



# Older persons

## Background

Australia has an ageing population. Older people in Australia can face significant human rights challenges relating to poverty, workforce discrimination, stereotyping, elder abuse and violence.

## Key Issue – The COVID-19 pandemic and older people

The Commission is concerned about the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on older people in Australia. As of 7 September 2020, the vast majority of Australia's COVID-19 deaths have occurred in those over the age of 70 and over half have occurred in residential aged care facilities.

Alongside the physical health impacts of contracting the disease itself, other measures that have been put in place to stop the spread of COVID-19 have had a substantial effect on the mental health and wellbeing of older people. These include the restriction of visitors to residential aged care facilities and other self-isolation measures.

Social isolation of the older person, as well as stress and financial pressures on behalf of perpetrators, are some of the drivers of elder abuse in the community. As more people are at home, and more people are facing financial pressure, there is a risk of increased levels of elder abuse.

The Commission is concerned that the economic impacts of the the COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect the oldest and youngest workers, particularly women.

## Key Issue – Elder Abuse

In 2019, the Australian government launched the [National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians \(2019–2023\)](#). The Commission welcomes the steps being taken under the plan to help address the growing problem of elder abuse.

Elder abuse is defined in Australia a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person. Perpetrators are most often family members, generally adult children.



Elder abuse can be financial, physical, social/psychological or sexual or neglect. Financial elder abuse can range from pressuring on older family member for money, taking extra money when paying their bills or buying groceries to pressuring an older person to change their will or threaten access to grandchildren.

## Recommendation

### **Government implement recommendations from the ALRC's report Elder Abuse—A National Legal Response.**

#### **Key Issue – Older women at risk of homelessness**

Homelessness occurs when a person has inadequate or unstable housing, no tenure, no sense of safety or privacy or no access to a space for social purposes. In 2019, the Commission published the background paper [\*Older Women's Risk of Homelessness\*](#) which outlined that between 2011 and 2016, older women were the fastest growing cohort of homeless Australians.



The number of older homeless women in Australia increased by over 30% between 2011 and 2016 to nearly 7,000. The number of older women accessing homelessness services is also increasing, with a 63% increase in the five years leading up to 2018.

Risk factors for women's homelessness include: being single, renting, living alone, experiencing economic disadvantage, experiencing family and domestic violence, lack of family support, loss of partner or relationship breakdown, living with disability, mental health issues, job loss, illness and eviction.

Women who experience homelessness have poorer outcomes across a range of domains, including physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing, nutritional outcomes, employment outcomes, long-term economic wellbeing and relationships. Homeless women are more likely than homeless men to perceive and endure greater safety issues, including sexual victimisation. For women with children, the effects are likely to be intergenerational.

Initiatives and policies need to address the availability of affordable housing as well as challenging other broader economic, structural, and cultural barriers in order to advance women's housing and economic security.

## Recommendation

### **Government develop solutions to reduce women's risk of homelessness.**

## Key Issue – discrimination against older persons in the workplace

Australia has an aging population which means that people are living longer and the number of people over 65 years of age is increasing. By 2054, the number of Australians over 65 is expected to double. However, the number of older people currently taking part in the workforce in Australia is low. People aged 55 years and over make up roughly a quarter of the population, but only 16% of the total workforce.

In May 2016, the Australian Human Rights Commission published the [final report of \*Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability\*](#). The Inquiry highlighted that despite older workers contributing significant value to the workplace, older people are facing widespread discrimination in employment.

Older Australian face barriers at each state of employment such as finding a job, keeping a job and coming back to the workforce after taking a break. Negative assumptions and pervasive stereotypes about older people contribute to these discriminatory practices.

## Recommendation

**Government reduce workplace discrimination against older Australians and implement recommendations from the [AHRC's Willing to Work report](#).**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Data tables: Historic tables SHSC 2011-12 to 2017-18*, Homelessness Services, Excel, Table 6: Older clients (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Ludo McFerran, 'It Could be You: Female, Single Older and Homeless' (Report, Homelessness NSW, Older Women's Network NSW and St Vincent de Paul Society, 2010); Guy Johnson, David Ribar and Anna Zhu, 'Women's Homelessness: International Evidence on Causes, Consequences, Coping and Policies' (Discussion Paper No. 10614, Institute of Labor Economics, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Guy Johnson, David Ribar and Anna Zhu, 'Melbourne Institute Working Paper Series Working Paper No. 7/17. Women's Homelessness: International Evidence On Causes, Consequences, Coping And Policies' (Working paper, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, 2017) 15-18.

<sup>4</sup> In 2009-10, there were around 5.5 million Australians aged 55 years and over, making up one quarter of the population. Australian Bureau of Statistics, [\*Australian Social Trends, Sep 2010, cat 4102.0 — Older People and the Labour Market\*](#) (2010).

<sup>5</sup> In 2009-10, people aged 55 years and over made up 16% of the total labour force, up from around 10% three decades earlier. Australian Bureau of Statistics, [\*Australian Social Trends, Sep 2010, cat 4102.0 — Older People and the Labour Market\*](#) (2010).