

Maximising Impact

Baseline results from a longitudinal study of new tenants in social housing

Research Report No 6

Summary

November 2020

The Unison Housing Research Lab is a unique education and research collaboration between RMIT University and Unison Housing. Established in 2017, the Lab is funded to develop and implement a collaborative teaching program and undertake innovative policy and practice relevant housing research informed by the experiences of services users and providers.

The centrepiece of the Lab's research program is a longitudinal panel survey. Called Maximising Impact, it is following a sample of 170 new Unison tenants over two-and-a-half-years to determine which factors contribute to tenancy sustainment and tenancy satisfaction, as well as community and economic participation.

The Maximising Impact Baseline Report is the first of three Maximising Impact reports. It provides unique and important information on the social and biographical characteristics of Unison's tenants. The report presents clear evidence of just how severely disadvantaged Unison tenants are, with rates of poor physical and mental health, drug and alcohol issues, and experiences of violence, much higher than rates reported in the general community. What also stands out is that their disadvantage is chronic rather than temporary, emerging early in their lives for many. More specifically the report shows that:

- Single person households make up only 24% of the Australian population, and 55% of social housing tenants in Australia, but are 71% of the Maximising Impact sample and 74% of all new Unison tenants.
- 84% of respondents reported they had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives compared to about 13% in the general community. Half reported they had slept rough.
- Over 85% had experienced financial stress in the previous six months including going without food (44%) and seeking assistance from family and friends (48%) or a welfare agency (62%).

- Female respondents felt less safe than men, both being at home alone or walking in their local neighbourhood.
- Women were over two times more likely than men to report unwanted sexual contact prior to the age of 18, and 5 times more likely than men to report experiencing this as adults.
- Nearly one third (29%) had been in the State out-of-home care system
- Over 8 in 10 (84%) have been diagnosed with a chronic health condition, and nearly half report three or more chronic health conditions.
- Across a range of measures presented in the report, the degree of disadvantage was most severe among those that had previously experienced primary homelessness. For example, there is a clear association between self-assessed health and housing biography, with just 14% of those who had experienced primary homelessness reporting to be in good or very good health.

These findings are important for policy makers, politicians and the community. They highlight the complexity and level of disadvantage experienced by social housing tenants, and they set the scene for subsequent reports where we will check how residents are faring. The report also makes clear that in the context of increasing vulnerabilities induced by COVID-19, a strong safety net that includes a properly resourced social housing system is essential to protect the most vulnerable members of the community and offer them the best chance of living a good life.

Housing Research Report No 6 – Maximising Impact: Baseline results. November 2020. For full report or to see other publications, visit <https://unison.org.au/about-us/publications>