

Snapshot: Anglicare Riverina – Riverina & Murray regions, NSW

Introduction

The Riverina is made up of urban and rural areas in the Murrumbidgee and Murray region with a population of around 272,000 people. Major centres include Wagga Wagga, Albury and Griffith. Wagga Wagga LGA has around 63,000 residents, Albury LGA 51,000, and Griffith, 26,000. These centres are hubs for the provision of health, education and other government services.

Riverina has a similar unemployment rate to Australia overall, at 4.6% and 13.1% for young people. The Murray region has higher than average unemployment at 6.6% and a concerning 8.0% for young people. Alongside higher unemployment in the Murray region, the area has a lower rate of labour force participation (61%) while Riverina has a slightly higher rate of labour force participation (66.5%) compared to the national 65.7% participation rate. The lower participation rate in the Murray region may be related to the older median age of this population.¹

Housing prices are significantly cheaper in the Riverina/Murray region than those in metropolitan centres. The median weekly rent for a 2-bedroom house in the Riverina (including Wagga Wagga, Albury and Griffith) is \$270-\$298.² Wagga Wagga is one of the more affordable housing markets in Australia in terms of median income compared to median house price;³ however, households reliant on income support and earning considerably below the median wage frequently still struggle to afford housing.

Despite the lower accommodation prices in this area, 620 people were considered homeless on Census Night 2016. This is an increase from the 593 counted in 2011. This means about one in 400 people in the Riverina/Murray region were homeless on Census night. A further 607 people were considered to be marginally housed, in crowded accommodation, other improvised accommodation or caravan parks, meaning that about 1 in 200 people were homeless or insecurely housed on Census Night 2016.⁴

8.6% of the Riverina population and 9.1% of the Murray population who were renting accommodation were paying more than 30% of their household income for rent, putting them in an unaffordable situation. This is a lower rate than Australia overall (11.5%) reflecting the lower cost of accommodation in regional areas. The median household income is \$1232 in Riverina and \$1116 in Murray, compared to \$1438 nationally. 10% (Riverina) and 8% (Murray) of households take home more than \$3000 weekly income compared to 16% nationally. 23% of the Riverina population has a weekly income less than \$650 as do 26% of the Murray population, compared to 20% nationally.⁵

¹ Data from Labour Market Information Portal as at February 2019 <http://lmip.gov.au/>

² Median rental data from <https://www.realestate.com.au/neighbourhoods/>

³ <https://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/3697671/tick-of-approval-wagga-makes-global-housing-affordability-list/?cs=148>

⁴ Homelessness data from Estimating Homelessness, 2016, ABS 2049.0. LGA and SA2 tables.

⁵ From Riverina SA4 and Murray SA4, 2016 Census.

Anglicare Riverina supports low income households in the Riverina in the following ways:

- Ashmont Community Resource Centre, including a Survive to Thrive Hub located in Wagga Wagga, supporting families with young children
- No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS)
- Community based emergency relief programs
- Youth services for young people at risk of involvement with juvenile justice, or leaving supervision
- Child and Family support programs
- HIPPY parenting and early learning program
- Out of home care and associated non-placement support services

Findings

On the 23rd March 2019, 671 private rentals were advertised for rent in Riverina and Murray NSW. Private rentals and shared houses were surveyed from online sources including realestate.com.au, allhomes.com.au, and gumtree.com.au. While a property could be affordable and appropriate for more than one household type, any individual property can only be rented out by one household type at any time. To this end, we found that:

- 192 individual properties were suitable for at least one household type living on income support payments without placing them in housing stress
- 442 individual properties were suitable for at least one household type living on minimum wage without placing them in housing stress.

Families with children receiving income support

There were limited options for families with children who were supported by a government payment. As housing in regional areas is more likely to be standalone houses than apartments, a larger proportion has the number of bedrooms and space that a family might require, unlike the city where most cheaper properties are small apartments. There were only 9 properties affordable to a parent with one child supported by Newstart Allowance, all in smaller regional towns. Without family support in these areas such a household would be isolated and indeed risk losing eligibility for income support at all if they moved from an area with a lower unemployment rate. Other properties affordable to single parents or couple families supported by Centrelink also tended to be away from the larger regional hubs.

Young people and jobseekers

There was only one affordable and appropriate option for any single person reliant on Youth Allowance or Newstart Allowance. This was in shared accommodation in Howlong, about 20 minutes' drive from Albury, necessitating a personal vehicle. People on student or jobseeker payments would likely need to spend close to half of their income to afford accommodation, even in a relatively inexpensive region such as the Riverina.

Low-waged households

A reasonable proportion of properties were affordable and appropriate to families with one or two minimum wage incomes. Again, the condition, location, and proximity to essential services of the lower priced options are likely to have been quite variable.

On the Snapshot weekend, these are the number of unique properties affordable and appropriate for:

Households on income support payments (#1-10)

Households on minimum wage (#11-14)

Table 1: Rental Affordability, Riverina, by household type and percentage

Household Type	Payment Type	# Affordable & Appropriate	% Affordable & Appropriate
Couple, two children (one aged less than 5, one aged less than 10)	Newstart Allowance (both adults)	39	6%
Single, two children (one aged less than 5, one aged less than 10)	Parenting Payment Single	13	2%
Couple, no children	Age Pension	161	24%
Single, one child (aged less than 5)	Parenting Payment Single	53	8%
Single, one child (aged over 8)	Newstart Allowance	9	1%
Single	Age Pension	46	7%
Single aged over 21	Disability Support Pension	32	5%
Single	Newstart Allowance	1	0%
Single aged over 18	Youth Allowance	1	0%
Single in share house	Youth Allowance	1	0%
Couple, two children (one aged less than 5, one aged less than 10)	Minimum Wage + FTB A	343	51%
Single, two children (one aged less than 5, one aged less than 10)	Minimum Wage + FTB A & B	120	18%
Single	Minimum Wage	102	15%
Couple, two children (one aged less than 5, one aged less than 10)	Minimum Wage + Parenting payment (partnered) + FTB A&B	198	30%
Total No of Properties		671	

192	442
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Discussion

While there is more affordable housing available in rural locations, many of these options are located in areas with limited public transport or access to services. Local services note that affordable options for older people are frequently under-serviced and inaccessible to public transport and support systems, compromising their ability to age in place at their home. Similarly, people with disabilities or families with young children may encounter disadvantages, less access to services, or heavier reliance on personal vehicle transport as a result of the distance and isolation of some areas. Meanwhile, jobseekers reliant on Centrelink benefits may be specifically precluded from moving to a place with higher unemployment simply to find affordable accommodation, and may lose eligibility for their payment for up to 6 months if they do so.

Despite the overall greater accessibility of the rental market in the Riverina/Murray area, there was still only one affordable option for young people reliant on Youth Allowance; this was in shared housing and twenty minutes' drive from town, meaning a vehicle would be essential to have access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Young people would need to spend half their income to afford more than a handful of properties in this region. As a provider of out-of-home care services to young people without family support, Anglicare is particularly concerned about the impact on young people of the expensive private rental market. The low rate of Youth Allowance young people receive compounds the multiple complex issues young care leavers may be dealing with. More options need to be provided for young people leaving foster, kinship or residential care to transition to independence in a safe, affordable environment well-linked to support services and opportunities for education, training and employment.

For families relying on income support, the proportion of affordable and appropriate rentals was greatest in areas away from the main population centres. Those within main centres like Wagga Wagga were located in disadvantaged suburbs such as Ashmont. As an organisation delivering front line services such as emergency relief, Anglicare observes an evident link between food insecurity and rental stress, which can be seen frequently at our Ashmont Community Resource Centre.

It is also important to note that the figures do not indicate the level of competition for any affordable option. Rental applicants may find themselves competing against many other applicants for a property or a room in a house and applicants with income from wages have an advantage over those with a Centrelink income. People with disabilities, those from diverse cultural backgrounds, and young people report experiencing discrimination which compounds the difficulty they experience in finding affordable accommodation.

Ageing government housing is also an issue in the Riverina, meaning houses are unusable or have poor energy efficiency. It is encouraging to see the NSW Government's recent commitment to upgrading the energy efficiency of social housing stock across the state.⁶

⁶ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/improving-nsw/regional-nsw/our-regions/riverina-murray/#region-overview>

Policy implications

Although waged households have access to affordable housing in this region, a number of vulnerable household types would experience considerable difficulty in finding appropriate, affordable housing within reach of needed services and transport links to the community. In order for our region to be inclusive of all its residents, policies which continue to promote the increase of rental prices need to be modified and incentives to provide lower cost, appropriate accommodation for low income families and individuals must be provided.

Messages for the NSW Government

There is a need to increase the supply of housing across NSW, both in total and with regard to the NSW Government's social housing portfolio. Ever-increasing private rental costs put increasing pressure on social housing meaning that in some regions the expected waiting time for housing exceeds 10 years. The Riverina/Murray area is less heavily affected by long waiting periods than some; however, the geographically dispersed nature of the region and low stock in small towns means that a person may face an extremely long wait or need to move out of the town where their family and social supports reside to access government housing.

Government investment in social housing and affordable housing options, as well as providing incentives for non-government investors to increase the supply of affordable housing, will be required to address the disparity between subsidised accommodation and the unaffordable private market.

A problem of increasing visibility is that of domestic and family violence, and how unaffordable housing undermines safety planning and opportunities for affected people who have left relationships to re-establish their life. Even where programs are available to support families who have left, such as Start Safely which subsidises rent, Anglicare's experience is that implementation appears variable as individual landlords consider the family unable to afford the property regardless. Whether this indicates that more education is needed in regional areas, or a more systemic issue, it appears that an important initiative is being undermined when families need it most.

Anglicare continues to advocate for young people leaving Out-of-Home Care across NSW by supporting the Home Stretch campaign to extend out-of-home care to age 21. Anglicare is a provider of services for young people in statutory care in Riverina NSW and is extremely concerned about young people leaving care into independence. Many young people leaving out-of-home care are dealing with extremely complex personal, legal and family issues and the severe financial strain of unaffordable housing compounds their stress and isolation. Statistics show that 35% of care leavers experience homelessness in the first year after leaving care.⁷ A combination of better wraparound support, extended care options, and increased financial resources is needed to prevent the additional trauma of homelessness for our most vulnerable young people. The Premier's Youth Initiative is an important component of supporting young people's transition to independence; however, providing options for young people to stay in care until age 21 would mean they have the same opportunities as most Australian young people to undertake further study or training

⁷ <http://thehomestretch.org.au/learnmore/>

without jeopardising their housing or trying to survive on inadequate government payments.

Social Housing waitlists in the Riverina/Murray region

Waitlists for social housing in the Riverina/Murray region are shorter than some across the state.

- Wagga Wagga: 2-5 years for 1 bedroom or 4 bedroom; up to 2 years for 2-3 bedroom
- Albury: 2-5 years for 1-3 bedroom, 5-10 years for 4 bedroom
- Griffith: 2-5 years for 1-3 bedroom, up to 2 years for 4 bedroom
- Leeton: 2-5 years for 1-3 bedroom, up to 2 years for 4 bedroom

Messages for the Federal Government

At the Federal Government level, it is important that current tax concessions including Negative Gearing and Capital Gains Tax exemptions are examined to ensure they are supporting equity in the housing market and not creating an unfair advantage for any group of taxpayers. Income inequality is also driving housing stress for households reliant on government benefits, which have not kept pace with the increases in the cost of living, particularly with regard to housing.

Conclusion

Appropriate, secure and affordable housing is the basic foundation for the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Once again, the data from this year's Snapshot adds to the growing body of evidence reflecting the housing crisis facing vulnerable people in our community. Other service systems are undermined by the lack of adequate affordable housing for young people, people with disabilities, and disadvantaged families. It is vital for government to recognise the importance of addressing the housing affordability crisis permeating Australia to ensure the efficiency of all services it provides, and promote maximal participation from all members of the community.