

CHAPTER 2

EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Surveys on the extent of the problem of homeless youth are completely unreliable. The Committee, however, has had to use this material as no other data is available. Consequently it has had to be particularly cautious when drawing conclusions.

Throughout the course of the public hearings, the Committee repeatedly asked witnesses for hard data on the extent of youth homelessness within a particular region or state. At best, most witnesses could only provide data relevant to their own organisation. Any attempt to give a wider account relied almost exclusively on anecdotal evidence and impressions gained from working with homeless youth within their region. The Committee is not critical of witnesses because of this, but the situation would seem to highlight a most unsatisfactory basis on which policy decisions have been made in this area.

Table 2.1: Summary of Surveys on Homeless Youth

<i>Author</i>	<i>Details of survey</i>	<i>Age breakdown</i>			<i>Conclusions of survey</i>
			<i>M%</i>	<i>F%</i>	
Victorian Consultative Committee on Social Development (V.C.C.S.D.) Victoria	A questionnaire was posted (and in some cases an interview was conducted) to a number of agencies, mostly in the Melbourne metropolitan area, of whom 123 responded. The survey was for the period 13 November 1978 to 3 December 1978	12-14 15-16 17-18 19-20 21-25	7.8 24.9 19.5 20.7 27.1	5.7 20.8 34.6 11.0 17.9	These figures represent a total of 300 requests per week, equivalent to 15 000 homeless youths per year
		Total No.: 897			
		M, F%			
Adelaide Council to Homeless Persons, S.A.	A questionnaire was posted to 31 metropolitan agencies, of whom nine responded. The survey was for the the period 3 to 9 December 1979	12-14 15-16 17-18 19-20 21-25	9.1 11.8 16.4 8.2 19.1		Projected to an annual level, between 5 500 and 6 000 young people are in need of housing assistance
		no response 35.4			
		Total No.: 110			
South Australian Council of Social Service S.A.	A questionnaire (with follow-up discussions) was posted to approximately 132 metropolitan agencies, of whom 52 responded. The survey was for the period 8 to 21 March 1980	<14 14-16 17-18 19-20 21-25	9.3 19.1 27.0 19.5 25.1	10.2 38.3 22.7 15.6 13.2	This represents a total equivalent of 9 000 young people seeking housing assistance each year

Age breakdown

<i>Author</i>	<i>Details of survey</i>	<i>M%</i>		<i>F%</i>	<i>Conclusions of survey</i>
Total No.: 362					
Department of Social Security, Cairns, Qld	Questionnaires were personally delivered to agencies in Cairns catering for the homeless of all ages. 17 agencies responded. The survey was for the period 21 January 1980 to 3 February 1980	<16	18.0	18.0	This represents about 1 000 young people per year
		16-20	41.0	35.0	
		21-25	41.0	47.0	
Total No.: 112 (39 under 26 yrs)					
M, F%					
Department of Community Welfare, Townsville College of Advanced Education, Qld	Questionnaires were personally delivered to 20 agencies in Townsville catering for the homeless of all ages. The survey was for the period 17 April 1979 to 14 May 1979	0-14	0.0		This represents about 600 young people per year
		15-19	37.0		
		20-24	63.0		
Total No.: 160 (46 under 25 yrs)					
North Brisbane College of Advanced Education, Qld	47 agencies in Brisbane were asked by phone to complete a questionnaire. 25 agencies, catering for the homeless of all ages, responded. The survey was for the period 18 to 31 August 1980	<18	37.0	52.0	This represents about 2 000 young people per year
		18-24	63.0	48.0	
Total No.: 182 (75 under 25 yrs)					
M, F%					
New South Wales Homeless Persons Advisory Committee, N.S.W.	A questionnaire was posted to 119 centres, of whom 83 agencies, catering for the homeless of all ages throughout New South Wales, responded. The survey was for the period 23 to 29 March 1981	<15	13.5		
		16-18	40.9		
		19-25	45.6		
No.: 363 daily					
<i>Numbers by State</i>					
National Committee for Evaluation of the Youth Services Scheme	Data on number of requests for emergency accommodation was collected from services throughout Australia funded under the YSP. The survey was for the 12 month period 1 October 1980 to 30 September 1981	N.S.W.	4 870		This represents about 12 304 young people per year throughout Australia
		Vic.	3 407		
		Qld	1 874		
		Tas.	1 575		
		S.A.	331		
		N.T.	58		
		A.C.T.	189		

Surveys

A number of the available surveys have attempted to gauge the extent of the homeless youth population either within the local region, or at a broader level through extrapolation. Because of methodology problems, however, they are either invalid or unreliable. The major problems shared by these surveys are:

- double or multiple counting;
- restricted numbers in survey samples (which raises doubts as to how representative the sample is and how meaningful any extrapolation from the sample to the population will be);
- relatively short periods over which the surveys were conducted;
- failure to take account of homeless youth not using agencies or shelters;
- failure to include all agencies or shelters in the area concerned.

One of these surveys is by the Victorian Consultative Committee on Social Development. This Committee found over a three week period in 1978 that 897 requests of assistance were received from homeless youths at 123 agencies in metropolitan Melbourne.¹ Of these, 518 (58 per cent) were from males and 379 (42 per cent) from females.² The study comments that 'this figure represents a total of 300 requests per week at least, equivalent to 15 000 homeless youths per year'.³

A similar study was conducted during a two-week period in March 1980 by the South Australian Council of Social Service Inc. for metropolitan Adelaide. Questionnaires were sent to 132 agencies of whom 52 responded (that is, about 40 per cent).⁴ The study comments that 'while the level of non-response appears high, it is likely that a majority of those non-respondents received no request for housing assistance during the survey period'.⁵

The survey found that 362 young people between the ages of 12 and 25 sought accommodation from the agencies who responded.⁶ They comment that 'this figure represents a total equivalent in excess of 9000 young people seeking housing assistance each year'.⁷ Of these 362 requests, 201 (55.5 per cent) were from males and 161 (44.5 per cent) from females.⁸

Another Adelaide study was conducted by the South Australian Council to Homeless Persons in December 1979. They sent questionnaires to 31 agencies of whom only nine replied.⁹ The survey found that over a two-week period, 110 people (80 males and 30 females) between the ages of 12 and 25 sought accommodation in the nine agencies that responded.¹⁰ The survey commented that 'projected to an annual level, a minimum of between 5500 and 6000 young people are in need of housing assistance in metropolitan Adelaide'.¹¹

A study of the homeless of all ages was conducted by the Cairns Co-ordinating Committee for Homeless Persons in June 1979. Over a two-week period, 17 agencies completed a questionnaire about the people requesting assistance.¹² A total of 112 people of all ages asked for help. Of these, 39 were under 26 years of age (22 male, 17 female).¹³ If a similar extrapolation is conducted on this survey as was done on the previous studies, this would mean that about 1000 young people are homeless per year in Cairns.¹⁴

In Townsville a study into the need for emergency accommodation was conducted over a four-week period by the Department of Community Welfare, Townsville College of Advanced Education. Twenty agencies who catered for homeless people of all ages were surveyed.¹⁵ Questionnaires were used to collect the data. It was found that a

total of 160 people approached the agencies for help.¹⁶ Of these 46 were under 25 years of age.¹⁷ If this figure is extrapolated it means that about 600 young people per year are homeless in Townsville.¹⁸

Students in Community Welfare at the North Brisbane College of Advanced Education conducted a survey of homeless people of all ages in Brisbane in August 1980. Altogether 47 were approached, of whom 25 completed the questionnaire.¹⁹ It was found that over a two week period a total of 182 people approached the agencies for accommodation.²⁰ Of these 75 were under 25 years of age (46 male 29 female).²¹ If this figure is extrapolated it means that about 2000 young people per year are homeless in Brisbane.

A recent survey was conducted by the former New South Wales Homeless Persons Advisory Committee. The questionnaire used in this survey was different from those cited above and is therefore not comparable. It asked for the number of people accommodated on each day of the week rather than the number who approached the agency over a certain period. The study found that on average 363 youths were accommodated in 83 agencies throughout New South Wales during the week 23 to 29 March 1981.²²

The only national surveys which have examined homelessness and homeless youth have been undertaken by the Department of Social Security. One of these (called 'A Place of Dignity') used a random sample to enable it to determine the typical characteristics of homeless youth. This type of sample, however, does not enable one to determine extent. Another national survey involved the collection of data from the Youth Services Scheme. It provides the most comprehensive information on extent of all the available data, but is also affected by the survey limitations listed above. Hence, as with the other surveys, it cannot be accepted as a valid estimate of extent.

The National Committee for Evaluation of the Youth Services Scheme commented in its report that:

'This data represents the largest and most detailed sample of homeless youth to be collected to date. It is adequate to allow for identification of major characteristics of users and trends in the nature of youth homelessness. However, there are limitations in this data.

The major lesson learned during the collection period is that data on this sensitive issue is extraordinarily difficult to collect. The data collection for the evaluation was very ambitious, and not all plans were fully realised. Data, particularly on demand patterns and occupancy, is patchy in some States, and not all agencies have consistently provided records of all attendances. Agency staff, in the main working long hours, do not put a high priority on data collection and resources available to departments for follow-up were extremely limited.

This data can only be regarded as a sample of the total homeless youth population because data could only be collected from agencies funded under this Scheme. Further, the impossibility of eliminating double counting means that it is not possible to determine an estimate of the size of the total homeless youth population from this data.²³

Table 2.2 sets out the number of requests made in each state, over the 12 month period 1 October 1980 to 30 September 1981, for emergency accommodation services funded under the Youth Services Scheme.

Table 2.2: Youth Services Program—Requests for Emergency Accommodation—1 October 1980 to 30 September 1981

<i>N.S.W.</i>	<i>Vic.</i>	<i>Qld</i>	<i>Tas.</i>	<i>S.A.</i>	<i>W.A.</i>	<i>N.T.</i>	<i>A.C.T.</i>	<i>Total</i>
4 870	3 407	1 874	1 575	331	No data supplied	58	189	12 304

For Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory data was collected only for the period 1.4.81–30.9.81. The data is incomplete in all States. South Australian services have noted that workers are not covering services 24 hours, and that referral agencies do not make referrals when they are aware that services are at capacity.

Source: Commonwealth Department of Social Security.

Table 2.2 reveals that over 12 months, 12304 requests were received for emergency accommodation. New South Wales has the largest number of requests followed by Victoria. Tasmania has a very high number considering its small population. It is almost four times the number of requests per head of population for New South Wales or Victoria. Part of this can be accounted for by the apparent mobility of homeless youth who move from the more populous states of New South Wales and Victoria to Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia.

Conclusion

So unreliable are the statistics available on the extent of youth homelessness that the Committee was hesitant to refer to them at all. However, as these are the only estimates available on this aspect of youth homelessness the Committee felt obliged to present them in its report for the information of the reader. Until such time as a properly conducted survey is undertaken, with adequate supervision and controls, there will continue to be conjecture as to the actual extent of the problem and whether or not the problem is increasing.

Endnotes

1. Transcript of evidence, p. 543.
2. Transcript of evidence, p. 543.
3. Transcript of evidence, p. 543.
4. Transcript of evidence, pp. 3267, 3270.
5. Transcript of evidence, p. 3267.
6. Transcript of evidence, p. 3270.
7. Transcript of evidence, p. 3270.
8. Transcript of evidence, p. 3270.
9. Committee exhibit number 3.
10. Committee exhibit number 3.
11. Committee exhibit number 3.
12. Committee exhibit number 7.
13. Committee exhibit number 7.
14. Committee exhibit number 7.
15. Committee exhibit number 10.
16. Committee exhibit number 10.
17. Committee exhibit number 10.
18. Committee exhibit number 10.
19. A Survey of Homelessness, Brisbane, August 1980, p. 1.
20. A Survey of Homelessness, Brisbane, August 1980, p. 7.
21. A Survey of Homelessness, Brisbane, August 1980, p. 4.
22. Homeless Youth --- A Discussion Paper---N.S.W. Homeless Persons Advisory Committee, July 1981, p. 33.
23. Supplementary evidence supplied by Commonwealth Department of Social Security.