



## Responding to Homelessness

**HOMELESSNESS DESCRIBES A MULTITUDE OF EXPERIENCES FOR A DISPARATE RANGE OF SOCIAL GROUPS. ALTHOUGH THIS COMPLEXITY MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE TO SPEAK OF EASY 'ANSWERS' TO HOMELESSNESS, RESEARCH DEMONSTRATES THERE ARE BROAD PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION**

### KEY POINTS

- There are many ways to define homelessness. A good definition of homelessness is one that allows for better understanding, measurement and response.
- Homelessness is a whole of government, whole of community responsibility and must be responded to as such.
- Responses to homelessness are complicated by funding shortfalls, program gaps and discrimination.

### UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS

One of the few definitive statements that can be made about 'homelessness' as a concept, is that it is complex, problematic and difficult to define. If homelessness was only about alcoholic old men, as per the stereotype, the task of understanding and responding to it would be easier. Homelessness is increasingly understood however, to affect a complex mix of youth, women, Indigenous people, families, people struggling with disabilities and refugees who have little in common in terms of how they became homeless, their experience of it or the best response to their needs.

In this environment, it is impossible to determine a single all-purpose definition for homelessness. Homelessness could be defined by a lack of ongoing access to a safe and secure house. It could be defined as a loss of connection to place of origin or family. It could relate to being on the streets, or sleeping on friends' couches or losing choice. And how would a definition accommodate those people who sleep on friend's couches or remain living in public places, but do not regard

*This bulletin by*

**Anne-Marie Heintjes**

*synthesises the evidence from a range of AHURI, and other research on homelessness.*



Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

[www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)

themselves as homeless? Ultimately, a good definition is one that fits a purpose, whether for describing the process of homelessness or effective responses.

If our purpose is understanding the prevalence and patterns of homelessness for instance, we require a means of measuring it, in accordance with an agreed, objective definition that is consistent over time and across Australia. Chamberlain and MacKenzie's conception of homelessness as being without conventional accommodation, moving between temporary accommodation or living permanently in a boarding house (primary, secondary, tertiary) provides a pragmatic and useful basis for doing this and has consequently been widely used across homelessness research. Based on this definition it was estimated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that there were 100 000 homeless people on census night, 2001. <sup>1</sup>

Other definitions have utility for thinking about appropriate responses to homelessness. For example, a definition of homelessness that describes an Indigenous experience of severance from country or identity is useful in directing attention to cultural and emotional responses rather than those of just physical shelter. <sup>2</sup>

Homelessness is often a repeated experience. Data for the program dedicated to providing accommodation and support to homeless people, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) indicates that nearly a quarter of all clients have more than one support period in a year. <sup>3</sup> If we wish to understand this repeated experience of homelessness, the notion of iterative homelessness or a homeless career can usefully direct policy and program thinking away from unhelpful one-off crisis intervention responses. <sup>4</sup>

Homelessness can have a devastating effect for individuals. The experience is often associated with grief, feelings of loss of control and disconnectedness from society. <sup>4</sup> The lack of a 'point of stability' is likely to reduce participation in positive activities, such as employment, that contribute to feelings of empowerment. <sup>4</sup>

Homelessness also has a financial and moral cost at a broader societal or structural level. <sup>5</sup> Homeless people are more likely to be unemployed, rely on welfare benefits and support, experience ill-health, engage in injurious behaviours such as drug-taking and unsafe sex and participate in crime, than the general population. <sup>6</sup> All of these characteristics of

homelessness put an inevitable cost burden on the health, justice, criminal and welfare systems.

Aside from the financial cost, a just and equitable society arguably demands that every person should have access to safe and secure accommodation. This principle is recognised in various Acts and Agreements, including SAAP and the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement.

## **KEY POINTS WHAT RESPONSE STRATEGIES WORK?**

Good responses to homelessness rely on rejecting simplistic beliefs about any single program providing the solution. Although SAAP is the program for providing accommodation and support to homeless people, it is not currently structured or resourced to respond to a homeless person's diverse needs for housing, counselling, health-care, skills training, employment and education so as to both prevent and combat homelessness over the longer term.

Homelessness is the final and most obvious layer on a cumulation of other experiences of disadvantage and not a phenomenon that exists in and of itself. As Cooper states for Indigenous women, "Alcohol and drug use leads to family violence. Sexual abuse and property damage leads to women leaving or being evicted, [which] leads to homelessness [which] leads to temporary housing [which] leads to overcrowding [which] leads to family violence." <sup>7</sup>

In Cooper and Morris's example, solving any one of these problems on its own will not keep a person housed in the longer term, but provided in a coordinated and sensitive manner, a safe home together with counselling, drug rehabilitation and skills training will give the best chance possible of achieving stability.

Employment for instance, is recognised as a powerful tool for combating disadvantage, by providing the social benefits of integration as well as the material benefits of an income. <sup>6</sup> Employment is a key objective of responding to homelessness. But clearly, given the range of disabilities, health problems, educational and skill short-comings of many homeless people, a job cannot be sought as an

objective on its own. Skills need to be developed alongside the provision of stable housing and appropriate health care.

Research on homeless people with mental illness, Indigenous people, ex-prisoners, youth, women, refugees, and drug addicts all support the value of a wholistic approach, integrating accommodation with other necessary support programs from mental health, disability, Indigenous, youth and aged care areas from government and community.<sup>8,7,9,10,11</sup>

This wholistic response applies for both prevention and early intervention of homelessness but logically, the locus of responsibility for both differs. While prevention will focus around people who may already be housed, early intervention will be oriented toward people in crisis. This broadly matches the current roles of social housing with respect to preventing homelessness and SAAP for intervening.

Logically, the best solution to homelessness is prevention.<sup>12</sup> With the right material and social resources, individuals and social groups will be protected against, and equipped to deal with the threats of homelessness.<sup>13</sup>

The availability of appropriate housing at the right time of an individual's need can be critical to combating homelessness.<sup>11</sup> But we would be cautious about suggesting that providing houses is a solution in itself. The right housing at the right time can provide the "point of stability" from which individuals can access support and develop feelings of empowerment and belonging, vital to longer term stability.<sup>4</sup> Thus housing can play a critical role in preventing homelessness and be the central or brokering point for other government and community programs to be provided.

Determining what is 'appropriate' in terms of housing at any given time is essential. The word 'appropriate' encompasses a range of considerations from location and design of the house, proximity to services and support, affordability and access to employment opportunities. Again however, determining what is 'appropriate' housing depends on a close understanding of the individual's needs. As one housing manager put it, "If you can match that housing need with the client's needs you're home and hosed!"<sup>11</sup>

Although we know that risk levels are higher for some groups (such as those coming from a broken home or for

Indigenous people<sup>6</sup>) it is difficult to know who is 'at risk', given the varying interplay of so many causal elements. Thus, preventative strategies are usually targeted at social groups, but build feelings of empowerment at the individual level that buffer against risk. For instance, pastoral care programs in schools build relationships between students and their pastoral care teacher that can protect against risk by building emotional resilience and resourcefulness.<sup>16</sup>

For Indigenous people, regional strategies that consider patterns of mobility, together with public education and cross government and community partnerships work to develop cross cultural respect and tolerance, a powerful adjunct to targeted reactive interventions.<sup>1</sup> The Community Harmony Strategy in the Northern Territory is recognised as a particularly progressive example of preventing and responding to Indigenous homelessness or 'public place dwelling'. It has components for responding to accommodation, anti-social behaviour, health-care and referral needs.

Once homeless however, intervention strategies are required and would mostly be provided or brokered through SAAP. Intervention strategies focus on tools like advocacy, case management, counselling, skills training and the sourcing of appropriate accommodation. These strategies rely on the principles of a wholistic response, assessment of need and positive relationship with the case manager or support worker.

In terms of assessing client need, research for numerous homeless groups including Indigenous people, women, youth, the aged, those with mental illness and ex-prisoners highlights the importance of a close understanding of the particular and changing needs of the individual, whether through case management or other relationship of trust.<sup>7,15,10,11,4,9</sup> Such an understanding enables insight into the issues that drive feelings of independence, belonging and control for that individual.

This 'close understanding' of individual need depends on a positive relationship between the case manager or support worker and the homeless person. A lack of trust, a fear of losing independence and feelings of pride can all mitigate against the acceptance of support by homeless people.<sup>11</sup> For Indigenous women, asking for help can feel like a "shame job".<sup>7</sup>

## CHALLENGES IN TACKLING HOMELESSNESS

There are tensions or challenges that can make tackling homelessness difficult and even alienate the very people that programs are designed to assist.

Arguments around lack of funding can be unhelpful, crystallising a belief that if only there were enough money, houses or support programs, there would be no homelessness. We know however, that even with enough of all of these things, some people will remain homeless for emotional, social or cultural reasons. The other danger of focussing on funding shortfalls is that it can obscure the reality of other solutions to homelessness. While recognising this tension, it must be said that the lack of appropriate housing and support programs is identified as problematic right across homeless research, whether for the Indigenous, youth, women, ex-prisoners, drug addicts, or the mentally ill.<sup>7,10,15,9,14,8</sup> Every day, 55% of people looking for accommodation are turned away by SAAP services, primarily because of lack of beds.<sup>17</sup>

SAAP is dedicated to assisting those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. In reality, the SAAP program fails to reach many homeless, caters better to some groups than others, and fails to effectively do the early intervention or prevention work that could justify the claim of assisting those “at risk” of homelessness<sup>18</sup>. Although difficult to measure, it is estimated that only 14% of the homeless were in SAAP services on census night.<sup>12</sup>

Indigenous people, children, single women, adult males over the age of 25 and clients with complex needs all tend to ‘miss out’ when it comes to the SAAP program.<sup>18</sup> SAAP relies on people approaching service providers when they are in need and on the providers being able to cater to need, no matter how complex. This of course, does not always occur, and groups like Indigenous people are particularly hesitant to approach services that do not cater to their cultural needs.<sup>1</sup>

Poor linkages across government also fail homeless people in different ways. For instance, tenants leaving public housing are seldom tracked or supported through subsequent pathways. People who enter public housing through SAAP, often receive no ongoing support to sustain the tenancy. Young people in care or custody are often discharged without accommodation being organised.<sup>18</sup>

Other tensions in tackling homelessness bring us back to problems of definition. The term ‘homeless’ in itself, can be counter-productive, suggesting commonalities between homeless groups that are in reality, non-existent.

This has implications for policy directions on homelessness. An amorphous “Homelessness Strategy” will only become meaningful if refined into either target groups: (e.g. public place dwellers, youth, women escaping domestic violence, families), or categories of response such as regional strategies, accommodation strategies and health interventions.

The experience of homelessness can also be compounded by discrimination. Mental illness can mark a homeless person out as a ‘hopeless case’ in an ill-equipped health system and a community that struggles to understand.<sup>4</sup> In considering policy interventions for homeless people struggling with drug addictions, there is a ‘moral agenda’ that can drive punitive approaches which do little to build feelings of empowerment and control.<sup>14</sup> Beer describes similarly disempowering perceptions of youth that can hamper good responses.<sup>10</sup>

## THE PATH AHEAD

What is the real level of unmet homeless need? Although Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s “Counting the Homeless” provides a solid basis for measuring homelessness according to their definition over time, there would be people within that definition for whom their state of ‘homelessness’ is unproblematic either for them or for society.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, there are likely to be people who suffer as a result of homelessness, but are either outside the definition or unlikely to be identified because of the difficulties of ‘counting’ people in rural and remote areas, or counting people who may be so disconnected from society as to escape the census. Understanding these subtleties would complement current knowledge about the prevalence of homelessness and assist in providing sophisticated, targeted responses.

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is the focus of government responses to homelessness. As such, it is vital to know who it gets to and how well. What percentage of the homeless

population actually access SAAP? And if they don't access SAAP, why not? What are the barriers? Are there particular groups that are more likely to miss out than others? Although this bulletin highlights some of the current knowledge on these questions, building the evidence base would enable ongoing improvements in the delivery of SAAP.

In thinking about homelessness holistically, future research would assist in identifying models of good practice that are in place for linking the homeless to integrated employment, health and accommodation programs. It would be important to determine what it was about those models that made them effective. Wholistic responses to homelessness would also benefit from an understanding of the kind of agreements or collaborative structures that underpin such models and what it is about them that makes them effective.

## HOMELESS RESEARCH

1. Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie, D. (2001). *Counting the Homeless*, Australian Census Analytic Program, Australian Bureau of Statistics. Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service.
2. Memmott, P., Long, S., Chambers, C. and Spring, F. (2003). *Categories of Indigenous 'Homeless' People and Good Practice Responses to Their Needs*, Final Report, Queensland Research Centre, AHURI, Melbourne.
3. SAAP support period statistics, Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2000. SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2002-2003 Australia. [http://www.aihw.gov.au/housing/sacs/saap/saap-stats\\_supportperiods.cfm](http://www.aihw.gov.au/housing/sacs/saap/saap-stats_supportperiods.cfm) 12/10/05
4. Robinson, C. (2003). *Understanding Iterative Homelessness: The Case of People with Mental Disorders*, Final Report, University of New South Wales – University of Western Sydney, AHURI, Melbourne.
5. Berry, M., Chamberlain, C., Dalton, T., Horn, M. and Berman, G. (2003). *Counting the Cost of Homelessness: A Systematic Review of Cost Effectiveness and Cost Benefit Studies of Homelessness*, Special Report, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, Department of Family and Community Services (not sure about referencing this one), AHURI, Melbourne.
6. Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness. (2001). *Working Towards a National Homelessness Strategy*, Consultation Paper. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
7. Cooper, L. and Morris, M. (2003). *Sustainable Tenancy for Indigenous Families: What Services and Policy Supports are Needed*, Final Report, Southern Research Centre, AHURI, Melbourne.
8. O'Brien, A., Inglis, S., Herbert, T. and Reynolds, A. (2002). *Linkages between Housing and Support – What is Important from the Perspective of People Living With a Mental Illness*, Final Report, Swinburne/ Monash Research Centre Ecumenical Housing Inc. AHURI, Melbourne.  
[http://www.ahuri.edu.au/global/docs\\_final\\_mentalillness.pdf](http://www.ahuri.edu.au/global/docs_final_mentalillness.pdf)
9. Baldry, E., McDonnell, D., Maplestone, P. and Peeters, M. (2003). *Ex-Prisoners and Accommodation: What Bearing do Different Forms of Housing Have on Social Reintegration?*, Final Report, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, AHURI, Melbourne.  
[http://www.ahuri.edu.au/global/docs\\_final\\_exprisoners.pdf](http://www.ahuri.edu.au/global/docs_final_exprisoners.pdf)
10. Beer, A., Delfabbro, P., Natalier, K., Oakley, S. and Verity, F. (2003). *Developing Models of Good Practice in Meeting the Needs of Homeless Young People in Rural Areas*, Final Report, Southern Research Centre, AHURI, Melbourne.
11. Judd, B., Kavanagh, K., Morris, A. and Naidoo, Y. (2004). *Housing Options and Independent Living: Sustainable Outcomes for Older People who are Homeless*. Final Report, University of New South Wales – University of Western Sydney, AHURI, Melbourne.
12. Hanover <http://www.hanover.org.au/>
13. Arthurson, K., and Jacobs, K. (2003). *Social Exclusion and Housing*, Final Report, Southern Research Centre, AHURI, Melbourne.
14. Dalton, T., Bessant, J., Coupland, H., Maher, L., Rowe J. and Watts, R. (2003). *Heroin Users, Housing and Social Participation: Attacking Social Exclusion Through Better Housing*, Final Report, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, AHURI, Melbourne.
15. Adkins, B., Jerome, K., Heffernan, M., Greenhalgh, E. and Minnery, J. (2003). *Women, Housing and Transitions out of Homelessness*, Stage 2 Report, Queensland Research Centre, The Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, AHURI, Melbourne.
16. Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie, D. (2005). *Youth Homelessness: Four Policy Proposals*, Final Report, AHURI, Melbourne.  
<http://www.ahuri.edu.au/global/docs/doc724.pdf>

17. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003). *Australia's Welfare 2003*, Canberra, AIHW.  
<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/aus/aw03/aw03.pdf>
18. Erebus Consulting Partners. (2004). *Final Report of the National Evaluation of the Supported Assistance Program (SAAP/IV)*  
[http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/saap\\_iv/\\$file/main\\_report.doc](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/saap_iv/$file/main_report.doc)

## **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

Reports on Homelessness can be found on the AHURI Website ([www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)) or contact the AHURI National Office in +61 3 9660 2300



Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

[www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)

---

HEAD OFFICE Level 1, 114 Flinders Street Melbourne Victoria 3000 TELEPHONE +61 3 9660 2300  
FACSIMILE +61 3 9663 5488 EMAIL [information@ahuri.edu.au](mailto:information@ahuri.edu.au) WEB [www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** This material was produced with funding from Australian Government and the Australian States and Territories, AHURI Ltd acknowledges the financial and other support it has received from the Australian, State and Territory Governments, without which this work would not have been possible.

**DISCLAIMER** The opinions in this publication reflect the results of a research study and do not necessarily reflect the views of AHURI Ltd, its Board or its funding organisations. No responsibility is accepted by AHURI Ltd or its Board or its funders for the accuracy or omission of any statement, opinion, advice or information in this publication.