

# Australia: Deaths of young homeless couple highlight social crisis

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In a tragic incident last month, a homeless young man and his partner died while sleeping in a car on the outskirts of Ballarat, a regional Australian city 125 kilometres west of Melbourne. Police believe that fumes from a portable butane heater that the couple used to keep warm during the cold winter nights were responsible. The deaths are symptomatic of deteriorating social conditions, marked by increasing poverty and deteriorating public services.

The young couple were Jesse Scholes, aged 27, and Shannon-Rai Knowles, aged 24. Jesse had been his mother's full-time carer until she died of lung cancer six weeks earlier. He was left homeless, living out of his car and staying with friends. Shannon-Rai Knowles was a single mother, who along with her four-year-old son, lived with her extended family in Ballarat. According to her family, the couple wanted to live together but were recently rejected after applying for a number of private rental properties. Amid a housing shortage, any rental vacancy typically sees numerous applications and stringent conditions imposed by landlords and real estate companies.

The tragedy has deeply affected many in the Ballarat and wider community. A friend of Jesse Scholes wrote on Facebook: "May they R.I.P. together and [I] hope that the government looks closely to fix this homeless thing for our country. We need to rally together for this to happen." Another simply wrote: "This is absolutely devastating. We need to do better."

A friend of Jesse's told the *Ballarat Courier*: "You'd be a fool to think these are the only two young people in this situation, it happens every day. It happens all around us."

The reaction reflects genuine anguish that two young people could die so needlessly, and an awareness that the incident is indicative of broader social distress and

political indifference to the working class. Few details have emerged of the events that led up to Scholes's and Knowles's deaths, but they lived their lives amid widespread economic hardship and deprivation.

Like many other regional centres, Ballarat, which is home to over 90,000 people, suffers from significant levels of poverty. In 2011, the median weekly household income in the city was almost \$100 less than the Victorian state average. Almost a third of Ballarat households had a weekly income below \$600.

Craig Schepis, who has operated a soup kitchen in Ballarat for the past five years, told the *Melbourne Age* that his service helped 5,000 people in its first year but was now assisting 12,000.

Ballarat has been hit by the wave of manufacturing closures sweeping Australia since the 2008 global financial crisis. Significant layoffs have occurred in the food processing, rail and electronics manufacturing industries.

The unemployment rate in Ballarat, according to the latest official figures, is now 6.8 percent. This is a gross underestimate of the real situation, with the actual jobless level more than 10 percent. Young people face an even bleaker picture, with youth unemployment in April in Ballarat now officially at 26 percent—again the real figure is much higher—compared to a national average of 12.5 percent.

In addition to the lack of job opportunities, youth in regional Australia have to contend with a chronic lack of public investment and infrastructure in health, education and recreation facilities. This has contributed to myriad social problems, such as mental ill-health, family violence, and drug and alcohol addiction. In some Ballarat suburbs and other regional areas, methamphetamine abuse among young people has been characterised as an epidemic.

Rising unemployment has intersected with welfare payments being kept at sub-poverty levels by successive Labor and Liberal governments, as well as escalating housing costs.

The 2014 Anglicare Rental Affordability snapshot reported that less than 1 percent of properties advertised in Australia were affordable for a single person on welfare. Single NewStart unemployment recipients only receive \$255 a week, while those receiving Youth Allowance receive \$207 a week. A maximum of \$60 a week rent assistance is available.

Jenny Smith from the Council to Homeless Persons told Fairfax Media that the median rent in Ballarat was \$260, so people were having to choose between buying food or paying rent. Public housing is available for only a small fraction of those who require it, with some applicants waiting for more than a decade on the waiting list.

The situation is fuelling a rise in homelessness nationally. A recent survey found that the numbers of people sleeping on the streets of Melbourne, the country's second largest city, increased by 40 percent in 12 months. The 2011 census reported that there were already 105,000 homeless people nationally, a 17 percent increase from 2006.

Homelessness has risen due to the pro-business policies of both major parties. In 2007, just before winning office, then Labor Party leader Kevin Rudd declared that "the Labor Party has a heart when it comes to people struggling with homelessness." He organised a cynical stunt within a week of becoming prime minister, when he ordered Labor MPs to visit homeless shelters. Rudd declared homelessness was a "national obscenity" and pledged to half the number of homeless by 2020.

This was never anything but empty rhetoric from a government dedicated to the advancing the interests of big business and finance capital. Homelessness increased under both Rudd and his successor, Julia Gillard. Labor's final budget junked any funding for the 2020 homelessness target beyond the 2014 budget period.

The situation is set to become worse, with the Liberal-National government's austerity measures picking up where Labor left off, pushing more people into poverty and worsening social inequality. The richest 1 percent of the population now owns the same wealth as the

bottom 60 percent, while the nine richest individuals have wealth equivalent to 4.5 million at the bottom of the wealth scale.

The terrible deaths of Jesse Scholes and Shannon-Rai Knowles are another indicator of a severe economic and social crisis for which the entire ruling class in Australia is responsible.

*The author recommends:*

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[8 February 2014]

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