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Double jeopardy : a socio-demographic profile of homeless jobseekers aged 18-35

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Double Jeopardy: A Socio-demographic Profile of Homeless Jobseekers Aged 18-35

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Being either homeless or unemployed jeopardises people's wellbeing. Experiencing both together is a form of double jeopardy: homelessness and unemployment reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. Being homeless makes it difficult to get and keep a job; and being unemployed makes it difficult to secure suitable housing. Breaking that cycle is no easy matter. Homeless jobseekers face complex barriers to establishing themselves with sustainable homes and jobs. Governments and communities offer a range of assistance to people facing these problems. However, many of the agencies delivering these services are keen to find better ways of supporting homeless jobseekers (Campbell et al 2003; Horn 2004).

This article reports on socio-demographic research that was undertaken as part of a broader project to improve service delivery to homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 years (Grace et al 2005). The broader project, known as YP⁴, is a randomised controlled trial of joined up services and programs for young homeless jobseekers. YP⁴ is an initiative of four organisations: Hanover Welfare Services, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne Citymission and Loddon Mallee Housing Services. This paper does not provide detailed information about the YP⁴ trial, rather it reports on socio-demographic research undertaken to set the context in which YP⁴ operates. For further details regarding YP⁴ please see Horn (2004).

When we set out to prepare a socio-demographic profile of homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 years, we found two main ways to count homelessness and at least two ways to quantify unemployment. Obtaining data and assessing its quality was far from easy, and this research was an exercise in frustration and perseverance. In this article we discuss the complexities of counting homelessness and unemployment, and the educated

guesswork involved in estimating numbers of homeless jobseekers. We present a tentative socio-demographic profile; and we make suggestions regarding better access to data in the future.

Literature review

In this review, we start with definitions and ways of counting homelessness, then move on to definitions and ways of counting unemployment. To the best of our knowledge no-one has previously combined these two 'jeopardies' in an attempt to profile homeless jobseekers.

Homelessness

The Burdekin Report (HREOC 1989) marked the beginning of a new era of public awareness of homelessness in Australia. Since that time, we have seen the development of the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) with services established in many areas of Australia; excellent SAAP data collection and reporting by the National Data Collection Agency (NDCA); convergence of definitions of homelessness; increased understanding of homelessness (Council to Homeless Persons nd); and serious attempts within the 1996 and 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics census collections to enumerate homeless people (Chamberlain 1999; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2004, 2003).

Definitions of homelessness have developed and converged over the past decade such that there is now considerable agreement that people are homeless if they lack access to safe and secure housing which meets community standards. Current debate centres on the inclusion of people who are insecurely accommodated in caravan parks (Chamberlain 2005b; Scarr 2005). Chamberlain (1999) provides an excellent discussion of definitions of homelessness (see also Council to Homeless Persons nd for definitions).

Chamberlain (1999:43) states that '[t]here can be no meaningful public debate about the best policy responses to assist homeless people, unless there is reliable information on the number of homeless people in the community.' His article provides an account of the work undertaken with the ABS in 1996 to count homeless Australians; and refinements to the

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DOUBLE JEOPARDY: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF HOMELESS JOBSEEKERS AGED 18-35

procedures for the 2001 census. The ABS went to extraordinary lengths to count homeless persons in 2001 (following Chamberlain 1999), and has published detailed reports on numbers, gender, age and location of homeless people (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003, 2004). As Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2004) have published homelessness rates for different small areas in Victoria, it is possible to estimate numbers of homeless persons right down to postcode level.

Chamberlain (1999) explains that there are two ways of counting homelessness: 'point-in-time' and 'cumulative annual totals'. 'Point-in-time' figures are counts such as the census, that count people who are homeless on one particular night. 'Cumulative annual totals' are used by service agencies to count the number of people who become homeless over a given 12-month period. While a count such as the census can aspire to full coverage, no Australian agency has contact with all persons who become homeless during a year. This means that we currently have no reliable cumulative annual totals. The program with arguably the greatest coverage and the most sophisticated data collection is SAAP. The NDCA that has responsibility for SAAP data is particularly thorough and diligent in their data collection. However, not all of Australia's homeless people access SAAP services, and when it comes to moving from SAAP cumulative annual totals to estimates for the broader population, considerable guesswork is involved. Chamberlain (2005a) suggests that for every homeless person who accesses SAAP services during a given year, there are between one and two who do not. This means that cumulative annual estimates fall within a range rather than being reasonably quantified as a number. For example, if 15,000 persons access a SAAP service over a year, the cumulative annual total of people in similar circumstances in the broader population could be expressed as 'between 30,000 and 45,000'.

Unemployment

In common usage, the idea of unemployment may include people who are not actively seeking employment, and those who receive income support such as Disability Support Pension or Parenting Payment, but would prefer employment. The term 'joblessness' is often used to cover this broadly defined group. Publicly available data regarding employment status defines unemployment more narrowly.

The ABS (2004: Chapter 6) uses the international definition of unemployment as agreed during the Thirteenth International Conference of Labour Statistics 1982. To meet this narrower definition, 'unemployed' people must be without paid work; actively seeking paid work; and currently available for paid work. The ABS classifies a person who worked for one hour or more during the survey reference period as employed, and this definition is criticised for not acknowledging underemployment,

discouraged jobseekers or those who are marginally attached to the labour force (although the ABS publishes other statistics relevant to these issues).

For the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), 'unemployed' people are those in receipt of either Newstart Allowance or Youth Allowance (other) (DEWR 2005).

Homeless jobseekers

Estimating numbers of homeless jobseekers presents a challenge, as published census data does not include employment status for individuals who are homeless or insecurely housed. The National Homelessness Strategy (CACH 2003) uses a figure of 40 per cent unemployment for homeless Australians aged 18-35. However, this is well above the figure of 28.4 per cent cited in the SAAP annual report (AIHW 2005). It seems that 40 per cent is a more inclusive figure, counting some students, people employed part-time, and those on Parenting and Disability Support Payments. Clearly these people could be seen as 'jobseekers', but are not 'unemployed' according to the ABS and DEWR definitions.

In the research for this article, we used an inclusive estimate of 40 per cent unemployment among homeless persons aged 18-35, following the National Homelessness Strategy (CACH 2003) and previous work undertaken for the YP⁴ trial (Campbell et al 2003; Horn 2004).

Methodology

The research reported in this article aimed to produce a socio-demographic profile of homeless jobseekers aged 18-35. The research team sought data to make both point-in-time and annual cumulative estimates of homeless jobseekers since, as Chamberlain (1999) points out, both are important for gaining an overall picture that is useful for policy and planning purposes.

As with the preparation of any sub-group socio-demographic profile, we commenced by identifying the broader population. We used published ABS 2001 census data for the total Australian population, and publicly available data from the AusStats website to calculate the total number of persons aged 18-35 years in Australia and the proportion they represent of the total population. We then used the ABS reports on homeless Australians as a basis for estimating numbers of homeless Australians aged 18-35 years (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2004, 2003). For all of our calculations, we factored up the published 2001 census figures in order to include homeless caravan park residents. The published age groups did not coincide with our target group. From published figures, we obtained the number of homeless Australians aged 19-34.

DOUBLE JEOPARDY: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF HOMELESS JOBSEEKERS AGED 18-35

We then examined the homelessness rates for age groups above and below our target group, and decided that using the average homelessness rate for 19-34 year-olds and applying it to the Australian population cohorts of persons aged 18 and 35 would give us a credible estimate. We repeated this procedure for the State of Victoria.

In order to estimate numbers of homeless persons in 2005, we used projections for the Australian population combined with information about numbers of homeless people in 1996 and 2001. The estimate that 99,900 Australians were homeless in 2001 is 5,404 fewer than the 105,304 estimated in the 1996 census. This reduction is partly because of a change in the definition of 'improvised shelter' (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003). The number of improvised dwellings in Indigenous communities declined from 8,727 in 1996 to 823 in 2001. If the same definition had been used in 1996, the number of homeless persons would have been more like 97,400, a homelessness rate of 0.0053 (53 per 10,000). The comparable rate for June 2001 is 0.0051 (51 per 10,000). This reduction in the rate does not establish a trend. However, in order to make a conservative estimate for 2005, we have assumed a downward trend in homelessness and used a base rate of 0.0049 (49 per 10,000) of the total projected Australian population at June 2005. Noting that both our 2001 and 2005 estimates do not include homeless caravan park dwellers, and that including these people would add 22,868 persons to these totals (CHP nd), we then factored the base rate up to include caravan park dwellers, giving a new rate of 0.0061 (61 per 10,000).

We calculated that, in 2001, persons aged 18-35 accounted for 30.1 per cent of Australia's total homeless population, and we used this proportion to estimate the number of homeless 18-35 year olds in 2005. We repeated this procedure for the State of Victoria, using relevant population projections and homelessness rates. In Victoria, the proportion of total homeless persons in the age group 18-35 in 2001 was 34 per cent, and we used this figure for our Victorian projection. Once again, we factored up all of our estimates to include homeless caravan park dwellers.

Centrelink, which administers Newstart and Youth Allowances, is potentially a good source of data regarding homeless jobseekers, but their administrative data set is not structured to identify homeless persons (Scarr 2005). Likewise, DEWR has a data set based on the Jobseeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) that includes two questions designed to identify housing insecurity. However Parkinson and Horn (2002) found the JSCI to be an unreliable identifier of homelessness among jobseekers (at only 22 per cent accuracy). We understand that changes have since been made to increase the accuracy of these data, and follow-up research would be useful to establish the current reliability of the JSCI as an indicator of homelessness.

Findings

According to ABS population estimates for June 2005, Australia's population was 20,414,152 persons, including 5,192,872 aged 18 - 35 years (25.4 per cent). For both the whole population and persons aged 18-35, numbers of males and females were approximately equal.

Table 1: Australia's population of persons aged 18 - 35 years

| | Persons | Males | Females |
|-------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Australia's total population | 20,414,152 | 10,131,610 (49.6%) | 10,282,542 (50.4%) |
| Australia's population aged 18 - 35 | 5,192,872 | 2,605,418 (50.2%) | 2,587,454 (49.8%) |

Point-in-time estimates: homelessness in Australia

On census night 2001, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2003) estimate that approximately 99,900 Australians were homeless. Figure 1 includes the estimated 22,868 marginal residents of caravan parks, bringing the number of homeless Australians to 122,768. Note that 'friends and family' refers to homeless people who are temporarily accommodated with friends and family.

Figure 1: Australia's homeless population census night 2001



Source: Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2003:2), modified to include caravan parks

We estimate that there were approximately 36,953 homeless 18 - 35 year olds (30.1 per cent) in June 2001. Given that persons aged 18-35 years were 25.4 per cent of Australia's total population in 2001, this age group is clearly over-represented among homeless people.

DOUBLE JEOPARDY: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF HOMELESS JOBSEEKERS AGED 18-35

Using ABS population projections as at June 2005 and multiplying by the anticipated homelessness rate of 0.0061 (61 per 10,000) gives an estimate of 124,526 homeless Australians. Of these individuals, we estimate that approximately 37,482 or 30.1 per cent are aged 18 - 35 years. We have applied Chamberlain and MacKenzie's (2003) male and female ratio to this estimate. Using Australia's National Homelessness Strategy (CACH 2003:17) figure of 40 per cent unemployment, we estimate that 14,448 Australians aged 18-35 are both homeless and seeking employment.

Table 2: Estimated homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 in Australia as at June 2005

| | Persons | Males (%) | Females (%) |
|--|---------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Homeless Australians | 124,526 | 72,225 (58.0%) | 52,301 (42.0%) |
| Homeless Australians aged 18-35 | 37,482 | 21,740 (58.0%) | 15,742 (42.0%) |
| Homeless Australian jobseekers aged 18-35 | 14,993 | 8,696 (58.0%) | 6,297 (42.0%) |

Point-in-time estimates: homelessness in Victoria

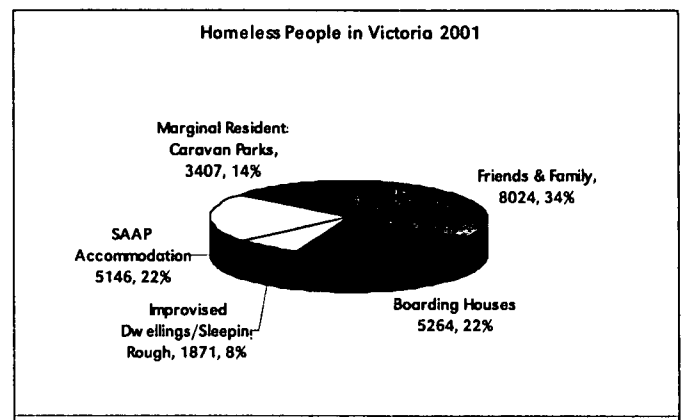
The ABS estimates Victoria's population to be 5,016,614 as at June 2005. Of these individuals, 1,295,055 (or 25.8 per cent) are aged 18 - 35 years. As with the Australian population, numbers of males and females are about the same.

Table 3: Victoria's population of persons aged 18 - 35 years

| | Persons | Males (%) | Females (%) |
|---|-----------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Victoria's total population | 5,016,614 | 2,473,244 (49.3%) | 2,543,370 (50.7%) |
| Victoria's population aged 18-35 | 1,295,055 | 646,514 (49.9%) | 648,541 (50.1%) |

On census night 2001, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2003) calculated that approximately 20,305 Victorians were homeless. Figure 2 includes a further 3,407 marginal residents of caravan parks (Chamberlain 2005b).

Figure 2: Victoria's homeless population census night 2001



Source: Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2004), modified to include caravan parks

Of the 23,712 Victorians who were homeless on the night of the 2001 census, we estimate that approximately 8,062 or 34 per cent were aged 18 - 35. With persons aged 18 - 35 years representing 25.8 per cent of Victoria's total population, this group is clearly over-represented among people experiencing homelessness.

According to ABS population projections, Victoria's population in 2005 would be 5,016,614. At the time of the 2001 Census, Victoria had a lower rate of homelessness (0.0043 or 43 per 10,000) than the national rate of 0.0049 (49 per 10,000). For our estimates, as detailed above for Australia, we have assumed a downward trend to a rate of 0.0041 (41 per 10,000). However, we have then factored up this estimate to include marginal residents of caravan parks as discussed above, giving an estimated Victorian 2005 homelessness rate of 0.0049 (49 per 10,000). We have applied Chamberlain and MacKenzie's (2004) male to female proportions to our estimate.

Table 4: Estimated homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 in Victoria as at June 2005

| | Persons | Males (%) | Females (%) |
|---------------------------------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Homeless Victorians | 24,581 | 13,520 (55%) | 11,061 (45%) |
| Homeless Victorians aged 18-35 | 8,358 | 4,597 (55%) | 3,761 (45%) |

In June 2005 there would be approximately 24,581 homeless people living in Victoria. Of these individuals, we estimate that 8,358 or 34 per cent are aged 18 - 35. Using Australia's National Homelessness Strategy (CACH 2003:17) figure of 40

DOUBLE JEOPARDY: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF HOMELESS JOBSEEKERS AGED 18-35

per cent unemployment, we estimate that 3,343 Victorians aged 18-35 are both homeless and seeking employment (see Table 4).

Table 5 below summarises point-in time estimates for Australian and Victorian homeless jobseekers relative to the broader population.

Table 5: Australian and Victorian homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 years

| | Australia | Victoria |
|--------------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| Total population | 20,414,152 | 5,016,614 |
| Homeless population | 124,526 | 24,581 |
| Population aged 18-35 | 5,192,872 | 1,295,055 |
| Homeless population aged 18-35 | 37,482 | 8,358 |
| Homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 years | 14,993 | 3,343 |



Annual estimates: homeless jobseekers in Australia and Victoria

As detailed above, annual homelessness calculations rely on SAAP usage data. These data are published as both persons and support periods. We have used persons to avoid double counting. In 2003-4, we estimate that 52,560 persons aged 18-35 used SAAP services in Australia. If between one and two homeless people do not use SAAP services for every one who does, then annual homeless persons aged 18-35 would be between 105,120 and 159,273. Assuming that 40 per cent of these people are unemployed, then between 42,048 and 63,709 persons aged 18-35 will be both homeless and unemployed in Australia annually.

In 2003-4, we estimate that 19,154 persons aged 18-35 used SAAP services in Victoria (Australian Institute of Health and

Welfare 2005: Table 9.4). Using the assumption above, annual homelessness in Victoria for persons aged 18-35 is between 38,308 and 58,042. Assuming that 40 per cent of these people are unemployed, then between 15,323 and 23,217 persons aged 18-35 will be both homeless and unemployed in Victoria annually. According to Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2004), Victoria has 0.2 or one fifth of Australia's homeless population. However, Victoria has more like one-third of Australia's SAAP usage. We understand this is because Victorian service development has been more active than in other states, particularly in relation to services for women and children. The discrepancy between the proportion of homeless persons and proportion of SAAP usage means that estimates of annual Victorian homelessness using SAAP data may be high.

Table 6: Estimated annual homeless jobseekers, based on SAAP usage data 2003-04, Australia and Victoria

| | Annual SAAP usage, persons aged 18-35 | Estimated annual homelessness, persons aged 18-35 | Estimated annual homeless and unemployed aged 18-35 |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Australia | 52,560 | 105,120 - 159,273 | 42,048 - 63,709 |
| Victoria | 19,154 | 38,308 - 58,042 | 15,323 - 23,217 |

Victoria's annual homelessness for persons aged 18-35 is between 15,323 and 23,217. This compares with a point-in-time figure of 3,343.

Characteristics of young homeless jobseekers

There is no data set that includes detailed characteristics of young homeless jobseekers. We obtained partial, limited information from:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census
- National Data Collection Agency SAAP Statistical Supplement
- Department of Workplace Relations (DEWR)

ABS data covered only 54.9 per cent of homeless people, and did not include people in SAAP accommodation. SAAP data covers between one-third and one-half of homeless people. Similar limitations apply to the DEWR data. Parkinson and Horn (2002) found that only 22 per cent of Centrelink files accurately recorded instability of residence. We understand that improvements have recently been made to Centrelink/DEWR data derived from the Jobseeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) and a further study would be useful in relation to its accuracy.

DOUBLE JEOPARDY: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF HOMELESS JOBSEEKERS AGED 18-35

Table 7: Summary of homeless jobseeker characteristics compared with Australian population

| | Australian population aged 18-35 (or nearest available age group) | Homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 |
|---|---|--------------------------------|
| Males | 50.2% | 59.0% |
| Females | 49.8% | 41.0% |
| ATSI | 2.7% | 12.8% to 17% |
| Highest education level attained | 83% Year 12 or above | 60% Year 11 or below |
| Ex-offender status | No stats located | 13.7% |

Gender

Although men make up 50 per cent of the Australian population aged 18-35, they account for approximately 59 per cent of homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 according to information obtained from the NDCA and DEWR. However the ABS indicates that this figure could be as high as 69.4 per cent. It is clear that men are considerably over-represented among Australia's young homeless jobseekers.

Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander

According to DEWR, of the 53,703 homeless Australians aged 18 - 35 who have an active JSCI score, 6,870 (12.8 per cent) identify as being either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The NDCA reported an even higher figure of 17 per cent indigenous SAAP clients in 2003 - 2004.

In Victoria these figures were much lower, with DEWR and the NDCA estimating 4.1 per cent and 4.4 per cent of Indigenous clients respectively.

According to the 2001 Census, 2.7 per cent of Australians and 0.6 per cent of Victorians aged 18-35 are indigenous. It is therefore apparent that Indigenous people are dramatically over-represented among young homeless jobseekers at both an Australian and Victorian level.

Highest Education Level Obtained

According to both DEWR and the ABS, approximately 60 per cent of Australia's young homeless jobseekers have obtained a highest education level of Year 11 or below. In contrast in the broader population 83 per cent of young people have completed Year 12 or a post-school qualification (Long 2005).

Ex-offender status

According to DEWR, of the 85,538 homeless individuals aged 18 - 35 who have an active JSCI score, 11,694 (13.7 per cent) have been identified as ex-offenders.

Conclusion

This article has presented a socio-demographic profile of homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 years in Australia and Victoria. Throughout, we have drawn attention to the educated guesswork involved in preparing this profile, and emphasised that these are estimates only, open to future revision as more information becomes available.

In conducting this research we have been impressed by and have drawn heavily upon previous work by the ABS, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (Chamberlain 1999; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003, 2004) and Horn (2004). We have benefited from advice from these colleagues, and those listed in the acknowledgements section of our report (Grace et al 2005).

Following the work of colleagues, we have presented point-in-time estimates and annual estimates for homeless jobseekers aged 18-35 in Australia and Victoria. We have discussed the difficulty of estimating annual homelessness in Australia on the basis of SAAP service usage data, because of the lack of clarity about the relationship between the number of SAAP users and total homelessness. In the absence of an accepted formula, we have taken Chris Chamberlain's advice that for every homeless person who uses SAAP services there are one to two homeless people who do not. Thus we have presented annual estimates as ranges rather than numbers. Working with these estimates is further complicated by evidence that while Victoria has about one-fifth of Australia's homeless people, it has about one-third of Australia's SAAP usage.

Estimating unemployment among homeless people has also proved difficult, with ABS publications not including this information. SAAP annual reports include employment status, but these reports do not cover all homeless people. The National Homelessness Strategy uses a figure of 40 per cent unemployment for homeless people aged 18-35, but it seems to us that this figure would include all people who are seeking more paid employment, rather than the more narrowly defined 'unemployed' who are eligible for Newstart Allowance or Youth Allowance (other).

We have presented some characteristics of homeless jobseekers aged 18-35, based on data that we obtained, but which are not readily available publicly. The data providers warn that these data are not as complete and reliable as they would like.

DOUBLE JEOPARDY: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF HOMELESS JOBSEEKERS AGED 18-35

Our experience of completing this research has demonstrated that people wishing to improve services for homeless jobseekers face many barriers and delays when attempting to access the data required for service planning. We would strongly advise colleagues to allow much more time and resources than would initially appear reasonable for the preparation of material of this type. Clearly a high level Commonwealth Government data clearinghouse would be very useful for researchers and those planning services, particularly if such a clearinghouse could facilitate access to administrative data sets rather than simply directing people to statistics already in the public realm.

This research focussed on the double jeopardy of homelessness and unemployment. Recent advances in ABS census enumeration of homelessness makes this kind of research possible. We have not examined the feasibility of similarly profiling other groups with complex and intersecting needs, such as for example homelessness and mental illness. However, our methodology demonstrates how such work could be undertaken, with a combination of ABS data, specialised service data, and educated guesswork. Governments sometimes resist calls for funding on the basis that service demand is a bottomless pit. This research indicates that far from being a bottomless pit, the numbers of homeless jobseekers are finite and it is possible to estimate demand and plan services.

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