

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Professor Chris Chamberlain

Organisation Name:

Your position or role:

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Rough sleeping,Housing affordability,Public housing,Services,Family violence,Mental health,Indigenous people,Employment

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Academic & research ,Concerned citizen

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

My submission is attached (one file)

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

My submission is a research paper prepared for the Inquiry. There is an executive summary on page 1.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5e2a59612ad77-How Many Homeless in Victoria FINAL.pdf](#)

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Signature:

Chris Chamberlain

How Many Homeless People in Victoria?

**A research report prepared for the parliamentary
inquiry into homelessness in Victoria**

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Executive Summary

- 1 The two most important organisations that collect data on homeless people are Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). However, they define homelessness differently.
- 2 According to the AIHW there are two groups of homeless people: those who sleep rough and those who live in temporary accommodation. The ABS agree that the groups identified by the AIHW are homeless but contend that the AIHW definition is too narrow. According to the ABS, there were 24,825 homeless people in Victoria on Census night 2016, and people in overcrowded houses and flats were the largest group in the population. They accounted for 8,929 people (36 per cent of the homeless).
- 3 This paper finds that all of those in overcrowded dwellings were at an address where they had lived, or intended to live, for 6 months or longer. They had *permanent accommodation*. Eighty-nine per cent were living in houses and 10 per cent were living in flats.
- 4 About three-fifths (61 per cent) of those in overcrowded dwellings were living in houses and flats that were rented. Most were renting in the private market, typically from real estate agents.
- 5 Another one-third were living in houses or flats that were owned outright or being purchased. We conclude that the problem identified by the ABS is NOT homelessness. The problem identified by the ABS is overcrowding.
- 6 After excluding those in overcrowded dwellings, there were 15,890 homeless people in Victoria on Census night 2016. However, we found evidence of undercounting. In the case of people living in boarding houses, the evidence indicated that about 7,300 were missed by the Census. In the case of rough sleepers, the undercount was probably at least 1,100. However, it was not possible to estimate the undercount for those staying temporarily with friends or relatives. Overall, the evidence indicated that the homeless figure was at least 24,300.
- 7 The report concludes by drawing attention to some limitations of Census data.

How Many Homeless People in Victoria?

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses two issues. Part One reviews two 'official' definitions of homelessness that count the homeless population quite differently. Part Two asks: 'How many homeless people in Victoria?'

The first definition is used by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2016) to ascertain whether people using specialist homeless services are homeless or not. The second definition is used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2012), particularly for counting homeless people on Census night. This is known as the ABS statistical definition of homelessness.

According to the ABS (2018), there were 24,825 homeless people in Victoria on Census night 2016, and people in overcrowded houses and flats were the largest group in the population. They accounted for 36 per cent of the homeless. In contrast, the AIHW (2016) definition states that people living in overcrowded houses and flats are NOT homeless. How can the two most important organisations that collect data on homeless people come to such different conclusions? We begin by explaining both definitions. Then we ask, 'How many homeless people in Victoria?'

PART 1: TWO DEFINITIONS OF HOMELESSNESS

The AIHW (2016, pp.106-107) identifies two groups of homeless people. First, there are those who sleep in non-conventional accommodation. Non-conventional accommodation includes sleeping in parks, squatting in abandoned buildings, staying in cars or railway carriages, sleeping in improvised dwellings, or living in the long grass, as well as literally sleeping rough (AIHW 2016, p.107). This description equates to the notion of primary homelessness used in the well-known cultural definition of homelessness (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992).¹

¹ The Australian Government (2008) report, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, used the cultural definition of homelessness. The report stated:

The most widely accepted definition of homelessness in Australia describes three kinds of homelessness:

- Primary homelessness, such as sleeping rough or living in an improvised dwelling
- Secondary homelessness including staying with friends or relatives and with no other usual address, and people staying in specialist homeless services
- Tertiary homelessness including people living in boarding houses or caravan parks with no secure lease and no private facilities, both short and long-term (Homelessness Taskforce 2008, p.3).

The ABS also used the cultural definition prior to 2011 (see: Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008, Ch.1).

The second group of homeless people are those who live in temporary accommodation due to a *lack of other options*. This includes: (1) people who live in refuges, crisis shelters and other forms of emergency accommodation; (2) people who live temporarily with friends or relatives because they have no accommodation of their own; (3) young people who couch surf; (4) people who live in boarding houses and caravan parks on a short-term basis; and (5) people in emergency accommodation arranged by specialist homeless agencies (for example, in hotels and motels). This description equates to the notion of secondary homelessness, also used in the cultural definition of homelessness (AIHW 2016, p.107).

The ABS agrees that the groups identified by the AIHW are homeless, but it contends that the AIHW definition is too narrow. The ABS (2012, p.7) begins by asking the question, 'What does it mean to have a home?' According to the ABS, for people to have a home, they should have 'a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. Homelessness is therefore a lack of one or more of the elements that represent home' (ABS 2012, p.11). Thus, the ABS also includes people living in conventional houses and flats as homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate (does not comply with health and safety codes, building and zoning regulations etc.); or
- they have no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- the dwelling does not provide them with personal living space whereby they can maintain privacy and safety. This category includes people who experience domestic violence and those in overcrowded dwellings (ABS 2012, pp.11-15).

However, the 2016 Census did not gather enough information to count those in inadequate houses, nor to identify renters who do not have security of tenure, nor to count those experiencing domestic violence (ABS 2018). Thus, the ABS only counted those in overcrowded dwellings.

The ABS use the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) to measure overcrowding. The CNOS assesses the number of bedrooms required by a household taking into account the age, sex and relationships of household members. The CNOS uses the following rules:

- there should be no more than two persons per bedroom;
- children less than 5 years of age of different sexes may reasonably share a bedroom;
- children 5 years of age or older of opposite sex should have separate bedrooms;

- children less than 18 years of age of the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom;
- single household members aged 18 years and older should have a separate bedroom, as should parents or couples; and
- a lone person household may reasonably occupy a bedsitter (ABS 2018, p.28).

This seems like a reasonable set of rules to measure overcrowding. The ABS then made the arbitrary decision that households requiring four extra bedrooms were homeless, whereas households requiring three extra bedrooms were housed. There was no convincing rationale for this decision.

Table 1: ABS estimate of the homeless population, 2016 Census data

	Victoria		Australia	
	N	%	N	%
Persons in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	1,118	5	8,197	7
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	7,175	29	21,238	18
Persons staying temporarily with other households	3,078	12	17,722	15
Persons living in boarding houses	4,411	18	17,500	15
Persons in other temporary lodgings	108	0*	673	1
Persons in severely crowded dwellings	8,929	36	51,066	44
	24,825	100	116,396	100

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder.

*Less than 0.5%

According to the ABS, there were 24,825 homeless people in Victoria on Census night 2016, and people in severely overcrowded dwellings were the largest group in the population. Table 1 shows that there were 8,929 people in overcrowded houses and flats, compared with 7,175 people in supported accommodation for the homeless, 4,411 living in boarding houses, 3,078 staying temporarily with other households, and 1,118 sleeping rough.

Table 2: Tenure of persons in severely crowded dwellings

	Victoria		Australia	
	N	%	N	%
Owned/mortgage	2,816	31	11,127	22
Rented	5,407	61	36,541	71
Occupied rent free	267	3	1,342	3
Other tenure type	198	2	976	2
Not stated	244	3	1,100	2
	8,932	100	51,086	100

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder.

All of those in overcrowded dwellings were at an address where they had lived, or intended to live, for 6 months or longer. They had permanent accommodation. Most (89 per cent) were living in houses and 10 per cent were living in flats. Having worked in the homeless area for many years, we know that homeless people often move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another, others go to emergency accommodation or boarding houses, and some people sleep rough. Homeless people do NOT live permanently in houses and flats.

Table 2 shows that of the 8,900 people in overcrowded dwellings, 61 per cent (5,400 people) were living in houses and flats that were rented. Most (91 per cent) were renting in the private market, typically from real estate agents. Three-quarters (73 per cent) were in properties with rents of \$300 per week or more.

About one-third of those in overcrowded dwellings were in houses or flats that were owned (2,800 people). Twenty-nine per cent of this group were in properties that were owned outright and 71 per cent were in properties that were being purchased. Apparently, some homeless people have mortgages.

We conclude that the problem identified by the ABS is NOT homelessness. The problem identified by the ABS is overcrowding.

PART 2: HOW MANY HOMELESS PEOPLE IN VICTORIA?

After excluding those in overcrowded dwellings, Table 3 shows that there were 15,890 homeless people in Victoria on Census night 2016. There were 7,175 people in supported accommodation for the homeless; about 4,400 people were living in boarding houses; 3,080 were staying with other households; and there were just over 1,100 people sleeping rough.

Table 3: Number of homeless, Victoria (revised), 2016 Census data

	Victoria	
	N	%
Persons in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	1,118	7
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	7,175	45
Persons staying temporarily with other households	3,078	19
Persons living in boarding houses	4,411	28
Persons in other temporary lodgings	108	1
	15,890	100

The operational categories used in Table 3 are similar to the operational categories used in the cultural definition of homelessness (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008, pp. vii-viii). The cultural definition is broader than the AIHW definition because it includes longer-term residents of boarding houses in the homeless population, whereas the AIHW definition excludes people who have lived in boarding houses for 12 weeks or longer (AIHW 2017, p.12). However, the cultural definition is narrower than the ABS definition because it excludes people in overcrowded houses.

How credible are the figures in Table 3? Next, we identify three groups where there was undercounting. The groups are: (1) persons staying with other households; (2) those sleeping rough; and (3) people living in boarding houses. The undercount was at least 8,400 people.

Persons staying temporarily with other households

The first group that were undercounted were persons staying temporarily with other households. To be counted as homeless, a person staying with another household must report that they have *no usual address* on their Census form. If a person staying with another household reports that they have a usual address elsewhere, then they will be classified as a 'visitor' to that dwelling. The ABS notes that three groups of homeless people are likely to be undercounted because they report a usual address elsewhere (ABS 2018, *Explanatory Notes*, pp.5-8).

The first group are homeless young people aged 12 to 18 who are 'couch surfing'. The person filling out the Census form may report a usual address for the couch surfer because the young person has not disclosed they cannot return home. Alternatively, the householder may assume that the person will return home and therefore record that they have a usual address.

A second group who are likely to be undercounted are women (and children) escaping domestic violence. Some victims of family violence fear being recorded on any official forms. Other women are recorded on Census night, but they do not disclose that they have 'no usual address'. Some women do not record 'no usual address' because they feel this entails stigma. Others reason that they have a 'usual address' even if they can't live there at present.

The third group who are likely to be undercounted are Indigenous people. They approach the 'usual address' question from a different cultural frame of reference. For Indigenous people, it is not appropriate to record 'no usual address' when they are

staying with extended family because 'home' is understood more broadly than in Western culture. Thus, Indigenous people may answer the usual address question in a way that masks their homelessness (ABS 2018, *Explanatory Notes*, p.7).

We can be certain that all three groups were undercounted, but it is not possible to estimate the number who were missed.

Persons in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out

The second group who were undercounted are persons in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out. First, we discuss how rough sleepers were counted in the mainstream Census; then we discuss the ABS homeless enumeration strategy.

Mainstream Census

Traditionally, the Census relied on a large workforce of Census collectors (29,000 in 2011) who delivered and collected Census forms from households across the country. Census collectors had responsibility for small local areas. Sometimes Census collectors were locals who knew where rough sleepers might be located and they made sure these people were counted. In other cases, householders alerted their Census collector to the fact that there were people sleeping rough in the neighbourhood. This 'local knowledge' was invaluable for counting rough sleepers.

In 2016, Census collectors only visited about 25 per cent of households. This is because the ABS developed a National Address Register for the 2016 Census which enabled them to mail out of Census material (ABS 2018, *Appendix 3: Census Procedures*, p.1-2). For the first time, 80 per cent of dwellings received a letter with information on how to fill out their Census form online. Fifty-nine per cent of households chose this option. These households never saw a Census collector (ABS 2018, *Appendix 3: Census Procedures*, pp.1-2).

The Census instruction letter also contained information on how to request a Census form. Paper forms were mailed to these households with instructions how to mail them back. Overall, close to 75 per cent of households never saw a Census collector in 2016. This removed an important channel for gathering information about rough sleepers.

Homeless enumeration strategy

In 2016, the ABS strategy for counting rough sleepers focused on:

... 'hot spots' using information received from service providers. ABS then worked closely with services and accommodation providers in awareness raising and local engagement in those

areas and recruited specialist field staff to help count people sleeping rough. (ABS 2018, *Appendix 3: Census Procedures*, pp.2-3).

The ABS strategy relied on service providers identifying 'hot spots'. However, the 2014 ABS General Social Survey found that 67 per cent of homeless people had NOT sought assistance from services while they were homeless (ABS 2015, Table 17.3).

The ABS also relied on field staff counting people who sleep rough. However, rough sleepers often hide away to escape the cold or because they fear being attacked. Invisibility is often a survival strategy for rough sleepers (Wellesley Institute 2009). Figure 1 identifies seven locations where it is difficult to count people sleeping rough.

Instruction manuals on street counts agree that volunteers should never enter empty buildings where people might be squatting (Sydney, City of: 2017; Inner Melbourne Action Plan 2018). Melbourne also has many large parks where people sleep rough. It is not safe for Census collectors to search poorly-lit parks in the early hours of the morning. Melbourne also has many poorly-lit laneways where rough sleepers can hide away behind bins or dumpsters. Census collectors are likely to miss some people who are hidden away to escape the cold. In regional centres and country towns, people can hide away behind houses or shops where there are few lights. Others may not come to the attention of local service providers because they are camping in the bush.

Figure 1: Places where it is difficult to count people sleeping rough

- 1 Back laneways, alleys where people can hide behind bins (poorly lit)
- 2 Large parks where people can hide away (e.g. Albert Park, Royal Park)
- 3 Empty or abandoned building where people may be squatting
- 4 Railway carriages or trams that are no longer in use for the night
- 5 Behind buildings, houses or shops, particularly in suburban areas
- 6 Stairwells in private buildings such as shopping centres or blocks of flats
- 7 People camping in the bush on the outskirts of country towns

The ABS counted 1,118 rough sleepers in Victoria on Census night, but it is obvious that this was an undercount. A national study found that 59 per cent of homeless people have slept rough at least once (Chamberlain and Johnson 2015, pp.450-451), whereas the ABS report that only 7 per cent of homeless people were

rough sleepers on Census night. Clearly, the Census underestimates the problem. We estimate that the number of rough sleepers could easily have been double the figure identified in Table 3.

People in boarding house

The third group who were undercounted were people in boarding houses. Traditionally, boarding houses provided single room accommodation and some meals, whereas rooming houses only provided single room accommodation. However, these days ‘the terms boarding house and rooming house are used interchangeably’ (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, p.2) and we follow this convention.

According to the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Regulations 2009*, a rooming house is a building where ‘one or more rooms is available for rent and the total number of people who occupy those rooms is four or more’ (Department of Human Services 2011, p.13). Smaller boarding houses (known as Class 1b dwellings) have up to 12 occupants and larger rooming houses (known as Class 3 dwelling) have more than 12 occupants. These days, most boarding houses are small with up to 12 tenants (Chamberlain 2012; Goodman et al. 2013, Ch.3).

Under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008)* in Victoria, all rooming houses must be registered with local councils. The Office of Housing collates this information on a central register which can be accessed online. There are 40 local councils in Victoria and information on the number of registered rooming houses is available for each municipality. There can be no doubt that these dwellings are rooming houses because each dwelling is inspected by council staff to see that it conforms to relevant public health and planning legislation.

Table 4: Number of boarding houses (ABS count) and number of rooming houses, Victoria

	ABS Census count		Rooming house register*		% identified
	N	%	N	%	%
Inner Melbourne (Melbourne, Port Phillip & Yarra)	83	41	123	10	67
Remainder of Melbourne	100	49	924	76	11
Regional Victoria	6	3	171	14	4
Missing data	14	7	0	0	n/a
Total	203	100	1,218	100	17

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder.

* Accessed 11 April 2018

Table 4 shows that the ABS counted 203 boarding houses in Victoria whereas the rooming house register recorded 1,218 properties (accessed 11 April 2018). According to the ABS, 41 per cent of rooming houses were in Inner Melbourne, whereas according to the rooming house register it was 10 per cent. Table 4 shows that the ABS identified: 67 per cent of the boarding houses in Inner Melbourne (83 out of 123); 11 per cent of boarding houses in suburban Melbourne (100 out of 924); and 4 per cent of those in regional Victoria (6 out of 171).

It appears that the ABS mainly counted people in traditional boarding houses which are disproportionately located in Inner Melbourne (Department of Human Services 2011, p.17; Goodman et al. 2013, pp.23-25). These large, older-style rooming houses usually accommodate 20 or more people. They are easy to recognise from their external appearance and there is often a sign outside indicating the use of the building. On average the boarding houses identified by the ABS had 21.7 tenants.

Research in 2011 indicated that many of the rooming houses in suburban Melbourne were family homes that had been converted into rooming houses:

A three-bedroom property with a lounge room and dining room can become a five-bedroom property if all five rooms are used as bedrooms. If the lounge room and dining room are large, it may be possible to turn this into a seven-bedroom property, by erecting partitions ... There are also 'larger' suburban rooming houses. Field visits revealed that some were two storey dwellings that had multiple bedrooms. Others were rambling, single storey houses that had outbuildings (Chamberlain 2012, p.37).

The average size of a boarding house in suburban Melbourne was eight bedrooms (Chamberlain 2012, p.19).

There were 1,015 boarding houses missed by the Census. If we assume that they had, on average, eight bedrooms and were 90 per cent full, then about 7,300 boarding house residents were missed by the Census ($1,015 \times 8 \times 90/100 = 7,308$).

CONCLUSION

This paper began by noting that the ABS and AIHW use different definitions of homelessness. The AIHW identifies two groups of homeless people: those who sleep rough and those who live in temporary accommodation. The ABS agree that the groups identified by the AIHW are homeless but contend that the AIHW definition is too narrow. According to the ABS, there were 24,825 homeless people in Victoria on Census night, and people in overcrowded houses and flats were the largest group in the population.

They accounted for 8,929 people. However, the evidence indicated that 61 per cent of those in overcrowded dwellings were living permanently in rented properties. Another 31 per cent were living in houses or flats that were owned outright or owned with a mortgage. The problem identified by the ABS was NOT homelessness. The problem was overcrowding.

This paper also asked: 'How many homeless people in Victoria?' After excluding those in overcrowded dwellings, Table 3 showed that there were 15,890 homeless people in Victoria. However, there was evidence of undercounting. In the case of people living in boarding houses, the evidence indicated that about 7,300 were missed by the Census. In the case of rough sleepers, the undercount was probably at least 1,100. However, it was not possible to estimate the undercount for those staying temporarily with friends or relatives. Overall, the evidence indicates that the homeless figure was at least 24,300.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the Census count is an estimate of the homeless population on one night. It is not the case, as Mission Australia (2018) claims, that: 'That there are 116,427 people homeless in Australia on any given night' (Mission Australia, 2018, p.1). On the contrary, the number of homeless people goes up and down as people move in and out of homelessness. Moreover, it is important to remember that the last Census was carried out in August 2016, and it is quite possible that the numbers have changed since that time.

Appendix 1: A Note on Boarding Houses

The 2016 Census reported that that 10 per cent of boarding house residents were university students or technical and further education (TAFE) students. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of these young people were overseas students, and most (75 per cent) reported an income below \$500 per week. However, we think the 2016 Census missed many boarding houses that had students in them. For example, the Census identified four boarding houses in the City of Whitehorse which is close to Deakin University's main campus. However, the rooming house register recorded 157 boarding houses in Whitehorse. The Census did not identify any boarding houses in the City of Monash which includes Monash University's Clayton campus. However, the rooming house register recorded 208 boarding houses. We have anecdotal evidence that there were overseas students in many of these boarding houses. The number of students in boarding houses is probably a lot higher than 10 per cent.

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