

parity

MARCH 2022 VOLUME 35 – ISSUE 1

ISSN 1032-6170



Homelessness and Social Work

HOMELESSNESS



AND

SOCIAL WORK

Contents

Parity

Australia's national homelessness publication

Published by Council to Homeless Persons

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Contributions to Parity are welcome. Each issue of Parity has a central focus or theme. However, prospective contributors should not feel restricted by this as Parity seeks to discuss the whole range of issues connected with homelessness and the provision of housing and services to people experiencing homelessness. Where necessary, contributions will be edited. Where possible this will be done in consultation with the contributor. Contributions can be emailed to parity@chp.org.au in Microsoft Word or rtf format. If this option is not possible, contributions can be mailed to CHP at the above address.

Proposed 2022 Parity Publication Schedule

April: Homelessness and Young People: Support During Troubled Times

May: "Holding the Line": The Salvation Army Response to Homelessness

June: Education and Homelessness

July: Pregnancy and Homelessness

August: Working Together: The Future of South Australian Homelessness and Domestic Violence Services

September: The Victorian Response to Homelessness

October: TBC

November: The Role of Information Technology in Responding to Homelessness

December: Homelessness and the Law Revisited

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Editorial

Jenny Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Council to Homeless Persons



For me, the nexus between homelessness and social work is an intriguing focus for an edition of *Parity*. This edition showcases the interface between the social work profession and our specialist homelessness service sector.

We have before us a survey of the current best: of social work in homelessness research, education, practice models, working with those with the lived experience of being without a home, practice, and the experience of and lessons learned from the COVID pandemic.

As a social worker, I am in furious agreement with Cameron Parsell when he says in his opinion piece, that *'the core of social work is about understanding individual problems as socially produced, on the one hand, and doing whatever can be done to work with people to assist them, which ideally involves intervening at the societal level, on the other.'*

In this sense it is not surprising that when consulted, specialist homelessness service providers nominate social work as a preferred qualification/ preparation for work in our sector. While social work is a core part of the specialist homelessness workforce, as the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) observes in this edition, housing and homelessness issues underpin much of the work social workers do to support vulnerable people across the human services.

One commonality of all the courses covered in this edition is their embrace of critical social work theory and the prioritising of the skills needed for developing the capacity for critical self-reflection. At the same time, the courses and the training they provide, are all necessarily premised on the AASW's Code of Ethics and the core ethical principle of social justice, that requires social workers to promote *'policies, practices and social conditions that uphold human rights.'* (AASW Code of Ethics)

How homelessness is 'taught' in Social Work courses is clearly crucial in equipping graduates for their work in the homelessness sector. It is heartening in this respect to see the range and diversity of approaches to the teaching of homeless in the courses outlined in this edition.

However, Juliet Watson summarises what we in the homelessness sector all know, which is that overall, there is a lack of homelessness specific social work curricula. This edition not only outlines what is currently being done, it sets the scene for the many next steps needed to strengthen the preparation of social work graduates to make their contribution, and to flourish, in our specialist homelessness service sector and beyond.

Acknowledgements

CHP would like to acknowledge and thank the generous support of all edition co-sponsors:

RMIT University, The University of South Australia, MacKillop Family Services, Sacred Heart Mission, Unity Housing South Australia, Queensland University of Technology, The University of Melbourne, The University of the Sunshine Coast, Multicultural Youth South Australia and the Australian Association of Social Workers.

Particular thanks to the Guest Editors of this edition, Robyn Martin and Juliet Watson from RMIT University, Carole Zufferey from the University of South Australia and Darran Stonehouse from the University of the Sunshine Coast.



Introduction

Carole Zufferey, University of South Australia, Juliet Watson, RMIT University,
Robyn Martin, RMIT University and Darran Stonehouse, Southern Cross University

The aim of this edition is to examine and discuss the important role of social work in the response to homelessness. It is a collaborative initiative between the Council to Homeless Persons and social work educators and researchers and universities across Australia, particularly Victoria, Queensland and South Australia. It gives those working in social work education the opportunity to discuss how homelessness is incorporated and taught in the Social Work curriculum in the higher education system. It highlights the experiences of social workers and frontline practitioners influenced by social work ethics and values and provides an opportunity for them to discuss their responses to homelessness in their different organisational contexts. It also presents innovative policy and practices responses that enhance social and housing outcomes, to prevent and end homelessness. This can include examples of co-designing or co-writing about lived experiences, service delivery and policy responses with different service user groups. Policy makers, researchers, service managers, front-line workers and service users may have differing perspectives, but they all bring important knowledge and expertise to enhance social work responses to homelessness. This edition canvasses a range of opinions on homelessness and social work.

Homelessness and social work are both heavily debated areas. The definitions of homelessness are contested, ranging from narrow definitions focusing on 'rough sleepers' to a subjective sense of being or feeling home-less. Responding to homelessness in social work means advocating for more

access to appropriate housing as well as moving beyond narrow definitions of homelessness as only pertaining to the lack of housing.

To be effective, such advocacy must be underpinned by empirically informed critiques of existing policies, discourses and dominant representations of homelessness. It also means tracing the intersections of housing precarity, homelessness and a range of other lived experiences which create disadvantage and exclusion. For those working in homelessness and housing services and those who are responding to homelessness in mainstream services, how homelessness is understood and conceptualised, has clear implications for how they deliver services and indeed, what services are offered and for whom.

Wider discourses of homelessness sometimes seem to operate and function between two polarities that see it, on the one hand, as a problem and responsibility of individuals and their various personal dysfunctional issues, and on the other hand, as a larger social and structural issue. This is often articulated as the difference between explanations of homelessness that stress 'agency' as opposed to 'structure'. However, it is also important to emphasise that resources and structures shape but do not determine people's agency and that people are not passive recipients of services.

Individualist explanations of homelessness convey a normative agenda that determines policy responses. Homelessness is fundamentally a lack of access to affordable and stable housing, with important implications for public policy. In many areas of Australia, there

have long been concerns about the gentrification of cities and suburbs, social planning, policy responses to boarding houses and 'cleaning the streets' initiatives, especially prior to events such as Olympic games.

The ending of homelessness is a key priority for the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). Homelessness is a social justice and human rights issue and a main advocacy concern for social workers. The Australian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) that frame accreditation for higher education providers do not contain specific guidance for higher education providers on how to include homelessness content.

However, the AASW has a clear vision for all Australians to have access to affordable and secure housing, to prevent homelessness, reduce housing stress and to link those without homes to sustainable and supported housing.

Homelessness and housing instability are areas that graduates are increasingly likely to come across because housing circumstances are connected with many reasons why people encounter social workers.

Furthermore, as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have illustrated, exposure to housing precarity is also becoming more widespread within communities — including non-metropolitan regions.

Access to safe and affordable housing is central to providing a foundation for security, autonomy and social participation. It is therefore imperative that social work education incorporate critical frameworks that challenge normative assumptions about housing precarity and homelessness.

Critical perspectives that expose intersectional privilege and oppression based on factors such as gender, race, class, age, ableism, sexuality and place can provide analytical tools to reconceptualise homelessness and to work towards dismantling the structures that sustain homelessness. Critical social work approaches are pertinent in offering resistances to the individualising and neoliberal discourses about homelessness; for examining widening social inequalities in Australia, and challenging neoliberal policy agendas, including the neo-liberalisation of universities, that can contribute to the individualising of social problems.

This edition highlights numerous examples of critical and innovative teaching practices in social work education, including standalone homelessness courses that enhance student's critical understanding of homelessness; courses that embed homelessness in their program and objectives, including in critical policy analyses, and doctoral studies opportunities such as in the research-industry partnership initiatives of The Unison Housing Research Lab at RMIT.

Who is a 'social worker'? What does a social worker do? This is contested. However, many practitioners and policy makers working in mainstream social services and specialist homelessness services will have studied and trained to be social workers. It is well known that in all fields of social work practice, including people being released from prisons and deinstitutionalised from mental health facilities, the lack of access to housing remains a key issue.

Many groups of people whom social workers work with, such as Indigenous peoples, young people, people born overseas, and women and children escaping family violence, are known to be more vulnerable to homelessness in Australia.

There is also social work research on previously overlooked areas of homelessness, such as gambling, migration, and pregnancy.

This edition highlights university-industry collaborative research and social work placement



partnerships that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The closing of many emergency responses, health and housing services has increased the vulnerability of people 'sleeping rough' and more people are now 'at risk' of being homeless. Student placement experiences in homelessness can raise some personal and ethical dilemmas but also enable the development of a profound understanding of systemic failures, social disadvantage, childhood trauma, domestic violence, incarceration, substance abuse and barriers to medical care.

The mental health effects of abusive and violent relationships are well known, with trauma-informed services emerging to respond to the impact of such trauma. Integrated specialist housing and mainstream family support services are pertinent to addressing family homelessness and

to meet the individual needs of each family. Another area in family violence is supporting 'Safe at Home' initiatives that recognise that perpetrators must be made accountable for their violence and for women and children to be able to remain safe in their own housing. Gender-sensitive assertive outreach responses have also been found to be able to flexibly engage and support women who experience homelessness. The trauma and abuse and precarious housing situations experienced by young women who have been in contact with the justice system because of their use of violence is often rendered invisible by service system responses that perpetuate social injustices.

Not having a home impacts on access to, or can be a by-product of entanglements with, many other systems, including health, welfare and justice. As well, the use of social

workers' 'personal discretion' and advocacy can prevent or accelerate eviction outcomes and homelessness.

Homelessness services on the front line are also providing pertinent health care services, such as vaccinations to people who are living in crisis situations, who may have negative experiences with authorities and may lack trust in formal government services. The real-world consequences of the problems that are perceived to contribute to homelessness and their explanations play out in complex systems that can often create and reinforce social and systemic injustices.

Systems and structural change efforts need to be informed by the practice wisdoms of social workers and the expertise of lived experience, as noted by many contributors in this edition. Service user participation initiatives in the homelessness sector are central to challenging existing social

inequalities and power imbalances between service users, social workers, service providers and policy makers.

This wide and deep landscape of factors and experiences that intersect with housing precarity and homelessness impact service users, social workers and social work students. Many students have been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, facing loss of income and housing, particularly in locations that endured long lockdowns. This tells us that the issues and concerns highlighted in this edition of *Parity* represent the lived and living experiences of many social work students, who juggle paid work, caring responsibilities, study and lengthy, unpaid field education placements.

Social work ethics and values as evidenced by the Australian association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics espouse human rights, social justice and advocate for social change as central to social work identity. Social workers are advocates for and give voice to how multiple social injustices are experienced by the most disadvantaged in society.

This edition contributes to providing a broader advocacy voice about homelessness, in social work education, policy, research and practice.



The Australian Association of Social Workers:

Addressing complexities between work with individuals, families and communities and our social service systems

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing a growing membership of more than 15,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact on the quality of life of all Australians.

Ending homelessness is key priority for the AASW, as a social justice issue to fulfil our fundamental human rights, to support our members who are delivering housing and homelessness services, and as an advocacy priority to federal, state and territory governments.

Housing and homelessness issues underpin much of the work social workers do to support vulnerable people. Many AASW members are directly involved in the delivery or planning of housing support and homelessness services. Social workers work within all facets of the housing system, in crisis support, long-term housing assistance, women's refuges, tenancy support and more. Social workers also work across a range of fields of practice which also encounter the impacts of homelessness on people's lives. For those working in mental health, income and unemployment support, youth justice or those responding to natural disasters, their daily work is interrelated with housing and homelessness.

So much is needed to dramatically improve coordination and address our fragmented, siloed systems, in addition to increasing investments in social housing and implementing measures to ensure our housing stock is accessible to all. The AASW

has a strong history of advocacy in these respects and we will continue advocate on behalf of our members until everyone's needs are met.

The Social Work Profession, Social Determinants of Health, and Housing

Social workers focus on the social determinants of health, that is, the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. Housing is a well-known social determinant of health. Housing factors such as housing conditions, affordability, rental stability, location, integration with public transport, amenities and jobs, neighbourhood security, natural surroundings and more, all have an impact on a person's physical health and wellbeing.

Social workers also work with individuals, families, groups and communities. They maintain a dual focus on improving individual wellbeing (within the broader context of family, social and community relationships) and addressing any external issues that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination resulting in structural disadvantages.

In practice this means that social workers provide supporting services to people where housing may be the presenting problem or where housing insecurity and/or instability contributes to poor health and wellbeing. Examples include women and children who are unable to leave situations of family violence having nowhere to go, parents who face extensive delays when seeking to be reunified with their children due to housing shortages, people with disability living in unsuitable housing, and people unable to leave temporary accommodation due to a lack of permanent accommodation.

Within this context, there are numerous and fundamental challenges for social workers operating in government, program and service delivery systems. Just two examples of these challenges include:

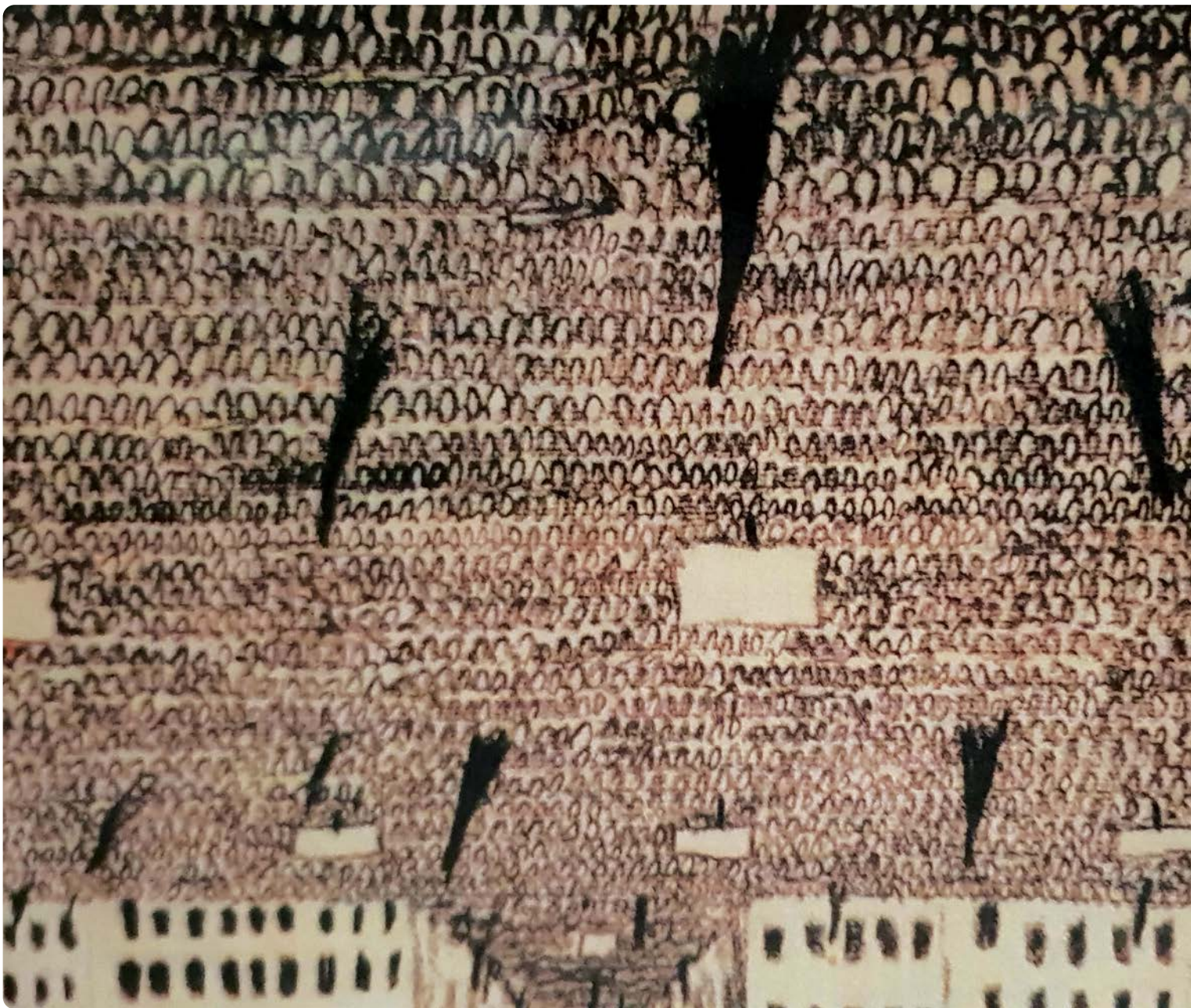
- 'Increasing complexity' and service silos
- Service design and service evaluation structures.

'Increasing complexity' and Service Silos

Our current service systems are designed to address the relevant presenting issue without enough regard for how this system may be ineffective for people experiencing crisis and requiring assistance on multiple fronts, simultaneously. People in distress may be forced to apply for assistance from many different services at once.

In recommendations from major inquiries such as Royal Commissions, Ombudsman's reports, government audits and other parliamentary inquiries, we see similar recommendations about joining up service responses across fragmented service systems for homelessness, mental health, child protection, alcohol and other drugs, education employment and training and family violence.^{1,2}

While many social workers and other professionals are experts in these fields of practice, service users can be overwhelmed (and under-supported where waitlists exist to access supports) by referrals to disparate organisations and programs. The social work perspective sees these issues as connected and some of the solutions to such problems as linked.



Small administrative issues for a client navigating bureaucracies can lead to complex social issues, and social work issues left unaddressed turn into legal issues. The experience of homelessness can disrupt employment leading to a loss of income that prevents someone from paying fines for public transport and car parking. Having no fixed address may mean that a person does not receive infringement notices or letters from Centrelink, they may be forced to stay in unsafe accommodation where their possessions are stolen and their safety is compromised. If a person has no family or friends who can help them, if they struggle to navigate complex systems to access support, then many of these issues will end up being dealt with by the courts — and can lead to criminal charges or long-term fine payment plans.

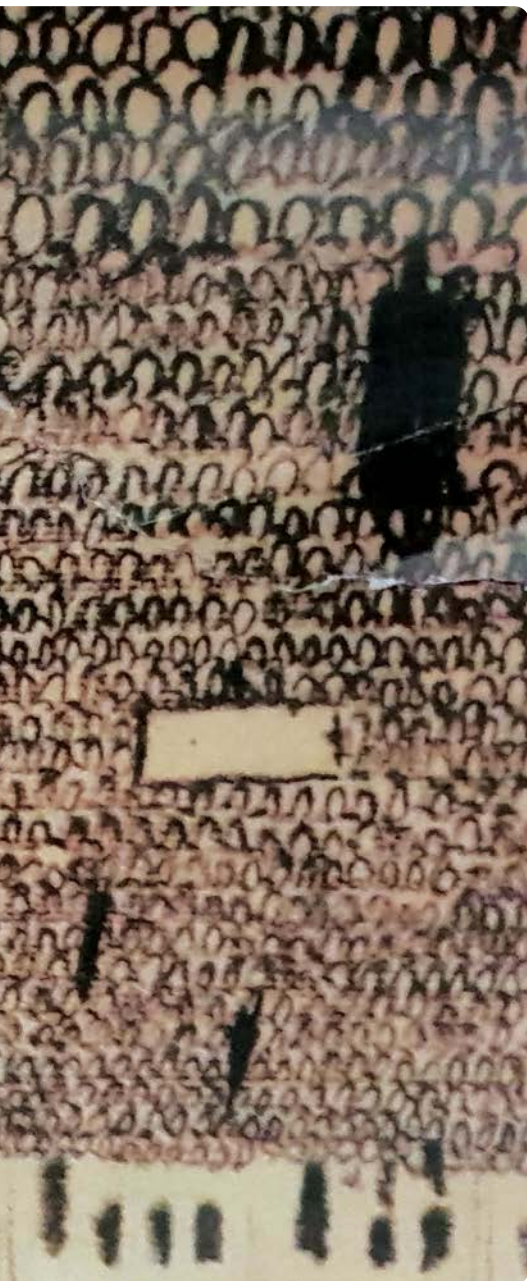
Social workers specialising in housing and homelessness issues are often *de facto* generalist workers as a lack of safe or stable accommodation both causes and is caused by such a large number of associated issues. The Youthlaw Legal Pod program highlights the intersections between social disadvantage, social work and the law in its findings that young people transitioning from care, often facing homelessness, can require assistance and advocacy with fines, debts, tenancy issues, family violence, understanding their legal rights and accessing files and records held about them by freedom of information.³

To this end, the holistic practice and psychosocial perspective in which social workers approach housing and homelessness is essential, not

only for direct client support, but to fundamentally inform government policy and service delivery models.

Service Design and Service Evaluation Structures

While social work operates from a holistic, psychosocial perspective, social services funding, auditing and evaluation structures prefer 'targeted' interventions favouring one issue at a time, across several silos of policy, research and service delivery. These structures impact upon the agency of organisations, program consortia and practitioners to generate knowledge and practice innovation from lived experience and practice wisdom across different service systems. Often the knowledge is generated but the funding structures do not support the knowledge translation



and information sharing that is so critical to effective practice.

From the perspective of government: accountability and evidence of outcomes from investment is paramount, as it should be. However, the principles underlying the construction of accountability measures often fundamentally fail to understand the experience of disadvantage and *compounded* disadvantage amongst people who are reliant on many forms of government-funded intervention. Consider people who grow up in government care, live with disabilities or experience disruptions to the education, all people who can live in independence and with self-determination, given the right supports. All of these people are at high risk of homelessness. They are also penalised by social

stigmas and policies which blame individuals for their homelessness, from perspectives which individualise what are actually systemic problems, and focus on homelessness from too narrow a viewpoint — or too narrow an evaluation framework.

The Role of the AASW in Tackling Homelessness

Our vision is for all Australians to have access to affordable and secure housing, to prevent homelessness, reduce housing stress and to link those who have no home to sustainable and supported housing. As champions for human rights, we see housing as necessary to fulfill our obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESC) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Issues around homelessness are front of mind for the Association. In our podcast series: *Social Work People*, homelessness was the very first issue addressed in *Episode 1: The Right to Shelter, Colonialism and Leonard Cohen*.⁴

As a social justice issue, the AASW works diligently to maintain awareness of the wider systemic links between homelessness, mental health, family violence, child protection, systemic disadvantage and public health issues.⁵

The AASW is heavily involved in developing policy recommendations and advocating to the federal and all state and territory governments. The AASW has a strong history of advocating for:

- the formulation and implementation of an integrated homelessness policy, based upon effectively integrated planning and community development
- the development of an integrated national affordable housing strategy to reduce the number of homeless Australians
- an urgent increase in the supply of affordable rental housing and the reform of rental assistance
- the promotion of private sector investment in low-cost housing

- a focus on housing issues within a framework of urban and regional design that addresses issues facing people on low incomes in areas of economic disadvantage.

In our submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs: Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia in June 2020, we outlined serious concerns and made a range of recommendations for government to act on.⁶ Sadly, many of these same issues remain and there is much advocacy work yet to do.

With important federal and state elections on the horizon, we will be challenging our leaders to act to address homelessness, on behalf of the social work profession.



Endnotes

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Chapter 1: Teaching Homelessness

Academic-Industry Collaboration to Advance Social Work Homelessness Education

Juliet Watson, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University

In 2017, as a way of addressing the lack of homelessness-specific preparation for social work graduates, RMIT University and Unison Housing, one of Victoria's largest social housing providers, launched an education and research partnership — The Unison Housing Research Lab. A key purpose of the Lab was to address the shortage of homelessness-specific tertiary education. This involved two initiatives to create and develop educational opportunities: an undergraduate course and doctoral scholarships.

Homelessness Course

The Lab employed a social work academic to design and coordinate the course — Homelessness: Contemporary Themes, Policy and Practice — which involved consultation with the RMIT Social Work Department, Unison, homelessness research academics and advocates. This stakeholder participation ensured that both sector and academic requirements were embedded in the syllabus. This elective course is aligned with the RMIT Social Work and Human Services Cluster. As such, a critical social perspective that involves analyses of power and intersectional discrimination, and that positions social workers as change agents working to dismantle structures of oppression, is fundamental to the course.

Run as an intensive course for undergraduate students during the summer semester break, it is designed to expose students to a range of perspectives from researchers, service providers, consumers, and advocates. The course is structured according to assessment and tasks that meet set learning outcomes.

Successful completion of the course means that students are able to:

1. define and articulate the concept of homelessness and how it is affected by policy, practice and research
2. critically analyse, synthesise and reflect on how factors such as housing market conditions, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and place contribute to homelessness
3. identify and appraise policy and practice contexts affecting the delivery of homelessness services
4. critically analyse and apply theoretical frameworks that inform homelessness research, policy and practice.

The teaching program consists of workshops that cover topics such as definitions of homelessness, the dynamics of homelessness, lived experiences, the homelessness and housing sector, Indigenous homelessness, gender and homelessness, and institutional responses.

An integral component of the course is the opportunity for students to visit housing and homelessness agencies where they conduct interviews with key workers as part of their assessment. This activity, highly regarded by the students, allows them to observe the environment in which service providers operate and to hear from those with frontline experience in the field. A range of organisations have been involved in both the agency visits and the class presentations including Unison, Salvation Army, Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation, Council to

Homeless Persons (including the Peer Education Support Program) and Launch Housing. This support for the course from industry is invaluable in exposing students to working conditions as well as offering insights into immediate and emerging sector concerns.

Scholarships

The RMIT-Unison partnership has also invested in educational pathways for future homelessness researchers through the provision of three doctoral scholarships. These students are co-supervised by the Lab's social work academic, highlighting the value placed on social work theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Following open competition, two scholarships were awarded to social work graduates. That these scholarships were highly competitive indicates the interest in homelessness research careers, particularly by social work graduates, and also speaks to the need for social work education programs to prepare students for specialisation in homelessness research as well as practice.

The appointment of the social work doctoral students has resulted in the Lab making adjustments to incorporate and enhance social work education. This has been a reflexive and reciprocal process in which the students are active members of the Lab, sharing their evolving knowledge with colleagues. The doctoral students' prior education has primed them to bring critical social work perspectives to their projects. Importantly, the students are expected to contribute to the homelessness research space through empirical studies and by progressing critically-informed theoretical frameworks. They are shaping the research produced by the Lab and contributing to



a legacy of homelessness and housing research from a social work perspective. The doctoral students further participate in the translation of research into education through teaching into the university's social work program.

The participation of social work doctoral students in the Lab

has created additional research opportunities. These were not initially incorporated into the education aims of the Lab, but instead have evolved organically through the collaborative relationships involved in the partnership. For example, the Lab's research program is responsive to the ongoing and emerging areas of inquiry for Unison, with a suite

of projects being undertaken at different times. Social work graduates, including the Lab's doctoral students, are desirable candidates for employment as research assistants on these projects, which have in turn fostered opportunities for them to further develop their research skills and to consolidate their relationships with the industry partner.

Teaching About Homelessness in Social Work: Integrating Theory and Practice

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Homelessness is a growing concern in both regional and urban geographical locations. This paper presents an example of how learning about theoretical approaches for responding to homelessness is embedded in a generic social work course for third year undergraduate social work students. The overall aim of the course is to develop students' advanced social work knowledge and skills about using diverse theoretical perspectives in different practice contexts. Students learn to critically analyse the applicability of a range of social work theories and practice approaches to different social work fields of practice, that are all relevant to homelessness. Students research the theory/practice nexus and develop their reflective skills as reflexive social work practitioners. The course focuses on integrating social work theory with the realities of social work in practice. The realities of social work practice when responding to homelessness includes systemic and structural barriers, such as the lack of access to affordable housing, limited exit points and long waiting lists for social and community housing.

This course is taught across three campuses, one metropolitan and two regional locations, as well as being offered online to external students. Homelessness and housing stress is on the rise in all regions of South Australia, including in Adelaide and the Mt Gambier and Whyalla regions. Although the demographics of each campus location differs, the structure of the course, its orientation around a homelessness case study and focus on the application of practice theories, means that it can be easily adapted to each locational context.

As well, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, students living in regional and interstate locations, who were locked down or unable to cross into South Australia, completed the course with their peers by joining a face-to-face class via Zoom. This allows students to continue their study with minimal disruption and provided another learning option for the regional and external student cohorts. Being able to complete role plays and other practical tutorial tasks in 'real time' through an online medium also provides students with a skillset to prepare them for online social work practice that is fast becoming an option for both social workers and clients.

The course content and assessments transferred smoothly for students who were joining the class online. This means that regardless of

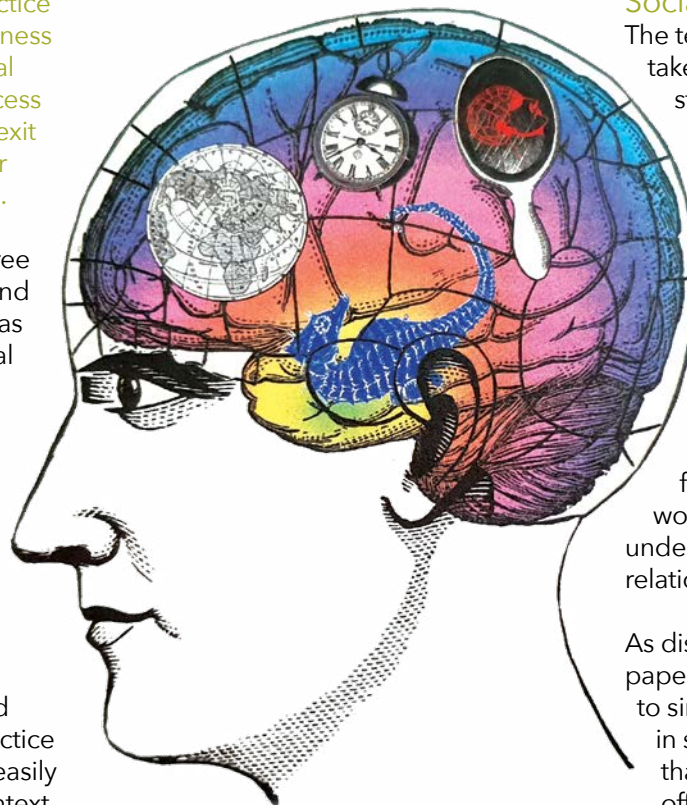
context (urban, regional or via video link), students are equipped with the adaptability, knowledge and skills required, to enable them to work with a diverse range of clients in differing circumstances.

In the social work studios and in online zoom classes, students practice their social work skills and engage in the 'real life' application of a theory to a field of practice, using a complex homelessness case study. Students become familiar with a range of theoretical frameworks, and knowledgeable in determining which practice theories are applicable to what situation, and when. The course consistently receives positive feedback from students, who commonly express that they have benefited from learning about different practice approaches and social work issues.

Social Work Studios

The teaching of this course mostly takes place in the social work studios at the different campuses of the University of South Australia. The use of the social work studios, a progressive homelessness case study and assessments that incorporate self-reflexivity and the theory/practice nexus, enables social work students to comprehensively learn about responding to homelessness and associated fields of practice. Reflexive social work practice is central to understanding intersecting power relations in client-worker relationships.

As discussed in previously published papers, the social work studios intend to simulate 'real life experiences'^{1,2,3} in simulated work environments that include interview rooms and offices, where students can practice



and observe role play interviews. The studios are fitted with audio and video recording equipment, two-way mirrors, and microphones, which allows for students and staff to provide peer feedback, during and after the in-class skills demonstrations. Previous research has found that the use of the Studio enhances student engagement, increases student confidence, and requires the development of emotional management skills essential for professional practice.^{4,5} In this course, we emphasise the importance of reflexivity and critically reflective practice,⁶ as a social work student practitioner. Students learn about and practice social work skills and reflexivity by providing and receiving written and verbal peer feedback, which can be facilitated by using the two-way mirrors in the social work studios.

A Homelessness Case Study

Social workers are employed in many diverse fields of practice where homelessness is common. This course uses a complex progressive case study about a young couple who are homeless, after having left 'out of home care'. The young woman is pregnant. There are multiple issues in the 'problem-saturated' case study, associated with systemic failures, domestic violence, mental illness, alcohol and other drug abuses, child protection and criminal justice, all commonly faced by social workers when responding to homelessness.

In each week of the course, a different theoretical and practice approach is covered, starting with crisis intervention and risk assessments, moving to counselling modalities, such as after the young couple are housed and have had the baby. In the later parts of the course, the couple, young woman and/or man are now requesting ongoing counselling and family support, such as for parenting, escalating domestic violence, the effects of trauma and abuse and so on. The weekly practice approaches include crisis intervention, suicide risk assessment, safety planning in domestic violence, working with men who use violence, feminist theories, narrative therapy, motivational interviewing, solution focused approaches, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and

practice considerations about working with couples. These weekly approaches are covered in a *Weekly Studio Activities Booklet*, with associated information and possible interviewing questions for the first skills assessment.

The Assessments

The first assessment for this course is an in-class skills demonstration, or for some students, this was online via zoom, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the first assignment (25 per cent of the course) is to demonstrate advanced interviewing skills, choosing one key practice approach and one key issue in the case study. The skills assessment develops advanced skills in engagement, empathy, building trust and rapport, from a non-judgemental, person-centred, strengths and empowerment-based approach.

Students who are observing the skills demonstrations provide critical peer feedback, about what the students presenting did well and what could have been done differently, which is then incorporated in the second assessment. Thus, the students provide and receive constructive peer feedback and learn about the importance of feedback as a reflexive social worker. Self-reflexivity is enhanced, by the students reflecting on their own role-play in the second assessment. The second assessment (25 per cent) is a reflective paper in which students are asked to provide a concise and accurate analysis of their skills in the first assessment. In this assessment, students are required to demonstrate a critical understanding about the practical application of their chosen practice theory as it relates to social work ethics and values. Key learnings from these assessments come from reflecting on the application of a social work theory to their practice role play, by using a complex and progressive homelessness case study.

The third assessment is a research paper (50 per cent of the course) and an in-depth critical analysis of one key issue and one practice theory/ approach covered in the course. Students commonly choose crisis theory and homelessness, feminist theory and domestic violence, motivational interviewing and alcohol and other drugs, cognitive

behavioural therapy and mental health, solution focused or narrative therapy and mothering/fathering. In this assessment, students are asked to describe the chosen field of practice and population cohort, such as youth homelessness, and to provide definitions, Australian prevalence statistics, and to discuss key debates, such as the structural/ individual debates in the field of homelessness.⁷ They are then required to critically examine the theoretical approach they have chosen, by describing its origins, main argument, key principles and strengths and weaknesses, in its application to the chosen field of practice. Students are asked to critically apply theory to practice, such as interrogating the individualist focus of the crisis intervention approach in responding to homelessness, while considering social work ethics, values, and purpose.⁸

In summary, this generic course prepares social work students to engage in complex homelessness scenarios, from a range of practice modalities, that respond to intersecting social issues affecting people who experience homelessness, including domestic violence, mental health and alcohol and drug use.

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Locating Critical Social Work at the Heart of What We Do: Queensland University of Technology's Approach to Critical Pedagogy and Homelessness in Social Work Education

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As we enter a third year of a global pandemic while enduring almost a decade of a federal coalition neoliberal government, critical pedagogies and critical social work practice have never been more important in education and practice,¹ particularly for understanding homelessness and the housing affordability crisis. Australian society continues to manifest widening social and economic inequalities and this is reflected in the increasing numbers of people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness throughout the country. On Census night 2016, more than 116,000 people were homeless across Australia.² This data is dated and we keenly await the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) release of the 2021 Census data as part of the third and final data release in early to mid-2023.

The last decade has seen an unprecedented and relentless attack by the Commonwealth Government on Australia's social welfare system. This is reflected in weak or absent, social policy responses that exacerbate the crises in housing affordability,³ violence against women⁴ and poverty.⁵ It is widely anticipated amongst many social workers that when the 2021 data is released, it will show a profound increase in rates of homelessness throughout the country in all operational groups (that is, rough sleeping, emergency accommodation/shelter, couch surfing, boarding houses, severe overcrowded housing).

The social work profession has long been integral to the housing and homelessness sector.⁶ However, dynamic practice fields that focus directly on material need and deprivation created by structural inequality (such as housing and homelessness, and poverty) have been overlooked in recent decades

in mainstream social work education and research. As universities and academics become more impacted by neoliberal influences, social work has shifted its emphasis to fields of practice that focus on the consequences, rather than the causes, of inequality (such as mental health). Focusing on the consequences/responses to inequality promotes an individualised analysis of social problems, which aligns with dominant neoliberal discourses (that seek to blame the victim). Despite this, a critical or radical tradition has always existed in social work.⁷

In this vein, this article explores the journey that Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has taken to promote critical social work theory and practice as central in its social work programs, and what this means for providing a contemporary education for future generations of social workers. We highlight the importance of student's developing a structural analysis of political economy, an attuned capacity for critical self-reflection and the praxis-oriented relationship between social work education and the housing and homelessness sector.

Over the last six years, the social work and human service programs at QUT have undergone a major transformation to situate critical social work theory and practice at the heart of our teaching and learning, field education, research and scholarship.

In Australia, and other Anglophone countries, the impact of four decades of neoliberalism has taken an increasing toll, and mainstream social work education has tended to become more conservative as a result⁸ offering a recipe of individual change based on positivist and

scientific values and assumptions to 'evidence-based' practices that reinforce neoliberal agendas.⁹

These conservative approaches to teaching social work theory neglect many aspects of social work practice including a structural analysis of social problems that present as if they are personal problems, and the fundamental need to give priority to Indigenous Australian knowledges and perspectives.¹⁰ The marketisation and commodification of social work education in recent decades has also provided the ideal circumstances through which social work students and practitioners become indoctrinated into political and organisational systems that perpetuate neoliberal systems of domination and control.¹¹ Our purpose as social work educators at QUT has been to expose and resist this trend, to instead create advocates of progressive social change.

Drawing from the diverse traditions of radical social work from the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s,¹² structural social work from Canada¹³ and Marxist, Feminist and Post-Modern, Anti-oppressive and Anti-discriminatory theoretical influences, critical social work provides the theory and political strategy to challenge existing power structures that serve to oppress and marginalise community members and generate inequality.¹⁴

Critical social work refers to all of the professional efforts and approaches that are designed to bring about greater social and climate justice. Australian social work academics have made significant contributions to the development of critical social work theory and practice including connections to Green and Ecological Social Work that have embedded

the core nexus of social and climate justice.¹⁵ Social work practices that are in any way congruent with these values and ethics require an intentionality amongst social workers to apply critical social work approaches. Yet, for many, this is easier said than done. Increasingly homelessness service providers and advocates have been vocal about threats to their funding should they speak out about the impacts of government policy processes and directives.¹⁶ This very point about political repercussions for speaking critically about government policy was made by former Australian of the Year, Grace Tame in her address to the National Press Club on 9 February 2021 where she stated that she was warned not to make critical remarks of the Prime Minister for threat of retribution.¹⁷ The current relationship between governments and the broader community sector is itself a topic in urgent need of greater critical inquiry.

At the level of social work within a university faculty and school, a critical social work approach has meant a fundamental rethink of the content we teach to privilege critical analysis of all social phenomena, the inclusion and relative priority of fields of social work practice and knowledge that have otherwise been subjugated by the dominant neoliberal higher education policy and funding paradigm¹⁸ equipping students with a strong capacity for critical self-reflection. This provides them not only with the skills to recognise and contest privilege, but to connect with a personal sense of agency to work towards emancipatory change. Critical approaches to understanding housing and homelessness are topics covered across our courses in a range of units including introduction to the Australian social welfare system, addiction, trauma and change, critical social work

theory, critical policy, participatory community development and complexity in social work.

Our rationale for preferencing critical social work approaches to social work education and practice are clear. Firstly, critical social work is fundamentally consistent with social work values and ethics. For example, *The Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics*⁹ core ethical principle of social justice requires social workers to promote '*policies, practices and social conditions that uphold human rights.*' It is our observation and experience that neoliberal and managerial environments that are hostile to social welfare tend to promote an acquiescence amongst social workers to punitive discourses of social control. In order to resist this pressure, social workers committed to these ethical principles need to draw on critical approaches to retain their integrity in practice. We argue that social work must reclaim its values base and critical social work approaches to education and practice are the most effective way of achieving this outcome.

Secondly, critical social work provides the foundation for effective contemporary and future practices across a range of settings and fields because it offers resistance to the corrosive effects of neoliberalism.²⁰ Increasingly human and social services are subject to neoliberal influences that manifest in a number of ways. These include a managerial preoccupation with data and interference, the rise of information technology systems that drive practice at the expense of social work wisdom, funding requirements and compliance, outputs and outcome measurement the reduce human experience, case management as an end in itself and content free service and organisational level management.²¹ This list of implications of managerialism for social workers in sectors such as the housing and homelessness sector is non-exhaustive. Critical social work equips social work students with the skills to make a successful transition to the role of a practitioner within this complicated and chaotic sets of organisational arrangements and systems pressures.²² These skills require a commitment to critiquing

prevailing social and economic structures and critically analysing and influencing policy as fundamental to being able to the task of social work.²³ The reconstruction of social work practices that can then achieve greater self-determination and agency for the people with whom social workers work is at least then consistent with the stated purpose, values and ethics of the social work profession.

Ending homelessness for all people through access to safe and affordable housing continues to be amongst the most significant social issues affecting Australians and public policy challenges of our time. The field of homelessness is complex. There are many reasons that lead to homelessness and



the service system responses are complicated and variable. Our critical social work approach firmly situates homelessness as a structural problem, not an individual one. The last two years of the pandemic have further impacted the under-resourced homelessness service system to respond to the needs of people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness.²⁴

Overriding all of this, is the fact we have a national government that has not made any effort to commit to a national policy approach to end homelessness in Australia; in fact, nine years of the Coalition Government have had a terrible impact on entrenching inequality in relation to accessing housing (polarising larger divisions between people in poverty and people monopolising wealth). There has been no new policy innovations or investments to prevent or end homelessness in more than a decade and existing housing strategies established by the former government including the National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing, have ended. The current national government continues to be hostile to calls from advocates and sector leaders for a greater role for the Commonwealth Government in funding social and affordable housing.

The neoliberal policy agenda of the current national government has been punctuated by both the Home Builders Scheme and the Job Keepers Scheme. The Home Builders Scheme, for example, allocated billions of tax-payer funding to subsidise private home ownership and renovations to private dwellings for people who were in a position to undertake at least \$150,000 worth of renovation during the pandemic. The national government also disbursed more than \$30 Billion of tax-payer dollars under the Job Keeper Scheme to private companies that made significant profits during the pandemic and were found to be not at all eligible for Job Keeper. The national government has not been willing to pursue these companies to ask for these funds to be repaid, demonstrating an extraordinary tolerance for fiscal welfare. These are not policy initiatives that are in any way designed to promote greater social or environmental justice. Imagine if Australia had

a government that was willing to invest \$30 Billion to improving and expanding homelessness and housing initiatives across Australia?²⁵

Given the possibilities for change, and the gap between what we envisage for a fairer future, and the current political landscape, social work and human services academics at QUT unapologetically adopt a critical standpoint when teaching about homelessness and all social issues in the social work curriculum. We recognise that the housing and homelessness sectors have been leaders in critical social work practice for many decades and pioneers of social and political action.

Our commitment as educators is to provide a critical social work education that equips students to address the structural challenges of our time in their practice. Staff bring their own extensive practice experience, industry partnerships and scholarly insights to making the social work classroom (both in person and online) as critical, dynamic and interactive as possible and to identify the enduring and vital role of social work in bringing about social change.

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Teaching About Policy Responses to Homelessness: Policy Practice in Social Work

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Homelessness as a social issue continues to be a significant concern for policy makers in urban, rural, and regional areas across Australia. The promotion of social justice is a key ethical principle for social workers requiring an understanding of the impact of social structures and social policy on practitioners and service users.¹ Awareness of and the ability to demonstrate an understanding of the policy processes is critical in developing an understanding for the systemic context of social issues that social workers deal with on a daily level.²

Research has highlighted that there is a strong correlation between social work students' commitment to social justice goals and policy practice, that is, the more concerned they were regarding the structural context of personal issues the more likely they would engage in policy practice.³ The pedagogical challenge is to connect the student's commitment to social justice with facilitating an understanding of the policy processes in a way that highlights how the key components of social justice and policy are implicit in all aspect of practice at micro, meso and macro levels.⁴

This paper presents examples of how learning about policy responses to homelessness are embedded in a generic policy stream for undergraduate social work students and a course in policy practice subject in an entry level master's degree in social work.

Undergraduate Courses

Within their studies for undergraduate degrees in Social Work or the Human Services students undertake policy courses. These courses provide theoretical and skills for analysis for social policy from an

Australian perspective. In the course Governance and Citizenship in Australia students develop:

- an understanding of the political and institutional frameworks of Australian federalism and the Constitution, jurisdictions of policy making, funding and legislative power
- an understanding of political ideology, parties, participation, and insider and outsider policy actors and interest groups, and
- an understanding of citizenship, human rights and social justice.

In the course Australian Social Policy students gain an understanding of:

- the historical development of social policy
- the welfare state and its impact on social care and social control functions, and
- perspectives and conventional theoretical frameworks of broad social policy areas i.e., employment and unemployment, income security and poverty, health, housing, social inclusion, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

In the course Policy Practice, the major emphasis of the course is to foster an understanding of policy 'in practice' and thereby develop the skills necessary to inform policy deliberation and implementation.

Specifically, understanding the complexity of policy processes through a theory or ideal conventional analytical framework from the 'perspective of practitioners working within the government'.⁵

This enhances the skills necessary to inform public debate and deliberation, and policy implementation and to analyse policy 'in the field'.

Further, students gain an understanding through a critical analytical framework — Carol Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to be* (WPR). By exploring this model, students gain an understanding of:

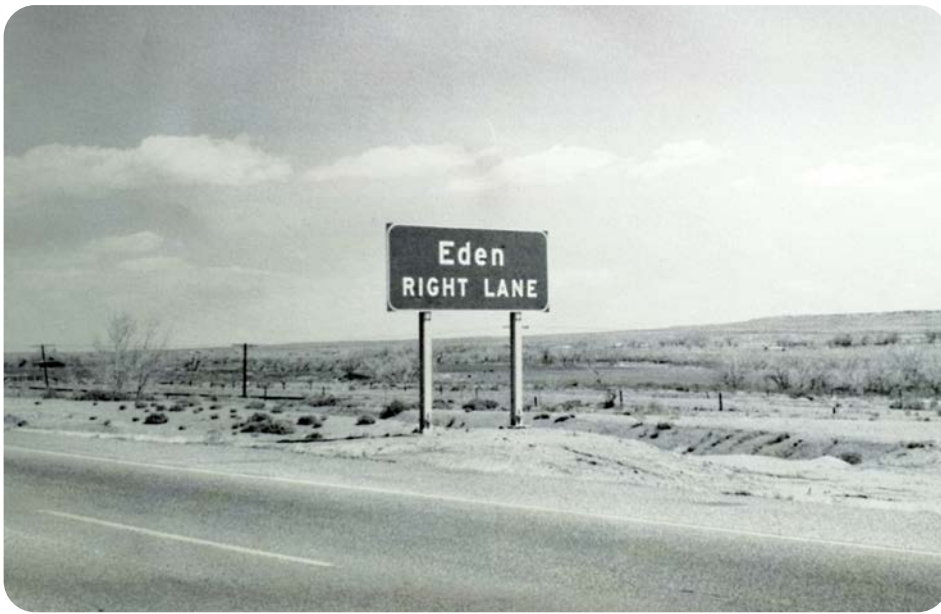
- analysing the policy 'problem' and processes
- policy representations that indicated a need to 'fix' or 'change' the policy
- policy 'problematism' that constructs and presupposes the way in which we should understand the social condition, issue(s), or problem(s), and
- critiquing how these representations and problematisations shape stakeholder relationships — funder, provider, and client impacts.

The policies which have been explored by some students have been:

Medicare, Newstart, Closing the Gap, National Disability Insurance Scheme, The Age Pension, Disability Support Pension, National Housing and Homeless Agreement, Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, National Drug Strategy, National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children 2000-2022, The Basics Card and Work for the Dole.

Post Graduate Course

The post graduate policy practice course seeks to assist students to develop their professional identity as social workers and the ability



to engage in policy practice. The subject aims to introduce students to the human services as a context for social work practice and enable them to critically analyse the interplay of social and economic policy and organisational service delivery in Australian and international human service contexts.

The course is taught at one campus and is offered online to external students. After six weeks of topics that introduce the political, professional, organisational, and professional context of human service delivery students are introduced to four major policy areas — Aged Care, Homelessness, Child Protection and Disability. While taught sequentially across four weeks, the links between the four areas are continually reinforced with a strong focus on homelessness throughout.

Homelessness — Case Studies.

The course includes an extensive lecture on homelessness covering the main areas of:

- Housing and homelessness policy since World War Two
- Discourses of homelessness (definitions, causes, enumeration and policy solutions)
- Voice and Homelessness
- Social Work and Homelessness

As part of workshop activities students work in groups to analyse the policy and service delivery issues embedded in three different case

studies drawn from the field. The case studies are used to highlight the complexity of homelessness with a focus on the policy and program contexts that frame the experience of people who access homelessness services. The second component of the workshop aims to assist students in analysing the National Affordable Housing Agreement and various homelessness initiatives that have been implemented in Australia over recent years including Housing First and Common Ground. In the workshop students are encouraged to articulate the aims of each initiative and how homelessness is constructed as a social issue in policy.

Assessments

As part of the subject students are introduced to two different ways of analysing social policy using the policy cycle approach as discussed by Althaus et al.⁶ and the *What's the Problem Represented to be?* developed by Carol Bacchi and outlined previously.⁷ The former might be characterised as a non-critical approach and the WPR a more critical approach to policy analysis. Specifically, the WPR approach aims to interrogate how policy solutions problematise social issues in specific ways that frame the policy response. Homelessness has been historically viewed as an 'individual' problem and policy service responses geared accordingly with minimal focus on broader structural solutions.

These tools are used as the basis for the major assignment which students undertake. The assignment

is a critical analysis of one of the policy areas including homelessness with an emphasis on:

- identifying key issues and trends in policy
- analysing key issues and trends in the chosen policy area
- links with other policy areas
- critical analysis of how the policy has impacted on human service delivery
- how social workers might respond to policy challenges.

Students commonly choose homelessness as an area of analysis with many developing key skills in critical policy practice. In workshops and in major assignments this approach to policy practice facilitates students gaining and being able to articulate the broader structural and intersectional context of homelessness.

Concluding Comments

In both the undergraduate and post graduate policy courses outlined in the article, students are introduced to different ways of thinking about policy that includes a strong experiential base aimed at developing skills in critical policy analysis. As such the courses themselves do not constitute separate degrees in policy but are part of social work programs committed to ensuring social work graduates have the requisite skills to become good policy practitioners once they enter the professional work force.

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From Theory to Practice: Teaching Social Work Students about Homelessness

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In this paper we discuss our experience of delivering a homelessness subject to La Trobe University social work students at the Albury-Wodonga (2011-2020) and Bendigo (2012-2016) campuses. Here we canvass the subject delivery, intended learning outcomes, and assessment, alongside some key opportunities and challenges encountered.

The subject was delivered in a block mode over a five-week period prior to students undertaking their first placement in the third year of a four-year program. As a 'blended' subject it incorporated both synchronous and asynchronous elements, with weekly face-to-face, interactive workshops supported by an online learning site comprising various forms of curated content.

A key aim of the subject was to support social work students develop a critical understanding of homelessness in Australia as a social problem — including the various ways it is conceptualised and responded to. A critical approach is congruent with the theoretical framework underpinning La Trobe University's social work curriculum.¹ Reflecting this approach, and centring on the relationship between homelessness and housing, the subject supported students to develop their ability to critically analyse power imbalances in society through exploration of structural conditions (that is, inadequate housing) and discriminatory implications for those homeless (that is, cultural marginalisation and material deprivation).

We concur with the view that '*Social work educators need to prepare students through the design and development of homelessness curricula that are evidence based*' and '*provide graduates with relevant practice, policy, and research knowledge.*'² Attention to these key domains of social work knowledge was reflected in the subject's four key learning outcomes:

1. analysing the various ways homelessness has been conceptualised as a social problem over time
2. synthesising research and other forms of knowledge about homelessness (including knowledge about lived experiences); critiquing the drivers and success of policy developments

3. applying social work knowledge and practice skills to complex cases involving homelessness or housing insecurity.

In accordance with these learning outcomes, we retained an explicit focus on exploring and critically analysing the relationship between homelessness and housing (including home ownership, private rental and public/social housing) and welfare systems, as well as key areas of social work practice such as family violence, out of home care and mental health.

Assessments were aligned to the learning outcomes and comprised a series of online quizzes testing students' understanding of core concepts derived from scholarly literature, a group presentation analysing a case scenario and outlining an assessment and intervention plan, and an essay critically analysing contemporary government policies and their effectiveness in addressing homelessness and related housing issues. Collectively, these assessments required students to synthesise new knowledge about homelessness and existing forms of knowledge and skills developed through the social work curriculum. This focus on the synthesis was particularly important given the relatively short duration and intensive learning involved in this 'block mode' subject.

Theoretically, the subject involved students revisiting classical sociological debates about agency versus structure and considering how they offer competing explanations of homelessness as either an



‘individual’ or ‘societal’ problem. They were then introduced to more contemporary theoretical positions (notably, structuration and critical theory) and associated literature examining homelessness as a multidimensional and intersectional issue. Students then examine various conceptualisations of homelessness derived from these different theoretical positions, and through a social work lens, appraise their implications at both individual (micro) and societal (macro) levels.

Students’ engagement with the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the subject was supported through the use of a contemporary Australian text as a primary source,³ which was supplemented with a range of additional literature and multimedia resources. This included qualitative research and other media exploring lived experience perspectives. Critically, the more ‘theoretical’ aspects of the subject were complemented by delivery of ‘practical’ information (such as information about local service systems and referral processes, and contemporary direct practice approaches) in collaboration with local practitioners and service providers.

As noted above, we sought to foster capacity of students to build upon and apply their developing skills, values, and knowledge base to the homelessness and housing field. Through exploration of the research, policy, and practice context, the subject provided opportunity for the integration of student learning and enhanced their ability to identify and analyse intersections between the macro (that is, policy) and micro (that is, direct practice) contexts. We consider this strengthened students’ appreciation of the complexities involved in this field of practice, alongside its interconnections with others — indeed, there are few areas of social work practice where issues of housing are not critical.

As social work academics with backgrounds in ‘direct practice’ in this field — and ongoing research endeavours — we drew from our specialist knowledge and networks to enrich student learning opportunities

where possible. For example, we engaged practitioners from the field to help students appreciate ‘on the ground’ challenges and opportunities of engaging in direct practice and negotiating the service system context while striving to integrate social work values and contemporary practice models. Where possible we engaged those with lived experiences of homelessness to meet with students, which deepened their appreciation of the associated stigma and deprivation, alongside perceptions of what is valued in social workers. Providing examples from our research and policy advocacy experiences, we think, also helped students deepen their appreciation as to the critical importance of social workers shining a light on gaps in knowledge, identifying oppressive service systems, practices, or policies, and undertaking action to influence social change.

As indicated, a particular focus of the subject was to critically examine historical and contemporary policy responses to homelessness in Australia and locating these within wider political and cultural approaches to housing. From the perspective of social work education, this focus supported students to further develop their understanding of social policy as a contested political process involving a range of stakeholders and interest groups, while also providing an opportunity to introduce skills in policy analysis and advocacy. In doing so we aimed to enhance students’ capacity to identify impacts of government policies in their first field placement (which typically took place after they completed the subject) and provide important scaffolding for a final year social policy subject.

This position of the subject immediately prior to placement posed some challenges, particularly because it necessitated condensing delivery (including assessments) into a four to five-week block of teaching and learning, rather than the standard 12 weeks. For many students, this was also a period of considerable uncertainty whilst they awaited confirmation of their placements or undertook arrangements for commencement. The heightened anxiety of the collective student

cohort at this time needed to be carefully managed to minimise impacts on the learning experience.

An ongoing challenge we would note relates to the increasingly congested social work curriculum, which is subject to (sometimes competing) expectations of accrediting bodies and university administrations. The complexity and diversity of contemporary social work practice, reflected in evolving practice standards, means that it can be difficult to retain specific ‘fields of practice’ subjects (particularly those perhaps considered ‘secondary’ to more traditional areas such as child protection) within the curriculum. Indeed, homelessness is not included as required content by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW).

Encouragingly, the importance of the field of homelessness for social work education is being recognised through the planned reintroduction of a subject at La Trobe University in 2024, which will occur as part of the social work program’s curriculum and course redesign, though its delivery will be dependent on availability and expertise of teaching staff. As we have canvassed above, we see much value and opportunity incorporating homelessness into social work curricula. Indeed, shining a light on the structural foundations of homelessness, and bringing into focus its socially determined nature, has great potential to strengthen social work graduates understanding of this social problem, alongside their ethical commitment to ‘*advocate change*’ to ‘*social systems and structures that preserve inequalities and injustice*’.⁴

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Recognition, Social Work and Homelessness

Dr Chris Horsell, Lecturer, Justice and Society, the University of South Australia

This article explores the role of homeless voices in constructing knowledge about homelessness and the development of policy and service delivery responses to people without homes. Specifically, the article highlights the suggestive value position for social work encapsulated in Honneth's concept of recognition as a framework from which to understand and incorporate homeless voices in the construction of knowledge about and policy responses to homelessness.¹ The issue of recognition in social welfare provision has frequently been seen as one that can be addressed through service user involvement in the policy, planning and delivery of services.² However, as highlighted by Thompson,³ this presents as an important issue regarding homelessness because significantly more people experience homelessness than those who present at services for assistance.

In the mid-1990s, the relationship between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution emerged as a significant debate in social policy. This debate was underpinned by the perceived failure of redistributive politics to address inequality particularly for some minority groups, leading to calls for an analysis not only of the outcomes, but also the processes of distributive justice.

The two most prominent antagonists in this exchange were Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth.⁴ The importance of this debate for social policy, social work and homelessness lies in the observation that contemporary policy frameworks regarding homelessness in Australia and internationally underpinned by

normative cultural assumptions regarding notions of home and housing of homeless people, are limiting in their capacity to recognise and address multiple and complex homeless identities.

Axel Honneth and Recognition

Honneth has argued the primacy of the struggle for recognition, with any question of redistribution being derivative from these. He argues that the identity of the self is dependent upon recognition by others at three levels and the moral progress of a society is dependent upon acknowledging all three. Honneth asserts that, at the level of intimacy of others, the love relation is critical to the development of self-confidence and, if damaged, contributes to a profound sense of aloneness and alienation. An example, in the context of this article, is the extent to which child sexual abuse and domestic violence are cited as significant factors in people experiencing homelessness.⁵ Honneth argues that people have a right to be protected against such acts of abuse, and notes that the converse is a facilitative environment in which others become a source of value.

Honneth's second level of recognition is that respect for the moral agency of the self. This has relevance for the nature of social policy and social work, to the extent to which this is frequently reconfigured as part of a neoliberal responsabilisation agenda, highlighting moral deficit in which marginalized groups including people without homes are held primarily accountable for what is a systemic issue. Honneth contends the struggle for respect is the struggle for full individual rights and full citizenship. Honneth asserts this is a process of becoming whereby legal rights are extended to all marginalised groups.

Honneth's third level of recognition is that of self-esteem, his argument being that societies afford self-esteem to individuals who contribute to culturally valued objectives (such as those who are independent and who are productive members of the paid work force). Key to Honneth's theory then is the idea that relations of care, respecting rights and social esteem are central for self-realization and failing to treat people accordingly leads to forms of misrecognition and disrespect.⁶ Honneth's work provides an explanatory framework for identity construction and recognition with respect to homelessness particularly the idea that lack of recognition leads to different forms of hurt, humiliation and disrespect.

The contribution of recognition theory to social work and social policy has been explored by a range of authors with differing views regarding its appropriateness and applicability.⁷ Rossiter for example argues that Honneth's theory has relevance to social work because most service users (including people experiencing homelessness) face situations of marginality through experiences of 'misrecognition' in all three forms discussed by Honneth. Recognition theory provides a framework that connects private pain to social injustice, and in doing so moves social work away from a reliance on the psychologized individual to an emphasis on social justice as critical for identity formation.⁸ Houston finds Honneth's ideas on self-realization useful in contributing to a social work of recognition that highlights the importance of the social context of human action.

According to Houston recognition theory poses a challenge to neoliberal responsabilisation agendas that contribute to feelings of shame

informing some contemporary social work fields of practice.⁹ Houston and Montgomery build on Honneth's recognition theory and his analysis of major forms of social pathology to enhance social worker's awareness of forms of misrecognition to inform anti-oppressive practice.¹⁰ In all these examples Honneth's theory of recognition proves useful in challenging the liberal conception of human subjects as independent highlighting instead the idea of interdependence and mutual recognition.

Recognition struggles then are concerned with cultural and symbolic injustice which are associated with, but distinguishable from, social-economic injustices and political representation. However, within the institutional discourse and practices of user involvement, people's status often remains marginalised through the practice of objectification and dividing practices. As a result, people become excluded from view or not recognised by virtue of their ascribed status which reinforces exclusionary practices. This forestalling of recognition is further reinforced and magnified by the stigmatising and all defining nature of a social problem such as homelessness within which it is difficult to assert a positive identity.¹¹ Inclusive user involvement is further undermined by the dominant discourses informing knowledge regarding an issue

such as homelessness through which the social construction of dependency is construed as behavioural. Consequently, forms of non-recognition, disrespect and misrecognition can serve to impede parity of participation at both the levels of policy, service delivery and service planning.¹²

Critical to facilitating voice in the homeless sector is the criteria used to assess what counts as valid knowledge in homeless research and policy.¹³ People who are experiencing homelessness have always had voice in the stories they tell as part of their attempts to access services and their very visual presence, but this has been ignored.¹⁴ In research conducted regarding rough sleepers and service user involvement highlights the construction of people without homes by social workers and other human service workers as passive, despite the coupling of rough sleeping with the user involvement as providing a potentially critical gateway linking citizenship, social justice and human rights.¹⁵ This work highlights the profound constraints facing people without homes in participating in service development and policy as a reflection of the structure and practice of homeless services despite the example of housing support initiatives that demonstrate the clear importance and potential offered by service user involvement in reshaping social service provision for people without homes.¹⁶

While there is a growing literature that incorporates the biographical and narrative accounts of people who are homeless in academic accounts of homelessness¹⁷ the extent to which these narratives inform part of a broader participation of service users in policy and program development is a far more nuanced issue. It is clear the involvement of people without homes in policy processes and service development is significantly less than other sectors much less the general population.¹⁸

A FEANTSA audit¹⁹ noted that there were several benefits accruing to involving service users, most notably more effective and targeted services, greater confidence and empowerment for service users, a more positive view of service users by service providers and better integration of service users into 'mainstream' society. While noting the benefits of participation, the audit noted that there were significant barriers to service users' participation. These comprise the medical and psychological condition of clients, issues around time and money and the paradox that there was a contradiction between close involvement of people without homes running services and the imperative of agencies to move clients on. Further over the last decade or so a renewed public interest in homelessness, assisted in part by efforts of people without homes themselves to raise public awareness of the issue



and provide alternative images of homelessness, has supported service user involvement in the development of services (for example, in Australia and the United Kingdom the *Big Issue* newspaper is an example of social entrepreneurship that initially started as a non-profit organisation in the United Kingdom that provides people without homes with the opportunity to 'earn' an income).

Beginning with the homeless references that were included as part of the social inclusion initiatives specifically in Australia and the United Kingdom in the late 1990s and 2000s some weight has been given to the importance of consultation with homeless service users, specifically where Housing First principles inform policy and service design.²⁰

In those instances, where the voices of people without homes have been more formally incorporated in policy or research contexts, invariably there has been a considerable disparity between the experiences and needs of service users and the priorities and direction of policy. As highlighted in other areas of service provision, the voice of people who are homeless is filtered by the voice of experts that supposedly provide a more objective version of events. Dominant discourses that inform both policy and research practices are themselves underpinned, by epistemologies that prioritise expert types of accounts rather than those



of service users.²¹ The question for social policy and social work is what theoretical frameworks may be useful for guiding the development of inclusive participatory involvement for service users, particularly with respect to people without homes.

Homelessness, for instance, entails both material deprivation and forms of disrespect (for example, lack of voice). The objective here is to develop an understanding of homelessness which gives substance to both questions of recognition and redistribution that will encourage and sustain dual policies addressing these two fundamental issues. The assumption here is that people are creative moral agents but within stratifications of power. This allows for a focus on agency that, without losing sight of the constraints on agency, notes the material and social constraints under which it operates. The difficulty here of course is that claims for recognition have traditionally been based on assertions of group difference (for example, gay pride, feminism). While the claims made by people without homes are arguably different recognition must be given to the expertise that people exhibit in negotiating their lives despite inadequate resources and the indifference and stigma imposed by other members of society.

It is essential to an individual's self-esteem that the opportunity is provided to experience recognition in the light of one's accomplishments and abilities as a valuable member of society. However, for those of a more neoliberal persuasion, this is constituted through the duty which obligates people to participate in the paid work force; public policy needs to be more respectful of diversity and be seen to be able to counter the collective denigration highlighted by Honneth's notion of misrecognition.

The article has argued that contemporary service user participation initiatives in the homelessness sector need to challenge the existing inequalities and power imbalance between service users, service providers and policy makers. This article has argued that a critical component of an alternative social work and social policy response to homelessness is one that incorporates Honneth's

idea of recognition. Honneth's theory of recognition provides a central theoretical construct through which service user involvement in the development of homelessness policy and services can be developed.

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Chapter 2: The Role of Social Work in Enhancing Policy Responses to Homelessness

Keeping Family Violence Victims 'Safe at Home': Practitioner Perspectives

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Safe at Home is an approach which addresses the risks of homelessness, poverty and intergenerational trauma that occur when women must leave their homes to escape violence. When the alternative is sleeping in cars, squalid rooming houses, multiple moves around unsuitable accommodation, and struggling financially, many women will feel that they have no realistic option of leaving. As many as 7,690 women a year return to perpetrators due to having nowhere affordable to live.¹

'Safe at Home' is a social justice response underpinned by the belief that perpetrators should be held accountable for their violence and recognises the inherent unfairness of expecting that women must leave home because of violence. It involves a combination of policing, legal and integrated supports so that wherever possible, women and children are able to stay home, while perpetrators are the ones who must leave. In the more traditional situation, victims-survivors end up with all the disadvantages of having to leave. Their children's schooling is disrupted: they leave behind friends, family, neighbours. They depart their employment unexpectedly. They struggle financially with only one income, and all the costs of moving and relocating. And with housing in short supply and so unaffordable, they often end up couch-surfing, staying in a whole series of emergency motels, living in cars, or homeless.

McAuley Community Services for Women has been a strong advocate for a 'Safe at Home' approach to avoid such consequences, and throughout 2021 worked with others, including police, courts, and peak bodies to understand the barriers. We know these exist because more and more women who seek support

from homelessness services are there because of family violence. Through consultations with women with lived experience, we learnt that they were often unaware of the option to stay home. Some were extremely surprised to learn of the legal protections they could have accessed to make it viable. None could recall conversations or advice from the multiple organisations they encountered about the possibility of the perpetrator being excluded. Even if this would have been impractical or extremely difficult, this option was, in their recollection, not even explored.²

It was also clear that the point at which they left, or were helped to leave, their home after violence became pivotal to their later story. It set off a chain of events where the abuser's right to stay in the primary residence quickly became entrenched, while their own drift into unstable accommodation and poverty felt inevitable.

We became interested in learning more about the role of practitioners working with women experiencing family violence in these outcomes. A joint project between Melbourne University and McAuley set out to explore their views on 'Safe at Home' and the factors that help or hinder its effective operation. Two Masters of Social Work students conducted 11 interviews over six weeks in 2021 with frontline family violence workers in both rural and metropolitan settings.

Key Findings

Overall, frontline workers supported the goal of supporting women and children to remain in their original housing, recognizing it as much fairer than the current, more typical situation of women moving to crisis or refuge accommodation.

There was some caution or pessimism, though, about whether increasing the numbers of those who can stay 'Safe at Home' is achievable. The persistence and severity of perpetrator violence, system flaws (especially fragmented services), and unaffordable housing were the main barriers perceived. The workers were also clear that they viewed it as a choice, not something that becomes universal or forced. They recognised many women would elect to move because the house has been a place of distress and terror, as well as fear of becoming 'sitting ducks' by remaining. As one worker also noted, victim-survivors' lives have often been characterised by 'having choice removed from them'; it was important that they needed to be in control of decisions about staying, or leaving, their homes.

Models of Support affect 'Safe at Home' Perceptions and Outcomes

Outcomes and attitudes to 'Safe at Home' varied, with the timing of the first contact with the woman and the sort of intervention offered being significant. Outreach workers, for example, were more positive about it as a possibility than those working with women who had already left.

Workers based in organisations that also supported perpetrators felt more confident about the feasibility of women remaining home. They spoke of a sense of relief that the perpetrator was being monitored and supported, so that heightened risks and escalating behaviours could be quickly identified.

Workers based in services which only worked with women were less confident that 'Safe at Home' was achievable. Typically, the women they saw had already left the family home, and may have already had several moves to be safe. Workers in

these situations often felt it was already too late, too difficult — or just too unsafe — to initiate the legal and policing steps necessary to remove perpetrators who'd remained in the family home.

There was a wide range of views in how often the practitioners interviewed saw successful 'Safe at Home' outcomes. Some said they had virtually never seen it occur or 'could count it on the fingers of one hand'; these were mainly located in women's accommodation services. Others said it was actively at front of their minds. In one remote rural service, comment was made that 'Safe at Home' was always the first option pursued because crisis accommodation was scarce and women were keen to remain in their community.

'Duty of Care' vs Dignity/ Risk: Protective vs Empowering Approaches

Workers were thoughtful and realistic about their own roles and ethical responsibilities in supporting a woman whose choice to remain home might carry a risk of significant and imminent danger. They acknowledged that if a perpetrator had the will and determination to stalk and abuse the woman, no physical safety measures or intervention order could prevent it. They felt it was impossible to completely, exhaustively, and comprehensively safety plan for all possible avenues and outcomes. One said they 'can only try to think of what may happen and do the best [we] can' to put preventative safety measures and safety plans in place to protect victim-survivors'; another said: 'The victim-survivor needs to have the self-confidence and will to remain within the home in order to live a full life'. Some workers recognised the ways their anxieties and concerns could colour their discussions with women around a 'Safe at Home' option. Some, perhaps inadvertently, mentioned giving 'advice' or 'an opinion'. This indicates that it can be hard in such conversations to avoid projecting practitioners' own concerns and fears.

Workers who had previously been situated in homelessness services described themselves as having a particular passion for the development of 'Safe at Home', having seen the long-term negative effects of

housing instability on women, and what they saw as an inferior service system. One worker stated: *'to end up homeless is the worst-case scenario... we try to do what we can to help them stay [within their home].'*

Barriers and Enablers to a 'Safe at Home' Response

One of the most significant barriers to 'Safe at Home' outcomes was the waiting period for case management. Applications for flexible support or personal safety initiatives (such as cameras or upgrades to home security) must be made through case managers; this can take two months. Workers pointed out that many women had already lost their housing in the meantime and also commented that there were particular disadvantages for women who were 'on the move' and living in a different region when they finally moved 'up the list.'

The role of police was also cited as critical in an effective 'Safe at Home' response, and workers interviewed — especially those who had worked in family violence over a lengthy period — believed police responses had considerably improved. There were still reports however of failures to respond unless there were multiple breaches, subjective labelling of which breach was more 'serious' than another, and variations in language and attitudes to family violence. Most significantly communication breakdowns can mean that important information is not passed on about perpetrator whereabouts — release from jail, or postponement of hearings for example.

According to the workers, for women with children, 'Safe at Home' considerations were complex. If a father was still involved in children's lives safety measures could be complex. Child protection interventions frequently focused on pressure on mothers to leave so that their child was not at risk; an approach viewed as 'too cut and dried' by several workers. The fear of child removal was often weaponised by the perpetrator. Mothers often feared that violent fathers with consistent housing would be seen as a more 'fit' parent than a mother who is entering unstable, precarious housing or homelessness.

Implications and Conclusions

The research highlighted practical, tangible ways that 'Safe at Home' responses could be better implemented and more widely achieved. It was equally, if not more, important, that frontline staff achieve a 'Safe at Home' mindset. This means consciously exploring 'Safe at Home' strategies in their safety planning with clients, and not 'defaulting' to the position of encouraging victim-survivors to flee. In the course of the interviews, some workers reflected on their own practice, and recognised that, especially where a 'Safe at Home' option was so rarely seen or the challenges seemed so immense, it could become routine to discount it as a possibility.

To shift this situation, workers will need to be skilled in safety planning, as well as risk assessment and person-centred care. Their work requires recognition that risk and 'Safe at Home' statuses are not stagnant, but could be in some type of flux, and that 'safe' and 'home' are subjective concepts.

It will also require trust that victim-survivors are best positioned to make decisions about the trajectory of their own lives. Family violence workers need to have clear boundaries about what they can and cannot do to facilitate 'Safe at Home', and accurately communicate this with their clients.

The findings also have implications for service models, given that organisations which included perpetrator oversight and visibility were associated with increased workers' confidence in a 'Safe at Home' option. Current trials of perpetrator accommodation and interventions already underway in Victoria could point to a way forward in testing whether these are perceptions, or whether evidence shows they do lead to better outcomes for women and children.

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Mobilising Academia: Industry Partnerships to Reshape Homelessness Services in South Australia

Linda Jordan, Communications Officer, Baptist Care SA

Through a new partnership between Baptist Care SA and Flinders University, student immersion in the homelessness sector is playing a critical role in increasing understanding of the causes of homelessness and building the capacity of the social workers of the future to address it.

For over a hundred years, Baptist Care SA has operated homelessness and food security services from their InnerCity site in Adelaide. Volunteers provide vital support to these services, but with the onset of the pandemic in 2020, restrictions meant they were unable to fulfil their roles. Like so many others, Baptist Care SA was forced to seek solutions so they could continue to serve the community.

At the same time, pandemic restrictions were also making it difficult for social work students to complete meaningful field work placements. With both organisations seeking solutions, Flinders University and Baptist Care SA formed a mutually beneficial partnership which has seen unprecedented numbers of social work students complete placement in Baptist

Care SA's Aboriginal, Children, Youth and Family, schools, and homelessness services.

While student placements were not new to the organisation, the new agreement saw numbers increase more than 300 per cent, allowing crucial food security services to remain open while social work students gained unique field work experience in the sector.

By the end of 2020, the student model was outlined in a formal contract between the organisations. Since this time, 71 students (from both Flinders and other educational institutions) have completed their 500-hour placements at the InnerCity site, with a further 20 per semester commencing their placements with Baptist Care SA. The organisation has vastly improved its ability to mobilise the strength and knowledge of students, recognise the value of their diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, and fully utilise this workforce.

Social workers have an ethical mandate to confront social injustice. Although it can be argued that homelessness is amongst the most prominent examples of social

injustice, as a social concern, it is not a specific focus of a social work degree. Despite this, over half of the students who have completed placement at Baptist Care SA have done so in their homelessness and food insecure services.

Those students have seen first-hand the crossover challenges that people who are homeless often experience with food insecurity, mental and physical health, disability, child protection, criminal justice, addiction, domestic violence, and poverty. Each of these areas is within a social worker's domain and it is this complexity that makes work experience in the homelessness sector so beneficial for learning.

Flinders University master's in social work student Isabel Praschifka completed her placement in Baptist Care SA's (former) Eastern Adelaide Aboriginal Specific Homelessness Service in 2020.

'It was such a valuable experience because when you support clients in homelessness you need a multidisciplinary approach. You need to be able to draw upon the expertise of other helping professions to



L to R: Onsite Social Work Student Supervisor Joanne Brown speaks with students Mel Wang, Embar Kaur, Sussan Hashemi-Sakhtsari and Aleen Sebastian at Baptist Care SA's Inner City site

meet their needs. Placement in homelessness services is a great way to learn about how the referral process works, to connect with other helping services and learn how different sectors interact.'

For Bachelor and Master of Social Work students on placement, the experience-rich placements are complemented by intentional initiatives designed to help them gain a deeper understanding of the causes of homelessness and develop instinctively reflective practice.

One of these initiatives is the unique student hub at the InnerCity site where students can complete the theoretical components of their course when not engaged with clients. The Hub is staffed by Onsite Social Work Supervisor, Joanne Brown, who is jointly employed by both organisations to support, educate, and facilitate students throughout their placements.

It also provides a safe space for fortnightly group supervision sessions where students discuss their projects, problem solve together and share their learnings.

'It sets students up for good healthy practice in their career ... and allows them to become better equipped to manage the complexities of working with the most vulnerable groups in society,' explains Joanne, who has a professional background in substance misuse and homelessness.

The placements are challenging and offer opportunities for students to develop broad skill sets including counselling, community development, advocacy, policy analysis and case coordination. As capacity is built in the sector, promising students are often offered employment in the services. To date 17 students have gained employment at Baptist Care SA.

This was exactly what happened with Isabel Praszifka. In 2021, Baptist Care SA formed part of a new sector Alliance, Toward Home¹ designed to reform homelessness services in the State. After completing her placement, Isabel was offered a paid client engagement role in Wardli-ana, the new Aboriginal specific homelessness service. She was later employed as a case manager.



Flinders University Master's in Social Work student Isabel Praszifka completed a practical placement in Baptist Care SA's homelessness services before being offered employment in their Wardli-ana Program.

There are many ethical dilemmas to being a non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person working in a 'helping' role with First Nations people. Social workers have played a role in historical injustices to Aboriginal people, which can contribute to distrust. At Wardli-ana there is a keen awareness that, as social workers have been part of the problem in the past, it is critical to practice (and teach) reflective practice, or they could become so again.

'Being a person who doesn't identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, I felt that it was my responsibility to be aware of how I was engaging and check that I was accommodating cultural needs,' Isabel explained.

Her experiences working with Aboriginal people who are homeless have been eye-opening. Aboriginal Australians experience homelessness at almost 10 times the rate of non-Aboriginal Australians.²

Yet rather than focusing on deficits, Isabel has found there is much to celebrate in the strengths of her clients, including the closeness of relationships with family and friends, and their strong cultural ties.

'I would like to see that celebrated more,' she reflects. *'Social work theories and values are based on Euro-centric ideals. They rarely come from First Nations peoples, and so they're often not great when applying them to First Nations people.'*

Since Wardli-ana was established in 2021, social work students have made up one fifth of the team at any given time. Many, like Isabel, have gone on to be offered employment in the service.

'Students offer diverse perspectives to our team,' explains Wardli-ana Team Leader, Rebecca Attwood, who also began her association with Baptist Care SA as a social



L-R: Rebecca Attwood, Team Leader - Wardli-ana with Joanne Brown, Onsite Social Work Student Supervisor

work student on placement. *'As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service, we value cultural perspectives that are broader than traditional Western thinking.'*

Students inject energy into the team — they enthusiastically engage in conversations around creating change, embrace novel experiences and are keen to grow and learn.

Social workers often have high caseloads and although we try not to, there is a risk of becoming outcome driven. While supporting students' learning, social workers must pause and reflect on their own practice more deeply to answer student questions, *why do we do what we do?* Having students around prompts a culture of regular supervision, which is healthy for all of us.

Australia is still on a journey of thinking more deeply about First Nation's social work practice. It helps to think beyond Western pedagogy and ideology, to grow and effect change both in our team, our organisation and beyond.

For Isabel, advocacy is a distinct feature of working in Aboriginal homelessness. All too often she has witnessed her clients experiencing discrimination in the private sector. *'We're looking to change the narrative about our clients all the time; to focus on their many strengths and combat the idea that they are not going to be good tenants.'*

There are other complexities as well. Due to cultural obligations, many Aboriginal people need to have family who are not on the lease stay with them for lengthy and open-ended periods of time. For this reason, staff work closely together with the South Australian Housing Authority (SAHA) to negotiate flexibility around tenancies.

'Family obligations are important for the wellbeing of the tenant, and they won't always be able to give a timeframe for when family members will leave, but it's in their best interests — spiritually and socially — to have family nearby,' says Isabel.

As Team Leader, Rebecca has been encouraged to see students take their first-hand experiences of working with Aboriginal people

in the homelessness sector and develop their confidence to have robust discussions with their peers and lecturers.

'I was also a social work student who completed placement within Baptist Care SA's homelessness services before working at Wardli-ana. They played a key role in helping me develop my thinking around how to reshape First Nation social work practice,' she explains.

It's a challenging space to work, and there is still a lot of room for growth in how social workers work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But there is cause for hope.

'Although we see our clients experience systemic racism all the time, students are recognising this and needing to manage it and are helping effect change.'

'We're seeing social workers of the future play a significant role in reshaping and decolonising social work practice in Australia.'

Endnotes

1. The alliance comprises Lutheran Care, Mission Australia, Sonder, The Salvation Army and Baptist Care SA.
2. First Nations people are far more likely to experience homelessness — despite comprising just 3 per cent of the population, 20 per cent of Australia's homeless population are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. See: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness*, 2016. [online] Available at: <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/census-population-and-housing-estimating-homelessness/latest-release>>



L to R: Social Work Students Yanan Li, Bdoor Aljedaani and Dilshani Lanka Elvitigala complete the theory components of their course at Baptist Care SA's Student Hub

An Olympic Feat: Securing Boarding House Tenancies in Brisbane

Lauren Mickle, QUT, Michelle Newcomb, QUT and Andrew Webster, West End Community House

As Brisbane prepares to hold the 2032 Olympic games the inner south suburbs of West End and South Brisbane will be irrevocably impacted. These areas have long been considered inclusive and diverse suburbs, but concern exists for the many local residents in insecure, temporary boarding house accommodation. As a part of a Master of Social Work (MSW) student placement the lead author supported by West End Community House (WECH) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) undertook a historical research project to better understand local community housing needs. The research was conducted via informal interviews with previous local housing workers to better understand how their past experiences might influence future housing practice and policy for those in boarding houses. The study revealed the impacts gentrification and poor policy and planning have had on boarding house residents in Brisbane's inner south.

Boarding Houses in Brisbane

Boarding houses, sometimes referred to as rooming or guest houses, are privately run, for-profit accommodation. They are often poorly maintained, having a run-down appearance and lack privacy but are often easily accessible, becoming the accommodation of last resort for society's most vulnerable people. Boarding houses fall into the category of affordable housing, however the tenants who live there are technically classified as homeless due to the precariousness of their tenancies. Queensland Council of Social Services states that residents do not have control over their lease, nor access to private facilities.¹ Residents often share access to bathroom, kitchen and laundry areas and are often described as insecure and unsafe places to live.²

The areas of South Brisbane and West End in the inner South of Brisbane have been the home of many boarding houses. However, changes to boarding houses have occurred over time in this area alongside the changing demographics of residents. For example, the deinstitutionalisation processes in the '60s and '70s removed people from government-run facilities and placed them back into the community. This occurred alongside the migration of industries out of the city centre taking working class, single boarding house residents with them. During the 1980s the World Exhibition held in Brisbane, known as Expo '88 saw new infrastructure built into what was still one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Brisbane. The event was successful in bringing in jobs and tourist dollars to the economy but many in the area experienced decreased housing affordability, forced evictions, and unscrupulous landlords increased rents. During this time community activism led to last minute funds being provided to WECH to employ housing resource workers.

Boarding houses have continued to struggle and during the 2000s changes to legislation applied building fire and safety codes on heritage era buildings leading to the closure of some local boarding houses. Remaining boarding house residents often find themselves stuck in rundown, unsafe buildings, in fear of eviction due to weak tenancy protections. Limited alternative housing options remain in the area as the continued development of high-density, high rent, luxury apartment blocks litter the West End and South Brisbane skyline.

Method: Talking to housing workers of the past

As a novel MSW placement, the chief author was located at WECH and sought to understand how previous housing workers supported and advocated alongside boarding house residents over the past 30 years. Informal interviews were held with nine previous key stakeholders who have worked within the community sector, in and around West End and South Brisbane. While there is a wealth of work done over a few decades, this study focused on events since Expo '88. Participants reported changes to boarding houses in the inner south due to gentrification, law reform, neoliberal politics, and shared a collective fear for boarding house residents as the 2032 Olympics loom.

The Impact of Gentrification

Most of the participants of this study have been involved with the West End community since the 1980s and interviews allowed them to reflect on historical changes. Some participants, who are also residents, talk of a time when West End had a largely migrant community. They described a time when families were able to accumulate enough wealth to move out of the industrial belt of the inner-city and into bigger suburban properties. The boarding house industry grew organically out of these rapid changes in the post-WWII era. The push for home ownership and the relaxed boarding house regulations provided perfect conditions for meeting the changing needs of this community driven by economics and migration. This allowed people from lower-socioeconomic classes to be able to live somewhat affordably and access the health care and services they needed. Several participants noted the true human cost of Expo '88 was that it irreversibly changed the real estate



demand for the area, displacing many people from their homes and support networks. The consequences of this gentrification can be seen today with many high-density rental apartments approved in the area which are financially out of reach for boarding house tenants.

Neoliberal Legislation and Policy

West End and South Brisbane has long been considered an inclusive and tolerant inner-city enclave however it has succumbed to neoliberal demands. Participants described how the area has gone from being affordable, close to services and support networks, to highly coveted, luxury living for higher-income earners. Demographic changes have been mirrored by changes to local service delivery with many local services being defunded, subjected to restructuring focused on measurable outcomes and forced to participate in overly competitive funding conditions. Advocacy services within the area have been consistently dismantled and small community organisations have been forced out or forced to surrender to larger organisational alliances.

Participants also reported the detrimental impact changes to legislation had on boarding houses in the area. Sections 370 and 375 of the Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation Act 2008 (3) were highlighted by some as

they apply specifically to boarding house residents. Section 370 states a provider or landlord may give a written notice requiring a resident to leave the rental premises immediately, while section 375 allows the use of force to remove that resident. One participant felt discrimination is embedded in the use of the legislation allowing landlords to exploit many vulnerable boarding house residents. To date, advocacy within the sector has dwindled in part due to limited resources and funding requirements.

Others pointed to a lack of policy and planning across all three levels of government in relation to boarding houses and their residents. Many felt boarding houses were left untouched as they were considered a market response to an unpalatable social need. In embracing this ideology, governments have allowed for a 'hands off' approach, despite the advocacy and collaborative interagency efforts made by practitioners in the past. To address the issue of housing and the conditions boarding house residents find themselves in, the call for a human rights approach also became apparent during these interviews.

The Olympics' Impact

There is still a long way to go when it comes to protecting the housing rights of low-income renters, particularly boarding house residents. Every participant felt anxious about the impact the 2032 Olympics will

have on those in local boarding houses. These concerns ranged from the possible lack of community consultation and participation; a lack of engagement from newer, wealthier residents' and property owners ready to make a profit turning their rental into tourist accommodation. Ultimately if left unaddressed the likelihood of increased boarding house closures and displacement of vulnerable tenants to areas unknown to them seems credible. Participants feared repeating the mistakes of the past with little consideration of social and community impact.

Conclusion

The demographics and housing availability in West End and South Brisbane have irreversibly changed over the last few decades. This has led to many vulnerable boarding houses tenants to be evicted or marginally housed despite the continued economic growth within these suburbs. As the Brisbane Olympic deadline looms more must be done to support existing boarding house tenants but also to advocate for more fair, sustainable and humane housing to be provided to all in Brisbane's inner south. As social workers we call on all three levels of government, local organisations and residents to engage in meaningful consultation and development to support society's most vulnerable. The Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games will be a time of great opportunity for the inner south, however, unless proactive social justice responses are implemented in the lead-up, the consequences for those living in boarding houses are likely to be grim.

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New Role Combines Mental Health, Family Violence and Housing Support

Olivia Troughton, Inaugural Family Violence and Homelessness Worker, McAuley Community Services for Women and Wellways

Traumatised women who determine, during the course of mental health support, that they cannot return to abusive relationships, are at an elevated risk of homelessness upon discharge. This is because they are now in two categories of risk — being those escaping family violence and those leaving mental health services.¹

Compounding the stress, this threat might need to be faced within weeks of them first seeking support from an agency with no specialist training in family violence or housing responses.

In 2020, leading mental health provider Wellways Australia and McAuley Community Services for Women, joined forces and conceived a role to try and address this challenge.

The primary role of the partnership's inaugural Family Violence and Homelessness Worker (the Worker), is to identify and transition eligible women from a short-term specialist mental health service to a service for women and children that specialises in family violence recovery and supported medium-term housing.

Working alongside the Wellways team, the Worker:

- advocates for family violence victim-survivors in programs at four Wellways Prevention and Recovery Care (PARC) centres
- builds capacity in the mental health team around family violence and housing issues
- works with mental health workers and program participants to develop individual support plans with goals to address family violence and homelessness

- refers victim-survivors to safe, affordable, secure housing and relevant programs at McAuley House and other services where possible, while building support networks and longer-term housing options.

An introduction to the Partner Services

Wellways PARC centres provide sub-acute mental health services (a mix of clinical and psychosocial supports) in a residential program.

In a client-centred approach, Wellways recovery staff work with clinicians, creating recovery plans and transitioning participants to community support networks when they leave. Participants generally stay at a PARC for an average of 14 days.

McAuley provides support for women and children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence, accepting referrals from across Victoria. Across McAuley's services, women can access family violence and outreach support, health and employment programs, legal and financial advice, and trauma-informed supports for their children including tutoring programs and a children's worker at court.

As well as a 24-hour crisis response, McAuley runs a women's refuge service, with stays of up to three months, as well as medium-term housing and support across the Western Metropolitan Region of Melbourne and Ballarat. The average stay across McAuley House is around nine months.

In the 2020-2021 year, 44 per cent of the women supported by McAuley's family violence services had been living in short-term or emergency accommodation,

with little ability to improve that situation. Sixty-four per cent of those supported by McAuley's homelessness services had experienced family violence and 72 per cent of all women supported reported one or more mental health issues.²

Generally, McAuley clients can be dealing with a range of issues including homelessness, family violence, childhood trauma, episodic mental illness, sexual abuse and challenging social behaviours.

Identifying the Need

Presentations at Victorian homelessness services because of family violence represented 42 per cent of all clients in 2021, with mental health issues accounting for 40 per cent.³

Research over a longer period shows that 22 per cent of all those who experience physical violence while in stable housing fall into precarious housing the following year, while 75 per cent of victims of physical violence who were in precarious housing can find themselves still in that position in the same time frame.⁴

Why Responding to Homelessness is Difficult in a Mental Health Setting

As with every mental health service, a condition of being accepted into the PARC program is that participants provide a residential address they can be discharged to. This is because the average time spent at PARC is two weeks.

Despite this requirement, a risk of homelessness can still be revealed during the program. There are two main reasons for this. The first, we refer to as a 'necessary untruth' and the other, a 'safe disclosure'.



A 'necessary untruth' occurs when a participant knows that they can only access mental health help at PARC if they have a fixed address, so they provide one that is potentially unsafe to return to, or that they have no intention of using. Participants are not to blame for such misinformation and are understood to be doing what's in their power to access a rationed, essential service.

A 'safe disclosure' occurs when a participant has built up enough rapport with a worker to disclose that their discharge address is unsafe for them.

Commonly, the participant will then be referred to a homelessness Entry/Access Point that has a co-ordinating

role in its region. Each Access Point operates and delivers its services differently, making it hard to navigate. In our experience, it can be difficult to get a call back and delays are common.

Where family violence has been revealed, a participant might also be referred to a specialist family violence service for support and/or crisis accommodation.

This then can lead to women having to move multiple times as the family violence and homelessness systems respond to changes in safety, risk and availability of housing.⁵

Experiences of family violence can result in victim-survivors being five times more likely to

have depression, post-natal depression and suicidal thoughts, as well as be at risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder;⁶ it's not hard to see how navigating multiple and shifting systems can be overwhelming.

Indeed, those forced to seek help from the family violence and homeless systems speak of being confused and worn down by multiple moves, being given incorrect advice about eligibility for support, and drifting between both systems.⁷

Removing Barriers to Prevent Homelessness

The Family Violence and Homelessness Worker role significantly reduces the risk that a victim-survivor who presents at

PARC without a safe discharge address, could be turned away from mental health help because of it.

Importantly, it also offers victim-survivors the opportunity to receive continuing support despite being considered 'at low risk' of further abuse.

For example, through this role, a participant who had experienced homelessness was referred to McAuley because she did not want to return to an unsafe boarding house. A second participant was referred after she had been abandoned by her abusive husband when he left the country with their three children.

But referrals for housing with ongoing support can only be made when places are available, and there is a critical need for safe housing upon discharge.

How the Mental Health Service has been Enhanced

While mental health support workers are experienced at picking up cues for abuse, some can feel like having a conversation with a participant without specialist family violence knowledge is like opening a 'pandora's box'.

The role of the Family Violence and Homelessness Worker addresses this by building capacity within the team. For example, mental health support workers who ask for a secondary consult with the Worker because they suspect family violence, will be involved in that consult.

Support workers are also able to take part in training. An online family violence education session has been delivered by Safe and Equal (former the Domestic Violence Resource Centre), and more training is planned.

Being on site at PARC also enables the Family Violence and Homelessness Worker to share skills in reading external reports through a family violence lens, picking up for example, a woman who had presented numerous times to emergency departments with 'panic attacks' who had slipped through the cracks because the

hospital had failed to identify family violence as the trigger.

Family violence is now recorded on her discharge summary and can help to shape any future service response. The participant also has a new understanding of her situation and is able to make decisions accordingly. It was really pleasing that after a family safety plan was drawn up, she was able to say: 'I now realise that leaving is an option'.

A survey of Wellways staff at PARC showed 75 per cent had seen a difference in referrals, knowledge and conversations regarding family violence and homelessness over the first year of this appointment.

Described benefits included availability for secondary consults, access to additional resources, in-house knowledge of family violence and relevant referrals, timely support with housing needs, and providing PARC with an opportunity to work with people who might not otherwise be eligible because of homelessness.

A similar role connecting a family violence and mental health service in Liverpool, New South Wales, attracted similar responses. An evaluation of that model concluded that it could 'inform service delivery across the health system'.⁸

Sally's Story — A Case Study of How the Partnership is Working

Sally (not her real name) had experienced extreme trauma at the hands of her ex-husband at an earlier time and gave her discharge address to PARC as the home she now shared with her adult sons.

During her stay, a PARC support worker began to suspect Sally was still experiencing abuse and referred her to the Family Violence and Homelessness Worker. Being able to have a conversation with her in a safe space where trust had already been established, was hugely beneficial.

It became apparent that Sally's sons were repeating their father's violence against each other. When

Sally acknowledged she didn't want to live like that, we were able to access McAuley services and move her into safe accommodation when her PARC stay ended.

Not only was the anxiety of 'what happens next' removed from her thinking, but she was also able to access art and cooking activities as her identified coping mechanisms in her new surroundings.

When it comes to family violence, momentum is everything and a change in circumstances and commitment to supports can occur very quickly.

The Family Violence and Homelessness Worker role can significantly reduce the risk of homelessness for a victim-survivor who seeks mental health support. It also dramatically improves the chances that those surviving family violence can regain control of their lives so that stable housing becomes more achievable, more quickly, and more durably.

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Chapter 3: Social Work on the Frontline Response to Homelessness

COVID, Complexity, and Collaboration: University Engagement with Rough Sleeping Homelessness on Queensland's Sunshine Coast During the Pandemic

Claire Meraki and Phil Crane*

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) engaged in a multi-faceted collaborative research partnership involving staff and students from social work and other disciplines in support of a regional response for people without homes, particularly those 'sleeping rough'. This article outlines that involvement and the rich contribution and learning that occurred through this.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Sunshine Coast region already had an established housing and homelessness sector and suite of regional strategies. The Sunshine Coast Regional Council had identified collaborative regional responses to local housing needs as a key strategic priority within its *2019-2041 Community Strategic Action Plan*, and established an ongoing Mayor's Roundtable on Homelessness. In late 2019, funded through the Queensland Department of Housing, QShelter was establishing ten new Place Based Response Teams (PBRT) across the state; 'strengthening existing networking and care coordination structures'.¹ Integrated Family and Youth Services (IFYS) was chosen as the Sunshine Coast auspice organisation, and a new Care Coordinator position was filled in late January 2020.

The Initial Impact of COVID-19

Following Australia's declaration of the pandemic in February 2020, a range of meetings were held involving different levels of government, emergency, and community services. Very little was known about the virus; unknown factors and community anxiety were significant. Many workplaces closed offices and worked from home, and many

stopped face-to-face and outreach services. Neighborhood centres closed, or significantly altered service provision. Publicly accessible amenities including showers, barbeques, and toilets were closed, along with holiday parks and campgrounds. People without housing were increasingly camping in public areas, and homelessness was becoming a more visible issue.

What we saw was a very very quick withdraw from frontline services and doors closed. And that in turn left our most vulnerable people even more vulnerable. The PBRT, along with the Department of Housing and Council, gave us permission to go 'Actually, that's not ok'. The values base that they weren't prepared to let individuals down, we can see individuals struggling and families in cars... it was about providing dignity and humanity.

— IFYS Executive Manager
Community Services

Around the same time the federal government announced income support packages including Job Seeker, Job Keeper, and a temporary eviction moratorium. In spite of this, during the pandemic many became unemployed, and many unexpectedly found themselves experiencing homelessness. Parliamentary Inquiry submissions from the Queensland Government, QShelter, and IFYS give important context.^{2,3,4} Over time, additional pressures included rental availability near zero, a significant influx of people moved to the Sunshine Coast from New South Wales and Victoria and long-term renters being evicted against a backdrop of rapidly escalating property values and sustained upwards pressure on rents.

In short, pressures fueling homelessness were increasing and the very limited resources for persons sleeping rough were becoming inaccessible. At the time no local crisis accommodation option for homeless adults existed on the Sunshine Coast (except for a few domestic violence crisis spaces) — the closest was in Brisbane or Maryborough. People experiencing homelessness can be highly mobile through a community, are more vulnerable in their physical health and need to be able to isolate safely from COVID-19 as and if required.⁵ When the pandemic was declared, the Sunshine Coast PBRT became the local homelessness coordination mechanism. A rapid and substantial coordinated regional response was needed.

The following instance was cited as highlighting a critical service gap and triggering the urgent development of a COVID-19 regional response. As told by IFYS staff in research interviews, the PBRT Care Coordinator received a call from a local Neighborhood Centre just before the Easter holidays. A man with a long history of sleeping rough had been discharged from hospital after taking a COVID test, his symptoms suggested he was likely positive. He had then been turned away from a motel, and so was back to life on the streets. Health and police services wanted to find him as a matter of urgency. Information was limited to the name he answered to, his general appearance, and that he would likely be somewhere between Caloundra and Maroochydore pushing a shopping trolley. It was night, and IFYS staff (unfunded and beyond scope of their roles) searched the streets until he was located a few hours later and helped him into accommodation. As they found him, an ambulance was dropping off another man to a shopping centre, being exited

from hospital into homelessness. These instances provided the PBRT coordinating group with clear (though anecdotal) evidence of a critical gap requiring immediate attention.

The Initial Response

In quick response, funding was provided by the Department of Housing to provide temporary accommodation to persons experiencing homelessness, couched as a 'pandemic health crisis' response. Motel rooms and cabins across a wide geographic area were used, but it quickly became apparent that the exclusive rental of one or more entire sites was needed.

The Kawana Sports Hub, owned by a not-for-profit organisation (normally used to accommodate elite sporting teams),⁶ was established as a site for individuals experiencing homelessness within three days. From the beginning, the strategy was to transition people from The Kawana Hub into permanent housing. IFYS managed the premises, the Department of Housing established an office onsite, and a range of other health and human services visited regularly.

The service model developed at The Hub has been characterised by participating services and students as:

- a health crisis framed response
- an immediate response (rapid opening, no wait lists)
- providing good quality and safe accommodation for 40 'single' adults (each unit had its own bathroom and secure PIN keypad; on site security)
- having conditional elements (the lease required a 'dry' site, there were behavioural expectations, and there was a 9pm curfew with limits on numbers of nights away before place lost)
- outcomes and future oriented (the actively pursued goal of transitioning from The Hub to long term sustainable housing), and importantly
- relational, both in terms of engagement with residents, and between participating

services. Responsive and person-centered strategies rather than pre-existing bureaucratic procedures were prioritised.

The way you get entry into this cohort is through a relationship. So I've been very clear to my staff... relationships are key. Not only organisationally, but with the client group.

— Department of Housing
Regional Director

In August 2020, The Hub changed from a 'pandemic health crisis response' to an 'ongoing transitional housing pathway service'. While pandemic crisis accommodation models in other regions closed, The Hub remains open. As of March 2022, The Hub has had 488 people through its doors, and has successfully transitioned 241 people to permanent housing, an outcome seen as a highly positive and highly unlikely before the pandemic.⁷

The Hub was one of a number of local responses during 2020. Additionally, the Sunshine Coast Stadium was used as a centralised service location during the early pandemic when offices closed; 307 individuals engaged over eight weeks in accessing services, a hot meal, amenities or a shower. A facility for families experiencing homelessness was established at the Currumundi Recreation Centre and operated for two months, with all families transitioned into permanent housing. A new relationship-building outreach position was funded, which combined public space management and homelessness/ welfare responses, a clear improvement on a narrower more regulatory scope of practice when authorities undertook outreach alone. A Sustainable Tenancies group was established, supporting people to maintain their new accommodation and allowing attention to be given to underlying complexities.

Significant positive media engagement generated and sustained institutional and political support, local awareness, and a wider range of community engagement options.

USC Involvement

Academics from the then School of Social Sciences were approached in March 2020, and asked if they

and their students could assist in researching this regional response. With School approval, and reflecting the University commitment to community engagement, a strategy to provide multi-faceted support was developed by staff and from the then School of Social Sciences, coordinated by a member of the social work and human services staff, in close collaboration with the three key agencies IFYS, the Department of Housing and Sunshine Coast Regional Council. Between May 2020 and June 2021 a combined total of 19 students and staff from the School were directly involved in supporting the initiative:

- 10 students undertook field education placements — nine from social work, and one from nutrition/ international development
- one social work student and one recent social work graduate engaged formally as volunteers with IFYS
- one social work student employed at IFYS provided support
- a Psychology honours student focused their research project on the student experience
- six School staff developed a research strategy, three from the social work and human service program (including both academic and field education staff) and one each from the human geography, psychology and social science programs.

Social work field placements took place in two semesters from mid-2020 to mid-2021. Many had the opportunity to spend time at the three key agencies each week as a way of appreciating and contributing to different aspects of the initiative: IFYS in terms of front-line service delivery, Council in terms of Council engagement and community development, and the Department of Housing in terms of their role in housing provision and strategic response development. In days based at The Hub students also assisted with a raft of other COVID homelessness initiatives including at the Stadium, at a newly completed nearby apartment block which received many Hub residents, and meeting with local



community centres and another pandemic rough sleeping crisis response model in north Brisbane. Students engaged with regular supervision and ongoing meetings with academic and agency staff, individually and in groups. The student experience crossed agency boundaries and explored human service collaborative development in a rich and innovative way.

Staff in consultation with the three lead agencies identified four research focus areas namely the interagency collaborative aspect of the response, the character of The Hub service delivery and its impacts, the experience of service users, and the experience of students. Formal research ethics approval was gained from USC to utilise agency data, and to conduct interviews, focus groups and surveys. Students assisted with document and data collection, and supported action inquiry processes undertaken within the various agencies.

Student Benefits

Student perspectives elicited through focus groups and surveys indicate the complexity of this project encouraged self-awareness, reflection, and growth. 'Wicked' ethical problems were encountered and wrangled. A deeper sense of values and more

robust practice framework emerged. Placements were experienced as a very 'real and alive' with significant capacity for them to exercise agency. Students indicated that their professional relational skills improved. None had prior experience with rough sleeping homeless persons. Getting to know residents over time and hearing their stories, students were able to utilise and further develop person centered, trauma informed, strengths based and advocacy skills.

There was a need to develop nuanced personal safety practices. The complicated tapestry of mental illness, addiction (including the impact of pandemic travel restrictions on substance supply⁸ incarceration, the medical system, domestic violence, adverse childhood experiences, profound disadvantage and at times bad luck, were all too-frequent contexts. Social determinants were understood experientially with many residents at The Hub impacted by systemic failures; including a childhood in an abusive orphanage, being exited from hospital or incarceration into homelessness; a lack of accessible residential addiction services; and a lack of available housing. Discussions contemplated the challenges of managing a transitional housing

service for this cohort, for example the issue of resident autonomy versus safety for the broader group.

The large team of students, university, and professional staff worked well under challenging conditions. Novel practice was occurring within the somewhat chaotic and changing environment of the early pandemic, and the need for service delivery that was immediate yet flexible and responsive. Relationships with numerous professionals across many organisations were formed, including with those at the senior executive level.

The research effort also allowed students to engage at organisational and inter-organisational levels. They could observe how different roles, organisations, and models engage with people without homes and interact; often purposefully and sometimes in tension. It was a complex terrain of innovative and rapid cross-sector collaboration, inclusive of policy, practice and place.

The project strongly linked social work theory with practice — praxis. Students were encouraged to imbibe grey and academic literature, and experienced ongoing mentoring with highly experienced practitioners, field educators and academics.



Students expressed gaining a greater understanding and appreciation of a social work perspective.

Project Outcomes

It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the data that emerged about the project. That said, initial research insights were reported at the Sunshine Coast Mayors Roundtable on Homelessness held in February 2021.^{9,10}

These include:

- Strategic, political and community legitimacy was able to be developed through the combination of high level regional leadership and strategic and relational processes that engaged key systems and the media.
- A future focused approach on working with people without homes to gain long term sustainable housing/ accommodation keeps 'the endgame' clear. A diverse range of destination possibilities, each scaled up as far as possible, are needed for achieving this.
- Agency barriers to the progression of individuals/ families to longer term housing can be minimised by collaborative vertical and

horizontal partnerships and problem solving processes.

- A collaborative person-centered front-line 'case management' approaches to responding to individual and family needs that appreciate complexity and diversity.
- Practice processes that respect and enhance both individual agency and community connection.
- Agency and partnership culture: An openness to changing how we work and how we can do things differently.
- Homelessness being discussable, seen as relevant to the community, and open to appropriate contributions.
- Investing in regional rough sleeping and homelessness responsiveness should be highly valued and seen as delivering value.

The ongoing Mayors Roundtable on Homelessness provides a venue for ongoing information sharing and strategy development about homelessness on the Sunshine Coast. Data gathering and sharing are seen to have significantly improved,^{11,12} along with enhanced multi-level sector collaboration.

Conclusion

The crisis generated by the outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in a destabilised environment for people, policy makers and service systems. From this, the character of risk associated with homelessness was broadened and the assumed logic of existing regional service delivery was questioned. This short article has briefly overviewed how the students and staff from a regional university, largely but not all from the social work program, supported the development of one region's response. Multiple student pathways for involvement, collaborative social research, direct service delivery support, service and regional development, and student learning interwove in ways that were negotiated and emergent. While students were well supported, the context was at times chaotic, messy and complex; a

highly valuable experience for those soon to emerge into professional social practice. This multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary engagement provides an example of how social work education can support and add value to collaborative efforts to address homelessness.

The authors sincerely thank Integrated Family and Youth Services, the Queensland Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy and the Sunshine Coast Regional Council for their generous assistance.

* Claire Meraki is a final year Master of Social Work (Qualifying) student at the University of the Sunshine Coast, and a volunteer on the project. Phil Crane is Adjunct Associate Professor, Social Work and Human Services in the School of Law and Society, USC and coordinated USC involvement in the initiative.

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Using Discretion When Evicting Social Housing Tenants

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Introduction

Social workers employed on the frontline of the housing and homelessness sectors commonly need to work with limited time and resources, and are faced with human situations that defy programmatic responses. Accordingly, they are required to respond to challenging situations with discretion, managing each case in the way they believe is most appropriate for that individual, and managing their caseloads in a way that allows them to retain a sense of job satisfaction and personal fulfilment.¹

Social workers use their discretion to allocate services and dispense resources among different households at varying risks of homelessness. From initial assessment and planning to placement in housing, from supporting struggling tenancies to taking action against tenancy breaches, social workers are involved in decision-making processes that require them to balance their responsibility to prevent homelessness against their personal assessments of how limited assets should be distributed.

This article will present some preliminary findings of a doctoral study that investigated how workers at a large social housing provider in Victoria experienced the process of evicting (and not evicting) their tenants. The study conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 14 housing workers (11 frontline staff and three managers) about their practice of eviction, including the processes they followed, the decisions they made, and the conflicts they navigated. This paper uses material gathered from the frontline staff, whose experiences of using discretion to moderate housing and homelessness

outcomes are highly relevant to social workers in the sector and the profession as a whole.

The workers discussed how and why they use their personal discretion during eviction processes to sustain tenancies and avoid homelessness, or conversely to pursue eviction despite knowing the outcome would be homelessness. They described having a relatively high level of discretion allowing them to interpret the social housing provider's policies on eviction and make their own decisions to initiate, pursue, pause, and abandon tenancy actions. They placed importance on applying policies consistently but also used discretion to respond to the individual circumstances of each case, including their own interpersonal relationships and opinions. Although the project is early in its analysis stage, four patterns are emerging.

1. Using discretion in response to tenant 'effort'

First, the housing workers' use of discretion was influenced by their perceptions of tenant effort. Many of the workers saw themselves as being in reciprocal relationships with tenants and wanted the effort they felt they were putting in to sustain a tenancy to be matched by effort on the tenant's part. When workers perceived certain tenants were not making the effort to sustain their own tenancies, they described being less inclined to intervene on their behalf. Some described proceeding to each stage of the eviction process in direct response to lack of tenant effort and engagement.

One worker described going above and beyond to make the case to management that a tenant should not be evicted. Their rationale for this use of discretion was that the tenant

was engaging with the process: responding to contact, making small additional rental payments, and agreeing to be connected to support services. Management agreed to hold off on pursuing the eviction, and the worker reported the tenant was now successfully paying off their arrears. By contrast, the same worker described feeling let down when a tenant did not attend their Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) appeal hearing, resulting in the worker setting the possession hearing quickly afterwards. They were granted possession and purchased a warrant for the tenant's eviction.

Another worker described how, over a short period of time, three tenants in the same building smashed the sliding doors in their units. In two of those cases, the worker applied for eviction, but in one they did not because the tenant rang them, reported the damage, and offered to pay for it. The worker agreed that this gesture influenced their decision-making process to allow the tenant the opportunity to rectify the situation.

2. Using discretion when there is a personal relationship with the tenant

The second pattern emerging from the analysis is that over time, housing workers can develop relationships with tenants that provoke the use of discretion. Participants described a range of circumstances where their rapport or relationship with the tenant enabled them to intervene to avoid an eviction outcome. After getting repeated complaints from neighbours about a tenant they knew well, one worker felt it seemed out of character and made the effort to visit the property in person multiple times and speak to the individual away from the property. After coming to

understand that the tenant was facing intimidation from another individual in the neighbourhood, they moved them into a different property rather than pursue action.

Another worker described how a good relationship with a tenant was key to sustaining a tenancy. Because they regularly spoke to the tenant, they had developed a style of communication that they knew would elicit a positive response, and could explain things more clearly. They felt that the tenant had paid off a substantial amount of arrears and avoided eviction as a result. This worker was clearly fond of the tenant and had attained a great deal of personal and professional satisfaction from using discretion to help him sustain his tenancy.

The failure to build a strong relationship between tenant and housing worker could make a tenant more susceptible to an eviction process. One worker stated that the decision to evict was easier if they did not feel they were building a relationship with a particular tenant. A tenant's lack of relationships with other support workers could also put them in danger of eviction. For example, when describing a conflict with a tenant's support workers who were urging a housing worker to evict the tenant, the worker explained the support agency regularly asked the housing provider to evict tenants they found difficult, while advocating for their 'favourite' tenants. The housing worker's own use of discretion was thus complicated by the use of discretion in other support systems.

3. Using discretion in response to neighbourhood disruption

Thirdly, the use of discretion was sometimes prompted by considerations about the broader 'neighbourhood' within the property. The impact of tenancy breaches on neighbours and on the overall functioning of the property as a community was considered closely by housing workers deciding when to use their discretion to intervene. Multiple participants described balancing their duty of care to a tenant facing eviction action against their duty of care to the other residents of the property.



For one worker, the impact on the neighbourhood was the primary concern when deciding whether to push harder for an eviction. In buildings where it was felt the disruption or damage to the neighbours was severe, the worker said they pushed harder to speed up the eviction process. When asked to identify the most important difference between two stories about eviction actions, one which ended in eviction and one that did not, another worker said the impact on neighbours was key.

While the housing workers overwhelmingly expressed care and sympathy for neighbours whose peace or safety was threatened by anti-social neighbours, this was not the only reason they used their discretion. Many of the workers mentioned that neighbours would organise themselves to put pressure on them to initiate or speed up eviction processes. Constant complaints from neighbours impacted the workers' sense of personal fulfilment in the role and could be a crucial consideration in deciding how strongly to act.

However, pressure from neighbours did not always straightforwardly mean that workers would push harder for eviction. Many related that they found it difficult to persuade neighbours to provide evidence or testify at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) against someone to whom they lived in close proximity. For some, this was a frustrating and

challenging circumstance to navigate and in response, they retreated back from using discretion towards the formal steps of the policy.

4. Using discretion when the issue is arrears

The final noteworthy early finding is that some housing workers reported being more likely to exercise discretion on behalf of tenants when the tenancy was at risk because of rental arrears. Many interviewees expressed discomfort about evicting tenants because of arrears. While they recognised that payment of rent was necessary for the social housing provider to stay solvent, they saw eviction as a poor solution given that it rarely recouped the money owed. There was also a common feeling that social housing tenants would struggle to pay rent by definition and so should not be punished when they were unable to do so.

Multiple workers spoke of tenants currently in arrears whose evictions they were intentionally not pursuing, despite instruction from management to evict. One said they always felt it was more important to exert effort towards tenancy support rather than the administratively burdensome process of taking tenancy action. Another was actively slowing down the process to protect a tenant who was more than a year in arrears because they did not believe that was sufficient reason to evict.

Conclusion

Social workers who go into the housing and homelessness sector use discretion on a daily basis, which can significantly affect outcomes for tenants in both positive and negative ways. Investigating how and why workers in the sector use their discretion contributes to a more thorough understanding of social work practice both within, and external to, the sector. These early findings suggest there are a number of contexts in which housing and homelessness workers will intervene to prevent or accelerate an outcome. This has ramifications for social work policy, research, and practice in the sector.

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The Complexities of Accessing and Keeping Housing for Formerly Incarcerated Women in South Australia

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When your home has been a prison, leaving marks an abrupt and profound change, one which generates a complex set of emotions and challenges, such as finding shelter, meeting post-release obligations, reconnecting with family and combatting isolation. Whilst prison might be conceived by many in the community as easy access to 'three hots and a cot', for criminalised women housing insecurity is a both catalyst for their entanglement with the criminal 'justice' system, and a structure which constrains their agency to remain free citizens beyond completion of custodial sentences.

Homelessness permeates the experience of criminalised women. Over a third of women are assessed as homeless in the year preceding their entry into prison. Housing insecurity is often an outcome of prior and present experiences of violence, with these effects exacerbated by recent changes to social welfare policy, support payments and domestic violence policies and legislation.¹ Perversely, these changes increased the numbers of criminalised women, especially Aboriginal women, and the seriousness of the crimes with which they are charged.^{2,3} They increasingly render women homeless and with a criminal record. Once criminalised, homelessness further extends women's entanglement with the criminal justice system.

It costs around AUD \$111,000 per annum to imprison one adult in Australia.⁴ The additional social costs to families and communities are hard to estimate but might be scoped by considering at least 85 per cent of criminalised women have experienced violence, trauma and victimisation across their lives.⁵

When women are released from prison it is often into housing precarity. 'Affordable' accommodation options are rare, with public housing waiting lists being years rather than months long. Minimal post-release housing options for women means many who are eligible for early release cannot access it for lack of a 'suitable address'. Others choose not to pursue early release options because previous release experiences have been fraught, poorly coordinated and often accompanied by further traumatising experiences which impact their mental health and amplify the risks of suicide and self-harm.⁶

Women released from prison usually return to the same social issues they experienced prior to incarceration.⁷ Successfully remaining in the community post-release is unlikely if they cannot access resources such as housing and health-based models of addiction and mental health treatment. In South Australia, it is common for homeless women to be released from prison on a Friday after 5pm, well beyond close of business for the public and community organisations that might otherwise provide them with immediate and ongoing post-release support. This practice unwisely presumes 24/7 capacity of poorly resourced families and community organisations, and effectively guarantees women's high rates of return to prison.

Seeds of Affinity (Seeds) is an award winning, grassroots, peer-led community group which has supported criminalised women in South Australia since 2006. Co-founded by a woman with lived experience of prison and her social worker,⁸ Seeds is managed by an all women board

comprised of women with lived prison-experience, social workers, human service workers, educators and activists. Seeds structures their work using a community development model. Alongside bi-weekly community workshops based around a shared meal, Seeds offers a broad range of support options tailored to each woman's needs and circumstances in a safe, supportive and non-judgemental environment. Often support entails working with a woman to access or keep their housing. Amongst criminalised women in South Australia, Seeds is known as a trusted and authentic service provider. Women choose to, rather than being mandated, to engage with Seeds; we believe this is because we work outside of the criminal justice system. We do things differently, with love, care and compassion. We adopt an inclusive approach where we 'leave no woman behind'. Our advocacy work is mindful of the wicked problems created by prison reform; instead, we dream of a future without prisons. This is a position gaining traction in social work research; one we ask social workers consider to guide their practice.⁹

What follows is a case study (names are pseudonyms) outlining the complexities of accessing and retaining post-release housing.

Mary is in her early thirties. She has experienced mental health challenges for as long as she can remember, stemming from traumatising childhood experiences. Mary was first released from the Adelaide Women's Prison five years ago and placed at a Bail Hostel. This was Mary's first experience of release

in South Australia, having had her first contact with the criminal justice system interstate. Bail hostels are designed to be a 'pit stop' for people leaving prison; the recommended maximum stay is 10 days, with the presumption bail hostel staff support returning citizens to source housing.

Mary did not receive this support and with minimal local knowledge felt isolated and immobilised. Mary's parole officer suggested she attend Seeds. Welcomed by women who had survived similar experiences, Mary began to shift from surviving to flourishing. The Seeds Community Coordinator worked closely with Mary, eventually finding housing through the private rental market. Within a couple of months, Mary was helping cook lunches at Seeds, getting exercise, tending her garden and turned the roof over her head into a home. Here she found sanctuary from the world and could escape the stigma of being a criminalised woman, something she felt keenly in her post-release life.

Six months after moving into her rental, Mary attended court, where they suspended her sentence. Her electronic monitoring bracelet was immediately cut off, but no extra social supports were put in place. With this intense surveillance removed, Mary's addiction re-emerged. Within weeks, Mary was returned to prison. Knowing the importance of keeping housing, Seeds managed the property, paying the rent from Mary's account until the funds expended. Then, with Mary's permission, another Seeds member 'Jane', on parole and unable to access emergency housing to escape a violent partner, was placed in Mary's house. Jane maintained the property, paying rent for another five months, until she returned a 'dirty urine' and was returned to prison for 30 days. At this point, the hard-fought housing was lost. Soon after, Mary was released from prison again. Without a house, her only option for release was with a male acquaintance who had significant

alcohol problems and was sexually violent. Mary returned to prison soon after. The next time Mary was released it was after 5pm on a Friday night; she was back in prison within a week.

While this case study demonstrates the importance of housing for formerly incarcerated women, it also shows the need for more than just a roof over one's head. Homelessness does not occur in isolation, it is interconnected with other social problems such as poverty, addiction, poor mental and physical health, and experiences of domestic and sexual violence.¹⁰ Social workers working in homelessness services must draw upon their understanding of structural violence and enact their knowledge of trauma-informed practice when working with women like Mary. This means recognising poor mental health and addiction rarely disappear, and remain buried under the surface, ready to reappear once surveillance and monitoring cease.

However, no amount of understanding can compensate for the lack of suitable housing for returning citizens. Expecting a newly released citizen to organise housing within 10 days of release is arbitrary and unfair. While some women have the skills, connections and resources to find housing, this rush to move women on while they are decompressing after traumatic experiences of the prison environment is short sighted, setting many women up to fail.

For Seeds, a community organisation reliant upon fundraising and volunteer labour of experienced peer-workers, our frustration rests with the lack of policy, funding and action on solutions to housing women as they attempt to leave the criminal justice system. Twenty years of research and practice provides ample evidence that the most significant challenges to staying out of prison are the lack of housing, limited material resources and access to meaningful social support. While the cost of imprisonment is significant, we are not suggesting keeping women out of prison is about saving money, instead we propose the money is better spent on enhancing and supporting communities to flourish and thrive.

While the formerly incarcerated women we support acknowledge their privilege in accessing post-release housing, our experience shows a house is not enough. Extensive social, emotional and material support along with community connections are necessary to move from surviving to thriving in post-release life.

Our dream is that social policy and funding shift from offering up minimal reforms — those which 'tinker around the edges' and maintain the status quo, to the understanding that prisons are 'antiquated, cruel and ultimately ineffective' and that community led, managed and driven responses steeped with love, care and compassion prevail.¹¹

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Making the Invisible, Visible: Seeking the Voices of Justice Involved Young Women in Homelessness Discourse

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Young women involved in the justice system due to their use of violence have intersecting experiences of trauma and abuse, being themselves survivors of violence.¹ With precarious living situations frequently made worse by systems that fail to validate and listen to their experiences, their rich insights into their experiences of violence, including their own use of violence and the impact of homelessness in their stories of violence are often absent from practice, policy and research.² The following reflects on the role of violence in the homelessness of young women based on stories from young women (N=14) aged 14 to 18 from regional New South Wales (NSW) charged with violence related offences, who have participated in the University of Newcastle's Name, Narrate, Navigate (NNN) program.

This paper is authored by one of four female practitioners who had worked in NNN, which is a psychosocial early intervention program for both young people who use, used, or have the potential to use violence in their interpersonal relationships as well as the workers providing them with support. It is culturally responsive, trauma-informed and has been developed in consultation with community members, practitioners and young people who have an experience of violence. Young people, and in this case the young women working with NNN, have all been survivors of abuse and violence, live with trauma and are perpetrators of violence and harm to others.³

It is acknowledged that women of all ages are more likely to experience violence from men who they

know.⁴ However, for the first time, Police are charging more young women under-18 than their male counterparts for violence related offences in parts of regional NSW.⁵ Although the rationale for these increases is varied, it is clear that young women involved with Youth Justice have a greater likelihood of homelessness and housing instability.⁶

In NNN, violence, desire for change, community, education, and housing insecurity were discussed prolifically by the young women. The use of violence by young women is complicated: is difficult for people to conceptualise, discuss and for practitioners to work with effectively. As practitioners facilitating the program over a two-year period, we heard from young women and their stories of displacement, where

housing issues fell roughly into four categories: homelessness, living in unsafe and overcrowded public housing, or residing in an institutional setting such as residential care. The young women involved were on Community Supervision Orders by the Court⁷ instead of a custodial sentence, meaning they were subject to supervision and support through a Youth Justice office and were able to live in their community rather than being in a detention setting.

Over a third (n= 5) of the young women we worked with had no fixed address, often turning up to NNN group sessions tired having had little sleep, discussing where they slept the previous night and expressing concerns over where they would stay the coming night. They often had few possessions, treasuring things that they did own, such as their shoes. As practitioners, we were struck by the frequency and commonality of the use of transactional violence by young women to secure a place to sleep (for example, being instructed to assault someone the homeowner had an issue with to stay over at their place). These stories of transactional violence were given alongside of examples of staying in negative or dysfunctional sexual relationships to have a place to stay.

Those who did still live at home with family members, often lived in unsafe situations of overcrowding in public housing (n=6). One 15-year-old shared conversationally that she had not had a bed or mattress for a significant period. Another 17-year-old discussed issues she had with her brothers' 20-year-old friends



regularly breaking into her room and going through her clothes, and journal. These older males graffitied her journal and other belongings and stole her clothes. Another 15-year-old spoke of the number of times her mother's front windows had been smashed in by other members of the neighbourhood, to the extent that all the windows were replaced with plywood.

A small group of young women in NNN resided in residential care settings (n= 2), having been removed from their families of birth by NSW government Child Protection due to abuse and neglect, they were both placed in the foster care system (where they experienced further abuse and trauma), before being transitioned to one-to-one residential placements after the foster care system was deemed inappropriate for them. These one-to-one placements were also not positive, and the young women described them as 'lonely' and 'isolated,' but also acknowledged that it was a safer option than sleeping on the streets where they had both previously been assaulted.

The one young woman who was in private housing also lived in an unsafe setting: a drug stash house owned by a male relative, which was surrounded by security cameras and dogs, her movements were heavily restricted, and she was at risk due to the contents of the house.

In theory there is up to 12 months of accommodation support provided to young people involved in the Youth Justice system through referral to government programs funded to provide intensive support.⁸ In reality, we saw first-hand examples of lives being devalued and concerns about homelessness minimised and ignored by practitioners and the services funded to provide support.

Often this support was as limited as making a referral to at capacity Specialist Homelessness Services,⁹ or to services which often excluded the young women due their prior use of violence. Even more troubling were examples of organisations and practitioners using accommodation as a 'carrot and stick' or reward and punishment process rather than access to a basic right. An 18-year-old female shared her experiences of a

male support worker telling her he would 'see what he could do about extending her tenancy' if she stopped trying to escalate her concerns about his lack of support for her, particularly in relation to her rolling three-month lease extensions and delays in getting letters of support despite being six weeks ahead in her rent.

Several young women who participated in NNN have been successful in reducing or ending their patterns of offending. These reductions coincided with hard work on their part, the securing of some type of housing, study and/or employment. Sometimes it meant moving away from their communities. According to the young women, it also helped having a proactive case worker who encouraged them and worked tirelessly to support their goals.

Proactive casework is important when working with anyone but is especially so when engaging with young people with an experience of marginalisation, care, or institutionalisation of some kind,¹⁰ as is the creation of spaces to promote validation and care.¹¹

Many of our conversations were about community, people, place and belonging, with the young women expressing conflict between a desire to belong while acknowledging that where they feel they belong is not always safe. Despite knowing facilitators for a brief time, with the average NNN group being six to eight weeks in duration, it is telling and indicative of a lack of opportunity, that the NNN group spaces were nominated as one of the only places the young women felt safe and felt heard. Chances to reflect to practice, contribute to research or program design were readily taken by the groups when offered, often with incredulity and explanations that their opinions on matters concerning their service provision had rarely been sought.

The young women who participated in NNN were surviving the best way they could with the skills and tools they had. Surviving, but not necessarily thriving. All expressed a desire for a different life for herself, some had more of a concrete idea of what that life might look like than others. Despite their desire and courage for a life lived differently, they were also

acutely aware of the cyclic nature of their use of violence, offending and precarious living situations.

As experienced practitioners, we found working alongside these young women to be challenging. Not because of their offending, but because of the way in which the system interacted with them. This was especially the case for the young women who were sleeping rough, had no parental oversight and who seemed to be no one's problem or concern. Until these young women are treated and really listened to in practice as well as theoretically, the system risks contributing to the perpetuation and growth of female homelessness and violence.

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Reaching Out and Connecting with Women Where They're At: Exploring a Gendered Model of Assertive Outreach

Lara Turley and Kelly Hansen, School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Sciences, University of Newcastle,
Kate Davies, Tamara Blakemore and Joel McGregor, Nova for Women and Children, Newcastle

Sector-wide demand for specialist homelessness services has dramatically increased over the past two years. Nova for Women and Children, a specialist homelessness service meeting the needs of women, and women with children, in the Hunter Region in New South Wales has seen demand for services offered increase by 100 per cent from 2018 to 2021. During this time the service has observed the collective housing 'system' to become increasingly punitive and difficult for women experiencing homelessness and as a result a growing need for frontline organisations to develop alternative approaches to keep women and children safe and sheltered.

A significant challenge for services wanting to develop such approaches, particularly for women, is that policy, program, and funding impetus for models of assertive outreach (in particular), has been largely based on the experiences

of men. This may be because men's experiences of homelessness have tended to be more visible and, at least historically, more men than women have 'slept rough'. Perhaps because of this trend, the evidence base for assertive outreach is sadly missing the voices of women who experience homelessness and the workers who support them.

Working collaboratively with practitioner-researchers from the University of Newcastle,¹ Nova for Women and Children, have proactively worked to address this gap by learning from the wisdom of women experiencing homelessness and their workers to explore possibilities for a speciality assertive outreach for women experiencing homelessness in the Hunter region. This work held at its core the feminist and social justice frameworks that inform Nova's practice. The research process was trauma informed and culturally safe and aimed to ensure that assertive

outreach services for women experiencing homelessness in our region were in their design and delivery informed by evidence and importantly, by the voices of women.

The Research

With ethics approval from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee [H2020-0315] a rapid review of literature regarding assertive outreach with women experiencing homelessness was conducted, followed by semi-structured interviews with five women with lived experience of homelessness and interviews and focus groups with 15 local practitioners. The interviews and focus groups explored the experience of homelessness for local women; what helps and hinders effective responses to them when they are in crisis and what gendered considerations should be made in delivering services to women experiencing homelessness.

Women who had a lived experience of homelessness reported a range of issues and experiences that reinforce the need for gendered approaches to assertive outreach. Chief amongst these was the overwhelmingly common experience of gender-based violence and childhood trauma. When we spoke to women and workers, we heard stories of chronic and/or cyclic homelessness, often compounded by complex (and intersecting) experiences of disadvantage, domestic and family violence, substance misuse and trauma. Women who had experienced homelessness all discussed, in varying ways, past traumatic experiences.

These included the loss of children (through removal, estrangement, or bereavement), domestic and family



violence, childhood abuse, violence, sexual exploitation and homelessness as a child or teenager. For these women, traumatic experiences sometimes led to them experiencing homeless and/or continuing to experience homeless or cycling in and out of homelessness. A critical learning from these conversations is that trauma can be a 'gateway' to the experience of homelessness.

WLE04: Do you know what? You know they say a gateway drug, gateway drug—do you know what it all boils down to? The trauma and the childhood dramas, traumatising of what someone's been through.

Researcher: Trauma's the gateway?

WLE04: It is, it is.

The need for gender-informed responses to women's homelessness were also highlighted by the gendered realities of the experience of homelessness. For example, women talked extensively about their persistent and ongoing safety concerns and the ways that this made their homelessness 'invisible'.

While some women described experiences of sleeping in well-lit and CCTV covered locations, on the beach, in the bush, on trains or under bridges; there was a greater emphasis on women couch surfing or sleeping in cars which meant they were often less visible. The dilemma of wanting to be visible to be safe and wanting to stay out of view to avoid danger was common among the women we talked to. Workers reflected thoughtfully about their physical approach to women and were aware that in assertive outreach work they could be entering somebody else's space and they run the risk of 'invading' somebody's 'safe zone.' For some, this related particularly to women who were sleeping in their cars, but others felt it was relevant irrespective of where women were staying or sleeping.

Consistent with experiences of trauma, interviews with women who had experienced homelessness also highlighted feelings of shame about being homeless and unique approaches to dealing with the realities of life of the street.

Perhaps in contrast to men, women who experienced homelessness tended not to tell family and friends about their homelessness. If couch surfing with friends or family women reported, they would leave early in the morning and try to be out all day to lessen the burden they felt they were placing on others. Women described staying with friends and family like it was a finite resource to be utilised only in extremely desperate situations.

Women interviewed expressed being very conscious and embarrassed about personal care and hygiene and reported that they thought this was different for women compared to men. One woman said:

I think the worst part for me ever living on the streets was the hygiene. Hygiene. Like, I could go anywhere and get a feed... But there weren't many places where you could walk in and have a shower and not... be judged because you fucking stink.

Perhaps because of their experiences of relational trauma, women we interviewed stressed the importance of real and trusting relationships and that work with women experiencing homelessness needed to be relationship-based. They described how important it is, to slowly build real, trusting relationships, particularly in the context of complex needs, cumulative trauma, and circumstances where women have felt let down or lost to systems of support in the past.

The importance of service delivery that is flexible, person-focused, and client-led was also emphasised. When reflecting on what had helped them when they were in crisis, one woman said:

What's been helpful at Nova would be that they allowed me to be me. They allowed me to show them that I didn't just want them to hand me a home. They allowed me to do what I needed to do for myself to prove that when I do get a home, I've earned this home, and I've worked so hard for this home that nothing will get in my way.

In hearing the needs of women; for gender responsive, relationship-based, and flexible service delivery, our study highlighted

a tension between desired practice both by workers and service users and the framework and constrictions that are applied to the funding of the operations. These included limited time frames for work with clients, limited options in terms of housing and accommodation, stability and security of housing tenure and the expected outputs and outcomes required to demonstrate service effectiveness to funders. Workers reported frustration at systemic and structural processes influencing their work. These processes and the associated expectations they place on workers and clients were described as degrading, challenging and sometimes, as a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to overcome. One worker shared:

Like what I'm finding at the moment, we're struggling a little bit as workers because options are limited for clients. So, we're starting to feel a little bit of hopelessness having to have the hard conversations with clients and hearing how hard it is for them but having limited options of where we can put them.

Discussion

Most assertive outreach programs have an explicit aim to end homelessness rather than simply supporting people who sleep rough.

This women-engaged research project highlighted the need to meet women where they are at and offer a pace of work that balances building rapport in a time-sensitive way, to avoid women slipping through the cracks of services and supports.

Both the research interviews and literature review confirmed that people experiencing homelessness respond more to genuine interest and care rather than the outcomes of the interactions. Women's experiences of homelessness vary and are inherently tied to broader social contexts and circumstances. The experience of homelessness does not lend itself to a one-size-fits-all approach. Workers are keenly aware of this and know that services need to be able to adapt to the needs of women experiencing homelessness rather than expecting women to fit



in to narrow program requirements. Funding and service requirements to achieve and measure specific outputs and outcomes in allocated timeframes begs the question of how can assertive outreach be truly flexible and client led in that context.

An excruciating component of our work is when our casework efforts to support women to a place of readiness to sustain housing or flee violence is met with no house or safe accommodation for them. This reality has been exacerbated by the current housing crisis, the lack of address by government at both state and federal level and an absence of seeing of poverty as a driver for those experiencing homelessness. For workers the reality of this situation parallels many women's experiences, planning for safety amongst a range of unsafe options. The difficulty for workers in organisations delivering frontline homelessness services are the overarching structural barriers such as lack of housing stock, poverty and for women, long-term gendered inequality and ongoing domestic and family violence.

The need for a flexible way of working with women experiencing homelessness is often met with the inflexibility of policy responses to homelessness. Expectations of many housing providers for women to be working on their mental health and/or drug alcohol struggles before they obtain housing is unrealistic.

Other requirements to even access temporary accommodation such as obtaining bank statements, access to sufficient forms of identification and completing rental diaries fail to reflect the realities of many women experiencing homelessness. Even in the face of these barriers' workers highlight of the value of interagency collaboration and conversations with other service providers that aimed and building empathy and understanding of women's experience. Advocacy and building purposeful partnerships are key capabilities required of workers in this sector. The role of leaders in services in providing quality supervision that helps workers identify the structural tensions in our work is critical to helping workers mediate the tensions and continue to find purpose and meaning in the work they do.

Conclusion

In exploring our response to women experiencing homelessness, we have gone beyond considering where and how an assertive outreach program could make initial contact with women to also considering the practice approach and principles that would guide our work. It is essential that an assertive outreach model specifically designed with and for women is person-centred, client-led, trauma-informed, flexible, relationship-based, and cognisant of structural and systemic barriers.

Our next steps are to seek support to trial and evaluate an innovative model of gender responsive assertive outreach. In the meantime, we will continue to support women and influence change through our two community hubs and the use of Nova's assertive outreach van 'Betty' meeting women where they are at both physically, and emotionally.

Endnotes

1. The research team for this project were: Dr Tamara Blakemore (Chief Investigator), Dr Graeme Stuart (Project Manager), Louise Dean (Interviews) Dr Joel McGregor (Rapid Review).

Chapter 4: Recent Homelessness Research

Gambling and Homelessness: A Complex Relationship Often Overlooked

Dr Brian Vandenberg, School of Social Sciences, Monash University

New Australian research* shows clear links between gambling and homelessness. Yet, this relationship is often overlooked by governments, as well services providers. Almost two decades have passed since *Parity* first shone a light on the connection between gambling and homelessness in Australia. A strong view expressed back then was that while gambling and homelessness sometimes appear interrelated, the limited research allows us only to be 'speculative' about a link.¹ It was suggested that more research was needed to explore, firstly, how gambling contributes to a person experiencing homelessness and, secondly, how experiencing homelessness contributes to a person's gambling behaviour. However, finding answers to these questions has interested only a small number of researchers in the intervening years, such as our team at Monash University.

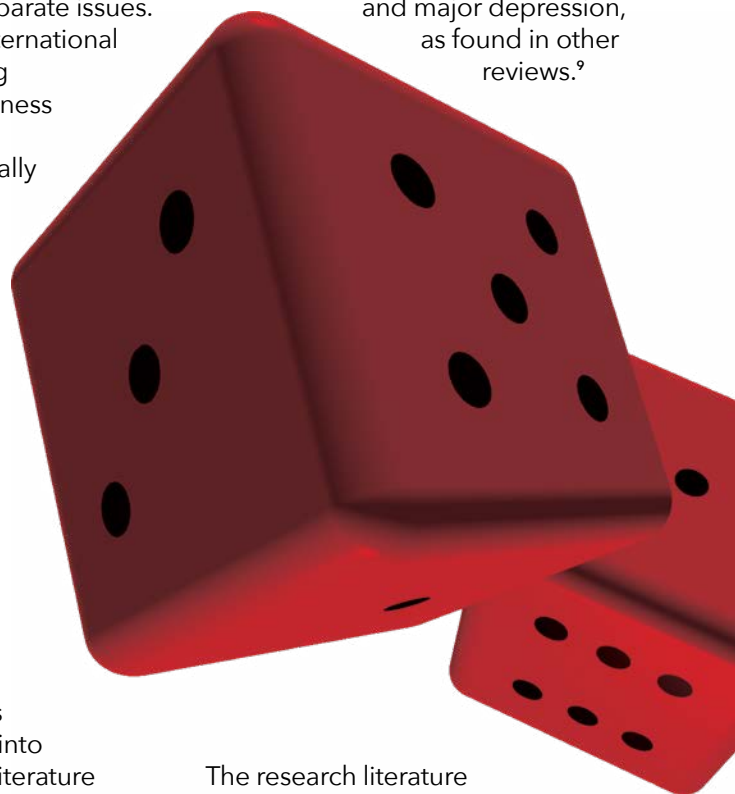
For some time now gambling has been largely disregarded in Australian homelessness policy and in the client data routinely collected by specialist homelessness services (SHS). For example, there is no mention of gambling in any current state or territory homelessness strategy, and the most recent SHS statistics infer that gambling is an issue for less than one per cent of homeless clients.² This seems perplexing in a country that ranks highest globally for gambling losses per capita, and difficult to reconcile given the large number of Australians who blame gambling for financial problems such as rent arrears and mortgage defaults.³ To better understand and bring attention to the issue, we reviewed all of the relevant international research,⁴ and undertook an in-depth qualitative study of how gambling and homelessness is linked in older adults in Victoria.⁵

A focus on older adults (50+ years) for the qualitative study was seen as important because they appear particularly vulnerable to experiencing gambling and homelessness. Older adults have high rates of regular gambling,⁶ and are the fastest-growing cohort of Australians experiencing homelessness.⁷ Also, SHS data indicate that older adults are the homeless client group most likely to report gambling problems as a reason for seeking support.⁸

Traditionally, researchers have investigated gambling and homelessness as two separate issues. Prior to our study, the international research on co-occurring gambling and homelessness had not been brought together and systematically reviewed. This is perhaps because research on the subject varies widely in methods, measures and sampling, which poses challenges for synthesising the findings. Also, given the relationship between gambling and homelessness can potentially travel in both directions, studies often differ in their perspective on the gambling-homelessness link. Taking these issues into account, the aim of our literature review was to produce a combined estimate of the prevalence of co-occurring gambling and homelessness, based on 45 research articles across 12 countries.

We found that compared to the high prevalence of gambling in the general population (approximately

60-80 per cent), studies indicate that a relatively small fraction of people experiencing homelessness report any gambling (less than 30 per cent). However, the reported prevalence of harmful gambling (including problem, pathological, and disordered gambling) is very high in people experiencing homelessness (10 to 20 per cent) compared to the general population (approximately one to seven per cent). This is a significant finding, as it suggests the prevalence of harmful gambling in people experiencing homelessness is similar to the prevalence of drug dependence, psychotic illness and major depression, as found in other reviews.⁹



The research literature we reviewed also suggests gambling at harmful levels may be a risk marker for experiencing homelessness. For instance, the rate of experiencing periods of homelessness is disproportionately high in people who gamble harmfully, affecting around one in six individuals. This contrasts with

the low prevalence of homelessness in the general population (less than one per cent), found in most high-income countries, like Australia.

With our review findings in mind, we undertook a qualitative study to gain a more in-depth understanding of the overlapping relationship between gambling and homelessness in older adults. Given the initial exploratory nature of our research, rather than recruit people with direct lived experience, we interviewed workers in health care, financial counselling, gamblers' help and homelessness services across Victoria. We interviewed them on-site and face-to-face, before the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Our investigation explored reasons why gambling and homelessness co-occur in their older adult client group, and what could be done to prevent the harm.

The interview participants' responses indicated a two-way relationship between gambling and experiencing homelessness in older adults, with one contributing to the other. However, we heard the link can sometimes be indirect and depend on certain individual, interpersonal, and societal factors. For example, a key factor often is the isolation and hardship of homelessness for older adults, making gambling seem attractive. As one participant said:

'I'm seeing people in boarding houses or rooming houses. They're people that don't have family that they're engaged with. And I think the loneliness perhaps more than anything, and the disengagement, is what people tell me is part of the compulsion to gamble.' (Housing worker)

Added to this often are a mix of individual vulnerabilities, including early life adversity, substance use and mental disorders, and relationship breakdown. Ready availability of gambling, along with poverty and housing insecurity, also contribute.

This aligns with previous Australian research showing that gambling during homelessness is sometimes motivated by desperation and hope of financial gain.¹⁰ Additionally, studies show the psychological effects of poverty (for example, stress) can create a feedback loop of behaviours



and economic decision-making that reinforces disadvantage.¹¹

As one participant said:

'The lack of safe and secure housing for single people on Newstart arguably would have a profoundly negative impact on people who already have a gambling problem. And I think that if people were in stable, affordable housing they would be more-able to seek support'

— Housing worker

We also heard gambling contributes to the onset of homelessness for the first time in later life. Significant, rapid losses from high-intensity gambling (for example, online betting, pokies) often characterise this pathway to homelessness. As one participant said:

'I've come across people who specifically blame their entire homelessness on gambling

and basically say 'I'm homeless because I gamble'. It's pretty much just as straightforward as that.'

— Problem gambling counsellor

Major life events and changes (bereavement, job loss, relationship difficulties) can trigger harmful gambling in older adults. So, recognising these as potential risk factors for co-occurring gambling and homelessness in older age is important for prevention.

As one participant said:

'What happens with the older guys is that, it's loneliness, absolute loneliness, social isolation... it's a huge, huge problem'

— Financial counsellor

As others have reported, we heard the design of high-intensity gambling products, especially pokies and online sports betting, and the conduct of gambling operators and creditors,



can accelerate financial harm from gambling.¹² This is particularly relevant given the availability and targeted marketing of high-intensity gambling to older Australians.

While our research has been the first attempt at a deep exploration of gambling and homelessness in Australia for some time, it is likely we have only started to scratch the surface of what needs to be known. We believe accurately measuring prevalence is now critically important for understanding the scale of the issue and informing where to target clinical interventions, support services, and policy responses in Australia. It is likely that high rates of co-occurring harmful gambling and homelessness are going undetected in locations where prevalence is yet to be properly measured.

There's also clearly a need for programmatic action. Individual

level interventions where gambling and homelessness co-occur should be near the top of the to-list list. This can be challenging, however, because gambling is often hidden in older homeless adults, in part because of the stigma and shame that surrounds it. This can hinder service providers' attempts to effectively identify gambling issues and offer help. A related challenge we identified is that homelessness services sometimes neglect tackling gambling issues. This is because they often lack capacity to respond, or view it as a lower priority for older homeless adults with many other pressing needs. As previous studies have found, the effectiveness of screening and treatment interventions for gambling in this population is likely to depend on support being delivered in a holistic, non-judgemental, and person-centred way.¹³

A key implication of our research is that homelessness in older adults should be recognised as a marker for increased risk of gambling and harm. We heard the housing difficulties and inhospitable living environments of older adults experiencing homelessness both worsened, and were exacerbated by, their gambling. Improving housing security therefore represents a fundamental preventative measure. Furthermore, regulatory controls that restrict the availability and accessibility of gambling, particularly pokies and sports betting venues, are likely to complement this preventative approach. Recent moves signalled by Victoria's regulators to introduce new pre-set time and loss limits on Crown Casino pokies may be a helpful step in that direction.

Pleasingly, the recent Victorian parliamentary inquiry into homelessness acknowledged more should be done to measure the extent of gambling and homelessness and develop appropriate responses. The inquiry's final report echoed our call to expand routine screening and early detection of gambling issues in the homeless population, and build the capacity of homelessness services to do this. However, the state government's response to the inquiry is now overdue. Meanwhile, cuts to JobSeeker and the Coronavirus Supplement have seen a jump in help-seeking among people

experiencing homelessness nationally, and gambling losses have risen sharply since gambling venues re-opened. Its time now to strengthen policies and improve service provision that can prevent and reduce the substantial, but avoidable harm from gambling and homelessness in Australia.

Acknowledgements

* Research undertaken by Brian Vandenberg, Kerry O'Brien, Charles Livingstone and Adrian Carter of Monash University, with funding support from the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

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Covid-19 Vaccinations at a Homelessness Engagement Hub

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Introduction and the Service Model

Every day of the year, between 250 to 350 people come to Sacred Heart Mission's inner-Melbourne hub service for meals and support. Along with hot, nutritious meals, we provide outreach engagement, case management, crisis intervention, specialist aged care support, along with pathways to alcohol and other drug (AoD) treatment and mental health support for people who are homeless or at risk.

In August of 2021, we started on site vaccination clinics in collaboration with local primary health service, STAR Health. Our guiding principle was that the vulnerable community members who attend each day for meals would benefit from culturally familiar and convenient access to on site vaccination, along with a tailored health promotion approach.

To help support this program we received funding from the Community Engagement Grants — Ambassador Program funding through the Department of Health.

The vaccination clinic is positioned alongside the meals take away service at the front of our property. Every day there are people we have not seen before, there are also regulars and the pattern of use is varied. There are those who come once or twice a month, right up to people who attend almost daily.

The clinic has run twice a week for three hours per session from a large white marquee in the middle of our front courtyard.

We have privileged a consistent, single worker to act as a vaccine ambassador. This has enabled consistent messaging and allowed the worker to become a familiar and trusted source of information.

This worker does a range of things including meeting and greeting arrivals, inviting people to have a vaccination, answering questions, and providing written information. A major part of the role has been listening to people's fears and concerns. Having a single worker present for each session has been a key part of this project's success.

I'd like to also acknowledge the work of STAR Health and particularly the team who have been coming to our service, who have demonstrated great flexibility and patience and an openness to working in a spontaneous way.

We know that in Sacred Heart Mission's four residential services, vaccination uptake has been high (above 80 per cent). This is primarily because workers have increased opportunities and time to engage with residents. At a drop-in service like ours, with an ever-renewing community of transient and marginalised people, the fully vaccinated rate remains low and (at the time of writing) is still under 50 per cent.

While many people in the homeless community are mindful of their health, we know that homelessness itself has a diversity of presentations. There are groups of people within this community who do not often engage with services. Experiences of trauma are probably at the heart of this.

Client Numbers

We generally see between 12 to 25 people attending for each three-hour session.

There was a lag in numbers at the end of 2021 where we had only three or four people, but that was unusual.

The work continues but at the time of writing:

- We have provided 711 vaccinations — the vaccinations are spread across first vaccinations (257), second (272), and booster shots (182).
- 41 individuals identified as Aboriginal community members.
- We estimate that a further 100 people have been able to access vaccinations off site at other clinics offered in Melbourne. Some of these our workers have helped to facilitate.

In all of this, it might be useful to remember that Sacred Heart Mission's engagement hub is a high-volume, open access service — we do not keep files on everyone who comes in, and we don't know everyone's name. If someone seeks specific help, then we get consent and open a file. Our model is to encourage people who may not be help seeking to come to us, with as few barriers to access as is possible.

It should be noted that in recent weeks the need for booster shots has been received with some suspicion and irritation, even from fully vaccinated people. 'When is this going to end? Is this really necessary?' have been common reactions. Enhancing the messaging about why boosters are needed

must be a key part of vaccination communication going forward.

We have identified four cohorts of people:

1. People who are 'vaccination ready'

A group of people who are likely to be in stable social housing — they are typically older (40 plus) and more proactive regarding their own health.

2. People who are hesitant

This includes people who have had significant negative experiences with authorities, with hospitals and institutions and, as a consequence, lack trust in services. A combination of fear and a lack of access to clear and reliable information on vaccinations seems to fuel hesitancy.

3. People who are unwilling to accept vaccination

Some people have a range of reasons for not accepting the reality of COVID. To some extent this response to vaccination reflects views held by some in the broader community. Fear can quickly turn to anger and our approach with this cohort has been through gradual and supportive conversation.

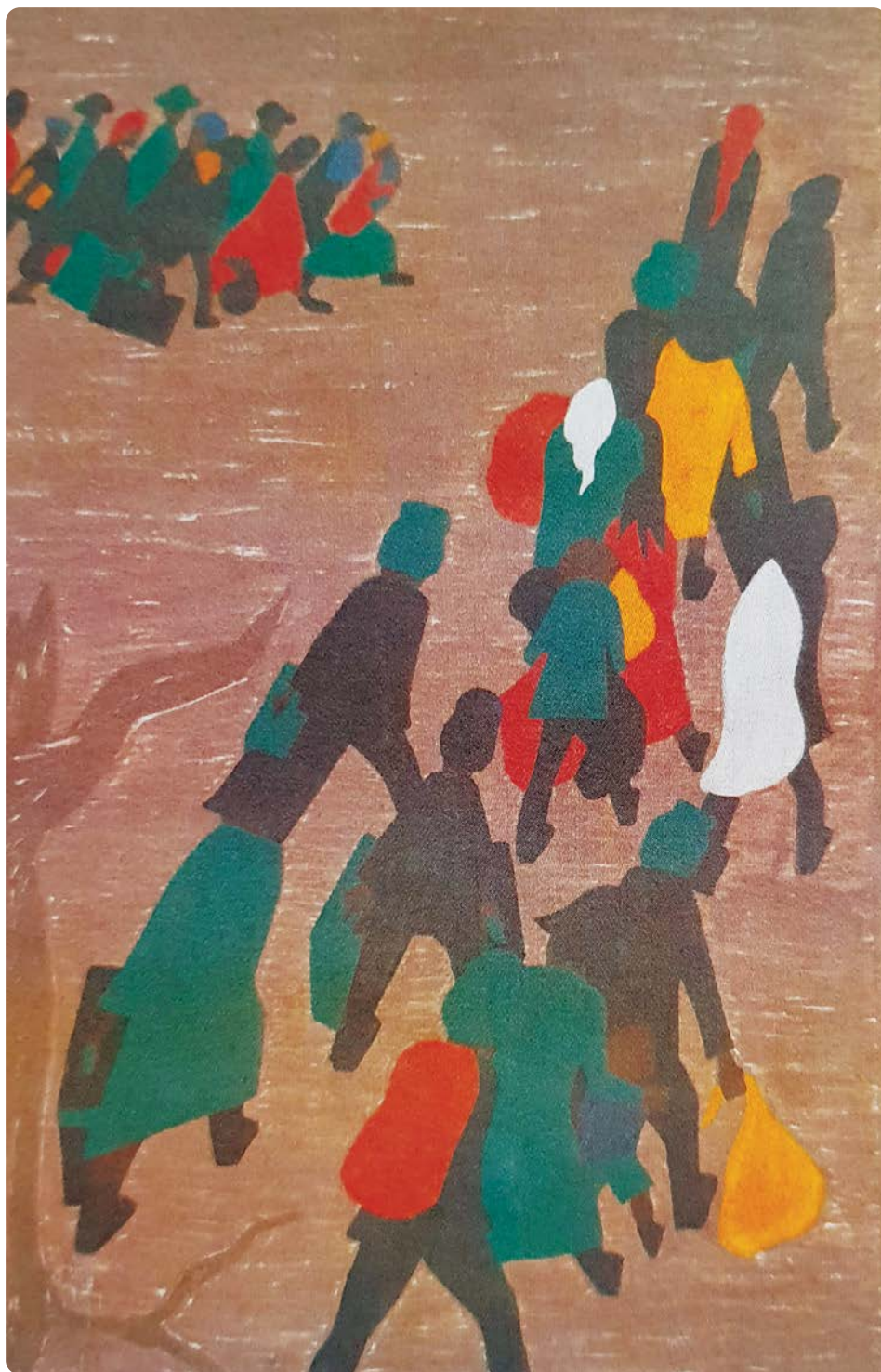
4. People who are living in crisis situations

This includes people who may have an untreated mental illness and use substances and find it difficult to wait and do an intake, even when the process is fast-tracked and streamlined. We took the view that rough sleepers and people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, should be fast-tracked in the clinic and this has worked reasonably well. But some people will walk if they can't be seen within three minutes. Where possible, we allocate a case worker to keep someone engaged with a drink and a chat.

Our Approach

Central to our approach has been having one dedicated worker whose job it is to educate, answer questions and provide clarification. Sometimes this has included being yelled at.

It's not always the bad thing when someone loses their temper. I can think of several occasions where a client has been very angry about vaccinations, and about the Pandemic in general, has vented and



this has eventually led to a fruitful conversation. A number of people have actually made the decision to be vaccinated from an initial position of verbal resistance, but it takes time and a nuanced response.

There have been many reactions to on-site vaccinations.

One man, Peter, is a 55 year-old who identifies as an Aboriginal community member. Nine months after he was eligible, he decided to have his first shot. We had a chat about why he finally agreed to go ahead after weeks of hesitation. Peter said that he came to our site

for several weeks and watched the people coming in and out for their shots. In Peter's words, *'I saw no one was taken away on a stretcher, no one seemed to get sick. I saw the same workers here each time. People were friendly. I decided, based on what I could see it was probably safe.'*

This goes to the heart of predictability and consistency.

I'm aware that other vaccination clinics have also been set up alongside vulnerable communities and that they have not always had a significant uptake of vaccinations. Perhaps what was missing was an element of



predictability and a dedicated worker to provide that important transfer of trust, to act as a conduit.

What Have We Learned So Far?

We think there are eight key lessons that are worth sharing.

1. That people who appear to be against vaccinations may well end up changing their mind. It is not easy to say how this process works but it requires an ongoing, supportive dialogue.
2. People need time to come to the decision to be vaccinated. They require significant time to deal with their fear, to hear about vaccination (in manageable increments), to push back, and to make up their mind. We know there are people who have taken 10 to 15 weeks to get to this point.
3. People need to enter into a conversation in order to make up their mind. Running a clinic is not just about if you build it they will come. They will not necessarily come... They need encouragement and tailored information.

4. It is important to have workers who can help build a bridge of trust from the service site to the vaccination clinic. This is where an ambassador or key worker comes into their own. They make it possible for the client to feel safe and prepared when walking into the vaccination tent.
5. Working from a consistent and predictable approach are critical. These are two important aspects of trauma-informed work and they assist in running a successful clinic. People see the same workers at the same times and this builds confidence and trust. One client who made the decision to be vaccinated said: *'I saw your clinic there every day at the same times and realised after a couple of months that it was not going away and that vaccination was something I should take seriously.'*
6. There have also been some surprises — the few people who have been most vocal against having vaccinations on site turned out to be clients who had been fully vaccinated. We

can only guess why they have been so vocal — possibly this resides in how they feel about government and society.

7. Our space has worked for us. People coming through for a meal can see the clinic right next to them. People wave and say hello. This provides a feeling of safety and transparency. It's not some sinister medical operation in a hidden back room. A number of clients have said to us that after seeing it did not look scary, they decided to go ahead. This is critical.
8. In talking to clients about vaccinations it is often helpful not to ask a direct question such as, 'Have you had a COVID vaccination yet?' It might be seen that there is an implicit judgement built into this question and it's very direct. We find it more useful to say, 'A lot of people are having COVID vaccinations right now. What do you reckon?' And then gradually get more specific about it. Or, 'We have COVID vaccinations here twice a week if you are anyone you know is interested.'

* Chris Middendorp is service manager of client support services and meals provision at Sacred Heart Mission's engagement hub in Grey Street, St Kilda Melbourne.

Opinion 1

Professor Cameron Parsell

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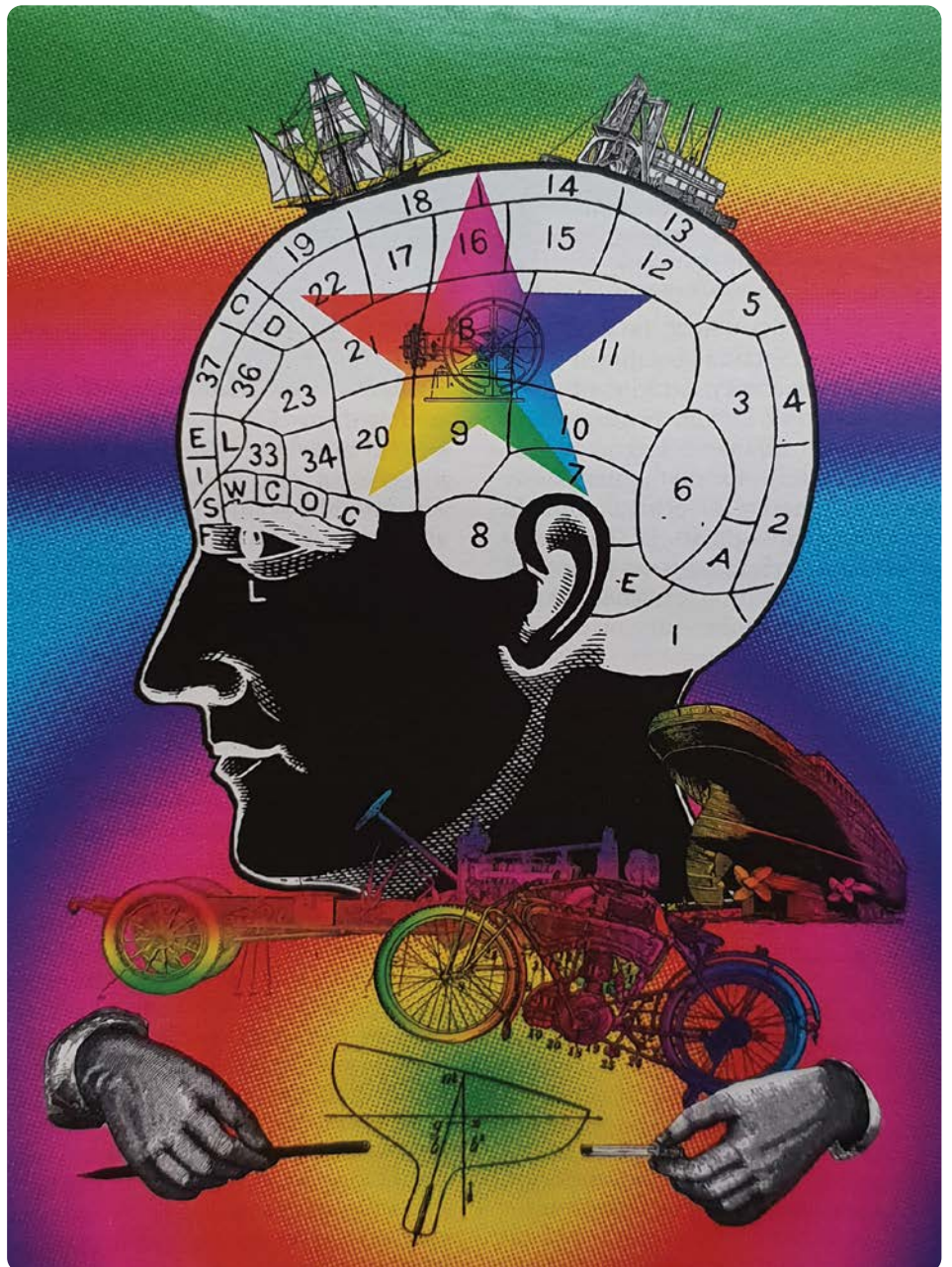
I can't remember whether it was my social work training that stimulated my interest in homelessness as a social injustice, or whether I came to social work because of my interest in homelessness. It probably doesn't matter much now anyway. It is certainly the case that my social work training has been a profound influence on how I have thought about homelessness. In fact, being a social worker by trade has without any doubt, whether I like it or not, shaped what I have tried to do about homelessness. As I understand it, the core of social work is about understanding individual problems as socially produced, on the one hand, and doing whatever can be done to work with people to assist them, which ideally involves intervening at the societal level, on the other.

I was fortunate to study social work in the early 2000s at the University of New South Wales. This degree, as university marketing professionals would proclaim, actually changed my life. The social work degree gave me the ideas, theories, and some practices to

understand how society needed to change to address homelessness. The training also inspired me, with a massive degree of naivety, to go out and try and enact some of the changes I thought needed to be made. I tried this working in shelter homeless accommodation, briefly in social housing, and then in child protection. I'm sceptical

as to whether I achieved any of the changes that animated me. It's ongoing work for me.

If I think back on it now, I recognise that it was the brilliant Eileen Baldry and the late Tony Vinson that shaped my development as a social worker and understanding of homelessness. They taught me that social work





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sat at the centre of everything I needed to know about social work. And by agency, I mean what people who were experiencing homelessness do and do not do, including how they made meaning of their situation and the resources available to them. Agency needs to be taken seriously when we think about homelessness, and this serious treatment of agency involves understanding how resources and structures can shape and add meaning to, but not determine, the agency of people. I found agency exciting, because as a novice practitioner and student, I could not ignore agency. People experiencing homelessness demonstrated their agency to me all the time. Beyond anything, they did not want to be pitied as victims, or assumed to be passive in their situation. Whereas the right of politics saw agency as a weapon to blame people who are homeless for their situation, the left ignored it on the basis they did not want to perpetuate mindless victim blaming. Social work taught me that ignoring agency amounted to paternalism and probably a range of interventions done 'to people' that would be suboptimal.

Third, and closely related to agency, my social work training provided the intellectual and moral scaffolding to recognise that I could never do anything useful without being driven by people who experienced homelessness. Social work is not about doing for the so called homeless, but forming knowledge, advocacy, and practice partnerships — fleeting and enduring — that ensured the changes I sought to implement were changes that made sense to people who I intended to help. This meant that I had to be seriously involved in working toward structural change that can only be determined successful or unsuccessful by people without housing.

is all about developing a deep understanding of not only people's lives but also the organisation of society that opens and constrains opportunity. This understanding is for no purpose other than working with people to do what ever can be done to change social processes so that those who are excluded can be included. Included, moreover, in terms that they dictate.

In concrete terms, social work has shaped three core elements of the research I have pursued over the years. First, since my initial period in social work training until now, I have been fascinated with questions of identity. I have been interested in the way that we identify people — impose an identity upon them — and how this shapes what we

and society does — to intervene. Social work gave me the theoretical knowledge to understand that homelessness, poverty, or client are not identities, rather experiences in people's lives. The critical approaches to identity made me aware of how we problematise people and assume that something they are lacking is used to convey something about them. In the homelessness field, I quickly learnt that the homeless identity was something that meant people were cast as other, and this othering justified our poverty of ambition. Identity matters in material ways.

Agency was the second key learning I took from my social work training. It was because of social work that I understood that agency

Mark Furlong, PhD

Independent Scholar



Who Gets the Credit and Who Gets the Blame? Social Work and Homelessness

What follows is a reflection on forty or so years of professional experience. Why might this be relevant? Perhaps, a review of this data will help identify stable elements in the relationship between homelessness and social work from those that come and go.

This reflection begins in 1977 in a large psychiatric institution — Royal Park Hospital in inner Melbourne. Totally green, within days of commencing employment in this intense setting I was pitched into one iteration of the relationship between homelessness and social work: the expectation that the primary task of the social worker was to resolve what the locals referred to as ‘placement problems.’ This expectation was unanimously asserted by the consultant psychiatrist in each ward, by the ward registrars and by the relevant charge nurse (a role since re-titled ‘unit manager’).

Mrs/Miss Mr. Jones has been here too long. S/he is clogging-up the ward. You know, there is a bed shortage. We are under pressure. In these statements everybody recognised what was the centre of attention. Accommodation, that is what social workers did — mindful the common account was that social workers did this job poorly.

To some extent times were different then. With a little can-do one could sometimes find accommodation that was, more or less, fit for purpose — a cheap flat you scrounged-up after fudging the need for references; an out-of-the-way bungalow might be fluked; an informal share set-up could be improvised. This said, the situation was abysmal. Women were frequently wedged back into at-risk situations. Many isolated men ended up being inappropriately re-cycled through inner-urban boarding houses and emergency hostels. To my shame, mostly I went along to get along, puffing-up with conflicted pride when one of the local bosses confided ‘*You are not like them* [the other social workers]. *You get things done.*’

A few years later while employed at Mont Park Hospital, an even larger metropolitan in-patient facility, the penny began to drop. There a lone social worker in one of that hospital’s out-patient centers — Margaret Tomkins at the Ernest Jones clinic — had alchemically, (or so it seemed) been able to develop half a dozen group homes and establish the Rosa Gilbert flats, a set of around ten units in a stand-alone block. Supported by the clinic consultant psychiatrist and senior community nurse, this innovative local sub-system absolutely pre-dated

what is now taken-for-granted — de-institutionalisation, community-based treatment and the model of out-sourcing that is a key feature of current service design.

Tomkins’ innovation was a no-brainer. Rather than exiting people to de facto homelessness/utterly inappropriate housing, you did not need to be Erasmus to know here was a beginning step in addressing the need for variegated, supported housing. Unfortunately, the hospital’s superintendent had a different view: *Furlong, I will break your back if you have anything more to do with those conniving bitches.* His face seizing-up with rage, this threat was, and was meant to be, intimidating.

No enemies, no honour. If you are not prepared to tell the lion he has bad breath, you better get out of the jungle, I said to myself at the time. Much was different then. Superintendents had a close-to-unlimited power and there were few, if any, external constraints to them exercising their whims. This difference noted, there is also a degree of continuity between then and now: it remains the case that, in an enclosed organisation, one will be less likely to speak out in as much as one is also trying to climb the greasy pole.¹

Tactics and personal disposition to one side, the concern with housing in this second job reflected the same expectations that existed in my first: social workers were expected to ensure that the ward/hospital’s through-put was not endangered. That is, if patients were to be efficiently ‘decanted’ — and this was one of the terms used to de-humanise the process of discharge — this was the job of, and a KPI for, the social worker.

Of course, good quality discharge options were often unavailable. Everybody knew this; securing what was needed was mission impossible. Unavoidably, this was an inconvenient truth as it endangered the dream of perfect accomplishment that sustains the hubris of high-status professionals. Such a too-hot-to-handle spoiler had to be defended against. It could not be jointly recognised and squarely shared. That is, while at a rational level it was obvious that social workers did not have a magic wand, the instinct of the institutionally powerful is to find a culprit rather than face their impotence or collusion, incompetence or guilt. You know the dynamic; it is entirely familiar. If an aristocrat gets in trouble, what do they do? Blame one of the servants.

For a moment put yourself into the mind of the privileged: *With all our diagnostic skill, our exquisite clout, with our years of high-par learning and our lauded techniques, something is wrong if this expertise does not keep the people we treat well and out of hospital. The self-serving conclusion reached was: We are being let down. If only those good for nothing social workers would do their job and move patients along efficiently, everything would be fine. This you-beaut instance of cognitive slippage resulted in this thought (if that is the right word): if the social worker was only doing her/his job properly the reception doors at St Elsewhere's would be open 24/7.*

In their 'failure' social workers inevitably call into disrepute the know-it-all game played by experts. This is what insider-outsider boundary-spanners do, either implicitly or explicitly. They cannot fail to communicate that their high-status peers in medicine and nursing, psychology and allied health, are one-down to material reality when it comes to determining patient/client outcomes. No wonder those on high, or who aspire to be on high, think social work is a prig, not scientific and a giant bring-down. If you prick hubris, do not expect to be liked.

A continuing theme is all the above is blame. Both as a defense and weapon, blame is an all too human phenomenon that is used to protect and to accuse, to excuse

and to contain. For better and for worse, given its cultural and historical position, social work gets struck in cycles of blame.^{2,3} A true story illustrates this point.

The ABC's *7.30 Report* used to invite a celebrity guest to comment on its Friday night stories. On one occasion the program presented a report on a problematic child protection event. This segment presented a strong case that social workers had not intervened in a timely and effective manner and had therefore failed to protect a vulnerable young person. On this occasion the guest was Lou Richards, an elderly but still knock-about ex-AFL player and media identity. At the conclusion of the segment Lou was asked to comment. He replied: *'That's the problem with social workers. They march in with their hob-nailed boots.'* That this comment contradicted the conclusion presented to the show's audience did not deter the program's host — John Jost — from sagely nodding before adding *'Yes, that's right Lou.'* If the task is to allocate blame rather than engage with complication, formal logic can be dispensed with. As those at the bottom of the hierarchy know all too well there is mileage in blaming the least powerful.⁴ Get with it. Blame the cabin boys for the sinking of the Titanic.

Coda

Yesterday's priorities are not always honoured today. What was taken-for-granted last year might not warrant a single line in this year's annual report. The conventions of earlier decades may not be reflected in a new employee's job description. We know this as an abstract fact even as, in the grip of the now, we often forget what has come before. Hopefully, what is fundamental never loses its epistemological prestige: that home and housing have a central importance; that the experience of homelessness envelopes rather than is an add-on.

Historically, in hospital settings social workers have been identified with discharge planning. More generally, in child protection, family violence, with refugees and asylum seekers, in correction and schools — in every field of practice — housing remains a key

professional concern. This focus may not provoke an active engagement if the client's accommodation is judged to be good/good-enough, but it is expected to be a priority interest if housing is precarious, inadequate, unsafe or non-existent. In this sense, the primacy of housing animates social work practice. Conceptually, the profession privileges quality housing as a human right and a sine qua non for wellbeing. This noted, what social workers do is far from their own call: *'agency decisions determine which clients will be served, how they will be served, by whom, for how long, and at what costs.'*⁵ This truth is in sharp contrast to the reassuring movies we have all seen where the central character is an individual professional, such as a maverick private eye or barrister, who resists external authority and public bias to ensure that justice is served.

Comfortable myths to one side, it is customary to be told the problem is 'the welfare' and/or those 'who refuse to help themselves.' This account elides constitutional bias, such as terra nullius, and those who are most accountable, such as Paul Hasluck who stewarded Federal Government policies and laws that attacked First Nations people for decades. Like national laws that currently enable high wealth individuals and huge resource extractors to pay no tax, statutes are voted into life by, and can only be rescinded by, parliaments. Nearly a 100 years ago John Dewey noted: *'politics is the shadow cast on society by big business.'* Homelessness exists on the penumbra of this shadow. So does social work.

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On Reflection: Thoughts from a frontline social worker responding to older people experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk of homelessness since 1994: A Retrospective.

Historically, social work emerged as a profession in the 19th century from the voluntary charitable efforts undertaken in Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, (and early 20th century in Australia and New Zealand), to address the 'paradox of increasing and devastating poverty in increasingly productive and prosperous economies.¹ That is, the great divide that emerged from the industrial revolution between wealthy and middle classes, and those working in appalling and underpaid work, living in tenement houses, tenant farms and slums, as well as those left behind on the streets or consigned to work houses.

In Australia, social work became established as a university based qualified profession in the early 1930s, amidst the Great Depression and the aftermath of the First World War. In the mid-1930's, local associations in States were formed and a national association established in 1946 (now the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)). Social Workers were predominantly located in health systems to assist individuals and families in poverty often compounded by the substandard and overcrowded housing for the poorest and most vulnerable in society, often in the inner-city areas.

Social Work has also had a challenged and disputed history from its beginning though trying to assist and champion peoples' needs, originally as almoners in hospitals, we are aware there was also power, and control exerted over vulnerable peoples' lives. By the 1970s, social work was also more widely spread across community settings and family welfare agencies. From the early 2000's, the AASW has publicly acknowledged Social Work's past contribution to Australia's legacy of forced adoptions and colonisation, the Stolen Generation and ongoing punitive child welfare interventions which have all contributed to people experiencing homelessness. There is still a great deal of work to be done to address past grief and decolonise social work and incorporate more Aboriginal ways of knowing, feeling, and doing in its core practice and values.^{2,3,4,5,6}

How do we as frontline social workers in the 21st century, experience our practice in responding to the many related issues and challenges of poverty particularly the over representation of First Nations people experiencing homelessness,⁷

the high proportion of veterans experiencing homelessness,⁸ the increasing numbers of older adults, particularly older women experiencing homelessness.⁹ How should Social workers face the challenge of adequately responding to women remaining in violent or exploitative relationships as a means of remaining housed?

In our Code of Ethics, social workers are committed to social justice and human rights, the most basic of these being the right to stable, safe, and appropriate shelter and housing. Housing stress directly affects the health, educational, employment, and the emotional well-being of individuals and families. It impacts upon both their current and future wellbeing and life-chances. Social workers have a commitment to working with individuals, groups and communities in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic, and political resources and this includes equitable access to housing. Fourteen years ago, an AASW position paper regarding Social Workers working in the homelessness sector outlined the emerging difficulties locating housing noting that '*Social workers are directly involved with assisting individuals and families to locate and maintain secure and affordable housing but are experiencing often increasing difficulties in achieving these outcomes*'.¹⁰

I have been a frontline social worker for nearly 40 years, 25 of those based in a mainstream housing and homelessness service within an inner-city Melbourne local government. In 2002, five years into my position, it was estimated that over 700,000 households in Australia were in housing stress, many paying 60 to 70 per cent of their incomes on

rent and other housing related costs.¹¹ This number has now increased, impacting over one million people by 2017–2018, and is expected to reach 1.7 million by 2025.¹² At the same time, public and community housing has fallen as a percentage of housing stock nationally from seven per cent in 1991 to 4.2 per cent in 2019.¹³

Despite the continuous advocacy directed to Australian governments of many researchers, policy makers and service providers, including Social Workers, for the need to double the availability of social housing through developing proportionate national housing and homelessness strategies and to more sustainably resource the specialist homeless services workforce, there has not been adequate planning, resourcing and training across mainstream service systems, homelessness programs or affordable housing policies.

Funding has not been expanded proportionately in homelessness services, either in the original Supported Assistance and Accommodation Program (SAAP) or

in Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), since then; or the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) program introduced in 1992, (known as ACH Assistance with Care and Housing since approx 2013–14) or the associated Commonwealth State Housing Agreements (CSHA), that are now managed within the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, the NHHA.

Many of the challenges in my day to day work remain similar to what I outlined previously some years ago (14) regarding the daily dire predicaments facing a multitude of older adults, predominantly having left the labour market struggling with poor health in private rental housing in receipt of unemployment benefits—often for up to ten years. This has been reported for over three decades, and yet despite the precarious situation of older renters, research into the needs of this group in Australia has remained minimal. *‘Older private renter’s housing needs and preferences have attracted little attention’*¹⁵ and lack of family and resources certainly contribute to their

isolation. There is also ‘a tendency for this segment of the population to be somewhat neglected in policy debate and policy formulation, relative to other groups of older people.’¹⁶ Older renters are a much smaller group relative to those who own their home but are increasing.

In 2017, Carole Zufferey¹⁷ highlighted that by social workers predominantly working with individuals experiencing homelessness to obtain *‘public entitlements and ... emergency needs, such as responding to crises’*, this has *‘siloe[d] or dichotomise[d] social work responses to homelessness, without focusing on how social inequalities are produced and intersect’*.¹⁸ Earlier in 2014, Anne Coleman and Rodney Fopp¹⁹ argued that there was no *‘coordinated plan for addressing the structural issues that cause homelessness.... and a lack of exit points from the Specialist Homelessness Services, particularly impacted by an increasingly casualised, insecure and competitive labour force and income support policies’*.²⁰



In 2015, an Australian Institute of Family Studies submission of the Productivity Commission said:

*'After taking housing expenses into consideration, over 60 per cent of single retired women were not able to afford a modest lifestyle, relying almost entirely on the age pension as their source of income. Single men fared slightly better, with fewer than half of single male retirees aged 65 to 69, and around 60 per cent of those aged 70 or older not able to afford a modest standard of living. These results highlight the relatively poor standard of living among current retirees, who have not had the benefit of compulsory superannuation for most of their working lives and have little in the way of retirement saving' further that also pointed to a worsening trend in housing security for Australian retirees, with estimates suggesting that by 2036 one in four retirees will be renters rather than homeowners.'*²⁰



Moreover, it has been estimated that by 2026 there will be 419,000 older people renting. The greatest projected change is in the 85 years-and-over age range, where the number of low-income renters is estimated to increase from 17,300 to 51,000, creating a continuing demand for affordable housing suited to older households.²²

Social workers are tasked by our Professional Code of Ethics to tackle oppressive and inadequate policies. On a daily basis, we deal with the impact of, and exposure to, the trauma and challenges of poverty and social exclusion experienced by our clients. Social workers do this predominantly based in services with insecure and inadequate funding and without the dedicated commitments given by governments to resource and support other professions such as medicine and education.

Can you imagine if the same inadequate responses and outcomes were to happen in these fields? Every day we are faced with increasing numbers of people presenting to our services. However, we are only able to source very limited and often unsuitable housing and support to assist them recover from their traumatic and stressful experiences. It is impossible to imagine that it would be acceptable for access to hospitals, schools, and other public institutions to be effectively reduced by half, as has, and is, happening with access to housing and homelessness prevention and support. It is especially hard to imagine what result would have been if health systems were similarly reduced given the challenges of Covid over the past two years on these systems.

We need change, and Social Workers need to be part of that change.

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Opinion 4

Robyn Miller

Chief Executive Officer, MacKillop Family Services



Social work continues to occupy a critical position in the purpose and practice of reducing and (ideally) eradicating homelessness in Australia. For those of us working in family services and out-of-home care, we are constantly looking to address the drivers of homelessness. Research has shown that almost two-thirds of young people experiencing homelessness have spent time in out-of-home care. Half the young people leaving residential care today in Victoria are likely to be homeless within three years. Recognising this dire reality and that change is needed, the Victorian Government has committed financial assistance to allow young people a longer and better supported transition to independent living.

Like many out-of-home care service providers across Australia, MacKillop Family Services (MacKillop) looks to evidence based and evidence informed programs as we strive to better meet the needs of the children, young people and families with whom we work, including those living in out-of-home care. While some have positioned the increasing use of evidence-based

and evidence-informed practice and programs as sitting in tension to social work and social work practice, this view does not reflect our experience of contemporary practice. As a significant employer of social workers, we believe that rather than a threat to professional knowledge and practice, a focus on evidence has the potential to further animate both practice and the profession.

Our early intervention family support programs seek to prevent children coming into care and where young people are residing in out-of-home care, we seek to change their trajectory which too often points towards homelessness and the criminal justice system. The work we are engaged in is life changing and it's important to draw on what has been proven to be effective.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies' Communities for Children Facilitating Partners is an example of the current emphasis within public policy and practice of supporting evidence-based responses to the complex and changing needs of young people. MacKillop has developed, supported and implemented a number of programs within this listing which have been selected and approved for use following a review of their evidence base.

MacKillop has invested in establishing and contributing to independent evaluations as we build the evidence base across a suite of programs in relation to children, young people and their families. As we build, refine and deliver evidence-based, evidence informed programs at MacKillop, we recognise that their success depends upon practice which is trauma-informed and privileges

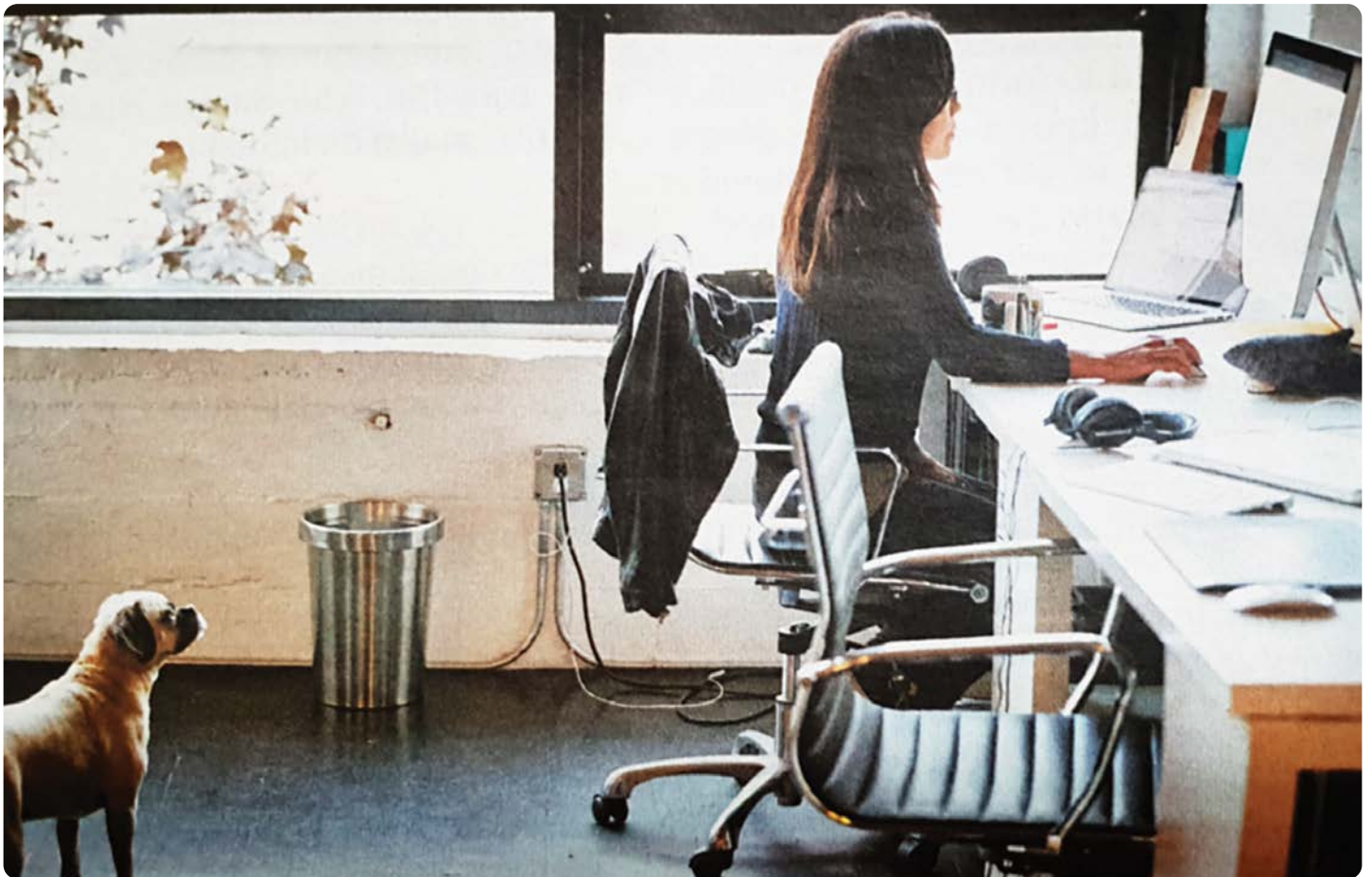
reliable, responsive therapeutic relationships with children, young people and their families.

The Sanctuary Model, MacKillop's overarching trauma informed organisational framework, supports staff to create a culture that prioritises safety and wellbeing. Sanctuary recognises that trauma is pervasive across human experience, not only for people who seek services, but also on people and systems providing services. The Sanctuary Commitments provide a set of values through which other evidence informed models are implemented across the organisation.

An example of a program that is of relevance to young people living in residential care is the Power to Kids program developed at MacKillop. Power to Kids upskills carers, building their knowledge and confidence to have 'brave conversations' with young people about sexual safety and providing them with strategies to intervene early when they see indicators of abuse. The program has been evaluated by the University of Melbourne who are also evaluating the national roll-out of the program currently underway.

Both the Sanctuary Model and the Power to Kids program share a trauma informed focus on rights-based approaches, creating safety, empowering service users, professional integrity, respect and addressing marginalisation — values consistent with the Code of Ethics of the Australian Association of Social Workers.

We know that young people entering residential care will bring unique worries and wishes and sadly experiences of abuse, neglect, violence and instability



which will shape the way they view and interact with the world. Central to social work practice is advocacy to address disadvantage and marginalisation. The focus on evidence to both understand the issues and highlight potential social policy initiative has never been more important in practice.

A recent survey of young people in residential care at MacKillop gave a concerning insight into their experiences prior to coming to MacKillop. It found:

- 36 per cent of young people had ten or more placements;
- 13 per cent had 20 or more placements;
- six per cent had 30 or more placements and;
- twopercenthadover50placements.

Can we expect even the most robust evidence-based programs to make a positive difference in the lives of these young people if we fail to attend to the structural context which normalises this level of instability and presents a significant impediment to embedding relational practice?

Our primary focus must be on allowing young people to establish a secure base — a base which can become the starting point for change. The Commission for Children and Young People's 2019 systemic inquiry *In Our Own Words* found that children and young people with complex trauma, challenging behaviours and/or intellectual disabilities are at higher risk of placement instability in out-of-home care. Clearly these children and young people are amongst those most in need of stability.

It is through reliable, responsive, and consistent care, that young people, who may have never experienced attuned practice and care, might begin to build a healthy internal working model. They can be supported to develop a sense of worthiness and an expectation that others will treat them with respect and care.

There is an urgent need to address young people's right to stability through the provision of housing stock and support services which are tailored to the diverse needs of young people leaving out-of-home care. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people and

young people with disability are over-represented in this cohort.

Children and young people in residential care need to feel safe, welcomed and wanted; to know that they are missed and searched for if they do not return home. Staff need the capacity to spend individual time with young people within a stable care environment.

Adequately funded two-bed homes would support such a care environment and address concerns widely reported by young people. Stacey, quoted in the Commission for Children and Young People's 2019 systemic inquiry *In Our Own Words* gives an insight into the lived experience of residential care and what is at stake:

It is hard with the number of kids coming through resi-care. One kid goes and in 20 minutes another comes in. [...] We don't get told who is coming or going out. That makes us [kids] angry more than we need to be

— Stacey, residential care, 17

As a system we can and should do better. We owe it to young people like Stacey.



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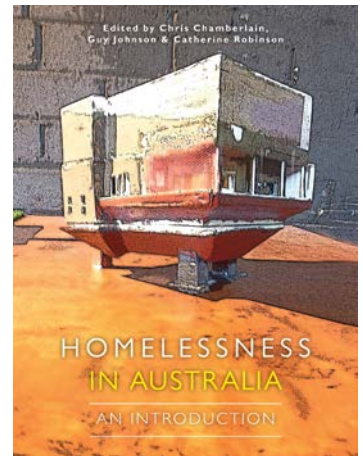
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