



Homelessness, Identity, and *our* Poverty of Ambition

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Why and What

- Why don't we systematically end homelessness?
- When we don't end homelessness, what do we do?
- An Australian perspective

Sociological study of identity

- Accumulation thesis
- Collective identity: disaffiliation and re-affiliation
- Different aspirations
- Purpose driven, solution focused social science research
- Understanding the social problem is never enough; sustained field research has to be motivated by developing empirical knowledge to address the problem

Paradox

- Australians are wealthy and the economy is continually growing
- As of January 2019, 28 years of uninterrupted economic growth
- Record for the longest period of recession-free growth for a developed economy (Australian Trade and Investment Commission 2019)
- Unlike many parts of the world, the 2008 financial crisis do not put the economy into recession

Paradox

- Australia's wealth per adult in 2018 is USD 411,060, the second-highest in the world after Switzerland
- Because of Australia's relatively low wealth inequality, we are ahead of Switzerland in first place by median wealth per adult (Credit Suisse 2018)
- Not coincidental, the significant wealth is partially driven by ownership of expensive property (and digging holes)

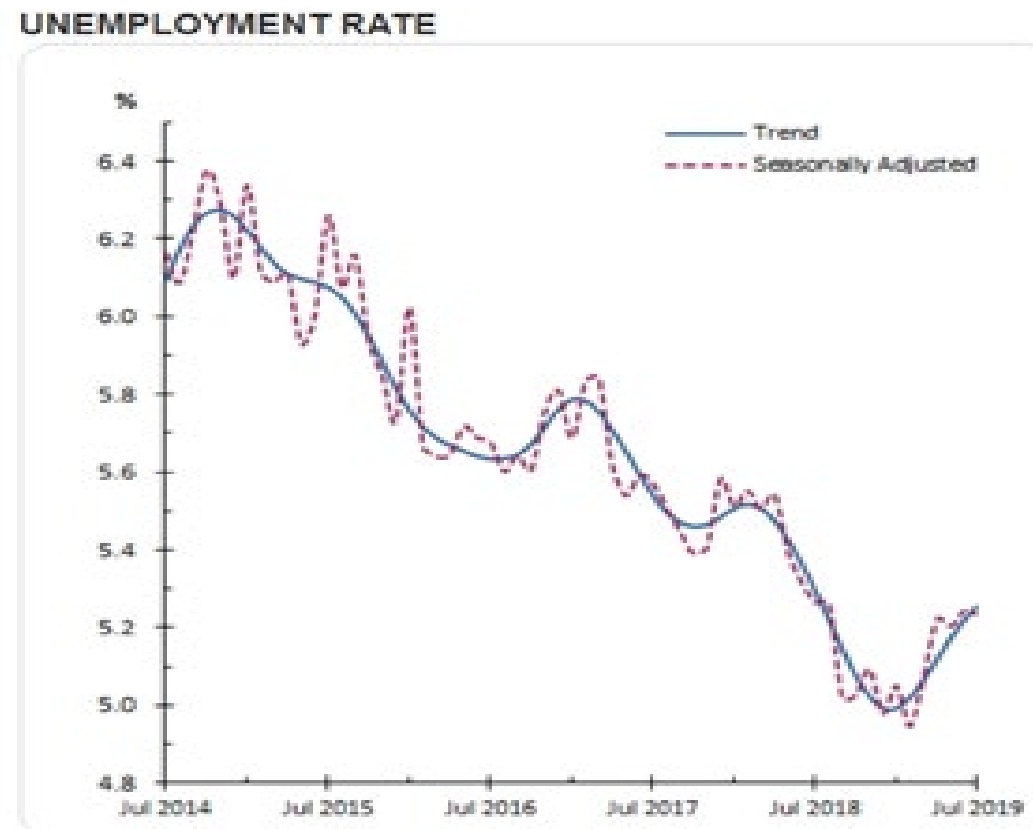
Paradox

- National unemployment trends 2000-16 (Commonwealth of Australia 2019)



Paradox

- National unemployment trends July 2014-19 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019)

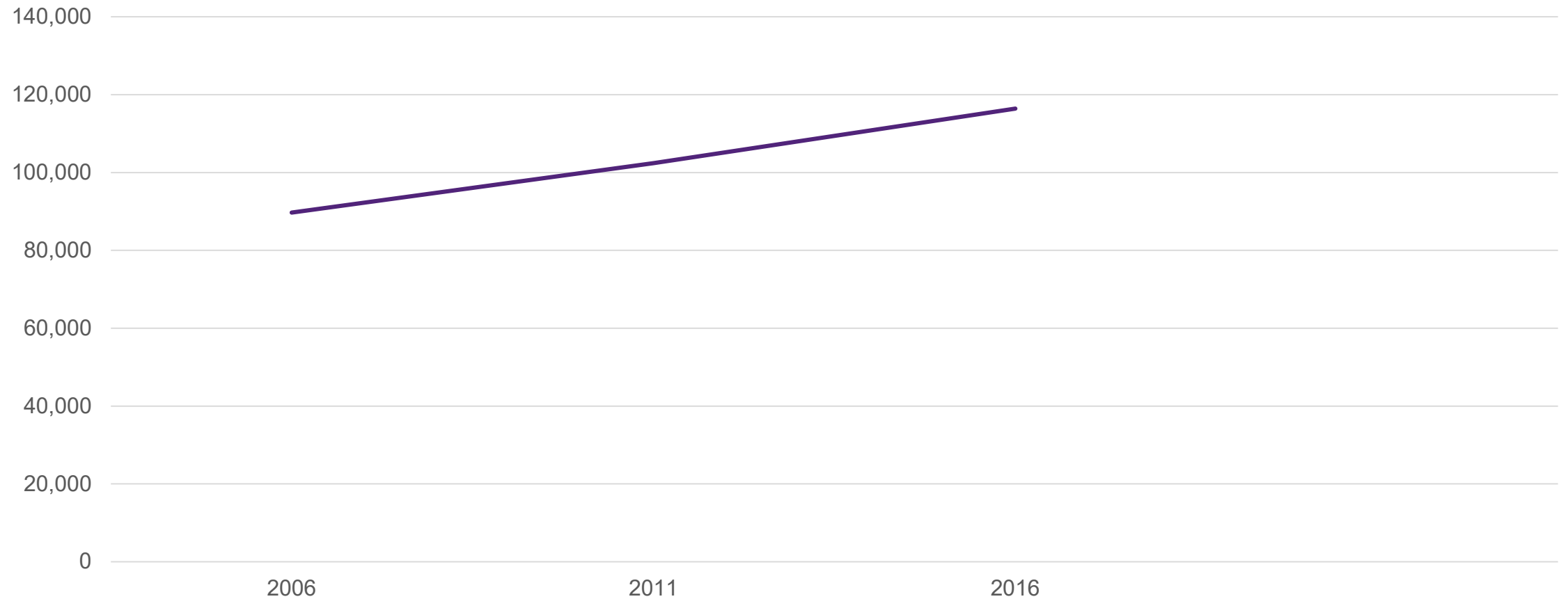


But...

- The positive economic, individual wealth, and employment measures are mirrored by increasing homelessness

Homelessness Trends

Census night homelessness estimates



What explains the paradox: Increasing homelessness in prosperity ?

- There are multiple explanations:
 - some will be familiar to you
 - some may represent a different perspective on what you observe
 - some may be uniquely Australian

Not a lack of *formal* policy ambition

- Vision to end, not to manage, homelessness
- Headline targets: Half homelessness by 2020 (Commonwealth of Australia 2008)
- Evidence based policy
- Learning from international evidence
- Increasing housing supply; altering systems to prevent homelessness; increasing capacity of services

Not a lack of *formal* policy ambition

- Australian identity

Something needs to be done. I do not want to live in a country where we simply discard people. I don't want to live in a country where we accept people begging on the streets is somehow acceptable in the Australian way of life. I don't want to live in a country where, like many I visit around the world, it's acceptable for people to be sleeping rough every night. We're not like that. (Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, cited in Parsell and Jones 2014: 428)

Formal policy aspirations versus reality

- Housing not included; incomplete policy transfer (Parsell, Jones, and Head 2013)
- Ongoing support does not exist (Parsell, Petersen, and Moutou 2015)
- Formal homelessness policy incongruent with housing policy (Clarke, Parsell, and Vorsina 2019)
- Did not have the data to assess whether targets could be achieved (Parsell and Jones 2014)
- Evidence discounted in favour of firsthand experience and intuition (Parsell, Fitzpatrick, and Busch-Geertsema 2014)

It is not a technical or knowledge gap problem

- Homelessness is increasing in Australia, yet we have the scientific and technical knowledge to end it
- Housing
- Housing led (O'Sullivan 2016); Housing First (Busch-Geertsema 2014; Padgett, Henwood, and Tsemberis 2016); Permanent Supportive Housing (Parsell et al. 2015); Assertive Street Outreach (Mackie et al. 2019)
- Prevention (Mackie 2015); legislation (Watts 2014); service and systems integration/collaboration (Parsell, Cheshire, Walter, and Clarke 2019)
- Complex and inflexible systems not complex people
- Frustration. Reconciling the gap between what we know and what we do

Is it a financial or cost problem?

- The power of the cost effectiveness dream
- We were sold the idea that all we needed to do was rigorously demonstrate the financial argument
- Cost offsets: annual average of \$48,217 per person living on the streets, whereas for those same individuals, annual average cost of \$35,117 per person living in permanent supportive housing (Parsell, Petersen, and Culhane 2016)
- We generated the figures through analysis of government administrative data
- Two time windows: 12 months when people were chronically homeless, and 12 months when people were securely housed (N=41)

Mental Health Data

	12 months pre tenancy commencement	12 months post tenancy commencement	Difference between pre and post
Episodes	1,029	359	-669 (65%↓)
Minutes	27,152	10,560	-16,592 (61%↓)
Cost	\$372,498	\$129,958	-\$242,540

Police Data

	12 months pre tenancy commencement	12 months post tenancy commencement	Difference between pre and post
Occurrences as Offender	50	24	-26 (52%↓)
Cost per offender = \$2,453	\$122,650	\$58,872	-\$63,778
Offences as Offender	57	28	-29 (51%↓)
Occurrences as Victim	24	11	-13 (54%↓)
Cost per victim = \$243	\$5,832	\$2,673	-\$3,159
Occurrence Police or Corrections transport to Hospital	5	1	-4 (80%↓)
Nights in Police Custody	45	27	-18 (40%↓)
Cost per night in custody = \$830	\$37,350	\$22,410	-\$14,940
Total costs to Police	\$165,832	\$83,955	-\$81,877

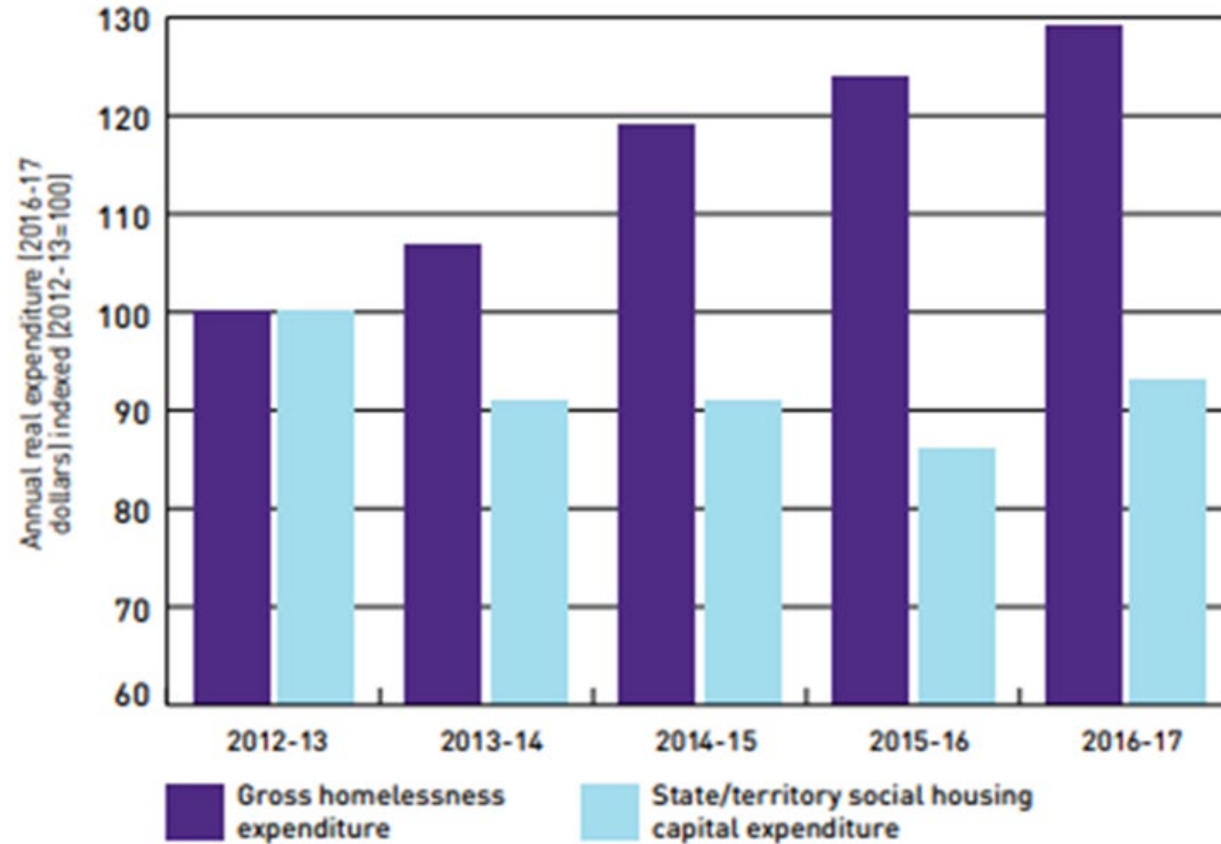
Data

	12 months pre tenancy commencement	12 months post tenancy commencement	Difference between pre and post
Admitted patients	\$1,064,167	\$472,673	-\$591,495
Mental Health	\$372,498	\$129,958.	-\$242,540
Emergency	\$102,510	\$104,860	+\$2,350
Ambulance	\$41,600	\$40,950	-\$650
Subtotal Health Difference	\$1,580,775	\$748,441	-\$832,335
Corrective Services	\$32,296	\$1,452	-\$30,844
Court	\$23,400	\$13,217	-\$10,183
Police	\$165,832	\$83,955	-\$81,877
Subtotal Criminal Justice Difference	\$221,528	\$98,624	-\$122,904
Specialist Homelessness Services	\$174,613	\$5,249	-\$169,364
Total Cost Difference	\$1,976,916	\$852,314	-\$1,124,603

Policy response

- The data and methods satisfied Treasury: objectivity and robustness
- The findings resonated with what government told us they needed to change policy
- Which department wore the burden; which departments benefited?
- No policies were changed to end rough sleeping/chronic homelessness. If anything, policy has digressed to the antithesis of what the evidence demonstrated. This is the policy response...

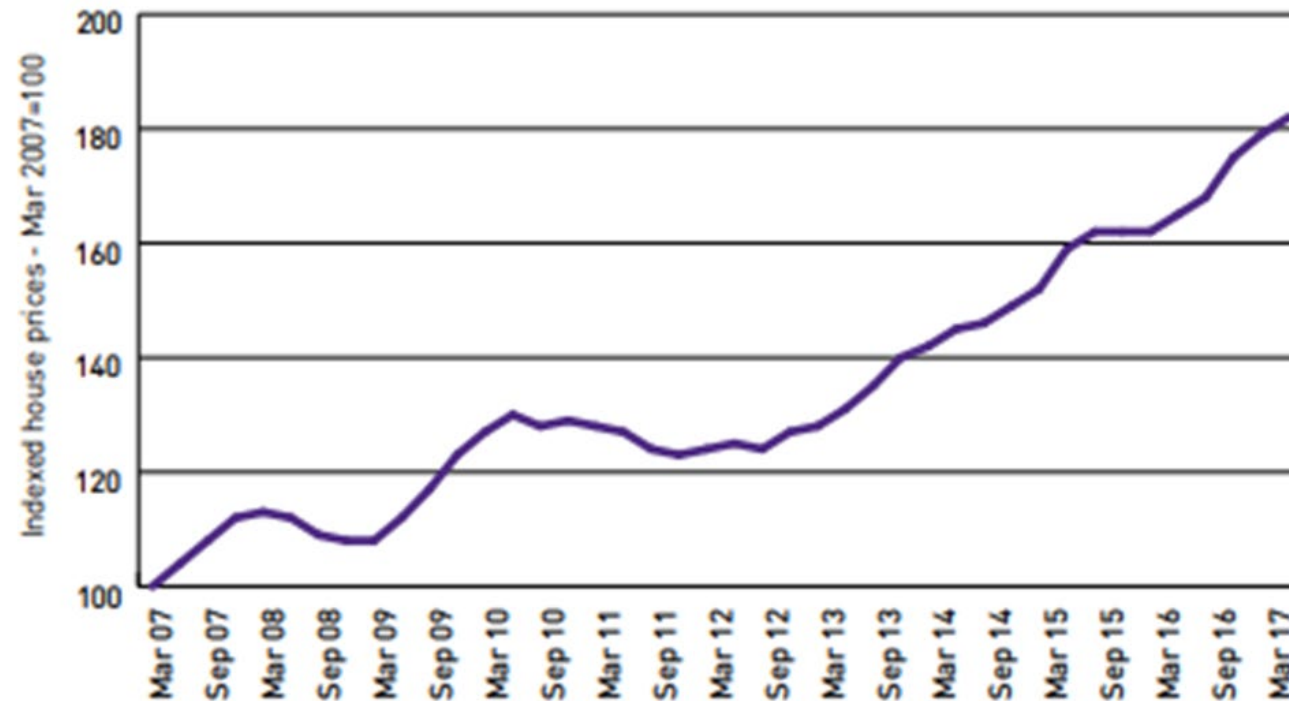
Systematic Policy Action



Homelessness services/accommodation expenditure up 29%. Social housing expenditure down 8%

Systematic Policy (in)Action

(a) Australia-wide (eight capital cities, weighted average)



Median house prices up 80%; whereas median household wage growth 40% (Pawson et al. 2018)

Predictably...

- 140,600 people registered on social housing waitlists (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019a)

“Long-term housing options were provided to 5% (or 5,200) of the 104,600 (36%) clients needing this service” (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019b)

- If you are homeless and just need a bit of advice, we’ve got you sorted in Australia:

“Of the nearly 225,000 clients who needed advice/information, 98% were provided assistance, and of the 155,000 clients requesting advocacy/liaison, 96% were provided with assistance” (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019b)

How can we theorise or conceptualise it?

- Neoliberalism is what many use to theorise Australia's growth in homelessness described thus far
- In a book entitled *The Value of Homelessness*, Craig Willse explains the causes of homelessness through a neoliberal analysis and all responses to homelessness as part of “competitive neoliberal industries of population management” (2015: 51)
- “The first cause we consider is the overregulation of housing markets, which raises homelessness by increasing the price of a home” (The State of Homelessness in America [September] 2019)
- Although neoliberalism can help conceptualise part of the problem, in Australia it is not the complete story. Too many people, as Nikolas Rose (2017) says, use “neoliberalism’ as a catch-all both to describe or explain, and to condemn almost everything one does not like”

Not reducible to Neoliberal logics

- Pilots, projects, and one-off programs
- Social determinants of health (Marmot 2005) and persistent disadvantage interact as structural barriers that prevent people who are homeless accessing and benefiting from health, social care, and housing (Parsell, Clarke, and Vorsina 2019)
- Highly successful initiatives that work for those lucky enough to gain access after systems failure (Parkinson and Parsell 2018)
- After neoliberalism (Larner and Craig 2005): state retrenchment creates conditions for highly expensive and interventionist models that are an incomplete rupture from neoliberalism (Parsell, Cheshire, Walter, and Clarke 2019)

Lamented or Pitied?

- Gerrard and Farrugia (2015) argue that the homeless are lamented, and indeed, Tamara Walsh's (2004) body of scholarship shows how certain groups who are homeless in Australia are subject to over-policing
- What I want to propose, however, is that our paradox can be partially explained by understanding how *the homeless* are pitied
- In Australia, people who are homeless are patronised as the downtrodden, in need of our benevolent care and compassion
- Whereas we previously spoke of evidence, justice, and housing, now we pity people experiencing homelessness, exercise our compassion toward them, and we...



What are we doing?

- “We have begun operating mobile shower vans where we have three in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.”



What are we doing?

- “Orange Sky Laundry is a catalyst for conversation... sit down on one of our 6 orange chairs and have a positive and genuine conversation between our everyday volunteers and everyday *friends* on the street”
- Young Australians of the year 2016

What are we doing?

- Create and watch content



What are we doing?

What homeless people really need is a home, not a clean shirt or bowl of soup. *Sydney Morning Herald*

- Diverting funding from ending homelessness: direct and through tax loss
- Diverting attention to the ending homelessness: normalising homelessness
- Herbert Hans (1972) poverty can only be ended when it becomes dysfunctional to the affluent
- Drawing on the evidence, we can do better

How can we understand it?

“I am finding it hard to write this email while hiding my disappointment at a report that starts detailing an event for a very worth charity only to knock the wind out of them for over half of the article. Solving homelessness is not going to be solved by securing x Millions of dollars and then with a click of your fingers it is instantly fixed. Nick and Lucas, if you manage to read this, please keep a stiff upper lip. Those who can't or won't do anything often criticise. You guys are legends. Please keep up the excellent work”
(online post)

“So, I really understand your concerns about Orange Sky Laundry of offering too many services which are really only a bandaid and also serve to make people more comfortable, but I think their great gift is to attract a generation of young people to experiencing the joy of giving and generosity of service to others”
(online post)

The Social Consequences

- Different – the *other*. Embodiment of their homelessness (Parsell and Watts 2017)
- A system that makes people dependent: Reify difference (Parsell 2018)
- Grateful, but inadequate. No home, no control
- Our Poverty of Ambition

Racism

- Of the 116,427 people estimated as homeless on Census night, 22% were Indigenous people
- Indigenous people, however, represent 2.8% of the national population
- Sever overcrowding and undersupply in remote Indigenous communities
- Race and the so called 'long grass'
- Return to country
- Adaptive preferences (Parsell and Phillips 2014)

Bringing it all together

- Homelessness in Australian is a public policy failure; and the evidence demonstrates that public policy represents the solution
- Two points about our policy successes:
 - not institutionalised within the system
 - profoundly successful, but success located within demonstrably failing welfare state
- Predictable biographies and childhood poverty (Bramley and Fitzpatrick 2017)
- Primary prevention
- Sameness. Aspirations. Optimism

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