

# Research shows the Northern Rivers floods exposed flaws in the NSW housing system

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As flooding impacts more NSW communities, [new research](#) shows action needs to be taken to safeguard regional Australians against homelessness and displacement as severe weather events become more common.

These are the findings of a new University of NSW report looking at housing vulnerability and climate change, focused on the Northern Rivers eight months after the severe floods earlier this year.

[The research, by UNSW's City Futures Research Centre](#), was commissioned by Mission Australia, the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, Social Futures, The Salvation Army Australia, the Australian Red Cross, and the Tenants' Union of NSW.

The key recommendations of the report are:

- Building more social housing stock in low-risk geographic areas
- Better protections for renters, such as ceasing no-fault evictions, at least in periods when the private rental market fails due to natural disasters
- Better resourcing for responses to homelessness and housing instability in periods of natural disasters
- More detailed planning around the medium-term housing solutions to be implemented following a disaster such as 'pod homes'
- Improving knowledge management around the housing system, so disaster preparedness and planning can reflect data about dwellings in flood-prone land and likely demand from rough sleepers during flood events
- Providing transport subsidies and public and community transport options to mitigate the impacts of displacement and dislocation from existing community connections.

The researchers found that regional housing markets cannot withstand widespread property losses caused by natural disasters, like floods, because there is limited rental stock.

The result is that more low-income renters are being displaced, while others are being left with little choice but to accept living in homes that need repairs, or are otherwise unsafe.

This is because they risk receiving a no-ground eviction as a result of simply asking for repairs.

Homelessness support services, not adequately resourced to deal with homelessness even prior to disasters, are being called on to help even more people, while their volunteers and workers are also flood-impacted.

People who were at risk of homelessness prior to the floods now face additional years of ongoing uncertainty because there is not enough social housing available.

Social housing has dropped to 4.7% of housing stock in NSW and this exposes people throughout the state to increased likelihood of ongoing risk of homelessness in the wake of natural disasters.

Access to affordable housing in the Northern Rivers was already at crisis point before the floods with 1 in 25 of the state's social housing waiting list applicants being in the area.

With risks of natural disasters increasing due to climate change, there is a strong need for a well-planned and better co-ordinated response to meeting people's housing needs post-disaster, and building a more resilient system.

**The following quotes can be attributed to spokespeople from the organisations that commissioned the report:**

"The crisis has further exposed deep flaws in an already vulnerable housing system. There is an urgent need to build greater resilience into the system in the face of more frequent and severe climate disasters. Failure to do so will push more people into a hard-to-break cycle of poverty, unable to find a stable home from which they can rebuild their lives," St Vincent de Paul Society NSW CEO, Jack de Groot, said.

"Climate change is undeniably here, leading to an increase in homelessness, poverty and inequality. Therefore, we need well-planned, well-designed social housing stock built in low-risk geographical areas. An increase in this type of social housing would go a long way in helping to house people on low incomes, help end homelessness and build resilience to the effects of climate change and natural disasters," Mission Australia NSW State Director, Nada Nasser, said.

"Regional NSW was already facing a rental crisis, but with the floods, the private rental market in the Northern Rivers has been pushed to its very limit. Local Tenants' Services are seeing an increase in the advice provided on 'no grounds' evictions, as well as rents continuing to increase, including for sitting tenants impacted by the

floods. So many are now relying on the private rental market, and as they start the process of rebuilding their lives they need better protections against unfair 'no grounds' evictions. It's time we also seriously consider putting in place fair limits around rent and rent increases. These tenancy reforms are needed broadly, but especially where households have faced such significant disruption and need our support through recovery," CEO of Tenants' Union of NSW, Leo Patterson Ross, said.

"The report highlights the need to urgently build social and affordable housing in areas of acute housing need like the Northern Rivers. Before the flood, we were facing an absolute housing and homelessness crisis, with rents and rough sleeping rates well above those of most capital cities. Climate change events like this highlight an urgent need for government to invest in resilient housing for communities across regional Australia," Social Futures CEO, Tony Davies, said

"This research emphasises the importance of housing in the recovery process for individuals, families and communities. We have witnessed firsthand the impact that displacement and multiple relocations can have on mental health and wellbeing. A safe and secure home can provide immediate and immense relief. As a nation, our disaster preparedness must include mitigating risks to the housing system, reinforcing it to be able to withstand sudden shocks and disruptions," the Salvation Army's Secretary for Mission, Captain Stuart Glover, said.

"Our recovery workers are reporting that people who have previously been able to cope, manage with the pre-flood lack of affordable housing are feeling a deep sense of lack of control over their future and losing hope," Australian Red Cross Emergency Services Manger NSW, Diana Bernardi, said.

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