Homelessness policy briefing

I’m Hal Pawson at the University of New South Wales, and in this clip I’ll present a short briefing on the homelessness policy context in Australia.

Much as in the UK, the past few weeks in Australia have seen extraordinary housing policy innovation and emergency spending. State governments have suddenly found tens of millions of dollars for crash programs to rehouse rough sleepers into hotels and motels on an astonishing scale. Since March an estimated 5,000 people have been rescued into temporary shelter across Australia. Alongside this, panicked by the vision of abrupt mass unemployment triggering a national rent arrears crisis, state governments across the country have rapidly enacted evictions moratoria.

The backdrop to this is Australia’s experience of the past 10-20 years, a period when we’ve seen rising rates of homelessness and rental stress. According to the most widely accepted benchmark – statistics generated by the five-yearly census – the point-in-time homelessness total rose by 30% to 116,000 in the decade to 2016. Another way of gauging the growing scale of the problem is the recent trend of expenditure on homelessness services – rising by 7% per year in real terms over the past few years.
The prevailing official view in Australia – even in conservative governments – accepts a degree of state responsibility for housing outcomes when it comes to the most disadvantaged. Maintaining a small social housing sector to help meet extreme need – including homelessness – is generally seen as an unavoidable necessity. This is a nuance to the broader conventional thinking that housing is a commodity that should generally be left to the market.

Even before the COVID crisis, it’s also fair to acknowledge, some state governments were already embarked on stepped-up action to reduce street homelessness. New South Wales pledged in 2019 to halve rough sleeping by 2025 and formally signed up to the Institute for Global Homelessness model as a means to do so. The Government of South Australia is also on board as one of the IGH Vanguard Cities homelessness reduction group. These are in my view no substitute for the abandoned national commitment to halve homelessness, more broadly, within a decade made by the Rudd Government in 2008. But even more narrowly-defined ambitions by individual states indicate new and welcome policy moves.

The past few years have also seen growing Australian interest in new homelessness management concepts including the functional zero model and Housing First. Allegiance to Housing First is nowadays widely claimed by government agencies and NGOs, alike. But the intensifying shortage of
affordable rental housing that has affected most of Australia over the past
decade seriously compromises the potential efficacy of the approach. A recent
paper reviewing Australian HF projects concluded that: ‘...in all the
programmes examined, the aim of providing immediate housing was
undermined by lack of quick access to affordable housing, with some unable to
access even temporary accommodation’.

So, to come back to the present, we now have a situation where there are
thousands of people temporarily rescued from street sleeping and
homelessness shelters, safely housed in hotels and motels for the time being,
but with no clear exit strategy for the point when funding runs dry. Although
no commitments have been made, it is very hard to envisage governments
overseeing a mass return to the streets.

It might be expected that social housing could take the strain of providing
move-on housing, but this is a sector only a quarter the size of its UK
counterpart. Since the 1990s, as a proportion of all housing, it has shrunk from
6% to a meagre 4%. More importantly, relative to population, the number of
properties let by public housing agencies and not-for-profit community
housing providers has halved over this time.
In most jurisdictions the sector therefore lacks the capacity to offer long-term housing to all the rough sleepers and others currently in hotels. And although there is a growing clamour for a major social housing investment stimulus program to kickstart economic recovery, the Federal Government has not yet given any indication of support for such a plan. And even if approved, such an initiative offers no quick solution to the near-immediate hotel move-on housing challenge. Some are arguing for this to be addressed through a rapid spot-acquisition program, but my own view is that large-scale head-leasing of privately owned properties is a much more realistic option.

Until now, there also seems to have been little recognition that we are likely to face a new wave of homelessness in coming months as severe economic recession pushes tens of thousands of vulnerable renters – and even home owners – into housing crisis.

Even as we speak, while the current employment protection program remains in place, and jobless people are receiving temporarily boosted dole payments, these programs exclude millions of non-permanent citizens and casual workers. Many among these excluded groups are surely even now being pushed towards a hazardous housing position by sudden loss of income in shut-down sectors like hospitality and tourism. When, later this year, crisis income support measures are ended, and with them, short term evictions
moratoriums, there must be a huge risk that a fresh homelessness spike will present Australian governments with a new policy challenge.

The hope must be that the pandemic housing crisis acts as a wake-up call for governments that have until now resolutely resisted the case that rising homelessness is a symptom of much more fundamental flaws in the operation of our housing system. This needs to include a recognition that a more proactive role for government in that system is essential not just as an emergency response, but as a long-term commitment.