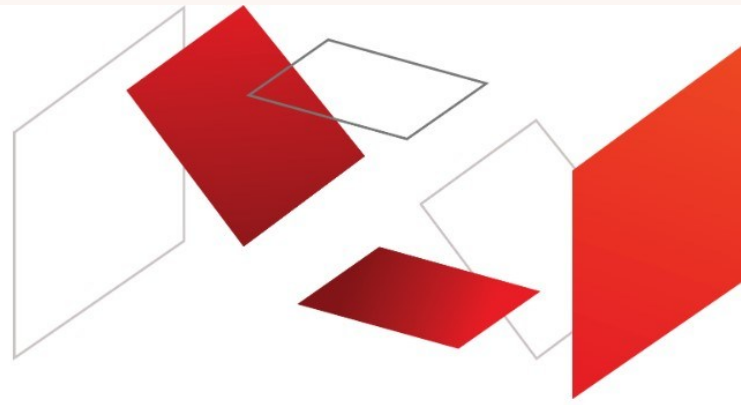




Homelessness in the ACT

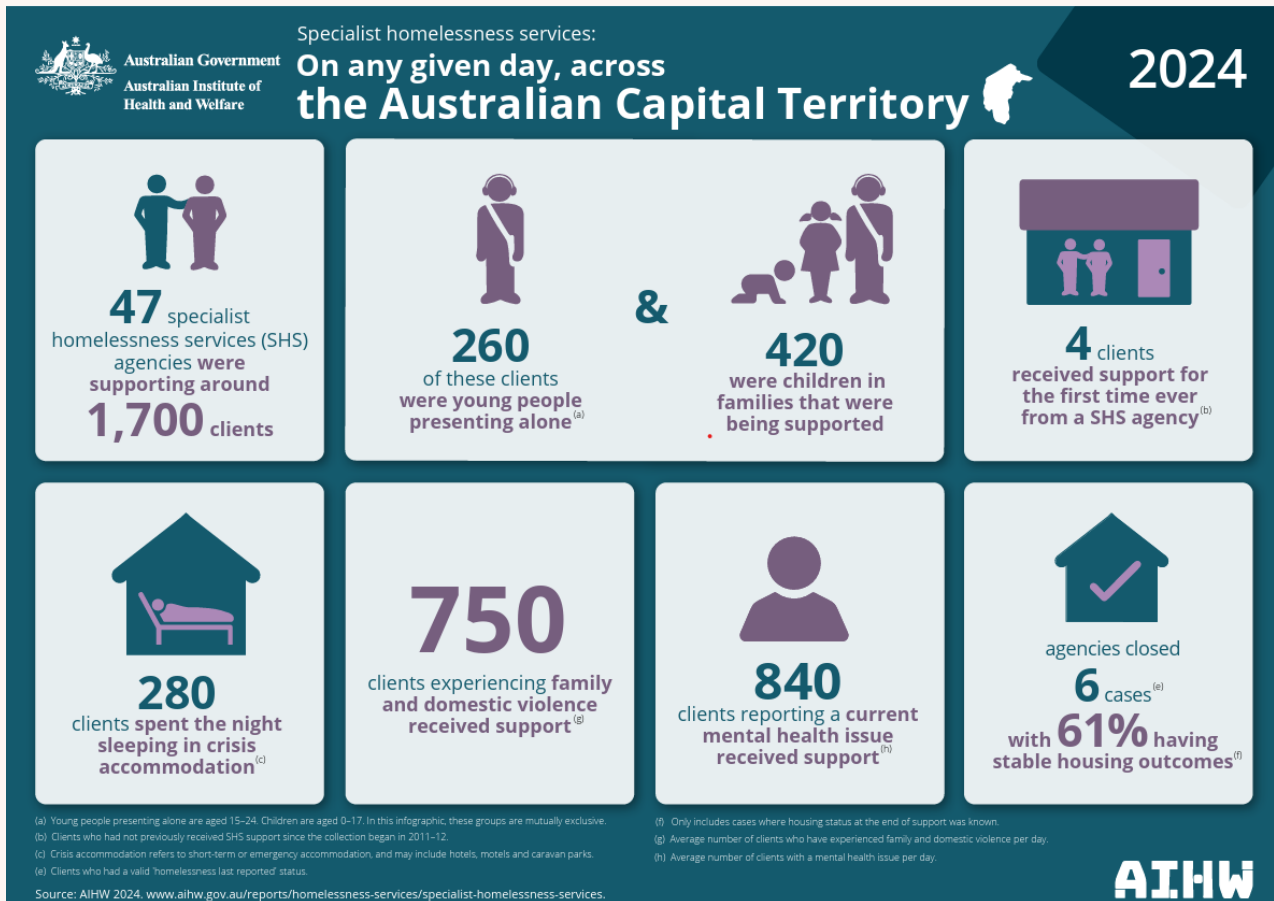


Defining homelessness

There is no single definition of homelessness. The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines homelessness as the lack of one or more elements that represent 'home'. More specifically, '... when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate;
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations' (ABS 2012).

The Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) collection is the national dataset about specialist support provided to people in Australia who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It considers a person to be homeless if they are living in non-conventional accommodation (such as living on the street), or short-term or emergency accommodation (such as living temporarily with friends and relatives) (AIHW 2024).



<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/on-any-given-day-infographics>

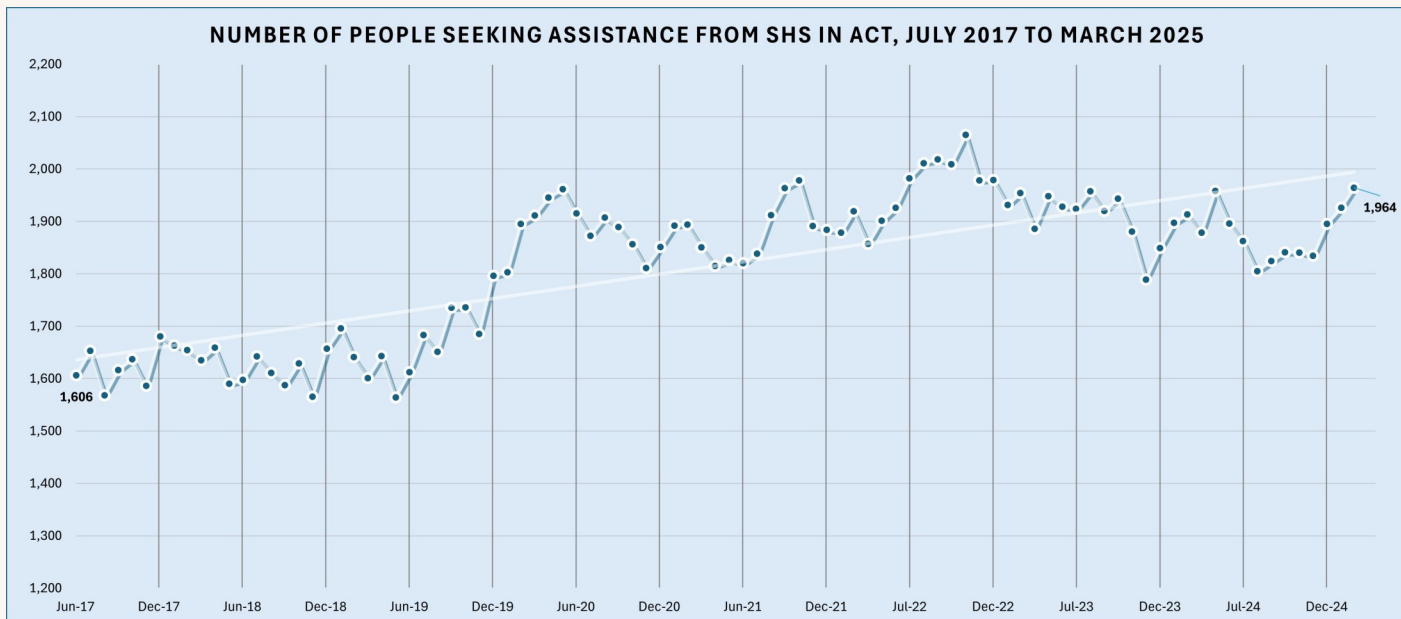
The data provided is primarily drawn from SHS data, including data published in the most recent SHS Annual Report and monthly report, in addition to data from the AIHW which is published in the [Annual Report on Government Services from the Productivity Commission](#).

While these figures reveal general trends, it has limitations, and does not provide insights into the actual incidence or prevalence of homelessness. The number of people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, is much larger than those who access services.

According to a study undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, most people who experience homelessness do not approach SHS agencies, and of the subset of people that experienced homelessness in the previous 10 years, only one third sought assistance from a service organisation for their most recent episode of homelessness [ABS, 2015, [General Social Survey 2014](#)].

The number of people seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services (SHS) in the ACT is increasing

In the ACT, **one in 116 people received assistance from a homelessness service in 2023-2024.**



The number of clients who received SHS support from Specialist Homelessness Services in the ACT fluctuated between 1,606 clients in July 2017 to 1,964 in March 2025. Of the 1,964 clients in March 2025, 1,113 were female, 851 were male, and 271 were Indigenous.

Source: AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services, Monthly Data Table, May 2025

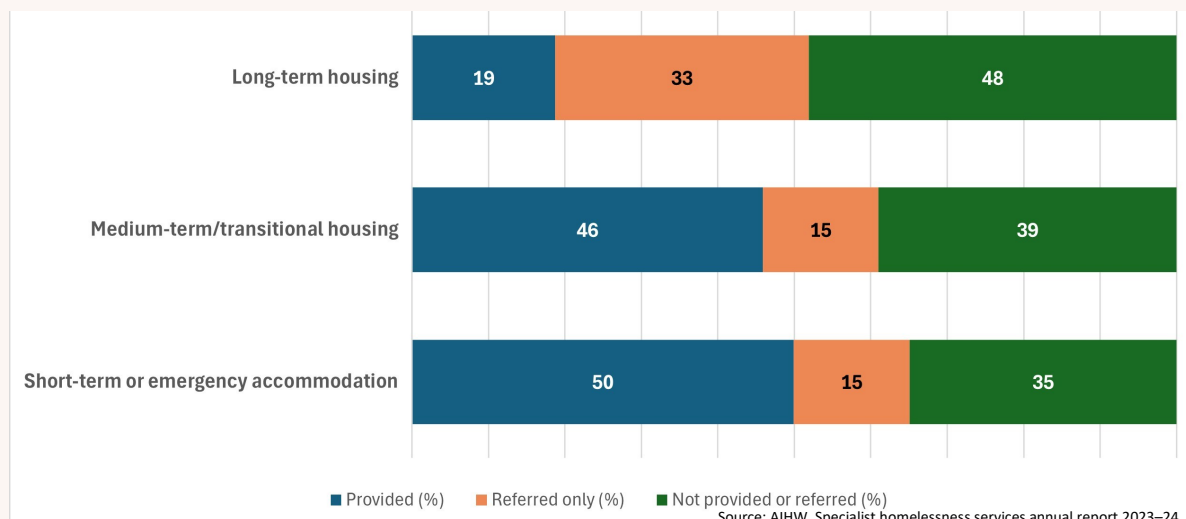
More people seeking assistance are already homeless and needing accommodation

Available data indicates that Specialist Homelessness Services in the ACT are increasingly providing services to those already experiencing homelessness, rather than those at risk of homelessness. And the lack of medium/long-term housing solutions means clients are being provided support for longer periods, creating bottlenecks that limit the ability of homelessness services to support new clients. During 2023-24 (the most recent year for which data is available):

- 56% of clients in the ACT were homeless on first presentation, higher than the national rate (48%).
- Before their first support period with any service, 53% had been homeless in the previous month.
- Almost 9 in 10 (84%) clients at risk of homelessness were assisted to maintain housing.
- Just under half (45%) of clients who were homeless were assisted into housing.

A greater proportion of clients in the ACT than nationally needed accommodation (73% and 58%, respectively).

Of those needing accommodation, most did not receive the accommodation service they required, as shown below.



Rates of homelessness are much higher and increasing for certain population groups

Overall, between 2022-23 and 2023-24, the rate at which Canberrans sought assistance from specialist homelessness services was relatively stable (at 86.4 and 85.9 per 10,000, respectively).

The rate at which people sought specialist homelessness service (per 10,000 people in the population)

	ACT		Australia	
	2022-23	2023-24	2022-23	2023-24
All clients	86.4	85.9	105.2	105.1
Indigenous clients	754.2	845.5	812.5	839.6
Young people presenting alone (15-24)	111.5	105.8	120.8	115.7
Older people (55 and over)	33.9	41.2	36.6	38.8
Family and domestic violence	32.3	34.3	40.0	41.1
Clients with disability	1.8	2.1	2.9	3.1
Clients with mental health issues	43.4	46.9	37.3	37.5
Exiting custodial arrangements	3.2	3.4	4.0	3.8
Leaving care	3.7	3.6	2.4	2.3
Children on protection orders	8.0	10.2	13.8	14.4
Problematic drug/alcohol use	14.1	14.9	10.3	10.2

Source: AIHW, Specialist homelessness services annual report 2023-24

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are vastly over-represented among those who are homeless in the ACT

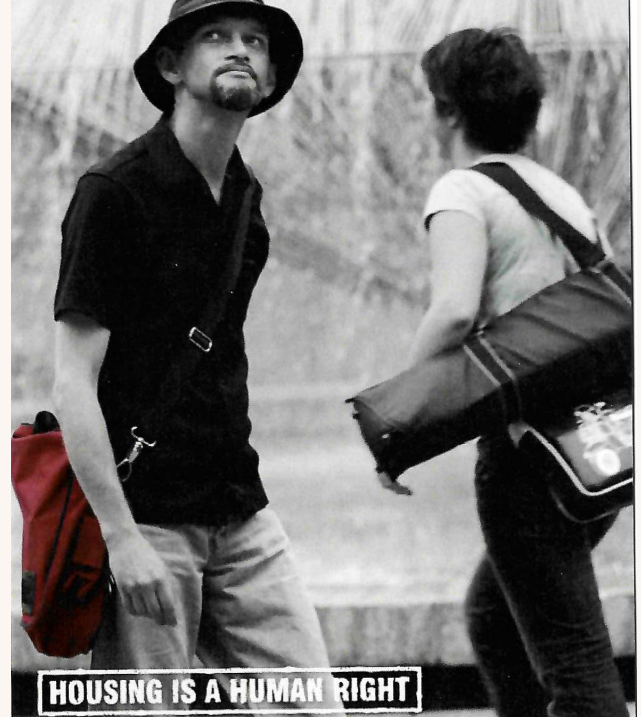
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are almost 10 times more likely to seek support from specialist homelessness services. Of those seeking assistance, nearly half (49%) were persistently homeless during 2023-24 – by far the highest rate in the nation. (Source: Productivity Commission, 2025, Report on Government Services, PART G, SECTION 19)

Of those people who sought assistance in 2023-24, they were much more likely to report experiencing multiple vulnerabilities, with two thirds (66%) experiencing AOD issues and/or having a current mental health issue. This is substantially higher than the national rate, with around a third (36%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples nationally experiencing AOD issues and/or having a current mental health issue in 2023-24.

In 2023-24, the ACT had the second lowest proportion (47%) of closed support periods for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients with an agreed case management plan.

What my house gives me that I didn't have before is a sense that I'm becoming a real human again. I remember I was begrudging the fact that I was walking to work and I looked at other people and it occurred to me – they're probably begrudging the fact that they're going to work at this time of the morning too and that was actually quite nice because I felt like I was part of the bigger, broader community.

Ian, Lyons



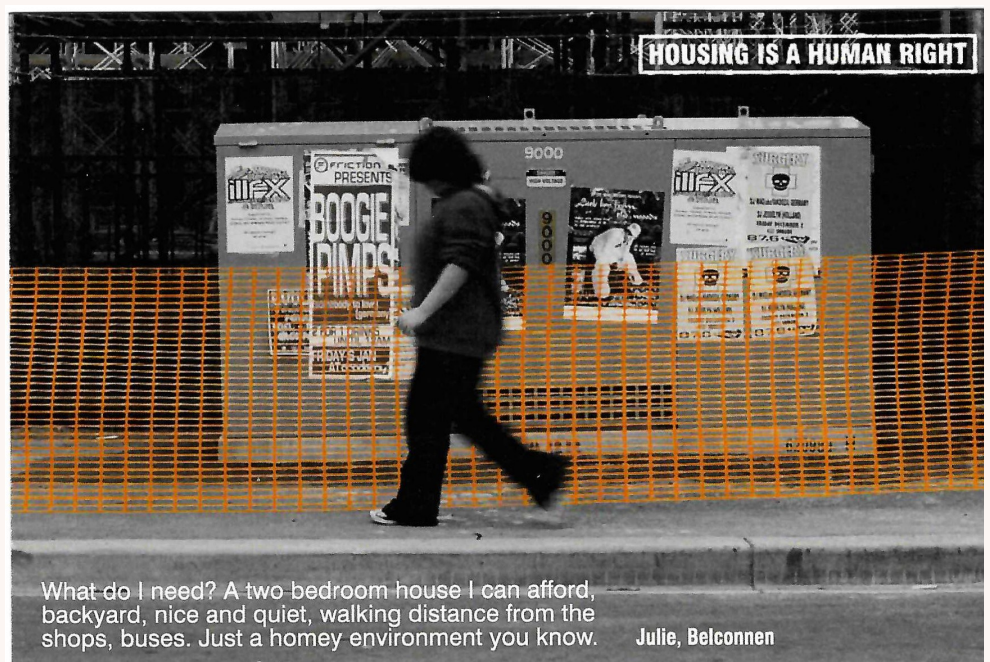
Nearly half the people seeking assistance have a mental health issue

Mental health is another key driver and consequence of homelessness – and both the number and rate of people experiencing mental ill health who are seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services has risen substantially over the past 8 years. Around 47% of SHS clients in the ACT in 2022–23 had a current mental health issue. The number of people seeking assistance with a current mental health issue has increased markedly over the past 8 years. While 487 who sought assistance were identified as having a mental health issue in July 2017, this number increased to 805 in March 2025 – an **increase of 65%**.

Number of people seeking assistance from ACT homelessness services with a current mental health issue, July 2017 to March 2025



According to the most recent SHS annual report, most people seeking assistance had multiple vulnerabilities, with three-fifths (58% or 2,000) of all clients in the ACT also experiencing alcohol and/or drug (AOD) issues and/or had a current mental health issue in 2023-24. This is significantly higher than the national rate of 40%, and makes the ACT the jurisdiction with the highest rate of people who are seeking assistance for homelessness and experiencing AOD and/or mental health issues



Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025) [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2023–24](#)

Reasons people sought assistance from homelessness services

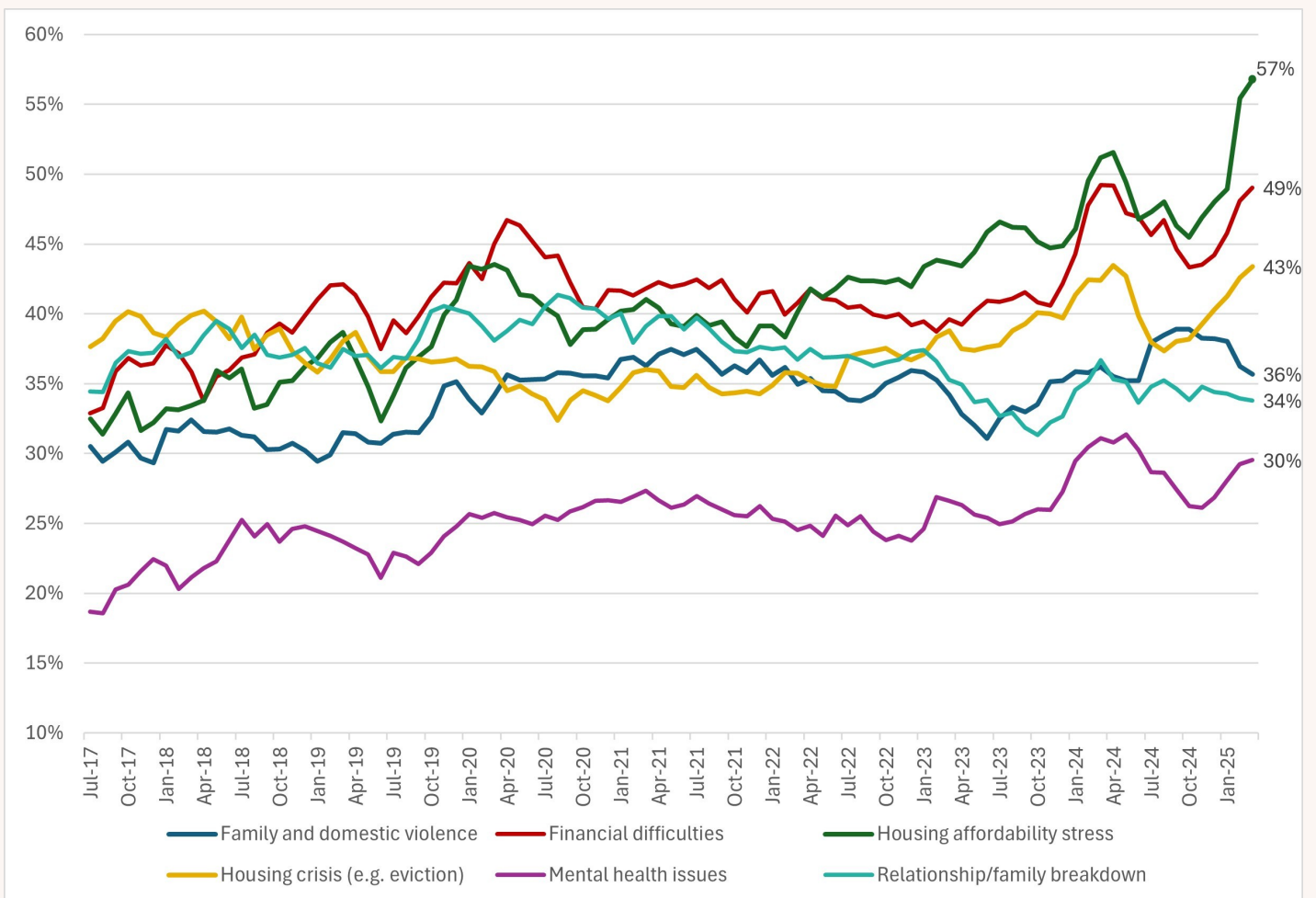
During 2023-24, the top 3 reasons for clients seeking assistance were:

- Housing affordability stress (53%, compared with 36% nationally)
- Financial difficulties (52%, compared with 41%)
- Housing crisis (49%, compared with 37%).

Monthly data from specialist homelessness services in the ACT, showing the most common reasons people sought homelessness services since July 2017, is shown below. The chart below shows the percentage of clients who identified the specified reasons for assistance.

While the reasons people present fluctuate, overall these tables show that over the past 8 years, the trend has been increasing rates of housing affordability stress and financial difficulties. While mental health does not figure as prominently as the reason why people seek assistance, the proportion of people identifying this as a reason has noticeably increased since 2017.

Reasons for seeking assistance (as percentage of all clients), ACT, Jul 2017 – Mar 2025*



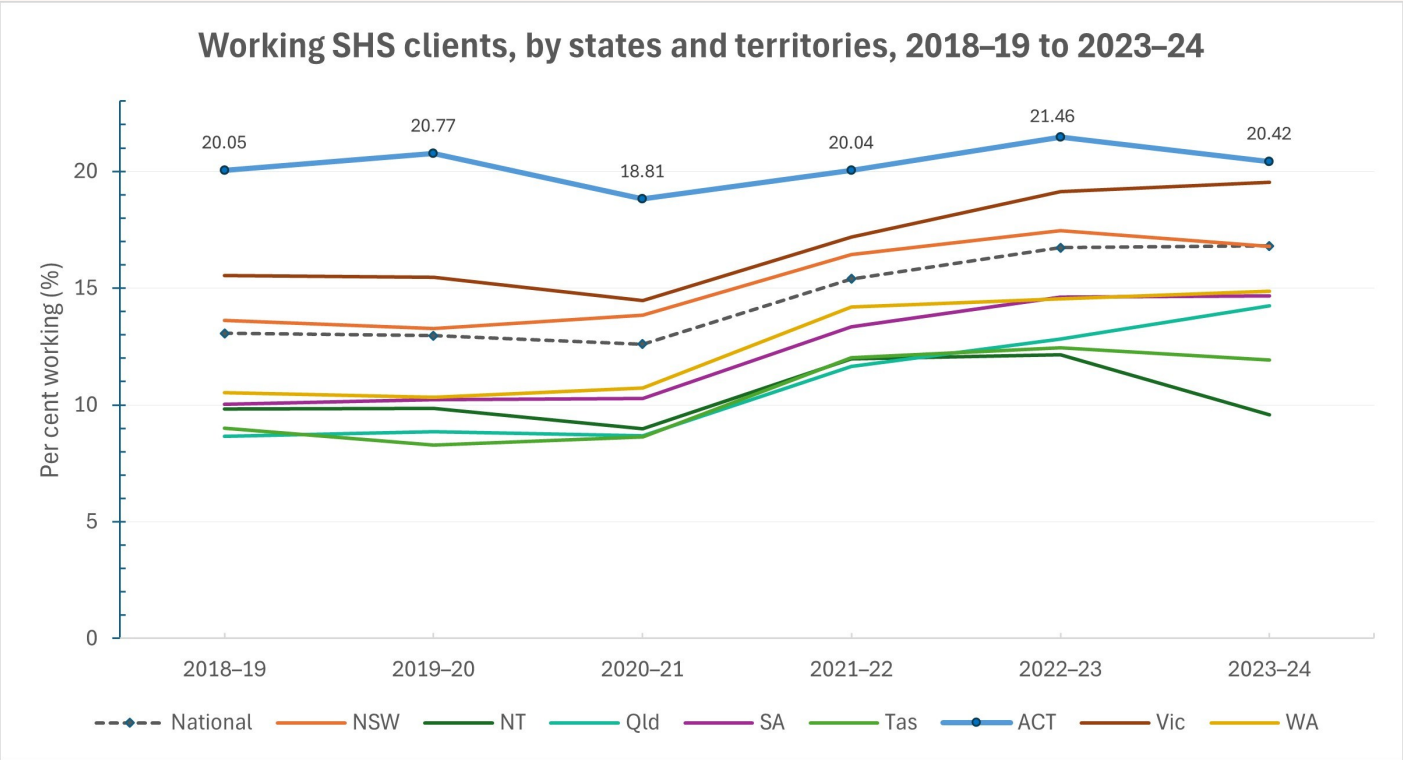
* NB: Percentages show the proportion of clients who specified that reason within a given month. The sum of these percentages across the different reasons stated is greater than 100% for each month because a client can specify multiple reasons for seeking assistance. However, each individual reason is counted only once per client across all their support periods active during the month.

Financial assistance for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness

As already noted, a significant proportion of SHS clients in the ACT report financial difficulties and/or housing affordability issues as reasons for seeking assistance. Despite this, SHS data from 2023-24 indicates people in the ACT received, on average, only \$666.50 in financial assistance to assist with establishing or maintaining a tenancy (Source: AIHW, Specialist homelessness services annual report 2023–24). This is far less than the average amount of financial assistance clients received nationally for this purpose (\$1,461.27).

With the cessation of the Rent Relief Fund Scheme, the limited options for financial assistance will only further diminish in the ACT.

Around one in five people seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services in the ACT are in paid employment – a rate that is higher than any other jurisdiction.



Length and complexity of support has been increasing over time

As indicated, available data indicates that Specialist Homelessness Services in the ACT are increasingly providing services to those already experiencing homelessness, rather than those at risk of homelessness. And the lack of medium or long-term housing solutions means clients are being provided support for longer periods, creating bottlenecks that limit the ability of homelessness services to support new clients. As shown in the table below, the ACT had the highest rate of continuing clients nationally in 2023-24, however the rate of returning clients was lower than other jurisdictions.

Proportion of SHS clients that are new, continuing or returning (by jurisdiction).

STATE/TERRITORY	Service user group (%)		
	NEW	CONTINUING	RETURNING
National	36.49%	42.55%	20.96%
NSW	40.05%	41.21%	18.74%
Vic	34.51%	43.09%	22.40%
Qld	39.12%	40.54%	20.34%
WA	35.52%	41.64%	22.85%
SA	30.86%	47.78%	21.36%
Tas	30.95%	46.48%	22.57%
ACT	32.68%	53.64%	13.68%
NT	31.40%	47.76%	20.84%

At the beginning of 2023-24, nearly 7% of clients who were already engaged with an ACT SHS were continuing to receive support 12 months later, while 22% who newly engaged and had a case opened were still receiving support at the end of the year. The rates of cases remaining open for extended periods in the ACT is higher than the national rates (see AIHW, *Specialist homelessness services 2023–24, Table CLIENTS.28: Support periods, by indicative duration over the reporting period, and by state and territory, 2023–24*).

The rate for ongoing support and closed for SHS services in the ACT

	No. of clients	% (of all clients)
Support periods that were ongoing on 1 July 2023, but closed in 2023-24	1,490	26.13%
Support periods that were ongoing on 1 July 2023, but remained open on 30 June 2024	390	6.84%
Support periods that opened in 2023–24, and closed in 2023-24	2,594	45.49%
Support periods that opened in 2023–24, and remained open on 30 June 2024	1,228	21.54%

Similarly, the average number of days of support in the ACT is **167**, with over **38%** of SHS clients receiving support for **over 180 days**. This compares to the national average of 104 days of support (with 20% receiving over 180 days of support nationally).

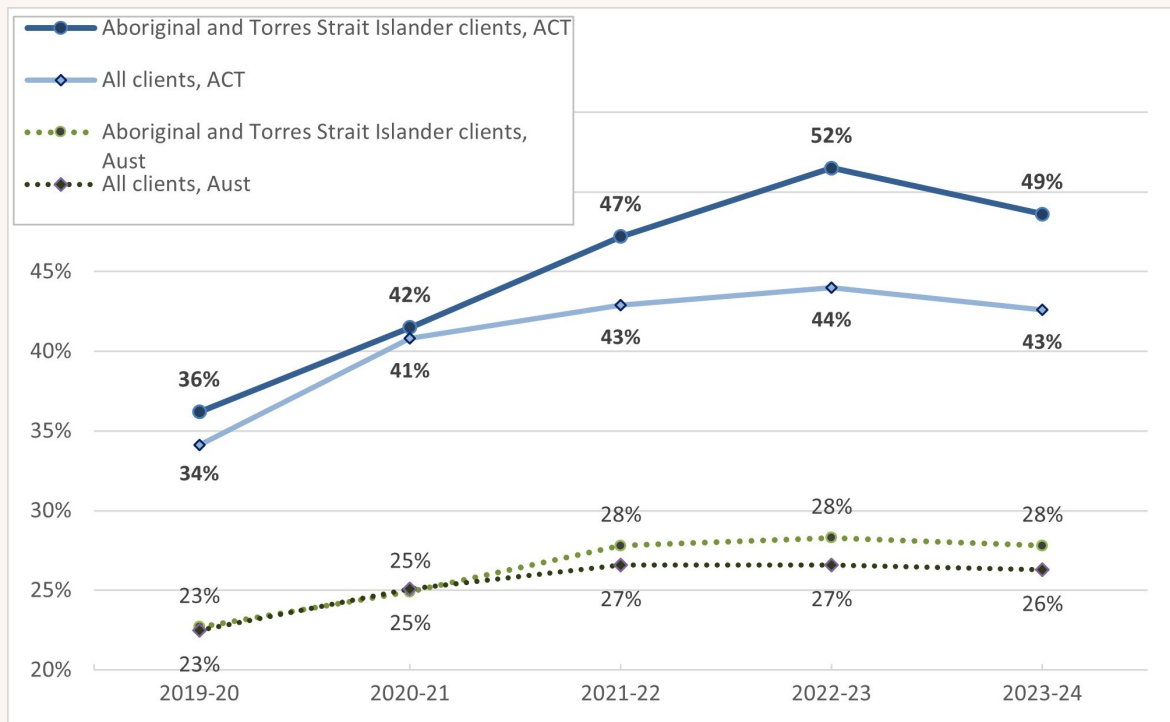
Of those clients whose support periods were ended during 2023-24, around a quarter (25.6%) were closed because the service lost contact with the client; a further 20% were referred to another specialist homelessness agency. Only 33.9% were closed due to the client's immediate needs being met or case management goals achieved.

The ACT has the highest rates of persistent homelessness in Australia

For many years, the ACT has had the highest rates of persistent or chronic homelessness in the nation. In 2023-24, **43%** of all clients had experienced persistent homelessness. The rate is even higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT (49%) – and nearly double the national rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as shown below.

This data underscores the urgent need in the ACT to better support people with complex needs, ensuring pathways into permanent housing and wrap-around supports that are culturally safe.

Rate (%) of persistent homelessness among people who use SHS services, ACT and national



Source: Productivity Commission, 2025, [Report on Government Services, PART G, SECTION 19](#)

Cost of homelessness services

The table below shows the recurrent cost per client accessing homelessness services (2023-24 dollars).

NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Aust
\$4,659	\$5,093	\$6,433	\$4,842	\$4,932	\$7,888	\$9,008	\$6,960	\$5,434

Source: Productivity Commission, 2025, [Report on Government Services, PART G, SECTION 19, TABLE 19A.22](#).