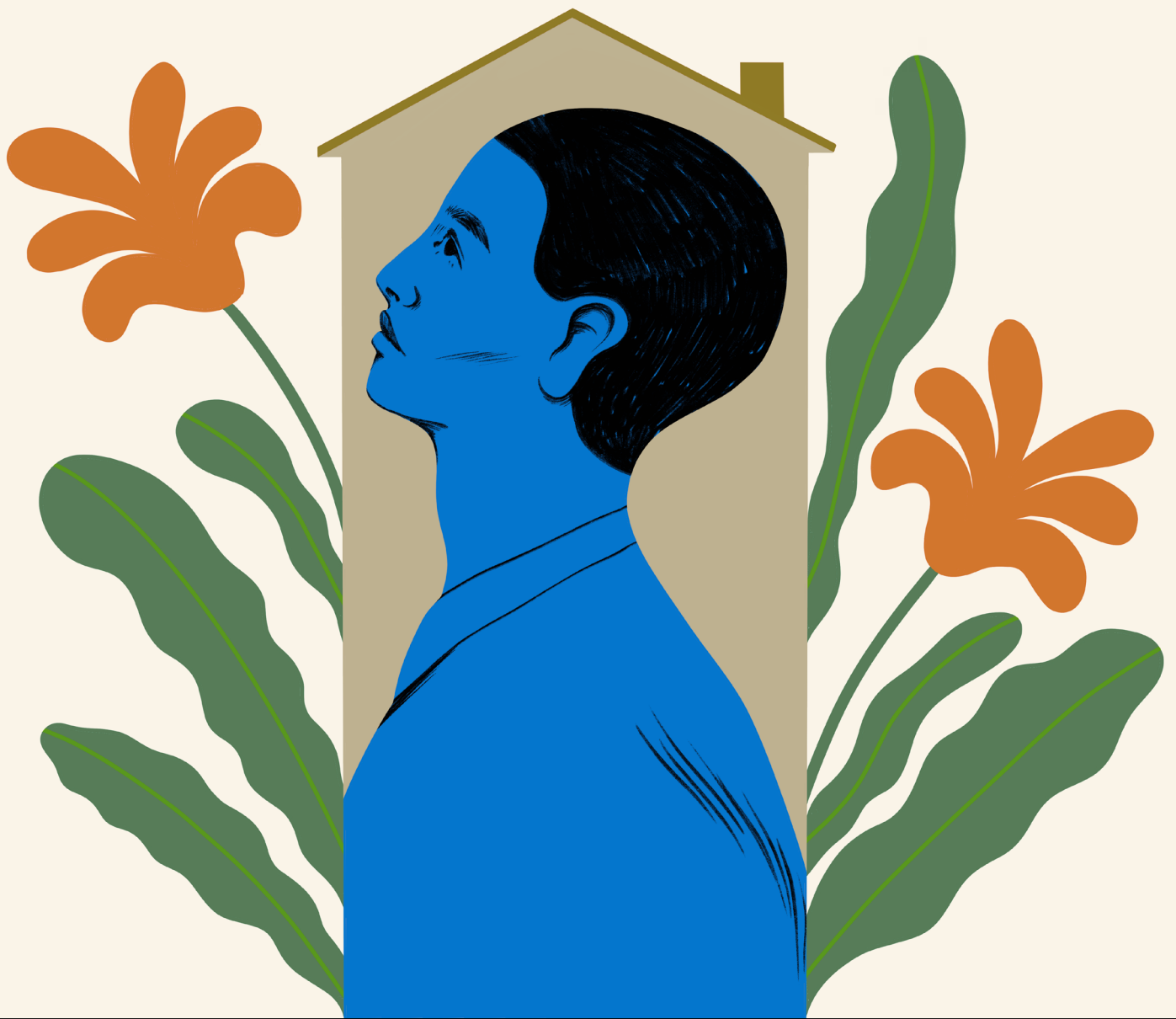


# A Place to Call Home

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



# 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*<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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.

## 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.<sup>8</sup>
- 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.<sup>9</sup>
- 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.