

**INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AMONGST OLDER
PEOPLE AGED OVER 55 IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Dr Emma Power

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Older women in housing crisis

Submission in response to the inquiry: Homelessness amongst older people aged over 55 in New South Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the inquiry Homelessness amongst older people aged 55 and over in New South Wales.

I am a housing researcher and Associate Professor in Urban Geography in the School of Social Sciences and Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. My research focuses on the housing experiences of low-income households. This submission draws primarily on my recently completed multi-year *Australian Research Council* funded research *Ageing, home and housing security among single, asset-poor older women*^{1, 2}. The research included in-depth interviews with single women aged 55 and over in New South Wales, focusing on their experiences of housing and homelessness.

This submission focuses particularly on the following items from the Terms of Reference and in relation to older women's homelessness:

- (b) factors affecting the incidence of homelessness
- (i) the impact of homelessness on the health and wellbeing of older people and the related costs to the health system
- (j) the specific impact of homelessness, including the matters raised above, on older women

Recommendations

I am member of the Ageing on the Edge NSW Forum and my research fully supports the full set of recommendations of that coalition, including calling on the NSW Government to:

- Fund a specialist older person's housing information and support service that comprises both an early intervention and crisis response, similar to the HAAG 'Home at Last' model in Victoria³.

¹ Research overview: <https://dremmapower.com/research/older-women-at-risk/>

² Power, E.R., 2020. Older women in the private rental sector: unaffordable, substandard and insecure housing. Western Sydney University. <https://doi.org/10.26183/5edf0f0d75cf8>

³ Ernst & Young's Cost Benefit Analysis of this service in Victoria found that it had a benefit cost ration of 2.3, bringing \$2.30 in societal value for every dollar spent on the Home at Last housing information and support service.



- Lower the priority age for social housing eligibility from 80 years as a matter of urgency.
- Build 5,000 social and affordable homes per year for 10 years, at least 20% of which should be dedicated to older people.

In addition, research reported in this submission clearly identifies the need to:

- **End 'no grounds' eviction**
 - In NSW tenants can be evicted without grounds. This impacts negatively on security of tenure and wellbeing and is a driver of first-time homelessness in later life. Rental laws should better protect tenants by only allowing evictions on reasonable grounds.
- **Introduce quantified minimum rental housing standards**
 - clear and *quantified* guidelines for basic standards including ventilation, thermal efficiency, cooking facilities and infestation from mould, vermin and related that apply across all housing in NSW to ensure renters of all incomes have access to appropriate housing that meets basic standards. *The New Zealand Government Residential Tenancies (Healthy Homes Standards) Regulations 2019* can provide a model for a new NSW standard.
 - the introduction of quantified standards to be accompanied by the removal of no grounds evictions in the rental sector.
- **Adopt the new mandatory minimum accessibility standards contained in the revised National Construction Code for all future constructions in NSW.**

Response to inquiry Terms of Reference

(b) factors affecting the incidence of homelessness

Single older women are the fastest growing group of homeless people nationally⁴. Factors that drive the risk of homelessness amongst this demographic include: being not employed full time; being an immigrant from a non-English speaking country; living in private rental; would have difficulties raising emergency funds; are Aboriginal; are a lone-person household; or a lone-parent⁵.

Older women who live in the private rental sector face twice the risk of homelessness compared to those with a mortgage. Women aged 55-64 who rent experience at 28% risk of homelessness. On the other hand, social housing is an important protecting factor. Older renters in social housing and mortgage holders do not have a statistically different risk of

⁴ ABS, 2018. Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2016 | Australian Bureau of Statistics [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/census-population-and-housing-estimating-homelessness/latest-release> (accessed 18.5.22).

⁵ Lester, L., Faulkner, D., 2020. At Risk: Understanding the population size and demographics of older women at risk of homelessness in Australia. Social Ventures Australia, p.5.

homelessness⁶. This identifies the important role of social housing in any New South Wales Government response to older people's homelessness.

Many women who at risk of homelessness in older age are in this position for the first time. Gendered differences in pay across the lifecourse and lower superannuation compared to men drive financial risks that place older women at a disadvantage in accelerating housing markets. The greater likelihood of having taken time out of the workforce to care for children or other family members increases these risks.

The housing system also drives risk. In addition to changes in personal relationships, Petersen and Parsell's⁷ research drawing on Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) data, concluded that older Australians at risk of homelessness for the first time in later life faced this risk due to three key housing issues:

1. being served a notice to vacate a rental property;
 - Most client data they reviewed did not provide a reason for the notice to vacate. This likely reflects policy settings across Australia at the time (including in NSW currently) that do not require landlords to provide reasonable grounds when evicting tenants.
 - Where reasons were provided, these included property redevelopment, or tenants behind on paying rent.
2. unaffordability of housing, including as a consequence of rent increases;
 - Unaffordability as a reason for being at risk of homelessness was only an issue for private renters, and not identified by renters in social housing.
 - After receiving a notice to vacate many older people report difficulties "locating and accessing alternative affordable housing."⁸
3. Inaccessible housing design
 - 21 per cent of people at risk of homelessness for the first time in later life reported housing accessibility issues that contributed to homelessness risk. This was reported more frequently by private renters than social renters.
 - Stairs and bathroom design were the most commonly identified barriers to access.

The evidence presented makes clear that the private rental sector is a substantial driver of housing and homelessness risk for older renters, particularly those on lower incomes. The New South Wales Government is called on to embark on rental reform to ensure greater security of tenure and better regulate rental affordability. This is particularly critical at a time when long-term tenure in the private rental sector is increasing.

⁶ Ibid, p.5.

⁷ Petersen, M., Parsell, C., 2015. Homeless for the First Time in Later Life: An Australian Study. Housing Studies 30, 368–391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2014.963522>

⁸ Ibid, p382.



The data also identify the essential role of secure social housing in disrupting the connection between private rental insecurity and homelessness. Currently low-income older households have few options for secure affordable housing. Their homelessness risk is a choice that we make as a society when we fail to invest in affordable alternatives. Direct investment in social housing is necessary to address shortfalls in the private housing market.

(i) the impact of homelessness on the health and wellbeing of older people and the related costs to the health system

(j) the specific impact of homelessness, including the matters raised above on older women

Low-income older renters in New South Wales are living 'on the edge' of homelessness. They frequently live in unaffordable and insecure housing and face substantial risks to health and wellbeing. Better regulating the private rental sector via the NSW Residential Tenancies Act is a way that the New South Wales Government can protect older people living in this sector and help to reduce the incidence of homelessness, and the health and wellbeing risks faced by those living in the precarious position. Building more social housing would provide a secure alternative housing option, also reducing the risk of homelessness.

In this section I point to the health and wellbeing risks experienced by low-income older women living on the edge of homelessness in the private rental sector.

The consequences of housing unaffordability

In my research⁹, single older women who reported housing unaffordability described:

- Challenges finding appropriate, quality housing. Housing they could afford was often of a low or degraded quality;
- Housing costs had implications for budget management, including the ability to buy sufficient, nutritious food and to manage utility bills;
- High rents also led to housing insecurity.

High and rising rents left many women struggling to meet the day-to-day costs of living. Most women paid rent before they met other costs such as utility bills and food as failure to pay rent would result in eviction. However, this typically left little budget to afford food or other bills such as energy costs. In an effort to sustain their tenancies, older women reported buying less quality fresh food. They were also forced to access local charities with food pantries in order to gain sufficient food, and they reported limiting their social activities (see Case Study 1 and 2). These experiences are consistent with the Productivity

⁹ Power, E.R., 2020. Older women in the private rental sector: unaffordable, substandard and insecure housing. Western Sydney University.

Commission's report on vulnerable private renter households¹⁰ and my recent analysis¹¹ of The Australian Rental Housing Conditions Dataset, which shows that nationally:

- more than 1 in 5 older low-income renters are struggling to meet essential costs after rent is paid, including food, bills and clothing;
- nearly 2 in 3 are struggling to pay for non-essential costs like social activities, and over three-quarters do not have money to save or invest.

Case Study 1. Tracy, an older renter describes the impact of unaffordable rental housing

Age bracket: 65-69; Income: Aged Pension

When Tracey received a rent increase that left her with only \$30 per week after other essential costs were covered, she ate through sourcing food from a local charity that offered supermarket gift vouchers and a local church that opened a weekly food pantry with food donated by local businesses. She described her efforts to source this food this way as *"like my job. I'd go to one where they had the cupboard food and clothing and fresh produce"*. She would also attend another local charity monthly where she could get a food voucher. This enabled Tracy to "get through" until she was able to find her current house, a lower rent home located in a service and transport poor region.

Case Study 2. Toni, an older renter describes the impact of unaffordable rental housing

Age bracket: 60-64; Income: Frontline community services worker

Toni changed her diet, reducing her meat intake and looking for food that had been discounted at the local greengrocer. During winter, when heating bills increased her budget costs, and in summer, when she was in between work contracts, she accessed a local church food pantry and collected food alongside the clients that she supported in her low paid community service job. Toni described how she tried to reduce her utility bills by buying heavy curtains she could move between properties. She had also clad the outside of two recent rental properties with tarpaulin to try and reduce the through draft and emphasized the need to stay fit and healthy so she could limit her use of heating, despite living in a cold region of the state.

¹⁰ Productivity Commission, 2019. Vulnerable Private Renters: Evidence and Options. Productivity Commission, Canberra.

¹¹ Power, E., 2020. Low-income older renters are lonely and struggling financially, in: Baker, E., Daniel, L. (Eds.), Rental Insights: A COVID-19 Collection. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne, pp. 21–22.



Low-income renters are more likely to live in lower quality properties that are a risk to health and well-being¹². Single older women who took part in the research gave detailed accounts of low quality and degraded housing that they viewed during property searches (see case study 3 and 4).

Case Study 3. Megan, an older renter describing the degraded quality of lower-priced rentals

Age bracket: over 55; Income: Government income support payment, unknown.

"Well every time I used to go I said, "Have you got any properties between \$250 to \$300?" and they said, "No we haven't but there's a bedsitter goin' for \$320 a week" and I said, "Can I have a look at it?" and when I walked in there it absolutely smelled terrible. It's supposed to be cleaned out and the carpet was sticky. You know when you walk in – beer on the carpet, it feels like that. The bathroom wasn't nice and wasn't cleaned very well, but the curtain smell of cigarettes and things like that, and they had white walls and it was yellow and I said, "No I can't, no. Since I walked in there you can smell everything. [...]"

So I went there and I said, "No, no, have you got anything else?" and he said, "Yes I have got another couple more places but they're \$350 to \$400" see? And I looked at those but the one at \$350 I liked but I still couldn't afford the rent because by the time I get the food, the electricity, the special tablets I have to get and things like that I still couldn't afford. Of course that woulda left me about \$50 to \$60 to live off a fortnight. That's gotta get milk, that's gotta get me on the buses to go to my support group and to my hospital and things like that."

Case Study 4. Philippa, an older renter describing the degraded quality and safety concerns connected with lower-priced rentals

Age bracket: 65-69; Income: Aged pension

"[I had to go part-time at work because of my health conditions] and I was getting really tired because I was 67. I was getting really tired. So then I applied to do part-time. I didn't know how I was going to manage but I - and then the rent started going up. [...] I was in a bit of a poverty cycle because I thought I've got to keep working and I've got to pay my rent, so I might look for somewhere cheaper. But that's all very well; it's easier said than done. [When I started looking] Yeah, they were just dumps. They were just dumps. I looked at a place in [Sydney suburb] and oh it was awful. It was so awful and you just looked out at this cement wall. It was awful. [...] It was all dirty and the carpet

¹² Productivity Commission, 2019. Vulnerable Private Renters: Evidence and Options. Productivity Commission, Canberra.



was grubby and it was next door to a clinic [that made me feel unsafe]. I thought no sorry can't do that. So I just didn't know what I was going to do."

Poor insulation was widespread. Rental properties frequently overheated in summer and were cold in winter. Poorly insulated properties require heating and cooling to remain liveable across the year (see case study 2 and 5). This increases the running cost of these homes, adding to the cost of low rent properties. Low-income households are vulnerable to energy poverty resulting from property condition, having to pay high heating and cooling costs to make their homes liveable. Older women in the research described the need to avoid using heating so that they could pay rent. Some described the need to keep active and fit so they could cope with low temperatures. Others went to bed early so they could keep warm under bedding. Cold housing is a leading cause of ill-health and death internationally in mild countries like Australia.

Case study 5. Michelle, an older renter, describes the extra costs of low-quality rental housing

Age bracket: 55-59; Income: Disability Support Pension

Michelle moved house seven times in an effort to find more affordable housing. The home she describes here was affordable because it was sub-standard:

... there were gaps around all the windows and all the doors where literally, when it was windy, the curtain would blow and the wooden shutters, the wooden blinds would actually blow. It was unsafe because there was two steps from the kitchen to the bathroom that were wobbly. So while it might have suited somebody young with no disability, it really wasn't that safe.

While the weekly rent was affordable, "the cost for that [house] rose astronomically" due to the need to use a heater throughout the winter.

Many women described housing that was substandard. Several described living in houses that leaked for extended periods. One woman lost access to 40% of the property due to a persistent leak over a two-year period. When the repair was made, her rent was increased to a level she could not afford, and so she was forced to move. Another woman described living with smelly carpets after the bathroom floor leaked into the room below, while another described a toilet that leaked "three buckets of water a day." Women frequently described landlords who were hesitant about repairing properties. Landlords sometimes delayed or refused repairs. Women also frequently reported being afraid of a rent increase or eviction if they reported repairs (see Case Study 6). This is consistent with a recent Choice survey that showed that in NSW 56% of rental homes were in need of repair, while nationally 69% of tenants were "concerned that the request would be delayed and



unreasonable length of time”, 68% were “concerned that the request could mean a rent rise” and 44% were “concerned that the request could get them evicted.” (Choice 2018).

Living on the edge of homelessness in the private rental sector women endure substantial risks to health and wellbeing. There are also one crisis away from homelessness. Better regulation of tenure security and affordability in the private rental sector, and sufficient social housing are essential steps for supporting this demographic.

Case Study 5. Sophie, an older renter describes the risks of asking a landlord for property repairs

Age: 65-69; Income: Disability Support Pension

Sophie had lived in a sub-standard rental property for 15 years. She credited her lengthy tenure with her willingness to live in sub-standard conditions, to not request repairs, and undertake small ongoing repairs herself:

Like, I've done all the painting in here for the last 15 years. My landlord's had to do nothing. Not even change – change two washers, tap washers. All my taps are stuffed in here. I can hardly turn 'em off because all the – it's not just the washers now, it's the actual – they're old, they all need replacing. But I won't ask my landlord to do it. I won't even ask him to put a new screen on my door because I'm scared he's gonna put my rent up. That's bullshit. [...] You know? It's bullshit. You're too scared to ask your landlord to fix your house up because you're scared he's gonna say oh well, if I do that I'm gonna have to put your rent up. So, I don't. Unless like when the hot water heater blew up, he had to replace that. That's about the only thing he's had to replace. I'm one of his cheaper tenants, you know?



Conclusion

Housing is an essential care infrastructure¹³. The ways that we organize our housing system, from the ways that we design housing, through to housing policy and governance, and the ways that we distribute housing (whether via the private housing market or a social housing system) determines the housing opportunities of low-income renters across the state, including opportunities to age in place¹⁴.

An important question within this inquiry on older people's homelessness is: how does the housing system in New South Wales perform as an infrastructure of care? Currently it does not perform well. While moderate- and higher-income households are serviced reasonably well, low-income households are being left out and placed at risk of homelessness. Low-income renters and particularly women renters are over-exposed to the problems of unaffordable and insecure housing. This drives an elevated risk of homelessness, alongside risks to health and wellbeing.

The New South Wales Government can choose to ensure that no low-income older person in the state is at risk of homelessness. Reforms to the private rental sector can ensure access to quality, affordable and secure housing, minimizing the currently elevated risk that older renters face of homelessness. Greater availability of social housing can provide a secure alternative, ensuring that low-income older households have access to secure, affordable housing options and do not face homelessness in later life.

Yours sincerely,

Emma Power
Associate Professor, Urban Geography
School of Social Sciences and Institute for Culture and Society
Western Sydney University

¹³ Power, E.R., Mee, K.J., 2020. Housing: an infrastructure of care. *Housing Studies* 35, 484–505.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1612038>

¹⁴ Ibid.