

1 DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

The ABS uses the cultural definition to enumerate the homeless population. The cultural definition contends that ‘homelessness’ and ‘inadequate housing’ are cultural concepts that only make sense in a particular community at a given historical period (Chamberlain and Mackenzie 1992). In a society where the vast majority of people live in mud huts, the community standard will be that these dwellings constitute adequate accommodation (Watson 1986, p. 10). Once this principle is recognised, then it is possible to define ‘homelessness’.

First, the cultural definition identifies shared community standards about the minimum housing that people have the right to expect in order to live according to the conventions and expectations of a particular culture. Then, the definition identifies groups that fall below the minimum community standard.

Cultural standards are not usually stated in official documents, but are embedded in the housing practices of a society. These standards identify the conventions and cultural expectations of a community in an objective sense, and are recognised by most people because they accord with what they see around them. As Townsend (1979, p. 51) puts it:

A population comes to expect to live in particular types of homes ... Their environment ... create(s) their needs in an objective as well as a subjective sense.

The vast majority of Australians live in suburban houses or self-contained flats, and 70 per cent of all households either own or are purchasing their home (ABS 2006a, Ch. 8). There is a widespread view that home ownership is the most desirable form of tenure (Kemeny 1983, p. 1; Hayward 1992, p. 1; Badcock and Beer 2000, p. 96). Eighty-eight per cent of private dwellings in Australia are houses and 75 per cent of flats have two or more bedrooms (ABS 2006a, Ch. 8).

The minimum community standard is a small rental flat—with a bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom and an element of security of tenure—because that is the minimum that most people achieve in the private rental market. However, the minimum is significantly below the culturally desired option of an owner-occupied house.

The minimum community standard provides a cultural benchmark for assessing ‘homelessness’ and ‘inadequate housing’ in the contemporary context. However, as Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992) point out, there are a number of institutional settings where people do not have the minimal level of accommodation identified by the community standard, but in cultural terms they are not considered part of the homeless population. They include, inter alia, people living in seminaries, elderly people in nursing homes, students in university halls of residence and prisoners.

1.1 A MODEL OF HOMELESSNESS BASED ON SHARED COMMUNITY STANDARDS EMBODIED IN CURRENT HOUSING PRACTICES

Minimum community standard: equivalent to a small rented flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom

<p>Culturally recognised exceptions: where it is inappropriate to apply the minimum standard, e.g. seminaries, gaols, student halls of residence</p>	<p>Marginally housed: people in housing situations close to the minimum standard</p> <p>Tertiary homelessness: people living in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure</p> <p>Secondary homelessness: people moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends and relatives, emergency accommodation, youth refuges, hostels and boarding houses</p> <p>Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation (living on the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, under bridges, in parks, etc.)</p>
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Source: Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992, p. 291.

While it is true that the concepts of ‘housed’ and ‘homeless’ constitute a continuum of circumstances, there are three situations that fall below the minimum community standard. This leads to the identification of ‘primary’, ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ homelessness. The model (shown in Figure 1.1) also includes the concept of the ‘marginally housed’.

Primary homelessness accords with the common assumption that homelessness is the same as ‘rooflessness’. The category includes people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, living in improvised dwellings (such as sheds, garages or cabins), and using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter. Primary homelessness is operationalised using the census category ‘improvised homes, tents and sleepers out’.

Secondary homelessness includes people who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another. On census night, it includes

all people staying in emergency or transitional accommodation provided under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). The starting point for identifying this group is the census category 'hostels for the homeless, night shelters and refuges'. Secondary homelessness also includes people residing temporarily with other households because they have no accommodation of their own. They report 'no usual address' on their census form. Secondary homelessness also includes people staying in boarding houses on a short-term basis, operationally defined as 12 weeks or less.

Tertiary homelessness refers to people who live in boarding houses on a medium- to long-term basis, operationally defined as 13 weeks or longer. Residents of private boarding houses do not have separate bedrooms and living rooms; they do not have kitchen and bathroom facilities of their own; their accommodation is not self-contained; and they do not have security of tenure provided by a lease. They are homeless because their accommodation does not have the characteristics identified in the minimum community standard.

The terms primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness are widely used, particularly when talking about census counts. However, the profile of the homeless population looks different if you classify people on the basis of their housing histories, rather than on the basis of their accommodation on census night. In a study of 4291 homeless people in Melbourne, Chamberlain, Johnson and Theobald (2007) found that 92 per cent of their sample had moved regularly from one form of temporary accommodation to another. Nearly everyone had stayed with friends or relatives, but 85 per cent had also stayed in a boarding house, 60 per cent had been in SAAP/THM accommodation, and 50 per cent had slept rough. People show up in particular places on census night but many homeless people will be somewhere else a few weeks later. Transience is the typical pattern. Primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness are useful categories to describe people's housing situations on census night, but there are not three distinct groups of homeless people.

In *Counting the Homeless 2001*, we also identified 'marginal residents of caravan parks'. These people were defined as renting caravans, at their usual address, with no one in the household having full-time work. Like boarding house tenants, these households have one room for eating and sleeping and communal bathroom facilities. The 2001 research found that two-thirds (67 per cent) of boarding house residents were in the capital cities whereas three-quarters (78 per cent) of marginal residents of caravan parks were in regional centres and country towns (Chamberlain and MacKenzie

2003, Ch. 7). In some communities, there are no boarding houses and SAAP workers send people to the local caravan park if there is no emergency accommodation available.

There is some disagreement as to whether marginal residents of caravan parks constitute a separate category. Reid, Griffin and Murdoch (2005) have examined this analysis carefully. They conclude that marginal residents of caravan parks are really part of the tertiary population. Giovanetti, Reid, Murdoch and Edwards (2007, p. 275) take a similar position:

Marginal residents of caravan parks were categorised as belonging to the tertiary homelessness category ...

We have two reservations about this approach. First, it is difficult for the wider community to accept that some people living in caravans are part of the tertiary homeless population when most caravan dwellers are on holiday or own their own caravan. The 2006 Census found that 56 per cent of individuals in caravan parks were on holiday. The census was held in winter and this figure would have been much higher in the summer months. Another 25 per cent owned their caravan and many had made a lifestyle choice to live in a caravan, typically following retirement. Only 14 per cent were marginal residents on census night and this figure would be significantly below 10 per cent in the summer months.

Second, it is now common to find that cabins are the main type of accommodation in caravan parks, and cabins often have better facilities than caravans. A cabin usually has a separate kitchen and bathroom and often has one or more bedrooms. The census cannot distinguish between households in caravans and cabins with certainty, but in 2006 we estimated that somewhere between one-quarter and one-half of marginal residents of caravan parks were living in cabins (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008, Ch. 7). This finding undermines the argument that marginal residents of caravan parks should be considered part of the tertiary population. It also means that our 'marginal residents' category is broader than indicated in *Counting the Homeless 2001*.