

# Tenancy Sustainment: Four Research Projects at Unison Housing

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Homelessness services have long been aware that as much as finding housing for people experiencing homelessness is a problem, sustaining it is an equally significant issue for some. Numerous studies, both local and international, point to patterns of episodic homelessness where some households cycle in and out of homelessness over a long period of time.

Despite an awareness of the difficulties that many formerly homeless people have in sustaining their housing, only a small number of studies investigate tenancy sustainment directly following homelessness. The available evidence is primarily derived from studies that focus on a small group of people — the chronically homeless — who account for between 10 and 20 per cent of the homeless population. This is largely a result of the shift towards Permanent Supportive Housing/Housing First (PSH/HF) approaches and their commitment to robust evaluations in which housing retention is the primary outcome of interest.

However, sustaining housing is also an issue for a much larger part of the homeless population. At the Unison Housing Research Lab our program of research is focused on the dynamics and determinants of tenancy sustainment among social housing tenants, many of whom have been homeless, but not necessarily chronically so.

Reducing unexpected tenancy loss and enabling vulnerable and severely disadvantaged households to sustain their housing has significant cost implications, as well as place management implications — the longer people live in a place the more connected they feel to an area,

their social networks are stronger, and the more their place becomes a home. Sustaining housing is thought to contribute to a range of other equally important non-housing outcomes but we still have much to learn about the mechanisms and processes that contribute to housing retention among severely disadvantaged households.

In early 2019 the Lab released a report — *Who stay, who leaves?* — that examined early tenancy loss. We identified four groups at heightened risk of early tenancy loss, and we argued that better

support was key to improving tenancy sustainment. Since then the Lab has started work on a number of projects that focus on the determinants and dynamics of tenancy sustainment, and I want to briefly mention three studies where we have some preliminary findings.

Two of the projects are examining administrative data held by Unison. The first project examines administrative records of ongoing and exited tenancies dating back to 2002. Applying a technique known as survival analysis we identify several important empirical





patterns. We find that age at commencement matters, but that gender does not. We find that the odds of sustaining a tenancy are substantially higher among those on the Disability Support Pension (DSP) compared to those on NewStart Allowance (now JobSeeker), and that housing prior to allocation matters — the likelihood of sustaining housing is highest among former rooming house residents (which surprised us) and lowest among people that had previously been in jail (which did not). The report — *Sustaining tenancies: Profiles and patterns* — will be published soon.

The second project examines tenancy retention patterns at the Elizabeth Street CommonGround facility, which is owned by Unison. Drawing on nine years of tenancy records *Is Permanent Supportive Housing permanent?* is one of the first studies to look at the tenancy retention patterns in a congregate Permanent Supportive Housing/Housing First (PSH/HF) facility that combines affordable and supported housing. It is an important

study because much of what we know about retention patterns in PSH/HF comes from studies of scattered site models. Given Australian policy makers have shown a preference for PSH/HF congregate models, the lack of robust empirical evidence on tenancy retention patterns in congregate facilities is puzzling.

Our initial results show little difference in the retention patterns of affordable and supported tenancies, but that exit reasons vary markedly, with positive exits more common among affordable tenancies. In terms of understanding patterns of tenancy sustainment, the benefits of historical data are substantial. If we restricted the analysis to current tenancies about half have lasted five years or more. However, when we examine patterns over time the proportion of tenancies lasting five years or more is about 25 per cent. We also observe a high number of short-term tenancies throughout the nine years. Our analysis suggests congregate facilities work for some, but not for others, and a better understanding of tenancy

sustainment patterns in congregate facilities clearly has important policy and practice implications.

The benefits of administrative data are well understood, but administrative data has limitations. In recognition of these limitations the Lab designed and implemented a longitudinal panel study in 2018 to examine why some tenancies 'stick' when other do not. The study, called *Maximising Impact*, is tracking 170 new tenancies in different forms of housing spread across a range of geographic locations over a two-and-a-half-year period. The survey instrument collects data on a broad range of issues that are thought to influence tenancy sustainment and satisfaction. In the coming months we will release the baseline results which provide detailed information on the experiences and characteristics of Unison tenants.

Although it is generally agreed that social housing tenants are more disadvantaged than in the past, the nature and severity of that disadvantage is not as well documented as might be thought. Our initial analysis provides clear evidence of high rates of severe disadvantage across a range of markers — incarceration, out-of-home care, drug and alcohol issues as well as chronic health problems. Indeed, comparing our findings with other studies of severely disadvantaged Australians, and as well as studies of chronically homeless individuals, we find few differences.

While our work in the Lab is focused on ways to improve tenancy sustainment, we are also cognisant of the fact that if people stay in social housing longer, fewer properties become available. And people are staying longer. Over the last seven years the proportion of tenancies in public housing that have been in situ for 10 years or more has increased and now account for over 40 per cent of all public housing tenancies. Among community housing providers a similar trend is emerging. Assuming this trend continues, without a substantial boost to social housing stock, a vital pathway out of homelessness will become more difficult to access in the future.

A focus on tenancy sustainment brings all these issues into sharp relief.

