

MEN'S HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA

TRAVIS GILBERT,

POLICY AND RESEARCH OFFICER HOMELESSNESS AUSTRALIA

Evidence suggests that homelessness amongst females has increased over the past fifteen years. Despite this, males still account of the majority of people who experience homelessness on any given night in Australia according to the 2006 Census data. In the Counting the Homeless 2006 report, 56% of people identified as experiencing homelessness on Census night were males'. In addition in the ABS methodological review of Counting the Homeless 2006, the proportion may be even higher at closer to 61%ⁱⁱ.

While the majority of people supported by specialist homelessness services are female, males account for the majority of people temporarily accommodated by friends and relatives and the overwhelming majority of people staying in boarding houses and sleeping rough. Research suggests that males who are sleeping rough or cycling between boarding houses and rough sleeping spend longer periods of their lives experiencing homelessness than other groupsⁱⁱⁱ.

While every man's journey into homelessness is unique, there are some common reasons cited by men for seeking assistance from homelessness services and a number of contributing factors have been identified by researchers.

Males aged 25 and over nominate relationship breakdown, financial crisis leading to eviction and housing problems related to alcohol and other drug use as their main reasons for seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services^{iv}. Males aged under 25 nominated family break-down or the need for 'time out from family' as their main reasons for seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services in 42% of cases.

Researchers have identified 'financial crisis' as a common cause of homelessness for men, particularly those aged 35-54. We know that financial crisis can have a detrimental impact on the ability to maintain housing, particularly in a rental

market characterised by high levels of housing stress, increasing median weekly rental prices (above the rate of the CPI in many localities), low vacancy rates and declining levels of public housing. Consider this: Your take home pay is \$750 per week of which you are required to allocate \$350 to your landlord for rent. You are already in housing stress and allocating around 40% of your income to housing costs, meaning your capacity to save is limited. If you were to lose your job, you would not be eligible for Newstart allowance until you had exhausted your savings. Even when eligible you would find that the maximum rate, inclusive of Commonwealth Rent Assistance is some \$110 per fortnight less than you are required to pay in rent alone. It is easy to see how a financial crisis triggered by an event such as unemployment could lead you to become homeless.

The Michael Project is a piece of research conducted by Mission Australian and funded by a private donor to investigate the reasons why a sample of men have become homeless, to elicit some details about their personal stories and life histories and to determine what interventions can successfully end homeless for them.

It commenced in October 2007 and concluded at the end of 2010. The objectives were:

- Improving the health, well-being and social and economic participation of homeless men.
- Improving their access to stable, secure and long term accommodation.
- Articulating and developing a new model of support.
- Providing an evidence base for policy and program development in the delivery of homelessness services.

The service model combines three elements:

- Homeless/accommodation services ranging from mobile, street based outreach through to emergency,

short term and medium term accommodation.

- Assertive Case Management, a consistent way of working with clients which emphasises frequent contact with integrated, timely and appropriate support.
- 11 specialist allied health and support services.

253 men who were homeless completed the survey. It found that:

- 95.5% were found to be exhibiting high or very high levels of psychological distress.
- A very high percentage of participants (94.7%) have extensive histories of abuse and trauma.
- The rate of post traumatic stress disorder was 20 times higher than in the general population.
- More than 50% reported a mental health diagnosis other than a substance use disorder.
- 50% of participants met the criteria for a substance use disorder.

Over 80% of participants had slept rough; a similar percentage had spent time in crisis accommodation and approximately three quarters had spent time in boarding houses. This is consistent with findings from other research which demonstrate that men frequently cycle between all three categories of homelessness articulated in the cultural definition.

The study found that there were significant improvements in the well-being of participants three months after baseline and that there was an overall improvement in accommodation/housing outcomes. The extent to which participants were socially isolated declined significantly as a result of the interventions offered and connections to health and social services that were facilitated.

In addition to increasing the understanding of men's homelessness, the study provides

further evidence that a holistic response to homelessness delivers better client outcomes. The study did however find that improving health and well-being can take a reasonable amount of time for people who had experienced long term or chronic homelessness.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this and other studies clearly demonstrate that brokering access to housing- with the right mix of support services in place to help people stabilise their tenancy- solves homelessness.

Men are a diverse group too

The study described above focused on men who had tended to experience long periods of homelessness and had cycled between rough sleeping, crisis accommodation, boarding houses and back again. As with all groups, however, men's experiences of homelessness are diverse. For many men, the experience of homelessness will be temporary and episodic. Their support needs will be low and a timely intervention may enable them to stabilise

their housing situation quickly. The factors that have led men to become homeless will be different across all age groups. Some men will experience medium term periods of homelessness. They may need a greater level of assistance and support to resolve their situation. A smaller group will experience long term periods of recurrent homelessness. They may have higher support needs. For all groups however, homelessness can be solved.

We need to see more investment in affordable housing, we know from research overseas that rapid access to housing while connecting people to support services produces cost saving across other areas of social services and the economy.

We need to see an expansion in services for men who are experiencing homelessness and we need to acknowledge that there are almost no services for men who do not fit conventional profiles such as single fathers who are experiencing homelessness with their children and men in childless couples.

ENDNOTES

- i Chamberlain Chris, MacKenzie, David; Counting the Homeless 2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, p.9.
- ii ABS Methodological Review of Counting the Homeless 2006 Position Paper, ABS, Canberra, 2011, p.48.
- iii Mission Australia, The Michael Project: Key Findings, 2010/11, p.3; Chamberlain, Chris, MacKenzie, David Homeless Careers: Pathways in and out of homelessness, RMIT, Melbourne, 2003, p.36; Fernee, Henk, Oldersma, Frans, Popping, Roel The Process of Homelessness: An event analysis of stays in Gromingen shelter Accommodation, FEANTS, European Journal of Homelessness, Netherlands, December 2010, p.156, Caton, C. L. M., Domingues, B., Schanzer, B., Hasin, D. S., Shrout, P. E., Felix, A, McQuiston, H., Opler, L. A. and Hau, E. Risk Factors for Long-Term Homelessness : Findings from a Longitudinal Study of First-Time Homeless Single Adults, American Journal of Public Health 95, 2005, pp.1753-59.
- iv National Data Collection Agency, Use of Government Funded Specialist Homelessness Services 2009/10, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011, p.15.

Thank you and goodbye to... 2011



We hope your year was fulfilling and productive, and we look forward to working with you in 2012