

Showers, sustenance and sleeping bags:

The acceptance of street homelessness in the context of housing policy failure

Felicity Reynolds, CEO Mercy Foundation, Sydney, NSW, Australia
Associate Professor Cameron Parsell, University of Queensland, Australia

Overview

- The context - Australian Housing Policy – National, State, Local
- The history of our homelessness service system
- Disinvestment in public housing
- Servicing (rather than solving) a modest number of people experiencing street homelessness in Australia
- Normalising homelessness
- Homelessness positioned as a charitable issue rather than a social justice/human rights issue

Context - the 'Australian Dream'

- Since the late 18th century when Europeans began arriving in Australia and started the process of dispossessing Aboriginal Australians from their land - Owning one's home has been considered the 'Australian dream'.
- It became part of Australian folklore and in the 20th century it was expected that most Australians would own their own home.
- *"By the 1830s, owning your own piece of property was an attainable objective."* Bluett, 2017
- By the 1970s home ownership rates in Australia were over 70% (some of the highest rates of ownership in the world)

Housing and homelessness

(a brief history)

- Lower rates of home ownership and disinvestment in public housing since 1980s.
- Homelessness definition includes rough sleepers, people in crisis accommodation, people in sub-standard or over-crowded housing
- Homelessness services/charities argue “constantly increasing” (though, stats show it isn’t).
- Causes – Individuals versus Structural
 - Homelessness viewed (then and now) result of individual factors
 - Structural factors as a cause of homelessness brought into debate past 3 decades or so. Still remains less common as a general explanation for homelessness. Though ‘housing affordability’ now seen as an issue in Australia (but mostly about ownership).

Primary homelessness (rough sleepers) by State (2011)

	2001	2006	2011
New South Wales	1698	1596	1920
Victoria	1018	786	1092
Queensland	2322	2026	1584
South Australia	512	436	258
Western Australia	1410	1016	925
Tasmania	125	122	158
Northern Territory	1798	1213	848
ACT	61	51	29
Australia (Total)	8946	7247	6813

Solvable problem

- Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing (when needed) are approaches to solving rough sleeping that we know work.
- However, a volunteer industry of people assisting rough sleepers has grown up around city CBDs in all State capitals in Australia.
- As you can see from the chart (previous slide), there is some evidence to believe there may be more volunteers assisting people who are street homeless than there are people experiencing street homelessness. (*Example Newcastle 2016 – less than 50 on register; over 50 volunteers new street laundry service*)

Servicing street homelessness

- No one disputes that any citizen should go hungry, be unsafe and exposed to the elements.
- However, the volunteer agencies that offer food, sleeping bags, showers, laundry services etc – seem not to question the social injustice of people's 'unhoused' situation.
- Not only is the lack of housing options not criticised, the services that are offered must always be honoured and appreciated. Criticising this type of charity invites criticism.

Some examples



Because sleeping rough is tough

the fighting chance they deserve.

A bag with room for extra belongings, the Street Swag is made of high-quality Australian canvas that is mildew resistant and breathable. The Street Swag also has a foam mattress. Designed for those living on the streets, its discreet appearance and camouflage colours offer warmth, comfort and safety to those who need to be invisible.

The Street Swags are made by Australian prisoners who gain qualifications and skills, improving their chances of employment after incarceration and helping to break the cycle of poverty, crime and homelessness. The swags are then rolled and packed by school children who learn about giving back to the community. Hundreds of homelessness services across Australia distribute them directly to those that need them most.

Street swags are incredibly important while someone is looking for accommodation. Over 120,000 people are homeless on any given night in Australia. Over 55% of all people are turned away while looking for immediate accommodation and over 80% of families are turned away.

A Street Swag can save a homeless person's life when it's cold or wet outside.

Street Swags save the lives of our most vulnerable. Swags are basic bed & shelter for our homeless Australians sleeping rough, giving them



BRISBANE



MELBOURNE



PERTH



SYDNEY



WERRIBEE
VIC



Restoring Dignity One Hot Shower at a Time...|

One challenge faced by homeless Australians when living on the streets is maintaining personal hygiene. Some people shower at shelters or others in public toilet blocks, constantly thinking, 'Who is around?' or 'Am I safe?'



Our mobile service offers people a safe place to shower, shave, brush their teeth and most importantly, helps restore some dignity in their lives!



Department of Housing and Public Works > Housing > Homelessness > Dignity First Fund

Dignity First Fund

The Queensland Government established the Dignity First Fund in 2016. The purpose of the Fund is to seek new and innovative ideas from non-government providers that aim to prevent and reduce homelessness and assist people experiencing homelessness to live with dignity.

To date, there have been two Dignity First funding rounds.

The first \$2.5 million funding round closed on 30 September 2016, with 24 applications funded. The second \$2.5 million funding round closed on 10 May 2017, with 29 applications funded.

These projects are delivering a wide range of essential services that are making a real difference for people experiencing homelessness in our community.



Feeding the hungry – every night of the year

The very first Youth Off The Streets program was a food van that served meals to homeless kids in Kings Cross. We've now been serving food and drink to people in need since 1991. Every night of the year there are 20-50 people who use the Food Van – both adults and young people. We never turn anyone away. The Food Van is staffed by a wonderful team of volunteers and travels in Sydney between Green Park and Darlinghurst feeding the hungry.

VOLUNTEER FOR THE FOOD VAN



Problems with these responses

- ❑ Providing charity is an unambiguous good.
- ❑ People who are homeless lack resources and the amenity to clean themselves. Thus providing cleaning is self-evidently right.
- ❑ Housing is seen as not sufficiently immediate, or naïve.
- ❑ Challenging a doer is provocative: not only progressive, but also morally superior to the argument for housing.
- ❑ Homelessness is presented as a charitable issue, not a social justice issue.
- ❑ Homelessness (mostly street homelessness) is 'normalised'.
- ❑ The number of services exaggerates the extent of the problem.