

# Not Waving but Drowning

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Last month, Anglicare Australia released its annual Rental Affordability Snapshot. In it was the finding that more rental properties than ever had been surveyed — nearly 63,000 of them, 7,000 up from last year and double the count from the early years of the study. It was disappointing then to find that there was not a corresponding increase in the number of affordable properties available to people living on low incomes. In fact, of the 63,000 only 25 were suitable for someone living on the Newstart Allowance. Scale that up to take into account all private dwellings occupied by households<sup>1</sup> and that is roughly 3,500 private dwellings that were affordable for the 500,000 people living on Newstart in Australia. 3,500 dwellings for 500,000 people!

The remaining 496,500 people are most likely living in perpetual housing stress.

Most of us in the sector know the facts about the housing crisis. There is a shortfall in supply of close to 200,000 dwellings and this is growing year-on-year.<sup>2</sup> Commonwealth Rent Assistance which hasn't kept pace with increasing rents and is a fairly blunt instrument in terms of sensitivity to market fluctuations.<sup>3</sup> The link between poverty and homelessness.<sup>4</sup> The necessity of government intervention to avoid market failure. Okay, so this last one is not a fact but if we are going to have anything like the society that we keep telling the world we think we have — egalitarian, fair, socially mobile and so on — then we cannot leave entirely to the market something as important as affordable housing generally, but in particular, affordable housing for the least well off.

If these facts are fairly widely accepted within the sector, how do we share them outside of it? Because as familiar as we all are with them it has occurred to me that perhaps some of our key decision makers are not. There are some other facts that I thought were interesting too, these ones relating to employment:

- People who are in receipt of Newstart for a long time are likely to be on it for longer still.<sup>5</sup>



Photo from *Stories from the Waiting List* project by Adam Quarrell

- People who are recently unemployed are more likely to find work sooner — as are people with higher skill sets.<sup>6</sup>
- The longer someone is unemployed, that is, in receipt of Newstart, the harder it is to find employment.<sup>7</sup>
- Looking for work is time-consuming, expensive and often soul-destroying. Over time, skills degrade and determination falters.<sup>8</sup>

- There are roughly five people for every advertised position<sup>9,10</sup> indicating that there are more people looking for work than there are jobs. This is to say nothing of the fact that many jobs require a qualification or particular skill set.

These facts are concerning on their own but taken together with those housing facts above a sense of the fallacy that is the 'choice' of living in poverty begins to emerge.

If you are unfamiliar with the 1957 poem *Not waving but drowning* from British poet Stevie Smith, it's very short and paints a fairly grim picture. Essentially, the poem is about a man whose plight is ignored. That's it. There are other aspects you can read into it but paring those other layers back, he needs help, is trying to seek that help but because of his perceived shortcomings that help is not offered and he dies. Tragic!

There is no particular reason to raise it with you now except to say that the experience portrayed in that poem reflects well the situation that many of our 'co-Australians' may now find themselves in. It could be argued that this Budget and some aspects of the approach to smaller government does much the same thing to our most disadvantaged; ignores their plight. It seems too, that many Australians agree with this.

The Nielson polls<sup>11</sup> released the week after Budget showed that 63 per cent of people polled felt that the budget was unfair. Around 74 per cent felt that they would be worse off and just over half, at 53 per cent, thought that it would be bad for Australia. Overall, 63 per cent of people were dissatisfied with the Budget. These are record numbers.

The media is awash with claims that the Budget delivered by the Government will disproportionately affect those at the bottom. No one chooses to live in poverty and believing as much effectively ignores the facts and ignores the plight of hundreds of thousands of our neighbours.

The solution to this problem is more jobs, more houses and the support to acquire and maintain the two. The policy settings that we are currently moving towards don't encourage job creation and they certainly don't encourage the increase in housing supply. The government's priority might be the welfare bill; civil society's priority might be reducing the inequality gap,<sup>12</sup> but either way, punitive measures focusing on individuals is not going to get the job done. Let's all review the facts and then, let's talk!

#### Endnotes

1. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4130.0Main%20Features2201112?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4130.0&issue=2011-12&num=&view>
2. National Housing Supply Council, 2011, *State of Supply Report*, National Housing Supply Council, Canberra.
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4. There is too much evidence on this to list just one reference, however: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008, *'Homelessness is a Human Rights Issue'* published by the Australian Human Rights Commission.
5. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014, *Job Search Experience, Cat No. 6222.0*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
6. *ibid.*
7. Department Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012, *Job Seeker Classification Instrument — Factors and Points*, Department Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra. <http://docs.employment.gov.au/documents/job-seeker-classification-instrument-factors-and-points>
8. Black D, Tseng YP and Wilkins R 2005, *The causes of long-term income support receipt associated with unemployment*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research. [http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/downloads/labour/44\\_Causes-LTunemployment\\_FinReport.pdf](http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/downloads/labour/44_Causes-LTunemployment_FinReport.pdf)
9. Labour Market Information Portal, 2014, *Employment Service Area*, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Canberra. <http://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/EmploymentData>
10. Department of Employment, 2014, *Vacancy Report*, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Canberra.
11. Kenny M, 'Tony Abbott pays price for broken promises', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 2014, viewed online 26 May 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-pays-price-for-broken-promises-20140518-38hzw.html>
12. Causa O et al 2014, 'Economic growth from the household perspective: GDP and Income Distribution Developments Across OECD Countries', *OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No 1111*, OECD Publishing.



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