

Addressing the Diversity of Homelessness

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Homelessness can happen to anyone. It affects a diverse range of people from all walks of life in Australian society. In 2011, Homelessness Australia will highlight this through our campaign titled: "My Address: Diversity in Homelessness". We will investigate throughout the year how homelessness affects different groups and individuals in the community across each of the four editions of Homelessness Australia News.

In this issue, we focus our attention on the diversity of homelessness among women and young people. Where might be a useful place to start?

We can begin with the premise that neither women nor young people are a homogenous group, yet this is often how they are portrayed by policy makers and those developing programs for these broad target groups.

THE DIVERSITY OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

Domestic and Family Violence

We often point out that in Australia today the face of homelessness is no longer confined to that of a middle aged or older male sleeping alone on a park bench. This was in fact recognised in the 1970s when services for women commenced operating.

The first women's refuge in Australia was established after the International Women's Day celebration in Sydney in 1974. Following a period of intense lobbying, Elsie Women's Refuge in Glebe in Sydney's Inner-South West became the first funded women's refuge in Australia in 1974.

The Women's Refuge Movement emerged in response to the growing recognition that too many women were either forced to remain in households where violence was commonplace putting them and their children at risk of serious injury or death, or forced into homelessness with no support. In line with feminist philosophy, the focus of the early women's refuges in NSW was on women and children's empowerment through a safe, supported environment. There was an emphasis on mutual support between the women which was felt to be a valuable component to their empowerment. These continue to remain as central principles in women's refuges.

Thirty-five years on, refuges have evolved and now provide a broad range of services, support and advocacy including; outreach, court assistance, assistance with housing and legal matters, information, training and referral.

We know that escaping domestic and family violence is the most often cited reason given by women for seeking assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services. 49.1% of females with children who presented to specialist homelessness services in 2008/09 nominated escaping domestic and family violence as their main

reason for seeking assistance as did 39.9% of single women aged 25 years and overⁱ.

Young Women and Family Breakdown

We know that the majority of people supported by specialist homelessness services each year are women and that young women aged 15-19 are consistently overrepresented in the National Data Collection Agency figures. In 2008/09, one in every fifty Australian women in this age group received assistance from specialist homelessness servicesⁱⁱ. Family breakdown was the most often cited reason given by women aged under 25 for seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services, nominated by almost one in four women in this age groupⁱⁱⁱ. Family breakdown was highlighted by Chamberlain and Mackenzie as a major cause of homelessness amongst young women^{iv}.

We know that 44% of people counted as homeless on Census night in 2006 were female, this was up from 42% in 2001 and indicates that homelessness amongst women may be on the increase^v. While males outnumbered females in almost every age group, the reverse was true for people aged 12-18 years with 54% of those counted as experiencing homeless on Census night in this age group being female^{vi}.

Older Single Women Facing Housing and Income Challenges

We also know from research authored by Ludo McFerran, 'It Could Be You: Female, Single, Older and Homeless'^{vii}, there is evidence that a growing number of women are experiencing homelessness for the first time in the later years of their lives.

The report challenges some widely held assumptions about homelessness and its causes and provides a new and important insight into why addressing Australia's significant shortage of affordable and social housing should be a leading priority for all levels of Government in Australia. In particular it found that women with a lengthy work history and no history of mental illness, cognitive impairment, alcohol or other substance abuse or a long history of homelessness were finding themselves at an increased risk of experiencing homelessness later in life and that as a society we are poorly prepared for this eventuality.

The report draws on a number of sources of data including Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute reports that have found



that while population ageing is driving enormous changes in housing demand, there is no evidence that housing policy is responding to the ageing Australian population.

According to researchers, while baby boomers aged 55-64 are wealthier than previous generations – having accumulated significant wealth through home ownership, with nearly one-third owning property other than their principal place of residence – a significant pool of older Australians were locked out of the housing market or struggling with insufficient support in the private rental market: in 2007/08, renters aged 55 and over constituted 15% of the aged population^{viii}.

McFerran's study found that change in marital status either through divorce or the death of a spouse was an important factor that could affect the housing status of older women (defined in the study as women aged 45 and over). While home ownership remained the great Australian dream for many, it found the proportion of women aged over 60 who were still paying mortgages doubled in the ten years to 2005/06 while there was a decline in home ownership among forthcoming retirees aged 45-59^{ix}. Researchers found that while the spectacular rise in house prices during that period accounted for some of the trend, divorce and separation were also pivotal factors which could have significant housing consequences.

The study also revealed a clear link between ageing, gender and poverty. What was particularly concerning was that women who had a significant employment history still found themselves vulnerable to homelessness in later years because of insufficient savings/superannuation, especially if they were forced out of the workforce due to injury or age discrimination. There was also a parallel between gender based pay inequity and risk of homelessness with researchers finding that:

“...It stems from deep and systematic gender inequality- attitudes towards gender roles and caring; vulnerability to violence; constrained choices about paid work and care; the impact of divorce; discrimination and harassment. Each of these experiences affects subsequent opportunities and finally leads to women accumulating poverty instead of financial security...”^x

The report recommended that the link between ageing, gender and poverty requires good ageing policy that strives to understand the different impacts of ageing on women and men.

‘YOOF’ ARE NOT HOMOGENOUS: DIVERSITY IN YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Youth policy is often couched in terms that imply young people are a homogenous demographic to whom ‘one size fits all’ models of service delivery. The youth homelessness sector has evolved over the years to challenge this paradigm by developing a variety of service models and approaches that reflect the diverse pathways to the experience of homelessness that young people may follow.

Young people make up the largest proportion of those who are supported by specialist homelessness services when the

data is broken down by age, accounting for nearly 40% of those who sought assistance over the course of 2008/09^{xi}.

Young people aged 12-25 were also the largest demographic of people counted as experiencing homelessness on Census night accounting for 36% of those counted as experiencing homelessness in 2001 and 33% of those counted in 2006^{xii}.

The youth homelessness sector began to develop in the mid-1970s in response to a growing recognition that young people or ‘street kids’ as the mainstream media termed them were potentially increasing in number and lacking structured support. From 1 July 1979, youth refuges had begun to receive funding via various housing programs^{xiii} and in 1985 the homelessness service delivery system was consolidated into the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). SAAP was backed by progressive legislation which guaranteed ongoing funding for homelessness services and outlined the types of services people could expect to receive when they accessed them. Reflecting the numbers, the Youth SAAP (YSAAP) sector emerged as the largest group of agencies which provided support to around one third of all people who accessed the SAAP.

Four years after YSAAP services had secured ongoing funding, the landmark 1989 Burdekin Report ‘Our Homeless Children’ was published which opened the eyes of both legislators and policy makers to the extent of the problem of youth homelessness in Australia. The Burdekin report documented both the complexity and diversity of youth homelessness in detail for the first time in Australia. In Chapter five, “The Experience of Homelessness”, the words of young people themselves encapsulate the many and varied reasons that led them to become homeless^{xiv}. Importantly the report also sought to examine the multitude of costs of youth homelessness, both social and economic.

When the *National Youth Commission report ‘Australia’s Homeless Youth’*, was published almost two decades later it found that while there were some commonalities in “homeless careers”, the factors contributing to the overall problem of youth homelessness were diverse^{xv}. The report details a number of factors that can contribute to young people experiencing homelessness including family breakdown, financial crisis, poverty and intergenerational disadvantage, labour market marginalisation, spending time in state care and protection, mental health issues, alcohol and other drug use. Not surprisingly, a number of these were also detailed in the Burdekin report. Importantly though the National Youth Commission report reminded us that homelessness should be understood as a process of becoming homeless, experiencing homelessness and finally, re-establishing a livelihood and a place in the community after a period of time^{xvi}.

YSAAP services evolved to support large numbers of young people in a variety of flexible and responsive ways.

One of the great strengths of the youth homelessness sector is its diversity. They have since been joined by the early intervention service Reconnect, FOYER models and other longer term supported accommodation models.

While the youth homelessness sector has continued to support large numbers of young people over the past twenty-five years, it is widely acknowledged that the largest

proportion of young people experiencing homelessness are 'couch surfers' staying temporarily with friends and relatives. Smaller numbers are likely to reside in makeshift accommodation such as 'squats' that form the basis of the popular media imagery of the young 'street kid'.

Like women, young people from all walks of life can come to experience homelessness though some, such as those in state care and protection, may be more vulnerable than others. In the twenty years since the release of the Burdekin report, the complexity and the extent of youth homelessness has changed little. Dramatically reducing youth homelessness over the next decade is essential if the *Federal Government's Homelessness White Paper* target of halving overall homelessness by 2020 is to be reached^{xvii}.

MY ADDRESS: DIVERSITY IN HOMELESSNESS AND THE CENSUS

Homelessness Australia's MY Address campaign is especially important given that 2011 is a Census year and the ABS are currently conducting a largely internal review that could result in significant changes to the method of counting used to identify people experiencing homelessness on Census night, and the methodology used to enumerate homelessness by adjusting for over counting and under counting after the Census has been completed and data aggregated.

Throughout 2011 Homelessness Australia will highlight diverse examples of people and their addresses while experiencing homelessness and aims to reinforce the view that due to the very nature of homelessness, the reasons why people come to experience homelessness, and the transient nature of people in different sectors of the homeless population, there will necessarily be examples of hidden homelessness across all age groups that need to be accounted for when seeking to enumerate homelessness based on raw data obtained on Census night.

Homelessness Australia's campaign has produced publications showing a series of real life examples of people's different experiences of homelessness (with changes made to the personal details in each case to preserve the anonymity of the people concerned). We will utilise the campaign to highlight the many and varied pathways both into and out of homelessness and to promote community awareness and understanding of homelessness and its causes and solutions.

(ENDNOTES)

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