

Homelessness on the North Coast

November 2023

About this report

This report was prepared by the Planning Team, Healthy North Coast and published in December 2023.

Acknowledgement of Country

Healthy North Coast acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands across our region, which includes the Githabul, Bundjalung, Yaegl, Gumbayngirr, Dunghutti and Birpai nations. We pay respect to the Elders past, present and on their journey. We recognise these lands were never ceded and acknowledge the continuation of culture and connection to land, sky and sea. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First Peoples and honour the rich diversity of the world's oldest living culture.

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Acronyms

| | |
|------|---------------------------------------|
| ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| ACHP | Aboriginal Community Housing Provider |
| AHO | Aboriginal Housing Office |
| CHP | Community Housing Provider |
| DCJ | Department of Communities and Justice |
| DFV | Domestic and Family Violence |
| LGA | Local Government Area |
| SHA | State Housing Authority |
| SHS | Specialist Homelessness Service |

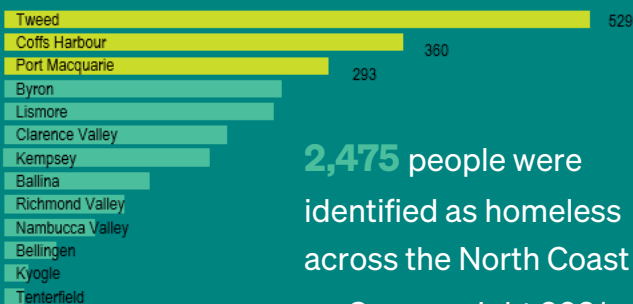
1. Snapshot of Homelessness on the North Coast



In the 2023 Street Count **Byron** LGA had the largest number **(300)** of rough sleepers in NSW.



Nearly **half** of all people counted as sleeping rough in NSW during the 2023 Street Count were in the North Coast region.



2,475 people were identified as homeless across the North Coast on Census night 2021.

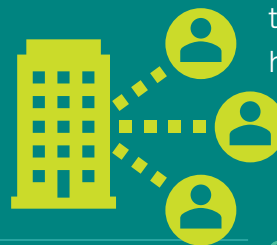


9,833 people were supported by specialist homelessness services across the North Coast in 2021, with nearly 1 in 2 people already experiencing homelessness at start of service.



Nearly **3** in every **10** people aged over 55 who identified as homeless were in Tweed.

532 children 18 years and under are experiencing homelessness, with 88 in Coffs Harbour.



3 in **10** people were temporarily staying with other households

2 in **10** were living in severely overcrowded dwellings.

2 in **10** were living in supported accommodation.



On the Anglicare Snapshot weekend of 18 March 2023:

- no houses were affordable for a person on the **Jobseeker** payment, this includes share houses
- a **single parent** without work could not afford any of the houses advertised
- a person on **Youth Allowance** looking for a share house couldn't afford a single house.



360 First Nations people identified as homeless on Census night, with **Tweed** having highest number **(66)**.

2. Homelessness on the North Coast

2.1. Background

Homelessness is a complex and pervasive issue that affects individuals and families across the North Coast region. The Australian Bureau of Statistics considers a person homeless when their current living arrangement meets any of the following criteria:

- is a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- has no tenure, or their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- they have no control or/and access to space for social relations.¹

Homelessness can affect anyone, as it arises from a combination of individual characteristics and structural factors. People may become homeless due to a variety of personal challenges, including unemployment, family and domestic violence, low education attainment, mental health issues, trauma, substance misuse, and limited access to social and affordable housing. Sudden life changes, such as the loss of a loved one or job loss, can trigger homelessness.²³ Structural factors that influence homelessness include the characteristics of the housing and labour market and poverty. The North Coast housing market has been impacted by the pandemic (regional migration) and other natural disasters in recent years. With 2,000 homes on the North Coast deemed uninhabitable following the March 2022 floods.⁴

Access to safe, affordable and secure housing is an important social determinant of health. The absence of housing or substandard housing can have negative effects on the health and wellbeing of individuals and families.⁵ Housing costs (rent, mortgage repayments) are a major component of household spending. Housing costs have been increasing and rental vacancies decreasing on the North Coast. This has placed more households in housing stress and insecurity or homelessness where households are unable to secure housing that meets their needs.

Individuals experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homeless are among the most socially and economically disadvantaged in Australia.⁶ They experience greater exposure to violence and victimisation, long term unemployment and acute chronic illness including heart disease, infectious diseases, alcohol and drug addiction and mental illness.⁷

People experiencing homelessness experience higher rates of disability, chronic illness and premature death than the general population.⁸ Homelessness is associated with poor health outcomes through:

¹ ABS (2012) 4922.0 - Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness, 2012 (abs.gov.au) accessed September 2023.

² Johnson G, Scutella R, Tseng Y and Wood G (2015) Entries and exits from homelessness: a dynamic analysis of the relationship between structural conditions and individual characteristics- external site opens in new window, *AHURI Final Report No. 248*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

³ ABS (2012) 4922.0 - Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness, 2012 (abs.gov.au) accessed September 2023.

⁴ NCOSS (2022) [Aftershock: Addressing the Economic and Social Costs of the Pandemic and Natural Disasters, Report Three – Housing Security](#)

⁵ AIHW (2023) [Australia's welfare 2023: data insights](#), accessed 25 October 2023. doi:10.25816/43wp-h749

⁶ AIHW (2021) [Health of people experiencing homelessness](#), AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 25 October 2023.

⁷ Fornaro, M., Dragioti, E., De Prisco, M., Billeci, M., Mondin, A. M., Calati, R., Smith, L., Hatcher, S., Kaluziński, M., Fiedorowicz, J. G., Solmi, M., De Bartolomeis, A., & Carvalho, A. F. (2022). Homelessness and health-related outcomes: An umbrella review of observational studies and randomized controlled trials. *BMC Medicine*, 20(1). accessed: October 2023

⁸ *ibid*

- **Health problems as precursors to homelessness:** some health issues such as mental health disorders, can reduce a person's ability to gain and maintain employment and basic life skills, potentially leading to homelessness.
- **Health problems resulting from homelessness:** including poor nutrition, dental issues, and depression, as individuals often lack stable living conditions and access to proper healthcare.
- **Barriers to accessing healthcare:** due to the absence of a Medicare Card, transportation challenges, and difficulties in maintaining appointments.⁹

These health challenges are likely to be exacerbated due to access issues as the rates of bulk billing decrease across the region.

2.2. Purpose

This paper provides an analysis of quantitative open-source data, research, and studies on homelessness on the North Coast. The purpose is to identify key trends, causes, challenges, and potential solutions that can inform future planning for Healthy North Coast. The Census was held on 10 August 2021, when various Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were in place such as restricting movement between states. During this time the NSW government worked with service providers to provide temporary accommodation to people sleeping rough or in crisis situations to protect them and the community from the virus.

Healthy North Coast has triangulated census data with data from specialist homelessness services and Street Count data to provide greater insight into the challenges faced by homeless individuals and the efforts being made to address their needs. Combining these sources of information can create a more robust foundation for developing targeted interventions to combat homelessness effectively in the North Coast region. It overcomes some of the limitations, notably the underestimation of youth, First Nations and people displaced by domestic and/or family violence in Census data.¹⁰

2.3. Homelessness identified in the 2023 NSW Statewide Street Count

The 2023 NSW Statewide Street Count identified 779 people as homeless on the North Coast. (Table 1). Byron Shire had the largest number of rough sleepers in the state, with 300 individuals identified as sleeping rough. The next highest area was the City of Sydney at 277. Byron and Tweed Local Government Areas (LGA) rough sleeper numbers combined account for 27% of all rough sleepers in the State in 2023.

Lismore was the only LGA that showed a decrease in the number of people sleeping rough in the 2023 Street Count compared to 2022, with 40 people (down from 48 the previous year). This decrease may be due to temporary accommodation being available in flood recovery villages as part of the 2022 flood recovery response.

The Street Count is based on specific criteria used to identify homeless individuals, which included those carrying substantial belongings and appearing to have no accommodation, people sleeping, laying, or sitting on pavements, streets, parks, shops/business fronts, parking

⁹ Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)(2008) [Homelessness is a Human Rights Issue](#), accessed October 2023.

¹⁰ Note, the local government area of Tenterfield has been included in the analysis as data, however Healthy North Coast's footprint only covers two SA1 areas with a population of 479. Data was not available at this level

lots, road or railway underpasses, individuals inhabiting tents or makeshift structures, and those sleeping in cars (excluding tourist vans) or self-identifying as homeless. The count took place between the 2nd and 27th of February 2023, with most counts taking place in the evenings.

Table 1:

Nearly half of all the people counted as sleeping rough in the 2023 Street Count in NSW are on the North Coast¹¹.

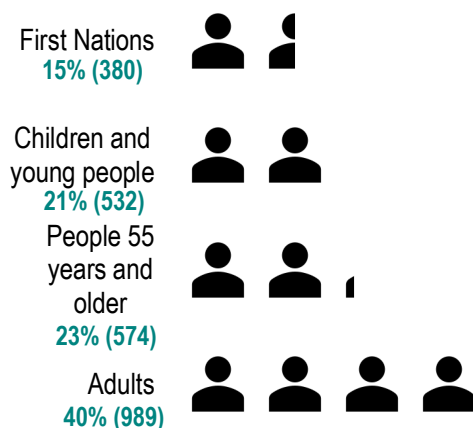
| LGA | Number of locations | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | Trend |
|---------------------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------|
| Byron | 9 | 174 | 198 | 138 | 300 | |
| Tweed Valley | 15 | 77 | 58 | 127 | 145 | |
| Coffs Harbour | 2 | 51 | 43 | 57 | 82 | |
| Clarence Valley | 6 | 7 | 17 | 11 | 69 | |
| Port Macquarie Hastings | 10 | 5 | 10 | 23 | 43 | |
| Lismore | 5 | 55 | 48 | 48 | 40 | |
| Ballina | 6 | 21 | 20 | 27 | 30 | |
| Bellingen | 2 | not counted | not counted | 10 | 23 | |
| Richmond Valley | 5 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 19 | |
| Nambucca | 6 | not counted | - | - | 17 | |
| Kempsey | 9 | 3 | 7 | 1 | 11 | |
| Kyogle | 2 | - | 1 | 1 | - | |
| North Coast region | 77 | 396 | 405 | 448 | 779 | |
| NSW | 383 | 1,314 | 1,141 | 1,207 | 1,623 | |

2.4. Homelessness identified in the 2021 Census

The 2021 Census identified a total of 2,475 people as homeless in the North Coast region (Figure 1). This represents an increase of 104 people from the 2016 Census.

Figure 1:

Homelessness affects people of all ages on the North Coast.



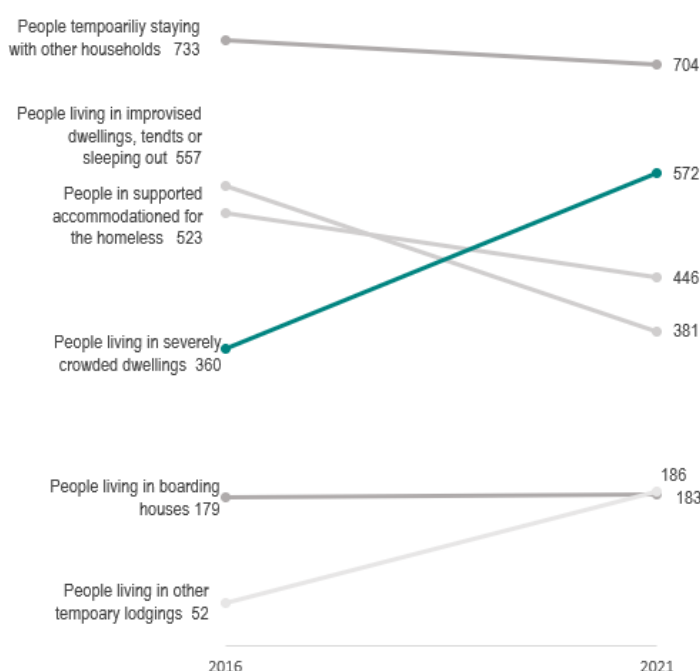
¹¹ Department of Community and Justice (2023) [NSW Statewide Street Count Technical Paper](#), accessed October 2023.

Source: ABS 2021¹²

The Australian Bureau of Statistics counts different forms of homelessness to the street count, including couch surfing, temporarily staying with other households, and severe overcrowding (Figure 2).

Figure 2:

The number of **people living in severely crowded dwellings** in the North Coast is increasing while other types of homelessness are decreasing.



Source: ABS 2021¹³

An additional 2,310 people were in other marginal housing on Census night, which means their living arrangements are close to the boundary of homeless or they may be at risk of homelessness (Figure 4). Other marginal housing includes:

- people living in other crowded dwellings where the dwelling requires three extra bedrooms to accommodate the occupants,
- other improvised dwellings including tent, sleepers-out who reported being 'at home' on Census night or

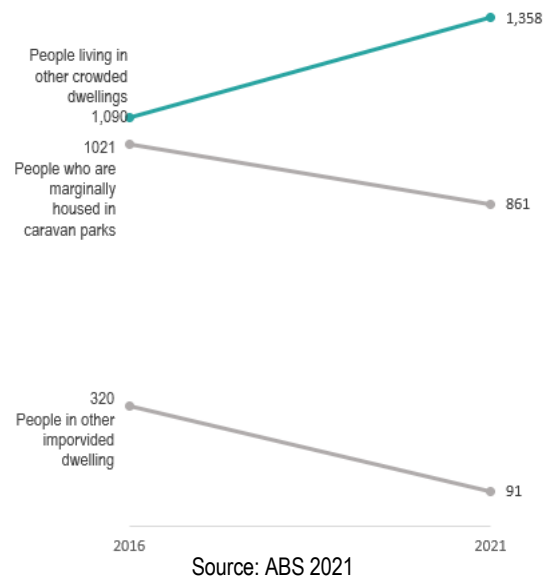
¹² ABS (2021) 20490D0006_2021 Estimating homelessness: Census, 2021 data table, accessed October 2023.

¹³ Note, although people living in other temporary dwellings is also increasing, it is not directly comparable with previous Censuses due to improvements in data quality through greater use of administrative data.

- marginally housed in caravan parks.

Figure 3

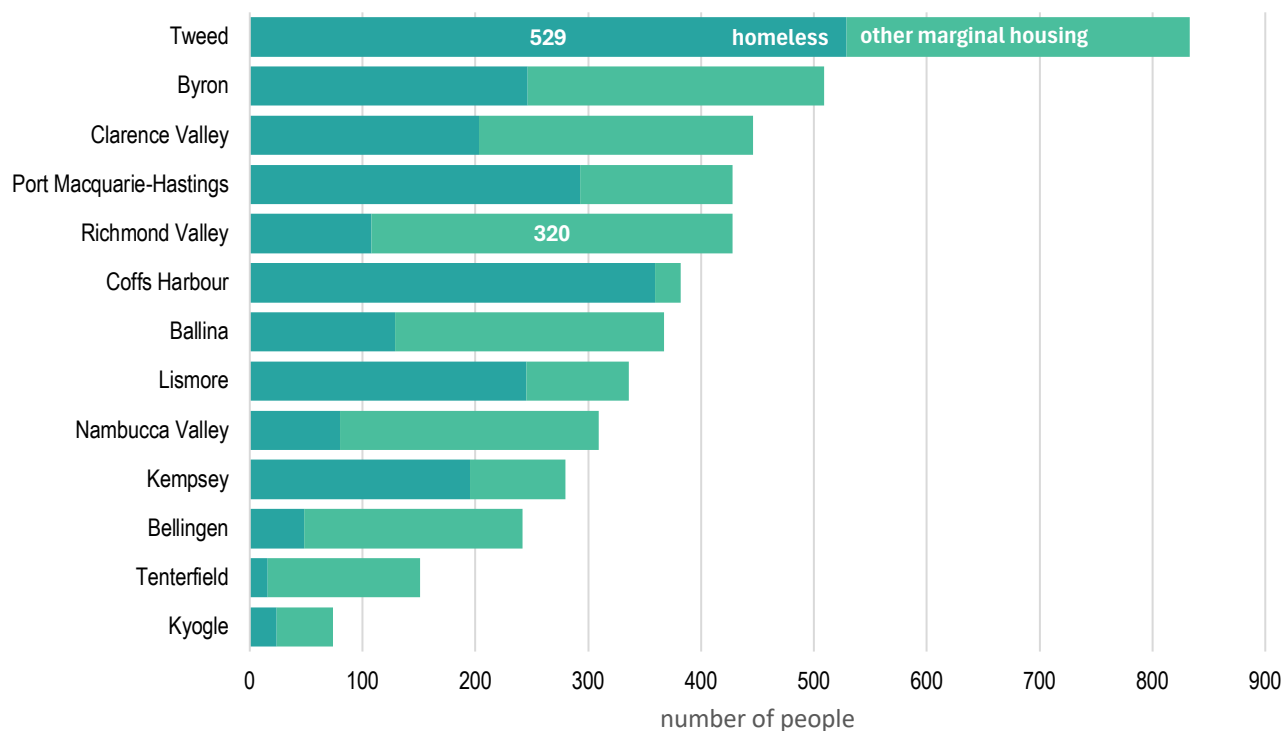
People living in other crowded dwellings is also increasing across the North Coast.



By local government area (LGA) Tweed and Byron have the largest number of people who are homeless and marginally housed (Figure 4).

Figure 4:

Tweed had the highest number of people who are **homeless** while **Richmond Valley** has the highest number of people who are **marginally housed**



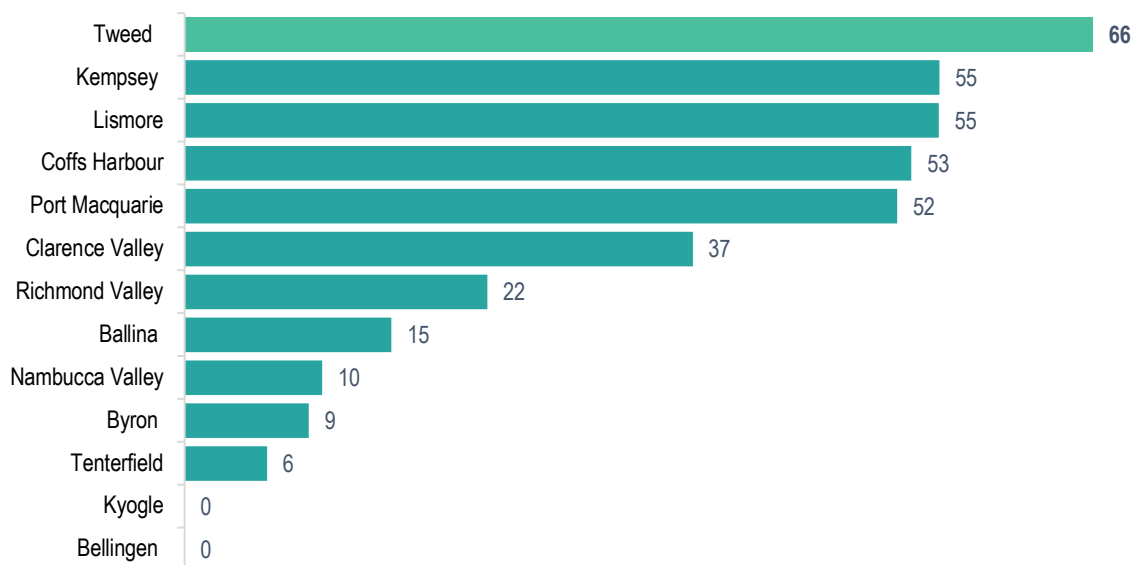
Source: ABS 2021

First Nations peoples. 380 First Nations peoples were identified as homeless on the North Coast on Census night in 2021 (Figure 5). First Nations peoples represent 6% of the population on the North Coast but account for 15% of all people who identified as homeless on Census night. This is slightly lower than the national average, where First Nations people represent 20% of people experiencing homelessness.¹⁴

¹⁴ ABS (2023) [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experiencing homelessness](#), accessed October 2023.

Figure 5:

Tweed had the highest number of First Nations peoples identifying as homeless.



Source: ABS 2021

When looked at as a proportion of the First Nations population in the LGA, 2% of First Nations people in Lismore identified as homeless on Census night (Table 2).

Table 2:

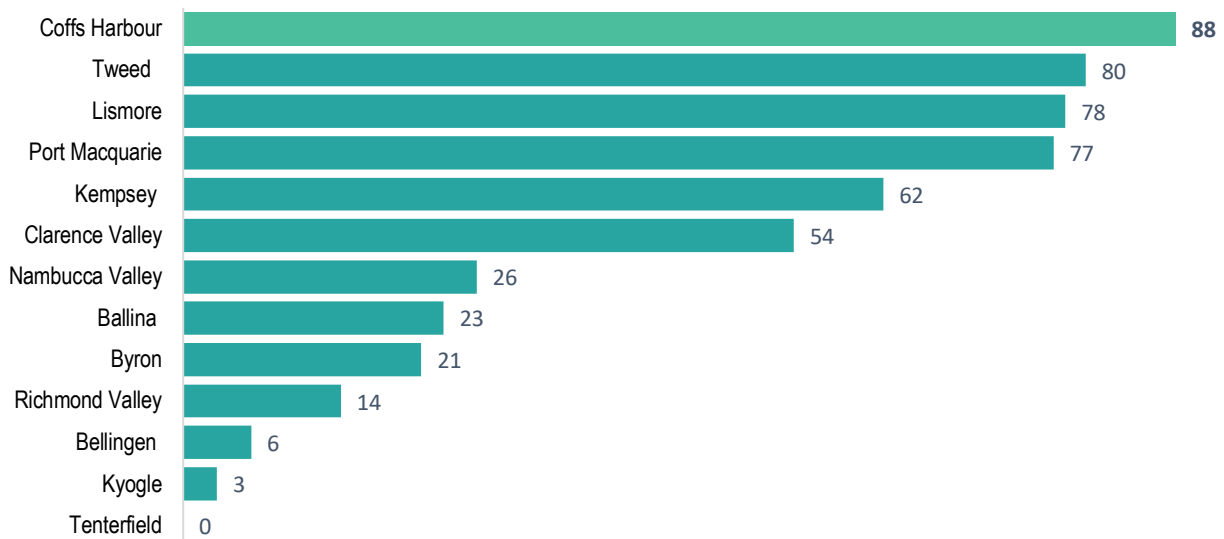
Lismore has the highest proportion of First Nations peoples that are homeless.

| LGA | Proportion of First Nations population who are homeless |
|-----------------|---|
| Lismore | 2.1% |
| Tweed | 1.5% |
| Kempsey | 1.4% |
| Richmond Valley | 1.2% |
| Coffs Harbour | 1.2% |

Children and Youth. 532 children and young people (18 years and under) were identified as homeless on Census night. Coffs Harbour, Tweed, and Lismore have the highest number of children and young people experiencing homelessness on the North Coast (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Coffs Harbour has the largest number of children and young people experiencing homelessness

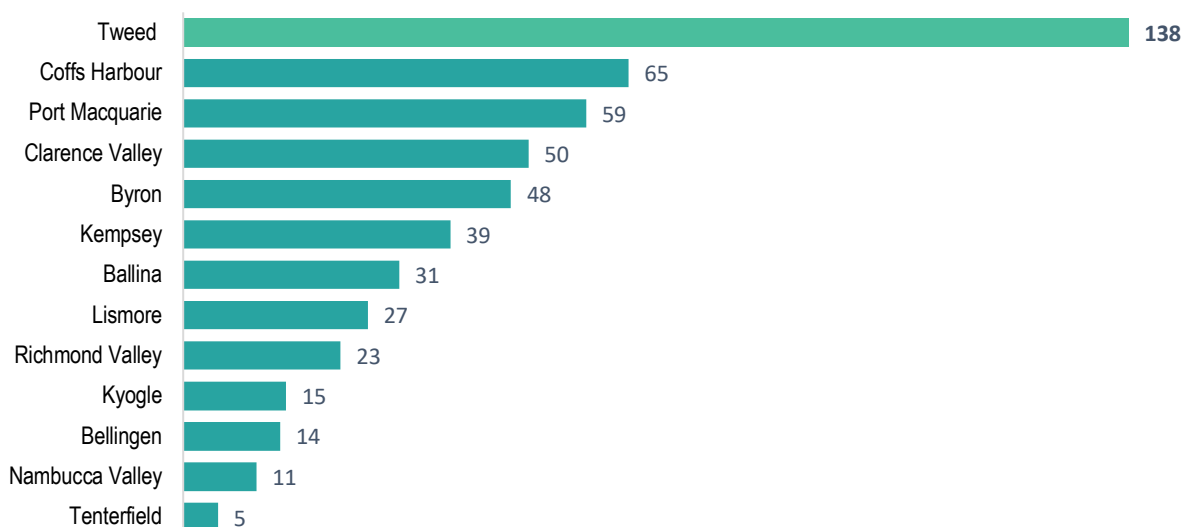


Source: ABS 2021

Older people. 574 people aged over 55 years and over were identified as homeless on Census night in 2021 (Figure 7). Homelessness of older people is a growing problem and is likely to continue to increase due to the ageing population and decreasing rates of home ownership among older people¹⁵.

Figure 7

Tweed had the largest number of people experiencing homelessness over the age of 55.



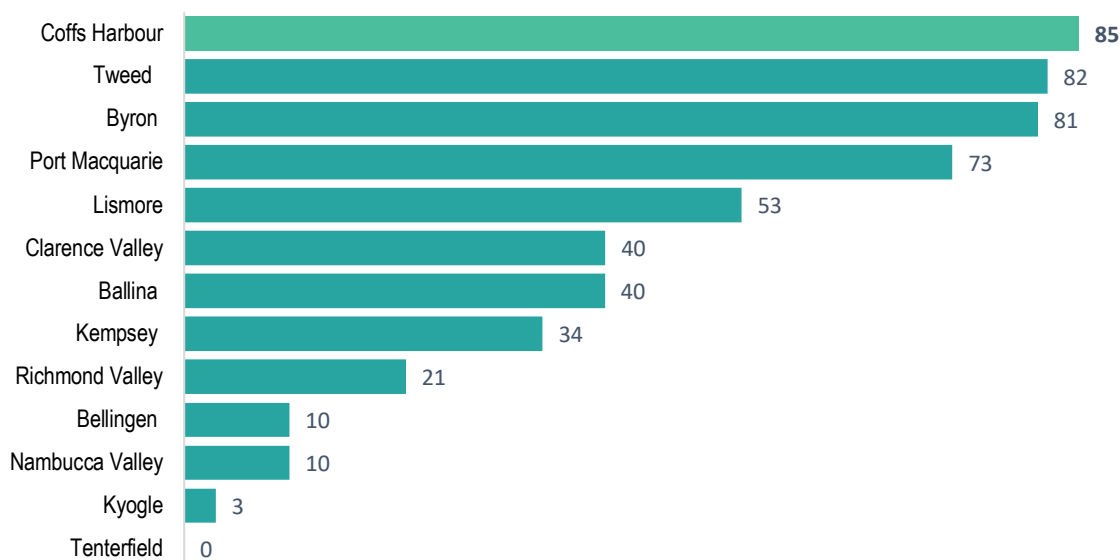
Source: ABS 2021

¹⁵ AIHW (2023) *Older Australians*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 05 October 2023

Employed Homeless Individuals. Two in every 10 homeless people on the North Coast were identified as employed in the 2021 Census. Coffs Harbour has the largest number (85) of homeless individuals who are employed, followed by Tweed (82) and Port Macquarie (73) (Figure 8). Unemployment is widely accepted as a significant contributing factor to housing instability or homelessness. A lack of access to employment can contribute to homeless people not having sufficient and sustained income to meet their basic needs.¹⁶

Figure 8

Coffs Harbour has the largest population of individuals employed yet experiencing homelessness.



Source: ABS 2021

3. Specialist Homelessness Services

Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) data complements Census and Street Count data by providing insights into the challenges faced by homeless individuals and the efforts being made to address their needs. 9,833 people accessed SHS on the North Coast in 2021/22, this was a decrease of 933 (11%). It is unclear at the time of writing this report the cause of this decrease but could be related several factors such as Covid-19 pandemic, changes to service delivery models or funding levels.

Of the 9,833 people supported by SHS agencies on the North Coast in 2021/22:

- 6 in 10 were women (60% or 5,908 people)
- 3 in 10 were children under 15 years (30% or 3,237 people)
- 1 in 4 were young people aged 15-24 years (24% or 2,634 people) or which 60% presented alone (1,607 young people)
- 4 in 10 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (40% or 3,863 people)

¹⁶ Steen, A., Mackenzie, D., & McCormack, D. (2012). [Homelessness and Unemployment: Understanding the Connection and Breaking the Cycle](#). Swinburne Institute for Social Research Swinburne University.

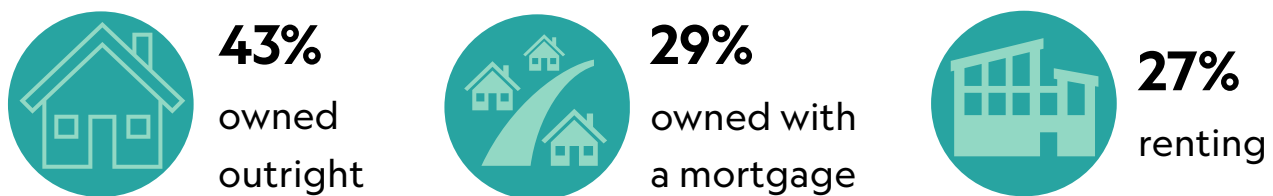
- 4 in 10 people accessed support due to family and domestic violence (42% or 4,127 people)
- 1 in 3 people aged over 15 years were employed (34% or 2,662 people)
- Jobseeker was the main source of income for 1 in 5 people (21% or 2,111 people)
- Nearly 1 in 4 people were enrolled in some form of education (23% or 2,259 people)^{17,18}

A total of 47% of people seeking SHS were experiencing homelessness, 46% were at risk of homelessness, and 7% unknown. Additional vulnerabilities experienced by people accessing SHS include family and domestic violence (42%) mental health (30%) and alcohol and other drug issues or a combination of these.

The housing outcomes from the SHS support people received in 2021/22 was^{19, 20}:

- 3 in 4 people who were at risk of homeless at presentation were assisted to maintain housing,
- 1 in 4 people experiencing homelessness at presentation were supported to achieve housing.

4. Housing Affordability and Availability



The most common tenure type on the North Coast is households where people owned their home outright (43%), ranging from 38% in Lismore to 51% in Kyogle. Households with a mortgage was the next largest category at 29% and households renting was 27%. With 15% renting through a real-estate, 4% through SHA or CHP and 8.5% other such as private rental arrangement²¹.

There is an increasing number of households relying on private rentals for long term tenure rather than buying a home, due to housing costs in the region increasing faster than wages.²² High interest rates and high inflation rates are also making it increasingly difficult for low to middle income earners to manage housing and living costs.

The proliferation of Airbnb across the North Coast has disrupted the housing market; in 2023 17% of all rental properties on the North Coast were only available through Airbnb (9,510 of 55,769).²³

¹⁷ DCJ (2023) Specialist Homelessness Services 2021-22 Overview of the Northern NSW District data. All data in this presentation is from the AIHW Confidentialised Unit Record Files 2021-22.

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ ibid

²¹ ABS (2021) 2021 Census – [counting persons, estimating homelessness](#) accessed October 2023.

²² DCJ (2023) North Coast – [What's happening with supply](#), accessed October 2023.

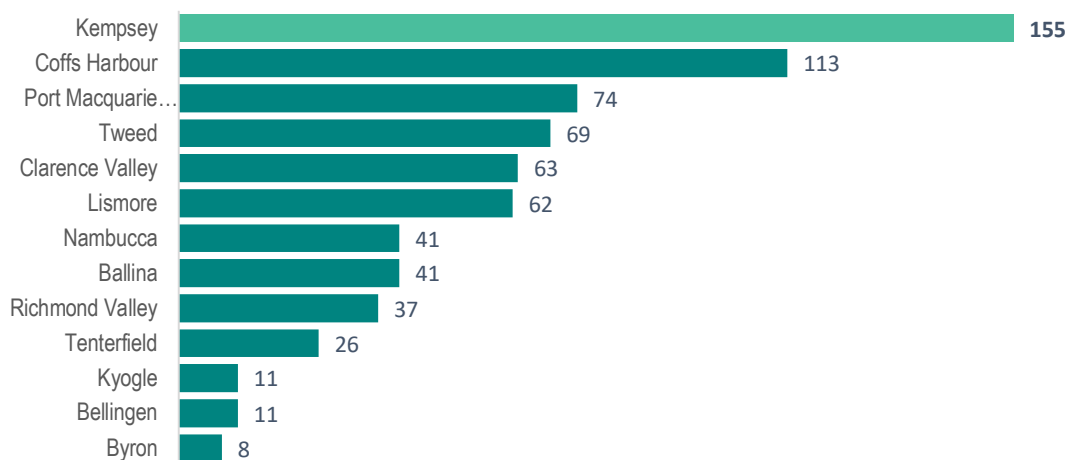
²³ ibid

Social Housing is affordable and secure rental housing for people on low incomes with housing needs. Census data estimates there are 2,602 public housing stock on the North Coast²⁴. Public housing is not always accurate as housing tenure can be under reported in the Census.

The North Coast region has 711 Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) owned dwellings, with 206 (29%) managed by Aboriginal Community Housing Providers (ACHPs), 14 (2%) Community housing Providers (CHP), and 491 (69%) Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) at 30 June 2021.²⁵ Nearly half (48%) of all AHO owned dwellings are in Kempsey, Coffs Harbour, and Port Macquarie (**Error! Reference source not found.**)

Figure 9

Kempsey has the highest number of AHO owned dwellings on the North Coast.



Source: NSW AHO (2021)

Across the North Coast 6 in 10 AHO dwellings are 3-bedrooms, three in 10 are 4-bedroom dwelling and one in 10 dwellings have 1-2 bedrooms.²⁶

Housing affordability on the North Coast has been compounded by natural disasters and increased migration from urban areas. The **2023 Rental Affordability Snapshot** conducted by Anglicare Australia highlights the challenges faced by low-income individuals in finding affordable rental options, with limited properties available for those reliant on government support or earning minimum wage.²⁷

There was a significant increase in properties on the North Coast for rent during the snapshot period (18th March 2023) compared to last year (731 homes or 125% up). The Snapshot tests whether it is possible for people on low income to rent a home in the private market and found that:

²⁴ DCJ (2023) North Coast – [What's happening with supply](#), accessed October 2023.

²⁵ NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (2021) [AHO-owned dwellings by managing organisation](#), by LGA, accessed October 2023.

²⁶ NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (2022) [Maps and Charts, Maps illustrating aspects of Aboriginal NSW and AHO regions](#), accessed October 2023.

²⁷ 2022: Rental affordability snapshot. (2022). Anglicare Australia. <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/publications/rental-affordability-snapshot-2022/>

- 5 (0.5%) individual properties were suitable for at least one household type living on income support payments without placing them in housing stress.
 - o 2 (0.3%) rentals were affordable for a couple or single living on the aged pension.
 - o 3 (0.4%) rentals were affordable to a single person working full-time on the minimum wage.
- 62 (8%) individual properties were suitable for at least one household type living on minimum wage without placing them in housing stress.
- There were no houses that were affordable for a person on a Jobseeker payment including share houses.
- A person on Youth Allowance could not afford a single house.

The number of individuals suitable for at least one household type living on income support payments 0.5% is similar to 2022 which was less than 1%. Even though there was an increase in the number of properties available for rent, this did not increase the percentage of affordable housing which was 7% in 2022 and 8% in 2023. Other factors contributing to lack of affordability has been the influx of residents relocating from cities/urban areas to regional areas.²⁸

The Snapshot of the North Coast demonstrates that the effects of the disastrous floods are still being seen with thousands of people either still displaced in temporary accommodation or struggling to repair or rebuild their homes. Rents across the North Coast have risen 10% from 2022 to 2023, with Lismore experiencing an 11% decrease while Tweed Heads has seen a 34% increase.²⁹

Across the Byron LGA there are 2,694 properties for rent as a whole house³⁰, many of which are not available for longer term rent as there is a proliferation of short-term holiday lettings. This places pressure on the rental market for residents and workers on low income.

The lack of affordable rental options across the region puts significant stress on households, particularly low-income families, single parents, and individuals with disabilities, forcing them to make difficult decisions to secure a place to live. This scarcity of affordable housing is exacerbating social and economic inequality within the community.³¹

Investments in social and affordable housing programs, incentives for private developers to participate in affordable housing projects, and supportive policies for rent control or rental assistance are some strategies that can help bridge the housing gap in the North Coast region.³² Additionally, leveraging data and insights from specialist homelessness services, community consultations, and continuous monitoring of housing demand can inform evidence-based decision-making and shape comprehensive housing strategies.

While the existing efforts by housing providers are commendable, sustained and increased investment in affordable housing solutions is imperative to meet the diverse and evolving needs of the Northern NSW region's population. As the homelessness data highlights, the current social housing offer is not adequate to address the regions housing needs.

²⁸ The Australian Government the Treasury, Centre for Population (2020) Migration between cities and regions: A quick guide to Covid-19 impacts, accessed September 2023.

²⁹ Anglicare (2023) Rental Affordability Snapshot – Regional Reports, accessed October 2023.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² Rowley, S., James, A., Gilbert, C., Gurran, N., Ong, R., Phibbs, P., Rosen, D. and Whitehead, C. (2016) Subsidised affordable rental housing: lessons from Australia and overseas, AHURI Final Report No. 267, Accessed October 2023

5. The impact of homelessness on health

People experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness are the most vulnerable in terms of economic and social disadvantage. Homelessness may be a result of illness that precludes a person from employment and subsequently unable to afford housing, or illness due to being homeless.³³

There are several barriers to accessing healthcare for homeless people. This includes the ability for homeless people to follow through on a referral and for health care providers following up when there is no address or other contact details. Other barriers include the cost of services, long wait times and the limited availability of appointments for some care. At times, illness and poor health provide barriers to attending appointments.

These barriers may be amplified by psychological stigmas of being homeless, physical barriers to access transport and having no fixed address for reminders and contact.

Overcrowding may present further health problems for people due to limited access to food preparation, bathing and sewerage facilities and close living giving rise to increased risk of infectious diseases and psychological stress.

International research has identified that homelessness can significantly reduce a person's life expectancy compared to people who are not homeless. This has been documented as a 30-year difference in the UK and USA^{34 35} and more than a 10-year difference for people in marginal housing in Canada.³⁶

6. Conclusion

Homelessness and housing insecurity continue to present complex and pervasive challenges in the North Coast region. Data from the census and specialised homelessness services highlight the large number of individuals experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness on the North Coast. Meeting lower-level basic needs as food, water, and a place to sleep are often a priority for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. As such health needs are often not considered until an emergency arises. Rough sleeping can result in more profound longer term health impacts due to living in harsh environments, poor nutrition and higher rates of injury or violence.

Severe overcrowding which is an increasing form of homelessness on the North Coast is associated with different health impacts. Through reduced access to food preparation areas, bathrooms and laundry facilities which can increase rapid spread of infectious diseases and psychological stress.

There is a large difference in life expectancy among people experiencing homelessness compared to those who are not. However, research is emerging that this gap can be reduced

³³ Health of people experiencing homelessness December 2021 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/health-of-people-experiencing-homelessness> Accessed November 2023

³⁴ Care of the homeless <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24784122/> Accessed November 2023

³⁵ Homelessness and mental health <https://wchh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/tre.445> Accessed November 2023

³⁶ Hwang SW, Wilkins R, Tjepkema M, O'Campo PJ, Dunn JR 2009. Mortality among residents of shelters, rooming houses, and hotels in Canada: 11 year follow-up study. *BMJ* 2009; 339:b4036

through increased interactions with health care services in the years prior to becoming homeless by identifying risk factors and increasing opportunities for early intervention.

Demographic trends further underscore the urgency of finding housing solutions that are not only targeted but also culturally sensitive. These trends reveal a large number of homeless individuals among First Nations people, youth, and older adults. This emphasises the need to develop housing strategies that are tailored to meet the unique needs of these specific groups.

Understanding the driving forces behind the various types of homelessness is crucial for devising focused interventions and support services to meet the unique needs of each group, and ultimately, to reduce homelessness in the region. Healthy North Coast should consider this issue in greater depth through consultation as part of the Health Needs Assessment with a population health lens.