Policy Forum: Australian Homelessness—Research and Policy Insights

Early Research Findings from Journeys Home: Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability

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Abstract

Journeys Home: Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability is a national, six-wave survey of 1,682 disadvantaged Australians who were either homeless or at risk of homelessness. This article summarises findings from more than a dozen initial studies that have conducted multivariate analyses of the survey to investigate the causes and consequences of homelessness and other outcomes. Although homelessness is strongly correlated with many social problems, the multivariate studies that adjust for conditions that co-occur with homelessness have found far fewer associations. The studies indicate that the experiences and circumstances of homelessness are complex, with different surrounding conditions, durations and paths into and out of homelessness.

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1. Introduction

The Journeys Home: Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability (JH) survey is an invaluable and unique tool for studying homelessness and its correlates. As Wooden et al. (2012) discussed when introducing the survey in this journal, the JH survey is a national, longitudinal, interviewer-administered survey of 1,682 disadvantaged Australians. At the time of their initial interview in 2011, all the participants were current or recent income-support recipients who had either been administratively flagged by Centrelink staff as being homeless or at risk of homelessness or been statistically identified as being vulnerable to homelessness. The survey asked people about their housing arrangements and homelessness, economic circumstances, physical and mental health conditions, family and childhood backgrounds, social and demographic situations, substance use, exposure to violence and other conditions in six waves of interviews that were each approximately 6 months apart. Most respondents also agreed to let their survey responses be linked to administrative records on income support from Centrelink. Participation in the first wave was very high, with 62 per cent of the in-scope sample responding, and subsequent retention was remarkable, with roughly five-sixths of the initial respondents still participating in the sixth wave.

The JH survey is path-breaking in several ways. It is one of only a handful of prospective longitudinal studies of homelessness, and unlike the other longitudinal studies, it considered a baseline population of housed and homeless people. The survey was national in scope, covering many geographical contexts across Australia, and demographically diverse, with women and

men, people of different ages and ethnic and Indigenous representation. Moreover, the JH survey collected a wealth of information, allowing for many different types of investigations and for extensive sets of multivariate controls.

Wooden et al. (2012) reported descriptive evidence regarding the baseline JH survey sample and Melbourne Institute staff have authored a series of mostly descriptive research reports following the completion of each survey wave. However, the real value of the JH survey rests on its ability to support multivariate analyses, especially longitudinal, multivariate analyses of housing and other outcomes over time. Scutella et al. (2013) published the first peer-reviewed article based on a multivariate analysis. Since their article, several other researchers have published peer-reviewed multivariate analyses and many others have prepared working papers or manuscripts. This article reviews these early articles, reports and manuscripts that have used multivariate methods. It describes their findings regarding the causes of homelessness and homelessness experiences, the consequences of homelessness and housing insecurity and other outcomes among the disadvantaged JH survey sample participants.

2. Causes of Homelessness and Homelessness Experiences

One strand of the JH survey research has investigated the causes of homelessness and of different types of homelessness outcomes. The JH survey is especially well-suited for these types of studies because it surveyed housed and homeless people, collected information about the duration of their experiences in different housing situations and followed people across waves as they moved into and out of different accommodation. To date, the JH survey research has focused on a broad definition of homelessness, sometimes referred to as ‘cultural homelessness’,

which includes: people who sleep rough, live in cars or squat in abandoned buildings; people who temporarily double-up rent-free with friends or family or temporarily live in emergency shelters; and people who stay in accommodation that falls below community standards, such as hotels, boarding houses and caravans (see Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008 for a discussion of the definition). However, some studies (for example, Diette and Ribar 2015; McVicar, Moschion and van Ours 2015; Cobb-Clark et al. 2016) have considered narrower definitions of homelessness in sensitivity analyses.

Using the broad definition, Scutella et al. (2013) found that 24 per cent of the JH survey respondents were homeless at the time of the first wave interviews. This rate is much higher than the proportion of homeless in the overall Australian population, which was estimated to be just under 0.5 per cent in 2011 (ABS 2012) and confirms that the JH survey sample participants are extremely disadvantaged. Scutella et al. reported that a further 26 per cent of the JH survey respondents were marginally housed and 50 per cent were stably housed. Nearly all the respondents (94 per cent) had been homeless at some point in their lives and about two-thirds had experienced 6 months or more of homelessness. Consistent with prior research (see, for example, the reviews by Lee, Tyler and Wright 2010; Johnson, Ribar and Zhu 2017), the researchers' multivariate analyses found that men, victims of violence and sexual assault, people with low levels of education, drug users and people out of the labour force faced increased risks of homelessness. They also found that childhood histories of state care, homelessness and low levels of family support were associated with longer lifetime homelessness experiences.

Cobb-Clark et al. (2016) used longitudinal JH survey data to investigate the duration of homelessness episodes. They found that most spells of homelessness under the broad definition were moderately long, with nearly half lasting 5 months or more. In multivariate analyses, older

people, childless people, people with less education, victims of sexual abuse, people living in expensive rental markets, but also people living in strong job markets, tended to have longer spells of homelessness. The researchers also reported evidence of duration dependence, with the probability of exiting homelessness increasing over the first 2 or 3 months of a spell, remaining relatively constant over the next 6 months and declining thereafter in an inverted U-pattern.

Johnson et al. (2015) and O’Flaherty, Scutella and Tseng (2016) examined another set of longitudinal outcomes: transitions from being housed to being homeless (entries into homelessness) and transitions from being homeless to being housed (exits from homelessness). Johnson et al. framed their analysis as a comparison of the importance of personal vulnerabilities, such as health problems and drug use, and structural impediments, such as expensive rental markets and weak job opportunities. As with the research by Scutella et al. (2013) and Cobb-Clark et al. (2016), Johnson et al. found that many individual characteristics were associated with entries into, and exits from, homelessness. However, they uncovered less evidence regarding structural characteristics. In particular, higher rents and higher unemployment contributed to entries into homelessness but not to exits from homelessness. Also, the associations between structural characteristics and homelessness entries did not appear for some high-risk groups, such as youths and people with a disability. In contrast, O’Flaherty, Scutella and Tseng framed their study in terms of a comparison of ‘public’ and ‘private’ information about people. In their analysis, public information consisted of characteristics, such as people’s sex and age, that would be readily available to housing officials and possibly used to target services, while private information consisted of characteristics, such as subjective assessments of the chances of losing housing, that would not be known by, or reliably reported to, housing officials. O’Flaherty, Scutella and Tseng found that private information was highly

predictive of subsequent housing outcomes. Worse, estimates that failed to account for private information were biased. Thus, there is a public policy implication that targeting homelessness services on the basis of public information will probably lead to a misdirection of resources; O'Flaherty's article in this issue discusses the targeting problem more (O'Flaherty 2017). There is also a quantitative methodological implication that unobserved characteristics and selection are likely to confound estimates of the determinants of homelessness.

Several other studies have focused more narrowly on specific potential causes of homelessness. McVicar, Moschion and van Ours (2015) investigated how heavy alcohol consumption, cannabis use, and street drug use affected, and were affected by, homelessness. They found that drinking and drug use were very common among homeless people, but that there were few associations between changes in these behaviours and changes in homelessness over time for the same person in statistical analyses that also controlled for other personal vulnerabilities. Diette and Ribar (2015) examined physical violence and homelessness. They found that physical violence unambiguously contributed to homelessness for men. However, a more nuanced pattern appeared for women. Women were more likely to transition into homelessness if they experienced violence while housed, but were also more likely to transition into housing if they experienced violence while homeless. Wooden and Chigavazira (2014) estimated longitudinal, fixed-effects models of employment and homelessness. They found that employment lowered the chances of homelessness, but only modestly.

In addition to its prospective housing questions, the JH survey also asked retrospective questions about people's first experiences with homelessness. McVicar, Moschion and van Ours (2016) compared the timing of these first experiences with the timing of people's first experiences, if any, of regular cannabis use and street drug use. They found that cannabis use

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frequently preceded homelessness for men, but not for women, and they found no discernible association between the onset of street drug use and homelessness. Moschion and van Ours (2016) utilised a similar methodology to investigate the housing consequences of parental separation and found that earlier experiences of parental separation were associated with an earlier lifetime onset of homelessness.

3. Consequences of Homelessness

In another research strand, several of the JH survey studies that considered whether specific problems were causes of homelessness also investigated the reciprocal question of whether the problems might be consequences of homelessness. Diette and Ribar (2015) found that men and women who reported being homeless in one interview were more likely to report experiencing physical violence in their next interview. Wooden and Chigavazira (2014) reported that homelessness was weakly negatively associated with employment. McVicar, Moschion and van Ours (2015) uncovered a surprising result that homelessness in one 6 month period lowered subsequent rates of heavy drinking in the next 6 month period, while McVicar, Moschion and van Ours (2016) found that an early initial onset of homelessness increased the chances that women, but not men, would start using drugs.

Other studies have examined unidirectional relationships between homelessness and subsequent problems. Herault and Ribar (2016) investigated homeless people's food problems, estimating multivariate models that accounted for observed and unobserved characteristics of people that might be associated with homelessness and food outcomes. They found that

homelessness led to increased food hardships, such as eating a limited variety of foods and going 1 day or more without food, and lower food expenditures for men, but that homelessness was not associated with food problems for women. Cobb-Clark and Zhu (2015) studied childhood experiences of homelessness and found that these lowered the chances of adult employment. For women, the linkages appeared to result from reduced schooling and increased welfare dependence; for men, the linkages occurred through schooling, higher rates of incarceration and other factors.

4. Outcomes among an At-Risk Population

The third strand of research has taken advantage of the JH survey's large-scale, longitudinal coverage of an economically disadvantaged population to investigate a wider set of social problems beyond homelessness. Housing insecurity and homelessness are associated with many characteristics, such as problem drinking, drug use, physical and sexual victimisation, psychological problems, welfare dependency, extremely low incomes, financial and material hardships and incarceration, which have a low prevalence among the overall population and are therefore difficult to study in general surveys, such as the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey. However, as Wooden et al. (2012) documented, many of these conditions appear relatively frequently among the JH survey's participants, providing some opportunities to examine outcomes and patterns that cannot be reliably studied in other surveys.

For example, Keane, Magee and Lee (2015) used retrospective JH survey information to demonstrate that a number of adverse childhood experiences increased the risks of adult alcohol problems. In a subsequent study, Keane, Magee and Kelly (2016) used the retrospective reports

of adverse experiences to develop a formal typology of complex childhood trauma that distinguished among people who had suffered from multiple traumas, violent traumas, traumas perpetrated by caregivers, traumas perpetrated by non-caregivers, traumas directed at others and low levels of trauma. They further showed that these types of traumas predicted adult victimisation and homelessness. Moschion and Powdthavee (2016) have used prospective longitudinal data to examine how trajectories of drug use are associated with people's assessment of life satisfaction. They found that people who drink, smoke, use cannabis or take illicit drugs report less life satisfaction during the times when they are engaging in these activities. However, with the exception of drinking, recent histories of these behaviours do not affect life satisfaction. Also, and again with the exception of drinking, diminished life satisfaction does not seem to predict these behaviours.

5. Discussion

This review has highlighted many new findings from the JH survey that are important to social scientists and policy-makers and that will set the stage for future research. An overarching methodological finding is that statistical analyses need to control for possible spurious associations between homelessness and other social problems that might arise from observable and unobservable characteristics of the JH survey participants. Analyses based on simple unconditional (bivariate) correlations indicate that homelessness is strongly associated with many outcomes, such as joblessness, drug use, alcohol consumption, physical violence and food problems. Some of these associations continue to appear in multivariate analyses, but several change or disappear for at least some groups of survey participants when multivariate controls

are included. The findings by O’Flaherty, Scutella and Tseng (2016) regarding the importance of hard-to-observe private information in predicting episodes of homelessness further suggest that controls for unobservable characteristics need to be considered in empirical research. The substantive implication is that homelessness is not as strongly associated with outcomes, such as substance abuse or employment, as we might have initially thought.

Another overarching finding is that many of the causes and consequences of homelessness differ by sex. The large size of the JH survey has allowed researchers to examine relationships in the data separately for men and women and each of the studies that has done this has detected some differences across sex. For example, McVicar, Moschion and van Ours (2016) found that early lifetime use of cannabis was associated with early lifetime onset of homelessness for men, but not for women; Diette and Ribar (2015) found that men’s housing outcomes responded differently to experiences of physical violence than women’s experiences. Cobb-Clark and Zhu (2015) found a similar relationship between childhood homelessness and adult employment for men and women but uncovered different mechanisms for these linkages. Sex differences in homelessness circumstances, experiences and outcomes have been repeatedly documented in research using other datasets and in other countries (Johnson, Ribar and Zhu 2017).

The research findings also reveal tremendous complexity in people’s experiences of homelessness and the circumstances surrounding homelessness. Homelessness is seldom an isolated event; it co-occurs with many other problems and circumstances. The duration of homelessness varies across people, and as mentioned, the causes and consequences of homelessness differ between men and women. The large scale and longitudinal design of the JH survey have allowed researchers to begin to untangle some of this complexity. Indeed, several of

the studies have found innovative ways to use the JH survey data to examine complex patterns, such as the precise timing and ordering of multiple events and the effects of compound events. To date, only a small number of the potential outcomes within the JH survey has been examined. Future research will examine new outcomes and extend and strengthen the research designs of the existing studies.

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