

Welfare reports document increasing homelessness in Australia

Janine Harrison**7 June 2001**

Three recent reports by charities reveal that growing numbers of low-income earners cannot meet the costs of housing in Australia, and are becoming either officially homeless, forced to seek assistance from agencies and charitable organisations, or part of a wider “hidden homeless” population, moving from place to place without a stable home.

Rising rents, severe shortages of public housing and increased demands for crisis accommodation have meant that thousands of young people, families and elderly people are being turned away from housing services and left to fend for themselves on the streets because there is nowhere else for them to go.

Many thousands more “hidden homeless” are camping in caravans, cars or squats, or are sleeping on the spare beds or sofas of friends and relatives.

According to the Wesley Mission report, *The Faces of Homelessness*, the homeless have changed significantly over the past two decades. “The old, derelict wino on the park bench has been joined by; younger men, unemployed and hopeless; by the confused and mentally ill, frightened by the pace of activity surrounding them; by women and children, desperate to escape violent and destructive domestic situations; by young people, cast off by families who can't cope or don't care.”

While number of homeless people in all categories is increasing, the fastest growing group is families with children, who now constitute one third of the total. The lack of affordable housing combined with the scarcity of crisis accommodation has created a “roving population of homeless families” who move “between shelters, street life and squatting”.

The services available to homeless people are being stretched far beyond their capacity. Funding to the Crisis Accommodation Program has remained static since 1994, and is projected to remain at the same level through to 2002-3.

As a result, far more people are turned away than assisted. Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) figures indicate that in 1996-1997 an estimated 147,000 people used homeless services across Australia, but a further 304,000 requests for support and accommodation were not met. By 1998-99, the number assisted had risen to 163,000, an average of 16,500 a day.

Another charity, Mission Australia, estimates that this could

be only one-fifth of the actual number of people without a permanent home. It said the true dimensions of the hidden homeless problem were unknown, but anecdotal evidence suggested that most were youth, women, families, Aborigines, immigrants and refugees.

In NSW, Australia's most populous state, 23,515 people were helped by SAAP services in 1997-1998, while an estimated 36,500 were turned away, an increase of 28 percent from the previous year. In 1999, the numbers seeking assistance rose by another 24.8 percent.

Sydney, the state capital, is the worst affected. The Homeless Persons Information Centre referred 4,173 people to crisis accommodation in 1994. By 1997, this had risen to 9,460 and in 1998 to 14,196—an increase of 340 percent in four years. Despite the huge leap in demand, the number of beds available in Sydney for homeless men decreased by more than half from 808 in 1994 to 370 in 1997.

A volunteer from the Nightpatrol food van operated by St Vincent de Paul told the WSWS he had seen a significant jump in the number of people regularly visiting the van, which serves sandwiches and coffee every night to homeless people around inner-Sydney.

“There has been an increase in the last eight years, and particularly in the last three to four. When we first began here, 10 to 15 people used to come to the van in this spot (Martin Place)—now there are 70. The people coming to us tend to be younger, and we're hearing more about gamblers now who gamble everything away.

“The services have also changed. There are fewer crisis beds available. It used to be possible for us to ring up and get a bed for someone, but now all the hostels are full by the afternoon.”

Homelessness is directly related to the rising cost of housing. A St Vincent de Paul report, *Roofs Over Heads*, found housing costs “to be a major contributing factor to the creation and perpetuation of disadvantage in Australia”.

The National Housing Strategy benchmark for housing affordability is 25-30 percent of income, but the report indicates that people seeking assistance from St Vincent de Paul spend an average of 38 percent of their income on rent.

The housing crisis is greatest in capital cities such as Sydney, where rents have increased significantly in recent years. People

in major cities receiving welfare benefits are often forced to spend over 45 percent of their payments on rent. An estimated 11 percent of St Vincent de Paul's clients pay over 50 percent of their income on housing, while some families are paying a staggering 70 percent of their income to keep a roof over their heads.

The report provides a case study of one family on the Single Parent Pension—a pregnant mother and four children under the age of 8. The family receives \$1,056.68 per fortnight and \$700 goes toward rent.

According to the report, home ownership is no longer a possibility for many. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that the proportion of people who own or are paying off a home has fallen for the first time since the 1940s. This is not surprising given that 25 percent of low-income households in NSW report that they are regularly unable to afford essentials such as food, clothing and transport.

Increasingly, only those on substantial incomes can buy a home. The mean weekly income for those with mortgages is \$358 higher than for those who rent.

Yet, while more people are unable to afford private rental accommodation, public housing funding has been slashed over the past two decades. In 1999, Shelter NSW calculated that \$231 million had been cut from public housing nationally over the previous five years. Since then, the 1999-2003 Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement has further reduced the funds available to the states by \$10 million per year.

The federal and state governments have attempted to justify these cuts by claiming that private rental subsidies are their top priority, and they are now committed to providing housing assistance to those in "greatest need". The only result is that private landlords are prospering while there is less long-term accommodation available and fewer people are receiving assistance.

It is now not unusual for people living in poverty to wait over five years for public housing. There are nearly 100,000 families on the NSW waiting list and another 12 households are added to this list every day. Despite this chronic shortage, the state housing department built only 1,285 new homes last year.

Much of the current public housing is also old and run down, and there is a \$750 million maintenance backlog, which will take at least 20 years to overcome.

Families who do manage to obtain public housing are invariably trapped in areas with high unemployment and minimal services. It is virtually impossible to secure a transfer to a better area.

Those denied public housing often have no choice but to turn to boarding houses and caravan parks, where they are at constant risk of eviction. *Roofs Over Heads* reports that several caravan parks on the outskirts of Brisbane are closing down for redevelopment, leaving families with nowhere to go.

More widely, low-income earners have little protection against rising rents and many have been forced to leave their

homes because their rent was increased. SAAP figures indicate that most of those seeking help were in private rental accommodation before becoming homeless.

The situation will undoubtedly worsen as thousands of workers are made redundant by the current wave of retrenchments sweeping through many industries. In its report, Mission Australia provided a number of case studies of ordinary working people and immigrants who have become homeless. One was Peter, 48, who had been working full time until 18 months ago in a factory that closed. He was paying off his home but because of his inability to find work, he started drinking. He lost his home, wife and children.

These reports paint an alarming portrait of growing poverty and destitution among families, women, children, the elderly and single men. Unemployment, the driving down of wage levels and the slashing of public services have combined to produce a homelessness crisis not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In ruling circles, the homeless are treated with contempt, increasingly regarded as pests who should simply be removed from sight to protect property values and business prospects. South Sydney Mayor John Fowler recently called on charities to halt food services and stop distributing bedding material in council parks, declaring that the homeless were upsetting local residents and business owners and encouraging vermin. "Homelessness is a lot more visible and vexatious," he complained. Tolerance was "wearing thin".

These are not isolated comments. In Sydney's west, Parramatta Lord Mayor Lorraine Wearne and local business owners have demanded the removal of a charity soup kitchen and even park benches from the city mall in order to rid the shopping district of "loiterers".



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