



HOMELESS CAREERS: Pathways In And Out Of Homelessness

A SALVATION ARMY RESPONSE

INTRODUCTION

The publication today of the *'Homeless Careers'* study confirms that homelessness continues to be a critical issue in Australia. In 1989 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission published a report – *Our Homeless Children* – which highlighted the plight of homeless young people. Generally this report was referred to as the Burdekin Report and it transformed the delivery of services to young people who were homeless. Sadly, despite genuine attempts to respond to the challenges of the Burdekin Report, many of its major recommendations have not been implemented by Commonwealth and State Governments.

Since 1990, David MacKenzie (Swinburne University) and Chris Chamberlain (RMIT) have committed themselves to enlarging our understanding of homelessness in Australia. They have built an impressive evidence base about homelessness in Australia and its impact on people's lives. In particular, they have focussed on how homelessness affects young people.

Their first *National Census of Homeless Students*, completed in 1994, led to heightened awareness about the need for early intervention into youth homelessness. They have continued to research the experiences of homeless people, improving their capacity to do so by linking their data collection with that of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. A series of comprehensive papers have been written using that evidence base to establish broad policy and planning parameters for practical pathways into community life for Australians who are homeless. Their work also outlines prevention and early intervention proposals.

The report launched today further adds to our knowledge base and provides The Salvation Army, and other community service organizations, with a clearer way forward. Because of the work of MacKenzie and Chamberlain we know more about homelessness. We can prove it's getting worse. The *'Homeless Careers'* paper offers even more sophisticated insights into how people become homeless.

THE REPORT

One of the most tragic issues highlighted in *'Homeless Careers'* is that many young people who became homeless around the time of the writing of the Burdekin Report are still homeless now. This confirms the concerns of workers in support services and emphasizes our need to work on building real pathways out of homelessness.

'Homeless Careers' draws its research data from two sources. The 2001 *National Census of Homeless School Students* (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2002) provided raw data and as part of this, school welfare staff were asked to provide case studies of homeless students where they had detailed knowledge of what had happened. Schools returned 1220 case histories. At the same time the researchers contacted all SAAP services across the country (N=1238) and invited them to take part in a case study project. The SAAP services provided 812 case histories of individuals, couples or family groups who were homeless.

The three pathways into homeless outlined in '*Homeless Careers*' are:

- those young people who become homeless in their teens and remain homeless into their twenties and thirties
- people who become homeless because persistent poverty leads to a housing crisis and subsequent homelessness
- ongoing conflict and violence in families which leads to breakdown and resultant homelessness

People of all ages become homeless because of these circumstances in their lives. The report argues that '*homelessness should be conceptualised as a career process*'. This career process highlights the 'factors that influence how people move from one stage of homelessness to another'. Examining this process in some detail enables government, and community agencies to develop support approaches which prevent people sliding into chronic homeless.

Intuitively most competent housing and support workers are aware of these pathways. It is good to see that what workers know from experience turns out to be validated by research. Nonetheless a solid evidence base for policy is essential and this report 'brings sensitivity in policy and practice to different types of intervention appropriate to different phases of the homeless experience – prevention, early intervention, crisis intervention and long-term support.' It says as much about the pathways out of homelessness as it does about pathways to chronic homelessness.

Over the past 25 years the levels of unemployment and poverty in Australia have increased. People in extreme poverty are particularly vulnerable. Private rental market opportunities for low-income people are limited in large cities and access to public housing is inadequate with long waiting periods. The 'housing crisis model' in this report draws attention to the fact that for many people it is poverty and accumulating debt that underpins the slide into homelessness. Although there is a current Commonwealth/Government focus on welfare reform there is no co-ordinated approach or national strategy to prevent poverty and its impact on the Australian community. This means that resources focussed on homelessness are increasingly stretched.

The career path into homelessness for the adult population which focuses on family breakdown has some similarities to the way that many young people become homeless. It often involves a period of leaving home and returning, particularly where domestic violence is involved. Early intervention is difficult to deliver because many victims do not request assistance until they are forced to leave, so it will be necessary to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the sites and process for early intervention into family breakdown.

Young people who progress through a homeless career and do not reconnect to family or community comprise about half of the young adults aged 19 to 24 in the homeless population. There is no opportunity for early intervention with this group because they are already chronically homeless. Many have issues with drug, alcohol or mental health and a significant number have had contact with juvenile justice systems. All were unemployed, extremely poor and highly marginalised. For

these young adults intensive support is required which can, over a long period, yield positive outcomes.

This is a comprehensive report which challenges governments and community agencies to respond seriously.

A SALVATION ARMY RESPONSE

Because, working with homeless persons is important to The Salvation Army has been a funding partner for the *Counting the Homeless 2001* project. We are involved because we want to ensure that our supports for people who are homeless are appropriate, effective and timely. Our commitment is to assist homeless people move from the insecurity of poverty and homelessness to safe and fulfilling lives in the community.

This report has challenged The Salvation Army to commit to:

- training the staff at our Emergency Relief Centres so that they are resourced and trained for early intervention into homelessness caused by housing crisis and family breakdown
- refocusing resources in these centres to ensure that families, single people and young people can remain in their current housing by the provision of rent support
- assisting family members experiencing conflict and violence to find appropriate counselling to prevent family breakdown, where appropriate
- building on our existing domestic violence diversionary programmes to offer the most appropriate option for women and children escaping domestic violence
- finding additional resources to expand our stock of exit social housing available to people in our homelessness programmes
- increasing the places in our foundation and vocational education programmes for homeless young people using our residential services
- offering appropriate employment support for all people in our homeless programmes
- developing opportunities for families and young people on low incomes to participate in affordable sport, recreation and other community activities which will both build social connectedness and create new opportunities for early intervention.

Supported by research from policy academics such as David MacKenzie and Chris Chamberlain, The Salvation Army is able to ensure that we are better prepared to deliver improved outcomes for all homeless people supported by our services.

THE CHALLENGE

Australia does not need another Inquiry into homelessness. We know the circumstances of homeless people. They are amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalised Australians. The Commonwealth Government must urgently develop and resource adequate responses for addressing homelessness. The responses must focus on strategic and national approaches to building **real** pathways out of homelessness.

It is shameful that nearly 15 years after the publication of the Burdekin Report we still tolerate high, and growing, levels of homelessness. Government at all levels must work with the community to make the 'homeless career' a thing of the past, not a path to the future for many people.