



(Response to article: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/inflating-homeless-to-fund-lobbyists/story-e6frgd0x-1226165274504?sv=7d84155a1e6c6ddf8b475ed84325480>)

Home is more than a roof over your head

The views expressed in the opinion piece by Gary Johns do not mesh with those held by the thousands of people who actually work every day with Australians who are experiencing homelessness.

In Australia we rightly view the issue of homelessness as much broader than people sleeping rough or in cars or squats. Australia – and 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).

Why is it important not to confine our view of homelessness to people whose homelessness is most obvious?

As noted in the 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 Mr 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 to 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 is unlikely to capture all people experiencing homelessness because they are not residing in *housing*.

This brings us to the issue of under counting and over counting. The homelessness sector has worked closely with the ABS 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 and 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.

Other sources of data need to be considered in order to provide us with a holistic understanding of homelessness in Australia.

The other major source of data we have is the specialist homelessness services data collection from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. It found that 219,900 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% 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.

Mr 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 3%.

Rather conveniently, Mr Johns does not refer to other factors from "the real world" as he puts it that might serve to increase homelessness such as the decline in housing affordability, and the shortage of affordable and available dwellings to Australians in the bottom 20% of income earners which is currently in excess of 200,000 properties nationwide and growing. If we expand the income range to the bottom 40%, 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.

Every year the Australian Government allocates \$6.5 billion in tax breaks to wealthy investors in a speculative property market, driving up house prices. Each year since 2008, the Australian Government spends a fraction of that, around \$600 million on homelessness initiatives and services. Far from being lobbyists seeking to "spin the numbers to place maximum pressure on politicians to screw money from the taxpayer", those who made submissions in response to the ABS discussion paper are in fact dedicated professionals who each and every day dedicate their efforts, generally at comparatively modest community sector rates of pay, to improving the lives of people who are experiencing homelessness in Australia.

The "dark side" would be happy to educate you and take you to visit some of our services and meet some of our clients, Mr Johns, if you wish to find out what it is really like, rather than pontificating from the halls of academia.