

A Place to Call Home

A Report on the Experiences of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion among People Seeking Asylum in Greater Sydney



Acknowledgements

This report is a culmination of research conducted by the Jesuit Refugee Service Australia (JRS) and Dr. Elizabeth Conroy of the Translational Health Research Institute (THRI) at Western Sydney University (WSU).

We acknowledge that this project was conducted on Aboriginal land and in relation to a place to call home on land that was never ceded. We pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of the lands of metropolitan Sydney, and extend our respects to their Elders past and present.

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To the participants who shared their stories, thank you for your courage, then and now.

mercy foundation

**LIFE
WITHOUT
BARRIERS**

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Summary

A Place to Call Home is a research project which explored the housing pathways of people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney.

The research was conducted by JRS Australia and Dr Elizabeth Conroy of the Translational Health Research Institute, Western Sydney University (THRI, WSU) between October 2020 and April 2021.

The research utilised a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. First, semi-structured interviews with participants explored their housing journeys including experiences of homelessness. This data informed the development of an online survey which explored the nature of homelessness and housing exclusion alongside variables such as visa status and income.

This report presents findings from the qualitative research with 14 participants. The survey findings are detailed separately in the companion report *A Place to Call Home: A pilot survey of people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney August 2021*¹ on the JRS Australia website.

There is a lack of current research on the homelessness experiences of people seeking asylum in Sydney and Australia, particularly in the light of recent changes to the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS). People seeking asylum in Australia do not have access to Australia's social security system, and instead they may be eligible to access the SRSS program while their claim for protection is assessed. The SRSS program provides a fortnightly income support payment valued at 89% of the JobSeeker payment or approximately \$35 per day at 2018 rates.² Since mid-2018, people seeking asylum who have the right to work are no longer eligible to access the SRSS program, except in limited circumstances. People whose claims for protection have been rejected at merits review stages of Australia's refugee status determination (RSD) process are also generally ineligible for SRSS.

The Federal Government cut funding of the SRSS program by approximately 85%, from \$139.8 million in 2017–2018 to \$19.6 million in 2020–2021.³ Since then, the number of people seeking asylum receiving assistance through the SRSS program dropped from 13,299 in February 2018 to 3,159 in January 2021.²

People seeking asylum have also been found to face unique barriers in the labour market related to the absence of local networks, non-recognition of qualifications, employer hesitancy related to visa status, and exploitation. People seeking asylum are also excluded from NSW housing services such as public housing and private rental assistance because of citizenship and permanent residence requirements generally attached to eligibility for these services. Women experiencing Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) may be exempted from these eligibility criteria in limited circumstances.

The objectives of this research were:

- To understand the housing pathways and experiences of homelessness of people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney, including during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- To develop an evidence base to more effectively assess and support those at risk of homelessness; and
- To build foundations for policy reform aimed at reducing the risks of homelessness and other forms of housing exclusion.

The research included the experiences of people at primary and post-review stages of the RSD process, focusing specifically on participants at the post-review stage in some sections of the findings. This focus on the latter cohort stems from recognition of the additional exclusions and barriers that people in this group face, and the increasing lengths of time that they spend in the Australian community in these circumstances. Following previous reporting on the challenges of housing for women experiencing DFV,⁴ the research also focussed on women's experiences of homelessness.

Housing pathways were analysed in terms of security of housing, and the physical and social aspects of housing, in line with the Global Homelessness Framework definition.⁵ This framework considers homelessness and housing exclusion as a combination of inadequacies across the three domains. For example, homelessness experiences that involve sleeping rough on the street involve a lack of security of tenure, none or inadequate physical structure for protection, and a lack of private space to enable social relations. Situations where people find themselves 'couch surfing' or staying in crisis accommodation services, minimally meet the physical need of being 'roofed' or housed but reflect inadequacy in the security and social domains. Housing exclusion can take many forms with homelessness being the most extreme expression of this. On a related note — and considering the loss of homeland, community, and status inherent in participants' forced migration journeys — participants were also asked broadly about the notion of home, and how it interacted with the domains outlined above.

Key findings

Housing pathways differed based on when and how participants arrived to Australia. Participants who arrived by plane in 2015 or after, initially stayed with family and friends or used savings to stay in a bed and breakfast, and then moved to private rental accommodation. Those who arrived in 2014 or before, mostly by sea, were initially detained, then transferred to motel accommodation and then found private rental accommodation.

All participants struggled to maintain adequate security of housing through the course of their journeys contending with the likelihood of eviction from formal and informal tenancy agreements and chronic financial insecurity. This stemmed from barriers to finding and maintaining safe and secure employment and exclusions from ongoing Federal Government funded financial assistance.

Inadequacy in the security domain was also driven by rental costs in Sydney. As a result, most participants were in shared housing arrangements. The impacts of sharing, including 'overcrowding', were experienced across the social and physical domains. While shared housing arrangements would not necessarily be classified as 'severely overcrowded' participants said they felt unsafe or lacked privacy, translating to inadequacy in the social domain.⁶ For example, one couple shared a bedroom with their children in a unit with another family, forgoing privacy and freedom for their children to play. Both single women and single men felt unsafe in their housing. For men this predominantly related to the security of their possessions or the presence of strangers. For women, this related to sexual or gender-based violence in the home.

Instances of homelessness in the form of sleeping rough or in a car were rare. However, every participant who experienced sleeping rough or in an improvised dwelling for more than one night was male, single, and at the post-review stage.

Participants who were in improvised dwellings also stayed briefly in a hospital as part of their crises. Pathways out of homelessness were unique with one participant housed in accommodation funded by an NGO, another securing a private rental with the bond donated by a supporter connected with an NGO, and another housed briefly in crisis accommodation and then moving to live in a carpark in exchange for looking after the carpark.

Home was consistently framed in terms of having the financial capacity to afford it, particularly by participants at the primary stage of the RSD process.

Participants at this stage also wished for freedom (privacy) to be themselves, and those with children wished for freedom (adequate space) for their children to play. For participants at the post-review stage, home was associated with the security or certainty of knowing what was next in relation to the RSD process.

The RSD process affected homelessness experiences through its influence on the capacity of participants to achieve financial security. This included restrictions to work rights; a protracted process that prolonged the state of being temporary, which contributed to challenges in finding secure work; and through sudden exits from the SRSS program particularly at the post-review stage.

As a result of not being allowed to work, or being unable to work, participants were forced to depend on family, friends, and charities. Participants described this as 'approval of begging' and described the humiliation of continually asking for food and rent from others. One participant explained:

“ The church is giving us Coles cards and I sell a \$50 dollar card to a friend for \$40 [cash] so I can put it on the top of the rent. ”

Participants at the post-review stage, who had restricted work rights and were ineligible for SRSS, secured housing through maintaining good relationships with their rental providers and with financial assistance from their social networks. In several cases, participants occupied the living room of a share house where their rent was covered through other housemates' payments, and significant arrears absorbed by the household. As mentioned above, one participant looked after a carpark in exchange for living in a small windowless room on site.

Participants were grateful for ongoing financial assistance from organisations such as the Asylum Seekers Centre, House of Welcome and JRS Australia and valued organisations that were non-judgmental in their assistance. Participants noted that rent was the most challenging aspect of surviving and preferred assistance with this over other material items such as food. Participants wished organisations could support them with rent until they were able to find work.

None of the participants we spoke to had heard of Workaway or The Room Exchange as options for accommodation in exchange for work. Overall, most single male participants thought these arrangements could be suitable for them, whereas participants who were in a couple or had a family felt such arrangements would be unsuitable.

All participants that had work prior to March 2020, either lost their jobs completely or had their hours reduced following the pandemic. The loss of income impacted the financial security of participants' housing resulting in significant rental arrears, which in some cases led to mental health crises, exacerbating anxieties related to maintaining suitable housing. Some participants secured a rent reduction, while others did not. People seeking asylum were excluded from the JobKeeper subsidy, meaning they were often among the first to be let go and the last to be re-employed.⁷ They also did not receive support to find work during the pandemic.

People also spent significant additional time at home as a result of restrictions. A number of participants experienced major crises as a result. This included one participant who slept in his car for weeks due to household conflict, and women participants who experienced sexual and gender-based violence within their housing, causing them to feel unsafe.

Recommendations

Access to income as a means to securing adequate housing

- 1 The Australian Government should ensure that all people seeking asylum in Australia have the legal right to work, including those awaiting ministerial intervention into their claims for protection, those awaiting judicial review, and those otherwise living in the Australian community pending removal or return.
- 2 The Australian Government should extend access to ongoing income support for all people seeking asylum in Australia who demonstrably cannot work or are demonstrably unable to find work. Ongoing income support should be provided at rates equivalent to amounts standardised across Australia's welfare system.

Enabling access for people experiencing homelessness (sleeping unsheltered)

- 3 In line with Recommendation 23 of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry Into Homelessness in Australia, the Australian Government and the NSW Government should enable access to social housing, transitional, crisis and emergency accommodation, safe-at-home programs, and housing and homelessness services for people seeking asylum who are at risk of, or are experiencing, homelessness in its most acute forms.⁸
- 4 The Australian Government should work proactively with the NSW Government, and relevant local governments to ensure the availability of an appropriate proportion of social housing and transitional, crisis and emergency accommodation which is accessible and appropriate for people with diverse needs.

Housing affordability

- 5 The NSW Government and local governments with high numbers of residents seeking asylum should establish frameworks for annual reporting on rental affordability in their respective geographical areas, including for people seeking asylum and temporary visa holders, taking into account their ineligibility for welfare.

Women experiencing or at risk of DFV in situations of homelessness or housing insecurity

- 6 Noting that the absence of secure, ongoing income is a key barrier to leaving violent or unsafe situations for women seeking asylum, the Federal Government should as a primary prevention strategy provide ongoing financial assistance to all women seeking asylum who demonstrably cannot work or are demonstrably unable to find work.⁹
- 7 The NSW Government and local governments should commission research into the prevalence and experiences of women seeking asylum experiencing sexual and gender-based violence in domestic settings, including outside intimate partner settings, owing to them entering into low-cost shared arrangements to avoid homelessness.

Covid-19 or other crisis

- 8 Noting the general inability of people seeking asylum and other temporary migrants to leave Australia in the last two years since March 2020, the Federal Government and NSW Government should extend eligibility (as the NSW Government did during 2021) to ongoing financial assistance for all people seeking asylum in response to public health orders requiring lockdowns, mobility restrictions, or other crisis-related responses measures.

Introduction

About us

Jesuit Refugee Service is an international Catholic organisation founded in 1980 as a social ministry of the Society of Jesus ('the Jesuits').

In 2020, JRS served and accompanied 1,049,781 refugees and other forcibly displaced people in 57 countries.

JRS Australia accompanies, serves, and advocates for the rights of people seeking asylum, refugees, and migrants in vulnerable situations. JRS Australia provides specialist casework, emergency food and financial assistance, employment assistance, access to legal assistance (in partnership with the Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS)), and a specialist prevention and response service to women on temporary visas at risk of or experiencing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In 2020 JRS Australia provided 21,834 instances of unique service to 3,882 people seeking asylum, refugees, and migrants in vulnerable situations.

JRS Australia also works to provide platforms and opportunities for leaders with lived experience of forced displacement to empower their communities, and promote the rights of people seeking asylum, refugees, and other migrants in vulnerable situations through engagement with parliamentarians, policy submissions, collaborative campaigns, and grassroots engagement in schools, parishes, and across communities.

Why this research now

There are more than 100,000 people seeking asylum living in Australia today, waiting for their claims for protection to be assessed or reviewed as part of the refugee status determination (RSD) process, or else making arrangements to depart Australia.¹⁰ The RSD process is the process by which people seeking asylum are either recognised as refugees or rejected and ultimately required to return to their countries of origin.

While individuals wait for their claims for protection to be assessed, or whilst they are making arrangements to depart Australia, the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) provides "needs-based temporary support". The SRSS program may include a fortnightly income support payment valued at 89% of the JobSeeker payment rate, casework support, access to torture and trauma counselling, and access to subsidised medication.²

In the last three years, the Federal Government has introduced a series of policy changes to tighten eligibility for the SRSS. As a result of these changes, the vast majority of people seeking asylum who have the right to work, but are unable to find work or who do not have a safe and secure source of income, are ineligible for SRSS.

Between February 2018 and January 2021, the number of people receiving financial and other forms of assistance through the SRSS program fell from 13,299 to 3,159, less than 5% of the total number of people seeking asylum living in the Australian community at the time.²

Anecdotal evidence from JRS Australia's intake data, ongoing consultations with JRS Australia's service users, engagement with frontline homelessness and Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) services, and discussions with diaspora leaders has suggested that these cuts to ongoing financial assistance combined with unique disadvantages in the labour market and Sydney's general lack of affordable housing create conditions in which people seeking asylum are particularly vulnerable to chronic homelessness.

As with the general population, homelessness intersects in multi-dimensional ways with poverty, DFV, drug and alcohol abuse, and health problems.

More specific to this cohort, homelessness creates barriers for a person's ability to participate in the RSD process, and to avoid so-called 'character issues' (e.g. public intoxication) that can lead to visa cancellation and deportation.

In response to changes to the eligibility for the SRSS program and anticipating the resulting impacts on safe and sustainable housing for people seeking asylum, JRS Australia, Life Without Barriers and the Asylum Seekers Centre conducted a project to scope safe and sustainable housing options for people seeking asylum. Published in 2019, the Foundations Housing Report explored housing options for people who were in the primary stage of the RSD process, who had the right to work and were in good health, as well as for women who were experiencing DFV.⁴ This research focussed on the housing experiences of women broadly, to better understand the experiences and risks, and in doing so identify any primary prevention strategies to mitigate the incidence and impacts of homelessness.

The Foundations Housing Report recommended further investigation of the housing pathways for people who were at the 'post-review' stage of the RSD process (henceforth 'post-review'). People at the 'post-review' stage of the RSD process are those who have had their claims for protection rejected by the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and by merits review tribunals, namely the Migration-Refugee Division (MRD) of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal or the Immigration Assessment Authority (IAA).

This Foundations Report recommendation reflected the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC) particular concern about the risk of homelessness and serious financial hardship among people seeking asylum at the post-review stage of the RSD process, and the increasing numbers of people waiting longer periods of time for judicial review outcomes, ministerial intervention, or simply for papers and permission to return home.¹¹

The closure of international borders during the pandemic, and the exclusion of people seeking asylum from Federal Government financial safety nets such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper assistance, has increased the amount of time that people who are 'post-review' remain in the Australian community. Significant numbers of people seeking asylum have lost employment during this period and have become increasingly vulnerable to homelessness.

Today, assistance with safe and sustainable housing continues to be the most common reason that people seeking asylum call on support from JRS Australia.

The confluence of these developments, alongside the relative dearth of recent academic or policy research on the housing and homelessness experiences of people seeking asylum in Australia, prompted JRS Australia and Western Sydney University's Translational Health Research Institute to pursue this research.

Objectives of this research

A Place To Call Home had two broad objectives. First the project aimed to address gaps in knowledge and understanding of the specific housing and homelessness experiences of people seeking asylum. Second, the project aimed to create the foundations for a broader, longer-term, cross-sector response to address homelessness and housing exclusion among people seeking asylum.

The objectives of this research were:

- To understand the housing pathways and experiences of homelessness of people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney, including during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- To develop an evidence base to more effectively assess and support those at risk of homelessness; and
- To build foundations for policy reform aimed at reducing the risks of homelessness and other forms of housing exclusion.

As previously outlined, the research had a focus on the housing experiences and pathways of women and people at the post-review stage of the RSD process in line with the recommendation of the Foundations Housing Project, and feedback from the Project Advisory Group.

The context of people seeking asylum in Australia

The UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (UN Refugee Convention) defines a refugee as a person who is outside their own country and who is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. A person seeking asylum is a person who has fled their own country and has applied for protection as a refugee, and whose claim for protection is yet to be processed, assessed or recognised.

As previously noted, there were more than 100,000 people seeking asylum in Australia as of the end of September 2021. This includes more than 92,596 applications from people who arrived in Australia on a substantive visa, applied for a subclass 866 Protection Visa (permanent), and are either awaiting a primary decision (30,174) or have not been granted a protection visa and are yet to leave Australia (62,422).¹⁰

The overall total of people seeking asylum in Australia also includes 11,136 applications from people who arrived in Australia by boat, including 1,971 applications awaiting primary decisions and 9,165 finalised refusals.¹³ This cohort of people seeking asylum are part of the so-called Legacy load and subject to Australia's Fast-Track Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process, outlined in further detail below. There have been a further 18,759 finalised grants of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs), representing people who have been recognised as refugees under the Fast-Track RSD.¹³

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the number of applications for asylum, likely corresponding to individual applicants and their dependents, currently at primary and post-primary stages of Australia's RSD processes.

Table 1: Number of people seeking asylum in Australia (Source: Department of Home Affairs)

	Onshore Permanent protection, 1 October 2021	Legacy Caseload Temporary protection, 1 October 2021
Awaiting primary decision	30,174	1,971
Post-primary decision	62,422	9,165
Refugees on TPVs and SHEVs		18,759
Total number of applicants awaiting a decision or departure	92,596	11,136

In addition, of the 4,183 people seeking asylum sent to Nauru and Papua New Guinea since the commencement of offshore processing on 13 August 2012, more than half had been transferred or medically evacuated to Australia by the start of 2021¹⁴⁻¹⁵ including a proportion who have been granted a Final Departure Bridging Visa (FDBV) E.

People from across these cohorts participated in the research interviews and survey.

The refugee status determination (RSD) process

As alluded to in the breakdown of numbers above, two distinct RSD processes apply to people seeking asylum in Australia, based on whether they arrived in Australia with or without a valid visa.

People who arrive in Australia with a valid visa (e.g. business, student, or tourist visa) and clear immigration at an air or seaport may apply for protection once they are living in the community. As part of Australia's regular RSD process, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), representing the relevant Minister makes a primary [initial] finding on a claim. Negative outcomes can then be subject to merits review at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT), and to judicial review at the Federal and High Courts.

People who arrive in Australia without a valid visa by boat or who do not clear immigration at an air or sea port, are not entitled to apply for protection under Australia's regular RSD process. They are subject to a 'statutory bar' under section 46A of the Migration Act, which prevents them from making a valid application for a visa of any kind. If and when the Minister exercises "a personal, non-compellable, discretionary power" to allow them to apply for protection, individuals who have arrived without a valid visa are subject to a limited 'Fast-Track' RSD process, including merits review at the Immigration Assessment Authority (IAA), the outcome of which is generally determined 'on the papers'.¹⁶

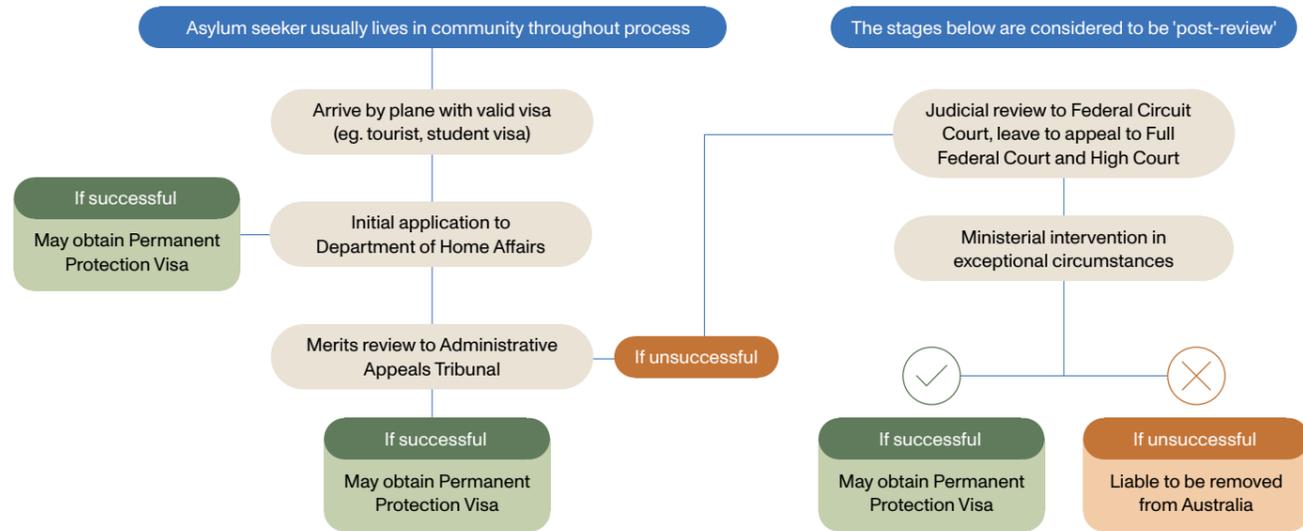
All people seeking asylum are also entitled to seek Ministerial intervention into their case, once other options have been exhausted. However, the instances in which the Minister intervenes in these matters are rare.

People who are recognised as refugees under the full RSD process are entitled to Permanent Protection Visas (PPVs), whereas people recognised as refugees in the 'Fast-Track' process are entitled to three-year Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) or five-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs) for which they must reapply before expiry in order to remain in Australia. Those who reapply before the expiry of their visas are granted bridging visas and must wait for their claims for protection to be processed and recognised again.

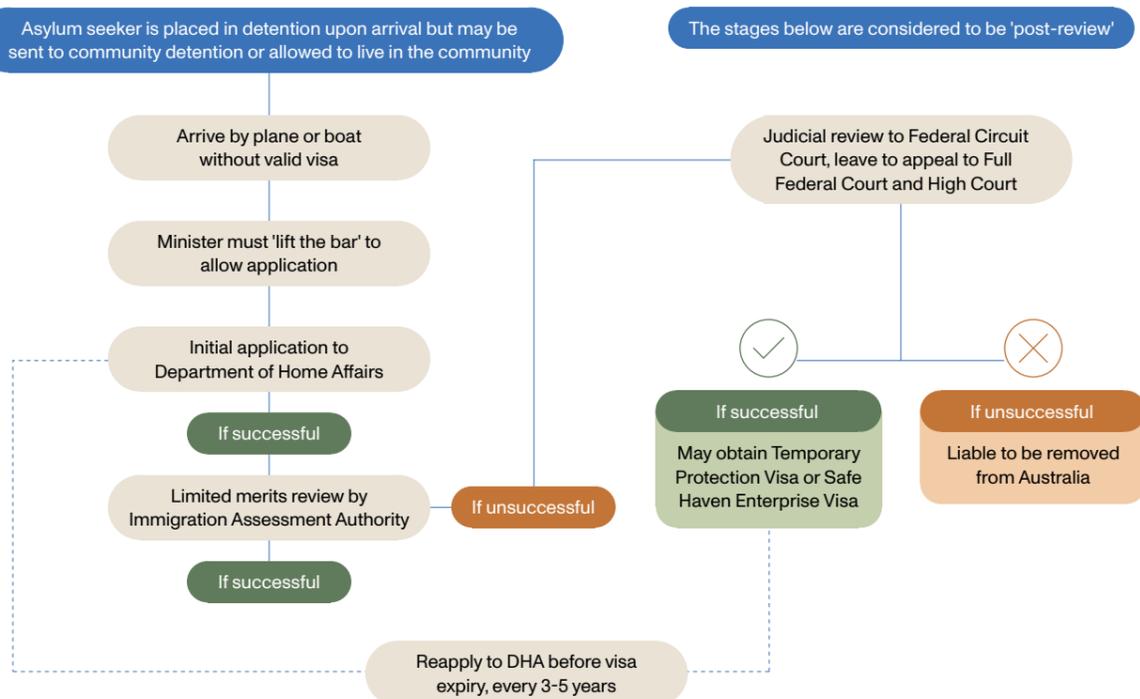
People evacuated or transferred from offshore processing locations (Papua New Guinea or Nauru) for medical reasons are also prohibited from making a valid visa application in Australia under section 46B of the Act. Those who have been medically evacuated or transferred from offshore processing centres since 2013 are excluded from applying for substantive visas in Australia. They remain either in closed detention, community detention, or in the community on Final Departure Bridging Visas (FDBVs).

Image 1: Illustration of RSD process amended to show the post-review stage¹⁶

Regular RSD process



Fast-Track RSD process



The Australian Government distinguishes between people whose protection visa applications are being considered at either the primary or merits review stage, and those whose protection visa applications have received a negative decision at both primary and merits review stage. The latter are considered to have their protection visa applications 'finally determined.' This is despite the fact that a positive outcome at judicial review means that the application may be reconsidered and ultimately precipitate the grant of a protection visa.¹¹

Visa processing times at the primary stage are not systematically published or known, however timeframes have been made public at various points in time. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission's Lives on Hold report, the average length of visa processing at the primary stage of the Fast-Track process in 2017-2018 was 384 days.¹¹ In addition, people in the Legacy Caseload who arrived by boat between 3 August 2012 and 1 January 2014 were initially excluded from applying for a protection visa courtesy of a 'Ministerial bar' or else had the processing of their protection visas paused between their dates of arrival until May 2015 when 'Fast-Track' processing commenced.¹¹

People who are in this 'post-review' stage of the RSD process are more likely to be denied permission to work, study, or access to ongoing financial assistance via the SRSS program.¹¹

There are significant delays and backlogs in the processing and determination of claims and migration law matters at the Tribunals and courts. For example, in 2019-2020, the median time to finalise review decisions at the AAT was 79 weeks or 1.5 years.¹⁸ Similarly, the 2020-2021 Annual Report of the Federal Circuit Court (FCC) said that although there had been a reduction in the number of migration applications filed in 2020-2021, the current caseload "placed significant pressures on judicial resources...and that 58% of cases were cleared in the year."¹⁹

People seeking asylum in the Australian community experience significant delays in the processing and determination of their claims for protection across the regular and Fast-Track RSD processes.

A 2021 JRS Australia submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Inquiry into family or partner reunions noted that the annual number of lodgements for protection visas at primary, tribunal, and judicial review stages of both RSD processes far outweighed the annual number of decisions.¹⁷

The substantive consequence of these significant delays and backlogs throughout the RSD process is that people seeking asylum spend considerable time in material deprivation, uncertainty and separated from family members.¹¹ As has been documented on many occasions, these delays have serious impacts on mental and physical well-being.²⁰⁻²³ In 2012 researchers described a clinical condition stemming from the protracted nature of the RSD process, known as 'protracted asylum seeker syndrome.'²⁴ Symptoms of the syndrome mirror those of other mental disorders and include fluctuating mood, poor concentration and attention, irritability, intrusive thoughts about the RSD process, overwhelming feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, and dissociative and psychotic symptoms.²⁴

It is clear that the protracted nature of the RSD process itself impacts a person's ability to function and live independently.

Bridging visas, work and study rights, and access to healthcare

During the long period of time in which people seeking asylum are waiting for their protection claims to be processed and determined, their legal status is precarious. Access to work and study rights is also variable. This systemic precarity makes it difficult for people in the community seeking asylum to maintain financial and social stability.

A bridging visa (BV) is a temporary visa granted to people who are awaiting the outcome of an application for protection (at a primary, merits review or judicial review stage) or are making arrangements to leave Australia, to ensure that they are lawful whilst they remain in the community.

In the vast majority of cases people seeking asylum hold a BV A, BV E or BV C. A BV is designed to cease 35 days after a merits review decision is made on a protection claim, after a determination is made that a claim for merits review is invalid, or after the withdrawal of a merits review claim. A BV ceases 28 days after a court upholds a decision to refuse a protection visa or an applicant withdraws a judicial review application.

In practice, bridging visas vary in duration, rights and conditions attached to them. These durations, rights, and conditions are largely dependent on the substantive visa the individual held at the time of submitting their application for protection. Bridging visas can be valid for an undetermined period, until a person's claims are determined. They can also have set durations, ranging from years to days.

Bridging visas may or may not include the right to work or study. Although changes introduced in 2014 mean that the majority of people seeking asylum, arriving with and without valid visas, have work rights attached to their bridging visas, this is not always the case in practice. People seeking asylum are more likely to be issued bridging visas without the right to work or study in situations where their protection claim has been rejected at primary and merits review stage, and an individual is either waiting for an outcome on their judicial review application, seeking ministerial intervention in their case, or making arrangements to depart Australia. People who are at the post-review stage of the RSD hold bridging visas that generally do not include access to Medicare.

Statutory bars under Section 46A, 46B, and 91K also apply to the grant of bridging visas. What this means is that people seeking asylum must rely on the relevant Minister to exercise discretionary powers to 'lift the bar' and thereby permit them to apply for a new bridging visa. In practice, the Minister does not always lift the bar in a timely manner, generating a circumstance in which people seeking asylum whose bridging visas have expired remain 'unlawful' in the community without any agency to change their circumstances.²⁵

Individuals living without a valid visa in the community may be detained and placed in immigration detention facilities. They also do not have the right to work or study, nor access to Medicare. In many cases, they are hesitant to seek medical attention or access health services available in clinics or hospitals, fearing that they may be reported to immigration authorities.

Access to the labour market and employment

People seeking asylum face unique disadvantages with regards to access to the labour market and workforce participation in Australia. These disadvantages can be exacerbated by the impacts of Australian Government policies on people seeking asylum who arrived in Australia by boat.²⁶

Such policies include restrictions on the right to work, limited access to ongoing financial assistance and the lack of access to Medicare, each of which has varied impacts on the ability to find and sustain decent work.²⁷

Institutional factors like systemic racism and discrimination,²⁸ labour market segmentation and a rigid system of skills recognition, and individual factors like English proficiency and physical and mental health needs also act to create barriers to people seeking asylum finding and maintaining suitable work.¹⁷

As such, multiple studies confirm that people seeking asylum are more likely to be under-employed, to experience occupational downgrading where their pre-existing skills, qualifications and experience are not recognised by Australian employers and were instead relegated to 'survival jobs'.²⁹⁻³⁰

Indeed even for those who have the right to work, their "temporary and conditional migration status exposes them to a...pervasive insecurity...and precarity."²⁸

Both in Australia and elsewhere, the combination of restrictive and inconsistent visa conditions and the lack of Federal Government-funded financial assistance to those who cannot work has also given rise to a culture of exploitation of people seeking asylum by some employers.²⁹⁻³⁰

Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have further impacted the employment of people seeking asylum. Lockdowns and restrictions on mobility caused a significant proportion of people seeking asylum in the community to lose employment or have their work hours reduced to a level at which they were unable to pay for rent, food, or other essential needs.³¹ One recent study from Monash University shows that the pandemic had a disproportionate negative impact on people seeking asylum via a decline in job availability, an increase in labour market competition, and an Australia first mentality.³²

In JRS Australia's own experience between March and May 2020, 47% of people who had found employment through JRS Australia's employment program in the previous two years lost jobs or a significant proportion of their hours as casual employees. People seeking asylum were excluded from the JobKeeper subsidy, meaning that they were often among the first to be let go and the last to be re-employed.¹²

Access to ongoing financial assistance and housing services

People seeking asylum living in the Australian community are excluded from access to social security benefits, including the JobSeeker payment, the Age Pension, the Parenting Payment Single, Youth Allowance, the Disability Support Pension, and the Carers Payment.

Instead, people seeking asylum may access the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program. People who are deemed eligible to obtain SRSS may receive financial assistance (worth 89% of the JobSeeker allowance), casework support, access to torture and trauma counselling, and subsidised medication. As the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has noted, payment rates under the SRSS program fall well below the poverty line.¹¹

People who are in the 'post-review' stage of the RSD process are generally removed from the SRSS program and do not have access to income support, torture and trauma counselling, or work support. Since 2017, the Federal Government has progressively introduced changes in eligibility criteria that have resulted in much fewer numbers of people seeking asylum being able to access the SRSS program, even at primary and review stages of the RSD process. In mid-2018, DHA notified people seeking asylum that they would no longer be eligible to receive the SRSS financial allowance unless they faced barriers to employment. Individuals sending money overseas or receiving a cumulative amount of \$1,000 over twelve months would no longer be eligible.

Barring a small number of exceptions made on the basis of particular, individual circumstances, those unable to find work are also no longer automatically eligible. Since then, DHA informed civil society organisations that access to the SRSS program would be determined on the basis of a vulnerability assessment, taking into account four criteria, namely:



Physical health barriers that are ongoing, permanent disability, or cognitive impairment



Mental health barriers, with a current diagnosis and treatment plan in place



Single parents with pre-school aged children (children under six), pregnant women, primary carers for someone with a significant vulnerability, people aged 70 and over



A major crisis for the client (family violence, house fire, flood etc.).

The Government insists that assessments for eligibility are made on a case-by-case basis. However, since 2018, JRS Australia has seen people who are demonstrably unable to work and experiencing serious vulnerabilities have their applications for the SRSS program rejected. These included individuals with chronic, life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, chronic disabilities, and victims of DFV.

Definitions of homelessness used in this research

For the purposes of the Australian Census, a person is considered homeless if they do not have alternative accommodation and if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.⁶

The ABS definition was based on the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, (ETHOS)³⁴ which considers a range of living situations including:

- 1 Rooflessness**
people living without any shelter such as people sleeping rough on the street or in improvised dwellings.
- 2 Houselessness**
people living in temporary forms of shelter such as crisis accommodation or institutions.
- 3 Insecure housing**
people residing in housing that is transitional or with no legal tenure or where there is a threat of eviction or threats to safety such as domestic and family violence.
- 4 Inadequate housing**
people residing in housing that is of a makeshift or semi-permanent structure or otherwise defined as being unfit for habitation or deemed severely overcrowded based on national norms.

Although debate continues regarding how well ETHOS captures 'homelessness' for different populations and in different contexts,³⁵⁻³⁶ it is a useful framework to guide discussions and inform policy and service responses. We used the framework to help guide our measurement of homelessness and housing exclusion in the survey component of the research.

In the qualitative component of the research, we used the nomenclature of housing pathways to explore the homelessness and housing experiences of participants at different stages of the RSD process. This approach was adopted to ensure we did not pre-empt or constrain the discussion of 'home' and 'housing' for participants. Our analysis of the interview data drew on the Global Homelessness Framework (GHF) developed by Busch-Geertsema and colleagues.⁵

In this framework, adapted from ETHOS, homelessness and housing exclusion can be considered in terms of three domains namely the security, physical and social domains. The security domain differentiates between 'de jure' security of tenure and 'de facto' security of tenure. De jure security of tenure refers to the legal title to occupy a dwelling, whereas de facto security of tenure refers to the practical likelihood of eviction. The security domain also includes the affordability of housing. The physical domain covers the quality and quantity of the residential space while the social domain covers privacy and safety. In doing so, this definition reframes 'overcrowding' to identify its constituent impacts on available physical space, privacy and safety.

Combining ETHOS and the GHF, we took homelessness to be inadequacy in the security domain as well at least one other domain.

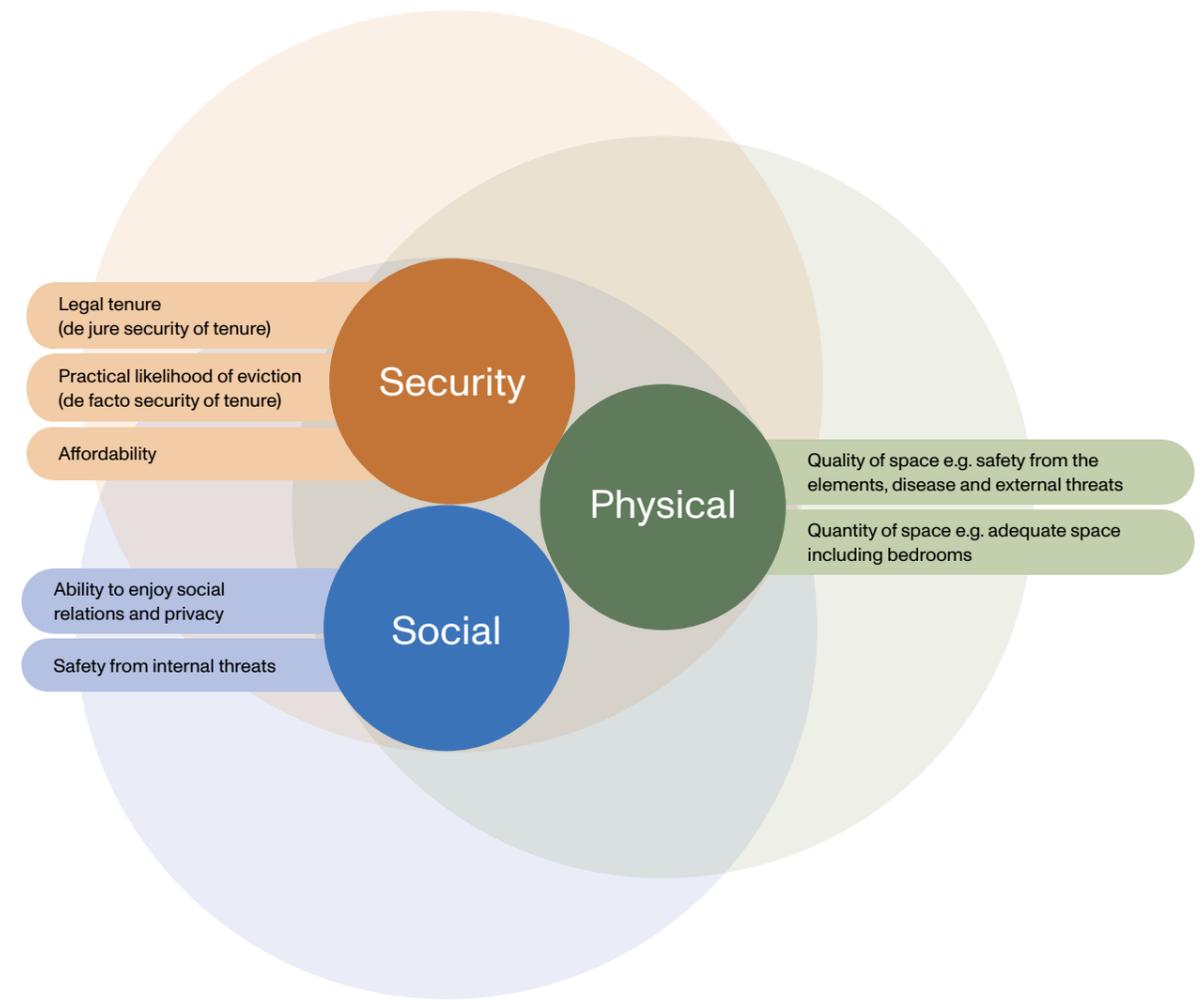


Image 2: The domains and elements of homelessness according to the Global Homelessness Framework⁵

Our analysis of the interview data was also informed by the writings of Paolo Boccagni in his research on migrants and home. Boccagni speaks of 'homing', a relational, appropriative and future-oriented process: a life-long attempt to make oneself at home and bridge the gap between the 'real' and 'ideal' home experience.³⁷

While Boccagni's approach deals with migration broadly and not the specific experience of being forced to leave home, the process of 'homing' is still relevant. A key step in this process is for people seeking asylum in Australia to undergo refugee status determination (RSD) in Australia.

As discussed above, a person's position in the RSD process coupled with their mode of arrival in Australia determines what economic and social rights they are entitled to whilst living in the community. This includes the right to work. In other words, the RSD process and the rights which flow from it, have direct and indirect impacts on a person's housing and homelessness situation, whilst also impacting the person's sense of identity, belonging, and capacity to contribute to society.

These impacts are prominent themes throughout the findings of this report.

Research approach

We conducted this research using a sequential exploratory mixed method design. Housing pathways and experiences of homelessness were explored first using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 14 participants between November 2020 and January 2021. This data was analysed and informed the development of a housing survey. The housing survey was conducted online in March 2021 with 101 participants.

Although the researchers sought feedback on experiences that pre-dated the onset of Covid-19, the timing of the interviews and the online survey a year into the pandemic meant that its impacts featured in various ways across the findings. The researchers also present specific, direct impacts of the pandemic-related policies on the experiences of participants.

For both the interviews and online survey, participants were mainly recruited through the JRS Australia Foodbank service. Recruitment information was also distributed to the Asylum-Seeker Interagency Group in NSW which included key support services in the sector. Recruitment was limited to people who:

- Had sought protection and were negotiating the RSD process, regardless of where in the process their claim was at
- Were not currently receiving any ongoing financial assistance from the Australian Government
- Were living in the greater metropolitan Sydney area.

Interviews

For the qualitative interviews, the researchers screened participants by phone to ensure the sample included people at the primary stage of application for asylum, at the merits review stage and at the 'post-review' stage, aiming for a majority of women participants at each stage. Interviews were offered online or in-person to account for NSW Health restrictions due to Covid-19 and were conducted in English or other preferred languages through the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National.

The researchers asked participants about their housing from the time they arrived in Australia, the challenges they faced, the support they wished they had, and strategies they enacted to create 'home'.

The researchers also asked about the impacts of Covid-19 and of government restrictions on access to housing. Responses were used to form a timeline of housing moves, or pathways, that were then reflected on by the participant. The full list of questions is included as Appendix 1 at the end of this report.

The researchers audio-recorded the interviews (with participants' permission) and transcribed these verbatim. The actual names of participants were replaced with their preferred pseudonym. We reviewed interview transcripts for key homelessness and housing experiences, and the factors associated with housing choices and changes in housing.

We developed a coding framework based on initial notes which included the following categories:

- 1 Homelessness experiences
- 2 Housing experiences
safety, affordability, household arrangements, support to maintain housing
- 3 Looking for housing
support to find housing, suburb/area, housing type
- 4 Structural impacts on housing
RSD, income and employment, Covid-19 impacts, health/disability
- 5 Home
as defined by certainty/security, family, control of space, freedom
- 6 Participants' advice to others
in a similar situation and feedback to organisations

Each interview was then coded using the coding framework and summaries created of the data within each code. These data summaries were shared with the research team and three themes were identified through discussion:

- 1 Housing pathways and experiences of homelessness
- 2 Impact of the RSD process on housing pathways and social exclusion
- 3 Organisational and community responses to homelessness

Survey

The researchers developed an online survey to document the extent of housing challenges experienced by people seeking asylum including associated factors such as employment, financial hardship, health and wellbeing, and social support. Wherever possible, the researchers used questions from existing surveys on homelessness and social exclusion previously conducted with migrant and refugee populations in Australia and the United Kingdom and adapted these for people seeking asylum in Australia.

The survey was developed on the Qualtrics platform and formatted so that it could be completed using a phone, computer, or tablet device. It was designed to be self-completed in either English or Farsi and took approximately 25 minutes to complete. Participants who needed assistance in completing the survey could contact the research team and conduct the survey via telephone with an interpreter.

Recruitment of participants for the online survey was undertaken over a period of three weeks in the same way as for the interviews. A total of 101 valid surveys were completed, including 9 participants who completed the Farsi version of the online survey and 5 participants who completed the survey with the aid of a research interviewer and telephone interpreter speaking Burmese, Bangla, Malayalam and Tamil.

The survey data was analysed descriptively as the purpose of the survey was to generate data on the housing and homelessness experiences and related challenges among people seeking asylum. Comparisons were made between female and male participants and different stages of the RSD process where the sample size allowed. The findings of the housing survey are included in the companion report *A Place to Call Home. A pilot survey of people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney August 2021*¹ and available on the JRS Australia website.

Project oversight

The researchers obtained ethics approval for the research from the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol #H14049).

The role of the Project Advisory Group was to guide the research so that it remained relevant to current contexts and challenges and to disseminate findings and advocate on recommendations. The Advisory Group also assisted with recruitment of participants for the interviews and survey.

Interview findings

Profile of participants

At the time we interviewed participants, most are experiencing a form of homelessness — either in the form of houselessness (in improvised accommodation or temporary accommodation) or housing exclusion in some combination of housing that was insecure, inadequate, unsafe or lacking privacy.

The demographic and housing exclusion profiles of interview participants is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Profile of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Age	Country of Origin	Stage of RSD	Right to Work	Current housing arrangement and income source*	Housing Experience
Cathy	She	32	Sri Lanka	Primary	Y	One bedroom in a 7 bedroom house with 4 men; employed	Housing exclusion (lack in social domain)
Samson	He	40	India	Primary	Y	With their 3 children in one bedroom of a 2 bedroom flat; employed	Housing exclusion (lack in physical and social domains)
Ancy	She	33					
Frida	She	54	Fiji	Primary	Y	In a single room, in community-sector run housing with other women; unemployed	Homeless (Houseless) (lack in security, physical and social domains)
Adam	He	50	Lebanon	Primary	Y	In one bedroom of a 4 bedroom house, with 2 other men and a family of 3; employed	Adequately housed
Annie	She	40	Pakistan	Primary	Y	Sharing with a friend in his 2 bedroom apartment; unemployed	Housing exclusion (lack in security domain)

* if applicable

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Age	Country of Origin	Stage of RSD	Right to Work	Current housing arrangement and income source*	Housing Experience
Abdullah	He	52	Iraq	Post-review	N	In a single room in sector funded housing; unemployed	Homeless (Houseless) (lack in security, physical and social domains)
Hanif	He	50	Pakistan	Post-review	N	In the back room of a 4 bedroom house, with 3–4 other men	Homeless (couch surfing) (lack in security, physical and social domains)
Mariam	She	40	Iran	FDBV	Y	With her partner and children in house; income through husband's employment	Adequately housed
Mansoureh	She	53	Iran	Post-review	Y	With her husband in a 2 bedroom unit; unable to work	Housing exclusion (lack in security domain)
Reza	He	61	Iran	Post-review	N	In a room in a carpark	Homeless (houseless); (lack in security, physical and social domains)
Aalekh	He	19	Sri Lanka	Post-review	Y	In one bedroom of a house owned by his colleague, employed	Adequately housed
Mulathy	She	23	Sri Lanka	Post-review	Y	In one bedroom with her husband and children, in a house shared with another person; income through husband's employment.	Housing exclusion (lack in social domain)
Yesudas	He	57	India	Post-review	N	In the living room of a 2 bedroom flat, with 4 others	Homeless (couch surfing) (lack in security, physical and social domains)

* if applicable

Housing pathways

This section outlines the housing pathways of interview participants upon their arrival in Australia, including the compromises and constraints they faced. The pathways to and experiences of homelessness where participants slept rough, in their cars or in other improvised places are also described.

Housing journeys followed two distinct pathways depending on when and how people arrived in Australia. Participants who arrived in Australia by plane since 2015 (8 participants) initially used savings to stay in temporary holiday accommodation such as Air Bnb or with family/friends, then moved to private accommodation. These private arrangements included formal and informal tenures. Participants generally found accommodation through their own connections including relatives, friends, church groups or acquaintances. Single male participants also found rooms on Gumtree and Facebook. This is in line with experiences of caseworkers at JRS and other organisations in the sector, as well as previous research by the Refugee Council of Australia.³⁸

Those who arrived prior to 2015 (6 participants), particularly those who arrived by sea, were initially detained, then provided temporary accommodation in motels, before finding their own private accommodation.

There were slight differences in the above pathways for some participants. The two young participants that arrived in Australia as adolescents were initially provided housing with their family or in a Government-sponsored group house (for the participant who arrived in Australia on their own as a 13-year-old).

Overall, the housing pathways of single male participants involved a higher frequency of moves than single women participants, couples and families.

Most participants made compromises in one or more domains of home/lessness to stay housed. Predominantly these compromises were in relation to the social domains covering privacy and safety, and the physical domain.

The physical domain of housing featured in some participants' accounts however it rarely precipitated a housing move. It was the main reason for moving for one participant who changed his housing because there were 'bugs itching from the carpet and the owner was not doing professional pest control' and it was affecting his sleep. Accounts of the physical domain of housing were focused on the quantity of space (for example, families not having enough space) and in terms of quality (such as being in old and dilapidated housing, being exposed to mould, or having no hot water).

Inadequacy in the security domain was driven by limited incomes in the context of high general rental unaffordability. According to the 2021 Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot, across Australia 1% of properties were affordable for a single adult working full-time and receiving a minimum wage but none were in Sydney.³⁹ No properties were affordable for someone receiving a JobSeeker Payment. People seeking asylum are not eligible for JobSeeker or other forms of social security, and only around 3% are currently receiving an SRSS payment which is less than the JobSeeker payment, rendering the private rental market totally unaffordable.

In its submission to the recent Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia, the Northern Sydney Housing and Homelessness Collaboration noted the historical factors that have contributed to the lack of affordable housing:

'Over the last 30 years the proportion of Australians who own their own home has declined. House prices have risen sharply while wages have remained stagnant. The ratio of average disposable household income to median house price has increased from just over 4 in 1991 to just over 7 in 2015. As a result, a growing number of households are now renting through the private market. At the same time, the total stock of social housing has declined from over 6 percent of the total stock of housing in 1996 to around 4 percent in 2016.' As a result of these structural drivers, there is a major shortage of housing that is affordable to those on lower incomes. Both the reduction in social housing and lack of affordable housing is a fundamental issue that needs to be tackled in order to successfully prevent homelessness.⁸

Considering the security domain and the elements of de jure versus de facto security, approximately half the research participants had formal tenancy agreements and half had informal arrangements with the property owner. Those with formal agreements such as Samson and Ancy and their family, and Mariam and her family, moved less frequently. Those with informal agreements, for example Abdullah, Reza, Yesudas, and Frida, tended to move more frequently. The kinds of informal arrangements participants spoke about included shared house arrangements with a friend of a friend, or living with family friends or contacts sourced through friends.

Formal tenancy agreements through a real estate agency or with the owner were coincident with securing and maintaining employment or a source of ongoing financial assistance, including through the SRSS program. For example, Samson and Ancy were able to transfer the tenancy agreement for their apartment from their friend's name to their own after securing employment.

Those who had formal tenancy agreements included participants whose children lived with them, and couples, where at least one adult was able to secure employment. Of the participants who had a formal tenancy agreement, all except one had the right to work. Hanif described his interaction with the real estate agent when he found his current house:

“ I have no work rights. When I get the house, I didn't tell him. Then he said 'Now you're showing me, if you tell me before you don't have work rights, I cannot give you the house.' He also truth. ”

Those with informal arrangements noted a flexibility in their payment of rent. For example, when Cathy lost her job during the pandemic she was able to defer her rent payment, as did Yesudas when he could not pay his housemates and had accumulated a debt of \$7,000 in rental arrears.

While most participants did not speak directly about the affordability of housing in Sydney, they indirectly addressed it as they spoke of strategies to make housing more affordable. Participants chose to share housing with others as a deliberate strategy to maintain their housing. Sharing with others conserved their savings, especially when reliant on low or irregular wages. Samson and his wife Ancy found a family to share with through their church and said sharing with another family was a way to save money.

Samson offered his advice:

“ In the beginning don't stay alone, stay with another family to share the rent. If you are ok with your job you can stay alone. ”

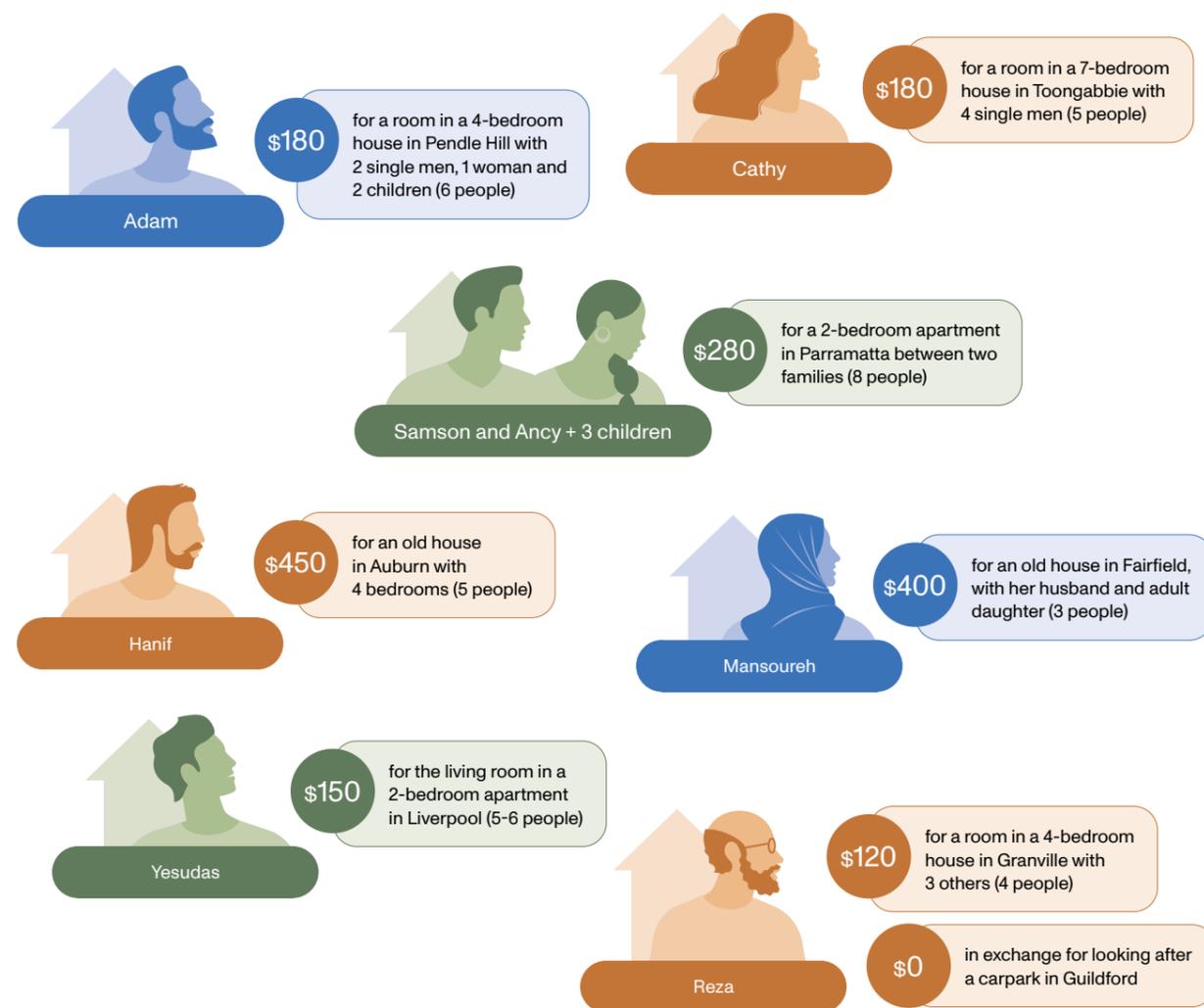


Image 3: Participants' housing arrangements and weekly costs

As the examples above demonstrate, even in situations where participants chose to share, they paid considerable sums of money to maintain their housing. This included situations in which the number of residents was significantly greater than the number of available bedrooms.

These shared housing arrangements had impacts in the social domain. For one participant this involved a sense of discomfort when sharing with others of different cultural backgrounds or constraints on family functioning and social relations. For others, the impacts involved feeling unsafe. This was the main reason that single participants moved to a new house and was evident in the accounts of both women and men but commonly among those that were single.

For women, fear for their safety was generally in relation to experiences of sexual harassment from male residents. All single women participants shared experiences of sexual harassment within their housing situation. Frida lived with extended family in Rooty Hill, rent-free. She was sexually harassed in the house, and her key was taken away, minimising her access to and control of space and causing her to feel even more unsafe. As she did not have an income, Frida was dependent on her hosts, and even in an unsafe situation did not have an alternative. Cathy who shared a seven-bedroom house with four or five men, was harassed by one of the men. She described her experience:

“ He said “Cathy, can I talk to you for a minute?” I was like “What?” And then he said “I have a gold chain...I have a Apple watch, do you want it?” I said, “Why do you want to give me? You give your kids, I already got a watch I don't need your watch.” Then he said “No, no, no, I'm going to give it to you if you if you do whatever I say (sexual), then I'm going to give you that.” So I was pissed off. And I couldn't resist and after that I just blocked his number. ”

After this experience, Cathy said she stopped sharing meals with the men in her house and did not use the shared space as she felt uncomfortable with them 'staring' at her. Even though Cathy wanted to move to a safer situation, she was concerned about whether she would have the same de facto security of tenure, which in her current place, was based on a good relationship with the owner, rather than a formal tenancy agreement. She explained, ‘So my concern, the only concern I have in moving, in case I move, if I lose that job, will the house owner be [as] flexible as him?’ Without secure employment, she found the prospect of securing a tenancy agreement daunting and preferred the security of the 'de facto' tenure she had.

The experiences of Frida and Cathy demonstrate that women seeking asylum find themselves living in close proximity to men within and outside friend and family circles and may be vulnerable to forms of sexual and gender-based or 'domestic' violence from these strangers with whom they are forced to reside, often due to affordability considerations.

This experience of having to compromise on safety because of a lack of income to secure alternative housing was noted by other participants. Annie moved to Sydney from interstate following a threat of being reported to authorities and being asked to perform sexually exploitative work. She said could not find a place to rent on her own in Sydney for six weeks, and as a result was forced to live with a male friend, who was able to get assistance from the NSW Government for housing as he was an Australian citizen.

For men, incursions into their sense of safety at home were in relation to the use of the space by others and the security of their possessions. Abdullah moved into his car when he observed people he lived with in temporary accommodation taking drugs. Adam moved house on two occasions, once as he said his landlord was using his room as a brothel during the day, and on a different occasion when he feared being involved with police as a result of other men in the house selling stolen goods.

Once participants had decided to share, they preferred people of the same cultural background. Men in particular spoke of a preference for this. One participant spoke about his experience of looking for tenants on Facebook:

“ You see I put today for the room, I [was] just asking. And now these people when I see [shows his phone with a photo of a young man], I also cannot take any headache. You see this boys [pointing at his phone], you have to [be] scared right? So that's why I have [to be] very careful. My community people, like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal...I have never mind[ed], anyone can stay — but I prefer them first because I can handle [them] very nicely. ”

Another participant said:

“ I am trustful because same language they are speaking. Because we cannot take another country people, we don't know about them. We don't know their culture, it is different. Even I have 3 daughters, and very difficult to stay with strange people, we don't know what they are doing. So the same culture helps. Same culture, same language better. That is better for sharing. ”

Adam described one experience of living in a five-bedroom house, where each bedroom was shared by two people, ten people sharing the house in total. He described sharing a bedroom:

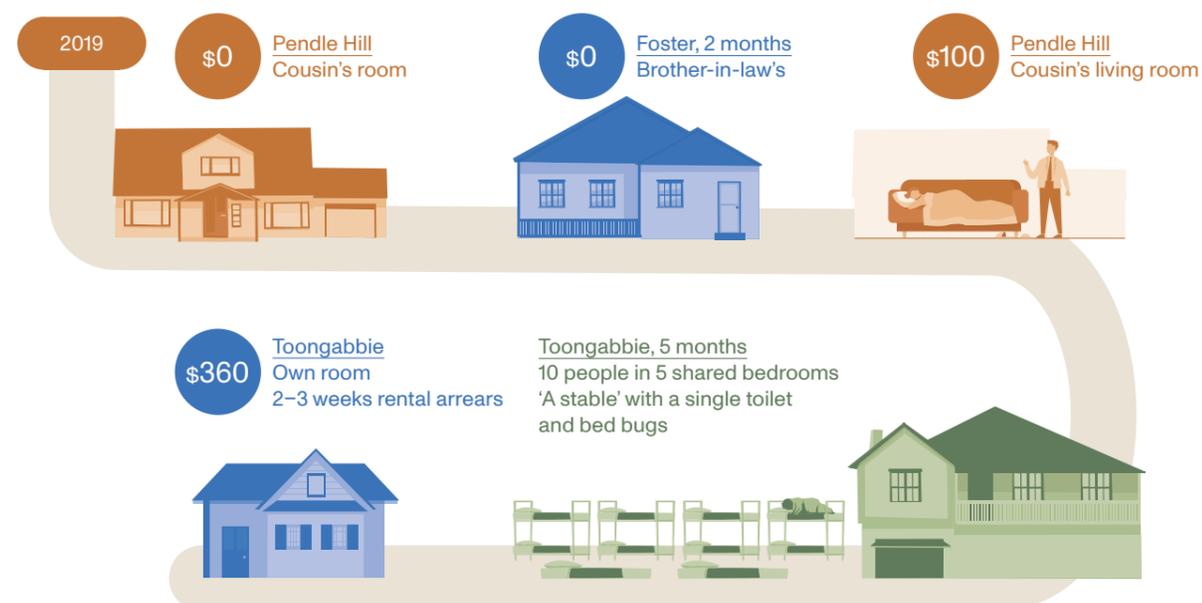
“ It's, it's frustrating, man, ... to share a room with a person you don't know. You are different with him in mentality and race, in language, in like religion and everything. But at the end of the day, you have to put your head and sleep. You are very tired. ”

Adam mentioned that the owner of the house was leasing to another landlord, who he said “gets people like me to [share]ing rooms with others, using people like me.” He referred to the arrangement as ‘a stable, it's a horse stable, it's not a house.”

A few participants, namely Adam above, Cathy, Samson and Mulathy cited the issue of privacy as a cause of concern to them. Samson who lived with Ancy and their three children in one bedroom, and shared their flat with another family, mentioned the couple's lack of privacy as a challenge. Participants with children also noted the lack of freedom for their children: Samson said his children were told off by the other family for opening the door each time they came and went, and were unable to play as they wished. Another participant who lived with her husband and two small children in a three bedroom house said she felt sad when their other housemate asked her son not to draw on the wall.

She said, “So if it's my own house with my son drawing or something we can paint it and give it, you know, when we leave. So you see that ‘don't do that, don't do this’ are the worst. I don't feel comfortable so I keep telling my husband, like getting a good job and we can move to a new house.”

Case Study: Adam, M, 50, Lebanon, primary stage



Experiences of 'home' and homelessness

Home was consistently referenced in terms of security as a result of the ability to afford the accommodation the person was residing in. For example, in answer to what made him feel comfortable or 'at home', one participant said, 'When I know that my rent is paid for the next two weeks. Yeah, I feel comfortable, yeah.' Home was also a base from which financial security could be achieved as Cathy explained, “that's the first thing, of course when you are, you know financially secure, you can. But if you don't have [a] place to stay, you can't even find a job.”

Beyond financial security, home encapsulated the freedom to be oneself, as described by one female participant:

“ Free to cook, free to... what else shall I say? Umm free, to, you know anything, everything that I feel right now, to do anything I say. What I like, I want to do it, what I don't like, I don't want to do it. ”

Home was understood as the freedom to be oneself and was linked to the functionality of a house and to privacy or quietness. For example, one participant expressed this as follows, “I would love a nice place with a family — I'm not sure with a family or...like a nice house with quite a big spacious house, where I can use a good, clean kitchen or washroom or something.” She refined this further to say, that she would like a peaceful, calm place with no noise where she could use the whole house (free access to space/privacy), with a place to work (adequate space) and where she can have the freedom to do what she wants (privacy).

Participants with children wanted this freedom (adequate space and privacy) primarily for their children. One participant said that she wanted to change her house as the house had a pool, and her younger son was traumatised when he fell into the ocean while travelling to Australia. Another said she would like a television in the future for the children to be entertained by. For another participant, a home would be a place with privacy where the kids could play freely.

For participants at the post-review stage, home was defined in terms of feeling settled and this seemed out of reach without recognition of refugee status and the certainty that arises from such status. For example, one participant said “A house on the beach! I just want to settle on the beach, a house doesn't mean anything if I'm not settled.”

Other participants described how a lack of certainty regarding a visa threatened their ability to remain together as a family and thus home became irrelevant. One participant described the anguish this caused:

“ Nothing is in my hand, I cannot think what is next. If I like you, you have a status, you have a next. I don't know what is next tomorrow with me — I have a roof or not, so I cannot make plan what is next. If I think about the hope or what's the next tomorrow, it makes me think, you have nothing, then you go back to depression or panic. ”

The certainty that comes with being recognised as a refugee and granted a protection visa underpinned the security domain because it enables the unrestricted right to work and easier access to ongoing income, which in turn heightens prospects for secure housing.

Experiences of being without shelter were rare. Participants in this category were typically single men at the post-review stage, with no children or not living with their children, and all of whom were without the right to work. Only one female participant, Annie, had experienced sleeping rough, and this was for one night on the street, after moving interstate to Sydney.

For the three male participants who spent more than one night without shelter, the experience was coupled with significant crises. These crises were coincident with being at the post-review stage in the RSD, and not having the right to work. Abdullah was living in his brother's house waiting for a court review of decisions on the merits of his claim when the Covid-19 lockdown precipitated tensions in their relationship. As a result of these tensions, he moved into his car and then slept rough on the street, and then went to a hospital.

“ I slept in my car for one week, after that my friends loaned me some money. After that they stopped giving me money so I couldn't afford to pay the rent. And then after that I had to go back to my car for two months. ”

Hanif experienced panic attacks, worrying he might have to leave his daughter behind in Australia if he received another negative RSD outcome. Hanif had been in Australia with his wife on her partner visa. When the relationship broke down, his wife cancelled his visa and he faced a return to Pakistan without his daughter. He then applied for protection, to avoid having to leave his daughter.

The panic attacks he experienced led to him being hospitalised. As a result, Hanif was unable to clean his house and cook for the tenants living with him, which led to the breakdown of his housing arrangement — “Every time — once a month, 3 time I go to emergency. The boys also ran away from there, so I’m alone.”

Hanif then moved into his car because there was no other accommodation — “I parking the car in park area and I just live inside. I go to Parramatta Mission, I go to Refugee Health Centre in Newtown, I go to Liverpool — nobody help me, they say we can’t do accommodation, it’s very hard. We have no space...”

Hanif’s experience of sleeping in his car compounded his anxieties. Below he describes an encounter with a police officer.

“Until the rego finish, then the cop coming. Cop asked me, ‘You cannot stay in the car.’ I said, ‘Where I should I go?’ [they replied] ‘We don’t know, but you’re not able to stay in a car. Then I phoned the Salvation Army — he [the cop] said, ‘Ask them where you go.’ I then cannot do the argument with the cop.”

Resolution of ‘rooflessness’ was not straightforward and some participants remained in temporary or improvised accommodation at the time of being interviewed. Reza was temporarily housed in shelters in the city prior to moving into a Tiny House* for a month. He later befriended a carpark owner who authorised him to live there and look after it.

After sleeping in his car for six to eight weeks, Hanif received a bond deposit to rent a house, through a donor he was put in touch with by the St. Francis Social Services House of Welcome. The donor and her church provided the bond for a private rental. Hanif then covered the rent through finding tenants to share the house, and them covering his part of the rent in exchange for him cleaning and cooking.

Abdullah was housed in accommodation with support from the Australian Red Cross. It was not clear if housing support was a result of emergency financial assistance such as SRSS during this crisis or as a result of emergency accommodation made accessible by the NSW Government during the pandemic to people seeking asylum who are generally ineligible for Government-funded housing services.⁸

Annie was able to temporarily stay with her male friend Abe, who was living in NSW social housing property. They became a couple and then moved together to a private rental which they secured using his income as evidence of financial independence.

Generally, situations of homelessness (including sleeping rough, in cars or in other improvised dwellings) experienced by people seeking asylum could not be systematically solved. Solutions were a result of good fortune, donors and in some cases resulted in a dependency on others. None of the solutions found by participants were guaranteed long-term security as they either did not include financial security or formal tenure.

Impact of the RSD process on housing pathways

The RSD process primarily impacted the housing pathways of participants via the security domain, which includes affordability. A person’s position in the RSD process is a key determinant of whether they are accorded the right to work legally in Australia. Moreover, even with work rights, people seeking asylum experience significant and complex disadvantages in the labour market, in part tied to employers’ lack of recognition of short-term bridging visas. The majority of those who are demonstrably unable to find work or cannot work due to mental or physical ill-health, disabilities or carer responsibilities are denied access to ongoing financial assistance, including through the SRSS program.

The unpredictable and protracted nature of the RSD process lengthens the amount of time that people seeking asylum remain in situations of uncertainty and financial insecurity.

Finally, losing ongoing financial assistance through SRSS after a negative RSD, and the extended periods of dependence on charity also have a demoralising impact on the mental and emotional health of people seeking asylum.

The right to work is conferred by visa conditions that are determined by the stage of the RSD, as well as details such as visa expiration. In some cases, participants had a visa to remain legally in Australia but did not have the right to work and were not receiving income support. In other cases, participants had the right to work but were unable to work for reasons of chronic ill health or carer responsibilities and some of these participants had also lost their income support once they were at the post-review stage.

Despite being willing to work, Hanif had no work rights. He explained:

“I can do the work, whatever — end of [the day] you have no rights to do anything. Only you have a right to sleep.”

Hanif mentioned the general lack of awareness and experience in the community about the existence of people like him, and his experiences of not having the right to work. In response to his requests for support with housing or other material support, he said of people in the community:

“They say, ‘How can you [have] no work rights? If you [have] no work, how [are you] to eat, who give you the food?’ They laugh like this. Some people don’t believe even. ‘Please help I have no work [right].’ They say ‘Impossible. They ask you to stay Australia, but they said don’t work, so they supply you food? They expenses all?’”

The right to work and securing employment

Over the course of their RSD process, participants moved between different income positions:

- 1 Having no right to work or being unable to work, sometimes without access to income support
- AND
- 2 Having the right to work but having difficulty securing adequate work.

* Defined by the Australian Tiny House Association as a dwelling that is moveable, up to 50 metres squared and suitable for residential use.

The lack of a legal right to work, or the lack of income support for people unable to work due to ill health or carer responsibilities created housing insecurity that in at least three out of four cases led to homelessness in the form of rooflessness.

Among participants who had the right to work, all spoke of the difficulty of finding work. The right to work did not equate to having a job. As Cathy said,

“ Even though you have work rights, what's the whole point, so difficult to get the job. You have unlimited work rights — you can work, where's the job? When I came I was applying for a lot of places, I didn't get work at all. Like, I didn't even be asked to come for interviews, I apply sometimes 24/7 because I just want to find a job its so important, I tried apply apply apply and never got. ”

Sometimes participants were excluded from applying for jobs because of their non-resident status. Cathy described this as being a common occurrence for her. She noted “Some interviews I've been... they say its only for people with PR [permanent resident] or citizenship. That's the most of the places.” Another participant, Adam, talked about being denied work opportunities as a migrant. He described how an employer who was initially enthusiastic changed their mind after speaking with him on the phone because they realised he ‘was not Australian.’

Adam further explained that his brother-in law had encouraged him to say he was French or Spanish, instead of Middle Eastern, to avoid being discriminated against when applying for jobs.

Other participants described being exploited by being offered lower wages because of their visa status. In Cathy's experience, local businesses in her area where there were a high number of people seeking asylum on bridging visas, were aware of people's struggle to find work and took advantage of this. She said,

“ Even these people — Toongabbie, Pendle Hill or whatever there are shops, they know that you don't have [rights], its very difficult and they'll try and take you for underpay. I said no, I've refused so many times, because they use people and we don't have to let them use us. ”

Adam noted how this discrimination directly impacted the affordability of housing, saying,

“ You cannot afford because your wages is so low. You are getting used...because you are a refugee... you are getting used...you are not born in this country. You are not Australian... He cannot, he cannot pay you \$150 if you are Australian. He gonna pay you \$250 and \$300. If you look — at all the issues...They are racist, racism in, in every point you got it. ”

Other difficulties encountered by participants were related to job skills training and recognition of qualifications. For example, some participants spoke of the prohibitive costs of licensing to be able to practice in their professional field. Mariam described how her husband was unable to practise as an engineer or electrician because they couldn't afford to pay fees to obtain the licence. Similarly, Annie explained the impact of not being able to afford fees to register as a medical practitioner. She described how being unable to work in her profession meant she was reliant on a friend for housing and that it constrained her quality of life:

“ A detention in the house which you say is the house arrest. When you are not allowed to work in your own field respectively. ”

Several participants undertook training with the hope of finding work. One participant visited the Sydney Job Fair as part of her search for work. There, the Australian Retail Association told her about a government subsidised Certificate II in Retail, which she completed. She said,

“ I did my work placement at Coles Blacktown for two weeks and then I thought they would hire me, I did my extreme good job but they didn't offer a job — none, none, none of them got from the ARA. ”

Another participant received conflicting messages about her eligibility for Jobactive employment services providers. She said, ‘Even I wanted to register with the Centrelink just to get the job — you know not the money, they refused. But when you go to Salvation Army, all those places they help people to find job...they say you have to register through Centrelink. When you go to Centrelink they say no we can't register you. But they [Salvation Army] say no you have to come through Centrelink. If you go there, just give us a call. I don't know how is that practical — going there and giving a call.’

In some cases where participants did have the right to work, the impact of prior immigration detention as a part of the RSD, continued to limit their ability to work and generate income.

There is a long and well-understood literature about the negative health impacts of prolonged immigration detention.

Studies indicate that the harm caused by prolonged detention continues to affect people once they are in the community. People who experience negative mental health effects as a consequence of detention frequently continue to suffer a sense of powerlessness and compromised self-esteem beyond the period of detention.⁴⁰

For example, Mariam spoke of the impact of detention on her mental health, saying,

“ I'm thinking I need [to keep] my mind busy, I need work because I don't like my now Mariam [I don't like myself now or I am not myself] because before I was very, very happy person, and now...I am very depressed. ”

Some participants who had experienced prior immigration detention were dependent entirely on others, including their partners, friends, community members or adult children for their income. As a result of not having an income, these participants were only able to secure housing with outside assistance.

Image 4: Housing pathways of participants

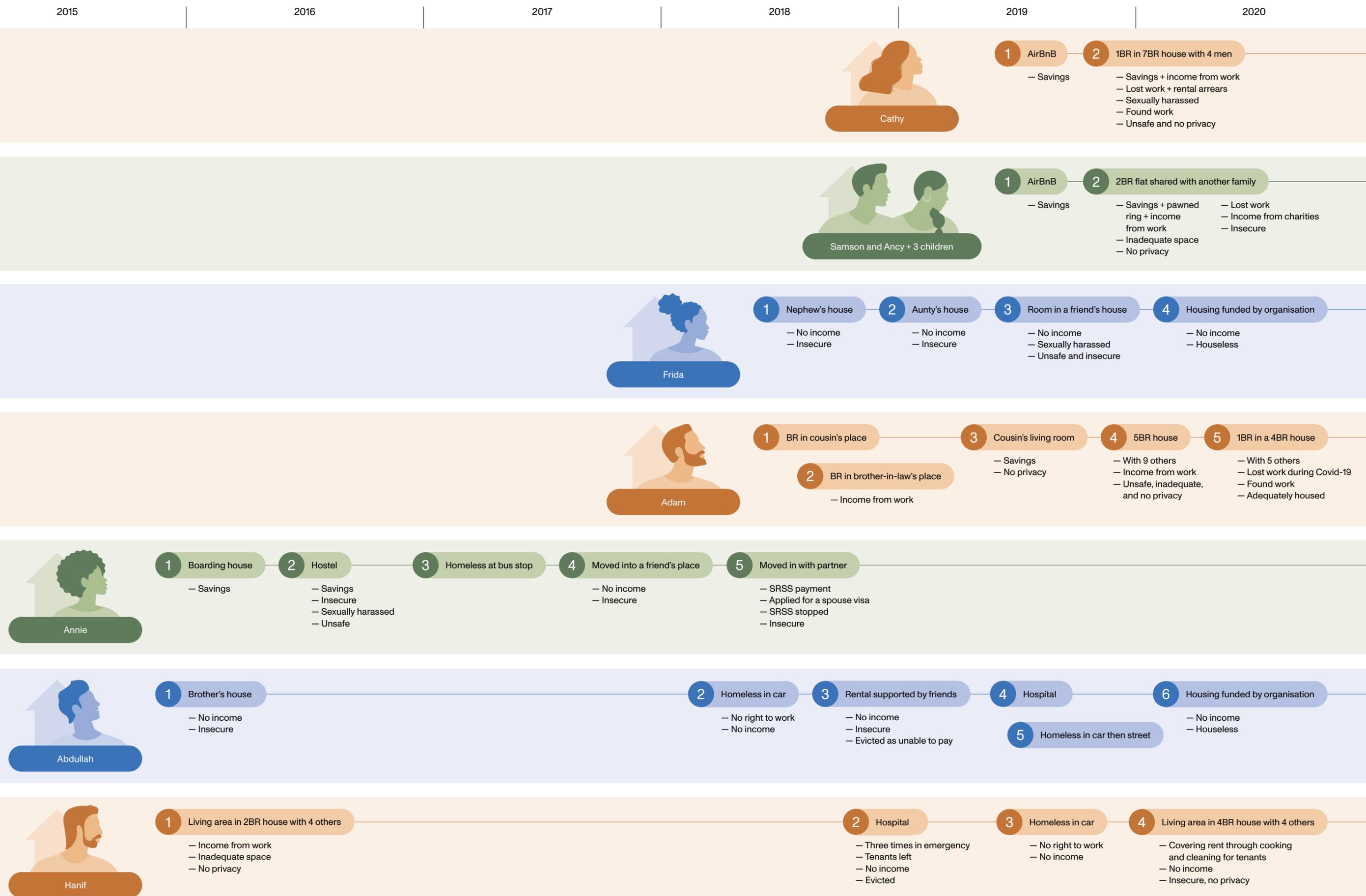
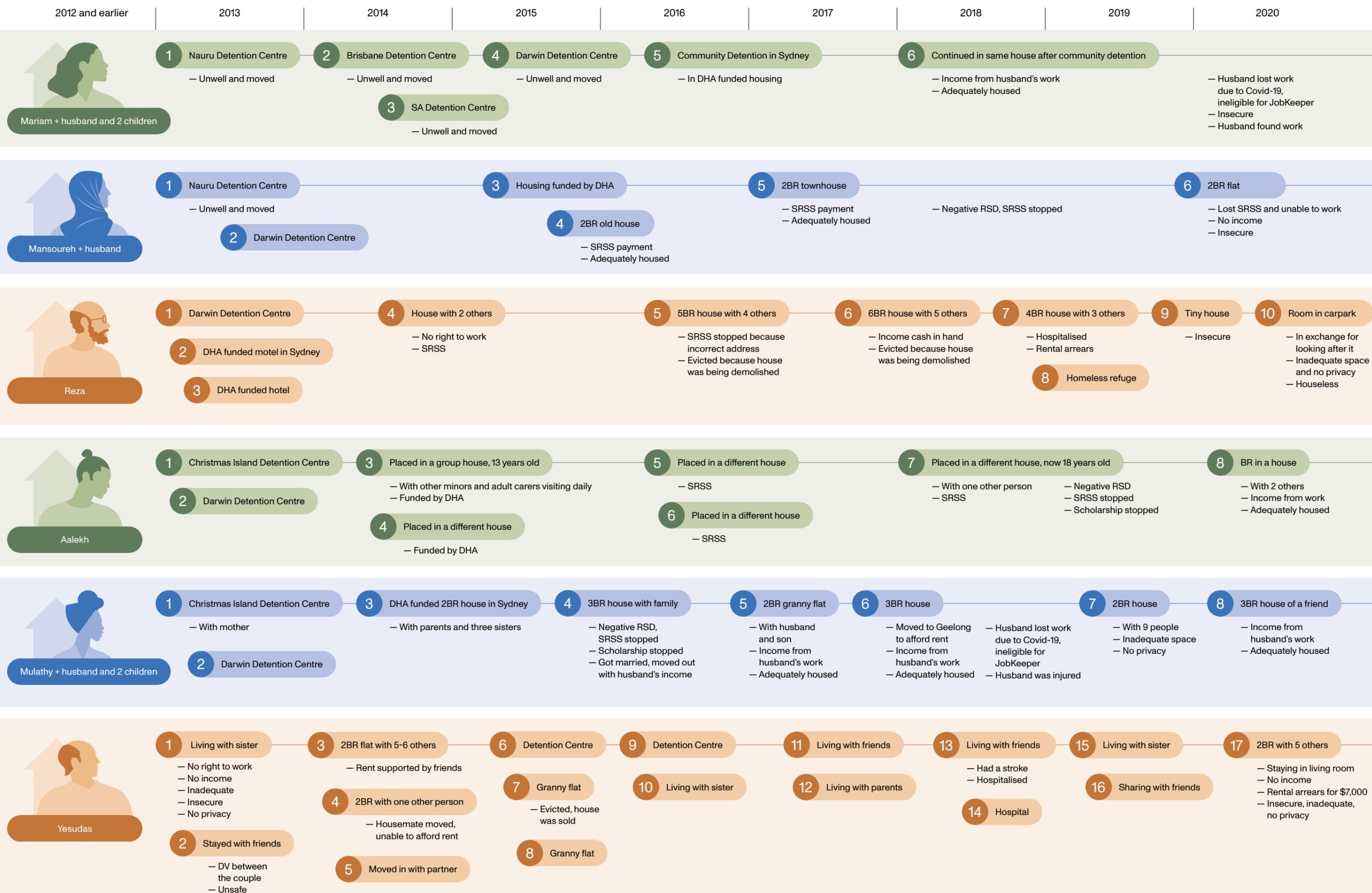


Image 4: Housing pathways of participants



Negative impacts arising from a lack of sustainable income

The protracted duration of the RSD process, during which participants were also denied fundamental economic and social rights pertaining to work and welfare had the greatest impact on housing of participants at the post-review stage. These participants spoke strongly about the desire to work, about work as a natural part of life. Hanif said, *'You see you live everywhere, You have to pay \$450 or \$400 or \$300. This stability coming with the work, if I have a health, I have a work, I have to pay nicely.'*

Participants who could not work or did not have the right to work, wanted to be able to work, rather than be dependent on organisations. Abdullah said, *'The best thing is the help of the organisation, they gave me money and food. But I don't want this, I want to work.'* Yesudas had not had work rights since the time he had applied for protection, many years ago. After years of being unable to work, he was demoralised by the continuous need to ask for charity and support, and said, *'My situation has put me into a place where I cannot stop asking.'*

Those who were at the post-review stage felt debilitated without the right to work. When interviewed, Hanif said that his long hair was not a fashion statement but the result of not being able to afford to cut his hair. As a result of looking this way he felt embarrassed to meet his daughter. He explained that having to survive without the right to work, the ability to generate income, and support himself, caused him ill health. He explained, *'Depression, panic, heart — I don't know tomorrow what happens. Here also I'm slowly slowly dying. Better I have a threat, [if] they want, they kill me. Here, whatever I have the reason, protection, they not listen — they [say] stay, but without work.'* As noted previously, it was a health crisis related to the outcome of his RSD that triggered a period of rooflessness for this participant.

Participants described the humiliation of having to continually ask for food and money from others. Hanif said, *'You know how embarrass[ing it is] when you go and stand and take the food for charity, and when you [are] healthy, you can do anything, and you[re] standing in the queue for charity food. You feel good? You feel bad, you feel embarrassed.'* He explained his dependence as a sanctioning of begging, *'It's very embarrassing, because you have no work rights, they [approve] to begging. Now I've come here, go to the JRS, go to St Vinnies, now two days I didn't [have medicine].'*

Yesudas said he felt embarrassed about his asylum-seeking status and said *'I made a choice not to tell everyone my circumstances as I see what happens to people like us. Either we are abused, misused, and you are looked down upon which is an additional stress that I don't want to take.'*

While men ostensibly felt shame at their dependence on others, women at the post-review stage expressed frustration and anger. Mansoureh said, *'For the rent, it is really infuriating me to get \$50 from this and \$20 from that, my son is paying \$100 sometimes, \$150, because he has his own life and he cannot afford more.'*

Participants recalled the distress of finding out their SRSS payment was being stopped and the difficulties that followed. Mansoureh said:

“ I never forget this day that the case manager called me and told me, “Tomorrow I am no longer your case manager and your money is going to be stopped”. I said, I am very sick, and my husband is very sick, but he said “That is your business — we don't know, that's your problem, you have to deal with it”. And then we didn't have any money to pay. ”

She went on to say a friend recommended that they move to a smaller place so they would pay less rent. However, as they were unable to work due to their health, they had no security of income and still struggled with their rent payments. Aalekh, a young participant who had recently begun his studies at university, was told that, as his application for asylum was rejected and was at the stage of judicial review, he would no longer receive the SRSS payment. He explained:

“ Now I'm just trying to find work and pay my rent. And in my stay in Australia this was the most difficult part where I had to move out of the government housing and find my own housing, find employment and such, especially when you had no savings and not receiving Centrelink [SRSS]. ”

Mansoureh and her husband, who had exhausted their avenues within the RSD process in Australia, and who could not work due to their ill health, said, *'At the moment, because we don't have any income, it is torturous. The house in Fairfield, it is right that it was really demolishable — but because we were receiving some sort of income, we could pay the rent — that was good — but here we are having a lot of difficulty.'* Financial security was more important than the physical adequacy of housing, particularly for those who had no right to work or were unable to work and had no access to income support. Mansoureh was receiving support from her daughter's church, and said: *'The church is giving us Coles cards and I sell a \$50 dollar card to a friend for \$40 [cash] so I can put it on the top of the rent.'*

This open and honest declaration was one of the clearest depictions of the desperation of participants at the post-review stage. The line between support and exploitation sometimes blurred, especially when support may have come from friends and community members who themselves were financially insecure.

Finding a place to live without income

Participants at the post-review stage responded to the challenge of finding housing in innovative ways, given they could not legally work, or in some cases were not able to work for reasons of chronic ill-health. All post-review participants relied partially or fully on family, friends, or community members for financial support. Most of the participants who secured private rental accommodation did so because of a support network comprising family and friends, charitable organisations and the community, as well as good relationships with rental providers (landlords and owners). The latter were also key to maintaining housing in the post-review stage.

One participant and her family who were previously in community detention in Sydney were able to remain in the same house that DHA had provided, *'because the owner told us you are a good person, and your house is clean, we got a house from the immigration and with the house until now.'* Mansoureh said, *'We were waiting and waiting until one of our relative — who was living in a very, very old and really nearly demolishing place, they spoke to the landlord and they said "We know these people..."'*

Reza spoke of the relationship he built with the owner of one of the properties he was sharing with several other men from his country of origin, and said:

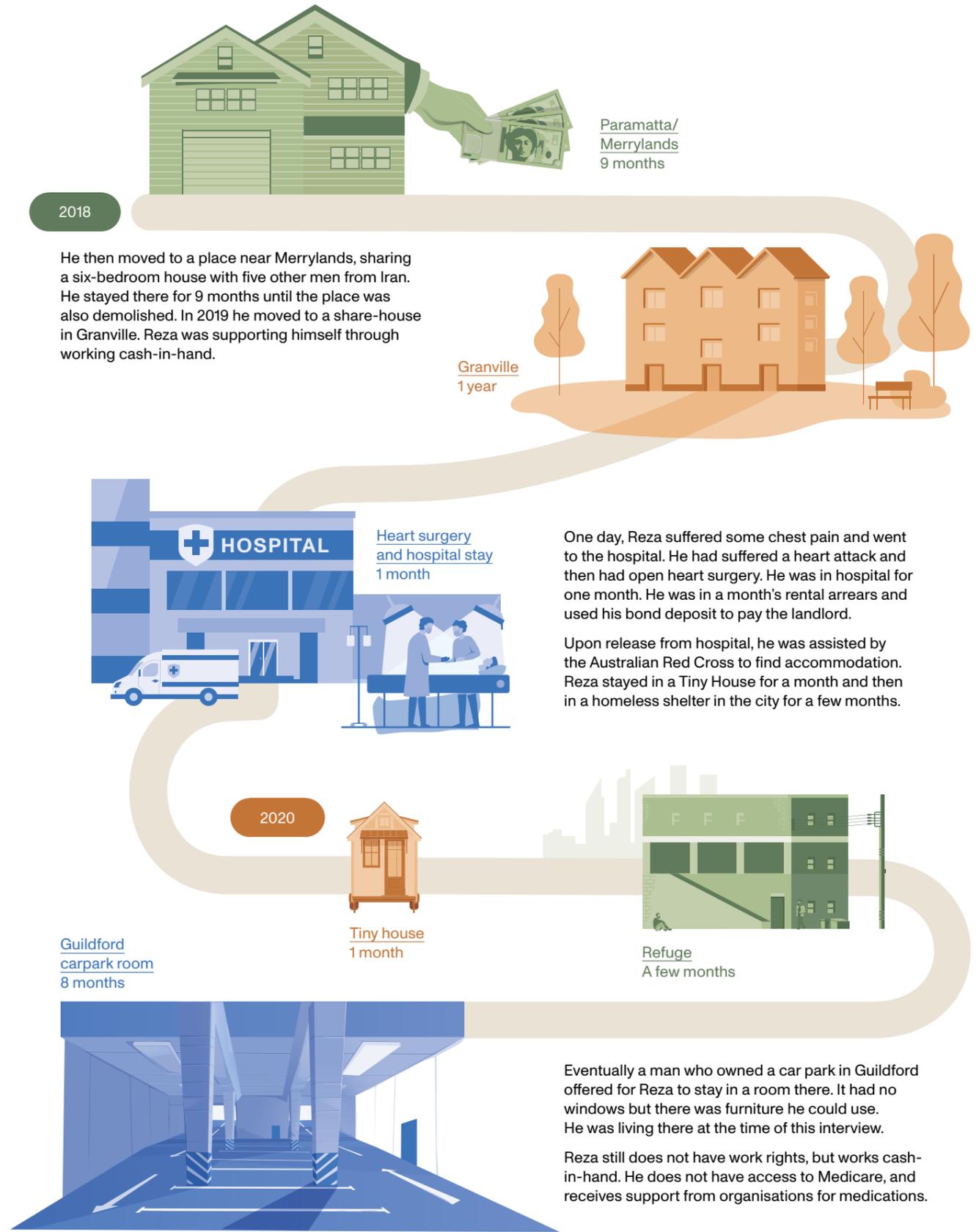
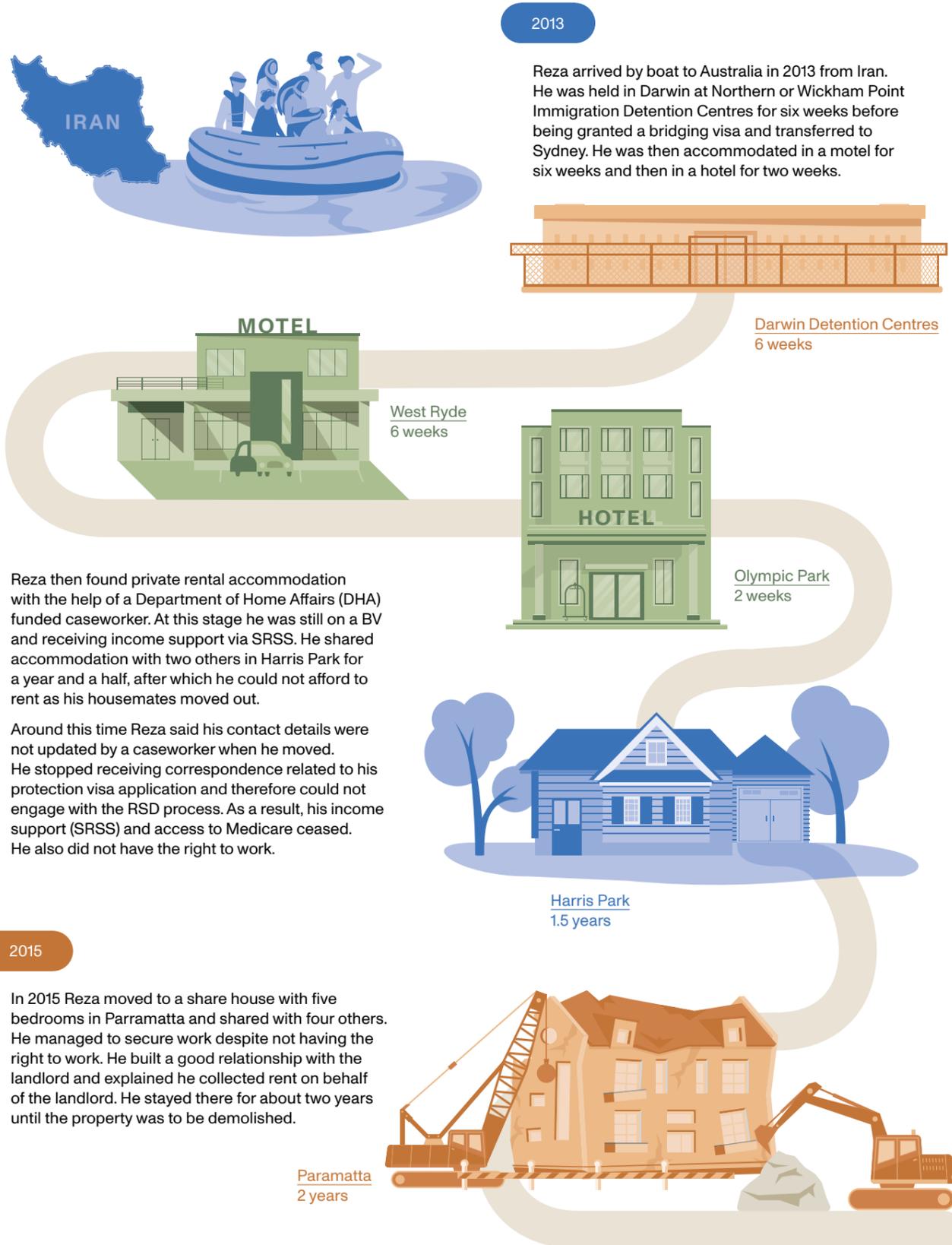
“ The owner of the place really liked me, and said I was a good tenant, and he said “When I go overseas, I want you to be in charge of this place, call people and take the rent and when I come back I will take the rent from you.” I was sort of like the manager of the building. ”

Some of the single, male participants used their housing to generate enough income to cover their own rent. Without the capacity to work and generate income legally, Hanif used his skills in catering to cook, clean and manage his housing arrangement sharing with three to four others, typically international students whose payments would cover his lodging cost.

“ It's quite big, 4 rooms...and I have one room behind. I am staying there and front I just keep the boys, I cook for them and clean for them. I just collect the money and pay to the estate agent, I stay free. ”

This arrangement fell through when Australian borders closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic. Without the income from the international student tenants, Hanif was unable to pay the rent. Without the legal right to work, he was unable to show any payslips to apply for another place. Hanif subsequently lost his bond after accruing six weeks in rental arrears.

Case Study: Reza, M, 61, Iran, post-review



Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on housing exclusions and homelessness

All participants that had work prior to March 2020 either lost their jobs completely or had their hours reduced following the pandemic. Between March and May 2020, 47% of people who had found employment through JRS Australia's employment program in the previous two years lost jobs or a significant proportion of their hours as casual employees.¹² People seeking asylum were excluded from the JobKeeper subsidy, meaning that they were often among the first to be let go and the last to be re-employed.⁷

The impact of restrictions during the pandemic affected the housing and homelessness circumstances of participants in two ways. First, participants lost hours of work or jobs altogether, creating further financial insecurity, as described in Hanif's situation. Second, tensions arose because participants spent more time in properties together.

Some participants expressed that the Federal Government's decision to exclude them from pandemic-related financial assistance packages for those who lost employment was unfair. Samson said,

“ We also have working rights. We also paying the tax. Why they not giving any benefit from Centrelink. That is my question. Need to see people everybody same. Everybody human being, everybody have same blood. ”

As a result of losing income, participants fell into rental arrears, suffered mental health crises, and were not able to find adequate housing at this time. Cathy who lost work, was forced to spend more time at home. She felt the increased time at home during the pandemic contributed to the sexual harassment she experienced from a house mate. While Cathy was able to secure a rent deferment, Adam was denied a rent reduction and Annie was evicted, despite the moratorium on evictions being in place.

Some participants who were at the post-review stage expressed the additional challenges of losing the SRSS financial assistance at this time following a negative decision on their protection claims. While they had the right to work, it was difficult to look for and find work at this time. Sources of community support that they previously depended on also became less accessible due to mobility restrictions, and also due to the loss of their own work and sources of income.

Table 3: Participants housing experiences following Covid-19 restrictions

The table below describes participants experiences following Covid-19 restrictions. These impacts concerned employment, study, income, mental health and ultimately affected housing arrangements and housing security.

Pseudonym	Stage of RSD	Right to Work	Effects of Covid-19 Restrictions	Housing Exclusion
Cathy	Primary	Y	Lost work, increased time at home, sexual harassment inside house (noted as a result of restrictions), Maintained housing, five months rental arrears, unsafe, lacking privacy.	Increased (crisis then stabilised)
Samson Ancy	Primary	Y	Reduced work and income, hospitalised due to mental illness, struggled to pay rent, received payments from organisations for rent, applied for reduced electricity bills. Maintained housing.	Increased (crisis then stabilised)
Frida	Primary	Y	Study moved online, unable to afford internet so stopped study, increased time at home, sexual harassment inside home. In temporary accommodation funded by organisation – houseless.	Increased
Adam	Primary	Y	Lost work, unable to visit friends and worship so used videocall. Requested rent reduction, denied. Found work. Maintained housing 2-3 weeks rental arrears.	Overall no change
Annie	Primary	Y	Lost work, increased time at home (with mould in room), complained to agent about mould and water bill, evicted. Found another place to live.	Overall no change
Abdullah	Post-review	N	Increased time at home, conflict with brother, slept in car, slept on street, then hospitalised. In temporary accommodation through organisation – houseless.	Increased (crisis then stabilised)
Hanif	Post-review	N	Lost rental income due to border closure, received rent reduction, unable to pay rent, faced eviction. Received a one-off payment from organisation to remain in housing. Experiencing housing exclusion, struggling to pay rent, 6 weeks rental arrears.	Increased
Mariam	FDBV	Y	Reduced income due to husband not finding work, difficulty paying rent, received help from friends. Maintained housing.	Overall no change
Mansoureh	Post-review	Y	Negative RSD outcome, SRSS cut. Reduced financial support from son as he lost work, supported by children and community. No income, struggling to pay rent.	Increased
Reza	Post-review	N	Reduced work and reduced income, maintained housing – houseless.	Overall no change
Aalekh	Post-review	Y	Negative RSD outcome, SRSS cut. Difficulties looking for work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Found work and secured shared housing.	Overall no change (crisis, then stabilised)
Mulathy	Post-review	Y	Husband lost work as result of Covid-19, ineligible for Jobseeker, evicted, moved in with parents (9 people in a 2-bedroom house), experienced tensions. Found work, secured housing.	Increased
Yesudas	Post-review	N	Less community support due to restrictions, deteriorating mental health. Maintained housing, \$7,000 rental arrears.	Increased (crisis then stabilised)

Community and organisational responses to housing exclusion

Family members, friends, communities of faith and NGOs such as JRS Australia and House of Welcome often provided one-off or ongoing financial support towards housing. A number of participants were provided ongoing temporary housing through charitable organisations. Friends also provided financial advice relating to finding cheaper housing. Communities of faith, medical professionals and organisations provided emotional support and support for physical wellbeing.

A number of participants shared that family and friends provided regular or occasional financial support to meet daily expenses. For example, one participant received regular payments for her Opal transport card and phone from her aunt. Another participant described how she woke up one morning to find \$500 in her bank account. Friends of the participant deposited a payment into her account because they were aware she and her husband were struggling financially without work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some participants received limited financial support that directly contributed to their rent. One participant relied on small, ad hoc amounts from friends and family to pay rent. He said 'I kept moving from place to place. Then, one particular point of time all of them decided okay, because most of them were married who took me in, they were more worried about their family and their kids and all that. And me as a single man going around, so what they did was some couple of them joined and tried to help me out to stay by myself.' Another participant also said his friends pooled money to help him with rent so he did not have to sleep in his car. However, as he did not have the right to work, he was not able to sustain rent payments, and went back to sleeping in his car after six weeks.

Communities of faith at churches and mosques were described as providing spiritual strength to participants rather than contributing directly to housing or providing other forms of tangible support. One participant noted that people at his church were occupied with their own lives and thus did not provide any financial support.

This same participant spoke about the value of going to church as a support for his emotional wellbeing:

“ Church means we are going to pray then we have some peace of mind, we can meet some people there, we can talk about our problems, we can share something. From church financially, we are not getting anything but we are ok. At least we can talk to the people, like that. ”

Acting on advice from family and friends was also evident in the participants' accounts, as described previously with respect to housing choices and living arrangements designed to make housing more affordable.

Participants appreciated the financial support provided by organisations such as the Asylum Seeker Centre and JRS Australia and the House of Welcome. One participant explained that part of the reason why this support was valuable was the fact that it was provided without judgement:

“ But you see who help me here? My god, my Allah, and ...like House of Welcome, JRS, they helping to people, without [asking] who are you. This I love to appreciate it to this organisation. They just see you are human being, you have two legs, two eyes. So, they just help for the person. ”

Several participants noted that they preferred to receive contributions towards rent payments over other material support like food. Paying rent was described by participants as the most difficult part about surviving. Samson said he would like organisations to support them with that until they got work. He said,

“ We can live, without drinking water, without food, we can live. Because we can just sleep and live. But without paying rent, no. ”

Mansoureh said:

“ Helping with rent, that is really what we need... because with food you can fill your tummy anyhow with whatever — it is not the issue as being humiliated to go to people and beg for money to pay rent. ”

Feedback on accommodation options in exchange for work

None of the participants we spoke to had heard of Workaway* or The Room Exchange** as housing options in exchange for work. Overall, most single male participants thought these arrangements could be suitable for them whereas participants who were in a couple or had a family felt such arrangements would be unsuitable. For example, a female participant felt the option was suitable as a short-term solution but not long term, as her aim was to earn money and rent her own place and for her children to live with her.

Some people at the post-review stage were interested in these accommodation options but as the exchange of labour for accommodation would be considered work they would not be able to legally take up the opportunity.⁴ However, one young man noted that the situation did not offer freedom and an overall progression towards an individual's goal, saying:

“ 75% of their work is kind of wasted. Obviously in terms of not having anything it can be really helpful in terms of a temporary stay. I think it would be amazing in terms of an experience and such. But in terms of long-term, they may want to pursue their education or they want to do certain things and if they are not able to because of that it is very difficult, right? I feel like each individual has their own life so I just don't think anybody's home should be according to somebody else's timeline unless, like, they want it to be. ”

His framing notes that the housing in this case has limited security of tenure and of income as the work and housing would be determined by someone else.

Another female participant was fearful about the accommodation being far away and in a new place and possibly interfering with commitments of her job. Another participant said her daughter had told her about something similar posted in a Persian community Facebook page, however the options were not suitable for her as she could not work due to her health concerns.

Participants expressed a desire for organisations to support people with rent while they were unable to work — whether this was due to a lack of work rights or because ill-health or other circumstances prevented them from working. Assisting with rent was described by one person as a means of preserving dignity because it eliminated the need for begging. One participant went on to suggest that people might be able to pay back organisations such as JRS Australia and the House of Welcome once they were employed:

“ After getting the job, with their income they can help maybe one month — this month I can give to House of Welcome \$500 for helping poor people — like that. It is like that, give and take. ”

Other participants discussed the support with information provided by organisations like JRS Australia. Yesudas who was at the post-review stage and had been involved with the RSD process for many years, suggested organisations supporting people seeking asylum provide clear information about what the government offered and what NGOs could do. His primary concern was getting the right legal advice, aside from knowledge about navigating material and other support services. He said, 'First of all, they should know which door to knock first and make sure you are doing the right thing. Sometimes you get the wrong legal advice.'

A young participant whose application had recently moved to the post-review stage described how a lack of information about the RSD meant his life was lived 'according to someone else's timeline'. He explained how as an adolescent he would have liked some assistance in navigating the complexity and uncertainty of the RSD process:

“ There's always assistance in providing equipment and things. I feel like the things that mainly affect people like us are uncertainty and not being aware of what's happening. ”

Information that could have been useful relates to the possible consequences of a negative RSD such as the loss of SRSS, the likely timing of an outcome, the implications of loss of work and study rights, and could be provided by community organisations and other non-legal providers.

* <https://www.workaway.info>

** <https://theroomxchange.com>

Advice from participants to others seeking asylum



Samson and Ancy

“ In the beginning, sharing a house with others is better as a way to save money. Don't stay alone, stay with another family to share the rent. If you are ok with your job you can stay alone. ”

Reza

“ Lie and not tell the truth because Australia only likes liars. ”

Mansoureh

“ Never leave your Homeland because I never had anything in this period of time I've been here. ”

Adam

“ Plan and be prepared with enough money. Depend on yourself, don't rely on others. ”

Mariam

“ Wants to make an art exhibition for women in Nauru because it is very hard for them. ”

Frida

“ There are organisations to help you, but you need to go and find them and have patience when dealing with lease and housing. ”

Hanif

“ Support yourself, particularly if you are alone and not in a couple, to take care of your mental health. ”

Advice from participants to others seeking asylum



“ Choose the lawyers who are the best ones who will help you because these four years we've been struggling a lot with the not so suitable lawyer.

It's expensive, if you have money choose the correct lawyer. If you don't have money you have to go with the free lawyers. ”



“ Staying steady, consistent and be patient, because every time which...we are going through it never stays same. ”



“ Don't give up because there is always a way. ”



“ Depend on yourself, get assistance only from reputed organisations like JRS [Jesuit Refugee Service Australia], ASC [Asylum Seeker Centre] and DON'T trust anyone (especially as a woman), find a job, organise your time, meet new people, gain new perspectives and also can improve your language. ”



“ Put in your application at the right time and get help from migrant centres if needed. ”



“ Learn the value of discipline, freedom and respect for the law. ”

Summary of survey findings

The housing survey was conducted in early 2021 and confirmed many of the findings described above. The full survey findings can be found in the companion report *A Place to Call Home – A pilot survey of people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney*.¹ The survey was completed by 101 respondents primarily recruited through the JRS Food Bank service, similar to the participants recruited for the interview component of the research.

At the time of completing the survey, most respondents were living in an apartment or house, either alone or sharing with others, including with family or friends. A small proportion of respondents (6%) were either couch surfing or staying in crisis accommodation (i.e. 'homeless'). Overall, homelessness was experienced by 9% of respondents while houselessness was experienced by 14% of respondents, at some point since arriving to Australia. The survey also revealed that 15% of respondents spent more than six months either homeless or houseless, in the preceding year.

Five percent of survey respondents lived in insecure housing such as boarding and rooming houses and a further 38% of respondents stayed with family or friends because they had nowhere else to go. Many survey respondents were residing in housing that was inadequate for their needs. For example, 54% of survey respondents indicated they needed at least one more bedroom to feel comfortable. Additionally, 15% of respondents described the overall state of their accommodation as poor with some respondents indicating this had a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Consistent with the qualitative findings, affordability was a key factor in determining the type and location of housing that respondents resided in. While most respondents had work rights (68%), difficulty finding employment, alongside the high cost of housing and lack of a rental history in Australia, made it challenging to find appropriate housing or maintain housing stability. One-fifth of respondents indicated they were likely to move out of their current housing in the next three months and a further 30% were unsure whether they would be staying or moving. The most common reason for needing to move was related to unaffordability followed by family reasons and the desire to move to a different or better area. Similarly, the interviews revealed that housing moves were commonly in response to issues of affordability (sometimes prompted by loss of income or the loss of co-residents to help cover the cost of housing).

Concluding remarks

Housing is a human right. In addition to providing protection from the elements, housing provides a base from which we meet all other needs and has significant impacts on our health and wellbeing.

This project set out to document the housing pathways of people seeking asylum in Sydney, including experiences of home and homelessness and the factors contributing to this. People who are navigating Australia's RSD process, which has several stages and can take years to navigate, live in uncertainty and limbo with limited economic and social rights. As a result, people seeking asylum in Australia are placed in a precarious socioeconomic position while they await an outcome on their claim for protection. This makes them vulnerable to experiences of homelessness.

As demonstrated in the findings, people seeking asylum sacrifice physical space, safety, and security throughout their housing journeys in Australia. They find innovative ways to make ends meet in the absence of work rights or work itself, in order to keep a roof over their heads, but in extreme circumstances can experience homelessness. Independent NGOs, community groups, and diasporas provide whatever support possible, but this is almost always a band-aid solution.

The findings described in the report have two clear implications.

- 1 First, the housing pathways of people seeking asylum in Sydney are characterised by instability and uncertainty, driven predominantly by the RSD process, and couched within broader experiences of social exclusion.
- 2 Second, there are clear opportunities for existing income and housing support mechanisms to be made available to this population, particularly when a person's capacity for economic independence is constrained by involvement in the RSD process.

This research represents an initial step in developing a more appropriate response to the homelessness and housing exclusion faced by people seeking asylum in Australia.

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Appendix 1

A Place To Call Home Interview Guide

I am interested in hearing about your experiences of finding a place to live since applying for protection in Australia. I would like to hear about the different places you have lived in, what was good or not so good about these places, and the people or opportunities that have helped you to make a home in Sydney.

We can make notes on this piece of paper as we talk so that we have a picture of your housing experiences over time. [OR explain the mind map software if conducting the interview online]. Remember, you only need to share the information you feel comfortable to share and you can take a break at any point. Are you ready to begin?

Note: We do not need to ask EVERY prompt. Participants are likely to cover the prompts naturally. Where they note something that could have affected their housing — delve deeper through prompts such as 'Could you tell me a bit more about that?' or 'Could you give me an example of that?'

- Perhaps we can start with where you stayed when you first arrived in Australia, before you applied for protection. Can you tell me about that time and where you were living?

Prompts

- What type of place was that? Who were you living with?
- Where was that? (prompt for the area or region in Sydney, if not suburb)
- How did you find out about this place?
- What was it like living there? (prompt what did you like / not like about this place?)
- Why did you move?
- How long did you stay here?
- What stage were you up to in your application for protection?

- Where did you move to next?

Prompts as above

Make some notes on the timeline (mm/year, # identifier e.g. suburb)

[Repeat Qn. 2 until you arrive at the present. If there are multiple moves within a short period of time these can be described together e.g. moved between friends place and sleeping rough over a 2-month period]

- Thinking about the past year, how has Covid-19 pandemic and Australia's response affected your housing?

Prompts

- Has it affected your Employment, Study, Need to access Superannuation or Savings?
- Your ability to pay rent? (Were you able to negotiate reduced or deferred rent?)
- Were you evicted or forced to move? (Did you have a rental agreement? Did you seek any legal advice or assistance? Why / why not?)
- What was the impact of lockdown on housing (e.g. crowding and connection with others)
- Was there anything good about it?

- So looking at this timeline, what do you notice about your housing journey?

Prompts

- What has been the most difficult thing in your housing journey?
- What type of support would have been helpful to you?
- What things have helped you to feel more at home? (or more comfortable in the places you've lived in)? What steps have you taken to make you feel more settled in your home?
- What do you want for your home in the future?
- What type of support do you think would be beneficial to would help to achieve that 'home'? (e.g. employment, \$, support with looking for a house)

- Have you heard about Workaway or the Room Exchange? They are online sites which offer a room or housing in exchange for work like gardening, cooking or looking after children for 10 to 25 hours per week.

Prompts

- Would they be suitable to you? Why / why not?
- At what point in your housing journey would they work for you?
- What things you would be thinking about with these options?

- What is one thing you have learned, that has helped YOU, that you would like to share with other people seeking asylum, who are new to Australia with housing? Is there anything that might be helpful for others?