

18 October 2016

# Climate change, housing and homelessness

## Report on the homelessness and climate change forum

Red Cross (Victoria)

**Prepared by:**

Dr Scott Hanson - Easey  
*NCCARF Vulnerable  
Communities Network*

Dr Danielle Every  
*CQU*

Bridget Tehan  
*VCOSS*

John Richardson  
*Australian Red Cross*

Antoinette Krackowizer  
*NCCARF Vulnerable  
Communities Network*



## Table of contents

Executive summary .....	i
1.0 Homes are the foundation for a stable prosperous life, but not everyone has one .....	1
2.0 Climate change exacerbates existing risks of homelessness.....	2
3.0 The Forum: Climate change, homelessness and housing .....	5
3.1 Speakers .....	5
3.2 Forum themes .....	6
4.0 What needs to be done?.....	10
5.0 Summary .....	14

## Executive summary

The forum on climate change, housing and homelessness was held in Melbourne in October 2016 to bring together a diverse range of researchers, policy and decision makers, practitioners, local leaders and community service organisations to discuss issues related to a changing climate and how these issues intersect with homelessness. The forum was co-convened with Australian Red Cross, Victorian Council of Social Services, Central Queensland University and the National Climate Change Adaptation Facility Network for Vulnerable Communities (VCN). The forum enabled wide-ranging discussion across three key themes:

1. *Homelessness and poverty are interrelated, and drive vulnerability to climate change*
2. *Housing affordability is exacerbating the risk of homelessness and exposure to climate change*
3. *Service provision for the homeless is constrained*

The forum also identified a number of policy and practice changes that could be implemented to minimise the impact of climate change and homelessness. These include:

- *a systematic approach to poverty reduction, a chief driver of homelessness*
- *more choice in the type of accommodation is required that will enable people to take the required climate change adaptation actions*
- *thermal quality improvements in government and private housing are urgently needed to protect people from heat related illnesses*
- *policies that address the cost of electricity are needed to provide better access to cooling adaptations such as air-conditioning*
- *more localised strategies that provide emergency support in extreme weather, such as the City of Melbourne's Heatwave and Homelessness Programme, are required and should be rolled out across jurisdictions*
- *homelessness shelters should take a more 'client focused' approach catering to the diverse needs of their users in extreme weather events.*

## 1.0 Homes are the foundation for a stable prosperous life, but not everyone has one

Over 105,000 Australians experience homelessness on any given night, whilst worsening housing affordability and the economic downturn is exacting housing stress on many more. Adequate housing is foundational to living a full and prosperous life; participation in work, raising children, good social capital (community ties) including health and wellbeing are all, to some degree, contingent on stable, safe and affordable housing.

Homes are the foundation on which people build stability in their lives. They provide the shelter, security, safety and privacy that people need that allows them to participate in the social, educational, economic, and community aspects of their lives. Housing is also an important determinant of health, with good quality housing protecting against extremes of heat and cold and other effects of extreme weather including fire, flood and storms. In addition, homes provide the opportunity to become part of a community, contributing to social cohesion and resilience.

### ***What is homelessness?***

HOMELESSNESS is defined as living in accommodation that is below the minimum standard or lacks secure tenure. People can be categorised as homeless if they are: living on the streets (primary homelessness); moving between temporary shelters, including houses of friends, family and emergency accommodation (secondary homelessness); living in private boarding houses without a private bathroom and/or security of tenure (tertiary homelessness); or marginal caravan park residents who are renting.

## **2.0 Climate change exacerbates existing risks of homelessness**

Secure, safe and affordable housing is also a prerequisite for coping with and adapting to extreme weather and disasters driven by climate change. People who are sleeping rough, are particularly at greater risk to adverse weather due to their exposure, than the general population. Further, they have limited capacity to cope and recover from events as they have far fewer material and financial resources to draw upon to stay safe.

Their risk is also increased by higher rates of chronic disease, smoking, respiratory disease, mental illness and substance abuse than the general population. This renders them profoundly vulnerable to climate change related weather events (heat waves, floods, storms), air pollution and in some regions, changing distribution of vector-borne diseases. In particular, extreme heat magnifies health risks of those experiencing homelessness. This is especially problematic for people with pre-existing health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, renal disease and mental illness. This vulnerability is made worse by inadequate access to medical services and in some circumstances, being forcibly 'moved on' by security personnel and police.

People living on low-incomes spend a greater proportion of their total weekly household budget on energy and water, compared to wealthier households, and are therefore less able to adapt to climate change. These are essential services for all households, but those with low incomes and facing financial hardship risk losing access to them. People on low incomes are less able to reduce their energy consumption by investing in energy efficiency measures in their homes, and face increasing prices for electricity, gas, water, food and insurance. The community sector has expressed grave concern that people living on low incomes are being left behind at an alarming pace, and risk paying proportionally more for power and resources.

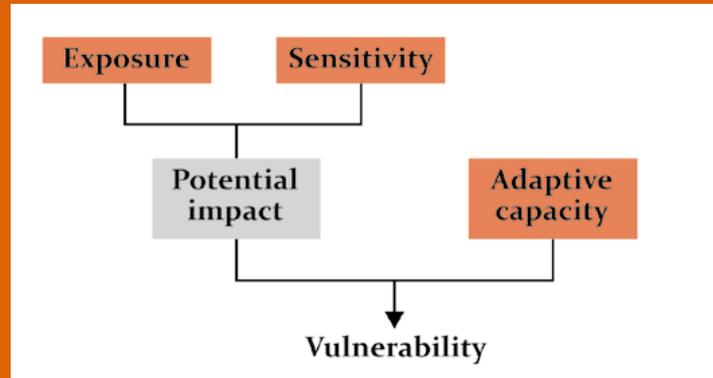
In addition, housing conditions have direct impacts on the safety, health, wellbeing and resilience of their occupants. People on low incomes living in sub-standard private rental properties, public or community housing, and vulnerable people living in boarding or rooming houses, hostels, caravan parks, residential parks or camping grounds, can lack the money, capacity or choice to cool their homes in periods of hot weather, or heat their homes in periods of cold weather.

The quality of housing is a significant risk factor during periods of extreme heat. Housing which is poorly ventilated, unshaded and does not have cooling, increases exposure to high temperatures. Living on the top floor of multi-story dwellings or sleeping in the roof cavity is also associated with a higher risk of death.

Australians are also vulnerable to extreme cold, with 6.5 per cent of deaths in Australia attributed to cold weather, compared with 0.5 per cent from hot weather, and largely due to poor housing quality. People on low incomes or living in poverty often cannot afford to heat their homes; or they may live in low-quality housing such as caravans or mobile homes which lack adequate insulation or heating options. This poor quality marginal housing, along with some low-quality private rental housing, boarding and rooming houses, contributes to the risk of death from extreme cold weather.

## ***What is social vulnerability to climate change?***

VULNERABILITY to climate change relates to the potential for loss (Cutter, 2003). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) characterises vulnerability as the degree to which a 'system' - either social, biophysical or biological - is exposed and responds to climate change stressors through processes of coping, adaptation, and recovery (McCarthy et al., 2001).



*Figure 1. Classic vulnerability to environmental stressors model (Allen Consulting Group 2005)*

However, homeless people's vulnerability to climate change is more helpfully understood with a contextual approach (Adger, 1999), which highlights how existing social, economic and institutional conditions mediate a community's capacity to cope with and respond to climate change related stresses and shocks (Brooks, 2003). In this way, social vulnerability is conceived as occurring in a multidimensional and dynamic social and political context, where climate variability and change functions to alter the biophysical, technological and socio-economic contexts of groups. This in turn affects the range of potential adaptations available to these communities. As such, vulnerability is 'not only [caused by] changing biophysical conditions, but by dynamic social, economic, political, institutional and technological structures and processes i.e. contextual conditions' (O'Brien et al., 2011. p. 76).

### **3.0 The Forum: Climate change, homelessness and housing**

The forum on climate change, homelessness and housing, was held in Melbourne in October 2016 as part of a national series of six events convened by the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF), Vulnerable Communities Network (VCN).

The overarching purpose of the forum was to provide practitioners, researchers, decision-makers, local leaders and community service organisations a colloquium in which to share and develop knowledge on the relationship between climate change and social vulnerability. The Melbourne forum was co-convened with Australian Red Cross, Victorian Council of Social Services and Central Queensland University. Over 75 people registered for the forum.

The forum's topic - climate change, homelessness and housing - was chosen because of the well-documented inadequacy of Australia's housing system. A group of community service sector organisations and social service peak bodies have recognized that Australia's shortfall in affordable housing is profoundly failing many within communities. Moreover, for people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness, climate change exponentially increases exposure to direct and indirect impacts, including storms and heatwaves. Without significant policy reform that addresses the myriad of factors leading to homelessness and housing insecurity, climate change will undoubtedly increase and entrench social disadvantage, thus placing greater adverse physical, economic and psychological stress on those whom are already highly vulnerable.

#### **3.1 Speakers**

The speakers at the forum were:

- *Andrew Coghlan, National Manager - Australian Red Cross*
- *Toby Kent - Chief Resilience Officer, City of Melbourne*

- *Peter Burns - Peer Education and Support Program, Council to Homeless Persons Victoria*
- *Kate Colvin - Council to Homeless Persons Victoria*
- *Assistant Professor Marc Settembrino - Southern Louisiana University*
- *Dr Philippa Watson - University of Tasmania*
- *Dr Danielle Every – Central Queensland University*
- *Barney Wilson - City of Melbourne*
- *Greg Hunt - South East Councils Climate Change Alliance*

### 3.2 Forum themes

A range of common themes resonated through the forum presentations and subsequent discussions. These themes are summarised below.

#### **Homelessness and poverty are interrelated, and drive vulnerability to climate change**

The forum discussed how the experience of poverty, social disadvantage and homelessness are mutually dependant; that is, poverty, dependence on social welfare and living on a low income, are considered to predispose people to living in inadequate or tenuous housing. Most clearly, in the context of the current housing system, living below the poverty line, especially for single parent families, represents a fundamental barrier to securing and maintaining affordable housing in the rental market (let alone the property market).

Conversely, the experience of homelessness undermines the requisite stability and wellbeing to re-establish oneself through education and employment, and break free from cycles of poverty and social disadvantage. Indeed, homelessness exacerbates myriad adverse health, mental health and socio-economic problems, making it increasingly difficult for people to find support and exploit opportunities to re-establish themselves.

Taken together, the Melbourne forum underscored how these social-economic and structural conditions render people less able to take adaptation actions that could protect them from climate change related impacts. For example, in heatwaves, people sleeping rough have far fewer options to choose from, in order to stay cool and remain hydrated. Access to adequate

air-conditioning, fans and water, all fundamental adaptations in extreme heat, are not easily accessible to the homeless. Cumulative exposure to heat over numerous days can lead to serious health conditions including heat stress, and severe hyperthermia (heat stroke), which if not treated immediately, can lead to death. These heat-related health risks are exponentially amplified for homeless people who are socially disengaged, living in isolation, and have a pre-existing medical condition. Inadequate ventilation and no air-conditioning can quickly precipitate heat stroke and incapacitate people's ability to seek emergency medical treatment. Clearly, in these contexts, social connectedness ostensibly means the difference between life and death.

### **Housing affordability is exacerbating risk of homelessness and exposure to climate change**

The exponential rise in house prices and rents, especially in capital cities and some larger regional centres, is placing increasing financial pressure on low income groups. Housing affordability, especially for people with complex needs and responsibilities, is driving people into substandard and dangerous accommodation. For some people in the private rental market, it was noted that up to 80 per cent of their income is spent on rent. Single parents with children are particularly vulnerable, chiefly because caring for children introduces a range of social and financial stressors that can make it difficult to find and secure appropriate and safe housing.

Family and domestic violence is broadly recognised as a causal factor leading to homelessness, especially for women and children. The provision of safe, affordable and secure housing is imperative to mitigating ongoing risk from violence and from climate change impacts. Moreover, excessive rent in the private rental market, and long waiting lists for public housing are contributing to homelessness and increasing exposure to climate related hazards. Overcrowding and lack of privacy in some short-term and rental accommodation is particularly concerning and is placing people at increased risk from multiple hazards. The threat from climate change risk will only intensify these issues. For instance, extreme heat is exacerbated in housing that lacks ventilation and adequate air-conditioning, leading to serious illness. Moreover, research is beginning to understand the links between

extreme weather events and family violence and it is generally recognized that climate change is adding to the kinds of stressors that lead to violence.

A number of speakers at the Melbourne forum provided detailed descriptions of the implications of climate change impacts for people living rough on the streets. Adaptation options, such as accessing homeless shelters and seeking refuge from the heat by going to the cinema, were considered appropriate for some homeless people; for others however, there were barriers to these options such as social factors and mental illness issues. Furthermore, homeless people with animals are often reluctant to go to a shelter in an emergency context, because of restrictions put upon pets.

Recent moves by Melbourne Council to ban sleeping rough in the CBD, notionally exacerbate vulnerability to climate change, as rough sleepers are 'moved on' by police to potentially more exposed and dangerous places. Homeless services have also argued that this policy will make it more difficult to locate and engage with people sleeping rough. This new policy is particularly concerning during extreme weather emergencies, where it is important to have rapid dissemination of vital preparatory information.

### **Service provision for the homeless is constrained**

Several forum speakers noted a myriad of challenges faced by homeless people when seeking support from government and non-government agencies. Homeless people with complex needs require a highly flexible and client focused approach to service provision. Unfortunately, the current systems of support services do not universally provide this level of service. Throughout the forum it was made plain that some homeless accommodation and support services were not providing services that were adequately flexible. Climate change related impacts (and rationalisation of funding) are placing ever greater pressure on services, adversely impacting on the quality of support allocated to people experiencing homelessness.

Further, the demarcation of responsibilities between services and jurisdictions in an emergency can convolute service provision to the homeless. For example, in the event of flooding, numerous players (e.g. police, council, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Vic Roads etc.) could all be notionally responsible for homeless people living

under a flood-affected bridge. Such an arrangement presents challenges for co-ordination of efforts to warn and assist people at risk.

## 4.0 What needs to be done?

To reduce vulnerability to climate change for people experiencing homelessness, structural and policy arrangements that lead to and sustain poverty and social disadvantage must be addressed. Essentially, this is because social and economic conditions across different scales create homelessness and undermine resilience to climate change impacts, including heat wave, storms and flooding, thus increasing the price of food and electricity. Targeted and evidence-based policy prescriptions that stop people becoming homeless in the first instance, are understood to be the most effective means for people across the homelessness spectrum to mitigate the risk from climate change. Secondly, sustainable pathways that offer a route out of homelessness are critically needed.

Moreover, the issue of housing affordability requires deep and systematic policy action. There exists a significant correlation between the rampant rise of house prices, homelessness and mortgage stress. Climate change related disasters, stressors and shocks will exacerbate this phenomenon in the coming years.

The following points further articulate what policy and service provision actions are required to support people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness in the context of climate change.

**Poverty is a chief factor leading to homelessness and must be systematically addressed.**

In the context of climate change, people with scant resources will be most at risk during disasters and weather related events. They will require additional financial and social support during disasters and emergencies. Equally, multiple or repeated extreme weather events in a climate change scenario will challenge peoples' resources, and especially those experiencing homelessness or on the cusp of being so. Adequate welfare and social support, enabling people to live stable safe lives, whilst retraining or searching for work, is fundamental to protecting people from becoming homeless.

### **Low-income people require more choice**

All citizens should have a choice about the location and type (apartment, house) of dwelling they live in and with whom they share. More social housing and increased choice will deliver better outcomes for homeless people and allow for greater personal control in their homes to enable protective climate change adaptation action. Overcrowding in particular, renders people at risk from physiological and psychological stressors that can be further exacerbated in extreme weather events.

### **A significant proportion of government and private/boarding house accommodation is substandard**

Substandard accommodation presents a serious risk to physical and mental health, especially to children, families and older people. The Australian rental market for low income people is fundamentally financially restrictive, thus forcing people into inadequate, inappropriate and dangerous housing. In particular, overcrowded illegal 'rooming houses', provide highly vulnerable homeless people with sub-standard accommodation (being well below government regulations), presents a serious risk to health and wellbeing, especially in the context of extreme heat events. Further legislation is needed (as the current standards are inherently inadequate) that enshrines a minimum standard for rental and other forms of housing. Climate change related impacts such as extreme heat are amplifying risk to health in poorly insulated buildings without adequate cooling. To ensure a safe minimum national standard, state governments must monitor the quality of rental housing in their respective jurisdictions.

### **The cost of electricity represents a significant constraint**

Ever increasing power costs are having the greatest impacts upon low-income people to effectively temperature control their dwellings. Consistent and targeted renewable energy policies that support low-income people to mitigate rising electricity and gas costs are critical. Regulatory and renewable incentives to encourage landlords and investors to improve thermal efficiency of their housing stock and to invest in solar, would assist low-income people to stay cool and healthy in extreme heat. Government-funded energy efficiency programs have helped low-income tenants and homeowners reduce energy bills and improve their health and wellbeing, including during

heat and cold extremes. These should be continued and rolled out more broadly.

### **Homeless people require localised, on the ground programmes**

These programmes would assist in mitigating the immediate effects of extreme weather. For example, the City of Melbourne's heatwave and homelessness programme provides heat respite options (e.g. visiting cooler places including libraries, pools, cinemas and public spaces) and health safety information to the homeless. Such a programme could be adopted by regional centres and other states.

### **Homeless shelters need to become increasingly 'client focused'**

Providing clients focussed services, allows efficiency to accommodate the diverse needs of the homeless. U.S. research demonstrates that people living rough are reticent to evacuate during emergencies such as a cyclone. This reluctance stems from past experiences of shelters, as being too restrictive and exclusive e.g. restricted access times; limiting what possessions people can bring with them; and excluding pets from accompanying their owners when using emergency shelters. The Australian experience is notionally similar, and homeless shelters should become more flexible to encompass the needs of users with complex requirements. Towards this end, involving the homeless in the co-design of strategic decisions and policymaking could radically improve client-focused services.

## 5.0 Summary

In summary, climate change impacts will continue to exacerbate social and economic circumstances that lead people into varying kinds of homelessness. Strategic policy action that addresses these conditions will, simultaneously work to build resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change on the one hand, and reduce the antecedent conditions leading to homelessness, on the other. The forum clearly illustrated that the homeless themselves hold an array of knowledge that could be drawn upon to advance homeless policy. Community engagement is key to policy design that is responsive to the diverse needs of those at risk or experiencing homelessness.



**Prepared by:**

Dr Scott Hanson - Easey  
*NCCARF Vulnerable  
Communities Network*

Dr Danielle Every  
*CQU*

Bridget Tehan  
*VCOSS*

John Richardson  
*Australian Red Cross*

Antoinette Krackowizer  
*NCCARF Vulnerable  
Communities Network*



