, without the ability to access safety nets available to permanent residents including social security payments and housing and homelessness support, people without PR living in Australia during the pandemic were at significant risk of primary homelessness with access to very few support services.

Additional factors increased the likelihood of entering homelessness for people without PR during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as border closures which prevented people returning to home countries and losing cash in hand work due to stay-at-home orders.

Cultural and language barriers

Other barriers include cultural and language barriers and the experiences of people without PR that have contributed to their homelessness. One staff member said that it can be “ten times harder” to engage people rough sleeping without PR:

“I remember working with a gentleman who was rough sleeping for a long time, I think still is, but he witnessed some atrocities from his home country, and he just couldn't sleep inside. And that for him, he's like, I'm safe, I feel safe outside, but to get that information required, you know, the interpretation and interpreters to get through.”

The engagement of people rough sleeping into accommodation or services can be further complicated by language or cultural barriers and requires specialised support and increased engagement time to provide high quality individualised assistance.

Other push factors

For a smaller known cohort of people without PR who are long-term rough sleeping, these push factors are accompanied by other longer-term challenges or traumatic events such as domestic and family violence or family breakdown, substance use, and/or mental health challenges.

These pathways into homelessness are further explained by the experiences of homelessness as detailed by lived experts below.

Lived experiences*

Names and identifying details have been altered for confidentiality

Michael

Michael migrated to Australia for work, but lost his job following the global financial crisis, and subsequently lost his work visa, ability to obtain income and entered into homelessness. As a resident of Brazil and New Zealand, he did not have access to Jobseeker or housing assistance. He has been sleeping rough on trains in Sydney for seven years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he sought access to accommodation to isolate after testing for COVID-19. When residing at the accommodation for isolation, a caseworker connected him to services, and he has been able to stay in Emergency Accommodation when it became available for people without PR. He describes the experience as one that enables him to “feel human again”.

Michael said, “I feel like I have a life, I feel normal. I've been, making the most the time that I have, I spend a lot of time, you know, going back to libraries where I can look for, you know, use computers, and look for work and do things. And basically, I'm trying as much as possible to reconnect and as soon as possible be on my own legs...”

Amir

Amir is seeking asylum from Iran and has been waiting for refugee status determination in Australia since 2013. He has held a range of different visas, which have intermittently prevented him from working in Australia. When a recent visa expired, he lost his income and could not pay his rent. He negotiated with his landlord to delay rent payments until he could work again but accumulated a rental debt of \$3000. Due to financial hardship, he began living in his car and at one point did not eat for 4-5 days. Amir is currently staying at the Emergency Accommodation for people without PR but fears what will happen after the program ends. Amir said “I need to work at something, I need to pay rent, I need to buy, make your breakfast, lunch, dinner. I need clothes, shoes, other, like any other normal human on earth.”

Johnny

Johnny is a 22-year-old man from Nepal without PR in Australia. He had been sleeping rough for four weeks in Sydney due to losing his cash in hand work as a labourer during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, Johnny had no identification, phone, or income for food or shelter, and his student visa had recently expired. He had recently been discharged from a mental health ward due to his mental health issues which were exacerbated by his living situation. Johnnie entered the Emergency Accommodation program and a Specialist Homelessness Service helped him to contact his family in Nepal and he decided that he wanted to return home. Services assisted him to return to his home country by collating all necessary documentation and providing financial assistance through brokerage and grant money.

Sam

Sam is a New Zealand citizen and has been sleeping rough at Wentworth Park for 9 years. He is still unsure of living within the Emergency Accommodation. He is staying between the Emergency Accommodation and Wentworth Park where he has a community that looks out for each other. However, he does not always feel at ease living there. He feels that the emergency accommodation gives him a sense of independence and safety that he hasn't felt in a long time and he can "shut the door behind him". However, he feels that he needs to prepare to leave as this accommodation is only short term and he knows he will have to go back to his home at Wentworth Park.

Support needs

When people without PR enter homelessness, their primary need is assistance with ongoing accommodation. This is particularly the case due to the lack of access to Centrelink entitlements or access to temporary, crisis or long-term housing access – there is simply no safety net for this cohort.

Staff working at the current Emergency Accommodation program reported that most residents were able to maintain their accommodation, though some members of this group were still in the process of learning basic living skills.

Intensive support stream

Staff reported two known people leaving the accommodation due to the need for higher level support. It is evident that some people within the program needed a high level of support to maintain their accommodation. While the low number of people leaving accommodation prematurely is a positive outcome, there is a need for an intensive support program for people without PR rough sleeping, particularly those those who have been sleeping rough with intersecting and co-occurring needs, such as mental health issues and alcohol and substance use challenges.

One staff member said:

“Because when you think about someone who hasn't had a job or a rental property for more than 10 years, how are they going to be able to get back on their feet in a couple of days? If you're just in temporary accommodation for a week, it's not going to make any difference your situation. They need something intensive and longer than that because no one's going to want to rent to them.”

Another staff member said, *“there are really, really deep issues that are affecting a lot of the people at [accommodation] and are not ones that are going to go away by giving someone a hotel room for a few weeks.”*

Short-term piecemeal support

Some people are refusing accommodation because it is short term and uncertain

There were also a small number of people refusing the accommodation due to lack of certainty. Because they do not know how long they will be staying, some people prefer to remain rough sleeping because they do not want to abandon their belongings and camping gear and/or like to be in control of decisions related to their lives. One staff member said:

“... some without a housing pathway just said, oh, I'd rather just go back. Which is probably the most difficult. If you had an accommodation that someone could call their own after that program, I think most would be willingly take it. But knowing that there was just so much uncertainty, I think some people just chose to return, which is disheartening because it's undoing the great four months of work.”

Another reason for refusing accommodation was lack of choice in location, as people had built connections in diverse areas of outer Sydney, and this accommodation was only available in inner-city Sydney.

Unstable funding is impacting service delivery

The Business-as-Usual grant-based nature of support for people without PR and temporary nature of the Emergency Accommodation revealed that Non-Government Organisations are heavily reliant on charity. Without stable funding, NGOs and charities are relied upon to assist with piecemeal assistance such as booking a few nights in a hostel– despite many people experiencing long-term homelessness and requiring intensive, long-term, and multiple support services. One staff member said:

“We can only provide for a certain amount of money for a certain period. So, when that runs out, that’s where the issue arises, you know, because where do you send these people where do you refer these people, I mean, you could only help with so much with delivering the services we have.”

This can also result in people placed in accommodation which is inappropriate for their needs, including women and children being placed in backpacker hostels.

The need for exit options and a person-centred approach

An individualised and person-centred approach taking into account each person’s needs and providing the right supports along with accommodation, could end homelessness for many people in this cohort. Unfortunately, many staff reported that a large proportion of people that they work with, at least 50% of people without PR, return to homelessness due to the lack of exit options. Within the Emergency Accommodation Program, a changing end date of the program also caused some people to exit prior to the end of the program due to unclear and uncertain time frames.

Long-term solution - accommodation pathways

If the NSW Government Premier's Priority to reduce street homelessness by 50% by 2025 is to be achieved, the lack of certainty and exit options into long-term housing must be addressed for people without PR facing homelessness.

A return to homelessness will have detrimental impacts on people in the current Emergency Accommodation Program. The crisis of homelessness for this cohort needs to be addressed through access to longer term housing programs and support services. The lack of certainty and exit options into long-term housing is the main barrier that needs to be addressed for people without PR facing homelessness.

Staff and lived experts proposed solutions to solve the lack of exit options for this cohort which could be implemented by the Department of Communities and Justice.

This report recommends assisting people without permanent residency in Australia experiencing homelessness in NSW with the following key service and policy changes:

1. No exits into rough sleeping for people currently residing in the inner-city Sydney Emergency Accommodation program
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