

Stephanie was already struggling to pay \$700 a week rent on her own when black mould made her son, who is asthmatic, sick. He suffered a couple of asthma attacks and had to go to hospital, which meant she missed work. She fell into arrears, and before the 35-year-old mum knew it, she found herself homeless. Just over a decade ago, Stephanie had fled her violent partner and moved with her then three-year-old and six-month-old to start a new life. At the time, Stephanie was paying \$425 a week for a three-bedroom house.

Since then, property prices have skyrocketed. Stephanie had been working two jobs – one as a traffic controller and another packing shelves in a supermarket at night. After sleeping on a friend's couch with one child for three nights while another stayed with a friend, she ended up finding temporary accommodation in a caravan park. "It was really stressful, there was so much noise," she says. "One night a car came in and did donuts around the campsite. I only got a few hours' sleep at night as backpackers were using it as a party zone. At one stage I was sleeping in a tent that kept flooding."

Stephanie says her self-esteem has suffered dramatically in recent months. "When you're always looking for a house and you can't afford to pay your rent you feel like the scum of society. You lose all your self-esteem."

While the first image of homeless people that comes to mind is likely to be men on the streets – known as 'rough sleepers' – in reality, women make up a large chunk of the homeless population.

Even before the pandemic, on Census night 2018, more than 102,000 people were identified as severely housing deprived in New Zealand, which is more than two per cent of the population. Around half of those who are homeless are women, which is considered high by world standards. Otago University research in 2021 analysed data of nearly 400 men and women who were homeless before being rehoused by Housing First services. It found the women were more likely than men to be younger, Māori, and sole parents.

It's a similar story across the Tasman. Homelessness Australia research shows that, of the 290,500 people helped by specialist homelessness services agencies

# THE FEMALE FACE OF HOMELESSNESS

*Rising rents, property prices, life circumstances and a lack of social housing are pushing more and more people to the brink of homelessness. Many of the victims of this disturbing trend are mothers and older women. So what can be done to help?*

WORDS BY ANGELA SAURINE



throughout Australia in 2019-20, six out of 10 were female. Nearly 120,000 had experienced family and domestic violence. Research by the ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership also shows renters on low and modest incomes are in the grip of a housing pincer, especially in regional Australia, thanks to surging rents and a lack of social and affordable housing. While there was an influx of public housing built in Australia after World War II and onwards, many in the industry believe there has not been enough investment since.

As well as mothers, as seen in the acclaimed Netflix series *Maid*, older women are also increasingly facing homelessness. According to the Australian Human Rights

In 2017, NZ had the highest per capita homeless rate in the OECD.

Commission, women aged 55 and over were the fastest-growing cohort of homeless Australians between 2011 and 2016, increasing by 31 per cent.

## WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

Ashlie Stevenson vividly remembers the night she jumped out of a window to escape after being beaten by the man she lived with. She spent the night sleeping on cardboard boxes in the basement of an office block near the police station where she went to get help. At the time, she was working as a gardener for the local council and had access to the master key for properties in the municipality. She spent some nights sleeping in parks with sensors and locked gates where she knew she

would be safe, one night in a toilet block. That was 20 years ago. Back then, she had a job and was able to dig herself out of the situation.

This time around, it has been harder. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Stevenson, aged 64, found herself facing homelessness once again. Despite being able and very willing, she struggled to find work – possibly due to her age. When the lease on the three-bedroom cottage she'd been renting expired, her two flatmates moved out. As she was on welfare payments, she couldn't afford to pay the rent on her own.

"The real estate agent was pushing me to sign another lease, but COVID-19 really hit in April, so with no more students from overseas I couldn't find anyone to move in and I couldn't sign a lease for \$1600 a fortnight when I was only getting \$720 a fortnight, so I had to walk out and I had nowhere to go," she says. Since then, Stevenson has been 'couch surfing' – relying on the kindness of others to keep a roof over her head.

## SPIRALLING CIRCUMSTANCES

She stayed with some friends until they moved house, then with a man whom she used to do gardening for. But he suffered dementia, and became abusive. Terrified, she was forced to flee to emergency housing once again. "After my last experience with domestic violence he only had to do it once and I ran," she says.

Having, ironically, worked as a volunteer helping feed homeless people for six years, she knew what to do. She called Link2Home, a homelessness information and referral telephone service operated by the NSW Government's Communities & Justice department. She ended up spending two weeks in a two-bedroom unit with a Muslim woman who had also escaped violence.

"She was in a worse position than me because she didn't have knowledge of the way the rental market works," says Stevenson. "She also didn't have a computer, only a phone. She ended up staying a week and then luckily a friend offered to take her."

Since then, Stevenson has been staying with an elderly woman whom she used to garden for who suffers dementia; in exchange for helping to look after her. But it could end at any time. Stevenson, who has a tertiary certificate in horticulture and

Diploma of Ministry, has been on the list for public housing for seven years, and says dealing with the system has been difficult. "The Housing Department keep telling me that I could rent privately on the north coast, but the rents are the same or higher now in regional areas," she says. "And how do I get to view properties? They present you with unobtainable goals and then they say

"IF I NEEDED A HAIRCUT, I'D HAVE TO GO WITHOUT SEVEN MEALS."

ASHLIE STEVENSON

you're not trying hard enough. There's so many homeless people and so little housing, so they have to cull compassion somehow. They don't see the havoc and distress they cause."

Even when she was renting, Stevenson couldn't afford the oestrogen and progesterone medication she was prescribed, and could only afford to eat two meals a day. "If I needed a haircut, I'd have to go without seven meals," she says.

## EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen an already major problem worsen, says Homelessness Australia chair, Jenny Smith. "We were turning away 250 people a day from specialist homeless services before the pandemic," she says. "Housing is getting more expensive and it's a phenomenon post-pandemic. We have one of the biggest gaps in the Western world between income and cost of housing. It's really hard for people who are working, but when you come to people who are unable to get employment and are on government support, there's virtually nothing in the country that you can afford to rent. Vacancy rates are less than one per cent in most places. You used to be able to go to rural towns and rent something affordable, but those prices have gone through the roof as well."

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice's annual street count of people sleeping rough found the Byron Bay area had the second-highest number after Sydney.

Women's Village Collective founder, Sama Balson, says the soaring price of housing in Byron Bay – exacerbated by COVID-19 and Airbnb – has led to an influx of homeless people.

She concurs that most of those being evicted are older women who find it hard to get full-time work because of their age, and single mums who only have one income and can't move too far from their kids' dads due to court orders. In one 24-hour period in the lead-up to Christmas, the organisation had seven single mothers who were being evicted come to them for help.

"That was a hard day," she says. "Landlords are putting up their rents by \$200 per week, and the only way you can do that is by evicting the current tenant. Granny flats don't have grannies in them anymore – they are being rented out on Airbnb. Properties are being treated as a commodity and an investment, rather than a home as a human right. Property prices have gone up 550 per cent since the 1990s."

Balson says a lot of women don't recognise themselves as homeless because they will stay in a vehicle or with a friend; they're not out on the streets. "Women with children also tend to hide because of the fear of children being taken away," she says. "It's really an invisible issue."

Balson believes the system needs a massive overhaul. "Welfare payments haven't increased anywhere in line with rental costs," she says. "There's not enough subsidised childcare. We need big-hearted landlords that don't become extortionists. We have people who are perfectly capable of paying the rent if it's a reasonable amount." It is hard seeing people go through so much trauma, but Balson is constantly impressed by the resilience of the women she meets. "One woman I know has built a truck to live in."

Through donations, Women's Village Collective bought a former glamping business which included 20 bell tents, which it is erecting in two holiday parks for women who need urgent temporary accommodation. But Balson says a long-term solution is needed. "We need to be looking at European models where you get the house first."

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, comparing homeless estimates across countries is difficult, as there is no internationally agreed

definition of homelessness, and countries do not define or count the homeless population in the same way. Although the homeless are a small share of the population in most countries, there are still more than 2.1 million homeless people across the 36 countries for which data is available. The US reports nearly 568,000 homeless people, with Germany, France, Canada, Australia and Brazil all also having more than 100,000.

**NORDIC SUCCESS**

Yet Norway and Finland recorded the biggest falls in the homelessness rate, by 40 per cent in Norway between 2012 and 2016 and by 39 per cent in Finland between 2010 and 2018. The success of the Nordic countries can largely be attributed to its Housing First policy, which involves giving people homes as soon as they need them – no questions asked. With state, municipal and NGO backing, flats

**SUPPORT SERVICES**

LinkPeople helps people find permanent, stable housing and works with them to ensure they can access the health and wellbeing support they need to help them stay there. It has staff in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, New Plymouth, Whanganui, Wellington and Christchurch. 0800 932 432, [linkpeople.co.nz](http://linkpeople.co.nz)

Work and Income can help with somewhere to stay, emergency housing, advice and escaping from family violence. 0800 559 009, [workandincome.govt.nz/housing/nowhere-to-stay](http://workandincome.govt.nz/housing/nowhere-to-stay)

were bought, new blocks built, and old shelters converted into permanent, comfortable homes.

Auckland City Missioner, Helen Robinson, agrees that New Zealand and Australia should adopt the Housing First model. She says New Zealand has also been badly impacted by the pandemic, with policies that allow the affluent to buy more properties as investments, fuelling a further surge in house prices. In August 2021, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission launched a national inquiry into the country's property market, which is exacerbating an already challenging situation.

"In the first lockdown last March doors were unlocked, motels were unlocked, special support was unlocked," says Robinson. "It significantly reduced the number of rough sleepers. But since then, we have struggled to find appropriate permanent accommodation for people to be in. If you go to Work and Income in New Zealand or Centrelink in Australia and say you don't have anywhere to live, they'll put you into emergency accommodation for a short period of time – usually a motel for a couple of weeks."

Organisations like Auckland City Mission then help find transitional housing for three months, and support people to find permanent housing. "It gets tricky because there's no housing to put people into; that's where the system gets stuck," says Robinson. "New Zealand suffers from a lack of supply; we just don't have enough appropriate housing. There's a big move to build and create more housing, which we haven't done for 30 years. Over time, the government has seen that different people need different types of support."

During her time at the Mission, Robinson has overseen the opening of two transitional housing programs, including one specifically for women, called Te Whare Hinātore. In Māori mythology, when Ranginui (sky father) and Papatūānuku (earth mother) were separated by their children, the first glimmer of light was Hinātore. Opened in 2020, the 15-bed service also employs mental health clinicians.


Robinson says the series *Maid*, based on a memoir of an American mother who becomes homeless after escaping domestic violence, has raised awareness about women facing homelessness. "It just makes you realise the helplessness and impossible

**“NOBODY CHOOSES HOMELESSNESS. IT’S A GENUINE LACK OF OPTIONS.”**

HELEN ROBINSON

choices," she says. "Nobody chooses homelessness – it's a genuine lack of options. It becomes cumulative. It's one thing to be knocked over once, but when it's twice, three times, 15 times ... we're talking about people who have experienced that kind of suffering their whole life. Many, many people report that they're having to tell their stories over and over again. They say services are made for systems, not people. At places like the Mission [we] worked hard to be responsive and fluid."

In February 2022, Auckland City Mission is opening a purpose-built, state-of-the-art facility called HomeGround, which will permanently house 80 people. It will include access to medical and detox support services, a pharmacy, and community spaces, including a shared roof-top garden.

It's a much-touted fact that anyone can become homeless – all it takes is to fall ill and not be able to work to pay your rent or mortgage. But Robinson says two key drivers are poverty and trauma, often from childhood, which can also lead to family violence. "In New Zealand, Māori have suffered deeply from the impact of colonisation and part of the impact of that has rendered people homeless," she says. "There is hope in the sense that New Zealand is really getting systems together to be brave enough to acknowledge the problem and say collectively as a country: 'This is what we need to do'." 



**VISION TO PREVENT HOMELESSNESS**

Launched in February 2020, the Aotearoa/New Zealand Homelessness Action Plan aims to deliver on the vision that 'homelessness is prevented where possible, or is rare, brief and non-reoccurring'. Backed by over \$300m of initial funding, the plans had 18 immediate actions to be put in place, and a further 18 longer-term actions to be developed over 2020-2023. It aims to provide urgent support to those in the most need, by continuing to increase transitional housing places. It is based on a commitment to partner with Iwi, hapū, marae and Māori organisations, local authorities, providers, and people with lived experience of homelessness to prevent and reduce homelessness. Increasing public housing and affordable housing is crucial to the success of the plan.

The plan's aims include:

- \* Providing urgent support to those in the most need, by continuing to increase Transitional Housing places.
- \* Delivering investment through the He Taupua fund to support 37 projects to assist whānau experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.
- \* Piloting a rapid rehousing approach to support individuals and whānau into permanent housing.

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The image of homelessness often focuses on men sleeping on the streets, but new research has revealed it's an increasingly worrying issue for single women aged 45 and over. [mindfood.com/homeless-studies](http://mindfood.com/homeless-studies)