

COUNCIL TO HOMELESS PERSONS



“Issues in Estimating the Number of Homeless in Australia: A paper to inform a review of *Counting the Homeless* methodology”

Response by the Council to Homeless Persons

The Council to Homeless Persons welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ paper *Issues in Estimating the Number of Homeless in Australia*.

About the Council to Homeless Persons

Established in 1972, the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak Victorian body representing individuals and organisations with a stake or interest in homelessness.

Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development. We do this through:

- Promoting individual and systemic advocacy
- Promoting consumer participation
- Developing strategic relationships, partnerships and alliances to ensure the interest and issues of homeless people are addressed across all sector
- Educating the wider community on issues of homelessness
- Leading state and national policy development
- Representing and assisting organisations on sector related issues
- Promoting, facilitating and disseminating research, evaluation and continuous improvement in collaboration with others

CHP also incorporates the Homelessness Advocacy Service (HAS), which provides individual advocacy to homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, secondary consultation, training and consumer participation through the Peer Education Support Program (PESP). PESP is a consumer group, trained and supported to provide input into sector practice, community and government education and policy development relating to homelessness.

Counting the Homeless

The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) supports any improvements in the data collection and methodology relating to providing accurate measurements of the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in Australia. We believe reliable and timely data is essential to adequately understand the nature of homelessness and to develop appropriate responses.

Data provision and utilization informs our policy and program development and serves to evaluate the success of innovations to address homelessness.

The most thorough data set, quoted throughout National homelessness literature, is the Chamberlain and MacKenzie *Counting the Homeless* data. For those in the homelessness and housing support sector, the data provided by *Counting the Homeless* is the most rigorous and specialized count of people experiencing a broad range of types of homelessness in Australia.

Chamberlain and MacKenzie's *Counting the Homeless* methodology has resulted, across Australia, in the adoption of a cultural definition of homelessness. It is CHP's belief that this is testament to the researchers' understanding of the varied nature of homelessness and the sector.

Initial comments about the *Estimating the Number of Homeless in Australia* paper

CHP is extremely concerned that the ABS is considering substantially changing the methodology utilised in recording the number of homeless people in Australia.

The paper presented by the ABS, which sets out to 'inform a review' of the methodology used in *Counting the Homeless*, presents a number of suggestive open ended questions, without any detailed methodological explanation nor scientific back up.

Homelessness research is a complex issue, which requires significant expertise and a thorough contextual understanding of the issues surrounding homelessness and the broad homelessness sector. Additionally, homelessness research must contend with issues of engagement that are not present in other forms of research, due in part to the transient nature of the population.

Understanding the methodological issues around homelessness research is a specialised field. Current methodologies utilised in the *Counting the Homeless* are based on rigorous analysis, which take into account census figures, SAAP data, consultations with schools, sector expertise, local knowledge and a dedicated team of data collectors.

To replace and/or to dilute the current research methodology, (while potentially showing a dramatic decrease in homelessness) would serve to further confound the issue and would result in a loss of confidence in the statistics. This also has the potential to cause people to question the government's commitment to addressing homelessness.

Essentially, a change in the methodology as proposed by the ABS would eradicate any ability to measure comparisons over time. This is particularly concerning considering that the Australian Government's White Paper and state based Homelessness 2020 strategies have utilised baseline figures and created

targets from the 2006 census data. Therefore subsequent data measured against the 2006 baseline would be rendered useless.

It would be inherently misleading for the government to then claim any success in reaching targets against new *Counting the Homeless* methodology.

Is there an overestimation in homeless figures?

CHP is concerned by assertions in the ABS paper that *Counting the Homeless* figures “may well be overestimating the count of homeless people in Australia” (p. 1). We feel this is grossly inaccurate and not reflective of views held in the sector.

The sector has accepted and works with the *Counting the Homeless* figures, however, discussions with our stakeholders have repeatedly highlighted that there is consensus that the data provides an undercount of those who are experiencing homelessness. This will be explored in later sections.

The cause of undercounting is not so much a methodological issue, but reflective of the nature and complexity of people experiencing homelessness. This includes, but is not limited to:

- i) the individual’s decision not to be included
- ii) the impossibility of locating all homeless persons, even when counting occurs over a number of days and
- iii) the challenges faced in counting people who are sleeping rough.

The following points examine the issues of undercount in the homelessness population.

Primary homelessness

A number of capital cities in Australia have conducted research to attempt to quantify the number of individuals who are sleeping rough in city centers. These have come to be known as ‘street counts’. It is acknowledged throughout the

literature and reviews of the street counts that it is almost impossible to accurately measure the number of rough sleepers and significant undercount¹ is acknowledged. For instance, for the safety of volunteers conducting the street count, the number of people living in squats has to be estimated. Squats are not approached, so this data relies on information given by agencies where available.

The count of people living in improvised dwellings is dependent on the work of the collectors and those in the sector who identify known areas where people are rough sleeping. Locating and engaging people is a difficult task and a credit to those undertaking the data collection.

CHP would like an assurance from the ABS that it will continue to provide resources for this important work to be undertaken.

Secondary Homelessness

In estimating the number of people experiencing secondary Homelessness, just consideration must be given to the specific issues of a certain groups. These include youth, Indigenous Australians and women escaping domestic/family violence.

CHP wishes to express serious concerns over proposed changes in the methodology used to count young people experiencing homelessness. Assumptions made in *Issues in Estimating the Number of Homeless in Australia* highlight a worrying lack of understanding about the nature and prevalence of youth homelessness.

The paper's assumption that 62% of homeless youth would still be engaged in education (p. 11) is contrary to the empirical evidence which highlights that the majority of young people who become homeless disengage with education.²

¹ Coleman, A. (2007) Where did you sleep last night? Measuring homelessness in Brisbane's inner city, *Parity*, 20 (3), p. 8 and Pisarski, A. (2007) The 2004 Homeless Count in Brisbane *Parity*, 20 (3), p. 10

² Johnson, G, Gronda, H & Coutts, S (2008). *On the Outside: Pathways in and out of homelessness (2008)*. Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne.

The implications of undercounting this group will result in youth specific homelessness services being under resourced, and has the potential to create pathways into chronic homelessness.

The proposed scaling down of the schools survey is also of concern to CHP. The ABS suggestion of conducting a sample survey of schools to gauge levels of homelessness is fraught with difficulty and seriously raises the potential for under-enumeration. The proposed 'sample survey' methodology is unclear from the paper, however there is still a great risk of undercounting.

Another misconception made by the ABS relates to the assumption that those engaged in full time employment should not be counted as homeless. CHP reiterates its position that homelessness is indiscriminate and affects people from all walks of life. Additionally, the ABS paper fails to acknowledge the housing crisis that is affecting Australia and the difficulty individuals have in securing private rental regardless of income.

There are unique issues around measuring the extent of Indigenous homelessness in Australia. Even when an individual has no fixed address and is experiencing secondary homelessness, they may not list themselves as "without a permanent address". This directly links into issues of overcrowding and is also related to historic concerns in regard to relationship with government. It is accepted in the sector that the number of Indigenous Australians experiencing secondary homelessness is undercounted.

Furthermore, women and children escaping family violence are a special case, suggested to be undercounted in *Counting the Homeless* as they may consider they do have a fixed address which may be temporary or unsafe and/or they may be counted on census night at their usual dwelling.

These examples strive to illustrate the complex nature of estimating homeless individuals across the country and further highlight the need for expert analysis.

Tertiary homelessness

CHP wishes to comment on the difficulties in counting rooming houses, and the challenges in inclusions and exclusions. CHP wishes to reiterate the aforementioned information that determining how likely/unlikely someone is to be homeless is becoming increasingly difficult. The ABS comment that “no deduction is made for high income residents in such dwellings” (p. 14) replicates concerning themes from the youth count section, of the ABS perception that earning, or employment are a guaranteed barrier to homelessness.

A challenge to collecting data has also been that landlords have withheld census forms from residents, refused entry to houses or residents are unable and/or not supported to complete the forms.

Furthermore, again related to housing shortage, a large number of private rooming houses are becoming evident in metropolitan and regional Victoria, and presumably this is consistent with other states.

Identification of private rooming houses heavily relies on the housing and homelessness sector to identify homes which are being utilised as a rooming house. There is little doubt in our minds, as evidenced through discussion with the sector and homeless consumers that the figures for *Counting the Homeless* undercounted private rooming houses. There is also little doubt in our minds that the number of people in rooming houses will continue to grow prior to the 2011 census.

Marginal residents

In the 2006 *Counting the Homeless* data, marginalized residents in caravan parks were included as a separate group outside the overall figures. Rates and totals including marginalized residents were also included to highlight the additional number of people.

CHP always includes marginalized residents in their estimates of those homeless due to an understanding that caravan parks are often used as crisis accommodation or for those unable to secure private rental.

CHP acknowledges that there are also a number of people residing in caravan parks who are not homeless – this includes holidays makers, lifestyle-travelers, and those who have permanently moved into caravan parks/cabins, but who had other options for where they would reside.

CHP would like to see marginalized residents in caravan parks included in the definition of those experiencing tertiary homelessness. Current methodology identifies the marginalized homeless as:

- i) renting their caravans, and;
- ii) where all persons were at their usual address; and
- iii) no-one in the dwelling had full time employment

Potential methodological considerations/definitions could be adapted to include the above definition, and further questions could be asked to expand understanding and correctly identify marginalized homeless as:

- i) renting their caravans, and;
- ii) where all persons were at their usual address; and
- iii) had **applied** for other forms of accommodation within an x month period; and
- iv) had been **unsuccessful** in obtaining other forms of accommodation.

The rationale for this is that it would accommodate people who were working but still in marginalized dwelling, and excluded people who had specifically chosen to live on site.

Concluding comments

The ABS suggestion of altering the *Counting the Homeless* methodology has caused significant concern in the homelessness sector. CHP strongly recommends the ABS exercise extreme caution before implementing cost

cutting measures that will impact on the lives of some of Australia's most vulnerable people.

The current crisis of affordable housing places an additional onus on statutory and non government bodies to better understand and respond to homelessness in all of its forms and complexity; not to underestimate or 'define out' those who may need early intervention or other responses.

CHP would like the ABS to demonstrate its commitment to homelessness and defend and support its ongoing role in *Counting the Homeless*.

CHP would welcome the opportunity to further contribute to this discussion around *Counting the Homeless* methodology.

For further information or to discuss this response paper, please contact: Trish Westmore, Acting Policy and Project Officer on (03) 9419 8688 or by email trish@chp.org.au.