The Australian government’s 2008 White Paper *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* outlined a new ‘once in a generation’ agenda to reduce and ultimately end homelessness. The reforms were intended to introduce a more comprehensive policy and service system than the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), which since 1985 had focussed on providing crisis and transitional accommodation and support. This paper sets out to examine the broad rationale and progress of these reforms over the five years since the White Paper launch and to consider how they may have impacted on policy understandings of homelessness in Australia.

The White Paper focussed on three areas: early intervention; improving and expanding services; and addressing long term or repeated homelessness. The initiatives represented a 55 per cent increase in funding for homelessness services following a period where funding had not increased in real terms, and included a small amount of social housing, subsequently augmented through an economic stimulus package.

The document also contained a change in the official discourse about homelessness. In contrast to the increasingly individualised approach that had dominated homelessness policy in the preceding years, the White Paper stated that: ‘homelessness can happen to anyone’. This discourse emphasises causal factors that are outside an individual’s control rather than being related to individual characteristics and problems – that is structural social and economic issues. The document thus promoted a conception of homelessness that required broader solutions than the ‘welfare reform’ approach that relies on bringing about improved personal capacities. Consistent with this, the new approach purported to deal with structural causes of homelessness as well as targeting particular groups at risk of homelessness.

I will argue, however, that rather than providing a new approach to assisting people facing homelessness, the strategies contained in the White Paper involve an extension of the approach taken under SAAP. Three key strategies dominate the White Paper approach: risk management; performance management; and case management. These strategies operate in a coordinated way, shifting the focus away from structural factors and impacting on policy understandings of homelessness itself.

Three significant contextual issues that had interacted to impact on SAAP over the years have remained relevant to the analysis of the reforms set out in the White Paper.

Firstly, during the existence of SAAP a lack of affordable housing has both caused and perpetuated homelessness (2). The shortfall has worsened, with both affordable private and social housing becoming more unavailable since SAAP’s establishment.

Secondly, at the same time that housing became less available, an ongoing process of ‘welfare reform’ in Australia has criticised the entitlements of the welfare state as producing ‘dependency’, and aimed to shift the focus of welfare by increasing self-reliance and participation through individualised service delivery (3). Consistent with this approach, the emphasis of SAAP changed from the provision of crisis accommodation to increasing ‘self-reliance and independence’ through individual case management (4).
Thirdly, SAAP’s development was influenced by changes in public policy and administration that drew on the approaches and techniques of business and the market, and emphasised improving performance (5). Practices derived from business management came to be used as tools in other areas of activity such as social programs like SAAP, transforming the way that social issues could be understood and acted upon. These included performance management, entrepreneurial approaches and calculative accounting practices such as audit and risk management.

The first strategy set out in the White Paper covers homelessness prevention and early intervention through ‘tackling the structural drivers of homelessness and targeting groups who are at risk’. This reliance on risk management in addressing homelessness can be seen as a significant extension of the approach of ‘targeting’, already used in SAAP, involving a change away from welfare state approaches towards a residualist approach focussing on those considered to be ‘the truly needy’ (6)

The concept of ‘risk’ is derived from the business of insurance, which is based on calculations of chance or probability among a population (7). While the White Paper reforms directed to people ‘at risk’ have certainly assisted some people, they do not prevent new instances of homelessness from occurring or reduce the prevalence of homelessness in the population overall, as they do not deal with the structural issues that produce homelessness (8).

The White Paper did include both increases in social and affordable housing as well as the measures targeted to groups assessed as having particular risks. However those measures directed towards addressing the structural factors were insufficient to have an ongoing effect. The increases to the supply of housing occurred against a background of decline in social housing stock as a proportion of the total stock, and an increased shortage of private rental dwellings at rents that are affordable and available for lower income households (9).

The National Housing Supply Council found that, without continued investment, the effects of this increase in the proportion of social housing would not be maintained. Indeed, the Council found that by 2009-10 the shortage of properties that were affordable and available for low-income renters had become more acute, so that there was a shortage of 539,000 rental properties that were both affordable and available for households on low incomes (10). The increases to housing implemented as a result of the White Paper therefore did not address the shortage of affordable housing as a structural cause of homelessness, but merely acted to slow the worsening of this factor.

The third White Paper strategy is an example of risk management, targeted primarily to a small subgroup of homeless people identified as ‘chronically homeless’. This strategy involves assertive outreach that connects people to long-term housing. Since the late 1990s there has been an increasing focus in both international and Australian research on creating typologies of homeless people according to the length of their homelessness and their level of service use; and on calculating the cost and cost offsets of program use by people identified as ‘chronically homeless’, leading governments to prioritise those considered to be at highest risk in economic terms (11) (12). While it is ethical and just that people who have experienced long term homelessness are housed, such arguments are not emphasised in this analysis. Instead the emphasis is on economic values of efficient resource use, cost-effectiveness and program performance, and homelessness is reinterpreted in terms of population dynamics and economic costs. This change has a transformative force in
reshaping the very conception of homelessness, so that what was previously viewed as a social problem is now to be seen as an economic problem (13).

Under the White Paper reforms, performance management is continuing to be used to increase the ‘performance’ of individual homelessness services and to mould services into a service system, using techniques drawn from business. Statistical and economic techniques are playing a greater role in the initiatives that are being implemented as a result of the White Paper, signalled by the use, for the first time, of numerical targets for the reduction of homelessness and the emphasis on tighter controls on outcomes, and looser controls on inputs. These strategies are consistent with a long-term change process to construct non-government organisations that assist homeless people as ‘providers’, at arms’ length from, but accountable to, and integrated with, government.

Case management and the focus on the individual remain important in the new approach. Case management is consistent with the shift from welfare entitlement to welfare reform. While case management can be vital in assisting individuals, its individualised nature, like risk management, tends to shift the focus away from structural issues, and towards problems that are viewed as linked to individuals. This is particularly the case where policies do not address structural issues.

The 2011 Census gives an early indication of outcomes from the White Paper. Between the Census dates of 2006 and 2011 there was a reduction in the number of rough sleepers of 6 per cent (compared to the targeted reduction of 25 per cent between 2008 and 2013); and an increase in the number of all homeless persons of 17.3 per cent (compared to the targeted reduction of 20 per cent between 2008 and 2013) (14) (15). In particular there was an increase in the numbers of people living in severely crowded accommodation and people living in temporary supported accommodation.

These outcomes support the argument that, while risk management may reduce homelessness among those targeted, it does not prevent others becoming homeless or reduce homelessness overall. Indeed, the figures suggest that, in the absence of an approach that targets broad structural causes, policymakers relying on risk management may have improved outcomes for some ‘at risk’ groups, only to find the situations of other groups worsen.

I suggest that these changes do impact on the policy understanding of homelessness in Australia, shifting our focus away from structural issues such as the housing shortage and historically low rates of income support. At the same time, the changes provide added support to the idea that homelessness is causally linked to particular individuals and groups, and is to be resolved by focussing on these groups rather than on broader factors. This idea is further linked to economic rather than social reasoning by the introduction of cost analyses that identify certain groups as targets for support on economic rather than other grounds. The policy conceptualisation of homelessness is thus re-formed to focus on particular groups, and not on the larger homeless population, consistent with the change from a welfare state to welfare reform.

Endnotes
2. Erebus Consulting Partners 2004, *National evaluation of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP IV): final report; a report to the SAAP National Coordination and Development Committee*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.


