

A WSWS investigation into the social crisis in Australia's Mount Druitt

“Where are we going to herd our poor?”

Our correspondents
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During its investigation into the social crisis in Mount Druitt, the WSWS spoke to Jon Owen, a community worker with the Urban Neighbours of Hope who has been in the area since 2007. Born in Malaysia, and raised in Melbourne, Owen has also been involved in advocacy and support for refugees locked-up in detention centres.

Owen, along with his wife and children are based in Bidwill, a predominantly public housing suburb. Like Mount Druitt, Bidwill has been hard hit by decades of job destruction and cutbacks to essential government services. According to figures quoted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) last year, of the 2,500 people living in 800 public housing dwellings in the area, 93 percent subsist on some form of Centrelink (welfare) payments. By contrast, when Mount Druitt was established in the 1960s around 85 percent of residents living in public housing were employed.

In 2011, the median household income in these areas was just \$689 per week, while the median individual income was \$338, a little over half the median income for Greater Sydney. Single-parent families made up over 40 percent of the total of family households and over 7 percent of residents were living with a severe or profound disability.

With virtually no recreational facilities, children are often forced to play in car parks, on roads, and in nearby bushland. Youth unemployment in Bidwill was over 30 percent in 2011.

Asked about changes in the area since he has worked there, Owen said: “What we’ve seen is a huge government directive toward the selling off of public housing stock. At the same time, they’ve tightened up eligibility requirements. What you hear from people who were here 30 years ago is that the common thread was that ‘we’re all battlers, but we’ll make it if we stick together,’ and there’s still that camaraderie, it’s in the

DNA of the place. But the criteria have been restricted—you can’t just be poor to get assistance anymore, you have to be poor with a problem. What we’ve seen is a decrease in housing, but an increase in social issues.

“Around 10-15 percent of public housing stocks have been sold off while I’ve been here,” he said. “The official reason is that they’re damaged and can’t be replaced. If you leave a property unattended for long enough it will be broken into or vandalised, burnt down and then the government goes, ‘see, we’ve got to sell them off.’ But usually they sell them off in bulk lots. Mount Druitt was the end of the world 30 years ago—now the government’s realised they’re sitting on millions of dollars of housing stock.

“It’s creating a crisis of overcrowding, so people just keep moving in to places. In the houses in the area, it would be common to have eight or nine people—starting to get crowded would be 18-plus.”

Owen, who provides services at a local high school, recalled: “We had two star students at this school, and then their attendance and attention span started slipping, and pretty soon they were truanting. Eventually one of them broke the law, and they started doing drugs. It was because there were 23 people in their house. One of the students said, ‘I can’t study when I want to study.’ He used to just come to our house, and sit quietly in the corner. I’d ask him if he wanted anything, and he’d say, ‘no I just want to sit and think.’ You have to take in family, but he just couldn’t cope, couldn’t sleep or do anything. There were always babies crying, or some other distraction.”

Owen pointed to the deepening social problems resulting from the housing and unemployment crisis, and the growing number of “disengaged youth” who are neither studying nor working. “The concentration of need

that's happening in the area has been compounded by the flooding of the streets with methamphetamine," he said. "It intensifies the stress on family. Having just one member of a family on ice can have a devastating impact ... And we've had families with two siblings on ice."

Owen condemned the recent Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) television documentary, *Struggle Street*, which followed the lives of a number of individuals from the Mount Druitt area. The program provoked widespread opposition for failing to place their difficulties in any broader context, or to point to the culpability of government policy for the social crisis in working class communities. Owen wrote a piece for the *Guardian* critiquing the documentary, and has provided assistance to some of its participants.

Owen commented: "When you present someone's lifestyle choices absent of the social, and economic context which they're in, all you're left with is a judgment on personal lifestyle choices and for me, that's the definition of pornography. It's poverty pornography."

"You're left to watch it and think, 'what a bizarre choice to smoke when you're pregnant, or drink or buy junk food when you've got so many problems.' It's objectifying, not humanising people. Is this likely to create the scenario where we're going to address social inequality, or reinforce it? I think we all know which it is. All we were presented with is the phrase 'personal lifestyle choices.' Whose agenda does that bolster at a political level?"

Owen was critical of SBS, a publicly-funded broadcaster that is often touted as "progressive" by virtue of its commitment to "multiculturalism" screening the program. He noted the other publicly-funded broadcaster, the ABC, played a similar role. "The last two hack jobs on this neighbourhood have been from the ABC and SBS," he said.

"A '7:30' report program [on the ABC] had Pru Goward, the [New South Wales state] government minister responsible for housing, frogmarch the ABC through some of our ugliest streets around here. And at the time Goward said, 'we need to talk about the privilege of public housing.'"

Explaining the impact of government cuts to community organisations, Owen, whose organisation chooses not to receive state funding, said: "The way we place supports and structures around our most vulnerable people says more about our society and its priorities than what happens at the top end of town for me. What we're seeing is a progressive set of cutbacks, taken from our

community.

"We know that it's a limited number of postcodes that produce the highest number of social issues. At a time when we should be getting a concentrated, collaborative focus to [deal with] those social problems, which includes people from the grassroots, we're seeing those things being stripped away. We're seeing government superstructures being built that do not service local specific needs. They just impose priorities and solutions that shift with the winds."

"From year to year, we're eyeballing each other and thinking, 'who's going to drop next, who's going to get funding?' There was an excellent indigenous mentoring program called Excel that got dropped out of funding."

Owen pointedly noted that Talisman Saber, military exercises involving Australia, the US and Japan off the coast of northern Australia, had not received a funding cut.

Asked about the prospects for the future, Owen commented: "Where are we going to herd our poor? If we look at it, probably all the public housing is going to be sold in the next 20-30 years. So what, are we going to shove our poor out of Sydney past the mountains or something, and relocate all the problems to regional areas, who are already suffering serious issues with drugs? No one can afford to live here. Are we going to have slaves? Who's going to teach my kids? A basic worker can't afford to live in Sydney ... What are we doing for the next generation of the workforce?"

"We're being primed for more cuts, less support and more demonisation of the working class and the underclass. It's not the Australia I hope to be a part of."



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