

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

'It's soul-destroying': how people on a housing wait list of 175,000 describe their years of waiting

Published: August 8, 2023 6.02am AEST

Alan Morris

Alan Morris is a Friend of The Conversation.

Professor, Institute for Public Policy and Governance, University of Technology Sydney



Shutterstock

Nationally, about 175,000 households are on the social housing waiting list. An individual usually has to be in “greatest need” to get on the list. Even then, being listed does not mean you will be given the keys to a home any time soon.

This is especially so if an applicant is put on the general waiting list and not the priority list. In New South Wales in June 2022, for example, 57,550 were on the waiting list: 51,031 on the general waiting list and 6,519 on the priority list. The NSW government website indicates people on the general waiting list can expect to wait ten years or more in most locations.

Even people on the priority list can wait a long time, especially if they have special requirements, such as housing with no stairs.

For our research, we interviewed people on waiting lists in NSW, Queensland and Tasmania. Thirty interviewees were on the general waiting list and 49 on the priority list. The interviews covered various themes, but all of the interviewees were asked: “What words would you use to describe your wait for social housing?” This article focuses on their responses to this question.

Households on public housing waiting lists in Australia

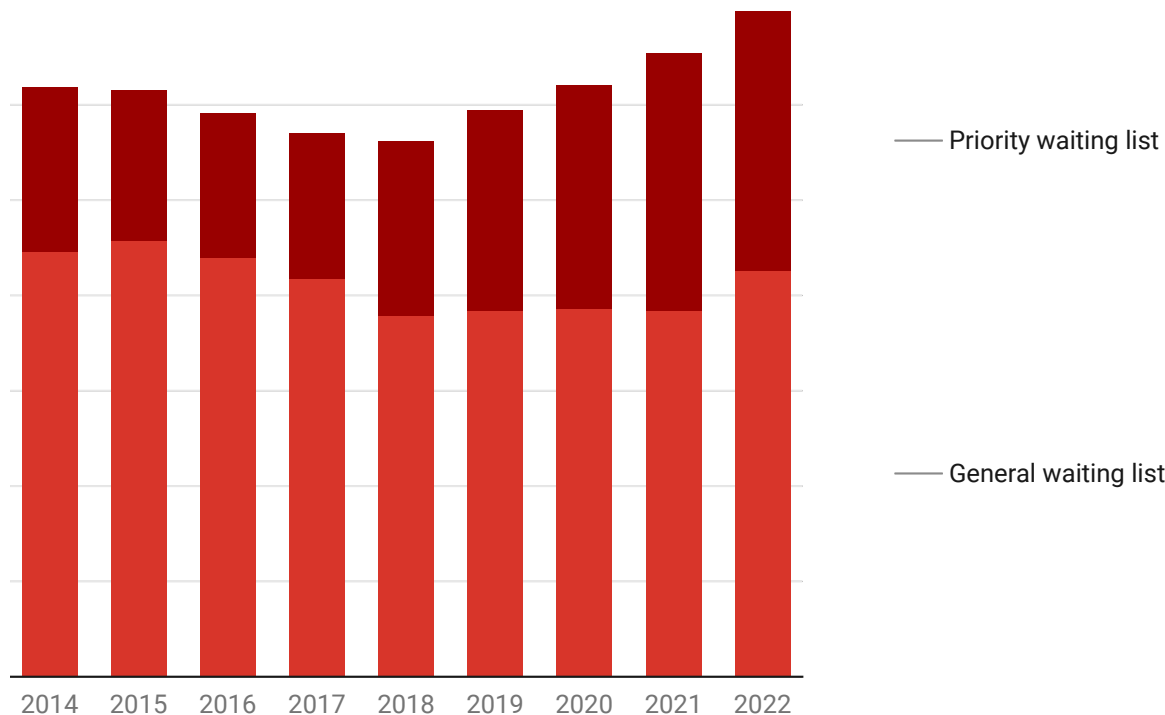


Chart: The Conversation • Source: [Housing assistance in Australia/AIHW](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Read more: Yes, the 1.5 million Australians getting rent assistance need an increase, but more public housing is the lasting fix for the crisis

Lives on hold

Most interviewees found the endless waiting extremely challenging. It commonly left them feeling powerless, extremely stressed and unable to plan ahead.

Tania* in Queensland, who had escaped domestic violence, powerfully captured the perception of her life being put on hold:

It sucks. [...] They [state government housing department] just give you no answers [...] It's stopped our whole life. Running from him [her ex-partner] was hard enough, but asking them [the housing department] for help is ten times worse [...] They don't care. It's pure and simple. They don't care. Yeah, as I said, it's like jail and they're the screws, whatever they're called. They're the ones that run the jail.

Read more: 'I left with the kids and ended up homeless with them': the nightmare of housing wait lists for people fleeing domestic violence

Zeynep, in her mid-70s, had been on the waiting list in Queensland for 13 years. Her response was particularly expansive:

Yes, I've got a few words. Frustration, disappointment, nerve-racking, just being beside myself sometimes. Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to keep moving and packing and finding places? It's soul-destroying, really.

A traumatising wait

Single parents found the waiting particularly hard. Thea was in a shelter in Tasmania with her three children. The uncertainty of waiting had shaken her confidence.

It's been painful [...] My anxiety has gone through the roof. It's affected my mental health [...] It makes me feel like I'm not good enough as a parent because I can't provide a stable home for my children [...] If it was just me, I could survive. But when I've got three little people that I've got to care for and provide for, that's when it gets hard.

Kylie's description was similar. She has a child with a disability and had been on the NSW general waiting list for several years.

It's quite nerve-wracking. It's quite depressing just for the uncertainty of everything, you know. I feel like so many thoughts that I have in my head I'm just trying to pick the best one. I would say [...] it's kind of traumatic as well, quite traumatic [...] why can't you support me to better my life in order for a child to have a better life and break that cycle, that generational cycle of poverty.

Read more: Focus on managing social housing waiting lists is failing low-income households

In Tasmania, Basma and her three children were living in crowded transitional housing attached to a women's shelter. She also described the waiting as traumatic.

It's trauma. It's made my health go down. My children and I are always angry. [...] It's terrible.

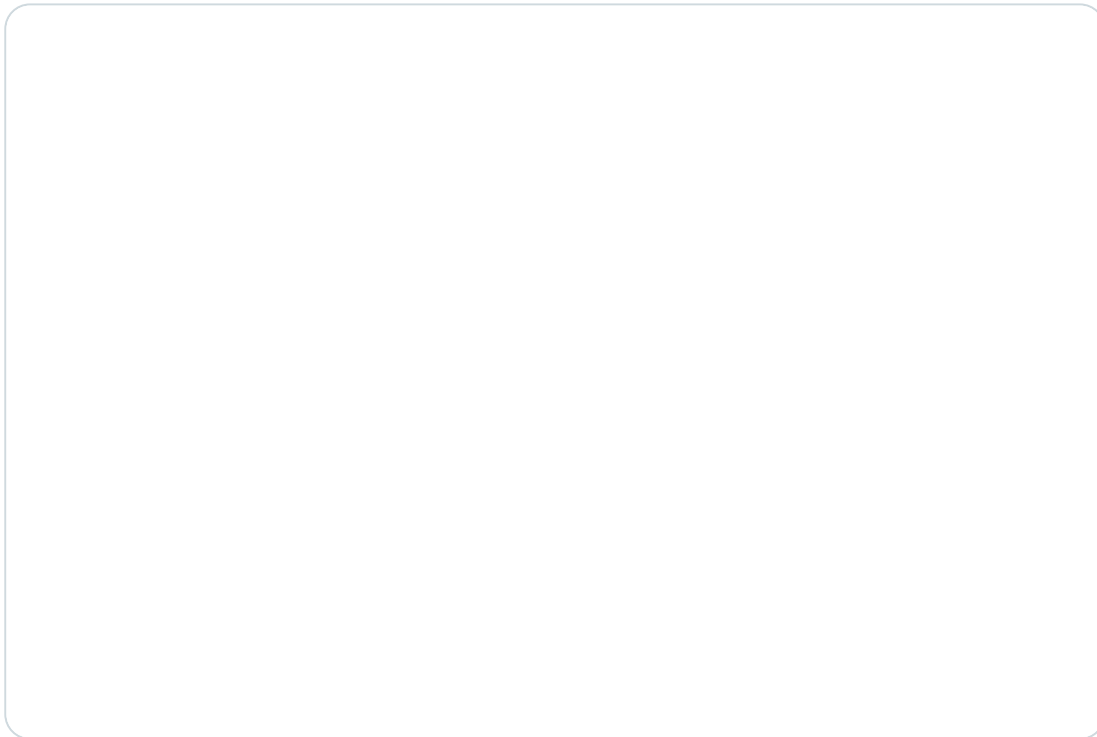
HOMELESS AUSTRALIA

@Homeless_AU · [Follow](#)



More Australians forced out of homes as rental housing affordability crisis rages on, Anglicare report shows.

[abc.net.au/news/2023-04-2...](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-2...)



10:36 AM · Jul 28, 2023



Reply



Share

[Read more on Twitter](#)

Read more: 'Getting onto the wait list is a battle in itself': insiders on what it takes to get social housing

Losing self-esteem and hope

Interviewees said the endless waiting affected how they saw themselves. Jacqui was living in her car in regional NSW.

I think it just it robs you of your pride and your dignity, your peace of mind and it leaves you psychologically exhausted [...] being on that waiting list thinking that is today the day [...] and then the call doesn't come. It is like that loss of, you know, self-esteem and loss of hope [...] So I think my words [to describe the wait] is my continual shame. You feel shame every day and other than that [...] you have to deal with a loss of control over [...] your position on the wait list. You have no control over anything.

Many described a sense of hopelessness. Geoff in Sydney has to use a wheelchair and the house he was renting was totally unsuitable. He was despondent about ever getting suitable housing:

I think the word is hopeless. You feel hopeless because you've done as much as you can to get the housing [department] to expedite your application, assuming that they have approved my application for priority housing, but there's no interpretation of that as to what they mean by the priority.

Kym Mercer

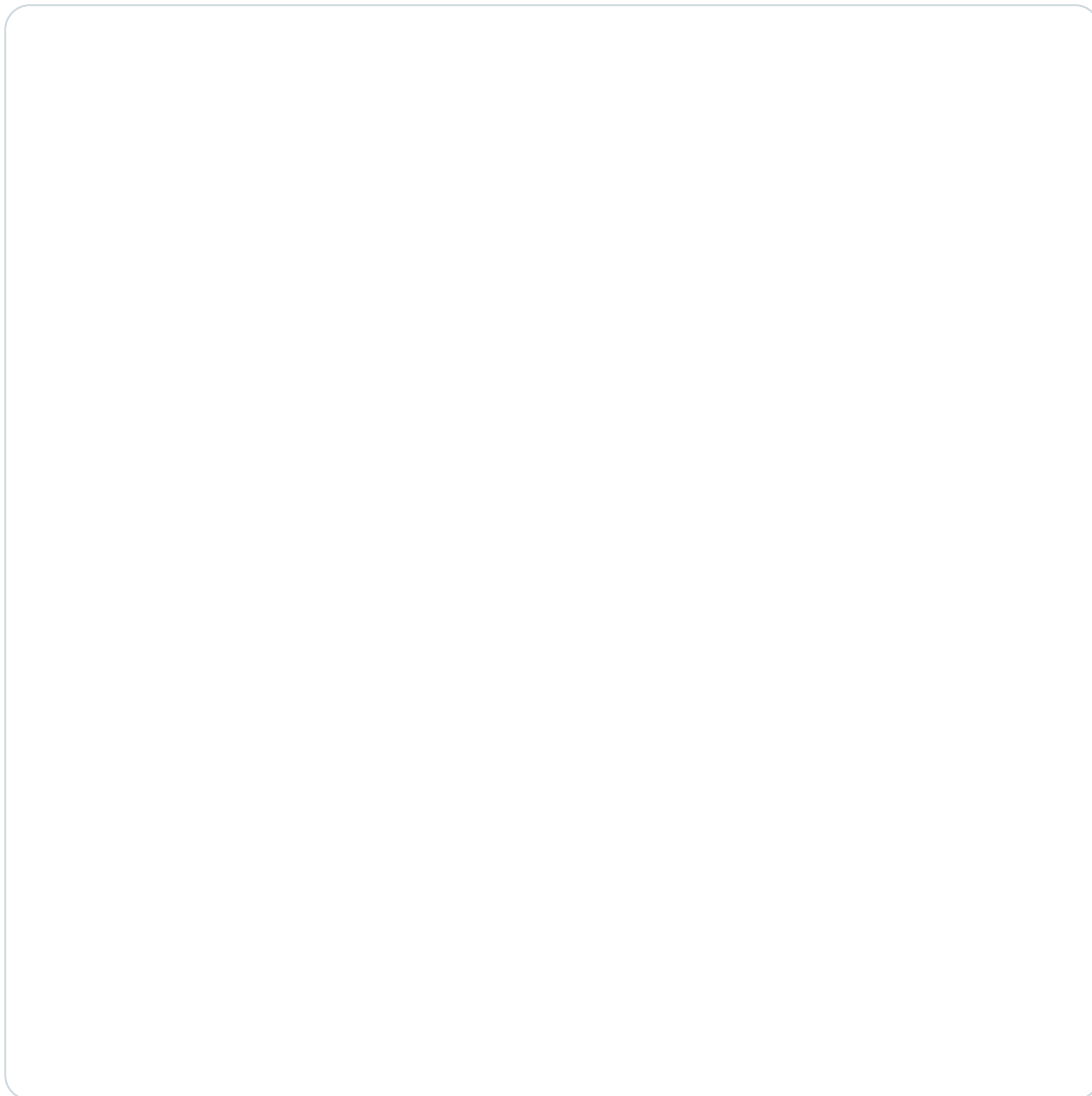
@kym_mercer · [Follow](#)



Again not a single wheelchair accessible rental available in South Australia.

The whole state not just Metro Adelaide. 4.5years and still waiting on cat1 waitlist

[#HousingCrisis](#) [#housing](#) [#Disability](#) [#ASD](#) [#wheelchair](#)
[#HousingForAll](#) [#accessibility](#)



11:31 PM · Feb 11, 2020



1 Reply Share

[Read more on Twitter](#)

Read more: 'I've been on the waiting list for over 20 years': why social housing suitable for people with disabilities is desperately needed

After 20 months on the priority list, Lily was blunt about the impact on her sense of self:

Yeah, you feel deficient. You feel forgotten. You feel really forgotten, yeah, and if you ring up and it's about a number and even once they've got your file open I can't remember being addressed by my name very much [...] You feel a bit like an outcast.

Josie also talked about being made to feel like a second-class citizen:

Demoralising, because you've been trying to do the right thing and do everything that you're asked. You try so many different approaches and you're getting brick walls everywhere. And demeaning, because your situation is not properly recognised or catered for. So you almost start feeling like well, we can't help you, but if you were good enough you wouldn't be in this situation. [It's] a nightmare, dreadful. I've never experienced anything like this before. Like never, ever, ever.

Clearly, the long wait for social housing is devastating for many people. Day after day of not knowing makes everyday life extremely challenging. The shocking aspect is that the huge shortage of social housing means a substantial proportion of people on the general waiting list could be waiting forever.

** Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of participants in the study.*