

Australian study highlights new trend

Families—the fastest growing subgroup of the homeless population

Book Review: *A Long Way From Home — Family Homelessness in the Current Welfare Context* by Terry Bartholomew, Deakin University Press, Deakin University, Geelong 1999, ISBN 0 909206 48 1

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International health, welfare and social rights organisations define adequate shelter as a fundamental prerequisite and basic right. Yet despite these proclamations "there are more homeless people than ever before in most Western countries... Moreover, the problem appears likely to become more severe in the immediate future." So begins Terry Bartholomew's book *A Long Way From Home—Family Homelessness in the Current Welfare Context* published earlier this year.

In this, his latest work, Bartholomew, an Australian academic at Deakin University, brings together a number of studies conducted in Europe and the US over the last decade, which note a growth in family homelessness and associate its cause with the dismantling of the welfare system. Bartholomew also presents a case study conducted in Victoria, in which he interviews 30 homeless families residing in inner-urban private hotels as well as several welfare agencies.

Homelessness, according to several studies cited in the book, has reached unprecedented levels and families are the fastest growing subgroup within the homeless population. This phenomenon has been noted since the late 1980's by welfare agencies throughout the developed countries. It is estimated that in the United States families represent 35 per cent of the homeless population, although in some regions the figure is as high as 75 per cent. In Europe and Britain families make up one third of the homeless population.

Australian welfare agencies, which only recently began recording homeless families, have noted that since 1993 this

subgroup has increased by 400 per cent. Families now represent up to 30 per cent of the homeless in Victoria who receive help from the federal and state government funded Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP,) as well as the non-government welfare agencies partially funded by SAAP. Victoria has by far the largest number of families without adequate forms of shelter, representing 11,000 of the 38,000 nationally recorded between 1996 and 1997.

These figures, appalling as they are, underestimate the true extent of the crisis because official statistics count only those who are registered by government agencies. Besides having to cope with the stigma of being "failures" for the circumstances they find themselves in, homeless families face the danger of Protective Services taking their children away and placing them in foster care. Many families, afraid of losing their children, do not officially register, in order to avoid this risk.

Central to Bartholomew's analysis is his identification of homelessness with poverty, high levels of unemployment and underemployment afflicting an ever-wider layer in society. He also stresses that homelessness is one of the many circumstances confronted by people living in squalor. Other conditions created or exacerbated by poverty include domestic violence, family breakdown, criminal activity, and social, physiological and psychological disorders.

The recent emergence of family homelessness, moreover, is indicative of the rise of extreme levels of poverty. "Until recently one could be poor and still maintain a reasonably

secure shelter. No longer is this the case. Likewise in previous decades, employment was a reasonable guarantee against homelessness. This is also no longer true," says Bartholomew. Current statistics have revealed that Australia has over two million people living below the poverty line, of which three-quarters are families with children.

Bartholomew's study challenges the archetypal homeless profile—dysfunctional, mentally ill, welfare dependent etc. The descent of large numbers of families into homelessness points to the fact that these characteristics are produced by an economic and social condition—poverty.

In an interrelated theme, Bartholomew indicts government attempts (aided by the media) to emphasise individual defects as being the catalyst of homelessness. He gives as an example research programs on homelessness conducted by SAAP. Such programs deliberately catalogue the homeless into subgroups, superimposing characteristics such as age, gender, family structure, health problems etc., as the basis for their research models.

Bartholomew says: "Through the application of the individual deficit model, these characteristics are then transformed into the 'causes' of homelessness. The result is that these characteristics become social problems which are caused by individuals and remedied at the cost of the State.

"Such practices reflect a broader trend in our culture to blame individuals for their situations ... because alleviation of the primary causes of homelessness (unemployment, poverty, social inequality, lack of exit points) has not occurred and the welfare sector has adjusted its objectives accordingly," he concludes.

These ideological categories release governments from any financial obligation towards the welfare of those most vulnerable, in a period of economic instability and dislocation. Government policy has achieved minimal involvement and expenditure.

Particularly since 1992-93, Commonwealth and State governments have reduced funding to public housing by at least a quarter. Victoria spearheads the assault, allocating the lowest amount of funds to housing of all the states in Australia. Only two per cent of low cost housing in Victoria is specifically designed for family groups. The result is that the waiting period for public housing is between three and 10 years. Of those who apply for medium to long-term housing, only 26 per cent in Victoria and 16 per cent nationally are successful. The remaining families are forced into emergency accommodation or receive no help whatsoever.

A significant proportion of diminishing government funds has been channelled into the private sector, as families are referred to hotels, hostels and backpacker inns. Partially funded non-government welfare agencies are more and more

being forced to refer homeless people to short-term and privately run facilities (once considered an option of last resort.) Two-thirds of homeless families reside in this type of accommodation in the U.S, while British welfare agencies are referring 20 per cent to private hotels. In Australia over 12 per cent are funnelled into hotels.

Welfare agencies have to provide limited financial assistance because, invariably, the families have no money whatsoever. Bartholomew notes that the St. Kilda Crisis Centre, one of the more established agencies situated in inner-southern Melbourne, spends \$35,000 annually in assistance in private rental arrears, bonds, housing expenses and accommodation establishment money for family groups alone. This type of assistance is short-lived, lasting an average of four days. After that, families must find other means to pay their rent until government welfare benefits arrive.

Bartholomew adds "The maintenance of social welfare and the provision of support to disadvantaged groups is becoming less and less a state function, and more the role of non-government organisations. Such practices underline how contemporary Australian government is focused more on the market and efficiency, and less on issues such as welfare equality and social justice."

Another central concern of Bartholomew's book is to oppose the referral of families to sub-standard, decrepit and short-term accommodation.

Homeless families inevitably find themselves in a Catch-22 predicament. Poverty and dependence on welfare benefits automatically bar them from the private rental market, and with little or no public housing immediately available the only solution is to accept emergency accommodation in the hotels or go back to the street.

Once in the hotel, families pay on average 49 per cent of their incomes, drastically reducing their ability to break out of the poverty cycle. The deleterious effect (particularly on those who stay in hotels for extended periods of time) is a marked decline in their health and well being and increased poverty.

"Once you're in there, that's it. Your money is gone so you can't get the money together to get something else".



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