

HOMELESSNESS 101 by Guy Johnson

- WHERE we are
- How we got here
- And where Journeys Home

In the next 15 or so minutes I am going to highlight some of the key junctures in homelessness policy and research. The best place to start is in the 1970s. The reason for that is that:

- In the mid 1970s **two influential reports – The Working Party on Homeless Men and Women (1973) and Homeless People and the Law (Sackville 1976)** were released.
- Both noted that the homeless population was becoming more diverse.
- According to these reports Homelessness was no longer a problem confined to the ‘derelicts’ and ‘bag ladies’ of skid row.
- Like many other western countries Australia witnessed the emergence of homeless young people, families and women.
- We see two important changes that distinguish the skid row homeless of the 50s and 60s, and what researchers define as the ‘**new homeless**’:
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 - Changes in the **characteristics** of the homeless population,
 - A sharp **increase in the number** of homeless people
- REASONS
 - Why the homelessness population began to change is not entirely clear but issues to do with
 - Stagflation
 - Rollback of the welfare state
 - Increasing rates of family breakdown ; were clearly implicated in the change.

2. POLICY RESPONSES

- **The emergence of the new homeless signalled the first significant shift in the social policy landscape.**

- In light of the increasing numbers of families, women and young people in the homeless population advocates began to campaign for funding to assist people get back on their feet.
- They were successful
- **In 1984 the Commonwealth Government launched the Supported accommodation Assistance Program – or SAAP)**
 - SAAP was a national program administered by each State.
 - SAAP provided a safety net to assist people who fell through gaps in mainstream service provision
 - 3 key target groups reflecting changes in the homeless population
 - Adults – traditional group
 - Women escaping DV
 - Young people
 - The latter two receiving nearly 70% of the total funding

In 1989 there was another significant moment in the social policy landscape.

It came about when the

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission released the report **‘Our Homeless Children’**, also known as the Burdekin Report.
- The report brought the issue of youth homelessness to a broader community audience and youth homelessness became a huge community concern.
- The report led to an intense debate about the number of homeless youth –
 - was it 12,000 as some claimed or 70,000 as others claimed -
 - But we also witnessed a debate about definition
 - In the press homeless young people were frequently described as street kids. Then, as now, the media endorse a literal definition of homelessness
 - Yet the report made it clear that most homeless youth were couch surfing or staying in some form of temporary accommodation.
 - It is widely accepted by researchers here and overseas that ‘couch surfing’ is a critical moment in young people’s experience of homelessness .
- Yet, ABS new ‘statistical’ definition has effectively made this group disappear

- **Nonetheless, by the mid 1990s the policy directions in Australia were reasonably clear:**
 - Assisting young people and women and families were the policy priorities
 - Early intervention was the key on both moral and economic grounds.
 - The Houses of Representatives report on youth homelessness in 1995 stated that Early intervention is:
 - probably the one area of public policy which could deliver to the community the greatest returns in terms of increased social cohesion through the reduction in the levels of **family breakdown** and **long term welfare dependency** .

- However, it was also the case that throughout the 1990s and the start of the 21 century there was little interest in homelessness
 - Few public servants focused on housing or homelessness
 - A small team of public servants managed SAAP but that was it
 - No Minister for Housing and certainly no Minister for Homelessness.
 - To be sure there were few initiatives such as ReCONNECT which focused on reconnecting young people to their families, but in the main there was little POLICY ENERGY

- **What was curious is that for some reason starting in the mid 1990s research interest in homelessness began to grow.**
- Up until then very few researchers were interested in homelessness.
 - There was a small number of clinical researchers whose work focused on the health issues of older long term homelessness.
- 1998 saw the launch seminal piece of research - **Youth Homelessness: Early Intervention and Prevention.**
 - The book by Chamberlain and Mackenzie introduced (borrowed) the idea of homelessness as a process.
 - **The idea that homelessness was a process of adaptation and exclusion is a very important one, but it was ignored not really widely used or understood**

- During the 90s we start to see a significant increase in the number of research studies being undertaken by academics, but also by agencies and also government departments.
- In 1999 the ABS released its first attempt to enumerate the homeless population.
- And by the turn of the century it is fair to say that we had a broad consensus of the definition of homelessness – subsequently shattered by the ABS - , and also reasonable evidence
 - The characteristics of the homeless population
 - And the number of homeless people at a point in time
- However, it is equally fair to say that much of the research was not particularly robust
- It tended to:
 - Draw on relatively small samples, often of services users
 - And based on single POINT-IN-TIME SURVEYS.
- **The result was that Australian research tended to view the homeless population as a static population.**
- **But this makes no sense – people are constantly moving in and out of homelessness**
 - In short our understanding of the dynamics of homelessness – that is how movements into, through and out of homelessness relate to one another – was poor.
 - Researchers overseas, and to a lesser extent in Australia argued persuasively that policy makers and service providers needed a better understanding of the dynamics of homelessness for three reasons:

First, more **diverse causes** of homelessness meant that people bring with them a more **diverse range of background experiences**. How these experiences relate to movements in and out of homelessness remained unclear. A good example is youth homelessness. Historically youth seen as a homogeneous population. More recently research has revealed considerable variation among the youth population

Second, we also know that the **experience of homelessness** is more diverse – some have a **short experience of homelessness while others become ‘chronically mired’**. This raises the question of why, when people face similar social and economic conditions, they experience homelessness for different lengths of time.

1. Raises issues with respect to
 1. Factors that perpetuate homelessness
 2. Factors that prevent homelessness
 3. The possibility of using duration as a way of segmenting the homeless population

Finally, we also know that **the characteristics of long term homeless POPULATION is different** to the short term population – THERE ARE MUCH HIGHER RATES of mental illness and substance use problems among the long term homeless. Raises the issues of what causes homelessness and what is a consequence – This has very important policy and practice implications.

REFORM

- As you would all know in 2007 when the Rudd government was elected homelessness became a policy priority.
- Ironically, despite a huge number of studies on homelessness
- There were still significant gaps in our knowledge
- For a government that enthusiastically supported the idea of EVIDENCE BASED POLICY this was a problem.
- The Government subsequently invested \$11.4m into research.
- Over half Was allocated to small projects and three research partnerships with universities across the country.
- Unfortunately, the end result overall was yet another batch of relatively small, not particularly robust or representative studies on a range of fairly innocuous issues. (Confess to be a recipient of some of this funding).
- However, out of the blue FaHCSIA decided to fund a large scale, national longitudinal study that focused on housing instability and homelessness.
- One that could answer key research questions
- One that could set the research agenda for years to come

- And one that would not be plagued by same methodological and sampling problems the undermined so many other studies.
- JH was a big, bold step. It was a risky step and there were many people who thought it had no chance of success.
- Everyone, however recognised that if this project came, research into homelessness and housing instability in Australia would never be the same.
- Journeys Home has the capacity to leave an enduring mark locally and internationally
- Whether the current Government recognises this remains to be seen.
- I will leave it to mark an Rosanna to explain
 - The challenges JH presents
 - How they have addressed those challenges
 - And what we are learning from JH