Homelessness Research:
Improving Services, Improving Outcomes
and Working to End Homelessness
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#### 2012 Parity
- **March:** An Introduction to Homelessness in Australia
- **April:** Philanthropic, Corporate and Private Sector Responses to Homelessness
- May: Policing Homelessness

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### Homelessness in Australia
- **October:** 2011 Update

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### Homelessness Research Organisations
- CHP Web Site
  - www.chp.org.au

- Parity Web Site
  - www.chp.org.au/parity

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### Homelessness Research Trends
- Contributions to Parity are welcome. Each issue of Parity has a central focus or theme. However, prospective contributors should not feel restricted by this as Parity seeks to discuss the whole range of issues connected with homelessness and the provision of housing and services to people who are homeless. If possible, they wish to support ron should be no greater than 1,000 words. Please consult the Parity editor if this is insufficient. Where necessary, contributions will be edited. Where possible this will be done in consultation with the contributor.

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### Homelessness Research Schedule
- **Volume 24, Issue 9 · October 2011**
- Homelessness Research
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### Homelessness Research Promotions
- **Promotion of Conferences, Events and Publications**
- Organisations are invited to have their promotional fliers included in the monthly mailout of Parity.

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### Homelessness Research Contributions
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### Homelessness Research Contributions
- **Contributions can be sent by e-mail to parity@chp.org.au or sent on disk in a Microsoft Word or rtf format to Council to Homeless Persons, 2 Stanley St, Collingwood VIC 3066.** If neither of these two options is possible, contributions can be faxed on (03) 9419 7445 or mailed to the above address.

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### Homelessness Research Website
- **CHP Web Site**
  - www.chp.org.au

- **Parity Web Site**
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### Homelessness Research Contributions
- **Website design and maintenance proudly donated by InXchange Australia**

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### Homelessness Research Contributions
- **2011 Parity**
- **Publications Schedule**
  - November: Responding to Homelessness in Tasmania

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### Homelessness Research Contributions
- **2012 Parity**
- **Publications Schedule**
  - March: An Introduction to Homelessness in Australia
  - April: Philanthropic, Corporate and Private Sector Responses to Homelessness
  - May: Policing Homelessness

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### Homelessness Research Contributions
- **The views and opinions expressed in Parity are not necessarily those of CHP.**
There is complexity when it comes to getting an accurate picture of homelessness. Its ‘hidden’ nature, coupled with the fact that homelessness does not have ‘one’ recognisable face or a simple set of causes poses a major challenge for policy-makers and researchers. Collecting and using data therefore becomes difficult and subject to many limitations because of this hidden nature.

We all know countless examples of people who are homeless who are not “conspicuously homeless”.

The teenager who has run away from a violent and unhappy home living at their mate’s place, avoiding school and avoiding contact with authorities or support services.

A worker who loses their job sleeping in a make-shift shed, too stressed to seek help.

A mother of three who has put in 146 applications for rental properties in one year, turned down for each of them, and living ‘temporarily’ at her friend’s place.

A young woman who has fled domestic violence. She has been on the waiting list for two years and sleeps in her car each night.

When people are homeless they are often going through the worst days of their lives and may avoid contact with governments and with members of the community. Even if they do present for support services, they can hide their homelessness or not necessarily view themselves as homeless.

Often people who are homeless or who have experienced homelessness have told their story countless times to get the help they need. To be asked by researchers to retell their story, or to commit to being tracked throughout some of the hardest and worst months of their life, is not always, understandably, welcomed by people who are homeless.

We have certainly come a long way in modernising and improving data sources. The commencement of the National Specialist Homelessness Services Data Collection system on 1 July this year will provide much-needed additional data, particularly in relation to children who are homeless and repeat homelessness.

But we do need more than just raw data. We need to be able to understand the complex pathways into homelessness and the stories of Australians who sadly find themselves homeless. We need to know the stories because we have to understand where the best points of intervention lie.

My view is that we have a responsibility to intervene where possible and make sure that the right mix of support services is available. We need to know where problems arise and what as Governments, as service providers, and as a community we need to do to make sure we are preventing and ending homelessness.

When the Australian Government developed its long-term strategy for addressing homelessness in the White Paper, we decided that early intervention and prevention were crucial. When I meet with people who are homeless, the question always arises in my mind — what could we have done as a community to prevent them from finding themselves without a place to call home?

Divorce, illness, sudden loss of employment — life’s events can throw up unexpected situations. Despite the challenges we face in terms of counting the homeless and in terms of identifying homelessness — and these are challenges that every country faces — we retain a strong commitment to evidence-based policy and to getting the most accurate snapshot we can of homelessness.

We cannot rely on just one source — there needs to be a range of sources which inform our understanding and our picture of homelessness.

There is some exciting research underway — both at a government and non-government level, including into how people experiencing homelessness can better access and maintain employment, the needs of homeless sole fathers and their children and homelessness among Indigenous women. The Australian Government’s $5 million investment in Journeys Home, a longitudinal study will be the first study to assess a large number of income support recipients who are homeless or are vulnerable to homelessness.

There is also a wealth of information that the community sector and the service sector can provide to help inform our understanding of homelessness. The people who work in these sectors are well-equipped to feed into policy development. Organisations helping people who are homeless sometimes become trusted advisers, friends, and confidants to people experiencing homelessness. My view is that all homeless services and organisations that come into contact with people experiencing homelessness that hear their stories are well-equipped to feed into policy development.

As a Federal Government we are working hard to reduce homelessness. We are investing in record amounts of affordable housing — almost 80,000 new affordable rental homes — and investing in more services, including more than 180 new or expanded support services under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness.

We are also trying to change the way we support people experiencing homelessness. Centrelink’s Community Engagement Officers network has recently been increased to 110 officers and they have had a great deal of success on the ground, providing outreach to people who ordinarily would not interact with support systems. Centrelink is also doing a great deal to better identify people who are homeless to ensure that they are getting additional assistance through Centrelink.

To ensure that we are hitting the right targets, the research agenda is critical. That is why we are committed to testing our data systems to ensure that they are working as intended to help identify and support people that are homeless.

Thank you to Parity for dedicating this issue to homelessness research. It is important to remember that while we have challenges with data on homelessness, research is critical to ensuring that we better understand a problem that all-too-often is out of sight.

Senator the Hon Mark Arbib, Minister for Social Housing and Homelessness.
As a new comer to the specialist homelessness service sector, I find the research domain an impressively active and exciting space. The Australian Government’s National Homelessness Research Agenda 2009–2013 is a systematic attempt to formalise and identify research to inform the evidence base and shape homelessness policy.

The National Homelessness Research Agenda makes good the commitments given in the The Road Home Homelessness White Paper to develop a national homelessness research strategy. Indeed much of the discussion around the development of both The Road Home and the National Homelessness Research Agenda, has focused on the need for evidence based policy, as a pre-requisite for effectively responding to homelessness in Australia.

The National Homelessness Research Agenda is welcomed by both the academies undertaking the research and the homelessness sector. Research responding to gaps in our knowledge of homelessness, as well as contributing evidence about what services are effective, is enthusiastically embraced across the sector.

Clearly public policy does not stand on evidence alone. The making of policy is a dynamic process shaped by political practicalities as well as the values, principles, philosophies, subjectivities and ideologies that inform what is accepted as legitimate evidence.

This edition of Parity provides a window to the state of the homelessness research in Australia, as it flows from the National Homelessness Research Agenda. In sketching the projects currently underway across the country, the focus is on important challenges including: defining and capturing client outcomes; what it takes to integrate services; building and sustaining research capacity; and making sense of the growing body of evidence for the effectiveness of supported housing responses.

Attention is also given to research being undertaken about the specific responses required for women, older people, youth, adults experiencing chronic homelessness, the indigenous population, those with a disability and sex workers. An important discussion about the reliability of both the data we are counting and the assumptions upon which that data is constructed, is also part of the landscape.

Research on homelessness has already delivered critical findings that have allowed policy-makers and practitioners to identify successful approaches to preventing and ending homelessness. To move policy and practice forward, we must continue to test these approaches and measure their impact on keeping people housed and healthy.

Let’s build on the good work of the National Research Agenda and drive the movement to end homelessness in Australia by showcasing solutions. This includes continuing to make better use of, and coordinating, administrative data to demonstrate what is successful in ending homelessness permanently; how to tailor the right mix of housing, specialist and mainstream support; and to promote the personal and economic benefits of preventing and ending homelessness.

Jenny Smith, CEO Council to Homeless Persons

Acknowledgements

CHP would like to acknowledge and thank FaHCSIA for their sponsorship of this edition and for their ongoing support for the work of Parity in resourcing the homelessness sector. Likewise, CHP would like thank Dr Guy Johnson for his work as Guest Editor on this edition.
Youth Homelessness Matters Day — 18 April 2012

The National Youth Coalition of Housing (NYCH) is gearing up for the annual Youth Homelessness Matters Day (YHMD) on Wednesday 18 April 2012. Last year several organisations across Australia organised media and events in order to:

- Raise public awareness about youth homelessness.
- Celebrate the resilience of young people.
- Provide information to the general public about how they can help to end youth homelessness.

Be part of the solution! Many community members are sympathetic to the plight of people who are homeless; however often find it hard to know how they can help. YHM Day aims to help people to not only get the facts and figures on homelessness, but also information on how they can help young people in their community.

Join the YHM Day campaign by organising an event in your community.

Shortly NYCH will be circulating tools to help you participate, including a Campaign kit and YHM Day Merchandise order forms.

Please visit the website to read more about last years success http://www.youthhomelessnessmatters.net
Introduction

Homelessness and Research: A Golden Age or a Missed Opportunity?

By Dr Guy Johnson,
Senior Research Fellow School of Global Studies,
Social Science and Planning, RMIT University

Parity had run this edition a decade or so ago it would have looked very different — apart from drawing from a far smaller sample, most of the research would have focused on variants of two research questions:

- Who are the homeless?; and
- How many people are homeless?

These questions certainly made sense at the time — in the context of a developing service system the extent of the problem and the characteristics of the homeless population provided important insights into the type and quantity of services that were required. But, as the homelessness service system evolved to meet the needs of a larger and more diverse population it has become clear that a much wider scope of inquiry is necessary, particularly if the ultimate goal is to end homelessness.

In this context FaHCSIA’s investment of $11.4m in three large research partnerships (Swinburne University, University of Queensland and Flinders University), a large longitudinal study (Journeys Home, The University of Melbourne), and numerous smaller scale projects represents, at one level, a rare opportunity to develop a uniquely Australian evidence base of the size and scope necessary to support systemic and structural reform. In fact FaHCSIA’s commitment, along with the raft of current projects funded through other sources, has prompted some to talk of a golden age in homelessness research.

While it is true that the overall investment in homelessness research has never been larger, the National Homelessness Research Program funded by FaHCSIA has nonetheless made some mistakes. How we respond to these problems has the potential to shape the homelessness/policy/research nexus for years to come.

First, it remains unclear how the various pieces of research funded under this program will link together to create the evidence base that is required to drive and sustain systemic reform.

Second, I am not sure if we have the balance right between pure and applied research. This may appear to be a slightly esoteric concern to service providers given the realities they face on a daily basis. But while policy relevant applied research is essential so too is research that provides us with a stronger theoretical understanding of homelessness. Wherever you look around the world, successful models always have a sound theoretical basis.

Third, with the growth in research activity (including research outside the scope of National Homelessness Research Agenda) the need for new mechanisms to bring research into the world of practitioners and policy makers appears to have been overlooked. Australian researchers have a good track record in this area but with the volume of research currently being undertaken new approaches need to be developed to ensure that research is released in a manner that progresses service development.

Finally, the failure to establish a link between the Federal Governments targets and goals set out in the White paper and the programme of research funded by FaHCSIA is a major problem. The failure to make this link means that many important but potentially politically sensitive questions remain unaddressed. For instance, despite there being an explicit goal to reduce the number of young people exiting from state care into homeless no research focuses directly on this topic. This is just one of many examples where there is a disjunction between the key policy goals and the focus of government funded research.

Despite these problems, research has added much to our understanding of homelessness. Today we are in a much better position to understand how people’s experience of homelessness is influenced by the dynamic interaction of structural conditions, demographic characteristics and biographical experiences; we have taken the first tentative steps towards developing an understanding of the economic costs of homelessness and, crucially, we now recognise the influence of trauma on people’s homeless trajectories.

These and many other research findings have shown us that resolving homelessness is not simply a housing or a support issue but rather a matter of ensuring that the balance between housing and support reflects individual needs.

Research can play an important role in helping us understand homelessness and develop appropriate responses; but only if it is focused on the right issues.
Part 1: The National Homelessness Research Agenda

The National Homelessness Research Agenda

By the FAHCSIA Evidence and Planning Branch

Australia’s Commonwealth, state and territory governments are investing record amounts to reduce homelessness, including $11.4 million for the National Homelessness Research Agenda.

The importance of this agenda cannot be overstated. The Australian Government’s White Paper on Homelessness, The Road Home, found that there is still a lot we don’t know about the causes of homelessness. More research is needed to fully examine this important issue.

In order to achieve the Australian Government’s ambitious target of halving homelessness by 2020, there needs to be a more thorough understanding of homelessness, the causal factors that lead people into homelessness, the life experiences of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and factors that impact on people’s resilience and the course of their lives.

A solid and evolving evidence base will give us a much fuller understanding of the pathways in to and out of homelessness, and other interacting factors. This will drive the development and implementation of evidence-based policy that will really make a difference for people that are homeless and those at risk of homelessness. We need to know more about homelessness so we can better respond in the future by ensuring that services are better tailored, coordinated, supported and resourced.

The National Homelessness Research Agenda

The National Homelessness Research Agenda is a four year initiative, extending to June 2013 that balances the need for long-term research requiring detailed analysis with short-term projects.

There are three components to the agenda:

- **Journeys Home, the Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability**, allocated $5 million;
- **The National Partnership Agreements**, allocated $4 million; and
- **National Research Projects**, allocated $1.5 million.

**Journeys Home**

As part of the National Homelessness Research Agenda, Journeys Home, the Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability (formerly the Longitudinal Study of Australians Vulnerable to Homelessness), aims to improve the understanding of, and policy response to, the diverse social, economic and personal factors that are related to homelessness.
and the risk of becoming homeless. Journeys Home will be the first large-scale longitudinal study accessing a broad sample of Australians who are homeless or vulnerable to homelessness.

The data will be available for research projects outlined in the National Homelessness Research Strategy 2009–2013 and for input into policy development. It will assist the Government to provide targeted homelessness support programs. Further information on this initiative can be found in a further article in this edition.

The National Partnership Agreements

Under the National Partnerships Agreement, FaHCSIA has partnered with The University of Queensland’s Institute for Social Science Research, The University of South Australia’s Flinders Partners Pty Ltd, and Swinburne University of Technology’s Institute for Social Research to deliver on the second element of the National Homelessness Research Agenda.

The initial annual research agenda 2010–11, comprised 13 short, medium and long-term research projects covering a range of issues, including the examination of rough sleeping, the effects of homelessness on older Australians, young people at risk of homelessness, early intervention strategies to prevent domestic violence leading to homelessness, homeless programs, inter-organisational collaboration and service integration, housing instability of humanitarian entrants, developing the homelessness workforce, youth homelessness, and caravan park dwellers and boarding house residents.

The flagship of this research effort is the rough sleeping project which has a national focus and is a collaborative effort between all three universities. This nation-wide project is augmented by the Indigenous “Long Grass” study that is taking place in regional and remote Australia, and will provide policy makers and the service delivery sector with reliable evidence to inform future support options for people who are homeless and those at risk of homelessness.

The 2011–12 annual research agenda is currently being finalised and it is anticipated that a further 14 projects will commence this year. The partnerships are beginning to deliver final reports on the 2010–11 agenda, and some of these are showcased elsewhere in this issue of Parity.

National Research Projects

Sixteen National Homelessness Research Projects were announced in May 2010, focusing on the priorities outlined in the National Homelessness Research Agenda 2009–2013.

The research projects support a ‘bottom up’ approach and multi-stakeholder initiatives to address emerging priorities and encourage innovation; strengthen our understanding of the factors that lead to homelessness; and provide evidence that can be used to improve services and inform future policy and program design.

The research projects cover a range of subjects including pathways into and out of homelessness, exploring the experiences and needs of homeless people, determining best practice service delivery models, evaluating homelessness programs, measuring homelessness, and investigating the impacts of homelessness.

A variety of groups are being examined including families and children, women experiencing domestic violence, people with disability, people with health / mental health issues, Indigenous Australians, unemployed people, people exiting corrective services, young people and lone-fathers.

Research Dissemination

Research dissemination is central to the aims of the National Homelessness Research Agenda to provide an evidence base and meet the information needs of policy makers and the community. The project reports will be published via the National Homelessness Clearinghouse website.

Homelessness Clearinghouse

The Australian Homelessness Clearinghouse provides an online resource for sharing information and good practice solutions for the homelessness sector in Australia. Project reports related to the National Homelessness Research Agenda will be published on this site. The Clearinghouse can be accessed at: http://homelessnessclearinghouse.govspace.gov.au/

Evidence Notes

In addition to the research projects, a suite of easy to read, two page, evidence notes will be prepared pertaining to each commissioned research project. These will be published online and will include fact sheets (a fusion of research findings on a single topic), research notes (a summary of evidence from a single research project that will be used to influence policy development), practice notes (a summary of findings that will be used to influence service delivery), and data notes (numerical evidence that can be used to influence policy, particularly in regional and remote areas). FaHCSIA also intends to publish an online suite of case studies and a Quarterly Homelessness Research Bulletin.

More Information

The National Homelessness Research agenda will significantly add to the evidence base to better understand the pathways into and out of homelessness, inform policy development and support service delivery improvement.

Filling the Knowledge Gap: Journeys Home: Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability

By the FaHCSIA Evidence and Planning Branch

The lack of data on homelessness has been recognised in the Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) reform agenda and the White Paper on Homelessness: The Road Home. The National Homelessness Research Agenda is the Australian Government’s commitment to improving the evidence base for its response to homelessness. The Agenda sets out strategic research priorities and the key questions needed to drive reform.

Journeys Home

As part of the Research Agenda, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) is funding the first largescale longitudinal study in Australia to assess a broad sample of income support recipients who are homeless or at risk of, or vulnerable to, homelessness. Journeys Home: Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability aims to combine de-identified longitudinal information held by Centrelink with a sample survey of around 1,550 respondents across Australia who have been flagged by Centrelink as homeless or at risk of homelessness. A third group, identified as vulnerable to homelessness, has also been included.

The study is guided by a Project Steering Committee comprising these partners and an independent Technical Reference Group provides expert advice. The Prime Minister’s Council on Homelessness (PMCH) also takes a keen interest in Journeys Home and its outcomes.

Other Australian Research

A great deal of research has been undertaken in some areas of homelessness, particularly in the areas of definition and enumeration, but less on the pathways into and out of homelessness. Until the late 1970s, Australian researchers and policy makers relied almost exclusively on individual explanations. Limitations with this approach, coupled with changes in the composition of the homeless population in the early 1980s, resulted in a shift in focus to the relative importance of structural factors as the reason for homelessness.

Chamberlain and MacKenzie identified three types of “homeless careers” from a number of individual cases and pathways — youth career, housing crisis career and family breakdown career. Coates and Pinney adopted a similar concept of mapping housing pathways or careers and suggested that longitudinal data supporting biographical approaches such as housing pathways or homeless careers would enable a “more fine-grained analysis of causal processes, allowing analysis not just of the relative importance of biographic and structural factors, but also of their interaction”.

Coultts, Gronda and Johnson also support the need for longitudinal research to explore the links between individual and structural factors in homeless careers. These approaches recognise that homelessness is a dynamic process and needs to be studied over time to allow patterns to be identified and allow for more holistic analysis.

International Research

One stream of international research explores the reason why some people become homeless but not others in similar social circumstances. A theoretical framework based on the interaction of macro features of social life with individual action is an approach that has been adopted in the United States of America (Snow et al 1994; Koegel et al 1995; Metraux and Culhane 1999) and the United Kingdom (Brandon 1980; Hutson and Liddiard 1994; Tomas and Dittmar 1995; Fitzpatrick and Clapham 1990; Fitzpatrick et al 2000; May 2000; McNaughton 2004). It is hoped that Journeys Home’s inclusion of at risk and vulnerable to homelessness cohorts will provide evidence of some use to this line of questioning.

The Contribution of Journeys Home

Journeys Home, which aims to improve the policy response to the diverse social, economic and personal factors that are related to homelessness and the risk of becoming homeless, takes into account and complements the research listed above. The research questions guiding Journeys Home include:

- the characteristics associated with people identified as homeless and the characteristics that distinguish at-risk families who become homeless from those who do not;
- the triggers for any changes from being at-risk of homelessness to becoming homeless, including movement between levels of homelessness;
- the length of time that people in the sample experience homelessness, including multiple episodes of homelessness;
- the factors associated with instability/stability in housing tenancy or occupancy, including over time;
- protective services, including familial and psychosocial factors, for staying out of homelessness; and
- geographical and other factors leading to homelessness.

The project will collect information in a range of areas such as:

- physical and mental health; participation in the workplace — employment, education and training; any significant life events;
- family status and living arrangements; support networks; experiences of domestic and family violence; and exposure to violence while homeless;
- the housing situation — the periods, nature of, and reasons for
homelessness; financial status; and
• the use of support services — types of assistance sought and used, including health care and support services.

**Journeys Home** will also complement the 2011 point-in-time review of *Counting the Homeless* by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It will in fact also provide point-in-time data for each wave of the survey which can be used immediately for medium term planning. Data and analysis findings will be available as follows:

- Wave 1  July 2012
- Waves 1 and 2  December 2012
- Waves 1 to 3  July 2013

Dates for the release of further findings will be announced closer to the time.

**How Journeys Home will be Used**

The Australian Government’s main interest in the evidence provided by *Journeys Home* is to assist in providing targeted investment in homelessness support programs and input into other policy development. It will also be used to guide research projects outlined in the National Homelessness Research Strategy 2009–2013.

**Building Block for the Future**

A confidentialised version of the data will be available for the use of non-government organisations in their policy making and academics in this field. *Journeys Home* can provide a sounding board for other research and the basis of future projects. It also has the potential to continue with the same beyond 2013 if necessary.

**Conclusion**

There has been recent controversy about the real numbers of homeless following the release by the ABS of the latest figures. Numbers are certainly important in order to plan service provision, but equally important is a better understanding of the factors that make such services necessary and how to tailor them appropriately.

Further information on *Journeys Home* is at:


Any reader with questions about the study or who wishes to add their name to our stakeholder list is invited to email jh@fahcsia.gov.au

**Footnotes**


Part 2: Research Projects Under the National Homelessness Research Agenda

What Makes a Difference? An Evidence based Client Outcomes Model for Homelessness

By Hellene Gronda, Director, AHURI Research Synthesis Service

The research project, What Makes a Difference, used a comprehensive research synthesis of more than 125 national and international studies to build an evidence-based model of client outcomes for the homelessness service system. The research identified the need for a shift away from simply getting housing and toward the long-term outcome of sustaining housing.

The Project

A focus on client outcomes has been widely promoted in many areas of social welfare, including homelessness. Across Australia, different agencies have explored client outcome focused practice and data collection systems. In Victoria, the three agency partners for this project, Hanover Welfare Services, HomeGround and Melbourne City mission, shared a commitment to an outcome focus and two had independently undertaken outcome definition and practice-development projects.

These partners saw an opportunity in the Australian Government’s National Homelessness Research Agenda project funding to collaborate more closely and contribute toward a nationally consistent client outcome system. They hoped to ensure comparability of outcome measures and to reduce duplication. They also sought to identify outcome measures that could capture what really makes a difference to people experiencing homelessness.

While there are already many outcome indicators to choose from, the research found that previous attempts at national outcome measures had struggled with the complexity of service delivery practice and the lack of a clear rationale for selecting outcome measures. The project sought to build an evidence-based, practice-relevant conceptual foundation that could negotiate this complexity and provide a credible basis for the selection of nationally consistent outcome measures.

The project involved a comprehensive synthesis of findings from more than 125 national and international homelessness research studies, and reiterated engagement with experienced homelessness practitioners, policy and research staff including the project Steering Group.

The model specified two key areas of service system work: assistance to get housing and assistance to keep housing. These areas of work are sequential phases in achieving outcomes for people experiencing homelessness; however the outcome steps involved in the second phase are also strongly indicated for assisting people who are at risk of their first or further experiences of homelessness. In some cases, people activities with the macro-level of policy targets. It also allows services to identify where their practice and services fit into the overall picture and how they contribute to long-term outcomes.

As with all outcome models, it can and should be subject to regular review and refinement in order to incorporate emerging research and practice innovation about what makes a difference.

The Model

The research synthesis found that the core goal and purpose of providing homelessness services is not just to help people get housing but most importantly to keep housing. Accordingly, as shown in the diagram below, the client outcomes model is structured around two simple but critical outcomes: housing secured and housing sustained.

While interim outcomes are required along the way, the evidence is clear that if these steps do not lead to getting housing and keeping it, then the service system is not making a difference to homelessness.

The model specifies two key areas of service system work: assistance to get housing and assistance to keep housing. These areas of work are sequential phases in achieving outcomes for people experiencing homelessness; however the outcome steps involved in the second phase are also strongly indicated for assisting people who are at risk of their first or further experiences of homelessness. In some cases, people
at risk of homelessness need both phases of assistance because their existing accommodation is unsafe, for example. In recognition that making a difference to homelessness means more than assisting persons currently without housing, the client of the outcomes model is defined on a continuum of situations as shown in Table 2.

Within the two phases of the outcomes model, getting housing and keeping housing, there are key components that will be more or less applicable in any individual circumstance. These components are the core steps in the outcomes model:

- Engagement with housing focused support;
- Effective housing work;
- Effective case management;
- Increased supply of housing and specialist support;
- Homelessness prevention;
- Complex health management; and
- Economic and social participation.

The full research report contains detailed evidence about each of these components and their effectiveness. The model is high-level so that the core components are applicable and adaptable for use with any homeless population. They can be adapted for use with different sub-groups by tailoring the activities conducted within the basic steps. Similarly, indicators or outcome measures derived from these steps and relevant to the local context can be adapted as required.

The first phase of the outcomes model involves engaging a person or family in housing-focused support, securing suitable housing in a timely manner and assessing the need for specialist health supports while providing comprehensive, practical case-management. The first phase needs to be completed quickly and it relies on the availability of suitable housing options. Key characteristics of suitable housing include affordability, timely availability, suitable in location and amenity, and supportive housing, maximising client choice.

The second phase may be even more critical than the first. The second phase involves proven steps to sustain housing and includes a combination of what the research defines as Homelessness Prevention, Complex Health Management and Economic and Social Participation interventions. While it is not possible to be sure how long this second phase of sustaining housing will take for any given household, longitudinal studies suggest that two to three years will be a minimum benchmark for most people.

The second phase is an area currently under-emphasised in the Australian service system and which sub-groups may be facing particular challenges. Yet the research synthesis demonstrates its core importance in achieving client outcomes that make a difference. It is clear from the evidence base that we need a better understanding of this critical phase of achieving outcomes for people who have experienced homelessness or are at risk of experiencing it.

While economic and social participation interventions for people experiencing homelessness are still rare, it is consistently clear that sustaining housing critically depends on increasing economic capabilities and resources as well as increasing social connectedness. The research also provides consistent evidence for the need for complex health management, including increased drug and alcohol and mental health specialists to achieved housing sustained outcomes.

**Using the Model to Create Consistent Outcome Measures**

The model provides a transparent, rigorous foundation to drive the selection of credible outcome measures or indicators. Consistency and transparency can be ensured by mapping outcome indicators onto the logic of the outcomes model. And individual agencies can map their own sets of outcome indicators onto the outcomes model to demonstrate the connection between their work and the high-level outcomes of getting and keeping housing.

All the client outcome indicators can be reported against basic demographic variables such as age, gender, cultural diversity, income and service location to determine who is being served effectively by the homelessness assistance system, and which sub-groups may be facing particular challenges.
Research Outcomes

The research contributes a new approach to nationally consistent outcome measures using an evidence-based client outcomes model. The model enables agencies to identify how their individual practice fits into the larger picture and contributes to long-term outcomes and clarifies cross-sector roles and responsibilities.

The report documents evidence-based good practice steps needed to make a difference for people experiencing homelessness and recommends indicators that can be used to track outcome progress. It provides a comprehensive evidence resource for practice development in homelessness services.

Policy Implications

A key policy implication from this research is a recommended shift of focus toward delivering and monitoring the outcome of housing sustained.

A second key policy implication, aligned with the direction of the homelessness White Paper, is the need for partnership and coordination between specialist and mainstream services. This research suggests that shared accountability for housing sustained client outcomes could provide a mechanism to drive client outcome focused collaboration between housing, homelessness and mainstream support providers.

References/Further Information

The full report and a booklet are forthcoming publications.

For further information, contact the lead researcher Hellene Gronda, Director, AHURI Research Synthesis Service, hellene.gronda@ahuri.edu.au or the project manager George Hatvani, Manager Service Development & Research, HomeGround Services, georgeh@homeground.org.au

Researching Policy and Service Integration in Homelessness: What Works and Why?

By Rhonda Phillips and Brian Head, Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR), University of Queensland

This article introduces and discusses early findings from a study of service integration and its potential to contribute to efforts to reduce homelessness in Australia. The study is one of five research projects being undertaken by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland (UQ) under a Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement (HRPA) with FaHCSIA.

Current Australian homelessness policy, as outlined in The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness (Australian Government, 2008), promotes a strong emphasis on service integration. This is further developed in the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) that sets priorities including “improving integration between the homelessness service system and mainstream services”, and “taking joint action and a nationally coordinated approach on homelessness” (COAG, 2008: 7). Further, the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Homelessness expresses the belief that “a better connected service system is a key to achieving long term sustainable reductions in the number of people who are homeless” (COAG 2008: 6). The related bi-lateral Homelessness Implementation plans include commitments to a range of initiatives aimed at ‘joining up’ services.

Close examination of these state homelessness implementation plans shows that service integration initiatives can be grouped or classified in terms of the three key national homelessness priorities (turning off the tap; improving and expanding services; and breaking the cycle) and that service integration is central to each of the three core strategies.

The service integration initiatives associated with ‘turning off the tap’ aim to avoid exits from institutional settings into homelessness. They respond to the growing evidence that the homeless population comprises a high proportion of vulnerable people who are exiting services and facilities such as corrective services, mental health, hospitals, child protection and social housing. The integration initiatives under this theme have a focus on identifying people at risk of homelessness, paying closer attention to exit planning, and building linkages between mainstream systems and specialist homelessness services.

Integration initiatives involved in ‘improving and expanding services’ focus on improving the experience of clients as they access and navigate the specialist homelessness service system, and enhancing overall effectiveness of services. The integration initiatives emphasise collaborative service planning, common access and referral systems, inter-agency linkages, and common information systems.

The group of initiatives directed to ‘breaking the cycle’ of homelessness are concerned with ‘wrapping’ multiple services around individual clients with multiple or complex needs. Initiatives supporting this priority emphasise coordination of multi-agency or multi-disciplinary teams by using processes such as pooled resources and case management.

Given this strong focus on integration, it is timely to review the evidence in Australia and overseas to inform the implementation of these new integration initiatives and to develop a framework for reviewing their success.

Forms of Integration

Having argued the importance of research into the role of integration in homelessness responses, it is useful to reflect on what we mean by ‘service integration’. It is a concept that has had many different meanings, leading commentators to describe the concept as confused, imprecise and highly contested (McDonald and Zettlin 2004; Reitan 1998). However, a considerable body of social science research points to the useful distinction between networking, cooperation, coordination, and collaborative arrangements (Keast et al, 2007; Fine et al, 2005). This ‘continuum’ of various forms of integration (a model proposed by Keast et al, 2007) is adopted for this study to characterise the diverse nature of integrative relationships.

Cooperation may occur where the agreed work consists of short-term tasks, where participation is voluntary, and participants maintain their organisational identities and independent goals and objectives. Networking and communication are relatively unstructured and casual interactions incurring few obligations. Coordination may be required for more complex projects, with some joint planning for agreed activities, a medium-term work program, and often a previous history of working relationships.

There may be agreement on a central coordinating function, often supplied by government. Collaboration, in this typology, is a term reserved for those cases exemplifying more robust longer-term multi-stakeholder commitments. Such cases typically occur where the members of the collaboration become more closely linked and connected, recognising they must extend themselves beyond their familiar home-base roles and functions, and begin to create new roles and functions that are specific to the collaboration. There is a strong awareness of their inter-dependent mutual interest in achieving shared objectives, and there is a genuine sharing of power, risk and reward (Keast et al, 2004, Huxham and Vangen 2005, Head, 2008).

In this study we use the term ‘service integration’ as an over-arching concept that encompasses the spectrum of approaches to working across organisational, sectoral and disciplinary boundaries.

Implementation

The study draws on academic and professional research and policy literature to examine some of the more common integration approaches that are relevant to homelessness policy and services. A number of specific mechanisms or implementation tools have been adopted to support service integration, including:

- Case coordination;
- Common assessment tools;
- Co-location of services;
- Coordinated access;
- Inter-agency partnerships;
- Local service networks and collaborative service planning;
- Shared IT and data systems;
- Organisational mergers; and
- Whole of government strategies.

While these approaches can be implemented separately, it is common for several of them to be used together, to provide supportive reinforcement especially where the success of individual elements are dependent on others being in place.
The literature review findings also highlight some key implementation lessons. These include the observations that: service integration should be a means not an end; integration is difficult to achieve and sustain and involves ongoing costs as well as benefits; each situation or challenge requires a fit for purpose strategy; capacity building is important for all participants; and appropriate governance arrangements need to be addressed.

**Research Approach**

The next phase of this research will involve case studies of a sample of different homelessness integration initiatives to identify what works and why. We now briefly overview key elements of the framework that will guide those case studies.

**Purpose and Governance**

The integration goals and commitments within current Australian homelessness strategic policy are both explicit and well-articulated through the White Paper and NPAH. As noted previously, the ultimate policy goal of reducing or ending homelessness is closely linked to a client outcome focus emphasising inter-sectoral collaboration in prevention initiatives, and multi-disciplinary approaches to ending homelessness and achieving sustainable housing for those experiencing homelessness.

The supporting objective has a service system focus concerned with making it easier for homeless people to find the services they need and for providers to work together in the delivery of coordinated, responsive and high quality services. Comprehensive governance structures and processes are in place through COAG, NAHA and national/state partnership agreements to drive the process.

It is equally important that clarity of purpose and appropriate governance are in place to underpin operational policy and local service level implementation of integration responses. The study will examine the integration purpose, goals and decision making processes involved in the study sites as well as the extent of shared vision and goals of the participants.

**Scope of Integrative Endeavours**

The study is also concerned with understanding the scope of integration initiatives in terms of target populations, localities and participants. These factors
are important in the work of service design, managing implementation, and determining what is most likely to work.

An important consideration in designing integrative measures is clarity about the target population and their needs. This particularly informs the service delivery approach and the range of services that should participate. For example, rough sleeping is a national homelessness policy priority, with integrated approaches to ending their homelessness through ‘Street 2Home’ initiatives involving multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral health, housing and personal support responses (Phillips et al., 2011).

Locality is also an important consideration in designing and implementing homelessness integration projects, due to differences in scale, service delivery infrastructure, and the nature of inter-agency relationships in various places. For example, homelessness service systems in rural and regional locations may be less complex, with a smaller number of service providers who are more likely to know each other and provide a more personalised service.

This means that homeless people might not face the same sort of access barriers experienced in urban areas, but may nevertheless experience gaps in services (Thompson Goodall, 2001). While locality specific integration is primarily horizontal (between local service organisations), there is also a need to consider vertical integration within and across regions and with state-wide services.

The range of participants involved is another important factor in characterising and designing an integrative endeavor. Potential participants in homelessness initiatives may include combinations of:

- Commonwealth / State / Local Government agencies;
- Government / Non-government organisations;
- Public / Community / Business sectors;
- Whole of Government (inter-agency); or
- Specialist homeless services / mainstream services.

Another aspect of relevant participants is the service-sectoral perspective. In the context of homelessness services, this may include participants from any combination of:

- Health;
- Education;
- Employment and training;
- Law and justice;
- Child Safety;
- Disability;
- Income support;
- Housing;
- Aged Care; and
- Other community services.

**Implementation**

Implementation factors constitute the ‘how’ of integration. Here we are concerned with the organising structure of each initiative, and the way it is implemented including issues such as:

- Initiation and facilitation;
- Leadership;
- Processes for engagement and relationship building;
- Timelines and milestones;
- Planning and monitoring;
- Resource allocation;
- Procurement and funding / contracting relationships;
- Capacity building and training; and
- Information management and data systems.

**Outcomes and Accountability**

Our primary interest in this study is to determine ‘what works for whom and why?’ We are therefore interested in assessing success of the various integrative processes as well as client and broader outcomes and the factors impacting on success. In terms of integration processes, we will assess the scope, depth and intensity of relationships and interactions between the participants, and the sustainability of integration.

Most importantly, we will examine what is known about the client benefits that have accrued from the initiative. We will seek to gather client perceptions of their service experience and changes in their circumstances; and where possible this information will be triangulated with service provider records and perceptions. Evidence of other service system or public benefits will be sought including matters such as efficiency, appropriateness, and changing demand for services.

**Next Steps**

The research approach and framework for analysis as discussed above have been developed with the intention of testing the usefulness of this approach. In particular, we expect to produce a ‘diagnostic tool’ that can be used by policy makers and practitioners to plan and review their integration initiatives.

**References**


Developing Homelessness Research Capacity at the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland

By Andrew Jones and Mark Western, The University of Queensland Institute for Social Science Research

In 2010 the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland (UQ) successfully applied for Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement (HRPA) funding from FaHCSIA for 2010–2013. This article explains how ISSR is using these funds to develop homelessness research capacity at UQ.

The 2009 announcement by the Australian Government of the National Homelessness Research Agenda (NHRA) 2009–2013 to underpin the plan to reduce homelessness in Australia was welcomed by many homelessness researchers in Australia, including those at the Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland.

ISSR was established by UQ in 2007 to undertake high quality social science research to provide evidence to underpin public policy. As one of the largest social science research organisations in Australia, with over 60 full-time equivalent research staff, ISSR felt itself well placed to undertake the type of research required to inform homelessness policy — inter-disciplinary, multi-method, social problem-oriented and policy-engaged. In mid-2010 ISSR was pleased to be chosen (along with two other university research centres) as a Homelessness Research Partner with FaHCSIA. This partnership involves ISSR undertaking five major research projects during 2010–2013 closely linked to core themes in the 2008 White Paper and to the research strengths of ISSR. The first project, undertaken in collaboration with the other university research partners, involves an analysis of Street to Home initiatives in Brisbane and Sydney. Reducing the number of people sleeping rough in Australian cities is a core objective of national homelessness policy. This project examines the ways in which international service provision models based on "housing first" principles have been implemented in two Australian cities and their effectiveness in assisting homeless people make successful transitions from living on the streets to secure housing.

Two further projects are focused on important client groups for national homelessness policy: Indigenous people living in regional areas and older Australians. Indigenous people are over-represented in the population of homeless people and addressing Indigenous homelessness requires distinctive strategies especially in regional Australia. This project examines the nature of Indigenous homelessness and public place dwelling, identifies the difficulties of estimating the number of Indigenous homeless people in regional areas, and develops case studies of three regional centres designed to show the nature and diversity of the issue and the need for locally-tailored responses.
The issue of homelessness amongst older Australians is receiving greater attention as realisation grows that an increasing number of people in later life are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Addressing homelessness for this population group has two main elements. The first is the provision of housing, support and care for those whose homelessness is associated with long-term major life difficulties such as chronic mental illness, cognitive impairment and substance abuse. The second is to provide housing solutions for those whose homelessness or vulnerability to homelessness is precipitated essentially by termination of a lease or by an unaffordable rent increase. ISSR’s research project will scope the nature and extent of this issue and the adequacy of housing and service responses with a view to providing a sound evidence base for policies to address this issue.

ISSR’s final two projects under the Partnership are concerned with the organisation and delivery of homelessness services. Service integration and collaboration are central themes in national and state and territory homelessness strategies. ISSR is examining the factors associated with successful integration through a critical examination of the relevant research and policy literature and through case studies of contemporary homelessness interventions which have service integration as a core strategy. This will result in guidelines to enhance the effectiveness of service integration policy and practice.

A further theme in national policy is to develop effective workforce planning in the homelessness sector. ISSR has undertaken the first detailed study of the homelessness workforce since the new policy directions established in 2008, identifying trends in employment in the sector, the new tasks and demands associated with current national strategies and principles to underpin workforce planning in this context.

This large body of commissioned research has provided a catalyst for ISSR to develop its capacity in homelessness research. This has been done in two main ways. Firstly, the Partnership with FaHCSIA has enabled ISSR to bring its expertise in research methodologies and in substantive knowledge areas to bear on the issue of homelessness. Developing an evidence base to reduce homelessness in Australia requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative research. For example, it requires studies that examine the long-term impacts of policies and programs through longitudinal data collection and analysis as well as studies that involve in-depth analysis of individuals’ experiences of homelessness.

Specialised knowledge and understanding of substantive issues such as public policy processes, the needs and circumstances of particular population groups, workforce and labour market issues, and so forth are also required. The Partnership with FaHCSIA has drawn researchers with a wide range of expertise from ISSR and UQ into homelessness research and extended the range of social science researchers engaged with homelessness issues.

Secondly, ISSR has built on the Partnership to develop a wider range of homelessness research activities that go beyond those funded directly through the Partnership. Prior to the Partnership, ISSR and affiliated researchers had undertaken research in Indigenous homelessness, had undertaken reviews of homelessness strategies for the Queensland Government and had undertaken AHURI-funded research on various aspects of marginal housing and homelessness. Since 2010 the volume of homelessness research undertaken by ISSR and associated research groups has grown sharply.

In 2010 ISSR and AHURI jointly funded a three-year postdoctoral research fellowship dedicated to homelessness research. ISSR is currently finalising an AHURI-funded project on assertive outreach and, in conjunction with the UQ School of Social Science, a study of the options facing families who have dropped out of the private rental market. Another recently completed AHURI-funded project undertaken in conjunction with colleagues at RMIT University examined the concept of ‘housing first’ in homelessness programs. The Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, which works closely with ISSR at UQ, will complete an AHURI-funded study of Indigenous crowding in 2012. ISSR participates in AHURI’s homelessness research and has several funding applications addressing various aspects of homelessness currently under review by AHURI.

The Institute is also currently evaluating two homelessness service integration demonstration projects on behalf of the Queensland Department of Communities. It has a postdoctoral research fellow about to commence a study of older women and homelessness in Queensland. It is participating in an Australian Research Council funded study of enhancing the resilience and wellbeing of homeless people led by colleagues in the School of Psychology, UQ.

The Institute has developed research links with three large community organisations. A new postdoctoral research fellow has recently been appointed who in 2012 will commence research in the area of homelessness and domestic violence in Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings. Researchers from ISSR have also been active in disseminating the findings of homelessness research through keynote and other invited conference and seminar presentations. These various initiatives have been supported by strategic funds provided by UQ for homelessness research directly linked to the funding provided through the partnership with FaHCSIA.

The success of Australia’s ambitious goals to significantly reduce homelessness in the early decades of the twenty-first century depends on many factors. One of these is the development of a strong research evidence base to underpin homelessness policy and practice. Through its participation in the National Homelessness Research Partnership with FaHCSIA, ISSR has been able to build research capacity that will enable it to contribute to homelessness research for many years to come.
Taking Shape: Street to Home Programs and Initiatives

By Dr Eleanor Button, Flinders University

The success of Street to Home (STH) services in the USA in helping to address chronic homelessness and reduce the numbers of people sleeping rough has been acknowledged by public policy-makers in Australia who have included the development of these initiatives as a core output in the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH).

However, as was noted in the February 2011 edition of Parity, there is a lack of evidence or research to demonstrate how effective this ‘model’ is in an Australian context. It is intended that work currently being undertaken by researchers at Flinders University in South Australia (alongside the work of other Australian researchers) will help to fill this gap.

In 2010 the Commonwealth Government (via FaHCSIA) provided funding for longitudinal research into STH services in South Australia (SA), Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory (NT). In these three jurisdictions we aimed to explore the following:

• The nature and attributes of STH programs and services (the service ‘models’ and underlying rationale);
• The profile of people accessing STH services, their housing pathways and the nature of their housing and support needs; and
• The factors that influence attainment and maintenance of sustainable tenancies.

Our research design includes qualitative interviews with STH service managers and/or staff and desk analysis of all documents available about the services. In addition to this we are interviewing a sample of STH clients. Due to the relative longevity of the STH service in South Australia we were able to distinguish two cohorts of STH clients. These were:

• Longer-term STH clients living in their own accommodation in SA.
• Clients new to STH services in WA and NT.

The implementation of our research has involved close liaison with STH program and/or service managers in each jurisdiction. Along the way we adopted differing approaches depending on the local contexts and levels of participation desired by STH services managers. We are aware that for front-line services, decisions to devote time to research can mean having to divert precious time away from work with clients. For this reason we are highly appreciative of the time employees in STH services have given to our project. In Western Australia we are securing our data through a third party to prevent repeating important work that is already being conducted there.

After we received clearance from a number of ethics committees for our research we made steady progress with our work. Our first phase of interviews with service staff and clients is now nearing completion with a second round planned for the middle of 2012. The ‘outputs’ from our research includes three reports that will be provided to FaHCSIA and made available on their website.

Our first report, based on interviews with STH program managers or service staff, is imminent and will analyse our findings about service models and characteristics in light of the literature relating to STH service models elsewhere. STH models in the USA that incorporate assertive outreach and Housing First principles will provide the framework for our discussion about STH service models in SA, WA and the NT. In
detail, our report will include consideration of the following:

- The local context in which STH services have been developed.
- STH service characteristics, work practices and their underlying rationale (the service ‘logic’).
- The types of inter-agency arrangements and approaches that help build the capacity of STH services to deliver effective services to people who either sleep rough or who are at risk of doing so.
- The perceived strengths of the STH services or the constraints that prevent the service meeting its expressed aims.

Our second report will focus on the people assisted by STH services. In this report we will include a profile of a sample of STH service clients from each geographical area to highlight the range of people currently being assisted by STH services and their current housing and support needs. We will also draw on clients’ perceptions and experiences to highlight the elements of STH services they have found particularly helpful in the short and longer-term.

The findings from the last phase of the research will be incorporated into the final report (due at the end of 2012). This phase will provide an opportunity to further explore STH service effectiveness and document changes that may have occurred over time in either the local policy or service environments and/or in work practices. Our follow-up interviews with clients will also increase our understandings of how STH services have assisted people over time and what help is perceived as being most effective in responding to and preventing returns to rough sleeping.

There may be many assumptions about what constitutes a Street to Home service based on our understanding of models from abroad. However little has been done to compare those models with the form of STH services that are now emerging in Australia. Our research will help to fill this gap and we will clarify the range of approaches being developed to address and/or prevent rough sleeping.

In providing significant details about the service models we also hope that our research will contribute to the evidence base as well as help local policy-makers and service providers reflect on the STH services they are resourcing and delivering. To some degree this is also base line data that can be used to measure and record incremental or major changes in the nature of STH services and their resources over time.

Beyond this, and as our research includes comments by people previously sleeping rough, we are hopeful of providing critical insights into people’s experiences of accessing STH services. Their authoritative comments can help to identify areas of weakness in our approaches as well as reinforce our understandings of what works well, for whom and why.

We believe there is much to be learnt from listening to STH service clients and in our research we have included comments to aid understandings about how local services can contribute to client outcomes that are sustainable. In our estimation these types of comments also help us to know what to do and how to act at a local level if we wish to help reduce the overall numbers of people sleeping rough across Australia. To this end, we hope our research findings will be of use and interest to service providers and policy-makers beyond our three jurisdictions.

Footnote
Researching ‘Street to Home’ in the Australian Context

By Cameron Parsell and Kristen Davis, The University of Queensland Institute for Social Science Research

This article introduces and discusses early findings from a study of Street to Home initiatives in Brisbane and Sydney that are designed to reduce homelessness in Australia. The study is one of five research projects being undertaken by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland (UQ) under a Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement (HRPA) with FaHCSIA.

As part of the National Homelessness Research Partnership with FaHCSIA, ISSR is conducting research examining Street to Home programs in Sydney and Brisbane. The research focus is threefold. It examines:

1. long-term outcomes (housing, health, well-being etc.) that Street to Home service users achieve;
2. the nature of the service individuals receive and an account of their experiences and engagement with the programs; and
3. an analysis of the Street to Home model and a consideration of the capacity of the Brisbane and Sydney programs to achieve their objectives.

This paper describes emerging findings responding to the third research objective.

Policy Context

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness was the impetus for the national introduction of Street to Home onto the Australian landscape. Following the parameter setting statements contained in the White Paper, whereby responses to people sleeping rough were deemed to be underdeveloped (Australian Government 2008), the establishment of “Street to Home initiatives for chronic homeless people (rough sleepers)” was identified as Core Output 2 (Council of Australian Governments 2009: 5).

Further to the importance accorded to deficiencies in the existing service system at the time, Street to Home was embraced on the basis of its impressive international evidence base. The successes of Australia’s first Street to Home program in Adelaide, and the outcomes achieved by initiatives in the US and UK (for example, Housing First, Common Ground and the Rough Sleepers Initiative, see below) are cited as constituting the evidence base for the implementation of Street to Home in Australia (Australian Government 2008).

Street to Home represents a program meant to achieve headline goals of reducing overall homelessness, with specific targets set for people sleeping rough. While policy documents tend to conflate chronic homelessness with rough sleeping (Council of Australian Governments 2009), in the Australian practice context, Street to Home is most frequently conceptualised as a response to people sleeping rough.

Whereas rough sleeping refers to the state of residing in public places or structures not intended for human habitation (including motor vehicles), chronic homelessness in Australia is commonly used to define homelessness that is long-term — there is no agreed upon definition as to what constitutes long-term homelessness.

Further, the Street to Home programs operating in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane utilise a Vulnerability Index Tool which assists in the identification of people sleeping rough that also present with additional risk factors (generally pertaining to health) that place them at a high vulnerability of premature death. Street to Home is thus largely conceived of as a strategy to respond to people sleeping rough that present with problems in addition to their homelessness.

The Street to Home Model

Street to Home comprises a collection of ideas, approaches and philosophical assumptions. It is not a unified or indeed even a coherent model of service provision. New York City’s Common Ground supportive housing program identifies as the architect of the Street to Home model (Common Ground n.d.). The Common Ground Street to Home program is an adaptation and extension of practices and ideas developed in the British Rough Sleepers Initiative. Similarly, from an international perspective Street to Home builds on practices and research from the Housing First model delivered by New York City’s Pathways to Housing program, and psychiatric practices inherent to the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) approach. Street to Home thus brings together a disparate number of approaches and theories from the housing, health and homelessness fields.

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This diversity notwithstanding, in Australia as a theoretical model Street to Home is broadly interpreted as containing four key features and fundamental elements. Reflecting the service delivery focus on people sleeping rough, the first critical element of the Street to Home model is street outreach. This type of outreach can be defined as assertive outreach (Phillips and Parsell forthcoming), and it involves proactive efforts to identify people sleeping rough (often prioritised on the basis of vulnerability) and deliberately attempts to assist people exit rough sleeping. The second feature of the Street to Home model is housing. The diversity and ambiguity of the model is perhaps no more evident than in the form, nature and allocation of housing to Street to Home service users.

Across Australia, Street to Home programs are grappling with questions about the most appropriate form of housing, for example whether it is permanent housing or homeless-transitional accommodation; the tenure of housing, be it social housing or private tenancies; and allocation practices pertaining to the type of housing stock, the neighbourhood in which people are allocated housing and whether housing is scattered throughout suburbs or congregated in contained facilities (e.g., Common Ground).

Thirdly, Street to Home involves support to people post-homelessness and upon commencing housing. This is broadly referred to as housing support. The provision of housing support to Street to Home service users recognises that people engaging with the services present with a range of health and social problems in addition to their homelessness (high vulnerability). In turn, the provision of housing support is critical to enhance the sustainability of tenancies; which in turn is consistent with the focus on permanent reductions in homelessness. There continues to be differences in the manner in which Australian Street to Home programs conceptualise and deliver housing support.

These differences centre on the type of support provided: on the one hand, welfare-type support, and on the other, clinical support. There are also ongoing questions about whether the support is provided directly by the Street to Home service — similar to the ACT model, or whether it is brokered out to other organisations (for example, if the housing support assumes a clinical focus, should health providers be directly involved).

The length of support provided by Street to Home or to Street to Home service users likewise differs across the country. It is not at this stage clear, for example, the extent to which the housing support provided will be indefinite, or time limited. As we will discuss below, the duration of the support provided will be influenced by the service that provides the support.

The forth element of the Street to Home model is the packaging of the aforementioned three features into an integrated service approach. Street to Home is presented as an approach to assist people sleeping rough to exit homelessness and sustain tenancies over the long-term. At the conceptual, funding, policy and practice levels, therefore, Street to Home is intended to contain the necessary integration to ensure that street outreach is supported by the supply of and access to permanent housing. In turn, the integrated model is intended to work in a seamless manner so that the permanent housing is coupled with the adequate housing support to enhance the sustainability of housing.

**Three Key Early Findings**

In this final section we identify three early findings that illustrate some significant Street to Home achievements and also, some barriers that Street to Home programs face in realising homelessness reduction and broader well-being objectives. This discussion is based on an analysis of Brisbane’s Street to Home and Sydney’s Way2Home programs. Empirical materials for this research were gathered through qualitative interviews with key program stakeholders (in funding, policy, management and practice roles), and also through document analyses of pertinent policy and program literature. The research largely focused on the Street to Home/Way2Home programs in their first twelve months of operation, beginning in April 2010.

**Street Outreach**

Both programs have demonstrated significant capacity to identify people sleeping rough (through daily patrolling in their geographical areas); to identify those individuals deemed to be most vulnerable (aided by the use of the Vulnerability Index Tool), and to engage people into the programs (as service users). While people sleeping rough are deemed to not actively seek help (Australian Government 2008), the street outreach has removed significant barriers by actively engaging people in public places and providing support in situ. The services provided by street outreach differ, but of significance are the direct medical assistance and the assistance with completing electronic social housing applications. The provision of these services to people in public places clearly addresses barriers to accessing ‘shop-front’ type traditional services.

The success of the street outreach at engaging people in public places and meeting some of their needs is a product of the ‘on the ground’ practices of the street outreach delivered by the programs. The strength of the street outreach delivered by the Street to Home/Way2Home programs lies in the fundamental practice of providing people sleeping rough with alternatives they otherwise are not accessing.

**Housing**

Housing sits at the centre of the Street to Home model. On the one hand, the availability of housing is the preeminent variable that will determine the extent to which the programs can contribute toward reductions in rough sleeping. On the other hand, the availability of housing shapes the nature of the ‘on the ground’ practices of service delivery, and the manner in which people engage with, or avoid the service. With reference to the latter, both programs have demonstrated that their capacity to access permanent housing for service users influences whether people sleeping rough will or will not engage, and whether engagement can lead to service user directed outcomes.

A lack of housing generally subverts the capacity of the Street to Home/Way2Home programs to meet the needs of their service users. Similarly, an absence of housing means that the programs can only offer support to people to access homeless-transitional accommodation. In some cases, some people sleeping rough do not engage because their housing needs cannot be met (immediately at least).

Notwithstanding the centrality of housing for Street to Home to assist with ending rough sleeping, the Street to Home/Way2Home service providers have limited capacity to influence the supply of, and access to, permanent housing. Both programs are reliant upon their respective state social housing providers (who also administer the programs) to allocate housing to Street to Home service users.

The programs have had some successes in assisting their service users’ access to permanent housing. This has come about through lobbying and advocacy, and through measures that assist with communication between the programs and social housing authorities. In Brisbane access to housing has been enhanced by the increased supply of stock built through the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan, whereas Sydney’s program is soon to benefit from the Platform 70 initiative that will enable housing to be head-leased through the private rental market.

The successes both programs have achieved in accessing housing for their service users should be highlighted, but it should be similarly emphasised that it is by no means clear that the Street to Home/Way2Home program objectives are supported by, or consistent with, the overarching policy. The relationship between the homelessness programs and the Queensland and New South Wales social housing allocation systems are complex, but the importance of access to housing to the capacity of the two programs to achieve their objectives cannot be overstated.
Housing Support

Street outreach is necessary to engage people sleeping rough, whereas housing assumes the important role of ensuring people engaged can exit homelessness. Housing support plays the role of ensuring that people who access housing can sustain it. Likewise, housing support represents a means to work towards the achievement of the broader social inclusion, health, labour market participation, community connectedness and well-being objectives that are intended to occur after exiting homelessness.

By successfully identifying and engaging people with high vulnerabilities the level of housing support many Street to Home/Way2Home service users require is high. The chronic health needs of service users mean that they require housing support that is both ongoing and that involves multidisciplinary health teams.

In the absence of dedicated professional staff to provide ongoing multidisciplinary support services, Brisbane’s Street to Home service for example, is required to dedicate a disproportionate amount of resources to housing support that is both ongoing and that involves multidisciplinary health teams.

Conclusion

This research has suggested that the policy intention underpinning Street to Home, and some early practices in Sydney and Brisbane are illustrative of progress toward meeting the housing needs of people sleeping rough. In terms of street outreach, both programs are successfully able to engage people sleeping rough and to facilitate their exits from homelessness. Both housing and service user directed outcomes, however, are contingent upon the supply of and access to permanent housing.

Similarly, Street to Home programs require the provision of a range of support services that can be delivered long-term in order to ensure that exits from homelessness are sustained, and that broader well-being objectives can be achieved. The subsequent phases of this longitudinal research endeavours to answer questions about tenancy sustainability, the characteristics of individuals assisted, and what other non-housing objectives are achieved.

Footnotes
1. Street to Home Adelaide is based on Common Ground from New York City.
2. Chronic homelessness in the United States is used as an official definition to encompass long-term homelessness among individuals with additional primary and mental health problems (see Pearson, Montgomery and Locke 2009).
3. The Way2Home program is based on the evidence from the Street to Home model (New South Wales Government 2009).

References
Assisting Women to Break Free of the Cycle of Repeated Use of Refuge and Crisis Accommodation

By Angela Spinney, Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology

This article describes the progress of a research project named Early intervention strategies to reduce the need for women and children to make repeated use of refuge and other crisis accommodation.

The project is being currently being conducted by the author as part of the National Homelessness Research Agenda. It is funded through the Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement between the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA) and the Homelessness Research Collaboration (HRC). The HRC is a consortium of four universities (the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology, RMIT, Murdoch and NATSEM at the University of Canberra together with the Australian Institute of health and Welfare).

My research project focuses on those whose homelessness can be attributed to domestic violence, because they are a specific and significant population of homeless people (Parker and Fopp, 2004). The project looks specifically at the period prior to final separation, when women and child victims of domestic and family violence can find themselves repeatedly leaving their homes after experiencing family violence and accessing crisis accommodation for a while, but returning to live with the perpetrator. These attempts at reconciliation often ultimately lead to permanent separation, but this can take some time, and several attempts, for the woman concerned to come to a realisation that an end to the violence will only happen if the relationship permanently ends. The repeat of incidents of violence and abuse, and “churning” through homelessness services (especially crisis services) at this stage can be extremely disruptive and stressful for both children and their mothers.

Although work has started in this area, currently in Australia there is still a direct and critical link between experience of domestic violence and homelessness. More than half of all women with children who have sought assistance through SAAP gave domestic violence as the primary reason for seeking assistance. As they frequently bring more than one child with them, the majority of those accommodated in domestic or family violence refuges, and other crisis and transitional accommodation are children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007).

The client group for this research are therefore major users of homeless services and domestic violence is the primary factor associated with their homelessness (Anderson, 2003). Structural factors create the conditions within which homelessness will occur, but people with personal problems are more vulnerable to these adverse social and economic trends than others (Parker and Fopp, 2004).

Most women using homelessness services designed for victims of domestic violence in Australia do have a dwelling. Homelessness for this group of women and children is a symptom of the problem (violence), rather than a cause of their problem (Nunan, 2005). This classification of domestic violence as a factor associated with women’s homelessness, but not as a cause of homelessness, is useful in clarifying the issues surrounding why women frequently “churn” through homelessness services and can return several times to live with the perpetrator.

Unlike most other groups of homeless people, these women and children do in fact have a home to return to, but they do not feel safe there. Women and children who are subjected to domestic violence are vulnerable to homelessness in two ways: because violence disrupts and violates the sense of safety and belonging that are associated with the home, and because when women and children make the decision to leave a family violence situation, they are usually required to leave their homes. Relationships with support networks are often severed in the process, and women can face isolation, emotional trauma and acute economic disadvantage as a result of their decision to leave. When women and children are forced to leave their homes because of violence, the loss of home in itself will often have a traumatic impact and they can suffer a real sense of loss from having to leave their home, which they often attempt to mitigate by trying to return.

To try to counter these negative factors and to identify gaps and potential improvements in Australian service provision, the research is investigating to what extent innovative early intervention schemes introduced in the United Kingdom and Australia have been successful in enabling women and children to reduce their experiences of violence and multiple use of refuge and other emergency accommodation.

The project has been designed to complement research being conducted by the same researcher for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) on homelessness prevention for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. That project looks specifically at issues surrounding how and to what extent homelessness prevention measures have been successful in enabling women and children to remain in their homes and localities.

As both projects draw on learning from the experience and from earlier this year I visited a range of Sanctuary Scheme projects in England, where the removal of the perpetrator, and support for the victims to remain in their home by a combination of security measures and on-going support, have become the norm in terms of policy and practice during the last six or seven years. Sanctuary Schemes are run by Local Authorities in some areas and the Police in others.

I interviewed workers, managers and partner stakeholders operating metropolitan, suburban and rural sanctuary schemes in England, and in order to compare how they differ in terms of their methods of operation. I also visited innovating perpetrator programs such as Strength to Change in Hull to investigate how preventing violence can help prevent homelessness and repeated use of refuge and crisis accommodation.

In Australia I have met with stakeholders of Tasmania’s State-Wide integrated justice led response Safe at Home, with policy makers and practitioners in New South Wales involved with the Staying Home Leaving Violence projects and with outreach services and projects working on the early stages of Safe at Home in Victoria.

Currently I am in the process of holding discussions with South Australia and Queensland policy makers and practitioners as well, in order to discuss the implications for the States of these ways of working with women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. It is anticipated that the final report of the project, which will include a review of the literature on the topic and the finding of this research will be with FAHCSIA by the end of the year.
The Challenge of Monitoring Regional Indigenous Homelessness

By Paul Memmott, Kelly Greenop, Michele Haynes, Andrew Clarke and Mark Western
The University of Queensland Institute for Social Science Research

This article is based on a study of Indigenous homelessness in regional Australia being undertaken by the Aboriginal Environments Research Centre (AERC) and the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland under a Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement with FaHCSIA.

Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the severity of Indigenous homelessness problems has been gradually increasing in the regional cities of Australia over the last three or four decades, but there is still no accurate and readily available method of recording, quantifying and comparing spatially or temporally the extent of this problem at the urban level. This paper addresses the methodological difficulties of obtaining ABS data on Indigenous homelessness and public place dwelling in regional Australian cities.

As part of current research for FaHCSIA under its national ‘Road Home’ homelessness policy (FaHCSIA 2008), we had intended to analyse ABS statistics to compile a list of the Indigenous homeless population in regional Australian towns that display significant rates of homelessness and public place dwelling. For a number of reasons this has not been possible. This paper addresses the methodological difficulties of obtaining ABS data on Indigenous homelessness and public place dwelling in regional Australian cities.

As part of current research for FaHCSIA under its national ‘Road Home’ homelessness policy (FaHCSIA 2008), we had intended to analyse ABS statistics to compile a list of the Indigenous homeless population in regional Australian towns that display significant rates of homelessness and public place dwelling. For a number of reasons this has not been possible. This paper outlines methodological difficulties of obtaining ABS data on Indigenous homelessness and public place dwelling in regional Australian cities.

Searching the Chamberlain and MacKenzie Data

The researchers Chamberlain and MacKenzie have produced the most comprehensive available analysis of the 2006 Indigenous homelessness data in the Counting the Homeless, 2006 State/Territory reports (e.g. 2009a, b). This data comprises information at the State/Territory, Statistical Division (SD) and Statistical Subdivision (SSD) geographic levels. Finer levels of geographic disaggregation appear to be unavailable either in their reports or from the ABS, with the exception of seven ‘selected SLAs’ (Statistical Local Areas) presented in the Western Australia (2009b) and the Northern Territory (2009a) reports, vis Halls Creek, Wyndham/East Kimberley, Broome, Derby/West Kimberley for WA, and Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs for N.T.

A spatially disaggregated analysis of homelessness for Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons at the Census Collection District (CD) level or some aggregation of CDs equating to towns or similar urban or rural centres was not available, thwarting our proposed research to investigate the degree and variation in Indigenous homelessness at the level of towns (or even suburbs).

Figure 1. Map of known centres on Indigenous homelessness based on past literature.
Furthermore, in the Counting the Homeless reports, data on ‘homelessness’ were broken down into four separate categories that roughly correspond to the three categories of homelessness defined by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2009). These were ‘improvised dwellings, sleepers out’ (which corresponds to primary homelessness or our alternate category ‘public place dwelling’); ‘[staying with] friends and relatives’ (which corresponds to secondary homelessness, or our alternate category of ‘at-risk of homelessness’); and ‘SAAP accommodation’ and ‘boarding houses’ (which correspond to tertiary homelessness or again our ‘at-risk of homelessness’).

The difficulty with the data can be demonstrated using the example of the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) information. Data are reported using Statistical Subdivisions (SSD) as the principal geographic units. These SSDs, particularly in remote areas, are large territories that may contain one or more major centres. As further disaggregation to a smaller spatial scale is not common in homelessness data it is difficult to know whether one or more towns share this problem, or indeed where homelessness may be better or worse. Table 1 shows the top 10 areas (including SSDs and available SLAs) ranked by the proportion of reported Indigenous homelessness relative to the total population, based on data from the 2009 AIHW Counting the Homeless reports.

Table 1: Top 10 areas reported (SSDs or SLAs) ranked by proportion of Indigenous homelessness people using data from the 2009 AIHW Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Division</th>
<th>Local Area (SLA)</th>
<th>Proportion of Homeless Population</th>
<th>Proportion Homeless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Perth Central Metropolitan</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Adelaide City</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Brisbane Brisbane</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Canberra Gungahlin-Hall</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Canberra North Canberra</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>Melbourne City Core</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Darwin City</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>Melbourne Outer City Ring</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Sydney City Core</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of this analysis were not able to penetrate far beyond the level of capital city, and certainly not down to a level that would include all of the regional towns on the map in Figure 1. Hence if the Mayor of Kalgoorlie or the Mayor of Mt Isa wished to inquire as to the number of Indigenous homeless people in their respective towns as of the 2006 Census, he or she would be unable to do so using on-line data.

What can be ascertained of Indigenous homelessness in the seven SLAs in the Counting the Homeless reports? Let us take the example of the Kimberley SLAs (see Table 2). We have mapped these Statistical Local Areas showing the Aboriginal population centres together with tables of the overall Indigenous population sizes for the centres in these same region (Figure 2), however it is still not possible to infer the accurate location of homeless people in these regions. For example, there are 59 people given as ‘rough sleepers’ (Group 1) in Table 2 for the Wyndham East-Kimberley SLA, but in this SLA there are two sizeable regional centres: Wyndham and Kununurra. It is not possible to say whether the 59 are largely in one city or the other, or distributed across both.

Table 2: Estimated number of Indigenous homeless people by selected SLA subdivisions in the Kimberley, WA, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Usual Resident Population</th>
<th>Rate per 10,000</th>
<th>Caravan Total</th>
<th>Rate (incl. caravan)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halls Creek</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>2,646</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyndham East-Kimberley</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>2,724</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broome</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4,148</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby West-Kimberley</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4,459</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further Difficulties with Census and Other Estimates of Homelessness

Both the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ regular Census and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) instruments include only those who are ‘usually resident’ in a private dwelling within Australia. ‘Usually resident’ is defined as anyone who usually lives in a given dwelling or regards it as their primary residence. This necessarily excludes visitors, which are a frequent occurrence, in Indigenous communities. This non-enumeration masks both crowding, as Memmott and colleagues and others have discussed elsewhere, but also secondary homelessness or in the schema we propose, ‘at risk of homelessness’. (Memmott et.al 2011, Horppool and Mowle 2011: 6.1, Morphy 2007:42.)

The SAAP Service Data for Indigenous Homeless People

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has recently described and quantified the homelessness services to Indigenous people (both actual homeless and at imminent risk of becoming homeless) that were provided by SAAP agencies during 2008–9 (AIHW 2011: 62–80). AIHW acknowledged that whereas this data provides “a solid base for reporting on homelessness statistics, it should not be interpreted as representing the entire homeless and at risk of homeless population” (2011:85), nor does it represent all services provided. The support services are quantified during 2008–2009 by recording time units of services provided, termed ‘support periods’. AIHW aggregates the total number of support periods according to Statistical Divisions (SDs) and then further, by geographic areas according to the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ABS 2007a) — See Table 4. The most telling thing about Table 5 is the number of SAAP support periods for Indigenous people which make up about 15.5 per cent of the total support periods yet Indigenous people only constitute about 2.5 per cent of the Australian population.

The proportion of support periods provided to Indigenous clients can also be aggregated to Statistical Division (SD) areas and mapped “to show the location of services that provide support to predominantly Indigenous Australians” (AIHW 2011:78). This map (Figure 3) indicates that the highest proportion of support periods to Indigenous clients occurred throughout the remote parts of Australia with the lowest proportion in the south-eastern and far south-western parts. Conversely, the highest proportion of the services to non-Indigenous homeless people occurred in the metropolitan and higher-density population areas of Australia, but this gradually reversed as one moves through the inner and outer regional areas to the remote areas. Additionally it should be noted that the distribution of SAAP agencies dropped from 57 per cent in major cities, through 24 per cent in inner regional areas, 13 per cent in outer regional areas and down to 5 per cent in remote/very remote areas (AIHW 2011:79), demonstrating that the homelessness problem in Australian cities becomes increasingly an Aboriginal homelessness problem the more one travels away from the metropolitan areas of South-Eastern Australia, into rural and remote Australia.

As the SAAP agencies decrease sharply in number however, the actual number of SAAP periods for Indigenous homeless people does not decrease correspondingly (see Table 4). This suggests that there is an acute homeless problem in many regional towns and cities in rural and remote Australia, and further, that homelessness in regional, rural and remote Australia is a distinctly Aboriginal homeless problem.

### Table 3: Population estimates for the Ord Region in 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Status Unknown</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kununurra</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>2,184</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>3,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyndham</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oombulgurri</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalumburu</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Argyle</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>784</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>1,144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyndham-East Kimberley (S) Rem</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmun</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balgo</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halls Creek Town</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>1,209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halls Creek (S) North</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulan</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindibungu</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Sandy Desert</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kundat Djaru</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>4,336</td>
<td>3,774</td>
<td>1,127</td>
<td>9,237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS, 2007b: Table 3

### Table 4: SAAP support periods by region and Indigenous status, 2008–09

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major City</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>11,400</td>
<td>109,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Regional</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>5,800</td>
<td>26,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer Regional</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>19,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Remote</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>3,800</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>31,100</td>
<td>169,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AIHW (2011: Table 1.9 p.16), based on SAAP Client Collection, SAAP Administrative Data Collection. See original table for further methodological qualifiers.
In trying to find an alternate method to monitor where Indigenous homelessness is occurring in regional Australia, we have devised a new proposal using a recently developed technique. This involves ‘web-crawling’ software searching textual media to track key words that trigger an association with homelessness and Indigenous social problems in regional towns using an automated search engine in order to make an initial assessment of the developing nature and severity of this problem.

Such a tool could be adapted and developed to maintain surveillance of regional and state newspapers as well as television and radio website transcripts (and any other identified suitable textual data source). It could be used to monitor Indigenous public place dwelling, homelessness, anti-social behaviours and other designated social problems in a targeted set of regional towns and cities throughout Australia and produce a quantifiable measuring index.

Conclusion

We argue that there is a strong case for all levels of government as well as NGOs to be able to accurately monitor where growth in Indigenous homelessness is occurring in regional Australia and where ‘hot spots’ of growth and anti-social behaviour might be. However we conclude that with the currently available tools (publicly available datasets), it is not readily possible to model Indigenous homelessness for cities, and only for regions with some difficulty. The local detail, and the fluidity and mobility of Indigenous public place dwelling and homeless people (Memmott et al. 2006) are not readily captured in the five-yearly national census. Only coarse spatial and temporal generalisations are available.

What is needed is a methodological approach that uses a different conceptual framework for identifying those Indigenous people who are technically homeless, in order to obtain more accurate quantitative and qualitative data. To capture the dynamic aspect, a more rigorous longitudinal approach with shorter time intervals between data collection is needed. New tools or methods are required if the ABS is to be able to render such a service. And even when such a service becomes available, alternative methods are required to provide qualitative understandings as well as evaluate the methodological limitations of the quantitative data sets.

References


Memmott, P., Birdsell-Jones, C., Go-Sam, C., Greenop, K. & Corunna, V. 2011 Modelling Crowding in Aboriginal Australia, AHURI Positioning Paper, for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, April.


Non-Psychiatric Disability and Homelessness: Building an Evidence Base for Better Policy

By Professor Andrew Beer, Director, Centre of Housing, Urban and Regional Planning, Deb Batterham, Emma Baker, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Housing, Urban and Regional Planning (CHURP), School of Social Sciences, The University of Adelaide and Shelley Mallett, General Manager Research and Service Development at Hanover Welfare Services

The relationship between psychiatric disability and homelessness has been well documented in Australia and it is now widely accepted that persons with a mental illness are at greater risk of homelessness, and that a significant percentage of the homeless have a psychiatric disability of greater or lesser severity. Very little attention has been paid to the incidence of non-psychiatric disabilities amongst the homeless either in Australia or internationally.

This research set out to build an evidence base around non-psychiatric disability and homelessness. It sought to find data on incidence, pathways into homelessness for this group and the key lessons for policy makers and service providers. The research included a review of the formal and informal literature on the topic; a quantitative analysis of the level of homelessness risk amongst different disability groups; qualitative interviews with approximately 35 homeless persons with a disability; and, workshops with policy makers and service providers.

This paper focused on the key lessons to emerge from the workshops. A more detailed account of the other dimensions of the research will be released later.

In order to better understand the policy and program lessons of the research two workshops were held in the latter stages of the project. The first workshop was held in Melbourne in August 2011 and the second was conducted in Canberra in early September 2011. The participants for the first workshop were drawn from state government, non-government service providers and peak organisations. Those involved in the second workshop were drawn from a range of Australian Government Departments and from the ACT Government. Participants in the two workshops were presented with a summary of the project outcomes and were asked to consider two key questions:

- What actions are needed to achieve the targets established in the White Paper on Homelessness, The Road Home?
- What steps can be taken by the Australian Government, State governments and service providers to better meet the needs of homeless persons with non-psychiatric disabilities?

The outcomes of the two workshops will be discussed together as there was considerable overlap in the views and perspectives of the two groups. Seven key policy themes emerged:

Theme 1: There is a need to recognise that persons with a non-psychiatric disability are unrecognised or under-recognised within the population of homeless persons. Participants in the workshops noted that there is little recognition that a significant percentage of persons who are homeless have a non-psychiatric disability. This was also one of the key issues to emerge from the literature review (Beer et al 2010).

Moreover, persons with intellectual...
Disabilities were most likely to be over-represented amongst the homelessness population. The quantitative analysis undertaken as part of this project also came to also to this conclusion: persons with a disability — and especially learning or intellectual impairments — were more at risk from precarious housing than any other group within the study.

While a small minority of persons with a non-psychiatric disability becomes homeless, this group constitutes more than 20 per cent of the homeless population. This fact needs greater recognition and warrants elevation in policy discussion in order to achieve greater awareness and make it possible to pursue assertive intervention where both flags are present.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that homelessness can contribute to the onset of mental illness, such that persons with an intellectual disability who become homeless may then develop a psychiatric disorder. As a first step, more attention should be paid to the nature, source and extent of disabilities amongst persons using homelessness services within the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's data collection;

Theme 2: Individuals with moderate disabilities often miss out on services. Those whose disabilities are substantial but not acute may not gain access to services or other support because there is greater need elsewhere within the disability services. Importantly, persons with moderate impairments appear more likely to be at risk of homelessness as their disability may be sufficient to affect their interactions within a broader society, but not of an extent such that they receive a comprehensive package of assistance. The qualitative findings supported this conclusion also. There was considerable discussion in both workshops about the risks confronting persons with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and how their impairment may preclude them from participation in the labour market but not warrant a comprehensive package of disability services.

Theme 3: There is a need for better integration between services targeting the homeless and those directed to the population with a non-psychiatric disability. Participants noted that both 'on the ground' and in the policy environment there are gaps between the two sets of services. There is a need for greater co-ordination between agencies but there is also scope for funding reform that provides resources to meet the needs of persons confronted by both challenges. There was a perception that health and disability rehabilitation services are largely blind to the risk of homelessness amongst the population with a disability and this partly reflects the funding structures that supports them.

Theme 4: A more holistic approach to service provision is needed. Participants in the two workshops considered both the current service system and the features of an enhanced system designed to meet the needs of persons at risk of homelessness who have a non-psychiatric disability. There was a clear view that in the further development of the service system there was a need for a housing first approach that also considered the employment, socialisation and other needs of the individual.

One policy option that was considered and evaluated favourably was the appointment of community advocates to participate. This pathway would appear to be an attractive pathway for development and has the capacity to help the Australian Government achieve its homelessness targets.

Theme 5: There is a need to identify points of intervention. Policy makers in both workshops noted that it is important to identify the logical points of intervention for persons with a disability who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Suggested points of intervention included: hospitals and particularly release from hospital, adolescence amongst persons with an intellectual disability, and Centrelink. Each of the nominated intervention points require different strategies and actions, but each offer the prospect of having a real impact and ‘turning off the tap’ of homelessness.

Theme 6: Gaining access to affordable and appropriate housing remains a challenge. Participants in both workshops noted the extensive waiting lists in virtually all jurisdictions for social housing. They also acknowledged that it created an impediment to the provision of housing for persons with a disability at risk of homelessness.

Discussion focussed on a range of ways in which this barrier could be overcome, including the potential to develop and apply a ‘Friendly Landlord’ model targeted at this group. The Friendly Landlord model has been developed in New Zealand and involves a number of non-government organisations supporting persons affected by poor mental health. This assistance is provided both as on-going contact and assistance and as a rental subsidy designed to sustain the individual in the private rental market (National Centre of Mental Health Research, Information and Workforce Development 2011). Others noted the potential impact of both tighter targeting of access to social housing, and investment in new stock via the National Affordable Housing Agreement, the National Rental Assistance Scheme and the Nation Building-Economic Stimulus Package.

In conclusion, our research has shown that non-psychiatric disability is an important part of the homelessness landscape in Australia. Co-morbidity with psychiatric disability is a challenging issue and the evidence suggests that homelessness places individuals at greater risk of acquiring a non-psychiatric disability while the same time, persons with a non-psychiatric disability who are homeless may fall into mental illness. The costs for individuals and society as a whole are substantial.

Fortunately, this part of our research has shown that real progress can be made via relatively modest changes to existing service systems. The homelessness initiatives already introduced by the Federal Government are having a positive impact.

Maintaining that momentum and introducing further policy refinements will further reinforce these gains.

References


Homelessness and Older Australians: Developing a Research Evidence Base

By Maree Petersen and Andrew Jones, The University of Queensland Institute for Social Science Research

This article is based on one of five research projects being undertaken by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland (UQ) under a Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement (HRPA) with FaHCSIA.

People aged 55 and over constitute approximately one-fifth of Australia’s homeless population, and there is a large, but unquantified, number of older Australians at risk of homelessness due to their precarious housing circumstances. There is at present no systematic approach to addressing this problem and the relative neglect of older homeless people that has characterised homelessness policy since the 1980s continues.

Developing a strategy to address homelessness amongst the older population is a core requirement for meeting the goals of Australia’s homelessness strategy. This imperative is strengthened given that Australia’s population is ageing and persons aged 50 and over are predicted to more than double numerically from 2010 to 2050, and to increase as a proportion of the total population from 31.4 per cent in 2010 to 40.0 per cent in 2050.

Understanding homelessness amongst older people requires a wide lens that encompasses older people who are homeless now and those who are vulnerable to homelessness in the near future. Many of those at risk of homelessness are so primarily because of the lack of secure, affordable and appropriate rental housing for older people in many parts of Australia.

Addressing homelessness for this population group must have a twin focus, firstly on those whose homelessness is associated with long-term major life difficulties such as chronic mental illness, cognitive impairment and substance abuse, and secondly on those whose homelessness is precipitated essentially by termination of a lease or by an unaffordable rent increase and who are unable to find alternative housing.

Uncertainty about Numbers

Recent debates on estimates of the number of older homeless people in Australia have resulted in considerable uncertainty. Based on Chamberlain and Mackenzie’s cultural definition, the Counting the Homeless report estimated 18,108 homeless older persons in Australia on Census night 2006, a figure reduced to 11,252 in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) recalibration in 2011 of the 2006 Census data.

The two estimates concur that older people comprise just under one-fifth of all homeless people in Australia. Using the ABS recalculations, males comprise 65 per cent of homeless people aged 55 and over. The largest proportion of older homeless people reside in boarding houses (39 per cent), followed by “staying with other households” (33 per cent), “sleeping out” (15 per cent), “staying in supported accommodation” (12 per cent) and “in other temporary lodging” (8 per cent). There are more men than women in all homelessness residence categories, but women are over-represented in “staying with other households”, “staying in supported accommodation” and “in other temporary lodging”.

The number of older people “at risk” of homelessness has not been the subject of careful analysis. The starting point for estimating the number of those at risk of homelessness due to insecure or unaffordable housing is an examination of older households living in the private rental sector. The 2006 Census enumerated 107,168 households in which the reference person was aged 65 and over living in this sector.

However, it is not known what proportion of these households enjoy reasonably secure housing and what proportion live in precarious housing circumstances. Older people most at risk of homelessness are those living in private rented accommodation that has insecure tenure, is costly relative to their income and is unsuited to their needs as older people.

There is evidence that increasing numbers of older people are living in such circumstances and if this is so it poses a major challenge for policies designed to reduce the incidence of homelessness in Australia’s older population. There is an urgent need to develop estimates of the “at risk” of homelessness older population.

Causes

A number of Australian studies have examined the causes of homelessness in later life (Crane et al., 2005; McFerran, 2010; Rota-Bartelink and Lipmann, 2007; Westmore and Mallet, 2011). For those experiencing long term homelessness key factors reported include alcohol abuse, physical and mental health problems, depression and gambling (Rota-Bartelink and Lipmann, 2007).

Several studies reported differences in the set of factors leading to homelessness between those with a long history of homelessness throughout their lives and those experiencing homelessness for the first time in later life (Rota-Bartelink and Lipmann, 2007; Westmore and Mallet, 2011). The former were more likely to have alcohol and mental health problems and to use illegal drugs. They were less likely to have worked regularly, to have been married and to receive assistance from family or friends. The latter were more likely to have had housing difficulties during their lives, to have limited financial reserves and to have experienced a housing crisis in later life that disrupted their tenancy.

This housing crisis then had negative consequences for physical and emotional health and wellbeing. This pattern appears to be particularly prevalent for women where domestic violence, income insecurity, ill-health and age discrimination cumulatively led to housing insecurity and risk of homelessness (McFerran, 2010; Sharam, 2008). The current state of Australia’s private rental market, characterised by chronic under-supply and high cost, seems likely to provide the conditions to foster housing-induced homelessness amongst the older population.

Services

There is evidence that many older people find it extremely difficult to access the services they require when faced with homelessness or the risk of homelessness (Fiedler, 2010; Westmore and Mallet, 2011). This is in part a consequence of the complexities of the service systems related to homelessness which include specialist homelessness services, the housing system, the social security system, the community and residential aged care system and the health system. What is clear is that an effective response to older person’s homelessness will require service integration and collaboration amongst all of these sectors.

With respect to specialist homelessness services, there is a need to closely examine the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) model of service provision to ascertain its suitability as a foundation for expansion of specialised services to this group. The ACHA model includes information provision, crisis management, personal support and assistance in accessing housing and other services including aged care, social security and health services.
There is also a need to review the engagement of specialist homelessness services (formerly known as Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)) with older people and to determine the role of SAAP services with respect to this group and the relationship between SAAP services and other services including ACHA and aged care services.

With respect to housing, the core issue is to provide a sufficient supply of good quality, secure, affordable and appropriate rental housing for older people. Social housing will need to play a central role, including public housing, community housing and the private rental sector and care homes.

The private rental sector will also need to be mobilised through various forms of public subsidy such as the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS).

Improved access to aged care services for older people who are homeless or living in precarious housing is also critically important. Some homeless people require the high levels of support and care that can only be provided in residential aged care services and access to these facilities for older homeless people must continue to be improved. Older people living in sub-standard or marginal housing in the community require improved access to community care to support them in their daily living.

Research

There are major gaps in our knowledge that impede the development of effective public policy. In order to address this issue effectively a stronger research evidence-base is required. Eight key areas requiring further research are identified.

1. Estimating the number of older homeless people.

Continuing work is being undertaken by the ABS to estimate the number of homeless persons in Australia, and further refinement of estimates of older homeless people will emerge from this research. The analysis of 2011 Census data when it becomes available in 2012, together with data from the 2001 and 2006 Censuses will provide a valuable picture of trends in later life homelessness. Further analysis of this data, especially on a geographic basis, will be particularly valuable in identifying the different character of later life homelessness in different parts of Australia.

2. Estimating the number of older people at risk of homelessness

It is important to develop a clearer understanding of the number of older households occupying precarious housing in the private rental market. We know that many older households have unsuitable and insecure housing as a consequence of high and rising rents combined with low incomes and limited supply of affordable rental housing in many locations. However, the precise number and proportion of older private renters who are “at risk” of homelessness has not been estimated. An analysis of Census data involving the identification of a number of risk factors could be undertaken to derive an estimate of the size of this population of older people.

3. Understanding the causes of homelessness and pathways into homelessness

Further studies are required of the causes of homelessness both of older people whose homelessness derives from their chronic personal problems and of older people whose risk of homelessness or actual homelessness is associated primarily with their precarious housing circumstances. Studies focusing on pathways into homelessness, identifying both the long-term life history factors resulting in precarious housing in later life and the short-term circumstances precipitating a housing crisis may be particularly valuable.

4. The role of specialist homelessness services

There is insufficient knowledge and understanding of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the engagement of specialist homelessness services with older people. There are two broad areas requiring research. Firstly, there is very limited information concerning the ACHA program which has been operating for two decades but which has not been evaluated since the early-1990s. Secondly, there is a need to review the engagement of SAAP services with older people. The key research tasks are to identify the approaches that have been adopted by ACHA and SAAP to working with older people and to assess their effectiveness in preventing later life homelessness and/or supporting older homeless people.

5. Housing supply issues

As well as researching rental housing demand from older people, there is a need to examine the impact and effectiveness of recent initiatives in rental housing supply for older people at risk of homelessness. This includes identifying the priority that has been given to housing supply for older people relative to other groups through the social housing initiatives of recent years and through NRAS. Case studies of innovative housing in the social housing sector, particularly housing that is integrated with provision of support and care services, are needed to provide a foundation for best practice in the future. It is also important to continue to explore ways of attracting private sector investment and provision into affordable housing for older persons, and to develop further understanding of the incentives and disincentives for private involvement in this housing sub-market.

6. Residential aged care and service-integrated housing for homeless people

There is an important role for research is examining the impact of recent policy and funding changes designed to increase access to residential aged care by people with complex needs who have experienced homelessness. This might encompass analysis of the extent to which mainstream providers have become more responsive to the needs of homeless people as well as analysis of the operations and effectiveness of specialist facilities, including service-integrated housing, for older people who have experienced homelessness.

7. Community care for homeless people

Similarly there is an important role for research in examining the effectiveness of the various approaches to providing community care to older people living in sub-standard or marginal housing in the community. Greater understanding is required of the experiences both of mainstream providers and specialised services in providing community care to older people in precarious housing. The impact of these services on the lives of older people, and in particular their role in preventing homelessness, needs to be better understood.

8. The development of national and state strategies

Finally, research can play an important role in underpinning national and state strategies designed to reduce homelessness amongst the older population. Reducing homelessness in the older population will require a far more integrated policy approach than is currently the case at national or state and territory levels.

In summary, further research has the potential to provide the evidence required to underpin the development of national and state strategies targeted on reducing homelessness amongst older Australians in the decade ahead.

This will contribute to addressing the divide that exists between the majority of older people who as home owners have housing security and the access to services and life choices this facilitates and the growing numbers of older people who do not have secure housing and consequently have reduced life opportunities including difficulties in accessing the care and support they require.

References


Part 3: Issues and Themes in Australian Homelessness Research

Responding to the Needs of the Elderly Homeless — Ageing in What Place?

By Trish Westmore, Project Manager, Hanover Welfare Services

As Australia faces unprecedented growth in its ageing population, current service systems providing a response to older people are struggling to meet the increasing demand for services. It is predicted that this will continue to worsen over the coming decades.

Anecdotal reports from Specialist Homelessness Services in Victoria indicate an increase in the number of older people, points with no recent history of homelessness, presenting at access. Currently, the Victorian homelessness service sector does not provide a differentiated response to older people who are at risk of housing crisis and those who are homeless. Instead, existing responses tend to be focused on interventions and assistance for those individuals with chronic health issues or with a history of homelessness.

Earlier this year, Hanover Welfare Services completed Stage One of their research into the experience of housing crisis and homelessness for older Victorians. This research was enabled by a generous grant from the William Buckland Foundation. An action research approach was undertaken which involved a literature review, consultations with service providers, in-depth interviews with older people who had experienced housing crisis and homelessness and two phases of mapping of the service sector.

The research identified a number of individual and structural factors impacting on older people’s housing pathways and provided initial recommendations for improving service responses.

Mapping
In the initial and final phases of the research the various service sectors accessible to older people across the domains of housing, health, mental health and Centrelink were mapped. Mapping revealed a highly complex and fragmented service system, delivered through a variety of local, state and federal government departments. Navigating and understanding the various service sectors, responding to different eligibility requirements, and accessing specialist responses provided challenges to older people and service providers alike.

Consultations with Service Providers

Consultations were held with senior workers from a variety of service sectors. These consultations confirmed that the number of older people presenting in housing crisis who were presenting to services was increasing. It was noted during these consultations that those older people who were on low incomes and renting privately were particularly vulnerable. There was a consensus that the housing crisis experienced by older people was perpetuated by a lack of suitable affordable and secure accommodation in local areas.

Housing and homelessness service providers reported being unaware of the various accommodation options available to older people who experienced housing crisis for the first time. As a consequence, older people either received no response, or a short term crisis response with little or no follow up, or a referral into inappropriate, unsuitable, and in some cases dangerous, accommodation such as unregulated rooming houses.

Interviews with Older People

In-depth qualitative interviews with fourteen older people who had recently experienced housing crisis or homelessness were also conducted. The housing pathways of the participants were mapped across a timeline, which recorded significant events, the point in time where services were accessed and the service response.

Consistent with the service provider consultations, nearly all of the individuals in our study, had been long term private renters, were unable to withstand rising costs of living, especially increases in the cost of housing. Many had found that in order to meet rental increases, they had to forgo other basics such as heating and food. The in-depth interviews identified two broad groups of older people vulnerable to housing crisis or homelessness. The first group of individuals had little or no history of engagement with welfare services but they had experienced a single significant life event that preceded their housing crisis. The significant life event generally included a rent rise, sudden unemployment or the loss of a housemate. For this group of people, all they needed was secure accommodation. They had little or no need for ongoing support once their housing had stabilised.

In contrast, the second group of individuals identified in the study had experienced a long history of multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage, which resulted in cumulative harm over time. This included poverty; personal or familial mental or physical health, a history of trauma, incarceration or long term unemployment. It was apparent that for this group the cumulative effects of multiple disadvantages contributed to their increasing vulnerability generally but especially to insecure tenure as they got older. Typically, following resolution of housing crisis or homelessness, this group had ongoing multiple service needs.

Once in housing crisis, older people reported a lack of alternative accommodation available for them that was suitable and that they could afford. They found themselves priced out of their local area or facing aged-based discrimination from real estate agents. Nearly all of the people interviewed for the
study reported wanting to remain connected to their local community, where they had both social supports and links to services such as health centres.

For all those interviewed, the existence of familial or community connectedness appeared to mitigate the impact of both housing crisis and homelessness. For older people with ongoing support needs, those familial and community connections were critical.

As most participants had never engaged with specialist homelessness services, or in fact, any other form of welfare services, they were unaware of where to turn for assistance. Where they did have support, it was mostly because they had stumbled across it. This highlights a lack of accessible information available to older persons who find themselves in crisis.

Participants who had multiple needs, for example facing imminent homelessness, multiple debts and health issues, reported a poorly coordinated service response and lack of referral to appropriate agencies. Individuals who became homeless noted that specialist homelessness services often provided a short term crisis response, such as accommodation in a motel, but noted there was poor case coordination or long term planning around their ongoing support needs.

Early Intervention

The fourteen case studies highlighted that an inadequate response early in an older persons housing pathway can have a devastating impact on an individual’s physical and mental health. Participants reported increases in anxiety and depression as well as long term impacts on their health from their time being homeless. In some cases inappropriate housing referrals resulted in direct threats to a person’s safety.

Significantly, examining older people’s timelines showed that the longer a person was in crisis or homeless, the longer and more significant their ongoing support needs were. Furthermore, when people received an appropriate, specialised response when their tenure was breaking down they spent significantly less time in crisis, compared to those who entered homelessness. On average the difference was 12 weeks in housing crisis compared to 56 weeks homeless. This is highlighted in Figure One which compares the journeys of two women, both private renters, who were interviewed as part of our research. Joan found support while she in housing crisis and had her accommodation resolved within twelve weeks. Kathy received no support and cycled through the homelessness service sector for 51 weeks.

Best Practice When Responding to Older People in Housing Crisis

An adequate response was found through specialist services that had an in-depth knowledge of the various service responses to older people, including housing and accommodation options. Programs such as Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) provided active advocacy for older people as well as assisting them to navigate the various service systems and negotiate on their behalf.

Older people stressed that active advocacy responses which were outcomes focused were critical to stabilising their housing and other support needs. Examples of outcomes focused advocacy were the securing of housing, material aid and assistance with moving. Additionally, the emotional support provided by the workers was highlighted as significantly beneficial.

The positive impact of an early response on older person’s wellbeing, duration in crisis and ongoing support needs, points to the need for early identification of those who are vulnerable. All participants in the study reported being linked in with a health service or GP when they first entered financial hardship, highlighting the essential role the health sector can play in identification of risk and dissemination of information.

Similarly, Centrelink, which provides Commonwealth Rental Assistance to private renters may be a first contact agency that can flag older people who face rental increases or present in crisis. Despite the negative experience many participants had with real estate agents, engagement with this sector may assist to ensure that those who receive notices to vacate also receive information and referral to a specialist agency.

Australian ageing policy is underpinned by the philosophy that people should be able to “age in place”, rather than enter residential facilities. However, for a growing number of older people this is simply not possible.

Recently, Hanover welcomed the findings from the Productivity Commission’s inquiry into Caring for Older Australians. We were pleased to see a recommendation for dedicated aged care for older homeless persons and further acknowledgement around service delivery and assistance for individuals experiencing financial and social disadvantage. As yet however, how this will be funded and resourced remains unclear.

The Productivity Commission also recommended the development of One Stop Shops where older people are able to receive information, referral and advocacy. This provides a unique opportunity to address some of the structural issues impacting on housing pathways identified in Hanover’s research.

While intervention needs to be tailored to the aged who are newly homeless, older people who have experienced chronic homelessness must also receive a specialist response. The work of agencies such as Wintringham and Wesley Mission ensure people with long term, profound disadvantage and complex needs are able to age with dignity. However, with demographic shifts over the coming decades, this area of aged care will require substantially more funding to meet need.

The Stage One Final Report is delivered in two parts, both of which are able to be downloaded from the Hanover website. The first, “Ageing in what place? The experience of housing crisis and homelessness for older Victorians. Final Report” presents in detail the research phases. The second component is a stand-alone document, “Ageing in what place? The experience of housing crisis and homelessness for older Victorians. Case Studies”. This document presents case studies outlining the journeys of the 14 older people interviewed as part of the research.

In 2011, Hanover received additional funding from the Mercy foundation (NSW) to undertake a second phase of research to extend the findings of the current study. Consultations and interviews will take place across the eight Victorian Department of Human Services regions to examine the impact of gender and location on housing pathways for older Victorians. This research is expected to be completed in early 2012.

Following the recently released Ageing in What Place? The experiences of housing crisis and homelessness for older Victorians study, Hanover and Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) is conducting research into the impact of location and gender on older Victorians’ housing pathways. Working across all Victorian DHHS regions, we will examine the similarities and differences in service responses to older men and women experiencing housing crisis and homelessness across metropolitan and rural areas.

We are seeking the input of men and women aged over 55 who have recently experienced housing crisis or homelessness, as well as homelessness and mainstream service providers who respond to this population. Researchers will be conducting interviews and consultations which will take approximately half an hour. Your information will be confidential at all times, and you will not be identified in the research.

For more information please contact (03) 9288 9805.
Action Research and Reconnect— ‘Speaking Action Research as a Second Language’ in a National Youth Homelessness Prevention Program* 

By Yoland Wadsworth, RMIT University

This article is summarised from Exemplar 2, Chapter 5 in Yoland Wadsworth’s new book Building in Research and Evaluation: Human inquiry for living systems (2010). The headings and dot point list detail the conditions identified as having contributed to the success of action research in the work of Reconnect, a methodology that was used consistently over more than a decade, and which has been linked to measurable changes to youth homelessness in Bureau of Statistics figures analysed in the 2008 Commonwealth Government White Paper on Homelessness.

Championed by the Australian Government

Perhaps one of the most successfully enduring ‘whole-system’ uses of action research in human services to date has been the work of the national Reconnect program. This was the first use of action research systematically throughout a whole government program in Australia.

The Reconnect program, familiar to many readers of Parity, is an early intervention program of the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs focusing on engaging with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Locally based Reconnect workers assist young people make (and remake) the human connections in their lives—with family, schools, community and workplaces.

At the time of writing in 2010 Reconnect workers had used action research for over twelve years— a particularly suitable methodology given that the contexts in which Reconnect works, involving both young people and a large number of other stakeholders, are complex, changing and individual-specific. A standardised, evidence-based single ‘best practice’ approach was not seen as practically viable by the pilot Reconnect phase which then used action research to develop its approach (Crane 1998) and to drive its successful emergent character from that time.

Systemic action research was able to generate significant and lasting theory

One of the earliest outcomes of Reconnect’s use of action research was the consolidation of an, at the time, radically new way of doing youth work, an approach that has largely characterised the sector ever since.

By closely observing with young people (and with their families, mostly parents, and with organisations/services) what had happened over time in their lives, youth work shifted its logic of involvement from only being ‘alongside the lone young person against the world’, to understanding the factors that were excluding and driving the young person away from their primary sources of support, practical resourcing and nurture.

From this came a new stance—of being alongside the young person, seeing how they see and feel (e.g. up against the world) and then working with them to knit or re-knit their relationships back to the people, groups and organisations they need, but with new mutual insight, understanding and respect, through responses that are more helpful, constructive and coherent for the young person.

To some extent this more relational practice had already begun to take shape. However, what the Reconnect pilot project did was use action research to clarify and distil the core principles of good practice and provide a clear and communicable framework for the new approach.

In a way this was an early capacity-building (autopoeis-strengthening) program in which action research was used continually to navigate service responses and build dialogue between ‘critical inquirers’—including the young people and other stakeholder-collaborators.

Active support from policy makers and funders who saw the value of action research—and of a substantial published resource: an action research kit

But much had to happen to get to this point of executive support, and with hindsight its beginnings can be seen as having been far more modest and interpersonal—something critically important to the success of most action research programs.

The issues and challenges faced by Reconnect clients and service providers can be very complex. Too often there’s little time set aside to reflect on and improve existing activity and outcome for the client. Action Research provides a process that will enable you to systemically examine your current work practices and improve services….It will help you to identify what works, what doesn’t work and, of course, what might work better. (Crane and Richardson 2000: viii)

The remainder of the extensive fabric of built in methods and characteristics that have contributed to the success and past sustainability of the Reconnect program are summarised as follows. Some of the methods were carried out in the early beginnings of the program and in some cases been removed or adapted to incorporate the changing needs of the program:

- In the beginning there was a requirement for well-documented inquiry, and project reporting mandated short (less than a page each), regular reports by practitioners on two action research questions quarterly (later annually). These were part of ordinary work practice and designed not to be onerous extra.
work (see ‘The Day in the Life...’ example that follows).

- The ongoing inquiring and reporting assisted in answering one or more of the ‘Questions of National Significance’, program-wide questions which related to Reconnect’s key objectives and to critical challenges identified in program-level evaluations. This systemically bridged between the use of micro action research projects with individuals and scaling up to program-wide use.

- Some strategies to assist the peer pooling of action research knowledge was achieved through agency-based peer training of new workers, regional service network meetings and forums, national action research professional development conferences conducted by around 20 Reconnect workers experienced in action research, and Good Practice forums.

- There was both strong involvement by departmental officers as well as and invited contributions of external meta-consultants working as (train-the-trainer) facilitators at the national gatherings, and in the local and regionally based workplaces of the over 100 Reconnect agencies around Australia. In addition, academic consultants worked as facilitators and resource people, writers and publishers of resource material, web-managers and committee members for both the Good Practice forums and other aspects of the infrastructure.

- A national Reconnect action research coordinating committee was supported by the funding department who stood to benefit from its program-level insights.

- Action research was included in job descriptions and connected to training competencies — and local programs conveyed the action research philosophy to new Reconnect workers, assisted by an induction kit.

- A written compendium of the action research method (the Reconnect Action Research Kit, Crane and Richardson 2000)——was both in hard copy and online, and served as a key resource that helped Reconnect projects ‘hold the story’ as they continually remade their service responses. It contained definitions, processes and examples, tools, challenges and trouble-shooting.

- Key internal and external experienced action research thinkers formed a network of activity for deeper learning, for example, one of the authors of the kit also served on the national action research committee, contributed to conferences, ran the ‘ReconnectAR’ intranet website and generally continued the three-way knowledge transfer partnership between local Reconnect people, a university Social Work and Human Services program, and FaHCSIA. Other key internal knowledgeable added more to the creative synergies, for example an Anglicare Reconnect worker in the Northern Territory ran a local conference for Reconnect partner agencies to learn how to use action research, and another established a specialist youth training consultancy.

- The program had an internal website which was another method for sustaining a networked learning community among Reconnect workers to enable them to pool their experiences and conclusions, exchange examples and ideas for local action research systems and raise questions.

- Local action research systems were aided by an iconic strategic question: ‘What would it take...?’ — a question which helped propel movement from observation-reflection into planning-action. Local Reconnect action research ‘systems’ additionally anchored the effort with the help of local reference groups, information systems, libraries of past examples, current active questions and data collections, or a suggestion box, notice board and whiteboard. Standing advice provided to service providers as a guide in the Kit was also to regularly destroy old data and retain only summary reports so as to keep the dynamic flowing.

A Day in the Life of a Reconnect Worker in Action Research

A case example that helps bring to life the daily use of action research in Reconnect is ‘Case example three’ from the Reconnect Action Research Kit by Crane and Richardson 2000: 5.7 Danyelle Bodaghi of Darwin Connect took the time to create this valuable resource that illuminates:

- The way in which action research thinking was possible even in the immediacy of normal busy human services work—-illustrating how time could be built in for action research.

- The way in which Reconnect workers learned to be alert, curious and questioning as ‘the way we do things around here’, more-or-less easily switching into the observe-reflect-plan-do mnemonic.

- The continuous micro-interchanges between action and inquiry, and the ability to see accrued learning as ‘best evidence so far’, and to not overly congeal it in perpetuity.

- Ways of collecting new insights and conclusions and finding easy built in ways of storing them so they are accessible as advice offered to others.

- The constant driving of the processes by the life worlds of the young people and their families — not just so that workers ‘get it right’ for them, but also so the young people are resourced to ‘get it right for themselves’.

- The assumption that there could always be yet more resonance to be achieved (e.g. around grasp and usage of ‘young people’s language’ rather than potentially alienating professionalised language, just as it was found that the term ‘homelessness’ itself was not wanted by young people (Crane and Richardson 2000: 2.8).

- The ingenuity and creativity sparked by sitting with the tension of a question that arises out of a discrepancy between an ‘is’ and an ‘ought’ without rushing too quickly to an overly certain conclusion.

- The ease with which observations that might otherwise be rejected as ‘just anecdotes’ became instead an evidence base by being collected and recorded systematically (see the reference to use in the day book).

- How efforts were most assisted when practitioners felt confident either to point things out to each other (e.g. regarding discordant language they might be using) or to hear about discordance directly from the young people themselves when they were sufficiently ‘alongside’ in their relationships with them.

- The scale of inquiry (e.g. where a macro question like—‘What would it take...?’[Crane and Richardson 2000: 5.9]—connected to a micro question that was explored in its own right , such as by a small-scale school-based research study conducted by students and Reconnect workers [Crane and Richardson 2000: 3.17].)

Being a Reconnect worker means that on any given day you can work across a huge spectrum of areas, using a number of interventions and with goals ranging from individual client change to long-term systemic change.

The use of Action Research in everyday work is imperative to the continued development of the Connect service in Darwin. With such a large emphasis put on the Action Research process in the pilot, Connect now has ingrained the use of Action Research questions and ways to develop/change how the program is run in response to client/community feedback, into every aspect of its service provision.

Opposite is a typical (if you could call it that) day in a Connect worker’s life...
Case example three — a ‘day in the life’ of a Reconnect worker using Action Research

8.30am–9.15am
Begin work, receive a message on the answering machine from Rita (Joanne’s Mum who I provide case support to) requesting an immediate response. A phone call is made back to her after speaking with the other Connect worker, who supports the young person. Rita is asked for her preferred way of receiving support. The result was that the other Connect worker finds out Joanne would be OK about a meeting between them all.

Action Research Component
An ongoing Action Research question is whether it is more viable for the young person and their parents to have separate workers. It was found in the pilot that this was often the case, but with the recognition that every client is different, this is a question that is asked of clients and ourselves every time we engage with a family.

10.00am–12.00am
Meeting with a youth detention centre social worker and other key stakeholders regarding the development of a ‘Community of Origin Visitors Scheme’. This meeting is to discuss the draft Background Paper created by a Connect worker and the creation of a time-line that allows for the optimum amount of consultation and contribution by relevant community members.

Action Research Component
Within the pilot, it was identified through client feedback and service assessment processes that there was a need for Aboriginal young people in detention to receive visits from other members of their communities with languages, family or just culturally similar backgrounds. This would be seen as a way to ease the feeling of dislocation and isolation from their communities and families, who are sometimes 2,000 km away. In response to this need and in partnership with the detention centre, Connect has drawn together a few key stakeholders in an effort to secure funding and put the beginnings of a model together, before further consultation is undertaken with members of the sector and the community.

1.00pm–2.30pm
Meeting with a young woman who is 14 years old. Went to shopping centre food court and discussed current issues. These included school truancy, self-harming behaviour and violent behaviour towards other people. On returning from meeting, a few observations regarding our meeting are placed in the 12 to 15 file.

Action Research Component
The key to making Action Research successful in terms of client work has been the ability to make it accessible on a daily basis. An example of this is creating a file titled ‘what works with 12 to 15 year olds?’ This came about as a result of observations by workers and in dialogue with local agencies. This age group’s support needs seemed to be different. The aim of this file is that when a worker has dealings with someone in this age group, they jot down what was effective, whether it be ‘meeting for shorter times’ or ‘driving the whole time’, and drop this in the file. This was a time-effective way of collecting information that was later collated. Then it was used at the service level and fed into an inter-agency process for improving access of under 15s. This helped to support services and improve their capacities to respond effectively.

2.45pm–3.00pm
Return from client visit and receive a message (amongst others) from the school counsellor at a local high school. Return her call to accept a referral for a 15 year old male requiring assistance with a mix of issues including extreme conflict with parents and the need to look at income support needs. Time make to meet with him and the school counsellor tomorrow.

Action Research Component
The school counsellors and Connect workers have jointly agreed to use Action Research to look at the best ways the service and school can work together to have the optimum result for the young person. This is at an early stage and tomorrow’s meeting will be a good opportunity for observation and reflection on how collaborative early intervention case work can happen. At a practical level, we are asking ‘what would it take for the young person and their family to have more options for referral, advocacy and support?’

Example — young co-researchers help service planning
A co-research group of young people was set up to explore the question ‘What would it take for young people to feel safe about accessing [the service] for support?’ As part of a planning process, the young people coordinated their classmates’ answers to questionnaires and interviews, and completed the observation and reflection phases.

The understandings about the issues of access and confidentiality and the service’s profile provided rich and in-depth data that was used as the basis for further planning. The co-research group also produced a video for local schools that covered some of the issues raised in their inquiry processes (A Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

3.00pm–4.30pm
Pick up another client from school and take her to Centrelink in relation to a breach that has been imposed.

Exceptional circumstances have come to light in our work with her. During this interview, it strikes me that Connect staff have been regularly providing additional information to Centrelink at the time of a breach and that a collaborative look at communication processes between the agencies might improve the information base for decision making. I make a note to follow this up with Centrelink.

Action Research Component
Anecdotal evidence indicated it was worth looking at this area. This insight led to communication with Centrelink and it was later decided we would look collaboratively at how the service and Centrelink could improve communication, particularly at the time of breaches. A page in the back of the service daybook (a book used between workers to communicate information during the day) was created to record client experiences and worker communications with Centrelink. This information was then able to go to the regular collaborative meeting we have with Centrelink staff as a basis for improving practice between the agencies and identifying any emerging issues. From the meetings, collective decisions could be made.

4.30pm–5.00pm
Message in the daybook from other Connect worker saying that Joanne says that she will meet with her Mum tomorrow night. Contacted Rita and told her that a meeting time has been made for tomorrow night after work at the office with her daughter. I help her prepare for the meeting and clarify with her the main issues she wishes to raise and discuss with her the potential impact on her daughter of speaking about these issues. The conversation ended with Rita being asked how she found phone contact as a way of getting support and indication that face-to-face was always an option. Rita says she was happy with phone support as the main way of communication, as it was very convenient for her.

Action Research Component
Another Action Research question constantly being explored by Connect is ‘What is the most effective way to support families?’ One strategy for exploring this is for phone support to be actively offered to parents, as well as face-to-face meetings. There was some anecdotal evidence that parents often find phone contact a more viable and practical means of support. The worker records Rita’s feedback on the Action Research observation sheet which has been set up to look at phone support. (a once a month focus). So far this is showing that phone support is a viable form of client work and not ‘just a phone call’.

(Contributed by Connect, Darwin)
Postscript:  
A National Evidence Base for Efficacy

In 2008 an Australian government White Paper on Homelessness recognised as a guiding principle that the action research utilised in the Reconnect program was ‘a legitimate source of insight for evidence-based policy and program design’ (Australian Government 2008: 20). The data from the 2006 national census also attributed statistically a causal connection between the Reconnect program and the 20.8 per cent drop in homelessness among twelve to eighteen year olds (calculated using Supported Accommodation client collection data).

At the time of writing in 2010 the Reconnect program continued to see action research as key to its effectiveness in breaking the cycle of homelessness as well as its good practice principles of client driven holistic service delivery, working collaboratively, culturally and contextually appropriate and accessible service delivery, ongoing review and evaluation and building sustainability.

Action research is a key component of the Reconnect program. For Reconnect’s early intervention methods to be effective, all services need to respond to their clients’ needs using a reflective and improvement-oriented approach to service delivery. (Source: http://www.fabsia.gov.au/ sa/housing/ progserv/homelessness/reconnect/ Pages/default.aspx)

* I thank Phil Crane, a long-time consultant to this program, for his valuable input into the draft of the exemplar on which this extract is based.

References
Crane, P. and L. Richardson (2000). Reconnect Action Research Kit, Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Youth and Students Branch, Canberra.


Responding to Youth Homelessness — Young People’s Experiences with a Foyer-type Service

By Professor Marty Grace, Victoria University, Dr Deborah Keys, University of Melbourne (formerly of Melbourne Citymission), Aaron Hart, Victoria University and Bernadette Keys formerly of Melbourne Citymission

Melbourne Citymission’s foyer-type service Step Ahead provides integrated accommodation and support to young people who want to pursue their education and employment. It aims to restore to them at least some of the life chances that homelessness takes away. In extraordinary circumstances, these young people aspire to have a job and a home, relationships, and some control in their own lives, aspirations that most Australians take for granted. Foyer-type services could be seen as a fairly straightforward intervention providing accommodation and support to young people who are motivated to pursue education and employment.

However, the Achieving (extra) ordinary aspirations research found that the young people’s experiences were complex, and assisting them is far from straightforward. The research was undertaken in 2010–2011 by Victoria University and Melbourne Citymission to explore how young people experienced the Step Ahead program. The research focussed on what their time with Step Ahead meant to the young people, and if it had assisted them, which aspects of the program were particularly useful, from their own points of view.

With Melbourne Citymission’s assistance, the researchers contacted 42 of the 63 previous clients of Step Ahead, 29 agreed to be interviewed. We used a mixed methods approach including in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a personally administered survey, and a review of the participants’ case notes. The average time elapsed since exiting Step Ahead accommodation was 2.7 years. The average age of interview participants was 23 years. The eldest was 28 and the youngest was 19.

Findings

Immediately before entering Step Ahead, about half of the participants were staying in crisis accommodation. Others were ‘couch surfing’, staying with friends, or in transitional housing or supported accommodation. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, lifestyles exposing them to risks of harm, and a history of abuse at home were common, as was serious conflict with other family members. Zichan spoke about his circumstances:

“I just didn’t have a secure location and I don’t usually talk about things to people but it was that bad I was couch surfing and I ended up living with a person who was alleged to have been involved with child pornography. I was seventeen at that time and so I was an easy target. I had nowhere to go. I was like ‘hey, it’s a roof over my head, if he’s like that so be it. At least I’m not living on the streets’.”

Step Ahead provided all of the young people in this research with supported accommodation when they had no other good options, and protected them from transitioning to chronic or street homelessness at that time. The important elements of the program included the provision of safe, affordable accommodation, individualised support by youth workers, supported access to other services, life skills programs, and a contractual expectation that the young people would pursue education, training and/or employment. Aheza’s story illustrates the wide ranging support provided and workers’ ability to set some boundaries. Aheza describes how she could call her worker at any time, and could ask for help with anything.
However, eventually this amazingly flexible and available worker said no.

I remember the first week that we moved to the house and the first problem we had we couldn’t kill the spider in the house so we called [four workers] on the weekend. He just said ‘just go in the house, kill it, get rid of it’, you know, ‘grow up’. He was just shooked, but he wasn’t mean. We couldn’t do it and we had to go upstairs and call the neighbour and he killed it for us. We’d laugh about it. Like you know, we would make jokes about when we were new, we couldn’t even kill a spider and now we’re thinking about university and we’re thinking about bigger things.

… It was funny but it wasn’t funny at the time. I would never call someone again to deal with a spider.

The average length of time spent in Step Ahead was 1.6 years. Participants described a range of experiences associated with their exit from Step Ahead. These can be broadly categorised as graduating, leaving of their own accord, requiring different care, and required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program requirements. About half the participants graduated and four left of their own accord. Roughly one third of participants required different care or broke conditions of the program and were required to leave, with some leaving for both reasons. Upon exiting Step Ahead, roughly one third of all participants moved into community housing, one third with family and friends and one third into other accommodation. Private rental was commonly sought by participants, but was rarely affordable. Vanida describes her exit and how her life is now:

Towards the end of my three years there, they really helped me to get moving, they got boxes, and so on. … I ended up applying at university and then I got accepted and I’ve been doing that for two years. I sort of moved away from some bad friends that I had, so a lot of my friends now they do the same thing as me. I work part-time. I think my interests have become different. I was more interested in going out before, now I like to cook more. I have a different boyfriend and he’s very good and I’m really close with his sisters and we have like, we’re sort of like family.

The young people participating in this study can be broadly described in three groupings according to their vulnerability to homelessness at the time of their research interviews:

- Well protected against homelessness;
- Protected against homelessness; and
- Vulnerable to homelessness.

Fourteen, or about half the participants were well protected against homelessness. They were studying, employed, or parenting and had some combination of good health and wellbeing, strong connections to others and stable housing. Overall, young people in this group can be described as having a range of opportunities, a sense of ontological security, robust dependabilities with the world around them and the resources to achieve their aspirations. The group included six males and eight females, ten overseas born and four Australian born.

Ten participants were protected against homelessness. The young people in this group were generally not able to access housing without some form of support. About half were working or studying or combining the two, while the others had clear plans for future participation. Supportive relationships and community connections were generally evident, although some still required the assistance of services to maintain their wellbeing. The group included three males and seven females, four overseas born and six Australian born.

Four participants were vulnerable to homelessness. These young people were living in short term housing and did not have the education or employment participation necessary to secure stable housing in the future. They had ongoing difficulties with their health and wellbeing and were yet to identify interests and aptitudes that might lead to greater opportunities. The group included three males and one female, with all the males Australian born and the female overseas born. Each of the four young people in the vulnerable group had suffered serious damaging events in their lives.

Who did Step Ahead work well for?

Step Ahead worked particularly well for homeless young people who needed time and support to acclimatise to a relatively unfamiliar cultural environment; for adolescents requiring support and safety to negotiate a transition to adulthood; for those with mild, reactive emotional and psychological problems; and for those transitioning from secondary school to higher education.

Who did Step Ahead not work well for?

Step Ahead did not work well for participants struggling with acute mental illness or those with other psychological or physical barriers to participation in education, employment, and program activities. It did not work well for those with unmet needs for intimate, emotional connections with others, and those who experienced incidents that undermined their sense of security in their accommodation.

If Step Ahead made a difference, how did it help?

Step Ahead made a difference in the lives of all those interviewed for this research. It offered them suitable, affordable, safe accommodation at a time when they were homeless and had no other good options. Without Step Ahead, these young people were at risk of making the transition to chronic or street homelessness. We found that it was the combination of accommodation and support that enabled them to pursue their education and employment.

Even those who remained vulnerable to homelessness at the time of the interviews spoke of the respect they received in the program, and their appreciation for what they were offered, even if they were not in a position to make the most of the opportunity at that time. The support that made a difference to the young people included the flexible, individualised support provided by youth workers, including practical assistance such as books and school uniforms, working on personal development, motivation, and supported referral to other services. The program activities focussing on life skills such as budgeting and cooking, relationships, health and wellbeing, and community connectedness were an integral part of what made a difference.

Not all aspects of the program were equally valued by all participants, but each aspect was valued by some. Being accepted into Step Ahead was a source of self-esteem for some of the young people. Program expectations were an integral part of how Step Ahead made a difference in young people’s lives, including supporting their motivation. Aftercare for up to six months following exit is an important feature of the program, although not used by all.

Step Ahead assisted the research participants to pursue their education. At the time of their research interviews, over 50 per cent had completed Year 12 and 37 per cent had completed post-school qualifications, including some university degrees. Nearly half were still studying at the time of the interviews, eight at university and four at TAFE. The majority of participants advanced their education in the program, and most successfully continued study after they left.

The practical assistance participants received in finding employment resulted in some people gaining employment after entering the program, and improving their skills and confidence in finding employment in later life. Upon exit from the program, participants were assisted to access affordable accommodation and establish themselves in their new home.

Coming to terms with past damaging experiences and forging new lives for themselves was far from straightforward. In general, completing their education took longer than for the average young person in the population, and the support of the Step Ahead program and its workers was essential to assisting the participants to overcome the many obstacles they faced. Some achieved extraordinary outcomes, and most can be described as protected from future homelessness.
Homeless Women —
No Home at the End of the Road

By Dr. Andrea Sharam,
Research Fellow,
Swinburne Institute for
Social Research,
Swinburne University

Single, older women in Australia are a group vulnerable to housing insecurity and at risk of homelessness in their old age. Wage inequality and childrearing have contributed to a decreased capacity to acquire housing equity and retirement savings. In addition, social changes that have enabled serial monogamy mean there has been significant growth in the number and proportion of single, older women in the population. These women now face further disadvantage in the housing market as purchase prices and rental costs have risen, reflecting a number of factors including a shortage of housing supply.

The No Home at the End of the Road research was commissioned by The Salvation Army Southern Territory to survey single women over 40 years of age who don’t believe they will own their housing outright at retirement. It was instigated in response to the growing number of women entering the welfare system with insufficient capital resources and income to provide for their retirement. The research sought to understand whether there is a potential market for a new affordable housing scheme for older, single women based on a shared equity, land trust model.

To understand whether single women were likely to be candidates for such a scheme, each respondent needed to be assessed for their capacity to pay a mortgage of at least $150,000. The income they had available for housing was determined using the residual income model of housing affordability developed by Burke, Stone and Ralston (2011). This provided a maximum housing purchase price, maximum loan amount and a minimum figure for savings to cover the deposit and stamp duty. Information about debt, savings, capacity to save and retirement and superannuation were obtained.

The survey received 111 Victorian responses:
- 86 were renting and 25 were purchasing;
- 81 per cent were under 55;
- 44 per cent lived alone;
- median income was $49,000 p.a.;
- 58 per cent expected to have less than $100,000 superannuation at retirement; and
- one quarter lived in rural and regional Victoria.

Amongst the renters, 34 per cent were in housing stress. While many respondents had above average incomes of between $60,000 and $80,000, few could afford to purchase a property.

Out of 81 renters, 53 had sufficient incomes to finance a housing purchase of $150,000 but only 11 per cent could have proceeded immediately. A further 28 per cent would be able to purchase if they could also access a rent-to-buy scheme. The respondents were very positive towards the modifications to traditional forms of home ownership that would be required, including having the willingness to forego capital gains.

The major problem was that most of the women who could afford the $150,000 required by the proposed model to enter the housing market had debts which would need to be addressed before they could commence saving for a deposit. Their age and existing debt meant the time they had to pay off a mortgage was reduced to such an extent that it would not be possible for them to be debt free at retirement (at 67).

Most of the women renters earning above $49,000 p.a. were not in housing stress and many had considerable disposable income. They could, accordingly, afford to carry the debts they had, but very few were saving and thus will be wholly or partially reliant on the age pension when they retire and are still paying rent.

Single parent renters not currently working had grossly inadequate incomes on which to live and were accumulating debts, but there was a clear pattern that once their earnings increased they switched to saving. The debt, however, negated their chances of ever purchasing in the market.

Of those purchasing, three were in housing stress and each of these was a single parent. The women who were purchasing felt pessimistic about getting to retirement without housing debt but they had specific strategies including downsizing that they hoped would allow them to meet their future housing needs. However, they were going to have to make considerable compromises and it was going to involve risk.

An assessment was made of how much respondents could save for their retirement in lieu of home ownership. Only 30 per cent of the renters could accumulate $321,750 which is the maximum saving allowed before the age pension begins to be reduced. For the women, this would mean an annual retirement income of only $28,600 (6 per cent) from which rent needs to be paid. This is likely to mean that they would have inadequate income for their non-housing needs and would be using the capital to live on.

The forecast of a growing number of single women facing housing insecurity if not homelessness in their later years is reflected in the responses to the Women and Housing Affordability Survey. A third are currently at risk of homelessness and most will be at risk later in their lives. The surprise was the women on higher incomes who understood they could not afford to purchase but who are also not saving to create a financial buffer for their retirement. The implication of this finding is that an even greater number of single, female renters are at risk of homelessness in their old age. This underlines the necessity to develop an affordable housing solution that permits women to accumulate housing equity as a safety net for their retirement years.

Reference
Homeless Men—Chronically Homeless Men in Parramatta CBD

By Gabrielle Drake and Michael Darcy, University of Western Sydney

A research partnership between the University of Western Sydney, Parramatta Mission, and the City of Parramatta is conducting action research designed to gather information through an evaluation of a ‘Housing First’ assertive outreach service in the city. The service will provide intensive support for a small group of between 6–10 long-term homeless men from the Parramatta CBD, while the research team will closely monitor their progress, any barriers or problems which emerge, and the development of the service relationships.

Homeless in Parramatta

In 2010, the University of Western Sydney and Parramatta City Council conducted a study, ‘Homeless in Parramatta’. The study was commissioned by Council to assist it prepare a Homelessness Policy. A part of this study included the first ‘street count’ or census of rough sleepers in Parramatta. In particular, the count was designed to provide data on the number of people ‘sleeping rough’ or staying in emergency accommodation in Parramatta, Sydney’s second largest CBD.

The street count identified 81 people experiencing primary homelessness and an additional 285 people in emergency accommodation including hostels and refuges. This was the first attempt to enumerate homeless people in the city and the Council has now instituted an annual count, to coincide with that conducted by the City of Sydney.

Council has committed to a strategic approach to homelessness including working collaboratively with other levels of government, community organisations and residents and business owners in Parramatta. This project will support individuals who are homeless and those who work with them and will also inform the development of Council’s Homelessness Policy. It is a partnership between Council, Parramatta Mission and the University of Western Sydney.

Assertive Outreach: A ‘Housing First’ Approach

Addressing the issues associated with persons experiencing homelessness is typically focused on providing services directly to ‘rough sleepers’ where they reside. Service provision in these programs often includes meal provision, mental health outreach, drug and alcohol support and case management. The provision of ongoing support to assist rough sleepers to secure and maintain rental accommodation is seen as a secondary requirement to other service provision in these so-called ‘Treatment First’ programs.

By comparison, the ‘Housing First’ approach advocates for the provision of housing as a necessary condition and precursor to the provision, and success, of other support services. Under these programs, once housing tenure is secured, the person is provided with individual case management by a supporting organisation. Like other ‘rough sleeper’ initiatives, under ‘Housing First’ programs, service provision is then tailored and is often focused on meal provision, mental health services, drug and alcohol support and the provision of ongoing support to assist people to maintain their tenancies.

Rough Sleepers in Parramatta CBD

The current study has three parts.

Firstly, a ‘descriptive account’ which will include the collection of demographic and biographical information from participants, and the response of this project and other services. Biographical information will be collected from individual participants through interviews and focus groups. This information will be used to determine the participants’ perceptions of their desired outcomes for the project.

Secondly, a ‘participatory assessment’ will be used to develop ‘participant-driven measures’ to evaluate the service. This information will be collected through a series of individual interviews and focus groups.

Thirdly, a comparative evaluation will determine the relative ‘value for money’ (VFM) of the assertive outreach service. To determine VFM, the study will establish a baseline by way of a ‘virtual control group’. The ‘virtual control group’ will include a similar number of chronically homeless men from the Parramatta CBD who continue to access traditional/conventional services offered by Parramatta Mission. Data for the ‘virtual control group’ will be sourced from case notes collected and held by Parramatta Mission as part of their current service provision.

The project outcomes will include housing and case management for 6-10 men; a research report; presentation of results at a seminar for the sector; using the results to inform training program for Council employees as well as academic articles and conference papers. The project commenced in September 2011 and will be concluded by June 2012.

If you would like more information about the project please contact Associate Professor Michael Darcy or Dr Gabrielle Drake at the University of Western Sydney: m.darcy@uws.edu.au or g.dake@uws.edu.au

Footnote
By Sue White, General Manager, Inner South Community Health Service, Melbourne and Dr. James Rowe, RMIT University

Introduction
Inner South Community Health Service (ISCHS), working in partnership with RMIT University, recently completed and published a report on the Victorian Department of Health funded SHANTUSI project (Surveying HIV and Need in the Unregulated Sex Industry). This was an extensive, action research project examining links between social determinants and health inequity experienced by a cohort of sex workers — most of whom had experiences of homelessness, housing insecurity and extreme disadvantage.

This article provides a brief discussion of these links as well as the impact of social determinants on health risk factors. It focuses on a sub cohort of this study — 100 Melbourne based street sex workers.

Evidence herein is intended to inform future public policy directions to minimise potential harms from both structural factors and individual behaviours.

Purpose
The SHANTUSI project was conducted over 18 months from 2009 to 2011. The aim was to learn more about the unregulated sex industry in Melbourne, specifically:
- To ascertain some understanding of prevalence of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) amongst vulnerable populations;
- To explore broader notions of health risk and social determinants experienced by three cohorts of sex workers.

In addition to street workers, the 145 participants also comprised private online sex workers and CALD sex workers in unregulated brothels and street sex workers.

Methodology
The majority of the 100 street based sex workers were recruited via Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry (RhED), a program of Inner South Community Health Service to provide support to sex workers across Victoria. A small number were recruited from other agencies in St Kilda and Footscray. The research methodology comprised three elements: a survey that incorporated demographic information, housing status and health knowledge; a saliva swab for HIV screening; and a semi structured interview that explored determinants and risk factors. Participants were also provided with health education materials and individual support if required. Ethics approval was received from Alfred Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings: Demographic Data
Of the 100 street sex workers who participated in the research, 89 were recruited from St Kilda, with the remaining 11 based in Footscray. As outlined in Table one, the demographic data from the two areas varied slightly, with the Footscray group being solely female and slightly younger than the St Kilda group.

Over 90 per cent of participants received government income support payments. In contrast, a range of accommodation was identified by participants. However, 60 of the 100 street sex workers were currently experiencing homelessness — of these 18 per cent were living in primary homelessness while the remainder were living in temporary accommodation such as rooming houses, transitional housing or with parents or friends. A further 19 per cent were living in public housing.

Findings: Social Determinants of Health
The 100 in-depth interviews provided a unique picture of the relationship between the social determinants and health inequities. The link between homelessness, disadvantage and poor experiences of the social factors that create health is clearly demonstrated, and was particularly evident amongst the 86 female participants.

Early childhood experiences of poverty, neglect, marked disadvantage, low education levels and abuse had a profound impact on participants’ well-being in adulthood. Many had childhood experiences in the child protection system, with a significant number disclosing unhappy childhoods as state wards.

Most of the working girls have been abused. But people don’t want to listen to the story. I want to be able to talk about my past and let go and not do this sort of work ... But no one wants to know what happened: they just want to know how I’m feeling now (Latisha 36 years of age)

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It was indicative of the impact of the social determinants experienced by the participants — and the inability to address them — that the very factors that led participants to commencing street sex work — homelessness, violence, exploitation and addiction — were those that entrenched and, effectively, trapped them in this work, with few other options perceived to provide material support to the degree necessary. This was directly related, in a majority of cases, to the women interviewed becoming involved in the sex industry to meet the financial costs of drug dependency. Many participants spoke about the discrimination, marginalisation and social exclusion (including an absence of supportive networks) inherent in their experience of living and working on the street.

Most people don’t know about [my work] either and that’s the way I’d rather keep it. I don’t want people walking down the street calling me a slut (Lillian 23 years of age)

Such fears only strengthened their desire to be included in ‘mainstream’ society of which they are equal and contributing members.

The interviewees were far from homogenous. Whilst, a large proportion of female participants were compelled to engage in street-based sex trade by drug dependency and/or homelessness, there was no neat, linear process to adequately explain how women come to work on the street as a sex worker at a particular time in their lives — whether that point is at the age 17 for one and 47 for another.

Findings: Health Inequities

This research sought to specifically learn more about the sexual health of participants. However, many participants spoke openly about other aspects of their health. The relationship between experiences of violence, transience and mental health was a common theme. The health issues associated with drug use were also frequently mentioned. Despite the fact that their mental health and wellbeing is profoundly impacted by discrimination and marginalisation, the resilience of participants was remarkable, as was the candour with which they shared their stories.

Determinants such as homelessness, poverty and drug dependency appeared to be linked to increased risks across a two key health areas: violence and transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI). Poverty — and the need to keep drug withdrawal at bay — led to many participants to prioritise financial need over their health and well-being, decreasing their ability to work in as safe a manner as possible, and increasing their risk of exposure to both sexual and physical violence.

Whilst participants themselves demonstrated high levels of sexual health knowledge, their clients appeared to show very little concern — or knowledge — regarding the potential risks of STI and HIV transmission.

The guys ask me ‘don’t use a condom’, because I’m clean. I’m, like, how do you know I’m clean? How do you know I’m not riddled with diseases? … They go, ‘oh, but look at you, [you look clean]. It’s got nothing to do with how I look’ (Bridget 24 years-of-age)

The extent of this problem is aptly illustrated by Table Three, which quantifies participants’ reports of increased demands for unprotected sexual services, predominantly in relation to oral sex, but also penetrative vaginal and anal sex.

Table Three — Do clients ever ask you not to use a condom?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>St Kilda</th>
<th>Footscray</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than half of all street-based workers interviewed reported that they do not provide any form of unprotected service. However, as outlined in Table Four, a lack of other viable options led some vulnerable participants to comply with demands for unsafe sex, significantly contributing to increases health risks.

Engagement in STI / HIV testing was high (see Table Five), although the frequency of testing varied. Of the 100 street-based sex workers who participated in this research, one tested positive for HIV. This woman had ceased working on the street by the time she participated in this study.

Table Four — Do you ever make the choice not to use condoms while providing sexual services?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>St Kilda</th>
<th>Footscray</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Five — Have you ever been tested for an STI or HIV?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>St Kilda</th>
<th>Footscray</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where to From Here: Future Policy Directions

The experiences of the social determinants and health inequities described by participants require urgent responses not only from agencies engaged in homelessness support and health care (who assist workers as best they can) but from state and federal governments who must accept their responsibility to address pockets of disproportionate disadvantage and limited opportunity in our society.

Street sex workers are members of a community who have often arrived by the side of our roads because they had few other options to support themselves. This places them at a serious disadvantage at great cost to their wellbeing and requires equally serious responses to address their severe health inequities.

In Victoria, street-based sex work is illegal. Consequently, public policy responses are constructed within a law and order framework, with a lesser role for public health. Public policy responses that focus principally on law enforcement merely perpetuate the aforementioned structural inequities. They will not result in improved health outcomes for street sex workers.

ISCHS calls for a reorientation of the current public policy approach to investment in programs that:

- Address the complex personal and structural factors that lead people to live and work on the street;
- Provide a platform for street sex workers who want to exit the industry, to do so.

Policy initiatives must be collaborative — working with services and in partnership with vulnerable sex workers themselves to provide the best outcomes for workers and the broader community alike. Past policy implies that street sex work is an issue of individual or ‘lifestyle’ choice.

Many participants expressed a desire to leave homelessness, street sex work, social exclusion and drug dependency. Until determinants such as social exclusion, ill health, homelessness and entrenched violence are addressed, they have little hope of doing so.

My daughter doesn’t know anything about drugs … nothing … she thinks I work waitressing. She doesn’t know what I do … [long pause as tears well in her participant’s eyes] … she has no idea what bad things are out there in this world. It freaks me out now when I work because, like, am I going to make it home tonight? Am I going to see her little face again? How would she be if Mum wasn’t around anymore?

Conclusion

The majority of street sex workers involved in the SHANTUSI study had experiences of homelessness and numerous other social determinants that impact so negatively on health and wellbeing. These led to entrenchment in street sex work and further health inequities. In spite of marked disadvantage and high rates of homelessness, street sex workers in Victoria have a high level of sexual health awareness. The prevalence of HIV amongst street sex workers in Victoria is extremely low.

In light of these findings, it is imperative that policy makers undertake two essential steps: frame street sex work as a health and wellbeing issue (not a law enforcement one) and address the complex personal and structural factors that lead people to live and work on the street.

Copies of the full SHANTUSI report and the ISCHS Call to Action are available at http://www.ischs.org.au
Issues in Service Delivery - Unintended Consequences:
The Impact of Delivery Systems on Homelessness

By Michael Darcy, Hazel Blunden and Neil Hall, University of Western Sydney

What if current service delivery arrangements unintentionally exacerbate homelessness for certain groups? What if the services don’t match needs geographically or for particular groups? A new study by UWS, Wentworth Community Housing and four local councils in Western Sydney will attempt to discover if this is the case, and identify ways in which identification of needs and service delivery can be improved to avoid such outcomes.

A scoping study undertaken by the same partners earlier this year identified the lack of affordable housing across the public, community and private sectors was as a key regional issue. This was found to lead to service ‘blockages’ all along the provision line from crisis to post-crisis services. However, the study also highlighted a number of issues and service delivery arrangements which appear to exacerbate homelessness in Western Sydney particularly for young people, single men and women and children experiencing domestic violence.

In 2010 the Federal Minister for Housing launched the Nepean Blacktown Regional Taskforce on Homelessness to develop a 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. The research project is part of the Taskforce’s regional plan process.

The Study

The aim of the proposed research is to examine the ways in which service provider practices and service delivery systems may unintentionally cause or perpetuate homelessness amongst specific cohorts: youth, women and children, and single men. It will then identify ways in which service delivery arrangements can be improved to avoid such outcomes.

The key questions are:

1. In what ways do existing service delivery systems unintentionally cause or perpetuate homelessness amongst youth, families and single men within the Blacktown and Nepean region?
2. How can service delivery be improved?

Looking at Services rather than Counting Homeless People

Until recently, Australian literature pertaining to homelessness has tended to focus on the numbers of homeless people. Research that focuses on other aspects of homelessness like system barriers to maintaining housing and the role that service provider practices might play in contributing to homelessness, rather than on the homeless themselves, has been relatively neglected.

Homelessness services themselves have been energetic in examining systemic ways of improving homelessness services. Wesley Mission’s (2008) survey based report More than a bed: Sydney’s homeless speak out identifies the underlying causes and complex needs of people who are homeless and suggests that longer term support and better integration of services for homeless people is needed to reduce the critically high rates of homelessness. AHURI (Gronda, 2009) found that case management works because of a relationship between the client and the case manager or case management team, with the qualities of persistence, reliability, intimacy and respect that delivers comprehensive, practical support.

The proposed research follows on from such studies and will attempt to develop an understanding of the systemic barriers, agency practices and policies which may cause or perpetuate homelessness at the local level, and then suggest ways in which systems and policies might be modified to provide enhanced services for people at risk of homelessness.

Using Centrelink, Police, SAAP and HPIC Data

It is planned to access five existing data sets which when analysed together will provide a detailed base of evidence. The four data sources will be:

- Centrelink client homelessness vulnerability indicators;
- NSW Police homelessness vulnerability indicators;
- Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) occupancy and turn away data;
- Homeless Persons’ Information Centre (HPIC) data; and
- Housing NSW applicant data.

By mapping geographic and time-series data from these four sources, we expect to be able to identify specific sub-regional areas, and population subgroups most frequently identified as at-risk and by which agencies they are identified, and also to locate where and for which groups service gaps or other institutional barriers might be seen as exacerbating risk or perpetuating homelessness.

Interviewing Service Providers and Service Users

In order to enrich, qualify and triangulate the quantitative data, structured interviews will be conducted with staff from service providers, as well as with people experiencing homelessness, in order to identify operating arrangements and policies which may lead to or perpetuate homelessness.

Focus on Improving Services

The final stage of the study will involve forming two deliberative focus groups with providers involved directly and indirectly with homelessness service provision in the region. One group will cover the Blue Mountains/Hawkesbury area and the other the Penrith/Blacktown area. It provides the opportunity for participants to develop insights into other perspectives, and allows for participants’ own views to be re-evaluated. Ultimately, however, the purpose of the approach is for the sector to draw conclusions on ways it can improve service provision.

The project outcomes will include a research report; presentation of results at a seminar for the sector; as well as academic articles and conference papers. The project is starting in October 2011 and will be concluded by June 2012.

If you would like more information about the project please contact Associate Professor Michael Darcy at the University of Western Sydney: m.darcy@uws.edu.au

References


Consumer Participation—Owning the Research Agenda

By Cassandra Bawden, CHP, PESP Project Team Leader

The members of the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) Peer Education Support Program (PESP) have decided that it is about time that consumers and clients of homelessness services and people who are or who have experienced homelessness, stop being the passive objects of the work of academic and professional homelessness researchers.

Towards this end PESP members have determined to embark on the development of a research project where they will determine what is to be researched, how this research is to be undertaken and what will happen with their research findings.

For several years now, CHP PESP members have played an increasingly important role in assisting programs and services undertake research and evaluation into their program and service delivery. In Victoria they have played a central role in raising the profile and reinforcing the value of effective consumer and client participation in all levels of program and service delivery and most importantly, the development of homelessness policy.

Recently, and with the support of Dr Guy Johnson from RMIT and Phoebe Peterson, a University of Melbourne student on placement with CHP, PESP members have embarked on the development of a research proposal that will examine what makes for effective consumer participation, an issue both highly relevant to their own experience as PESP Members and consumers and clients of homelessness services, and central to the future work of the PESP program itself.

As well as drawing on their own now extensive experience and growing expertise in the field of consumer participation, they plan to begin the development of this research proposal with a literature review and an investigation into existing models of consumer participation in both homelessness and other related human service delivery areas.

At present they key question they are examining is: How do you measure effective consumer participation?

In developing a research proposal to examine this question PESP members hope to use a range of qualitative research methods including undertaking extensive interviews with both consumers and clients as well as service providers and policy makers.

The aim of the research project is to develop and promote models of effective consumer participation to both government and homelessness services with a view to the incorporation of meaningful consumer participation in their organisational policies and procedures. Indeed that meaningful consumer participation becomes an integral and accepted part of the culture of homelessness organisations and likewise, an integral part of the policy and decision making processes at all levels of government.

The essential premise underpinning this research as well as consumer and client participation itself is that it is the consumers and clients of homelessness services and people who have or who are experiencing homelessness who know best what it is needed to prevent homelessness and assist them out of homelessness.

At PESP we believe that the best people ask the right questions to get the answers and solutions required it is consumers and clients themselves.

CHP is currently looking for funding support for this project. If you are interested in partnering with CHP on this important project, please get in touch with CHP.

If you would like more information and to be kept up to date with the development of this project please contact Cassandra Bawden: Cassandra@chp.org.au
Food Insecurity — Food Insecurity, Health and Homelessness

By Jill Whelan, PhD Candidate, Deakin University

Health and nutrition are key areas of research across Australia and internationally. However so far there has been very limited published research in Australia on the diet related health issues of homeless people.

Irregular access to safe, nutritionally adequate, culturally acceptable food from non-emergency sources is known as ‘food insecurity’. Although 6 per cent of Victorians experience this, it is known that disadvantaged sub-groups of society experience much higher levels. However, we do not have comprehensive research that documents the extent of food insecurity, malnutrition and diet related diseases in the Australian homeless population. It is an area that is rarely researched in Australia.

Improved food security would have multiple benefits, not only improvements in short and longer term physical, emotional and mental health; but also provide potential economic benefits of a healthier and engaged population. I hypothesise that this is especially true for adolescent homeless youths during their peak growing years.

Booth discussed food security in homeless youths in Adelaide with her aptly titled thesis ‘Eating Rough’, where 63 per cent of youths in the study visited welfare sources for food. International research has reported that homeless youth experience poor nutrition; and specific nutrient deficiencies have been identified. Food acquisition practices have been described that most would consider socially unacceptable and sometimes illegal. Meals served to vulnerable groups have been analysed and found to fail below nutrition requirements. Some Australian programs have highlighted social inclusion in their food security interventions through the provision of subsidised meals in mainstream food venues.

Other studies have focused more on the experience of food insecurity, and concluded that homeless youths were ‘enmeshed in a web of insecurity’ p.1046, that included food insecurity. Food was a very precious resource.

Access to nutritious food has largely been overlooked in core service delivery to the homeless sector. It is often the role of charitable services or run as an ‘add on’ to an existing service. My PhD research examines the importance and potential of food security to be a component of an integrated service model for this vulnerable population and the possible impacts improved nutrition may have on their health outcomes and the potential cost-benefits of providing appropriate food to malnourished and vulnerable people. Bev Wood spoke of this debate in the April 2004 edition of Parity. Through working in the sector since 2005 I have seen some uptake of her call for consideration of social inclusion and human rights in the food security debate, there is however still much room for further discussion, debate and improvement.

Footnotes


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Researching the Homelessness Workforce: What Sustains an Effective Workforce to Tackle Homelessness?

By Bill Martin, Rhonda Phillips and Ning Xiang
The University of Queensland Institute for Social Science Research

This article introduces and discusses findings from a study of the homelessness workforce and the workforce initiatives required to reduce homelessness in Australia. The study is one of five research projects being undertaken by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland (UQ) under a Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement (HRPA) with FaHCSIA.

An appropriately skilled and committed workforce is widely recognised as central to effective responses to homelessness, and successful implementation of national homelessness policy and service delivery reforms. The Homelessness White Paper, *The Road Home*, identified workforce development as a key national priority in policy responses to homelessness. Echoing other analyses, *The Road Home* identified a set of critical workforce issues that must be resolved: "low wages, lack of career progression, high staff turnover, low skilled staff, an ageing workforce, casualisation of the workforce, and significant workload stress". A further major concern of many analysts is that changing service delivery models require distinct, new skills of homelessness workers, rather than simply "higher" skills.

Despite this strong interest in the specialist homelessness workforce, and strong views about workforce challenges in the sector, little robust data on workforce characteristics and dynamics was available. Our research aimed to develop the first accurate picture of the national homelessness workforce, to identify views of key sector informants about future workforce challenges, and to support an analysis of workforce challenges with this reliable information.

The research was funded under a Homelessness Research Partnership Agreement with the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). It involved surveys of 362 homelessness service providers and 951 homelessness workers across Australia, along with interviews and focus groups with key informants, including homelessness workers.

The research tells us a great deal about what sustains the current specialist homelessness workforce, and what can be done to support it.

**A Small, Qualified Workforce**

The specialist homelessness workforce is small, we estimate that about 11,600 people across Australia are in specialist jobs providing services to the homeless, or managing such workers. This is a small sub-sector of the Social and Community Services (SACS) sector. For example, it is dwarfed by the aged care workforce, which included over 200,000 workers in 2007 (excluding managers).

At the same time, the homelessness workforce holds quite high formal qualifications: nearly 40 per cent have university degrees, another third have Diplomas, and less than 10% have no post-school qualifications. Given the size of the workforce and this profile of qualifications, it seems unrealistic to adopt...
workforce policy goals focused around retaining most workers in the homelessness sector for most of their careers. Certainly, many current homelessness workers have limited experience in the sector — 55 per cent have worked for a total of less than five years in homelessness.

**A Female Dominated Sector with Many Full-time Jobs**

About 80 per cent of homelessness workers are women, and half work in full-time, permanent jobs. Around 15 per cent of the workforce is employed casually. Homelessness workers are diverse in age — 20 per cent are under 30, 45 per cent are aged 30 to 39, and the remainder are 50 or over. Homelessness workers’ satisfaction with the flexibility available to them to balance work and non-work commitments is closely comparable with that of the overall Australian female workforce. Thus, homelessness services seem to be managing well the challenge of a workforce with significant non-work commitments at a wide range of life cycle stages.

**A Committed Workforce that Feels Supported, but Underpaid**

Most homelessness workers say that they enter ‘the sector because of a commitment to helping others, ‘making a difference’, or a more general commitment to social justice. This belief in the social value of their work is clearly important in influencing workers to remain in the sector. Indeed, focus group participants made it clear that remaining in the homelessness sector depended on feeling that they were actually able to help others and ‘make a difference’.

Homelessness workers were generally very positive about the relationships they have with co-workers and managers, and many would turn down better paid jobs to stay in their current organisation. Overall, the satisfaction they receive from the work they do, and the positive relationships in the workplace, are undoubtedly very important in motivating workers to undertake the difficult work of homelessness support, and to continue doing so rather than leaving for easier employment.

However, like many other SACS workers, homelessness workers are much more likely to be dissatisfied with their pay than most Australian workers. Those in case worker and similar professional positions are particularly likely to be unhappy with their pay, and this group is most likely to expect to leave the sector within three years (only some 40 per cent are prepared to say they will be in the sector in three years). Advice from key informants also indicates that recent graduates who enter professional occupations in homelessness work are at particular risk of leaving to gain career advancement and higher pay.

There seems little doubt that higher pay would contribute to retaining qualified, effective workers. But better pay is not a panacea; only about 20 per cent of homelessness workers intending to leave their current job cite financial reasons.

**Skills, Training and Casualisation**

As noted above, the homelessness workforce is, in general, quite well qualified. Almost all homelessness workers in our survey feel they have the skills they need for their jobs. Homelessness service providers are a little more circumspect, with about 45 per cent saying that at least some of their residential support and related workers are under-skilled for their jobs. Within the sector, there is clearly significant ongoing training, partly through in-service training (though workers quite often suggested that specific homelessness training was not always available), and partly through workers studying for higher qualifications (25 per cent are currently studying).

This level and pattern of training is consistent with the very limited evidence of casualisation we found. Almost all casual employees are in residential support and similar roles, with virtually no casual employment amongst those in professional and managerial occupations. Moreover, homelessness services say that they mostly use casual workers for short term needs (such as covering permanent workers on leave, or responding to unpredictable demand).

**Sustaining an Effective Homelessness Workforce**

A first step in policy aimed at ensuring an effective homelessness workforce into the future is to identify clearly what currently contributes to its effectiveness. New workforce initiatives need to avoid undermining forces that currently support the workforce’s effectiveness. From this viewpoint, the following are clearly important:

- Ensuring that work organisation and workers’ skills continue to allow them to gain satisfaction from their work, and to feel supported by co-workers and managers.
- Ensuring that work organisation continues to allow workers the flexibility they need to combine work and non-work commitments.

Indeed, enhancing these features of homelessness work may well pay dividends in the future.

A second key step is likely to be recognising that the small size of the homelessness workforce affects workforce dynamics. It probably means that it is unrealistic to expect most workers to have long, unbroken careers in homelessness. Enhancing career pathways for homelessness workers is undoubtedly important. Imaginative workforce initiatives could allow workers to move from homelessness to other SACS areas, and then back into homelessness. Such initiatives may be more realistic and effective in raising the overall experience and skill level of the workforce than a focus on career pathways confined to the homelessness sector.

A third step may relate to workers in residential support and related roles. These workers are virtually the only homelessness workers to be employed casually (30 per cent are casual employees), and most likely to be regarded by their employers as under-skilled for their jobs. Almost all would prefer permanent employment to casual. The effectiveness of these workers may well be improved by better understanding of the skills required for these jobs and how best to develop and enhance these skills, along with a focus on improving employment security for these workers.

Finally, many key informants expressed concern that growing complexity in client needs, and changing service delivery models, were creating new challenges for homelessness workers. There is no doubt that ensuring workers have the skills to respond to these changes will be important, both in maintaining effective services and in supporting workers’ sense that they can actually contribute to improving their clients’ lives.
Part 4: The Future of Homelessness Research

By Dr Andrew Hollows, Deputy Executive Director, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI)

It is a unique time in Australia for homelessness research and service reform. The release of the Australian Government’s strategy for reducing homelessness, *The Road Home*, was the first time a White Paper on Homelessness had been prepared. The strategy is being supported by the Government through a large homelessness research program. This research is complemented by an ongoing program of activity through the AHURI National Housing Research Program which, over the past ten years, has created a cumulative evidence-base about housing and homelessness.

There is, however, a need for a mechanism to support an active dialogue between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners about homelessness issues that is based on a sound evidence-base. While the recent influx of funding through the National Homelessness Research Agenda, managed by FaHCSIA, has prompted a more coordinated effort, this only applies to those researchers involved in FaHCSIA funded activities.

Accordingly, the AHURI initiated National Homelessness Research Network (NHRN) in December 2009 in response to the need for national (and increasingly international) collaboration between homelessness researchers and the policy and practice communities. The NHRN was instigated in response to a demonstrable need for an independent research broker to:

- Help coordinate the disparate activities of those undertaking homelessness research,
- Build on existing homelessness research, and
- Facilitate the peer-to-peer critique of the evidence-base and the transfer of research knowledge into policy development and practice.

The approach underpinning the NHRN is one where AHURI coordinates the activities of Network partners to critique the existing homelessness evidence-base and test its application to policy and practice settings.

The purpose of the coordination function of the NHRN is to support an expert dialogue between key researchers with an interest in homelessness and allied research areas, such as health (including mental health), justice, Indigenous issues and employment. This will help overcome the current lack of coordinated effort between different homelessness researchers (academic and practitioner-based) and provide, where relevant, the opportunity to enhance collaborations with international based researchers.

In particular, there is a pressing need to support and build on the cross-disciplinary nature of homelessness research. Research on homelessness in Australia occurs across multiple specialties such as the social sciences, health, criminology etc. While there is some collaborative research using multi or cross-discipline approaches, there is a need to build on these approaches and seek the active involvement of other disciplines and their particular expertise, data and methodologies. In particular, whilst there is much research that touches on policy and practice issues pertinent to homelessness, these researchers don’t necessarily self-identify as ‘homelessness’ researchers. Thus far, the NHRN has sought to include a range of researchers from different disciplines in Network events and activities.

The purpose of the critique function of the NHRN is to critically review the existing evidence-base by coordinating peer-review activities of prominent researchers (academic and practitioner based) in terms of:

- Research methods and quality of research (i.e. how we know), and
- Research content, the framing, scope and underpinning ideas informing research (i.e. what we know).

While a growing body of research on different facets of homelessness had grown over the past decade, the cumulative evidence-base is of variable quality and scope. There is an opportunity for Network partners, together with AHURI, to improve the rigour of homelessness research including the use of innovative research approaches.

The Network will also help overcome the variable quality and scope of current research through the inclusion of other research disciplines to critique current approaches. An important principle is the invaluable role of ‘peering’ or peer-to-peer support, review and critique. In networks, members relate to each other as peers and one strength of the NHRN is to draw on the collective insight and peer review capabilities of Network partners, much akin to the activities of the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations in the health and social sciences respectively.

The purpose of the application function of the NHRN is to enable the transfer of the best available evidence into policy and practice by coordinating the transfer of research knowledge from researchers (academic and practitioner based) to policy-makers and practitioners. This includes:

- The issue of policy and practice application vis-a-vis current policy and practice issues and future options, and
- The contribution to research methodology, scope and cumulative evidence-base.

More can be done to improve the transfer of knowledge from research to policy and practice. This issue has been repeatedly identified by NHRN partners as a priority. The past decade in particular has seen an accumulation of research (albeit of variable scope and quality). However, much of this has not been adequately tested and translated into real world applications.

More can be done to foster engagement with policy and practice in a way that is critical and mutually respectful. There is an opportunity through the Network to foster policy and practice engagement using a range of mechanisms and so help
overcome the poor translation and transfer of the current evidence-base into policy and practice.

An important feature of the NHRN is the development of international collaboration. The benefits of international collaborations include cross-country comparison and insights into programs and service initiatives. However, such collaboration takes time and resources to design and support. To date, AHURI, as a partner of the NHRN, has helped foster collaboration with international research academics and practitioner-based researchers in the United States, Canada and Europe.

An international conference on homelessness research held in Washington D.C. in March 2011 has provided a platform to actively engage researchers, practitioners and some policy-makers with the work of the Network. The interests of the conference reflected many of the interests of the Network. For example, the need to improve the overall quality of homelessness research, a better use of the existing research evidence-base and to ensure this evidence is effectively translated for policy and practice.

To further develop the quality and application of homelessness research, AHURI and RMIT University will be co-hosting the Homelessness Research Conference in Melbourne on 19–20 April 2012.

The purpose of the conference is to provide a national platform for prominent researchers (from both the academic and non-government sectors) to focus on the critique of homelessness research and to test its application for policy and practice.

The conference, as part of the activities of the National Homelessness Research Network, will be a rare opportunity to:

- focus on the current state-of-play of homelessness research in Australia,
- present on homelessness research underway, and
- facilitate the knowledge transfer to contemporary policy and practice settings.

It will also provide an opportunity to hear from two international experts:

Dr Dennis Culhane — Professor of Social Policy at the University of Pennsylvania in the USA. Dennis studies homelessness and assisted housing policy with a particular emphasis on the use of administrative datasets. His research has contributed to a shift in public policies to address homelessness, including expansions of supported housing for people who are chronically homeless, and housing stabilisation programs for people who are recently homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless.

Dr Volker Busch-Geertsema — Char of the European Observatory on Homelessness which was established in Germany in 1991 to facilitate research to promote better understanding of the complexity and the changing nature of homelessness. The network is composed of 11 national research correspondents from different EU countries who have built up extensive experience in the field of homelessness and housing exclusion.

For further details regarding the National Homelessness Research Network or the Homelessness Research Conference, visit the AHURI website at www.ahuri.edu.au
The National Homelessness Research Agenda: Questioning State-Sponsored Homelessness Research

By Dr Rodney Fopp, University of South Australia

Introduction

The National Homelessness Research Agenda (hereafter NHRA) is aimed to "contribute to the whole-of-government response to homelessness." It is based on the need for an increasingly 'cohesive evidence base' for policy. In some ways, the NHRA may contribute to our knowledge of the issues although the extent to which it will 'inform and improve service system and practice, including evaluation' is yet to be fully tested.

However, even as the research is being undertaken there are a number of assumptions on which the NHRA is based which can and should be contested. For example, what does 'evidence based' mean? Who defines the evidence as sufficiently credentialled for governments to take it seriously? What makes research merit the government-sponsored accolade of being the evidence on which policy is based? And, despite the claims made, is there an ineluctable nexus, as seems assumed, between evidence and policy?

While acknowledging the benefits of the NHRA for the research sector, and insisting that my erudite peers in the sector are the best people to undertake such research, it is timely in this edition of Parity to revisit a cluster of issues which come under the heading of the uses of state-sponsored research. I begin with the meaning of, and claim to, evidence based policy?

Questions about the NHRA

According to the official document, 'evidence-based' policy is central to the NHRA and policy formation and development. But what does the term mean? What is assumed and implied? One things seems clear: not just any evidence is meant. Anecdotal or inchoate evidence derived from the collective voice of people who are homeless, or those who advocate for them, seem to be excluded unless it is authenticated and sanctioned by a particular type of socially ordained evidence gathering.

At this point I could embark on an analysis of the limitations (often unacknowledged) of the theories of knowledge on which so-called scientific research is based, and how we get socially certified valid knowledge and why. But I have tried to resist the temptation to embark on such a critique of the dominant scientism which operates socially to determine what counts as knowledge and what doesn’t – and its implications for housing research!

But it is worth asking a question with practical implications: what is meant by "evidence"? One response is that it is research which is undertaken in a certain way according to specific assumptions and presuppositions which cannot necessarily be demonstrated by the scientific method itself (and I am still resisting the temptation to trespass into theories of knowledge!). But even without going there, what counts as evidence in state-sponsored research is of government and the executive’s choosing. It is that which governments regard as evidence.

So not all evidence which is undertaken by reputable researchers and organisations is accepted as such. In housing policy some research, and therefore evidence, which could easily count as meeting the canons of knowledge, has been minimised and ignored, or belittled or denigrated as ‘ideological’.

As social theorists have emphasised for some time, there is a link between what counts as knowledge, truth and evidence, on the one hand, and those who have the power to decide the standards of such things, on the other. So what constitutes the privileged ‘truth’ (which includes evidence) about homelessness is not necessarily something that meets the criteria of what is true or as close as we can get to it at any one time. What counts as evidence is what is deemed to be evidence by those who have the clout to make and impose such a decision.

Further, evidence is not necessarily conclusive. It is often contested. So there are regimes of evidence from which governments choose. If there are regimes of contested evidence, how is some evidence selected ‘in’ and some selected ‘out’ when it comes to policy formulation and development? On what basis is evidence included and excluded? One answer is that the evidence is selected because it fits into a worldview, a perspective, about social and political order and disorder, what are regarded as the causes of homelessness and what can be done about it within the limitations of resources allocated (which in itself is a decision which reflects values and priorities).

In other words, whatever the quality of the research evidence included and excluded, it is chosen over others because it is consistent with and reinforces prior worldviews, moral perspectives (such as about deserving and undeserving recipients), values, and political agendas. This has at least one other important implication, namely, that any claim to evidence being objective and neutral (which it may be in vary degrees) is a ruse. Why? Because evidence is chosen on grounds which often have less to do with the quality of the research and more on the extent to which it is consistent with, and conducive to, policy aims and objectives.

In other words, the research evidence is used to further certain causes.

In this way the claim to base policy on research evidence is not only a ruse. It also performs an important social function, namely, to masquerade policy decisions as objective and neutral when that may not be the case; to create a facade of independence when the evidence chosen for policy is selected according to a prior framework.

This issue is exacerbated when the government and funding bodies dictate what research is required. That seems to have occurred in the NHRA. The purpose of the NHRA ‘is to provide direction about the Government’s priorities without being too prescriptive and limiting the scope of research innovation.’ Let’s accept this as genuine. But the analysis above shows that even if genuine the direction of research is prescribed. Creative researchers will certainly find some room for manoeuvre, as they should, but the salient point is that the research framework also presupposes a certain prior approach to homelessness, it causes, and policy directions.

The retort might come that any research funding will, of necessity, be circumscribed and that the funding body (in this case the Federal Government) is entitled to dictate the research they require. In one sense, they have that right (although one might have hoped that they would be more inclusive of alternative research paradigms and themes). But that evokes the question: what are the implications for researchers of being involved in the NHRA? Do they (inadvertently) become accomplices in the Governments agenda? Are they (unwittingly) colluding with the Government’s notion of homelessness? My answer is: not necessarily but there is a possibility that our research will be used for purposes which are far from the neutral and independent.

The dilemma for researchers can be identified in one of the research priorities which is
intended to plug research gaps. In the priority entitled ‘Understanding of homelessness’ there is a reference to ‘people with complex needs’. Rather than being taken for granted the whole notion of complex needs could, and I would argue should, be problematised. That is, the notion of ‘complex needs’, would be an excellent topic of research? Where did this idea come from? Why is it regarded as axiomatic? What social function does the notion of complex needs perform? Is it to mystify homelessness in order to justify more intervention? Is it to blame people who are homeless? Does it justify longer stays in support services than is necessary?

My point is that the very notion of complex needs assumes a particular view of the nature of homelessness. Arguably, it covers-up as presupposed and unquestionable what good research should be used to discover; it serves to close from critical inquiry the very analysis which could disclose its origins, meaning and social function.

I am aware that people who are homeless may present with more than a housing issue (that is, they may present with what are called complex needs). But did the complexity of need cause the homelessness or did homelessness cause the complexity of need — or both? And could affordable accommodation be a circuit-breaker to address other issues — as it is for most Australians.

There is another related assumption which often plays itself out here, namely, the assumption that complex needs must be addressed before a person is able to live successfully in independent accommodation. My point is that the assumption should be tested, it should be the subject of research rather than assumed as it seems to be in NHRA.

And now a final point before I conclude. It is interesting to note that there does not appear to be anything in the NHRA about the interface between homelessness and the economy in general, and homeless and the housing industry and sector, in particular. If homelessness is about housing why does this not appear in the NHRA (apart from perhaps an odd reference to the economy)? Is it excluded because homelessness is regarded as a personal issue rather than the lack of affordable housing which could be regarded as a broader structural issue. Why are the latter seemingly excluded from research? And what social and political interests are served by such exclusionary regimes in research? Is it because of a worldview which maintains that it is easier to develop policy around normalising miscraet individuals than broader structural and infrastructure issues?

In my experience over the decades, if not the, most common theme about homelessness in the National Reviews of SAAP, at conferences, and from people who are homeless, is the lack of affordable housing or genuine exit points. Yet somehow this is not a major (or apparently, a minor) theme in NHRA. So does the NHRA merely perform the function of deflecting attention away from some of the major issues? Does it divert attention away from potentially the explanation for homelessness with the most explanatory power?

Even if I am wrong about the strength of the explanatory power of the lack of housing and exit points as cause of homelessness, its lack of potency as an explanation should not be presumed but made open to research and analysis.

Conclusion

The NHRA provides the opportunity for research about homelessness and I am certainly not suggesting that we look the NHRA ‘gift horse in the mouth’. There are some interesting themes and research areas on the agenda (including factors of resilience and protection from homelessness, and its long term consequences).

Undoubtedly some creative researchers will use the opportunity to explore issues in the space provided by priorities which are not ‘too prescriptive’ and do not ‘not limit the scope of research innovation’. It is also important that I acknowledge that I am not exempt or immune from any of the comments above. My criticisms have the potential to apply to, and recoil on, me as much as anyone else.

So what can researchers do? One corrective to the position outlined is to undertake our own critical research in parallel to official, government sponsored research. This may have its own adverse consequences including penalties such as being overlooked in funding rounds. The dangers are real but so is the danger of being instruments of the technological power exerted by the state and its legitimising and oppressive ideologies.

Footnotes

2. Ibid., p. 4.
3. Ibid., p. 1–2.
4. Ibid., p. 3.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Ibid., p. 4.
7. Ibid., p. 4.
Part 5:
Perspectives on Counting the Homeless

Homelessness Australia
October 2011 Update

By Nicole Lawder,
Chief Executive Officer

Just when you thought it was safe...

Just when you thought it was safe to talk about the Census, the argument about the methodology pops up again. Is this a coincidence or part of a campaign? Your guess is as good as mine. I refer, of course to a recent interesting article in The Australian, written by Professor Gary Johns (13 October 2011), arguing that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) got it wrong when they applied the cultural definition of homelessness to the Census.

I have been censured in the past for stating that some in our sector feel that the new methodology, which would mean a drop in the number of people counted as homeless, is politically motivated. Comments such as “the ABS is fiercely independent” start coming my way. However, I am merely stating a fact: I have heard many people say it is politically motivated in order to make the government look as though they have achieved the desired target. Claims of political influence are pooh-poohed. And now we get allegations back the other way: that our sector is motivated by greed to inflate the figures — “Inflating homeless to fund lobbyists”. Many of the comments I received from sector members after the publication of the Johns article referred to their low-paid positions in the sector. So now we are benefitting ourselves, rather than attempting to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness themselves, is anyone’s guess.

It is my understanding from information provided by the ABS that government agencies asked the ABS to look at the methodology after the release of White Paper on Homelessness, The Road Home. Prior to that, the ABS had seemed happy with the “Counting the Homeless” methodology. Now they were responding to a specific request from governments to review it. The ABS has applied the cultural definition of homelessness to each Census since 1996. The cultural definition includes primary homelessness (people sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings), secondary homelessness (people staying temporarily in homelessness services, boarding houses or ‘couch surfing’) and tertiary homelessness (people staying in boarding houses with no security of tenure for 13 weeks or longer).

The specialist homelessness sector supports the use of the cultural definition of homelessness and, I will say it again: there is a large degree of cynicism among our members in the sector that the government is artificially reducing homelessness by applying a new (different) methodology. Some believe it is akin to the Howard government’s redefinition of unemployment some years ago. This brings us to the issue of under counting and over counting. The homelessness sector has worked closely with the ABS over the past year to improve the methodology. This means, identifying areas of under counting as well as over counting. The specialist homelessness sector has identified groups of people to the ABS who may be experiencing homelessness on Census night but who may not be counted as such because of their circumstances. This includes women escaping domestic violence who want to remain anonymous for safety reasons and don’t identify themselves as homeless on a Census form; young people who are ‘couch surfing’ temporarily with friends or relatives on Census night and do not identify themselves as homeless on the Census form; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people staying with kin in overcrowded housing, to name a few. These are all key groups that people who work in homelessness every day know to be unidentified or under counted in the Census data.

As noted in the Gary Johns’ opinion piece, domestic violence is “the greatest single cause of homelessness”, why then would we exclude women and children escaping violence from the homelessness estimate by placing them in a new category of “potential homeless”? The new distinction between the “actual” homeless and the “potential” homeless ignores the reality of what a safe and secure place to call home should mean in a country like Australia, the “lucky country”.

Just because someone is able to secure a few nights’ accommodation in a shelter does not mean they are housed. If the only place that a mother and her children can return to is a home in which violence is likely, this does not mean they have a safe and secure place to call home. Likewise, temporary accommodation in a youth homelessness service does not equate to adequate housing for a young person. One wonders whether Professor Johns has had the opportunity to visit a boarding house. Had he done so, he may find cause to agree that boarding houses do not and should not meet the definition of a place to call home. Boarding house occupants typically have no private bathroom or kitchen and face the prospect of eviction with very little notice. Furthermore, some boarding houses can be sites of criminal activity, prostitution and violence and many people prefer to sleep rough rather than stay in boarding houses out of concern for their safety.

The Census provides us with the best source of point in time data on homelessness. It is immensely valuable in helping us understand the overall level of homelessness at a national, State/Territory and regional level. It is a Census of population and housing. However, and by definition, it is unlikely to capture all people experiencing homelessness because they are not residing in housing.

Other sources of data need to be considered in order to provide us with a holistic understanding of homelessness in Australia. For example, the specialist homelessness services data collection from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that 219,800 people were supported by specialist homelessness
services over the course of 2009–10 (the most recent data available) including 84,000 children. It also found that 58 per cent of people who sought to be newly accommodated on any given night were turned away. This suggests that there is a high level of demand that cannot be met on the current level of resources.

Professor Johns cites improvements in employment, household incomes and rates of domestic violence to support his assertion that homelessness numbers should have fallen significantly between 2001 and 2006. In fact the ABS’ own review estimates the change in the overall level of homelessness was a reduction of less than three per cent.

Some of the figures not included in Gary Johns’ article include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experience homelessness at four times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW).
- The average first home loan has gone from three times the average annual income in 1996 to six times the average annual income in 2010.
- Across Australia it is becoming harder and harder to secure affordable housing. We all know that homelessness can be one end result of diminishing affordability of housing, and there are some groups that are more at risk than others. From 2009 to 2010, the amount Australian households spent on housing increased by 55 per cent, more than any other household expenditure.
- People on income support payments, who are often in financial stress. The latest ABS Household Expenditure Survey shows that for a person living in households where the main source of income is government pensions and allowances, those on the lower paying allowances such as Newstart and Family Support Payments, are experiencing the highest level of financial stress.
- Over the last ten years, house prices have risen by 147 per cent while incomes have risen by only 57 per cent and in the last five years rents have risen at twice the rate of inflation. Households are paying more than they can afford for housing, with over 740,000 renters and more than 380,000 mortgaged home owners reporting significant financial stress. Despite significant investment in recent years, there is less public and community housing properties now than there was in 2003.
- The shortage of affordable and available dwellings to Australians in the bottom 20 per cent of income earners which is currently in excess of 200,000 properties nation-wide and growing. If we expand the income range to the bottom 40 per cent, the shortage blows out to 493,000 dwellings. Nor does he deal with the growing waiting list for social housing. At the time of the 2006 Census, just over 160,000 Australians were languishing on social housing waiting lists, a figure that has today blown out to almost 250,000 people.
- More recently the global financial crisis may have placed more people at risk of homelessness.

Homelessness is not just rooflessness. There is a desperate need for appropriate, timely, ongoing support for people as well. Perhaps if we all put our efforts into working with people experiencing and those at risk homelessness instead of arguing about how to minimise the numbers to achieve a target, we would see a real reduction in the rate and numbers of those experiencing homelessness, rather than a reduction in numbers resulting from a change of methodology.

Rough sleeping is the most extreme and perhaps most visible grouping of homeless people. But it is important not to confine our view of homelessness to people whose homelessness is the most obvious. In Australia we rightly view the issue of homelessness as much broader than people sleeping rough or in cars or squats.
**Counting the Homeless and Beyond — More than Mere Statistics:**

**The Importance of Research in Increasing our Understanding of Homelessness**

By Travis Gilbert, Policy and Research Officer, Homelessness Australia

**Over the past nine months,** Homelessness Australia has been heavily involved in responding to the initial findings of the methodological review of **Counting the Homeless** 2006. Ensuring that we get an accurate count of the number of people who are experiencing homelessness across Australia, in each state and territory and in each region, is of paramount importance to the homelessness sector. In short, accurate statistics that take into account the difficulties of identifying people as homeless through a vehicle such as the Census, matter.

In devoting so much energy to ensuring that the Census night count is as accurate as possible I have found myself thinking, beyond these numbers, beyond the 105,000 or 80,000 or 63,000 people considered to be homeless on any given night (depending on who you talk to), are tens of thousands of real people with real stories who are not afforded the dignity, safety and security that a safe place to call home affords.

Capturing the essence of these often heartbreaking human stories could and should be a core focus of the national homelessness research agenda. The Journeys Home longitudinal study of factors affecting the stability of housing is a good example of a research project funded through the national homelessness research agenda that has the potential to provide us with rich qualitative data that offers insights into the individual housing journeys of people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity over time.

There is little doubt that such a study is needed and probably overdue but on the flip side, the money allocated to the Journeys Home project accounts for a significant proportion of the $11.4 million of total funding provided by Government for the national homelessness research agenda.

This article will begin by discussing the national homelessness research agenda and what we as a peak know about its priorities and findings to date and I will conclude by proposing some future topics that if well researched would increase our knowledge base of homelessness, its causes and solutions and suggest that there needs to be a more coordinated and transparent approach to the publication and dissemination of research findings from the partnerships, projects and the longitudinal study. Included in this will be the suggestion that the new homelessness clearinghouse be the key location for the publication of the research findings.

Homelessness Australia has also committed to playing a leading role in disseminating the findings from both the research partnerships and the research projects to our members and the wider homelessness sector.

**Filling the Gaps: Homelessness Research**

Thanks largely to the pioneering work of some dedicated academics in Australia and the participatory action research component of the Reconnect program we have a reasonably strong evidence base covering a number of aspects of homelessness. Arguably, we have a good understanding of the pathways in and out of homelessness and the structural and individual factors that lead people from different demographics and at different life stages to experience homelessness.

We have an understanding of the regional variations in the level of overall homelessness and the factors that may lead to rough sleeping being higher in particular areas than others, different forms of tertiary homelessness/marginal housing (boarding houses in urban areas and large regional centres and caravan parks in coastal towns and regional and rural areas) and why regional variations may be occurring.

Through the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) and its Homelessness Research Network we have access to comprehensive research reports on a range of issues related to homelessness, social housing and housing affordability. Homelessness Australia is an active participant in the homelessness research network. The AHURI National Homelessness Research Network is underpinned by four pillars:

- Coordination;
- Critique;
- Application and;
- International collaboration.

The AHURI is well positioned to contribute to the expansion of the homelessness evidence base in Australia. It has a strong track record in delivering research bulletins, reports and papers on housing and homelessness related matters and is an invaluable resource in policy and research work. The National Homelessness Research Network joined an international homelessness researchers’ alliance in April 2011. For more information about the network, please visit: [http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3919/](http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/3919/).

We look forward to the AHURI Homelessness Researchers Conference in April next year.

In addition to the AHURI network we have the National Homelessness Research Agenda funded by the Australian Government. $11.4 million has been allocated to the research agenda over four years from 2009–2013, about half of which has been allocated to the Journeys Home longitudinal study on factors affecting housing stability.

The rest of the $11.4 million has been allocated to three national research partnership agreements (the “top down” component) which are three years in duration:

- University of Queensland’s Institute of Social Research.
- Swinburne University of Technology’s Institute for Social Research.
- Flinders University’s Flinders Partners.

Homelessness Australia welcomes the research component of the new approach to homelessness. It is vital that quality research and the findings from it inform the evidence base that underpins homelessness policy in Australia.

We are eagerly awaiting the release of the findings from the sixteen national homelessness research projects that we understand commenced in mid-2010 and are anticipated to be completed in the latter half of 2012. The sixteen projects comprise the so-called “bottom-up” component of...
the research funding ($1.5 million in total) and are outlined below.

Table 1 demonstrates that there is some variety in the breadth of research being conducted. Many of them have been developed by organisations with a role in service delivery and a few of them focus on areas where there is currently limited information available.

**Jointed-up Research delivery: Towards a Systematic Approach**

While Homelessness Australia welcomes the funding for additional homelessness research we have spoken with colleagues in the homelessness sector and there is a view that there needs to be a more systematic approach to the coordination of the research agenda, its relationship to service delivery and improved client outcomes and the dissemination of research findings.

Homelessness Australia shares the concerns of some of our members about the limited information that has been flowing to the homelessness sector since the announcement of the successful partnerships and projects in May 2010. We understand that research is an organic process and that it takes time to develop, grow and come to fruition but we are keen to establish where the agenda is up to and elicit preliminary findings from projects funded under the agenda.

We are keen to participate in a reference group that were advised would be established to guide the research process and we have committed to play a key role in disseminating the findings of research conducted by the three consortiums funded under the research partnerships as well as the findings from the 16 research projects outlined above.

To date we are not aware of the establishment of the reference group and have participated in research conducted for only one of the partnerships. In addition we have been provided with an outline of the findings from just one of the sixteen research projects.

The new homelessness clearinghouse would be the ideal place for the publication of findings from the research agenda. It would be also be an appropriate place on which to publish updates about the progress of the research agenda to date.

**Final thoughts...**

- There is an urgent need for improved coordination between Universities and other tertiary education providers who are conducting homelessness research and community sector organisations who are also conducting research;
- Having a coherent strategic framework that is linked to the key policy drivers of the homelessness reform process makes sense;
- There is a need for transparency regarding the main research projects that have been funded and reporting on the status of these projects;
- A cross-sector advisory group should be established at the earliest opportunity to provide input about homelessness issues and the role that homelessness research can/should play in improving the evidence base about these issues and how to effectively respond to these; and
- It is important that equal attention is given to all cohorts who experience homelessness in Australia so that the evidence base underpinning policy and service delivery is comprehensive and holistic.

### Table 1: National Homelessness Research Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of lead organisation</th>
<th>Project title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian Catholic University — School of Business</td>
<td>Homelessness and Unemployment: Understanding the connection and breaking the</td>
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<td>Australian Catholic University — Institute of Child Protection Studies</td>
<td>Responding to homelessness: The needs of sole fathers and their children who</td>
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<td>experience homelessness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Institute of Family Studies</td>
<td>The influence of unstable housing on children’s wellbeing. Evidence from a</td>
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<td>national longitudinal study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</td>
<td>Indigenous women and the role of transactional sex in homelessness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Access Community Health Inc.</td>
<td>Understanding homelessness service transitions between community and clinical</td>
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<td>Flinders Partners Pty Ltd</td>
<td>sectors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Griffith University</td>
<td>Precarious social inclusion: Chronic homelessness and impaired decision making</td>
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<td>HomeGround Services</td>
<td>capacity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melbourne GP Network</td>
<td>What makes a difference? Building a foundation for nationally consistent client</td>
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<td>outcome measures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Micah Projects Inc.</td>
<td>A comparative study of the effectiveness of family support and crisis</td>
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<td>intervention with homeless families.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Rivers Social Development Council Inc.</td>
<td>What to do when city based homelessness models don’t work in the bush?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queensland University of Technology</td>
<td>Understanding homelessness service network integration; place based network</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of NSW SPRC</td>
<td>analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of NSW — School of Social Science and International Studies</td>
<td>Life-course institutional costs of homelessness for vulnerable groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of SA Centre for Rural Health and Community</td>
<td>Homeless away from home: Understanding patterns arising from seasonal mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>of Aboriginal people to regional service centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of SA — The Australian Centre for Child Protection</td>
<td>Responding to children in specialist homelessness services.</td>
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</table>
By Zoë Probyn, North and West Homelessness Network

Australia is one of the few countries in the world that not only attempts to estimate the numbers of people experiencing homelessness but that also uses Census data to inform a “point in time” estimate. The Counting the Homeless (CTH) Reports developed by Professors Chamberlain and Mackenzie in partnership with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1996, 2001 and 2006 are acknowledged both here and overseas as both ground-breaking and innovative. They are consistently referenced in almost every piece of research, media article or policy paper on Australian homelessness.

Up until now we have been in the fortunate and unique position (compared to other countries around the world) of having a “consensus” on homelessness estimates in that the Homelessness Sector, Federal and State Governments, academics, peak bodies and the ABS broadly agreed that CTH Reports were a reasonably close representation of the extent of homelessness in Australia. This consensus was very important for reaching common understandings of the issue, developing appropriate policies and programs, targeting services and thinking strategically and collaboratively about how to address homelessness.

As many of you will be aware there is a Review of the CTH methodology underway. The fundamental premise the Review hinges on is the ABS view that the CTH methodology results in an ‘over-count’. This view is not shared by many in the Sector who contend that given the complexity of counting people experiencing homelessness it is far more likely that homelessness in Australia has in fact been consistently undercounted.

Revised 2006 homelessness estimates were outlined in the ABS Discussion Paper which was released, after a lengthy delay, on the 31st March 2011. The ‘point in time’ estimate of 105,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in Australia (for 2006) has been revised down, by the ABS Review Team, to 63,000. The Youth Homelessness count dropped by an extraordinary 15,000. Many of the revisions seem implausible and don’t tally with the experiences of those in the forefront. The methodological reasoning behind these revisions is confusing, questionable and has been thus far inadequately justified by the ABS.

These revised estimates indicate that the consensus we used to have is gone, and the loss of that consensus is a significant issue. If ABS homelessness estimates do not reflect the real extent of the issue it will have wide ranging impacts — from community perceptions of homelessness to policy development, program design and funding for services targeting homelessness.

It will mean that those Australians experiencing homelessness, already marginalised and disenfranchised will in effect become even more invisible, their circumstances and needs unexplored, their voices silenced. It will also mean tracking real progress in addressing homelessness will be more difficult.

The importance of reliable homelessness estimates has a deeper significance that goes beyond being used as a guide for directing resources or as a way of measuring outcomes. They also provide us with crucial evidence on how we operate and function as a society. Are we building communities that look after their members? Are our communities just and fair? Does everyone have access to the safety and security of a home from which they are able to participate in civic life? Or are there children, women and men who are excluded from the basic securities and opportunities that the majority of us take for granted? And if so, how many and where are those who are excluded?

Homelessness estimates should perhaps be viewed as a powerful, illustrative indication and measure of the health and inclusiveness of our communities. For this reason and many others it is critical that homelessness estimates are as accurate as possible. It would be a grave mistake to underestimate their importance and widespread influence.

The right to adequate housing and related rights are enshrined in the major International Human Rights treaties, to which Australia is a party. Article 11 (1) states that Parties to the Covenant:

“Recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing, and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.”

If we acknowledge the right to housing then we must also acknowledge that this means every day in Australia, many thousands of Australians have their rights violated through their experiences of homelessness. In April 2005, the Victorian Housing Rights Tribunal came up with a broad range of recommendations, some of which have in 2011 come to pass, but many of the issues raised throughout the Tribunal are still very much with us and in some areas, things have deteriorated. In the Tribunal’s report, Jelena Popovic, Deputy Chief Magistrate of Victoria, stated:

“The testimonies we have heard highlight the alarming scale and magnitude to which all elements of people’s rights to adequate housing are clearly being violated; and the urgent need for local, state and federal governments to cooperate and meet their obligations to address these violations.”

Alison Aggarwai, Tribunal member and Research Associate to the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing at the United Nations Human Rights Council further stated:

“We have heard how violations of the right to adequate housing can have a direct impact on a person’s right to health, education, security, livelihood, and privacy, freedom of movement, freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading behaviour. It would be useful to call on the government to invite the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing to visit Australia and report on the situation.”

In 2006, Dr Miloon Kothari the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing did indeed visit Australia. He found what he described as a serious “hidden” crisis noting:

“Although the number of homeless people around Australia has been evaluated at around 100,000 persons, it seems quite clear that the number is underestimated.”

The ABS itself acknowledges that it is not possible to achieve a completely accurate Census Count: It is a hugely complex undertaking and the ABS know there will inevitably be people who are missed. In order to correct estimates, a Post Enumeration Survey (PES) is carried out by the ABS shortly after the Census. In September 2006, 33,000 households were surveyed post Census and a range of other work was undertaken in order to establish the net undercount for 2006:

“In the 2006 Census, some people were missed (undercount) and some were counted more than once (overcount). As is usually the case, in 2006 more people were missed than over-counted.

The PES estimate of the number of people who should have been counted in the 2006 Census was 20,402,459 people. The actual Census Count for Australia was 19,852,973. The difference (549,486 people) is the net undercount for Australia.”

Unfortunately, the PES scope excludes people experiencing homelessness. Its basis for exclusion further highlights that there is a limited understanding of homelessness within the ABS that homelessness is viewed rather simplistically as a state of “rooflessness”:

“Of the people present in Australia at the time of the PES, the following are not included:

• People in non-private dwellings such as hotels, motels, hospitals and other institutions;
• Homeless people (as the sample selected in the PES is based on the selection of dwellings);
It is somewhat ironic that people experiencing homelessness are excluded from the Census mechanism that exists to understand the significance of ABS figures. It is not conceivable that the Council do not understand the importance of accurate population counts within the ABS Census and other population counts.

Given that Census data is a critical basis to formulating policy and allocating resources, Council has undertaken to further investigate this in relation to the 2011 Census.

It is unfortunate that information on the Review was not adequately communicated to the homelessness sector in an effective or timely way. This delay significantly limited the Sector’s capacity to engage and respond to the issue. Overall this Review has been characterised by inadequate consultation, questionable timing and an absence of both Sector and academic input.

However, as a result of the advocacy of recent months by Homelessness Australia, Council to the Homeless Persons and many others, the ABS agreed to a second submission opportunity. A common recommendation from those who submitted was call for the establishment of a Reference Group to guide future work on the Review that would include adequate representation from the Homelessness Sector and academia.

A Homelessness Statistics Reference Group has been now been established and met for the first time in Canberra on the 19th of August 2011. Some members have already raised concerns that this group is not adequately representative and are concerned that our capacity to genuinely engage in the development of a new methodology that all stakeholders can have some faith in is limited. However “better to be inside the tent than outside” is the feeling thus far. We will see how it develops over the coming months.

Homelessness is complex and needs multifaceted responses. There is no magic bullet. Until such time as homelessness is not present in our streets, parks, rooming houses, living rooms, schools and communities we will need the suite of responses and demand management frameworks that we have developed over the years. No single program or model holds all the answers, but rather they contribute like jigsaw pieces to a community of services that together make up the whole picture. Our diversity is one of our key strengths.

Homelessness Research Agenda is the starting point for the future development of the research required to support the efforts outlined in The Road Home. I believe this is a worthy and exciting idea. He’s absolutely right, we should be seeking to do as a sector what we want for our clients — independence and empowerment. It’s time for action, leadership and vision. We can do it.

Footnotes
1. “There’s No Dignity living like this” — The Victorian Housing Rights Tribunal Report — available on the VCOS website www.vcoss.org.au
2. 2940.0 Census of Population and Housing — Details of Undercount, Australian Bureau of Statistics, August 2006
3. 2940.0 Census of Population and Housing — Details of Undercount, Australian Bureau of Statistics, August 2006
5. I am a member of this group as the representative of the Victorian Regional Homelessness Network.

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Maximise use of existing datasets

Secondly, we need to better utilise existing, robust national datasets to build our understanding of the issues that lead to and perpetuate homelessness.

Prioritise robust service evaluations

Thirdly, we need to prioritise investment (through government, business, trusts and nationally competitive grant schemes) in high quality evaluations of nationally significant programs and service models that include cost effectiveness studies.

Resource homelessness services to use their service data

The federal government has recently developed and implemented a new and much improved service data collection known as SHIP. If we are to maximise the benefits of this data, small and resource poor homelessness agencies need to be supported to enter, access and report on it.

National Homelessness Research Agenda is but the starting point for the future development of the research required to support the efforts outlined in The Road Home.

* The full, unedited and unexpurgated version of this paper “The Future of Homelessness Research” can be found in the CHP 2010–2011 Annual Report.
Opinion — Shelley Mallet, General Manager, Research and Service Development at Hanover Welfare Services*

Homelessness research has never been in a better place in Australia. Knowledge and expertise is growing and with it, the capacity to develop an evidence base that can address outstanding policy and practice questions about the causes, consequence and solutions to homelessness.

Until very recently there had been little investment in homelessness research and evaluation in Australia. A limited pool of researchers, consultants and service providers have largely relied on small opportunistic grants from trusts, governments, nationally competitive grants (ARC, NHMRC) and some of the larger community sector agencies. Much of this research profiled urban homeless populations, their problems and experiences. Research on Indigenous, rural or remote populations was scant.

There had been an emphasis on small scale point in time rather than longitudinal studies, almost no policy or cost effectiveness research and few robust service evaluations or cost effectiveness research. Also, while useful to a point, the (NDCA) service data has focused on output rather than outcome measurement providing little or no evidence about what service interventions works for homeless people.

Arguably our understanding of what constituted homelessness research compounded these problems. Most of what counted as ‘homelessness’ research focused on homelessness as the problem under investigation rather than a key consequences or outcome of other social issues such as poverty, unemployment, health problems, housing affordability, family breakdown or gendered violence.

As a result homelessness researchers have developed or participated in relatively few multi-disciplinary and multi-sector or multi-issue studies that may for example analyse and report on factors that predict housing and homelessness outcomes for key groups (e.g. those with mental illness, exiting prison, unemployed, over time. This has limited our capacity to demonstrate how other issues (e.g. disability) and other service delivery systems (e.g. mental health, justice, disability) are implicated in homelessness outcomes for key groups.

However, at last the nature and character of homelessness research is beginning to change.

Funding has been the key to this change. The injection of $11.4 million over four years (2009–2013), into the development and implementation of the FAHCSIA National Homelessness Research Agenda has been critical. This resulted in Journeys Home, the first national longitudinal study of homelessness adults as well as 15 project grants and nearly 30 partnership grants.

The research has been developed and delivered by new, multi-disciplinary, consortiums of university and not for profit based researchers and service providers with expertise in and beyond housing and homelessness. As such it has built research capacity and expertise though new research collaborations. Most importantly it has seeded research in the field where significant gaps existed — service evaluations (e.g. integrated service models, toolkits) exploratory research on new or invisible groups (e.g. people with non-psychiatric disability, homeless fathers, older people), or under-explored issues (e.g. employment, outcomes measurement).

The findings of this research will become available over the next 12–24 months. As this occurs it will be important to review what we have learnt to determine what lines of inquiry are critical to pursue over the next decade. With this work we have the beginning of a much needed program of research around homelessness and not an end.

Looking to the future, there remain some fundamental issues that need to be addressed by researchers and government alike to maximise the benefit of current and future investment in homelessness research for policy and practice development. Four issues stand out.

Nationally consistent measures

First and foremost, we need to agree on and promote the use of nationally consistent housing and homelessness measures that can be included in a wide range of national surveys as well as state and territory service datasets (e.g. justice, child protection, drug and alcohol, etc.).

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