



Understanding Homelessness

Newspaper headlines reporting that people in the Hunter were paying up to \$150 per week for a single room in a sub-standard dwelling will have reminded many readers of the reality that the housing crisis in Australia is, or should be, a critical concern for all of us.

The housing crisis and homelessness is a well known problem for people working in the welfare sector, but former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd brought the issue to the attention of the general public in 2007/2008 when he described our homeless numbers as a national disgrace and promised to reduce these numbers by 50% by 2020. ABS has begun to count the homeless in their 5 yearly census and it was their 2006 figure that there were some 105,000 homeless people in Australia, which shocked the then Opposition into action.

Homeless people are difficult to count because on census night they obviously have no home and are in transit somewhere. However ABS staff these days go to some effort to give us a snapshot of homeless people in their census report, which certainly helps to clarify the challenge facing government, welfare agencies and of course homeless people themselves.

Most of those who are healthy and have a full time job imagine homelessness could never happen to them. But a combination of unexpected events such as loss of savings, unemployment or illness in the family could spell trouble for many of us.

In the Hunter we estimate that there are some 3000 people who are homeless and that little will have changed between the census of 2006 and the next census in 2011.

Just over 50% of these will be staying with friends and relatives. These types of living arrangements are fine for a couple of days but they tend to break down if the guest stays too long and the homeless person then rejoins the queue for low cost housing.

Another 20% will be living in refuges or accommodation supported by welfare agencies.

A major problem here is that welfare clients stay too long in emergency accommodation because the competition for low cost housing is intense and if you have too many children, or are unemployed, or have a poor rental record, or if you are 18 or younger, your application for tenancy tends to be rejected. The emergency bed then tends to become blocked and there is nowhere for the next person in crisis to live other than a cheap motel room funded by Housing NSW.

A further 17% will be in boarding houses, which is a comparatively small percentage compared with Sydney, but many of our boarding houses have closed in recent years, with little planning given to alternatives.

And some 400 people in the Hunter occasionally hit the headlines because they live in cars, tents, sheds or derelict buildings. Such people are often called rough sleepers and they can range from families moving to Newcastle seeking work to single people who are chronically homeless.

Many of the homeless in our region are children or young people, which is a real concern as homelessness is very damaging for children. We estimate that some 400 children under 11 are in this situation on any given night in our region. Usually these children are with mothers escaping domestic violence.

The question welfare agencies are asking in the lead up to a Federal election is whether the strategies are in place to tackle what has become a huge problem in the Hunter and across Australia.

The Federal government has produced a white paper entitled "The Road Home" which sets out how they might halve homelessness by 2020. This includes an undertaking to provide 20,000 new affordable housing units which is a good initiative, even though some local councils and residence groups have expressed concerns about the planning process. However, lobby groups such as ACOSS assert that we need some 250,000 additional housing units across the nation to provide accommodation for all and to bring down the cost of housing to levels enjoyed in other developed countries.

The State government has released a similar Homelessness Action Plan entitled "A Way Home" and regions such as the Hunter are being encouraged to establish their own regional plan. So the plans are in place.

The solution is not just about housing. There are other cost effective strategies which must be embraced to prevent homelessness. These include:

- ☛ Increasing support to people to maintain their tenancies or mortgages.

- ☞ Assisting women with children experiencing domestic violence to stay in their own homes, with the male partner finding alternate accommodation.
- ☞ Providing support to young people struggling with mental health, schooling or family issues so they keep connected to where they belong.
- ☞ Develop a genuine “no exit into homelessness” policy for people leaving hospital, prison and residential care. For example, 43% of people leaving prison in NSW reoffend, mostly following a period of homelessness.
- ☞ Provide flexible support to people who would formerly have lived in government institutions.

Our Federal and State Governments have made quite a good start in funding some of these strategies and a number of housing projects but progress is slow.

My worry is that their initial enthusiasm will wane in times of economic stringency, particularly where homelessness remains hidden.

With a federal election looming, welfare agencies and community groups will certainly be reminding political parties and election candidates that homelessness in Australia continues to be “a national disgrace”

Cec Shevels

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