

The impact of poverty and homelessness on children and young people in Australia

Poverty

3.3 million people (13.4%) live below the poverty line (50% of median income), including **761,000** children (16.6%). This equates to 1 in 8 adults and 1 in 6 children living in poverty in Australia.⁽¹⁾

Economic disadvantage accounts for 27% of all child maltreatment cases in Australia, with the strongest links found in physical abuse, sexual abuse, and exposure to domestic violence.⁽⁵⁾

Poverty can be the result of many social, economic and health-related factors. Individual factors, such as low educational attainment, unemployment, experience of family and domestic violence, ill health (including mental health issues) and disability, trauma, and substance misuse.⁽²⁾

90% of Australians agree that the rising cost-of-living crisis is pushing more families into poverty.⁽³⁾

Definition of homelessness

Data on homelessness comes from the ABS Census of Population and Housing collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) every 5 years, with the most recent data available for 2021.



Staying temporarily with another household and do not have a usual residence, also known as 'couch surfing'.



Living in an improvised dwelling, tent or sleeping in supported accommodation for the homeless.



Staying in a boarding house or other temporary lodging, or living in a severely crowded situation.⁽²⁾

Domestic violence and homelessness

In 2021-22, **108,000** Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) clients have experienced family and domestic violence, equating to **39%** of all clients.

40% or 43,200 people receiving SHS support are single parents with one or more children, and have accessed these services due to domestic and family violence.⁽⁴⁾

Family and domestic violence is the **main reason** women and children leave their homes in Australia.⁽⁶⁾

1. Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) Poverty in Australia 2023

2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - Australia's Youth - Homelessness and Overcrowding 2021

3. YouGov Survey 2024 Commissioned by Barnardos Australia

4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2023-24

5. Children and Youth Services Review 2017

6. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Housing, homelessness and domestic and family violence 2021

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Children and homelessness



In NSW, 80% of children who are homeless experience homelessness as adults.⁽¹⁾



Homeless children are more likely to have a physical disability, emotional or behavioural problems.⁽²⁾

Of the 122,494 people experiencing homelessness in 2021,

17,646

children (14.4%) aged 0-12.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census 2021



Homelessness is disruptive to children's education with decreased engagement in the classroom and poor academic achievement.⁽²⁾



Preschool and school-aged children experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience mental health problems.⁽²⁾



Food insecurity is also frequently reported by young people experiencing homelessness, putting them at increased risk of adverse health outcomes.⁽²⁾

Families and homelessness

Children living in sole parent families have a poverty rate of

44%

which is 3 times that of couple families (13%).

ACOSS Poverty in Australia 2023

In 2023-2024, **280,100** clients were assisted by Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS).⁽³⁾

- **6 in 10** were female (60% or 167,205 clients)
- **3 in 10** were children and youth aged under 18 (27% or 77,000)
- **More than 1 in 6** (16% or 43,549 clients) of all clients were children under the age of 10⁽³⁾

1. NCOSS - Lasting Impacts: Economic cost of child poverty 2025/2. Australian Council of Social Service Poverty in Australia 2023

2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - Australia's Youth - Homelessness and Overcrowding 2021

3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2023-24

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Young people and homelessness

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Homelessness and Overcrowding 2021



Being homeless can limit access to medicine, treatment and basic hygiene and expose young people to sexual exploitation, violence and social isolation.⁽¹⁾



Fewer than 45% of children growing up in poverty attain a university degree, diploma, or Certificate 3 or 4, compared to over 60% of children who have never experienced poverty.⁽²⁾

11,302

(up by 13.53% from 2016) young people aged 12-18 experienced homelessness on Census night 2021.

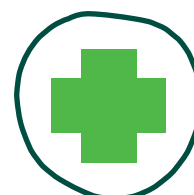
Australian Bureau of Statistics
(ABS) Census 2021



Homeless young people can also experience high levels of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, behavioural problems and alcohol and drug misuse and face a high mortality rate.⁽¹⁾



In 2016, rates of homelessness were substantially higher among young people aged 15-24 living in remote and very remote areas (6.2%) than among those living in major cities (0.8%).⁽¹⁾



Due to the combined mental and physical health effects of growing up in poverty, up to 60,000 adults in NSW are either unemployed or earning lower wages.⁽³⁾



1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Homelessness and Overcrowding 2021

2. Melbourne Institute - "Does poverty in childhood beget poverty in adulthood in Australia", 2020

3. NCOSS - Lasting Impacts: Economic cost of child poverty 2025

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