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Attempting to Hear the Excluded:
The Voice of Homeless People and Policy Implications

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Introduction

Until recently, there have been very few systematic attempts to hear what people who are homeless say about their lives and situations. Yet there are a few exceptions, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom (for example, Snow & Anderson 1993; Hutson & Liddard 1994). The Inquiry which resulted in the Burdekin Report in Australia also held consultations in which people who were homeless submitted evidence (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1989). Other Inquiries have done likewise and some reports have used the accounts of people who are homeless (for example Bartholomew 1999; Fopp 1989; MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2003).

If it true that there have been very few attempts to hear the voice of people who are homeless, then their voice has not been used in policy formulation and development. So for all the talk about taking into consideration the standpoint of stakeholders, people who are homelessness have been largely left out of such deliberations — even though policies affect them. Yet, as this article will show, it is in policy matters that the standpoint of people who are homeless is pertinent.

This article is a brief attempt to bring together the words of homeless people from some recent South Australian research (Catherine House 2003; Liddicoat 2004). These two research projects examined the experiences of women in homelessness, many of whom where escaping from domestic violence situations. All of the women involved either

where or had recently been in SAAP accommodation at the time of the research. What they say has important implications for decision-making which are often in contrast with current policy and practice. While people experiencing homelessness speak on a wide variety of issues, this article is concerned with only three main areas and their policy implications.

Needing time to cope with circumstances and adjust to independent living

The experience of homelessness is enormously traumatic. Several participants in the two studies referred to such experiences. For example, one woman in a South Australian country town explained the ostracism and marginalisation which occurs especially in rural areas: ‘I have stigma; sometimes I’d like to change my name’ (Liddicoat 2004, p. 58). Another woman asserted that: ‘I’m the slice of society’s pie that’s ostracised and that the government doesn’t want’ (Catherine House 2003, p. 20).

A history of moving around without becoming accustomed to stable accommodation was another theme. Of note was the general toll homelessness takes on people: ‘for people in my position moving in and out of homelessness can be very stressful and tiring’ (Catherine House 2003, p. 21).

Women dealing with histories of abuse and insecure housing stressed the need for time and support to cope with their circumstances and adjust to living independently. Two women, who had been in SAAP accommodation, then independent tenancies and then returned to SAAP, emphasised the importance of time to assist with moving onto independent living: ‘It is important to take things slowly so that you can genuinely build strengths, health confidence and skills’ (Catherine House 2003, p. 27); ‘With slow, day-by-day steps I gained the strength and confidence I needed to cope’ (Catherine House 2003, p. 26).

Similarly, other women in SAAP emphasised the need to progress through the service at their own pace in order to adequately
address their needs: ‘I need time and small steps...building blocks...if you’re under stress you need people to go a lot slower and you need genuine support’.

...these women need to do things slowly in order to build their strength, health, confidence, skills, and to manage habits’.1

The issue here is not necessarily staying in SAAP longer; some issues may be addressed with support in independent tenancies. The issue is the imperative for clients to be given time to come to terms with what has happened to them, build up energy and prepare for the future. As one client in transitional accommodation observed, women escaping domestic violence ‘have long histories of abuse, neglect, unemployment, insecure living situations, and often mental and physical health issues’ (Catherine House 2003, p. 21). In this context, agencies may not be able to meet outcomes and provide adequately for their clients if they move clients through their services within prescribed times. As one woman exclaimed ‘Quick fixes for homelessness – you’ve got to be kidding’ (Catherine House 2003, p. 7).

Need for supportive relationships

Throughout the two projects participants told of the importance of having personal supports to help with the transition to independent living. These took the form of friends, family members, other clients in similar situations and workers from agencies. For one woman and her children escaping a domestic violence situation, the presence of family members enabled her to deal with her abusive partner and ensure her safety. ‘It was not the police, FAYS, or any policy that helped me; it was the family and friends who have been the stop gap for my safety. I believe we were more at risk in another town, where we wouldn’t have support’ (Liddicoat 2004, p. 52).

For others, it was being near others in a similar situation which provided a supportive environment that as important. As a woman in transitional housing commented:

I had friends living in the other three units, and these friends showed me this was the path to take. The weekly group meeting we had with the workers was most helpful – we learnt how to relate to each other in this group. Here we were not really on our own but we were independent – each in our own house. We could test out our relationships – in a safe place.3

Such informal support can have a notable influence on people who are attempting to resolve their homelessness. For example, a woman in regional South Australia required to the assistance of a friend or family member to drive to the nearest SAAP agency on a regular basis: ‘I know I wouldn’t have been as motivated or determined without the supports. If I didn’t have someone to drive me 100km to get the services’ (Liddicoat 2004, p. 53).

Conversely, for one woman, ‘Living alone just gets too much, you just get too lonely. You feel like you just don’t care’. Another explained that, without other family or social networks, ‘it was easy to slip into isolated and lonely living and thinking that no one cared’.4

From the above quotes it is evident that the support of others is paramount in helping to resolve people’s homelessness. In particular, informal support networks appear to be an important key to re-establishing independence and links with the wider community.

Exit points and affordable housing

Throughout the two studies the difficulties of housing affordability were a common theme. For example, a single mother living in SAAP accommodation identified the problems of accessing both private rental and housing trust rental: ‘I couldn’t get private rental; they expect you to have a job or have other income; they don’t like you to be on a benefit’; ‘I had my name on the housing trust list, but that had been there for 8 years’ (Liddicoat 2004, p. 57).

These concerns where echoed by a woman in country South Australia who opted for private rental over housing trust accommodation despite the extra cost: ‘The public waiting list in our home town is horrendous, so I chose to go into private rental’ (Liddicoat 2004, p. 52).

A woman in a rural area told of a problem experienced by many SAAP clients but exacerbated in a small town: ‘Once the private rental agencies know you have used SAAP services they won’t look at you’ (Liddicoat 2004, p. 56).

The plight of many people attempting to move into an independent tenancy was summed up by a woman in such a situation: ‘It’s really hard to find accommodation, there’s not many places at all...If there’s a lack of accommodation where are you? You’re back on the street’.3

The implications for policy are clear. Given that SAAP is intended to assist clients move into independent tenancy, the difficulty clients experience accessing affordable housing post-SAAP is of great concern. The waiting times associated with public housing force many into the less affordable, less sustainable private sector which may place them at risk of once again becoming homeless.

Conclusion

The examples of the voice of women who were homeless in the above are representative, although they are only a snapshot of what was said in the research to which we have referred. But when ‘through-puts’ and ‘outcomes’ are expected of agencies, the women interviewed emphasised that time was important. In addition, support was also important. It was, of course, the informal networks to which the women were referring and not necessarily the ‘case management’ which so appeals to policy makers. Finally, the women emphasised the need for exit points, the very thing that makes much of the time spent in SAAP necessary and which complicates and confounds if not sabotages the Program.

There may seem to be a tension in all this. If there is a need for more time to deal with issues systematically, to acknowledge the consequences of the past and address them, then why are exit points so important? Surely clients could stay in SAAP. But it is not only the past which is the problem; it is that clients do not see a future – particularly if any available public housing is away from informal networks and has no blinds and heating and cooling (where necessary), and rent in the private sector is too expensive to sustain a viable independent tenancy.

Footnotes

1. In a short article such as this, it was deemed unnecessary to assign pseudonyms to the participants. However, the authors are aware of the possibility that the quotes used may appear impersonal without name attached to them.

2. These two quotes originate from the research conducted at the SAAP agency. As a consultant to the research, Dr Fopp had access to the research notes.

3. Catherine House research.

4. Catherine House research.

5. Catherine House research.

References


