

Worsening youth homelessness in Australia

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The first national study of homelessness since 1989 has found that more than 100,000 people are homeless on any given night in Australia. Of these, 36,000 are young people, 12 to 24 years old.

The year-long study, entitled “Australia’s Homeless Youth” and funded by the charity-based National Youth Commission (NYC), noted that the problems were “broadly similar” to those identified two decades ago. Should yet another such inquiry be required in 20 years time it would be an “admission of extraordinary failure”.

The 1989 Burdekin report, prepared for the previous federal Labor government of Bob Hawke, declared: “The fact is there are homeless children and young people dying in Australia, some from suicide, others simply from neglect. That is not something our nation can ignore.” Nearly 20 years later, after a succession of governments—Labor until 1996, Liberal until 2007 and now Labor again—the number of homeless has approximately doubled, funding for support and early intervention programs has stagnated and the plight of the homeless is as stark as ever.

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), the main government program for the homeless, providing transitional accommodation and support, has “turn away” rates of about 50 percent. That is, half the people who turn up at an SAAP service cannot be helped. Many more do not even get to a service—it is estimated that only 14 percent of the homeless population can be assisted on a given night.

According to the SAAP figures for the financial year 1 July 2006-30 June 2007, about 188,000 people, including 69,000 children who accompanied adults, received help in the form of accommodation, meals, or showers. Approximately 1 in 150 people in Australia accessed a homeless shelter over the year. Among children, under 17, approximately 1 in 70 received care from a homeless service.

The NYC report warns that although the number of homeless 12-18 year-olds fell from 26,060 in 2001 to 21,940 in 2006, the situation is again worsening because of soaring housing costs and increasing financial stress. It points out that housing affordability fell by 140 percent between 1986 and 2006. In 1986, 3.6 times average income was needed to buy a house; by 2006 the purchase price required 7.0 years’ pay.

The report provides a picture of the social conditions that cause homelessness, above all poverty, but also low-wage jobs, high rents, mental health problems, alcoholism, and family breakdown. It identifies several areas where government funding cuts have exacerbated these problems, including poor education opportunities, long waiting times for public housing, and punitive welfare and employment programs. The “Work for the Dole” program, for example, was “poorly conceived”.

Unsurprisingly, the report found that an “underlying cause” of homelessness was family poverty, a point also noted by Burdekin in 1989. The Illawarra Legal Centre told the NYC: “The impact of

poverty on family breakdown and the havoc on children and young people’s lives cannot be underestimated.”

A common measure of poverty, the Henderson Poverty Line, is currently at just over \$710 per week for a couple with two children. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data from 2005-06, nearly 30 percent of households had a weekly income less than \$600 per week.

At these levels of poverty, millions of people are on the verge of homelessness. With the sharp escalation of living costs, including housing, fuel and food, it is increasingly likely that significant numbers of households will become homeless. Submissions to the NYC report also noted that household poverty has long-term effects, particularly on the education of children. This, in turn, increases the future risk of homelessness.

Submissions were received from all over Australia. A tragic picture emerged, where tens of thousands of young people face a degraded and impoverished life—not only financially, but emotionally—often for causes completely beyond their control. As one young woman from Brisbane said: “Nobody chooses to be homeless.”

UnitingCare Burnside’s submission identified family breakdown as “the main cause of youth homelessness.” Family breakdown was attributed to: “parental unemployment; mental illness; substance abuse; physical, sexual and emotional abuse; domestic violence; neglect; inter-generational poverty; overcrowding in small homes; poor communication skills; complex family dynamics”.

In the stories told to the commission, the physical side of homelessness appears prominently. A young girl, homeless at 13, said: “Being so young with no home, I had no bed, no money, no clothes, wasn’t able to bathe or eat and drink.” A young woman, 17, described “being left out in the cold, and not having any warm clothes/shoes to wear.” A young man spoke of “not knowing where to go to sleep. Not having privacy. Cannot have any belongings that are valued because you don’t know where you will put them.”

The stories also reveal the emotional impact of being homeless. People described feeling “frustrated, embarrassed, helpless and vulnerable, hopeless, unhappy, worthless, scared and fearful, anxious, isolated and lonely, angry, and envious of other young people with homes and families”.

In its submission, the St Vincent de Paul Society pointed to “private rental increases as a key factor” and said “young people are experiencing forced evictions and a failure to locate other suitable housing”. Rents are rising astronomically because more people are unable to buy homes or are defaulting on their mortgages. According to Australian Property Monitors, asking rents have risen by 10 percent to 25 percent over the past 12 months in every mainland capital city, with a 50 percent rise forecast for the coming year.

The fall in the official unemployment rate to below 5 percent papers over the increasing problems of under-employment and casualisation.

A large proportion of young people are not counted in the labour market statistics, including the 70 percent of 15-to-19 year-olds who are in education or training. Many casual workers face insecure employment and low wages, and the situation facing indigenous people is harrowing.

The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre gave the NYC a list of difficulties experienced by homeless young people, including the low wages paid under aged-based awards, poor working conditions, insecure tenure, lack of full-time work, harassment and vulnerability to health and safety problems.

Even full-time employment is not necessarily a solution for poverty. Many young workers live with chronic hardship. UnitingCare Burnside reported: "One young person highlighted that even if you found a place to shower and got a job with a uniform such as at a fast food restaurant, the low wages make it hard to find permanent accommodation as they rarely cover rents, bills and recreation costs."

The report called on federal and state governments to commit themselves to a "national aspirational horizon" of eliminating youth homelessness by 2030. Among its recommendations were a multi-billion investment in public and community housing, an increase in SAAP funding from \$348 million a year to \$500 million, \$125 million for intensive drug, alcohol and mental health programs, and the trebling of money for the successful Reconnect early intervention program, from \$20 million a year to \$60 million.

Essentially, the report's authors made an appeal, based on reason and evidence, to the Labor governments, federal and state; but Labor's past record has helped create the crisis. The report wants "our governments to show leadership and resolve" while acknowledging there is "an accumulated deficit of past under-investment in public and community housing."

After Prime Minister Kevin Rudd took office last November, he made the homeless a symbolic issue, in an effort to present a caring public face. Alongside other gestures, such as signing the Kyoto Protocol and issuing an apology to indigenous people, he instructed Labor MPs to visit homeless shelters to acquaint themselves with the plight of the residents. As recently as January, Rudd declared it was "dead wrong that in a country as wealthy as ours, we have 100,000 people who are ... homeless."

However, in May, when the government released a Green Paper on homelessness—a call for policy submissions—the "Goals and Targets" section asserted, "it is unrealistic to end homelessness". Instead, without suggesting any targets, the document expressed the hope that homelessness could be reduced "over the long term". Rudd himself opined: "I don't think you can fix the whole thing."

One of Rudd's predecessors, Bob Hawke, infamously launched his 1987 election campaign by promising that no child would be living in poverty within three years. It was always a cynical lie. About 580,000 children lived in poverty in 1987, according to welfare groups, and 20 years later, at least 13 percent of children, or 730,000, are poor.

Nevertheless, it is a measure of Labor's further rightward shift that Rudd no longer even offers the prospect of ending homelessness. Even as the breakdown of the financial markets inflicts a rising toll of mortgage defaults and rent rises, housing policy will continue to be determined by the profit considerations of the real estate developers and construction companies.

Away from the catchphrases intended for media release, that is the real content of the Green Paper. "We will need to invest more in data and research to measure outcomes for homeless people," it states, and this will "include ... undertaking cost-benefit analyses, and capturing

the returns on any new investments in homelessness".

In March 2007, while in opposition, Housing Minister Tanya Plibersek, was sharply critical of the Howard government's inaction on homelessness, claiming that what was needed was "a 40 percent increase in funding for emergency accommodation to make any impact on the unmet demand for emergency accommodation".

At the release of the NYC report, however, Plibersek announced only "A Place to Call Home" program, which allocates \$150 million for 600 homes for the homeless. In a television interview, when pressed on this measure "barely scratching the surface", Plibersek claimed it a "down-payment." The interviewer, Kerry O'Brien, noted that dealing with homelessness "properly" would require a "huge capital spend," to which Plibersek replied, "we are facing a very tough budget."

Since then, the government has announced a series of pittances to supposedly tackle housing affordability. For example, the "National Rental Affordability Scheme" aims to build 100,000 rental houses over 10 years, to be rented at 20 percent below market rates. Of these, only 3,500 will be built in the first year. This is a drop in the bucket compared to the estimated 25,000 annual shortfall in new housing.

Behind its smokescreen of concern, the Rudd government is continuing the protracted decline of public and social housing, the funding of which has fallen by 25 percent over the past 10 years, a cumulative cut of some \$3 billion (and much more in real terms compared to rising land and construction costs). The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia told the NYC that the "reduction in housing affordability, including the reduction in public, and more broadly, social housing stock, is the single most significant factor contributing to the increasing problem of homelessness".

The problem of homelessness cannot be separated from the wider issues of deepening social inequality and falling living standards for ordinary people. Billions of dollars should be poured into public and social housing, as well as support and intervention programs. More fundamentally, critical human needs such as housing cannot be left in the grip of the private developers, property speculators and construction giants—the housing industry must be placed under social ownership and democratic control.



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