

Australia: Homeless people speak on worsening social crisis

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Record numbers of homeless people are living on the streets of Australia's cities as charities and government services strain to meet growing demands from families, young people, pensioners and the unemployed seeking shelter and accessing meal programs.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, a federal homeless agency, reported in its 2013–2014 annual review that nationally those seeking assistance had increased by 4 percent from the previous year, with more than three-quarters of this increase registered in Victoria. Long the centre of the Australian manufacturing industry, working people in the state have been hard hit by years of corporate restructuring, backed by successive Labor and Liberal governments and enforced by the trade unions.

In Melbourne, the number of people sleeping rough on the streets has increased by nearly 25 percent in the last twelve months. Rising housing costs are fuelling the homelessness crisis, with just 8 percent of available homes now affordable for low income families in the city.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with people attending the Salvation Army's inner city café in Melbourne. Free breakfasts and lunches are regularly provided to more than 150 people daily, with the Salvation Army reporting increasing demand of between 60 and 100 percent over the last year. A wide range of people access the meal service, not just the homeless, including pensioners, single parents with young children, the unemployed and university students.

Risto originally came to Australia in 1996 from Finland. "I've been homeless since 2005," he explained. "I was self-employed as a builder in carpentry but developed a health problem and was unable to continue working ... I think it's shocking that

in Australia people are being forced into homelessness—government policies are terrible. We all have the right to housing, yet we are treated like this. People need to know what is happening.

"The place the Salvos gave me [in a boarding house] costs \$180 a week, just to live in one room. The person I share with has come from jail. He's been given no support since leaving prison and doesn't know how to cope. It's not his fault. I've been assaulted in some of these places, some people have mental health problems or drug problems."

He continued: "We had a Christmas party here with 100 homeless people invited—it was just a media stunt for politicians. I think all governments have a lot to answer for, I can't understand how this country with all these resources, and high taxes, can treat people with such little dignity."

Kennedy a young Aboriginal man who is currently unemployed, said: "I'm here because I am on Newstart [the poverty-level unemployment benefit]. After I pay my rent of \$130, I only have \$270 to live on for the rest of the fortnight. It's a one bedroom place, with a toilet and shower, that's it. I share a kitchen. And then we have to pay for our own food and stuff, so it is pretty hard.

"If I have no food I come here to the café, sometimes three times a week ... Before this, where I was staying all you got was a bed, a meal, a shower. That cost \$350 a fortnight. It is hard to access those sorts of places and you can only stay for a short time. I had to wait four months to get in there. Last time I got sick from the food they were giving us. Most of it is donated, cooked somewhere else and then brought to the place. It's not hygienic.

"I have a forklift and car licence. I have been looking for a job for over five years. I go for interviews but they

always knock me back. I get depressed and have to take medication, and that probably stops me from getting jobs too. I am just trying to live a good life but it is so hard to even get a start.”

David has been on the disability support pension for 10 years. “The thing I have noticed since the change of government, with Abbott coming in, is that all government departments seem to be far more intrusive as to your requirements to be on a pension. I have just received a letter that I have to go and see a government doctor. I already have pre-existing conditions and I am really perplexed as to why the government is doing this. I’m concerned the changes to the DSP might mean I am taken off the pension.”

Several students from Colombia told the *World Socialist Web Site* that after paying their fees and rent they had nothing left to buy food. “When university re-opens after the summer break you will see many more students coming here in the exact same situation as us,” one explained.

An ex-health worker, who did not want to be identified, explained her situation. “I worked in the health industry for 20 years, but was a victim of domestic violence and had to leave my husband and I became homeless. I was unable to keep my job due to my home situation. I asked for proper safe housing but they never provided it. The place I currently stay is a long way from the city and doesn’t have facilities for people like me, so I need money for transport to come here.

“There is an organisation called Home Ground, where people who need housing line up. The lines are getting longer and longer. I have noticed increased numbers of single mothers with children. People just don’t realise how severe the situation is.”

Angelina has been unemployed for more than six months. “I’ve also been homeless for six months,” she said. “I lost my job in retail and I couldn’t get any family support, so I ended up homeless. I have no eligibility for benefits in Australia. Before I came here I worked as a social worker in New Zealand. I had problems with addiction, and it stops me from working.

“I come here to get food and some coffee. I don’t often use their services, as I think they treat the homeless as if it’s their fault. Some of the charities are just for profit, and they’re not really interested in solving people’s problems. They just give band-aid

measures. The boarding houses they run take your entire dole payment, it’s really dehumanising.

“A group of us get together and ask cafés for extra food. We take the food down to the park for people. You see more and more elderly people coming to get the food. I just find it so sad—it could be your grandmother. There are plenty of families that are homeless too, but they are not as visible because some of them are living in cars.”

Angelina denounced the major parties. “I think all the austerity measures are terrible—the rich and poor divide is growing. It’s causing massive social problems. If you really want to resolve the problems, the government needs to give people jobs, and mental health and other support.”



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