

9 DISCUSSION

The Australian Government's White Paper on homelessness has proposed two ambitious goals: 'to halve homelessness by 2020' and to provide 'supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it', along with interim targets for 2013. The Commonwealth, state and territory governments will work together to achieve the targets specified in the White Paper. This chapter makes some comments on the White Paper's targets, on the basis of the 2006 statistical data on homelessness.

The White Paper highlights three strategies to achieve its goals. The first strategy is 'turning off the tap', which relates to the provision of services focusing on early intervention and prevention (Homelessness Taskforce 2008, Ch. 3). The second strategy is 'improving and expanding services to end homelessness', which focuses on providing services that assist people into 'stable long-term housing, employment and training' or other forms of community participation (Homelessness Taskforce 2008, Ch. 4). The third strategy is 'breaking the cycle', whereby homeless people can 'move quickly through the crisis system to stable housing with the support they need so that homelessness does not reoccur' (Homelessness Taskforce 2008, Ch. 5).

The White Paper was accompanied by a significant financial commitment of \$1.2 billion over five years, with \$800 million allocated for prevention and early intervention services, and a further \$400 million to increase the supply of 'affordable and supported housing for people who would otherwise be homeless'. Since the White Paper, the government has announced a further \$6.6 billion to be spent on the construction of 20 000 homes for public housing, the largest expansion of public housing for many years.

The aim of the government is to reduce the number of homeless people from 105 000 in 2006 to 50 000 by 2020. The White Paper is not a detailed plan, but it does provide a policy framework for the national response to homelessness and foreshadows significant funded initiatives to achieve targeted social goals. However, the international economic environment is now far more problematic than it was prior to 2008, and the global economic recession may create additional pressures that exacerbate homelessness.

9.1 HOMELESS STATISTICS

There are three main sources of statistical data that inform policy. The first is the ABS Census of Population and Housing undertaken every five years. The 2001 Census reported 99 900 homeless people and the 2006 census reported 104 676. At both censuses the rate of homelessness was 53 persons per 10 000 of the population. On census night 2006, 16 375 people were counted in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping rough (primary homelessness), 46 856 people were staying temporarily with other households (secondary homelessness), 19 849 were in SAAP (secondary homelessness), and 21 596 were in boarding houses (tertiary homelessness).

The profile of the homeless population looks different if people are classified on the basis of their housing histories, rather than their accommodation on census night. In a study of 4291 homeless people in Melbourne, Chamberlain, Johnson and Theobald (2007) found that 92 per cent of their sample had moved regularly from one form of temporary accommodation to another. Nearly everyone had stayed with friends or relatives, but 85 per cent had also stayed in boarding houses, 60 per cent had been in SAAP/THM accommodation, and 50 per cent had slept rough. Homeless people show up in particular places on census night, but many of them will be somewhere else a few weeks later.

The second source of data is the National SAAP Data Collection which gathers information on all persons assisted by the SAAP program. The National SAAP Data Collection provides important information on the needs and social characteristics of people who use these services. Between 1 July 2005 and 30 June 2006, 106 500 homeless adults and 54 700 accompanying children were assisted, making a total of 161 200 persons in SAAP (AIHW 2007, p. xi). It would be possible to estimate the annual homeless population if we knew what proportion of homeless people use SAAP services, but we do not have this statistic.

The third source of statistical data is research surveys of different subgroups within the homeless population. These samples are usually drawn from service users. However, findings from this kind of research can be used to make inferences about the homeless population. In 2001, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2003) contacted all SAAP services in census week and were provided with 812 case studies. The research found that 48 per cent of SAAP clients had been homeless for one year or longer (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003, p. 42). In a study of 630 SAAP clients, Eardley, Thompson, Cass and Dadich (2008, Ch. 5) found that 65 per cent had been homeless on two or more occasions and one-quarter had received help from SAAP for between one and five years; and in a study of 4291

people, Chamberlain, Johnson and Theobald (2007, p. 25) found that 64 per cent had been homeless for one year or longer. The findings suggest that a significant proportion of the homeless population have long-term housing problems. Making good use of the available statistical data necessarily means making reasoned inferences from the different data sources.

9.2 REDUCING HOMELESSNESS: OVERVIEW

Homelessness is a process including stages of becoming homeless, being homeless and at some point recovering from homelessness. In Australia, thinking about homelessness as a process is well-established and metaphors such as the 'homeless career' (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998) and 'homeless pathways' are widely used to refer to these transitions (Clapham 2003; Johnson, Gronda and Coutts 2008). The homeless population consists of diverse groups: single men and women, families with children, and young people on their own. For some people, homelessness is a short-lived experience, while for others homelessness lasts more than one year, and some people experience repeated episodes of homelessness.

People become homeless for diverse reasons. Teenagers typically experience homelessness following a breakdown in their family situation. Some families become homeless as debt mounts and they are evicted from their housing. For other people, it is a breakdown in their conjugal relationship, often involving domestic violence, that results in one partner (usually a woman with children) losing their accommodation. Mental health issues or drug and alcohol abuse may be directly implicated in some people becoming homeless, but other people develop these issues in the homeless population (Chamberlain, Johnson and Theobald 2007).

It is known that some groups are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, such as young people who have been through the care and protection system (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008a). Also, it is known that Indigenous people are more vulnerable to becoming homeless than non-Indigenous Australians.

Reducing the size of the homeless population will require a significant investment in early intervention and applying appropriate intervention models for different subgroups in the population. There will also be a need for improved services to support people who are homeless and follow-up support to ensure that formerly homeless people can maintain their accommodation. Finally, a major investment in affordable housing, including public and community housing, will be needed over the next decade.

9.3 ROUGH SLEEPERS

The White Paper prioritises reducing the number of people sleeping rough and ‘offering supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it’ (Homelessness Taskforce 2008, p. 17). This is a commendable priority, but three points need to be borne in mind.

First, providing people with emergency accommodation can be justified on both moral and practical grounds, but moving rough sleepers into supported accommodation will not reduce the overall number of homeless people.

Second, it is important to recognise that most people do not sleep rough on a permanent basis. Chamberlain, Johnson and Theobald (2007) found that only two per cent of their sample was consistently without shelter, but 49 per cent of the sample had slept rough occasionally.

Third, the census identified 16 375 people in the ‘improvised dwellings’ category. However, this category includes a wide range of situations from sleeping in a park and sheltering in a derelict building, to living in a shed or garage of some kind. There is no simple way of disaggregating the category, but in 2006 we conducted further research. We examined census data, then we held many discussions with building inspectors, town planners and service providers across the country. This provided the basis for estimating the number of persons in improvised dwellings (sheds, garages and cabins) and the number of persons sleeping rough (for example, in public places, derelict buildings, cars and tents).

In Chapter 2, we estimated that in the capital cities about 75 per cent of households in the ‘primary homeless’ category were sleeping rough. However, in regional Australia the situation was different. About 60 per cent of households in this category were living in sheds, garages or shacks, most of which were owned or being purchased. Their living arrangements were below the community standard used to define homelessness, and in the main they were low-income households, but they were not transient and some were employed in local communities.

People sleeping rough or squatting in derelict buildings were more likely to be on their own, whereas people in improvised dwellings were more likely to be in families or group households. Overall, we estimate about 9900 persons in improvised dwellings across the country and about 6500 rough sleepers, although the latter group was undercounted.

9.4 YOUNG PEOPLE

Youth homelessness has been a major policy focus since the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s 1989 report, *Our Homeless*

Children, and in 2008 there was a National Youth Commission report, *Australia's Homeless Youth*. Youth refers to young people aged 12 to 24. However, a distinction is often drawn between teenagers aged 12 to 18 and young adults aged 19 to 24.

There have been important initiatives to assist homeless teenagers and their families. The establishment of the Reconnect program in 1999 was a major early intervention initiative by the Australian Government to reduce youth homelessness. Reconnect was implemented in phases and was not fully operational until 2003. Twenty-nine services were funded in December 1999 (DFaCS 2003, p. 22). By 2003, there were 98 Reconnect services across the country. The most recent evaluation of Reconnect (DFaCS 2003, p. 8) found that the program had achieved positive outcomes for young people and their families.

In addition, several states implemented new programs such as the Youth Support Coordinators Program in Queensland and the Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program in Victoria. Some SAAP youth agencies also undertake early intervention with recently homeless young people. Since the late 1990s, several state and territory governments have expended additional funds to increase the number of welfare staff in schools and to improve assistance to young people and families in crisis.

9.1 CHANGES IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE HOMELESS POPULATION

	2001	2006	% change
Families with children	22 944	26 790	+16.8
Youth aged 12 to 18 (alone)	22 600	17 891	-20.8
Adults (singles and couples)	54 356	59 995	+10.4
	99 900	104 676	+4.8

Source: Census of Population and Housing 2001, 2006; SAAP Client Collection 2001, 2006; National Census of Homeless School Students 2001, 2006.

Table 9.1 shows that the number of homeless youth aged 12 to 18 decreased from 22 600 in 2001 to 17 891 in 2006, a decrease of 20.8 per cent. This is compelling evidence that these early intervention initiatives have been effective. There are currently 98 Reconnect services across the country, but it has been estimated that 50 per cent of communities do not have a Reconnect program (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2004b, p. 41–43). At any point in time, there are 15 000 students across the country at risk of becoming homeless (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2004b, p. 42). Youth homelessness could be further reduced by expanding Reconnect to have national coverage.

In a study of 1642 homeless adults and young adults, Johnson and Chamberlain (2008a) found that 42 per cent of their sample had been in the state care and protection system. Young people who have been in state care are at greater risk of becoming homeless than most teenagers, and they are at much greater risk of making the transition from youth to adult homelessness. Targeted intervention and a reformed care and protection system are important components of an effective early intervention strategy for youth. In addition, such initiatives will have a flow-on effect by reducing the number of homeless teenagers moving into the adult homeless population.

9.5 FAMILIES

Another group for whom early intervention is a crucial issue is families. The number of persons in family households on census night increased from 22 944 in 2001 to 26 790 in 2006, an increase of 16.8 per cent (Table 9.1). Families make up 28 per cent of SAAP users (AIHW 2007, p. 37). In 2005–06, the number of children accompanying parents in SAAP was 54 700 (AIHW 2007, p. 15).

Most commonly, families become homeless because of a housing crisis or domestic violence. Adults in families experiencing a housing crisis are typically unemployed or outside of the labour force. These families are usually poor and often have accumulated debts. In most cases, the family is facing eviction because of rent arrears.

Early intervention with families experiencing a housing crisis involves providing families with assistance before they lose their accommodation, including family counselling to resolve relationship difficulties, financial advice, some funds to settle debts, and assistance with applications for public housing. There is a small national program providing this kind of response. In 2001, a pilot program of eight services known as the Family Homelessness Prevention Project (FHPP) was launched with a single service in each jurisdiction. From 1 July 2004, the program continued under a new name as the Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program.

An evaluation of the HOME program found that if families at risk of homelessness were reached with assistance before losing their accommodation, 86 per cent of those families remained in adequate housing or improved their housing situation during the period of support (MacKenzie, Desmond and Steen 2007). The evaluation highlighted two key success factors: the availability of brokerage funds and a capacity to work through issues on a needs basis. The effects of this assistance were found to be sustainable for a majority of families in the 12 months after support.

The HOME Advice program was a small-scale initiative and had only a small impact on the overall population of at-risk families. Family homelessness could be reduced by expanding the HOME project to have national coverage. Preliminary estimates indicate the need for between 100 and 250 services.

Some families become homeless as a result of family breakdown involving domestic violence. There has been a considerable investment in changing community attitudes towards domestic violence (Carrington and Phillips 2006), but it is not clear to what extent early intervention strategies have been implemented to assist women experiencing domestic violence. One impediment to implementing early intervention is that many women do not request assistance until they have left the family home.

One form of early intervention is family counselling to help couples work through their relationship issues, and another form of intervention is to remove the perpetrator of violence from the family home. Otherwise, 'early intervention' for victims of domestic violence means assisting them to move quickly to alternative, secure accommodation. The number of people using these services may not decrease, but if their time spent in homelessness services is minimised, then the number of families in the point-in-time census count will decrease over time. The current lack of affordable housing affects homeless families escaping domestic violence, by prolonging their homelessness and increasing the number of homeless people on census night.

9.6 ADULTS WITHOUT CHILDREN

There were 59 995 homeless adults without children on census night, up from 54 356 in 2001, an increase of 10.4 per cent (Table 9.1). Two-thirds of these adults were men and one-third were women. Adults without children are the largest group of service users and many have been homeless for extended periods of time or have moved in and out of homelessness. In general, early intervention strategies are not the issue for single adults with a history of homelessness, although over time early intervention for teenagers will stem the flow into the adult homeless population. The lack of affordable and appropriate housing is a major issue for this group.

Some 21 000 people live in boarding houses, and these properties are often in poor condition with issues of health and safety for the residents. Greater regulation to improve the living conditions in boarding houses and legislation to improve security of tenure would be stop-gap measures, but most people in boarding houses want affordable self-contained accommodation.

About one-quarter of the adults without children were aged 55 or older (15 000 people). An appropriate aged-care response could provide more adequate long-term accommodation for people who currently reside in boarding houses or take up places in the homelessness service system.

A significant proportion of the people with a long-term housing problem have substance abuse issues and/or mental health issues, which complicates their exit from homelessness (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008b). Most of the adults who were homeless on census night needed assistance to find appropriate, affordable housing, and long-term support to maintain that accommodation.

The main policy imperatives for this group are the creation of sufficient affordable housing stock, continuing support for individuals with complex housing needs, and sufficient levels of support to assist people who have experienced long-term homelessness to live in the community.

9.7 CONCLUSION

The White Paper proposes a long-term effort to halve homelessness by 2020. Achieving the right mix of interventions is one challenge. About 50 per cent of the homeless population could be assisted directly by the early intervention measures discussed above. The other component of a balanced response is the need for a steep increase in the stock of affordable housing, combined with policies that guarantee access for the most disadvantaged, and sufficient long-term, case-managed support to prevent homelessness reoccurring. At this point, it is unclear whether sufficient resources have been deployed to fund the programs that are needed.

A second challenge is to recognise that it will take several years before an assessment can be made about the effectiveness of the White Paper's initiatives. It takes time to put new services in place and for those services to have their full impact. It will also take time to increase the supply of affordable housing, and other low-income people will be competing for the new housing stock.

The White Paper sets out interim targets for 2013, including an overall reduction in homelessness of 21 000 people (Homelessness Taskforce 2008, p. 18). In 2013, homeless figures from the 2011 census will become available, but it is unlikely that the impact from the new initiatives will be apparent in 2011. The findings from the 2016 census will be of more relevance for assessing whether the White Paper's targets have been achieved.