Homelessness in Australia: Service Reform and Research in the 21st Century

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> **Abstract_** *In 2008, the newly-elected Australian Government made home-lessness its highest policy priority. This resulted in a substantial injection of funding to support new homelessness initiatives designed to prevent homelessness, as well as end chronic homelessness. In addition, over $11m was invested in research. In this paper, we argue that despite some promising service innovations, service reform failed, by and large, due to resistance from entrenched interests committed to maintaining a systemic focus on transitional support tied to short- and medium-term accommodation, and a lack of leadership. Further, we question whether the goal of ending homelessness can actually be met through systems reform only. We then examine the Government's investment in research. We examine 'Journeys Home', a longitudinal study that tracked a sample of vulnerable and homeless households, and identify what makes it so unique. We draw attention to the paradox that despite Journeys Home being recognised around the world as an exceptional dataset capable of answering funda-mental questions about the dynamics of homelessness, it has yet to have a meaningful impact on Australian homelessness policy and service direc-tions. We explain why this is so and what needs to be done to harness its potential to drive evidence-informed policy and practice change.*

> **Keywords_** *Journeys Home, longitudinal research, impact of research on policy and services*

Introduction

Australia is a prosperous country. Most Australians enjoy a relatively high standard of living: unemployment is relatively low; life expectancy is high and over two thirds of Australians own or are purchasing their own home. Nonetheless, like many other countries, Australia has a problem with homelessness. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, over 100,000 Australians were homeless on census night in 2011, and over one in 10 have been homeless at some point in their lives (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; 2012). For most of the last three decades, homelessness programmes and research in Australia have lagged behind developments in the rest of the world. In 2007 the situation started to change. This paper examines what changed, why, and the legacy of that change.

Background

Australian policy interest in homelessness started in the early 1970s with the passage of the Homeless Persons Assistance Act (1974). Under the terms of the Act, NGOs were required to assist chronically homeless persons, most of whom were older men living in inner city areas (DeHoog, 1972; Jordon, 1994). In the early 1980s, the demographic characteristics and geographic distribution of the homeless population started to change (Sackville, 1976). These changes foreshadowed what some researchers around the world would term the 'new homeless' (Hopper, 1997; Huth, 1997; Lee *et al.,* 2010).

The Federal Government subsequently launched the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) in 1985. Services provided under SAAP were not targeted to the 'skid row' population, but to young people, families and women, as well as single people. The shift in policy focus also reflected a shift in how homelessness was understood. In the past homelessness was thought to be a chronic condition. However, SAAP was based on the view that homelessness was a temporary crisis that could be addressed through the provision of transitional support linked to short- and medium-term emergency accommodation (Neil and Fopp, 1992). Over the next two decades SAAP underwent a series of formal reviews. And, while these reviews resulted in some modifications to SAAP's priorities and focus, the principles that guided SAAP, and the underlying conception of homelessness as a temporary crisis, remained the same.

By the middle of the first decade of the 21st century there were around 1,500 SAAP services across Australia receiving approximately AUS$400m in recurrent funding. However, the structural context in which SAAP services operated had changed considerably since it began. The housing market of the early 21st century was very different from the housing market in the 1980s. Across the country, housing

affordability had become a major issue, and affordable private rental accommodation was increasingly scarce, particularly in major cities. From the mid-1990s funding for public housing declined in real terms, and public housing stock declined both in real terms and as a percentage of the nation's housing stock[1] (Groenhart and Burke, 2014). Although unemployment was relatively low throughout the 1990s, it remained persistently high among some groups, such as young people. The 1990s was also a period characterised by ongoing welfare reforms as the Federal Government applied more stringent targeting measures and increased the obligations and responsibilities of welfare recipients.

Despite clear signals that SAAP agencies were struggling to meet the increasing demand brought about by structural changes (Johnson, 2012), from the mid-1990s policy interest in homelessness was low. What interest there was in homelessness focused on bureaucratic concerns such as service duplication and the lack of service integration rather than any substantive rethinking about the way SAAP services were delivered or funded (Department of Family and Community Services, 2001; Department of Human Services (Vic), 2002). There was no reason to think this situation was going to change. But in late 2007 it did and homelessness suddenly shifted from comparative obscurity to national prominence.

Reform and Research

On 3 December 2007, a new national labour government swept to power after a decade of conservative rule. Within a fortnight, the new Prime Minister declared that homelessness was a 'national disgrace' and immediately identified homelessness as the Government's highest social policy priority. Although it is not entirely clear why homelessness figured so prominently in the new Government's policy agenda, Parsell and Jones (2014, p.433) mount a strong argument that the focus on homelessness was one way of differentiating the "new government from the old". Homelessness was framed as a social problem that was inconsistent with Australia's "espoused egalitarian ethos" (p.428). And, by locating homelessness in a moral framework, the new Government was able to attack the previous government directly for "allowing this morally unacceptable problem to occur" (p.433).[2]

In a remarkably short amount of time the new Government appointed the first ever Minister for Housing and Homelessness, established a Prime Minister's Council on Homelessness and, along with state governments, signed off on the National

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1   In 1996, public housing accounted for 5.2% of the nation's housing stock. By 2011 it had declined to 4.1%.

2   Another school of thought is that, as a child, the Prime Minister had been homeless and was deeply affected by his experience.

Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) in November 2008. Under the NPAH, the Council of Australian Governments committed over AUS$800m of additional funding for support services and new homelessness initiatives over four years (2009-2012).[3] This amounted to a 55% increase in funding (FaHCSIA, 2008). Crucially, though, these developments were occurring in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). To ameliorate the impact of the GFC, the Federal Government initiated the Nation Building: Economic Stimulus Plan. The programme was partly driven by concerns about the impact of the GFC on the housing sector and construction industry, both of which are vital to the nation's economic wellbeing. As a result of the stimulus programme, nearly 20,000 new social housing dwellings were constructed, many of which were targeted to at-risk and homeless persons.

Underpinning the NPAH was the Federal Government's White Paper on Homelessness called *'The Road Home'* (FaHCSIA, 2008). *The Road Home* committed the Federal Government to two '2020' goals: (i) halving overall homelessness; and (ii) offering supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it. *The Road Home* identified three policy approaches to achieve the two '2020' goals and to measurably reduce the number of people exiting institutional settings and private and social housing into homelessness: early intervention and prevention; better service integration and improved service capacity; and assisting people to sustain their housing. *The Road Home* also identified the need for innovative, evidence-based services. Indeed, the notion of 'evidence-based policy' became a government mantra. Addressing the Fifth National Homelessness Conference, the Prime Minister outlined a vision to "draw out bold new ideas and to identify evidence-based approaches to reduce homelessness" (Kevin Rudd, speech to National Homelessness Conference, 22 May 2008).

Research evidence was positioned in policy discourse as a key link between reducing homelessness and the selection of new homelessness initiatives. This was most evident in relation to the Government's goal of reducing the numbers of rough sleepers, which it equated with chronic homelessness (Parsell, 2014). Seizing on research evidence from the US of the effectiveness of Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) approaches, the Government committed to funding 'Street to Home' services (i.e., Housing First), as well as 'Common Ground' facilities (i.e., permanent supportive housing – PSH), in every state and territory. A Housing First/PSH approach to working with chronically homeless persons represented a radical departure from what was possible under SAAP. The Street to Home initiative, which drew on many of the principles articulated by the Pathways to Housing model, had a strong evidence base (Stefancic and Tsemberis, 2007; Tsemberis,

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[3]   The original NPAH has been renegotiated a number of times. There remains some uncertainty as to whether it will continue past its current iteration, due to expire in 2017.

2011). And, while advocates in Australia and elsewhere arguably oversold aspects of Housing First (Kertesz *et al.,* 2009; Pleace, 2011; Johnson *et al.,* 2012), the selection of 'Street to Home' confirmed the Government's willingness to trial new models, as well as its commitment to policy that drew on sound research evidence. The Government also invested in the 'Common Ground' model of permanent supportive housing from the US. The selection of Common Ground further confirmed the Government's willingness to try new approaches. However, as Parsell *et al.* (2014) note, the selection of Common Ground was not based on research evidence. Rather "intuition and direct personal experiences were afforded more credibility…. by relevant stakeholders than peer-reviewed research" (p.84). Indeed, the selection of the Common Ground model serves as a timely reminder that research evidence is not always at the top of policy-makers' 'knowledge hierarchy' (Parsell *et al.*, 2014).

The Road Home nonetheless reported that the development and delivery of effective service responses was hampered by gaps in the existing evidence base, most notably a lack of larger-scale longitudinal data. Although Australian researchers had made substantial progress through the 1990s and early 21st century, studies were primarily qualitative and very small. Where quantitative studies had been undertaken they, too, were small, cross-sectional and restricted to specific groups of currently homeless persons or services users.

Thus, alongside service innovation a key element in the Government's strategy to reduce homelessness was the development of a national research agenda. After 12 months of consultation with researchers, service providers and policy-makers, the Federal Government released *The National Homelessness Research Agenda 2009-2013* in November 2009 with the aim "[t]o improve the evidence base for preventing and responding to homelessness" (FaCHSIA 2009, p.4). The research agenda identified several core priorities for future research: to inform and improve the service system and practice; to increase understanding of homelessness; and to improve data and the measurement of homelessness.

Previous governments had also noted a lack of research evidence, but as they hadn't done anything about it, there was considerable scepticism as to whether this government would be any different. This changed when the Federal Government announced it was allocating AUS$11.4m to *The National Research Agenda* – by far the largest single investment in homelessness research in Australia. The Government used the funding to support three separate initiatives. First, it allocated AUS$1.5m to 16 small research projects that were of national significance and focused on priorities identified in the research agenda. The 16 projects examined a broad range

of topics, covering areas such as sole fathers, families and children, service integration, institutional costs of homelessness, unemployment and the clinical care needs of chronically homeless persons.

Second, the Government allocated over AUS$4m to three research partnerships. The aim of these partnerships was to deliver an agreed programme of research that focused on more complex multi-year projects. Flinders University, the University of Queensland and Swinburne University were awarded the contracts. Research produced from these partnerships included longitudinal evaluations of recently funded Housing First and early intervention initiatives, as well as studies that examined youth, later life and indigenous homelessness, as well as homelessness prevention for women and children.

Together, the two research initiatives contributed new evidence about homeless subgroups, service capacity, and the effectiveness or otherwise of specific homelessness interventions. This was useful evidence for policy-makers and providers. However, the scope of these projects was limited and none could provide any robust information on the factors that contribute to the onset of homelessness, on whether conditions related to the onset of homelessness are also associated with its persistence, or on the factors that contribute to exits from homelessness.

Australia was not alone in being unable to provide reliable answers to these questions. Clear answers about the causes and consequences of homelessness have largely eluded researchers around the world due to a lack of appropriate data. A small number of researchers from the US and Denmark have successfully used administrative and longitudinal studies to shed light on various aspects of the dynamics of homelessness (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Metraux *et al.*, 2001; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; Benjaminsen, 2016). But these studies have a number of weaknesses that limit their capacity to illuminate the determinants of entries and exits from homelessness. Most notably, the information that administrative datasets capture is often limited and the quality of data uneven, and they only provide information on people who use particular services.

The Government's third initiative aimed to address this gap. Just over AUS$5m was subsequently awarded to The Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at The University of Melbourne to undertake a large-scale, national longitudinal study that focused on housing instability and homelessness, subsequently called 'Journeys Home'. The commissioning of Journeys Home was a major step forward. For the first time researchers were going to have sufficient funding to attempt what had never been done before – a longitudinal survey that tracked a national sample of individuals exposed to high levels of housing insecurity and that employed more rigorous sampling methods than previously used.

Journeys Home: What Makes it Unique?

Commissioning Journeys Home was a bold move. Although the financial investment was bigger than ever seen before, three significant challenges had to be addressed if questions about causes and consequences were to be successfully answered.

First, the dataset had to include housed people and those at risk as well as homeless households. The inclusion of vulnerable households is important because it provides the opportunity to identify the factors that precipitate the onset of homelessness. Crucially, it also gives researchers a control group to compare homeless people against, given that such a specific population can hardly be deemed comparable to the general population covered in other household surveys. However, drawing a sample of individuals vulnerable to homelessness is difficult because homelessness is such a rare occurrence. This means that in any sample randomly drawn from a vulnerable population, the likelihood that an individual will experience homelessness is very low. Journeys Home was faced with a similar problem when it drew a sample from the Research Evaluation Database (RED), which contains administrative records for all Centrelink[4] income support recipients. Centrelink provides all income support payments to eligible members of the Australian community, and most people at risk of or experiencing homelessness would likely be in receipt of a Centrelink payment. The problem is that nearly five million Australians receive Centrelink payments at any given time, and the majority of these people would not be at risk of homelessness. Fortunately, there was a way around this problem.

Since 2010, Centrelink staff have been required to flag in their database customers they assess to be either 'homeless' or 'at risk of homelessness'.[5] This provided the opportunity to draw a sample of people who were homeless, had recently experienced homelessness, or were at risk of homelessness. All Centrelink customers aged 15 and over in receipt of benefits during a 28-day period prior to 27 May 2011 were considered to be in the in-scope population. This population contained 27,017 individuals flagged as homeless and 15,319 individuals flagged as at risk of homelessness.

A limitation of the Centrelink flags is that the flagging protocols were not consistently followed by Centrelink staff across the country. Consequently, a decision was made to identify a third group that had characteristics similar to those identi-

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4   Centrelink delivers a range of government payments and services for retirees, the unemployed, families, carers, parents, people with disabilities, Indigenous Australians, and people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and provides services at times of major change. The majority of Centrelink's services are the disbursement of social security payments.

5   The definitions of 'homeless' and 'at risk' used by Centrelink broadly matches the definition put forward by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992).

fied by Centrelink as 'homeless' or 'at risk' but that had not been flagged. Using a logistic regression equation, 95,755 persons were identified who were, at least in a statistical sense, vulnerable to homelessness. The extensive list of predictor variables was largely driven by what was available in the RED data and included controls for key demographic characteristics – health, housing tenure type, income and income support history, prior incarceration and a range of other indicators used by Centrelink to identify 'vulnerability', such as drug or alcohol dependence, a lack of literacy and language skills and having experienced a recent traumatic relationship breakdown.

Thus, the total population from which Journeys Home drew its final sample was 138,181 individuals. Individuals were randomly selected from each of the three subgroups. After determining various individuals and groups to be 'out of scope',[6] 2,719 individuals were randomly selected. Almost 62% of this group (n=1,682) agreed to participate. Individuals classified as homeless, at risk and vulnerable accounted for 35%, 37% and 28% of the sample, respectively (for further details on the population and sampling methodology see Wooden *et al.,* 2012). The response rate to the initial survey (wave 1) not only compares favourably with other studies that sample from seriously disadvantaged populations (O'Callaghan *et al.,* 1996; Randall and Brown, 1996; Weitzman *et al*, 1990), but it is also in line with panel surveys of the general population, including the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey,[7] the German Socio-economic Panel Study, and the British Understanding Society Survey, which have wave 1 response rates of 61%, 66% and 57%, respectively (Watson and Wooden, 2014).

The second challenge was to draw a sample from multiple locations. To understand, for instance, how the labour or housing market affects entries and exits from homelessness, one requires variations in the conditions of the housing and labour markets. The more the better. Studies that sample from a single location, or even a small number of locations, are unable to exploit variation in local conditions and hence are unable to estimate to what extent they affect homelessness. Journeys Home drew its wave 1 sample from 36 different locations (or clusters) covering city, suburban, regional and remote areas from all states and territories

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6   Those out-of-scope where those identified as: (i) in prison; (ii) an overseas customer; (iii) requiring an interpreter; (iv) having specifically indicated to Centrelink that they were not willing to participate in research studies; or (v) having a record marked as 'sensitive'.

7   The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA) is a household-based panel survey. It began in 2001 and 14 waves have been completed. Surveys are conducted annually. Funding is guaranteed for 18 waves. HILDA collects information about economic and subjective well-being, labour market dynamics and family dynamics. The wave 1 panel consisted of 7,682 households and 19,914 individuals. In wave 11 this was topped up with an additional 2,153 households and 5,477 individuals.

across the country. This means that for the first time, a national sample of those who were homeless or at risk of homelessness was constructed. National coverage was maintained in subsequent waves by tracking wave 1 respondents, even if they moved out of the 36 original clusters. Journeys Home went beyond drawing a sample from multiple locations in that it offered national coverage, not unlike general household panel surveys such as the HILDA (Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia) survey. National coverage allows researchers not only to exploit variation in local conditions with respect to the housing market, the labour market or even state and territory public policies, it also allows researchers to draw inferences at the national level. This represents a major step forward in addressing the limited geographical applicability of previous studies. For the first time, it is possible to examine the determinants of homelessness not only in a few urban areas but in an entire country, thanks to a survey that consistently measured how entries into homelessness, the experience of homelessness, and the characteristics of the homeless population vary across urban and rural areas in Australia.

The third and last major challenge was to generate a high-quality longitudinal dataset. Researchers have long been aware that the best way to answer questions about entries and exits from homelessness is through longitudinal research. However, maintaining contact with vulnerable and homeless individuals can be challenging given the relatively high rates of mobility, mortality and imprisonment in this population. Attrition is problematic for two reasons. The first obvious reason is that it reduces sample size. Large attrition rates can preclude any longitudinal analysis because there are simply not enough individuals that can be followed through time. More importantly, attrition raises particular concerns when it is not random. Non-random attrition occurs when individuals dropping out of the sample are different in observable or unobservable ways from those staying in the sample. And non-random attrition is particularly concerning when attrition rates are high. The evaluation of dynamic patterns, whether they relate to homelessness, health, income, geographical mobility or any other changing characteristics, can be biased if the underlying survey exhibits substantial attrition that is not random.

Journeys Home was extremely successful in retaining the original participants. Journeys Home conducted six surveys, with interviews held every six months. Over the 2.5-year observation period, 91% (wave 2), 88% (wave 3), 86% (wave 4), 85% (wave 5) and 84% (wave 6) of the original wave 1 respondents were re-interviewed. The very high retention rate means that sample size is unlikely to be an issue for any longitudinal analysis and it gives confidence that findings based on Journeys Home suffer little from non-random attrition biases. These high retention rates are most likely due to two factors: all sample members were offered a AUS$40 incentive

each time they agreed to be interviewed and the organisation sub-contracted to undertake the field work had access to participants' most recent contact details, including their address and phone number, from the Centrelink database.

The longitudinal dimension also allows researchers to control for both observed and unobserved individual heterogeneity in multivariate analyses. Econometric models such as fixed and random effects models that account for unobserved heterogeneity require longitudinal data. And, although Journeys Home includes a wide range of individual and household characteristics, it cannot possibly cover the full spectrum of characteristics relevant for any outcome variable. For instance, there are unobserved characteristics that predispose some people to homelessness or to longer durations of homeless, and failure to account for this unobserved heterogeneity could very well lead researchers to the wrong conclusions.

While these three features alone distinguish Journeys Home from other datasets available to homelessness researchers, a number of features of the survey design are also worth mentioning. The survey tool(s) used in Journeys Home were designed to elicit information in a number of areas that were thought to have a bearing on entries and exits, but which are not commonly captured in administrative data. Hence, questions about social network composition, employment, service contact, health and well-being, family history, exposure to violence, as well as housing and living arrangements provide researchers with an extremely rich dataset.

The survey was also developed in such a way that it avoided any specific definition of homelessness; indeed, the term 'homelessness' is never used. Rather, the instrument collected a raft of information on where people were staying, as well as the stability and the quality of their accommodation. The benefit of this is that researchers can apply their own definition of homelessness, as well as test different definitions.

Another distinctive feature of the Journeys Home survey tool is that it included a housing calendar designed to capture all changes in housing circumstances *between* interviews. Beginning in wave 2, Journeys Home respondents who had a new address (or had lived in other places) since their last interview were asked to report the month and period (beginning, middle or end of month) that they had left their last accommodation and the type of accommodation they had moved into. This line of questioning was repeated to capture all subsequent moves prior to the respondent moving into their current accommodation at the time of the interview. When individuals were sleeping rough, the survey only captured the timing of their move into accommodation rather than their moves from one street to another. These data provide very detailed information about the timing of homeless and housing spells, which is crucial in determining any causal relationships.

Finally, drawing the sample from Centrelink provided the opportunity to link respondents' survey responses to their administrative records. The administrative records contain detailed and accurate information on the benefits history, accommodation types and any periods of incarceration of respondents, as well as any medical conditions while receiving benefit payments. A question seeking consent to link respondents' survey responses to their Centrelink records was included and 98% of respondents consented. This is a key feature of Journeys Home because it allowed accurate information to be collected from administrative sources on issues that some respondents may be reluctant to reveal, such as past incarceration or medical conditions. Benefits history are also fundamental to determine present and past benefit payments, as recall bias, the complexity of the transfer system, and the potential stigma associated with these payments often translate into very poor measures of these payments in surveys relying on self-reported information.

Taken together, Journeys Home provides researchers with the opportunity to rigorously interrogate many important questions about the dynamics of homelessness using more sophisticated techniques than previously. For instance, Cobb Clark and colleagues (2016) utilise the full six waves and apply survival analysis to model exits from homelessness using two different definitions of homelessness – a literal definition and a broader definition, which they term 'housing insecurity'. Importantly, they apply techniques that account for time invariant and unobserved heterogeneity, which is a unique contribution. And it makes a difference. As with other studies, they find that exit rates exhibit negative duration dependence (i.e., exit rates decrease with the length of time spent homeless) when individual specific heterogeneity is ignored. However, when they control for unobserved and observed heterogeneity, such as demographic characteristics, education, health and a range of other background characteristics, they find "evidence of significant positive duration dependence in the initial stages […], with exit rates then falling for longer durations" (Cobb-Clark *et al.*, 2016, p.66). Hence, they conclude that "the common wisdom that exit rates fall continuously with increased spell length due to a combination of selectivity and scarring effects appears to be overly simplistic" (p.67).

Another important contribution comes from McVicar *et al.* (2015), who investigated the relationship between substance use and homelessness. Using fixed effects modelling to examine four waves of Journeys Home data, they found homelessness and substance misuse to be closely related. The relationship was, however, driven "by observed and unobserved individual characteristics which cause individuals to be both more likely to be homeless and to be substance users" (p.89). Other longitudinal studies could not control for observed and unobserved individual characteristics, but Journeys Home can. And it makes a difference, as it led the authors to the conclusion that the association between homelessness and substance use is unlikely to be causal in either direction. Indeed, these and other papers (Scutella

et al., 2013; Johnson *et al.,* 2015), have made an important contribution to the evidence base in Australia, and perhaps internationally. With a raft of manuscripts currently in progress covering topics including health, psychological distress and crime, the contribution of Journeys Home is set to increase.

Lessons

2008 was a watershed year for homelessness in Australia. And now, eight years later, the legacy is clear to see. Service reform was overdue, but the opportunity was, by and large, wasted. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the number of people experiencing homelessness increased by 17% between the 2006 and 2011 censuses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), and the number of rough sleepers has also increased, with rough sleeping now much more visible in many major cities across the country (City of Melbourne, 2016). The innovative and often evidence-based ideas that underpinned reform in the area of chronic homelessness have not taken hold in the way that was hoped. In part, this is because supporters of Housing First and PSP failed to bring along existing service providers. Indeed, by critiquing the existing system without recognising the historical, material and structural constraints that faced existing service providers, those services were alienated from the broader process of change. However, it is equally true that existing providers were overly defensive at times and many sought to preserve the status quo. Despite the promise of change, Australia's primary response to homelessness remains much the same – the majority of funding is still directed towards transitional support linked to short- and medium-term emergency accommodation. Another reason system reform stalled was because of a lack of leadership in key areas. Federal and state advisory councils were populated and often chaired by prominent services providers who conflated their own interests with the needs of the broader system. This created much rancour and resistance at the time. A key lesson is that it is important to have independent non-aligned people and institutions driving policy and practice change. The bigger lesson is that without structural reform increasing the supply of affordable housing, the capacity of systems reform to reduce homelessness, let alone end it, is limited (Bullen and Reynolds, 2014).

The story with research is slightly different and there are many positive lessons to learn. Governments often spend small sums of money on minor research projects that are not particularly rigorous or reliable. Of all the studies funded under *The National Research Agenda*, Journeys Home has the most potential to provide policy-makers with the evidence they need to develop and deliver effective service responses.

While the greatest value of Journeys Home lies in having a large robust panel dataset capable of producing robust, policy-relevant evidence, Journeys Home has also engaged an entirely new set of researchers. Whereas in the past homelessness research in Australia was dominated by a small group of researchers from limited disciplinary backgrounds, Journeys Home has introduced homelessness to new disciplines such as clinical psychology, economics, econometrics, criminology, quantitative sociology and social work. Not only do new researchers bring fresh ideas, they bring methodological skills previously unavailable.

Another sensible decision was aligning some Journeys Home questions with other surveys. Journeys Home borrowed many questions from HILDA. Not only was there a benefit in that some questions had already been tested, but using a selection of HILDA questions provides an opportunity to make comparisons between vulnerable and mainstream populations.

Another important decision was to make Journeys Home a publically available dataset. In doing so, Journeys Home has connected Australian researchers with some of the best researchers in the world. Engaging with overseas researchers has opened many new and interesting lines of enquiry, both empirical and theoretical. For instance, Dan O'Flaherty from Columbia University in the US, along with Yi-Ping Tseng (The University of Melbourne) and Rosanna Scutella (RMIT University), are using Journeys Home to examine whether private information held by people better predicts homeless entries than public information agencies can obtain. The findings have potentially important implications for service delivery, particularly in the area of assessment, which remains a problematic policy and practice issue in Australia.[8]

While the Journeys Home research team got many things right, any future attempt to undertake a similar study here or overseas might consider a few changes. The two-and-a-half-year observation period is arguably too short – doubling it to five years, while costly and increasing the risk of attrition, would undoubtedly be better. The addition of a fourth group drawn from the general Centrelink population and not at any significant risk of homelessness would strengthen the study.[9] In addition, there should be more consideration in the planning phase about possible links to national administrative datasets. In Australia, linking Journeys Home to Medicare (health) and homeless service systems data (SHIP) would have provided immensely valuable insights into patterns of service use among vulnerable and homeless households, and the associated costs.

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8   Paper presented at 2016 Workshop on Homelessness and Housing Insecurity. University of Melbourne, 18-19 July 2016.

9   Suggested by two of the key Journeys Home researchers: Rosanna Scutella and Yi-Ping Tseng.

Journeys Home has started to make an important contribution to the study of the dynamics of homelessness. Australian policy-makers are now getting access to robust findings identifying key risk factors for homelessness and factors that prolong homelessness, as well as findings on the impact of structural factors such as housing and labour markets. Importantly, Australian policy-makers and service providers no longer have to rely on studies from other countries where social, economic and cultural conditions differ. Indeed, Journeys Home provides the sort of nuanced localised findings that are crucial to developing and delivering services responses that meet the needs of vulnerable Australians.

However, it is clear that research from Journeys Home has yet to filter down and inform policy and practice decisions. While it is still early days, much more work needs to be done by academic researchers to disseminate their findings to non-academic audiences. While the scholarly potential of Journeys Home is rich, the true strength of Journeys Home lies in its potential to drive evidence-informed policy and practice change. Harnessing this potential should be a priority for researchers, policy-makers and service providers.

Journeys Home is by no means perfect, but it is a good example of what can happen when governments and researchers collaborate in the truest sense of the word. Journeys Home has put Australian research firmly in the spotlight across the world. And perhaps this could be its most important legacy: Journeys Home demonstrates that Australia does not always have to follow the rest of the world, but can occasionally lead it as well.

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