



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHEL STREICH, PHOTO BY NICOLE REED.

HOUSING ENDS HOMELESSNESS

Seems pretty simple doesn't it? But more than 116,000 Australians don't have a place to live. The impacts are monumental. Anastasia Safioleas finds out how things have gone so wrong, and what is being done to fix it.

PHIL RECENTLY RECEIVED excellent news: a letter telling him he finally had his own place to live. It's been a long time since he's had somewhere permanent to call home. When he's not speaking to school groups about his lived experience of homelessness through The Big Issue Classroom, he's out selling the magazine – often wearing his favourite terry-towelling robe.

Phil (pictured) has had a tough life. The eldest of nine, he grew up in a violent household, with rarely enough to eat. By 12 he was in foster care. At 18, he literally had nowhere to go.

Limited job prospects and no means to rent or purchase a home of his own saw him cycle through any accommodation he could find – emergency shelters, boarding houses, friends' couches, dumpy caravans, shoddy sharehouses. There were several stints of rough sleeping, too. "I slept in a toilet block once. It was uncomfortable and cold," he says.

Six years ago, Phil was finally placed on the government's waiting list for social housing. And now, he's got a place in Melbourne.

"When I got the letter, I had to read it again!" he says. "My apartment is absolutely fantastic. It's perfect. I can go in and lock the door and sit down



in my favourite seat. Each time I walk in I think, *I'm home!* There's a built-in heater and plenty of power points. I have my own letterbox with a key. It's my forever home."

But a staggering number of people are without a home. More than 116,000 Australians are homeless, an increase of 14 per cent in five years. Another 1.5 million are at risk, living in housing stress – spending more than 30 per cent of their household income on their mortgage or rent.

And a recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study found there were 800,000 people in social housing in 2017-18 – with another 140,600 applications pending. The average wait is 10 years. Due to a severe lack of funding, it is expected that there will be a shortage of more than 600,000 social houses by 2030.

Simply put, housing affordability is in crisis.

A COMMON MISCONCEPTION is that people end up homeless due to a mental or physical illness, or addiction. But the Council to Homeless Persons reports that this actually accounts for only three per cent of homelessness. For 45 per cent of people, it's due to a lack of affordable housing.

More affordable housing could

end homelessness, yet in the past two decades house prices have increased four-fold – in Sydney median house prices have risen by 460 per cent and in Melbourne by a whopping 539 per cent. While that has made some property owners wealthy, it's seen homeownership fall to a low of 65 per cent in 2016, according to the ABS. It's even worse for young people: for those in the 25 to 34 age range, home ownership dropped by 28 per cent between 2002 and 2015, to around 45 per cent. This has exacerbated housing inequality.

"Australia is experiencing generational change when it comes to home ownership," reported a 2018 study from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Once upon a time, you bought your house to live in. Today, it's common to hear people talk about houses as being a "good investment" with "excellent return".

Twenty years ago, about one-quarter of Australian households rented – now it's nearly a third. It has put a squeeze on low-income earners who are being pushed out of the competitive private rental market. Anglicare Australia's most recent rental affordability snapshot found that, out of 69,000 rental listings across the country over one sample weekend, *no properties* in any capital city were affordable for a single person on Youth Allowance (\$455.20 per fortnight) or Newstart (\$555.70 per fortnight). A single person on

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minimum wage had only two per cent of properties to choose from. The ABS cites the average weekly cost for rental households was \$366 in 2017-18.

As acting executive director of Anglicare Australia, Roland Manderson sees it: "Those [rental] properties that are arguably affordable are mostly pretty terrible. There's no incentive for someone who is a landlord to invest in that property if it's going to someone on a low income because the demand is huge and the supply is low. So unless you actually have a supply of social housing you'll never have private rental houses that are both affordable and adequate."

According to the government's own Housing Assistance in Australia 2018 report, our population growth is outstripping the amount of available social housing.

"The government has been cutting back on their investment in public housing since the 1990s," says Manderson. "The problems that's created is that all the social housing is for people with the most desperate need. It makes anywhere where there is social housing an intense environment that needs a lot of extra resources. So that makes it hard to get community support to grow the supply of social housing. It's a problem of our own making really."

Kate Colvin from the Council to Homeless Persons says two things generally happen when there isn't enough affordable housing to go around.

"Firstly, some people will miss out on housing and be homeless. That creates other problems, like interrupting people's participation in work or study. Being homeless also directly creates both physical and mental health problems, and means people can be more vulnerable to being on the receiving end of violence."

The second thing, she says, is that people are forced to pay more than they can afford for a safe place to live.

"That means there is very little money left over for essentials like decent food, or medical bills or school books," she points out. "If you've hardly any money left after paying for housing you will also struggle to manage if you have a crisis financially, like your car breaking down or an unexpected medical bill, and that

can in turn result in homelessness."

As the national spokesperson for Everybody's Home – a campaign aiming to halve homelessness in five years – she urges people to demand governments deliver affordable housing solutions and a fairer go for low-income earners. "For many people experiencing homelessness, all they need is a home," she says. "The solution is to deliver more housing people can afford, particularly in the rental market. The federal government must partner with state and local government to encourage them to also contribute to growing the amount of social housing that is available to those on our lowest incomes."

August marks national Homelessness Week, with its theme "Housing Ends Homelessness". It sounds simple, but we know that having a safe place to live can literally save lives. While the boarding house Phil most recently called home was sufficient, he says it just doesn't compare to having safe and secure housing he can call his own. "Having a place to stay allows me to concentrate on my other problems. I feel safe and valued. It has allowed me to settle, changed my outlook and improved my hygiene. It has improved my life."

In Finland, for example, the government follows a robust principle of Housing First – which posits that if you give people a home, it becomes considerably easier to take care of any other issues that person might be facing. And it's been an enormous success. Finland is the only country in Europe where the rate of homelessness has declined in recent years.

And while it costs money to meet this demand for housing, the savings that can be made in healthcare, social services and the justice system are colossal.

Australian Council of Social Service best sums up how excessive inequality is not only harmful to individuals, but also bad for our economy. "When resources and power are concentrated in fewer hands, or people are too impoverished to participate effectively in the paid workforce, or acquire the skills to do so, economic growth is diminished."

As Anglicare's Roland Manderson says, everyone should have access

to housing that is "safe, secure and affordable. That is what a home is. It's the starting point for most people to be able to get on with having an enriching life that is meaningful with the people around them."

THE PRETTY WHITE house sits in a crowded cul-de-sac. A trampoline peeks over someone's backyard fence. An idle basketball ring sits on the street's turning circle, the perfect place for a quick game that pauses for the inevitable call of "caaaaaaa". Just a short stroll away is the town centre with a church and local primary school. It's quiet and idyllic.

The pretty white house is Jema's new home. Soon she'll move in with her partner Romel and their 18-month-old daughter, Isla. Standing in her new backyard, still muddy from construction, there's a distinct sense of optimism mingled with disbelief. Growing up in and out of foster homes and residential care, she's just been given the keys to the first home she can truly call her own.

"When I was young, my mum became a bit mentally unwell, so I had gone to stay with my grandparents in Marysville to give my mum a break," she explains. "There was an opportunity I could live with them, but then Black Saturday came through and they passed." She pauses. "I was 10. I had no family that could take me in. It was a hard time..."

She eventually found herself in residential care and at 17 was given a housing commission apartment in inner-city Melbourne. Jema has been there for four years but, while grateful for the apartment, social housing has come with its own particular set of issues. The lease means Romel cannot reside with Jema and their daughter; he currently lives with his mother in the outer Melbourne suburbs. So they tried to look for a family home.

"It's so hard to get into housing," says Romel, who works part-time as a cleaner. "We tried saving but it was going to take forever. I'd probably be dead by then. And renting is so expensive – the average was \$350 per week."

Their three-bedroom house in Yea was built by Habitat for Humanity. It comes with an interest-free mortgage,

JEMA AND ROMEL AT THEIR NEW HOME, WITH DAUGHTER ISLA.



PHOTOS BY MARK AVELLINO

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based on 95 per cent of the market value of the completed home; and it's capped at 30 per cent of the couple's income, meaning they won't fall into housing stress. The Big Issue's Homes for Homes was granted \$40,000 towards the build.

Their new home is an innovative example of a community-funded solution to the crisis of housing affordability in Australia, and part of a trend that sees an increasing number of not-for-profits trying to meet the shortfall.

Homes for Homes raises funds to increase the supply of social and affordable housing for a wide range of disadvantaged Australians. Property owners agree to make a tax-deductible donation – 0.1 per cent of the property sale price – when they sell their property. The funds are granted to housing providers who are building affordable homes. In 2018, Homes for Homes granted \$500,000 to fund a range of social and affordable housing projects – Jema and Romel are the first recipients to move in.

At the official handover to Jema

and her family, Habitat for Humanity's Philip Curtis bluntly described the scenario confronting low-income earners: "For many, paying the rent means they cannot afford to eat, see a doctor, have a prescription filled, pay an energy bill, or pay for transport. Hard choices need to be made almost weekly in order to survive. We're facing a crisis."

Jema is all too aware of the significance of this pathway out of poverty, and into home ownership.

"It's going to be life-changing for my family," she says. "[It's a] massive change to be able to live in our own home."

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■ To participate in Homes for Homes visit homesforhomes.org.au.

■ For more about Everybody's Home, go to everybodyshome.org.au.

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