

What do single, older women want? Their 'own little space' (and garden) to call home, for a start

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The “great Australian dream” of owning your own home is rapidly proving to be an illusion for many in the early 21st century.

In an environment of exceedingly high house prices, groups who don't have secure, long-term employment are at risk of homelessness, particularly as they age. Single, older women are one such group at [increasing risk of being homeless](#).

While housing policy has neglected this area of concern, recent work is beginning to [highlight this gap](#). Most research has been done in metropolitan areas, but women living in regional Australia merit attention too.

In [our study](#) of 47 older women who do not own homes in regional New South Wales nearly all were living on low incomes. Their housing ranged from dingy hotel rooms and makeshift sheds or shacks to rundown flats or housing in regional towns. Only a few lived in reasonable circumstances, including community housing.

We discovered that the women had clear ideas about what sort of housing would suit them as they age. For all of them, stability and security of tenure were priorities. Other aspects of what these women wanted were perhaps more surprising and differed from research findings on older women living in cities.

Why is housing a problem for these women?

In a [recent article](#), we argued that women's work and family roles in the last century left them economically disadvantaged. Most had interrupted employment histories, lower status and lower-paid jobs than men.

[Research](#) shows that women who don't have a partner generally suffer greater insecurity when they can no longer work, particularly if they don't own their own homes.

Many single women now have to contend with a rental market in Australia in which the laws tend to be [skewed in favour of landlords](#). Leases are typically short-term and tenants have [little security](#) of tenure. An overheated housing market, which encourages [speculative investment](#), makes this insecurity worse.

To make matters worse, the [availability of public housing](#) has fallen.

What are their housing priorities?

[Our study](#) of older women in the [Northern Rivers](#) region of NSW found that only two participants had never had a partner. All but four had borne children.

Their shared desire for stability and security of tenure is understandable, given most had very disrupted housing histories.

Many worried about what would happen to them. Elizabeth said:

It would be just lovely to be somewhere where I know I could stay until I died.

Agnes thought she might end up “in an old school bus on somebody's property”.

The women also expressed a strong desire for privacy and independence, which many of them called their “own space”. They wanted to come and go as they please. For instance, Anne just wants her “own little space to be private”.

Many women linked their desire for security, privacy and independence to their age and their gender. Jane, for example, associated wanting her own kitchen space with being a woman.

In contrast to some [research](#) on this group in cities, our participants insisted they did not wish to share housing with other women. They spoke quite vehemently at times – Susan would rather live in a tent than share housing.

What was surprising was that nearly all the women wanted some sort of garden, even if it was a tiny space. This was almost as important as their need for security and independence.



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Finally, the women wanted to have space to accommodate their grandchildren and pets. They saw their role as being able to provide a base for their family and to nurture their grandchildren. This seems to reflect more traditional notions of women’s caring responsibilities, which were more widespread last century when these women were young.

We know that pets play a significant role in [fostering mental and emotional health](#) in older people. We also know that describing pets as family members is part of a [broader trend in Australia](#). In our study, one participant minded the “grand-dogs” when her daughter was away.

A few women even said they would rather be homeless than give up their pet, such was their attachment. But, for many, lack of secure tenure and independence meant they were denied this source of emotional security.

The Victorian government has recently announced [changes to tenancy laws](#) that will allow renters to keep pets, as well as improve security of tenure. This is a welcome development for Victorians. It must be hoped it spreads to other states.

Preferences have policy implications

Our study emphasises the housing preferences of a regional cohort. Though the desire for secure tenure may be widespread, some preferences such as the expressed need for a garden may reflect regional values.

If the housing problems that many single, older women experience are to be solved, housing policymakers need to be informed by research about what makes these women's lives meaningful and productive.