

Policy Forum

Policy Forum: Australian Homelessness—Research and Policy Insights

Introduction to the Policy Forum on Australian Homelessness¹

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From 18 to 19 July 2016, the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research hosted an international Workshop on Homelessness and Housing Insecurity; on 20 July, the Institute and RMIT University organised a Forum on Homelessness Policy and Practice in the United States. The Workshop was intended to integrate international research on homelessness with new Australian research that was being developed through the Journeys Home: Longitudinal Study of Factors Affecting Housing Stability (JH) survey, while the Forum was intended to translate the research for a policy and practitioner audience and to draw policy conclusions. Several prominent American and Australian homelessness researchers participated in the two events. This Policy Forum brings together five articles that draw from their presentations and research; each article addresses homelessness in Australia.

The article by Gavin Wood and Rachel Ong establishes the context for the Policy Forum by providing an overview of trends in the Australian housing system, especially for people with low incomes. Wood and Ong alert us to several worrying private-sector trends: falling rates of

¹ This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi:10.1111/aere.12223

home ownership, but growing rates of mortgage indebtedness among home purchasers, rising rents and increasing numbers of households with excessive rent burdens. For the public sector, the numbers of public and social housing units, which were already low by international standards, have edged down. Finally, homelessness has remained stubbornly high.

The next two articles discuss research findings. The article by Stephen Metraux and Yi-Ping Tseng reviews the highly productive and innovative research agenda that Dennis Culhane and Metraux developed by using administrative data from several US cities on homeless shelter and housing service usage. Culhane and Metraux have shown how these data can be used to enumerate the homeless, understand the links between homelessness and other services, provide a basis for time series and longitudinal studies, undertake program evaluation and improve system management and administration. Similarities between US and Australian administrative systems suggest that their research agenda could be fruitfully extended to Australia and Metraux and Tseng discuss the possibilities and challenges of doing so.

The article by David Ribar summarises multivariate research findings from the JH survey. The JH survey is a large, six-wave, national survey of disadvantaged Australians who were homeless or at high risk of homelessness and research involving this survey comprised most of the Australian presentations at the Institute's 2 day workshop. Ribar reviews numerous recent JH studies that have addressed the causes of homelessness and housing insecurity, the consequences of housing problems and other issues among extremely disadvantaged Australians. The rich data from the JH survey have revealed that Australians' experiences with homelessness are often embedded in complex webs of other problems. Multivariate analyses that have attempted to control for these problems have found surprisingly weak associations between homelessness and other conditions, such as drug abuse and joblessness.

The final two articles focus on homelessness services. The article by Stefan Kertesz and Guy Johnson describes experiences, mostly from the United States, with 'Housing First' housing service policies. For a long time, the United States followed a continuum-of-care housing model that focused on modifying chronically homeless people's behaviours and remedying their problems before arranging permanent housing. The newer Housing First approach treats permanent housing as a fundamental and immediate need, rather than a contingent one, and provides supports for chronically homeless people in conjunction with housing. Initial studies indicate that Housing First has many favourable results and is cost-effective. Kertesz and Johnson report these results but also caution that service providers have had challenges adhering to the Housing First model and that net cost savings do not always appear.

The article by Brendan O'Flaherty provocatively takes on the issue of targeting of homelessness services. The chief difficulty for a policy-maker who wants to target by using common assessment tools is that homelessness episodes are incredibly hard to predict. We can identify many vulnerabilities and conditions that increase the risks of homelessness, but most homelessness episodes also involve bad luck; that is, the experience of negative shocks that are effectively random. Under such conditions, targeting can be unfair. Worse, it can be misguided because targeting seldom accounts for people's responsiveness to services, nor for broader social objectives.

The articles in this Forum cover the context of Australian homelessness, highlight emerging research evidence regarding homelessness, point to promising research methods and describe policy interventions. They discuss policy experiences and research approaches from the United States that can help Australia with its homelessness problem. However, they also show several ways in which new knowledge, data and research from Australia are shaping general

understandings beyond its shores about homelessness.

March 2017

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