

# How Labor ignored WA public housing

JOSH ZIMMERMAN

WA spent less on public housing than Tasmania during the first four years Labor was in power — despite boasting a population five times that of the Apple Isle and billions in budget surpluses.

Productivity Commission figures released on Monday lay bare WA's dire underinvestment in social housing across the first four years of former Premier Mark McGowan's reign, during which the number of available dwellings fell nearly 2000 — a decrease of 5.7 per cent.

The paltry \$148.1m WA spent on replenishing and bolstering public housing stock between 2017 and 2021 compared with \$654.1m in SA and \$252.1m in Tasmania. Queensland and Victoria invested more than 10 times as much as WA over that period — over \$1.5 billion each — while NSW led the way with a spend of \$1.9b.

WA has picked up the pace over the past two years, pouring \$623m into new public housing — far eclipsing SA (\$187m) and Tasmania (\$258m) — but is yet to turnaround the fall in available stock. The number of public housing dwellings peaked at 33,836 in mid-2017 — shortly after Labor was elected — and fell to a low of 31,919 in 2021.

That had recovered to 32,694 by mid-2023 with the addition of more than 600 dwellings in the prior 12 months.

However, WA's 32,694 available public housing dwellings — according to the Productivity Commission figures — remains 1142 below levels inherited by Labor in 2017. There were more than 19,000 applicants on the public housing waitlist in mid-2023 — up 27 per cent from just over 15,000 in 2019.

In better news, the average turnaround time for vacant public housing in WA fell by a week in 2023 to 28 days — the best in the nation.

Housing Minister John Carey said the Government had added 1850 social homes since announcing a \$2.6 billion investment in public housing and homelessness, with a further 1000 dwellings under contract.

"There is pressure on public housing nationally and all States and Territories are experiencing challenges," he said.

He blamed "significant issues" within the Housing Authority dating back to the Barnett government.

For the first time in six years, Matthew Eaton & Jodie Caporn

# From spending all night terrified to a house called home

EXCLUSIVE CAITLYN RINTOUL

For the first time in six years, Matthew Eaton and Jodie Caporn finally have a place they can call home as they leave behind their life on the streets and break out of the cycle of homelessness.

The couple were one of almost 10,000 West Aussies who were homeless last year — with data revealing the crisis will only get worse amid a chronic undersupply of affordable housing across the State.

While the emotional scars that came with sleeping rough still run deep for the couple, Ms Caporn said they're working towards securing stable jobs to help set them up financially for the future.

After connecting with Unit- ing WA, engaging in support programs, and spending years on a waitlist, the couple finally secured a State Housing Commission home in time for Christmas.

After sleeping in a car for years, Ms Caporn said she often has to remind herself not to leave the windows and doors of her new home open.

"I have to have everything open because I'm used to being outdoors," Ms Caporn said.

"I think it's just like being in prison, you know, you can get institutionalised.

"Four walls feel great, I feel safe and secure but it's just that I feel suffocated sometimes."

Like many who sleep on the street, the couple regularly feared assault and theft.

"It was . . . bloody scary. But we had each other," she said.

Spending nights collecting cans and bottles with Containers for Change helped the couple get by with Mr Eaton saying it made them "self-sufficient".

"We're known to do the recycling, with the bottles and cans.

It was easier to relax and have a sleep in the day than it was at night because at night we felt like our stuff could be stolen," Ms Caporn said.

Rangers and store owners would offer them bottles to help them out.

"I think eventually they would say 'well, they're doing something positive'," Mr Eaton said.

In 2017, the couple found themselves on the street after a home invasion at their public housing home in Pinjarra.

Perpetrated by people known to them, the damage done to the property put a black mark on their rental record, impacting their ability to get another lease.

"We had a terrible home invasion at our HomesWest house in Pinjarra. We were kind to a lot of people. I had to put the brakes on and some of them didn't like that," she said.

"I went into shock, I don't remember much of it but it was horrific. We just didn't fight after that, we just couldn't and we ended up on the streets.

"I didn't realise how much trauma I had from it. I'm very guarded. It has taken me six years to find my feet."

Housing their children with family or friends but not wanting to overburden those helping, the duo made a car their home.

"Just as long as they had a roof over their head, I was happy. It was just Matt and I floating around in like toilet blocks or parks," she said. They then switched between living at

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Jodie Caporn

Mandurah and Rockingham caravan parks.

Reflecting on what their situation was like six years ago, Mr Eaton said: "We couldn't imagine being here.

"There's a stigma put around us. I think there's people out there that look down on you but I think we rose above that," he said.

They're known as the "it couple" around crisis support centre Tranby Engagement Hub, which recorded more than 70,000 presentations from people needing assistance in the past financial year.

While they have a place to call home now, they still continue to visit Tranby and engage with services as their road to normality continues.

Ms Caporn said she was buoyed their story to secure housing may inspire others seeking help.

"We're still going probably once or twice a week. It's just because that was home. I ended up just being like a counselor to others there," she said.

Mr Eaton took part in a Department of Justice program offered out of the centre, which allows people to do community service to pay down court fines.

He said it was helpful to help him pay down his traffic

fines, and set him up for a new life.

"It also teaches people the basics, like they're in the kitchen either teaching them proper cooking or just the basic stuff like cutting things or washing your hands. Working in a group or team as well," he said.

Their struggles illustrate the experience of many West Aussies doing it tough.

Support services are recording new cohorts on the streets who have never experienced homelessness before.

Many report stagnant wage rises and rising rents in the private market, some in the order of hundreds a week higher than their previous agreement.

According to the department's annual report, 756 social houses were added to the State's public housing stock during 2022-23.

In December, there were 81 newly identified homeless people in WA added to the State's dedicated homeless register — the By-Name List. November had 106 people added to the list.

But support services grappling to meet the demand fear it's just the tip of the iceberg as children are only added to the list if they access services accompanied by an adult family member.

Michala McMahon, pictured right, who helps monitor and update the database through the Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, said there was a gap in the data when it came to young people.

have hope & a roof over their heads



Above: Jodie Caporn and Matthew Eaton  
Picture: Michael Wilson

Ms McMahon said as more support services signed on and regularly reported to the list, the data would be collated on the cohort.

"Young people tend to only engage with adult services once they start to age out of youth services, between 18-20, as their access to youth accommodation options gets restricted," Ms McMahon said.

"Significant progress has been made in re-engaging past youth organisations and new ones — including The Salvation Army's Transitional Support Service, Home Stretch and Mercycare, and this is demonstrated in the data."

Homelessness and housing was listed as the fifth most important issue facing Australians in Mission Australia's annual survey released in December, which gauged the opinions of almost 20,000 youths aged between 15 and 19 years old.

The number of young people listing it as a top issue rose to 19 per cent, up from 12 per cent last year and 7 per cent in 2021. WA also had the highest number of respondents in an NAB survey struggling to meet their mortgage repayments, with 14 per cent saying it was a concern.

And almost 11 per cent of West Aussies experiencing homelessness had returned to living on the streets after a period in more secure housing, according to the Productivity Commission's Government Services 2024 report released on Monday.

The number, however, was higher at 14 per cent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Nationally, of all clients who experienced homelessness in 2022-23, 26.5 per cent experienced persistent homelessness, which is longer than seven months. It was up slightly on WA's 23.6 per cent.