OLDER WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

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Overview

- A brief summary of homelessness in Australia
- Causes and solutions to homelessness
- Older women’s homelessness research report – a few key points
- Research conclusions/recommendations
- Solutions
- A story
- What next?
A quick look at homelessness in Australia

- About 105,000 homeless people counted on last census night (ABS).
- I recommend no one ever start a presentation with this statistic (although I just did).
- Who can end the homelessness of 105,000 people? No one. (though, serious systemic change would be a good start).
- Must look at homelessness in every community (examples of local solutions and housing).
- Act locally, think nationally.
Included in the ABS count of homeless people are:

- People sleeping rough on streets/in cars/squats (now 6%, down from 11% of total homeless).
- People staying in homelessness services (refuges etc)
- People in sub-standard accommodation (no access to personal cooking/bathroom facilities).
That said.....when you think about homelessness what do you see?
These are the 6%
This is actually what homelessness looks like – just like you and me.
Talking to you about older women’s homelessness today.

But want to ensure that you also know a bit about chronic homelessness (about 20%) and rough sleepers (the 6%)

The Mercy Foundation believes this problem can be solved.

Through Housing First and PSH.

It is our primary focus.

We mustn’t forget the most vulnerable citizens in our community who lack anyone to care or to advocate for them. High cost to people lives & to the community.
Recent research report

- Mercy Foundation commissioned Dr Maree Petersen from University of Queensland to undertake research on: ‘Older Women’s Pathways out of Homelessness in Australia’.
- MF interested in all aspects of the issue – but most interested in understanding evidence based responses to solve the problem.
- Research report was launched 14 April 2014.
What the research found

- As well as outlining pathways out of homelessness, the research described the current situation.
- Reporting anecdotal and some quantitative evidence that there is an increasing number of women over 55 in housing crisis and homelessness.
- Women represent 36% of homeless older people.
- Women may have better family/social connections than men. However, this could also mean their homelessness or housing crisis can be better hidden.
Older homeless women

- Older women in housing crisis/homeless not an homogenous group:
  - Those with longer histories of homelessness/transience
  - Those who have housing crises & disruption
  - Those who have led ‘conventional’ lives and no prior history of housing crisis.
Women with histories of homelessness

- Shouldn’t be forgotten – but a smaller group.
- As previously mentioned, permanent supportive housing, using a Housing First or Rapid Re-Housing response is the best response.
- People who are homeless and who sleep rough at much higher risk of death compared to others.
‘Conventional’ women

- Have mostly led lives that have involved family; caring for children, other family members.
- May have not been or been in and out of the paid workforce.
- As a result – no or little superannuation (especially the current demographic of older women).
- May have jointly owned a house. But also may have had lifetime of renting with a partner.
- Add to that – a death of a partner/divorce/financial crisis at the end of a working life.

= Older women in poverty.
Affordable one bedroom rental lettings in Melbourne

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
## Some Sydney examples (from 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median weekly rent – Selected Sydney suburbs</th>
<th>% of min wage</th>
<th>% of pension</th>
<th>% of newstart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashfield</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>103%</td>
<td>148%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankstown</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>134%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatswood</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>138%</td>
<td>200%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parramatta</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>142%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penrith</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>102%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbelltown</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>106%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other issues

- Women in private rentals concerned about asking for maintenance or modifications to assist with aged care needs as it may cause rent to rise or be evicted.
- Loss of a partner – greater difficulty covering rent on single wage/single pension.
- Hidden homelessness – couch surfing between family members or living in cars.
- Greater difficulty finding work as you get older.
Research conclusions

- A lack of attention to older women’s homelessness.
- A need for housing/homelessness services to engage with aged services when appropriate.
- A need for affordable housing – for the majority. Some may also need support and some may need added support as they age in place.
The notion that older women who have lived ‘conventional’ lives are experiencing higher rates of homelessness has surprised some. Not me (and probably not others).

The trend in recent years to ‘pathologise’ all people who become homeless. Increasing tendency to believe there is something wrong with anyone who becomes homeless should be of concern to us all.

It has completely removed poverty and unaffordable housing from the discussion.

Case workers are provided, but affordable housing is not.
Do you really think that a woman in her 60s who has raised a family really needs to do a living skills course?

No – well, these are just some of the options on offer instead of housing.

In carelessly re-defining the homelessness problem in Australia as a problem of ‘the individual’, instead of a systemic issue of unaffordable housing – these have been some of the consequences.
Solutions to homelessness

- Housing ends homelessness.
- It ends homelessness for everyone.
- As previously mentioned, those with significant disabilities and health problems and histories of chronic homelessness may/will need ongoing support to sustain that housing.
- People who are ageing need access to housing that can mean supports or modifications (if needed) can be brought in at a later date.
- Whether you need support now, later or never – everyone needs affordable housing.
It was hot water Joan Lansbury missed the most. If she felt some warmth in the kitchen tap she'd strip off and race to the shower, no matter the hour. "It didn't last long and you didn't know when the hot water was going to come on again," says Lansbury, 71.

Normally, she would fill the kitchen sink with water she had heated on the stove and sponge herself down. "Try that in the middle of winter. It's not much fun." I don’t think I ever could see myself living on the street ... But the costs of living are so high that it really can happen to anyone. That was 2012, and Lansbury was living in a rundown flat in Melbourne's north, with dodgy hot water, a leaky toilet and appliances that didn't work properly.
She put up with it for as long as she could, too scared to complain in case the owner of the flat she had rented for 15 years put the price up - because she knew she couldn't afford 2012 rental rates.

But suddenly, he did just that, raising it from $280 to $500 a fortnight. That left Lansbury, then retired after 25 years as a nursing aide, just $70 a fortnight to live on. She didn't know where to turn. "I must admit that things were so bad at some stages that I didn't care whether I was alive or dead," she says.
How was Joan’s homelessness solved?

Affordable housing
Mercy Foundation, in partnership with housing/homelessness/older people’s and women’s organisations (including COTA) has developed a working group to establish some pilot projects. We want action, not just discussion.

May include more work on the ‘secondary suites’ idea. May involve housing projects.

We need clear policy advocacy about this issue (especially as NRAS was axed in the recent budget).

It’s easy to give homeless people a sandwich or a blanket, much harder to give them a house. Addressing homelessness - with housing - needs the most collaboration of any issue in Australia today.
The research report by Dr Maree Petersen of the University of Queensland ‘Older Women’s Pathways out of Homelessness’ can be found at the Mercy Foundation website: [www.mercyfoundation.com.au](http://www.mercyfoundation.com.au)

A summary handout is available today.

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