

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Submission from JRS Australia into the worsening rental crisis in Australia

Dear Committee Secretary,

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia appreciates the opportunity to make a submission into the worsening rental crisis in Australia.

JRS Australia has a mission to accompany, serve and advocate for and with refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in situations of vulnerability.

Globally, JRS serves over a million people across 58 countries.

In Australia we served over 3,000 people in 2022 — including 1,081 people who received 6,942 instances of specialist casework support in response to acute needs relating to housing precarity and homelessness, physical and mental health, food insecurity and domestic and family violence.

Most of the people whom we serve have spent many years on temporary visas without access to a social safety net and often without work rights. Consequently, we witness widespread destitution, increasingly characterised by vulnerability to housing precarity, homelessness and rough sleeping.

We make the following brief submission based on our experience of working and consulting with directly affected people.

Our submission will specifically address the following Terms of Reference (highlighted in **boldface**):

- a. **the experience of renters and people seeking rental housing,**
- b. **rising rents and rental affordability;**
- c. actions that can be taken by governments to reduce rents or limit rent rises;
- d. improvements to renters' rights, including rent stabilisation, length of leases and no grounds evictions;

- e. **factors impacting supply and demand of affordable rentals;**
- f. international experience of policies that effectively support renters;
- g. the impact of government programs on the rental sector; and
- h. any other related matters.

JRS Australia has conducted research on the experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion among people seeking asylum in the Greater Sydney area. Our research was conducted in conjunction with Dr Elizabeth Conroy of the Western Sydney University between October 2020 and April 2021, and culminated in the release of a report, [*A Place to Call Home*](#), in December 2021.

One key finding was that challenges associated with Australia's refugee status determination (RSD) procedure were direct drivers of homelessness experiences because they affect the capacity of people seeking asylum to achieve financial security. Restrictions on work entitlements, lengthy processes that maintain temporary visa status, and restricted access to and sudden exits from the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) program, which is intended to provide temporary needs-based support to people awaiting an outcome on immigration matters, impede the capacity of people seeking asylum and others awaiting immigration outcomes to attain financial self-reliance. Our findings also show that rental unaffordability was the most challenging aspect of the financial difficulties faced by research participants, with many preferring to receive rental assistance over assistance with food security.

People seeking asylum who had attained employment experienced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic more severely than others in the labour market, as they were often the first to be laid off because they were excluded from JobKeeper and JobSeeker subsidies, along with others holding temporary visas. And upon losing their incomes, many fell into significant rental arrears and often faced eviction, despite the imposition of rental moratoriums during the pandemic. In some cases, these factors have led to mental health crises, exacerbating anxieties related to maintaining suitable housing.

Visa precarity – characterised by a temporary or conditional migration status – often complicates an individual's or a family's ability to secure or maintain their tenancy. Some people facing visa precarity do not have work rights, or their visas with work rights are not renewed in a timely manner to avoid gaps in work authorisation. Without access to a financial safety net, many are left at risk of homelessness.

Amongst our frontline services, JRS Australia provides specialist prevention and response initiatives to assist women and children seeking asylum and with temporary migration status who are experiencing or at risk of domestic and family violence (DFV). Women in these circumstances face immense challenges in securing safe, suitable and affordable housing. Women leaving violent relationships often struggle to maintain their rental tenancies as they are unable to access a financial safety net and women with young children are unable to work without access to childcare subsidies. Women who are unable to stay in their rental property and seek safety in refuge accommodation also struggle to maintain access to safety, as access to refuge beds is generally tied to a financial contribution and exit pathway.

Increasingly, we are witnessing women resorting to staying with or returning to perpetrators when they cannot see a viable alternative means to avert homelessness and destitution.

Recommendations

In light of our research and experience of serving refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in situations of vulnerability facing housing challenges, we make the following recommendations:

Access to income as a means to securing adequate housing

1. The Federal Government should ensure that all people seeking asylum in Australia have authorisation to work, including people awaiting judicial review of their claims for protection, or ministerial intervention on their matters, or living in the community pending removal or return.
2. The Federal Government should extend access to ongoing income support for all people seeking asylum who demonstrably cannot work or are demonstrably unable to find work.
3. The Federal Government and state governments 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.
4. The Federal Government should work proactively with state and local governments to ensure that an appropriate proportion of social housing and transitional, crisis and emergency accommodation is accessible and appropriate for refugees, people seeking asylum, and migrants in situations of vulnerability.

Housing affordability for people seeking asylum

5. The Federal Government should work with state and local governments to establish frameworks for annual reporting on rental affordability in their respective geographical areas, including for people seeking asylum and other temporary visa holders, taking into account they are largely ineligible 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 and women facing visa precarity, 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.
7. The Federal government should work with state and local governments to 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.