

Homelessness soars in Australian state of Queensland

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A recently released report by the Queensland Council of Social Service revealed the shocking level of the housing crisis in Queensland, where homelessness is rising at the fastest rate in Australia.

The average monthly number of people accessing the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) in the northeastern state increased by 22 percent between 2017–18 and 2021–22, and by even more, 29 percent, in regional areas.

This is a sharp expression of the mounting housing disaster across Australia. Nationally, 280,000 homeless people sought help in 2021–22, up by 8 percent, with many turned away due to the lack of resources. These numbers have undoubtedly worsened since, due to soaring rents and mortgage interest rates over the past 10 months.

Queensland's SHS caseload—a proxy for the rate of homelessness—has grown far more rapidly than the state's overall population, which rose by 6 percent in the four years to 2021–22. Rising rents were a primary cause. Rents affordable to low-income workers halved from 26 percent to 13 percent.

In the state's regional districts, median rents rose by 80 percent in Gladstone, 33 percent in the Gold Coast and 51 percent in Noosa. Regional rents affordable to low-income workers fell from 36 percent to 17 percent.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, declining rental affordability for low-income households has also affected the capital Brisbane, with the proportion of affordable lettings falling from 19 percent to 10 percent.

As a result, there are approximately 150,000 households across Queensland whose needs for affordable housing are currently unmet. That is, they

are either homeless or paying more than 30 percent of household income in rent. As at the 2021 census, this “backlog need” included 102,000 households who would typically be eligible for social housing.

In the regional city of Bundaberg, families and pensioners were sleeping under bridges, on riverbanks, and in cars and parks, the Angels Community Group told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Chief executive Sue Tasker said people were struggling now “more than ever before.” She explained: “We are still getting so many people coming in who are homeless. There doesn't seem to be any hope that it's going to change in the near future.”

The response of the federal and state Labor governments has been woefully inadequate. Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk recently announced that just 4,000 social housing homes had been built in the past eight years, with 5,000 under construction. Last year, her government had promised to deliver 13,000 by 2027. But about 50,000 people are on social housing waiting lists.

Tasker commented: “Anything's better than nothing. But it's definitely just a drop in the ocean for what the need is at the moment.” She added: “2027 is a long time away.”

Palaszczuk last month hosted a housing crisis “roundtable” of representatives of property developers, building firms and advocacy groups. She again rejected calls for annual inflation-linked caps on rent hikes. Instead, she said her government would merely limit rent rises to once a year, rather than every six months. This would permit property owners to “sustain healthy rental supply,” the premier said. Tenants Queensland pointed out that the annual rent rise cap was not enough to protect people from the market's “price gouging”

that had seen rents rise at three times the inflation rate.

The Palaszczuk government's policy mostly consists of offering subsidies to private developers and investors. It will slash land tax by up to 50 percent for up to 20 years for Build-to-Rent developments that feature at least 10 percent of rental homes as affordable housing.

That means the other 90 percent will charge exorbitant rents, boosting profits. There will also be a full exemption from the 2 percent foreign investor land tax surcharge for up to 20 years, and the Additional Foreign Acquirer Duty for the future transfer of a Build-to-Rent site.

This scheme is tailored to the interests of the same property industry—the banks, construction companies, real estate firms and landlord venture capitalists—that have created the housing crisis. The Palaszczuk government has been in office since 2015, presiding over this growing social disaster.

Nationally, there have been decades of deep cuts by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments to public housing, contributing to soaring property prices and rising levels of household debt—among the highest in the world.

According to several research reports, Australia's shortfall in social-housing dwellings is 524,000 and is set to reach 671,000 over the next decade. That is because social housing, involving government subsidies to non-government organisations, has been slashed on top of the decimation of public housing. The Australian Homelessness Monitor estimates that social housing letting plunged by 61 percent, compared to population, between 1991 and 2021.

A 2021 Australian government-funded review found that “an investment of around \$290 billion will be required over the next two decades to meet the shortfall in social and affordable housing dwellings.”

But the federal Labor government has promised only to establish a \$10 billion investment fund, supposedly to deliver 30,000 social-housing properties over the next five years, while allocating \$368 billion for the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine project to place Australia on the frontlines of a US-led war against China.

In order to ensure affordable housing for all, as a basic social right, working people in Queensland, as

throughout the world, need to fight for a socialist program so that the great wealth in society, which is produced by the working class, is controlled by the workers and used to meet the needs of the working class.

A workers' government would place the banks, finance houses and property industries under public ownership and workers' control. It would redirect the massive wealth accumulated by the billionaires, property developers and financial speculators, and the billions being spent on war preparations, to housing, health, education and other essential social programs.



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