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'It was bloody amazing': how getting into social housing transforms people's lives

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For people on the long social housing waiting list, getting into secure, affordable housing is life-changing. Our study starkly illustrates what a difference it makes.

We interviewed people who were on the waiting list, and again about a year later. Some had moved into social housing and told us how it had transformed their lives.

The positive impacts included improved mental health, reintegration into society, reuniting with children, access to facilities the rest of us take for granted and greater job opportunities.

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In the UK, Austria and Finland, about 1 in 6 people live in social housing which provides dwellings to vital workers, vulnerable people and those on low incomes.

In Australia, it's fewer than one in 20, with decades-long waiting lists and pressing demand.

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A sense of home and security

Julia*, who relies on a Disability Support Pension, had been struggling in the private rental market. When asked “What did it feel like to finally get a house?”, she said:

It was bloody amazing. I don't have to worry about ever having to move again and I know I'll always be able to afford the rent [...] Inside my house, it just feels like peace [...] It just feels so good. I mean, my mental health has improved a heap. I've got a bathtub for the pain [...] This is my home [...] I love it.

When first interviewed, Jade had been couch surfing. Her mental health also benefited from living in social housing.

It just gives you your own security, your own independence. [...] It's wonderful what having your own place can do to your self-esteem. It just really brings you out of that hole.

Moving into social housing was an enormous relief for Yvonne. She had felt intensely vulnerable in private rental housing.

It is just such a weight off my shoulders and knowing that I don't have to be in a situation where I have had these horrible landlords that try and take advantage of you [...] I have landlords now that don't bother me [...] they can't hold anything over my head anymore: "You come and sleep with me or else I'll put your rent up," that sort of thing [...] I don't have to have that anxiety of looking for somewhere [...] I can afford. And there's not many places that you can afford on a disability pension [...] I'm enjoying life again.

Jacqui, 65, had lived in her car for over three years.

[Getting into social housing] has impacted every aspect of my life really [...] It means everything to be in a home and to have that privacy [...] To have somewhere you can go and you know just to be out of sight [...] It just makes such an impact on your life and your mental health.

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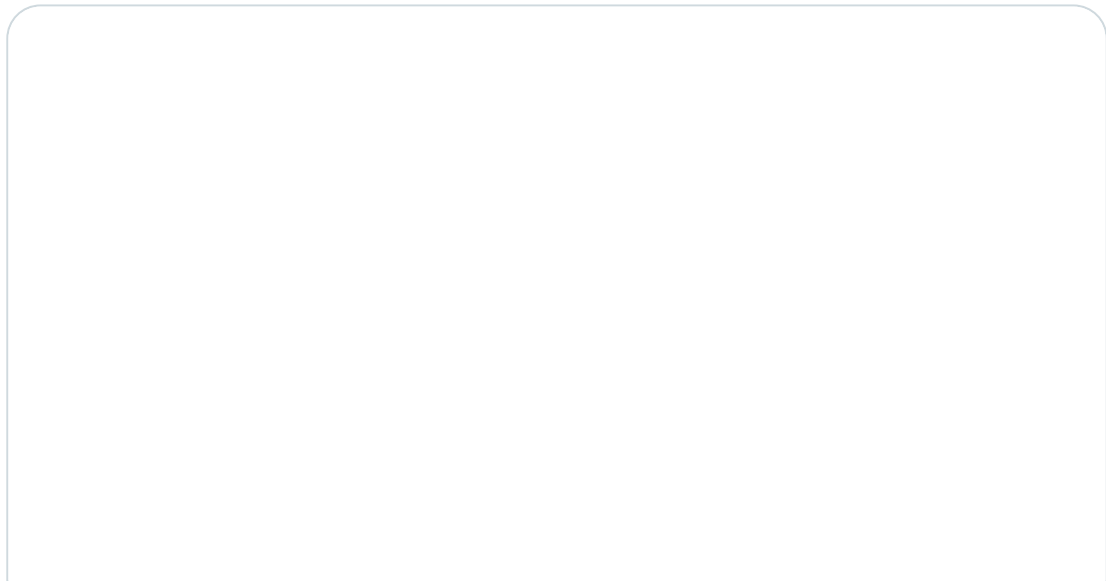
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The reality is right now across Australia, an estimated 640,000 households are deemed to be in 'extreme' rental stress.

Potentially another rent increase away from homelessness.

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Re-engaging with the world

Jack had been using most of his Disability Support Pension to pay rent.

I did not feel at all secure for another lease, so that was just ongoing stress [...] There was a lot of things I couldn't do or engage with, because there was no permanency [...] I became increasingly more isolated, increasingly more disengaged with community activities [...] It was just a horrid time.

Moving into social housing has allowed Jack to re-engage with the world.

Pretty much every aspect of your wellbeing is all connected to that simple basic thing, your accommodation [...] I've got certainty for the future [...] Now the goals have changed. It's changed from just survival to trying to engage with the world, to engage with community, to be getting out of the house again. It feels possible to solve problems because I've got the foundation to build on.

Reuniting with children

When Fiona was homeless, her teenage son had to live with his grandmother. Fiona and her son were reunited in social housing.

[S]o you know now I've got a place for [him] [...] Cos he was in care with his Nan, so they weren't seeing eye to eye [...] being able to [...] give him [...] a roof over his head as well like makes me feel not so useless [...] I love having him here.

Access to facilities

Jacqui emphasised how having a home allowed her to do routine tasks that are extremely demanding when homeless.

Just to have a bathroom, to have a kitchen [...] a laundry. All those things I had to drive away to a third-party place and pay for [...] It's such a saver to have all those things, because then you can get on with really living [...] You can exist in a car and a tent, but you can't live in a car and a tent.

Wesley Mission 

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Better employment possibilities

The circumstances of many of the people we interviewed had made it difficult to find jobs. Jessica had been in shelters for a long time. After moving into social housing, she started working two jobs.

Well, in a shelter there's no way I'd be able to work the hours I'm working [...] I could have gotten a job but the people that did have jobs at shelters, it was just hell for them because they're trying to get back on time for curfew [...] But having my space [...] I know where I can and can't work [...] I can work those fucking late shifts and don't have to worry.

Not all plain sailing

A few interviewees found the transition from homelessness challenging. Amy's experience indicates some tenants need continued support.

I was feeling really uncomfortable anxiety and stuff about it, but I knew it [moving into social housing] was for the best [...] I was so homeless and in need [...] You get used to being in that discomfort zone and living tough.

Now, Amy says:

I love it, I really do [...] This is definitely comfort zone for me and I really am very proud of this place and stuff.

In almost all cases, moving into social housing transformed our interviewees' lives. They were able to lead a decent life.

It's why governments in a country like Australia must strive to ensure everyone has decent, secure and affordable housing. Ultimately, the benefits for society far outweigh the costs.

** All names used in this article are pseudonyms.*