6.1 Social housing

Social housing is eligible rental housing that is provided by government or non-government (including not-for-profit) organisations, at below market rates. The aim is to alleviate housing pressures. Having access to appropriate and secure housing that is affordable can limit the risk of low-to-moderate income Australians being socially excluded by factors such as homelessness, overcrowding and poor physical and mental health.

Social housing programs

In Australia, there is a range of social housing programs that fall under a regulated funding model (Box 6.1.1).

Box 6.1.1: Main social housing programs and funding, 2015–16

Public rental housing—This is the largest social housing program (Figure 6.1.1). It comprises publicly owned dwellings administered by state and territory governments. Rents are subsidised for eligible low-income tenants so that they generally pay no more than 30% of their gross income on rent.

State owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH)—These dwellings, managed by state and territory governments, are aimed at low-to-moderate income households with at least one member who identifies as being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australian (see also Chapter 7.1 'Community factors and Indigenous wellbeing').

Mainstream community housing—This is the second largest social housing program (Figure 6.1.1). Mainstream community housing is generally delivered by not-for-profit organisations to low-to-moderate income or special needs households. Community housing models vary across states and territories. Generally, state or territory governments provide community housing organisations with some assistance, be it direct funding or land and property.

Indigenous community housing—This housing is owned or managed by an Indigenous community housing organisation. These organisations may either directly manage the dwellings they own or sublease tenancy management services to the relevant state/territory housing authority or another organisation. This housing is made available to households with at least one Indigenous tenant (see also Chapter 7.1 'Community factors and Indigenous wellbeing').

Commonwealth funding for social and affordable housing programs is provided via the National Affordable Housing Specific Purpose Payment and via National Partnerships between the Australian and state and territory governments.
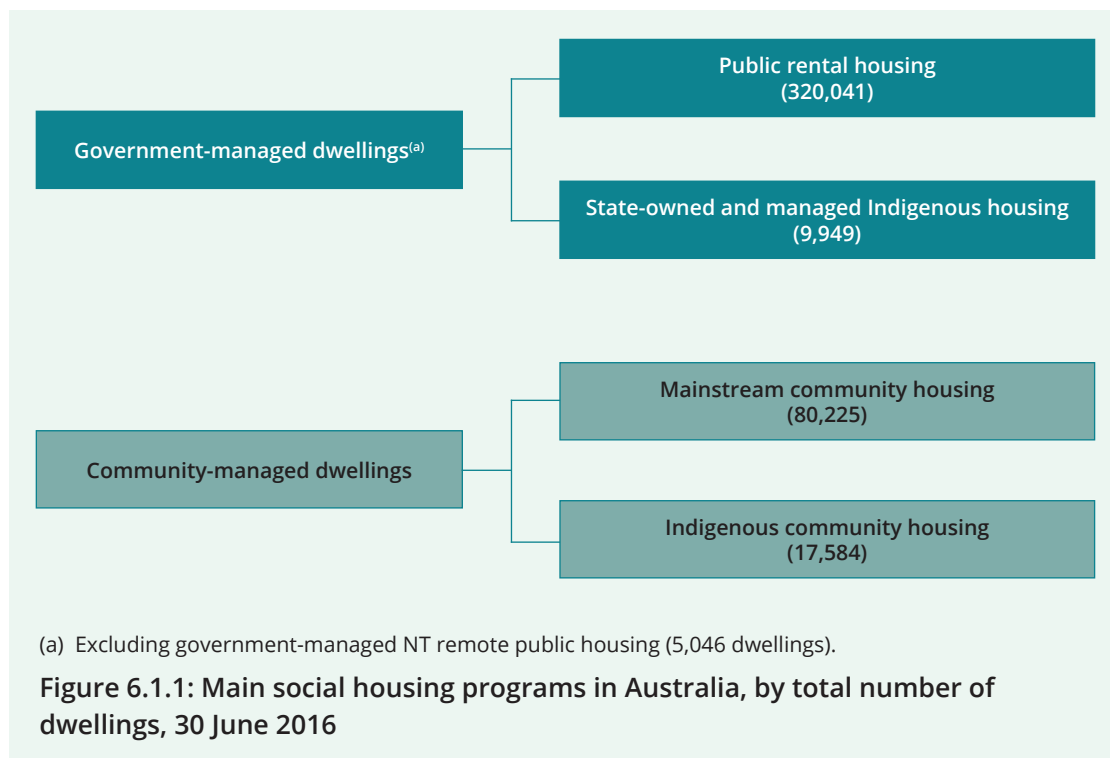

Over the past decade, policy changes have seen a gradual shift in the social housing sector, from government-managed housing programs toward community-managed housing.

In the 9 years from 2007–08 to 2015–16, the total number of social housing dwellings has risen by 5.6% (or 22,800 dwellings) to 432,800:

- The largest rise has been in community-managed housing programs; specifically, for mainstream community housing, where dwelling numbers have more than doubled, from 36,000 to more than 80,000.

- In contrast, dwelling numbers have dropped in government-managed programs; specifically, for public rental housing, where dwellings dropped by nearly 18,000 to 320,000 dwellings.

- Although their numbers have dropped, public housing dwellings continue to make up the majority of social housing (75%) (Figure 6.1.1).

Although the total number of social housing dwellings has risen, this growth rate is not keeping pace with household growth. Therefore, the share of social housing is declining. Over the 9-year period, social share has gradually fallen from 5.1% to 4.7% (see also Chapter 6.3 'The changing shape of housing in Australia').

Government-managed dwellings[a]
— Public rental housing (320,041)
— State-owned and managed Indigenous housing (9,949)

Community-managed dwellings
— Mainstream community housing (80,225)
— Indigenous community housing (17,584)

(a) Excluding government-managed NT remote public housing (5,046 dwellings).

Figure 6.1.1: Main social housing programs in Australia, by total number of dwellings, 30 June 2016

Australian Government
Australian Institute of
Health and Welfare

Australia's
welfare 2017

Australia's welfare 2017

Social housing tenants

As at 30 June 2016, 394,000 households were living in social housing (public rental housing, SOMIH and mainstream community housing)—a 4.0% increase from 379,000 households in 2008. An estimated 845,000 tenants made up these households across Australia. Indigenous households made up 9.4%, or 29,293, of public rental housing households and 7.9%, or 5,377, of mainstream community households while SOMIH and Indigenous community housing programs were focused on Indigenous households.

Social housing tenant characteristics such as the age of the main tenant, main income source and living arrangements can vary across social housing programs (Table 6.1.1).

Table 6.1.1: Ongoing[a] **social housing tenants, by selected housing program and selected characteristics, 30 June 2016**

| | **Number of households (% change from 2008)** | **Sex**[b] **(%)** | | **Age**[b] | **Living arrangement** | **Income** |
		Male	Female			
Public rental housing	312,000 (–6%)	37	63	54% older Australians (aged 55+)	54% living alone	29% disability support pension
SOMIH	9,700 (–22%)	24	76	64% aged 35–64	36% sole parent with dependent children	32% on other government payments[c]
Mainstream community housing	72,400 (+103%)	41	59	67% aged >45	59% living alone	n.a.

n.a. not available.

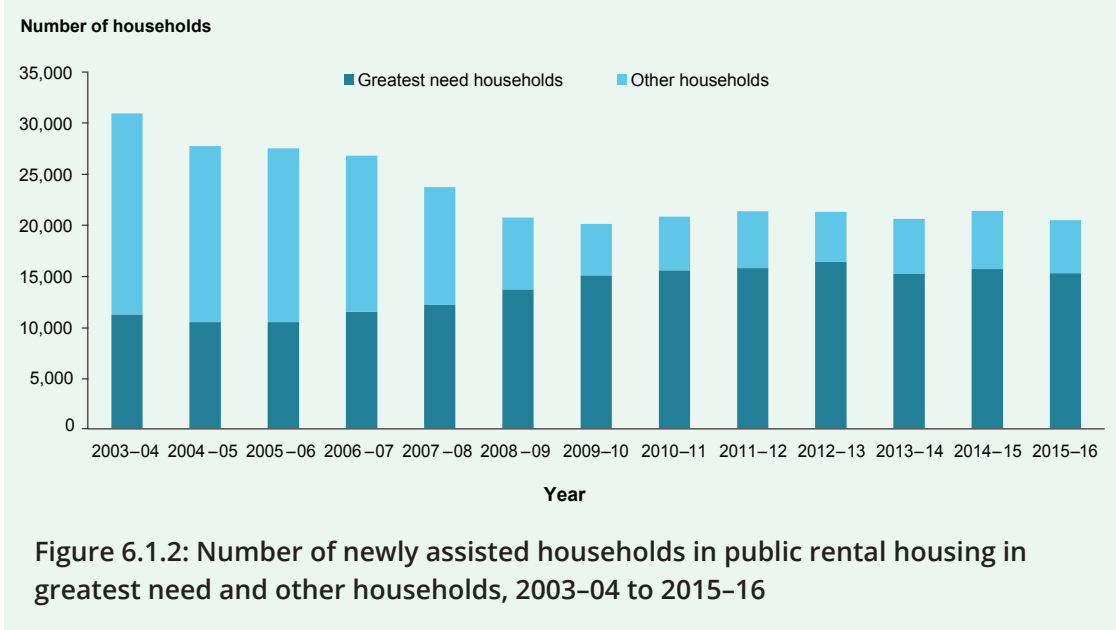(a) 'Ongoing' means that the household's tenancy is not concluded.

(b) Excludes cases where sex or age were 'not stated' (less than 3% in each program).

(c) 'Other government payments' are government payments provided other than set government allowances, pensions or cash incomes.

Social housing has focused on low-income households in greatest need who can also have special needs. This includes Indigenous Australians, young and older Australians, people with disability, people experiencing domestic and family violence, and the homeless. Based on the proportion of newly assisted households in greatest need, these vulnerable households accounted for more than half of all newly housed tenants in the public rental housing, SOMIH and mainstream community housing programs in 2015–16.

The proportion of new public rental housing allocations provided to greatest need households increased from 36% in 2003–04 to 74% of newly allocated households in 2015–16. Over the same period, however, the total number of new public rental housing allocations reduced from 31,000 households to 20,500, in part due to a reduction in public rental housing dwelling stock (Figure 6.1.2).

Number of households

Figure 6.1.2: Number of newly assisted households in public rental housing in greatest need and other households, 2003–04 to 2015–16

Social housing wait lists and prioritisation

Demand for social housing is strong. As at 30 June 2016, there were around 195,000 households on social housing waiting lists. Both the waiting lists themselves, and the wait times for many households, are very long. As at 30 June 2016, 47% of households waiting for public housing had been doing so for more than 2 years. This excludes households considered to be in greatest need, who remain a priority for provision of housing assistance (see also Chapter 9.2 'Indicators of *Australia's welfare*').

Tenant satisfaction

Over time, social housing has been a stable form of tenure for vulnerable tenants. For the allocation of affordable housing to be considered successful, the dwelling must meet the needs of the household. In 2015–16, 2 in 5 (42%) public rental households and 1 in 3 (34%) SOMIH households had been in the same tenancy for over a decade. This low tenant turnover, together with ongoing demand for social housing, poses a challenge when bridging the gap between supply and demand.

The National Social Housing Survey presents a profile of social housing tenants and their satisfaction with services provided by their housing provider (see Box 6.1.2). In 2016, tenants living in mainstream community housing had higher levels of satisfaction (80%) than tenants in other social housing programs (73% for public rental housing and 68% for SOMIH).

Box 6.1.2: Social housing tenant satisfaction

Personal experiences of social housing vary among tenants. To record the influence of individual experiences on social housing satisfaction, the National Social Housing Survey documents tenant comments. These comments reflect both the benefits and the difficulties faced by tenants. Here are two:

I thank you for giving me a place when my world fell from under me.

I have had several inspections over the years. I have holes in my floor which has [sic] *been inspected at least 5 times by a housing inspector. No side and back fence. Window can't be open or closed due to termites. Fireplace still full of bricks and falling into lounge room for 6 years now, very dirty, holes in the wall.*

2014 National Social Housing Survey

What is missing from the picture?

To further support low-income Australians into stable housing, governments across Australia fund services to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, known as Specialist Homelessness Services. Support from these service providers includes assisting social housing tenants to maintain their social housing tenure. More on these services is available through reports linked below and in Chapter 6.2 'Homelessness'.

Where do I go for more information?

For more information about housing assistance in Australia, see reports available online at www.aihw.gov.au/housing-assistance-publications/. The report *Housing assistance in Australia 2017*, the National Social Housing Survey: a summary of national results 2016, Specialist homelessness services 2015–16, and other recent publications are available for free download.