

Friday 10 April 2026

Construction Statistics team
Australian Bureau of Statistics
by email only to daniel.rossi@abs.gov.au



Dear Daniel and the Construction Statistics team,

Undercounting social housing building statistics

We are writing to you today to express our concern that the Australian Bureau of Statistics' building and construction data—specifically the *Building Approvals* and *Building Activity* series—are becoming an increasingly unreliable measure of genuine private sector building activity over the short-to-medium term.

This is due to a definitional anomaly related to social housing, which is built by the private sector via not-for-profit providers—but with primarily government funds.

Within this letter, we outline the rationale for the ABS to either:

1. **Review and revise the 'public sector' definition** to ensure it captures all government-funded social housing construction, or
2. **Create a third ownership category that captures the non-profit sector.**

Under current measurements, each new housing build is categorised into either private- or public-sector categories, based on the intended owner of the completed building. The specific [public sector definition](#) is as follows:

Residential buildings being constructed by private sector builders under government housing authority schemes whereby the authority has contracted, or intends to contract, to purchase the buildings on or before completion, are classified as public sector.

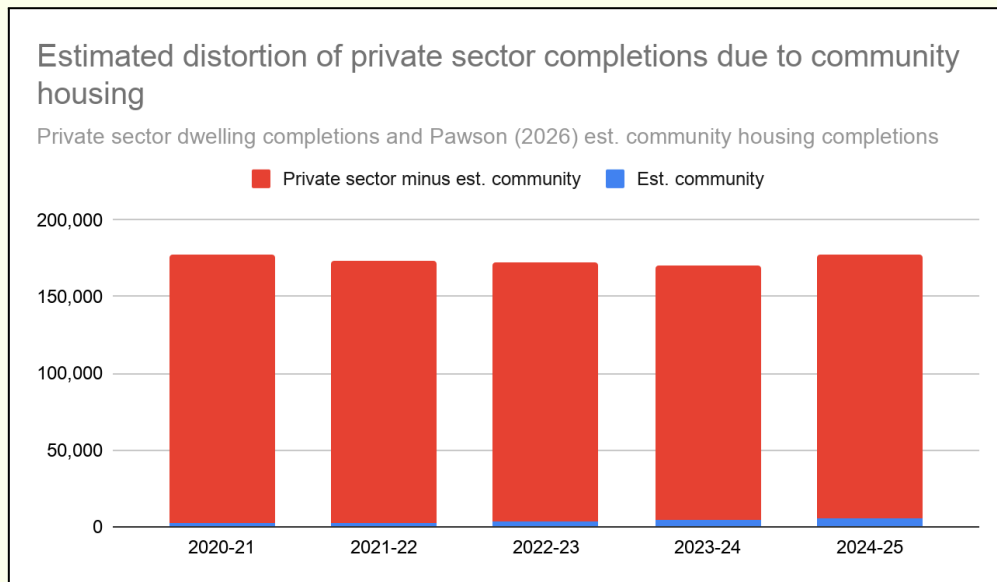
This definition made sense historically. However, due to policy shifts during the 21st century, social housing delivery has moved away from public housing, delivered by governments—and toward community housing, delivered by not-for-profits.

Term	Definition (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute)
Social housing	Umbrella term that covers both community and public housing
Community housing	Managed and often owned by not-for-profit organisations
Public housing	Owned and managed by State and Territory Governments

This shift has distorted the data as captured and presented by the ABS, causing the lion's share of publicly-funded dwellings—delivered by non-profits rather than the

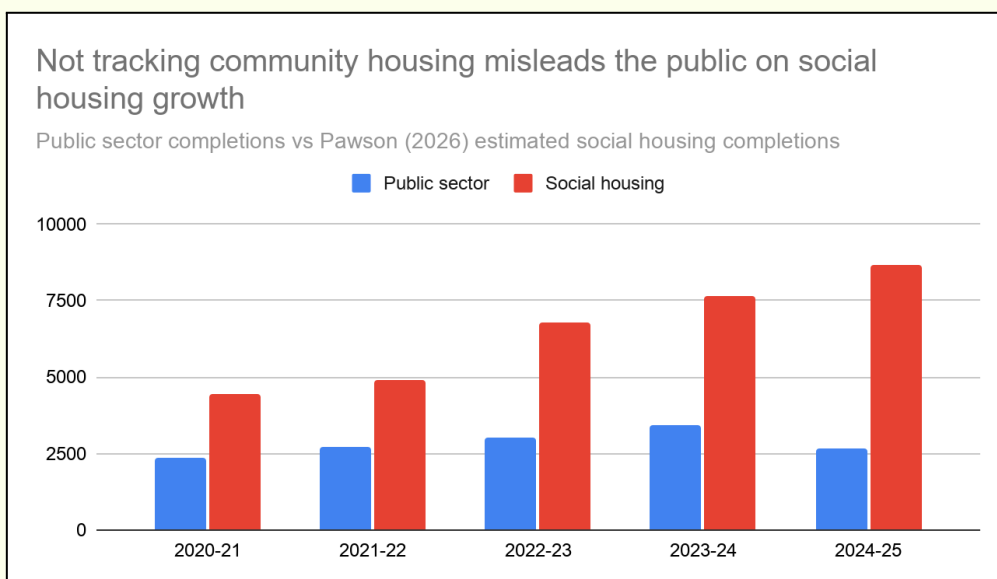
state directly—to be classified as private sector housing. This makes it difficult to assess how much social housing is actually being delivered for Australians each year.

For example, between 2020-21 and 2024-25, a total of 912,023 private dwellings were built by the private sector. [UNSW research](#) estimates that around 14,596 of these dwellings are utilised as community housing—meaning that policy makers and researchers are currently at risk of systematically underestimating the amount of government-led construction and social housing flows over any given period.



In the context of increased government investment in housing, it is essential that we capture the true impact of this funding so that successes and failures can be identified, and policy interventions can be improved over time.

Equally, this will enable us to demonstrate the degree to which public investment increases housing supply, and the degree to which it may crowd out private investment.



There is also a strong argument that improving this data would be of great service to public discourse. Commentary in both social and mainstream media rely extensively on ABS data to show how much social housing is being built.

The continued exclusion of community housing means that our nation significantly—and often unknowingly—underestimates the amount of social housing being built in Australia.

Given the significant distortion of the *Building Approvals* and *Building Activity* series, we strongly urge the ABS to either:

3. **Review and revise the 'public sector' definition** to ensure it captures all government-funded social housing construction, or
4. **Create a third ownership category that captures the non-profit sector.**

Thank you for your time, and for your consideration of this issue.

Yours sincerely,

Jonathan O'Brien

Abundant Housing Network Australia

e: hello@abundanthousing.org.au | w: abundanthousing.org.au

The [Abundant Housing Network Australia](http://abundanthousing.org.au) is a national alliance of independent, grassroots campaigners working to build a new vision for housing and cities—one that's more sustainable, liveable and affordable for everyone.

Our members — [Greater Brisbane](#), [Greater Canberra](#), [Sydney YIMBY](#) and [YIMBY Melbourne](#) — came together to forge a new urbanist politics that brings together everyone who loves our cities and wants to welcome more neighbours into them.

Our landmark [Brick Book](#) outlines shovel-ready housing policies the Commonwealth can deliver right now to boost housing supply and make homes more affordable and safer for all Australians.

