A Lack of Design: Homelessness Policy

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The process of policy-making is often depicted as a logical, iterative process that is responsive to its effects on the ground. In theory, policy is the outcome of a design process that begins with the emergence or identification of a 'policy problem', moves through a definition and description phase, consideration of policy options, clear and logical decision-making and implementation of a solution that is monitored and then evaluated for effectiveness. This paper explores the question of whether such a design process has existed in relation to homelessness policy in Queensland.

Policy responses to complex social or environmental problems often fail. An analysis of failure would tell us that governments make policy within a certain environment using mechanisms and processes which are often inflexible and limited. In fact, policy making may be better conceptualised as a series of decisions made within a particular and intensely competitive environment where decisions are more opportunistic than rational.

In Queensland there has not been a strategic State Government approach to the issue of homelessness as there has been in some other states and territories in

Australia. Instead, there has been a series of announcements about what Government is doing to address homelessness.

Media-Driven

In 2004 the Premier of Queensland was faced with a media focus on homelessness. He had been actively lobbied by homeless service organisations for additional funds and more services. In July he agreed to meet one agency's clients in a 'walk the streets' exercise in inner Brisbane (Queensland's capital). That night he announced additional money for affordable housing, the establishment of a new information and referral service for homeless people in inner Brisbane as well as a new, high-level committee to examine the issue of homelessness in Queensland. This was to be a 'Chief Executive Officers' Committee', a type of body established when significant policy issues emerge that straddle a number of agencies. Such a committee is intended to draw together the most senior Government decision-makers to ensure the issue is afforded a high priority.

About a month later a group of homeless young people held police at bay overnight in the Brisbane CBD threatening to jump off the roof of a disused city building they had adopted as their home. The young people were alleged to be 'chromers' (users of inhalants such as paint as intoxicants). The media heat under the issue of homelessness was turned up and public debate turned to the issue of drugs and alcohol. The Chief Executive Officers' Committee on Homelessness held its first meeting in September and decided to pay particular attention to 'public intoxication' in their deliberations on the issue of homelessness. This incidentally tied in well with long-term public concern in the city of Townsville (North Queensland) over the issue of public alcohol consumption. This new focus enabled the Committee to demonstrate its focus on regional Queensland as well as the south-eastern corner, a clear display of political even-handedness and a concession to the National Party heartland (this party, currently in opposition, has its support base in the regions).

This sequence of events is only a tiny part of the 'homelessness policy picture' but it demonstrates the reactive nature of policy decisions taken by Government at a time when public attention to the issue is high.

Whose Agenda?

This small part of the policy story also shows that the 'problem' of homelessness is defined according to very different perspectives, of for example: service providers, politicians, public servants or homeless people themselves.

Service providers want to expand services for their impoverished clients. But they provide services in an environment that demands increasing accountability. To retain the services

they currently run, let alone to enhance services, the temptation is to over-inflate the problem. Their agenda can become one that aims to impress politicians and public servants with a worsening problem, a situation where there are increasing numbers of families requiring assistance, increasing numbers of women escaping violence with their children, increasing numbers of young people living on the streets. A worsening problem is also highly newsworthy and likely to attract media attention.

Politicians are concerned to appease the electorate. But they operate in a highly competitive policy and financial environment. In the wealthy inner suburbs of Brisbane – New Farm, West End, East Brisbane and the other affluent inner fringe areas where many homeless people receive services – the problem becomes one of visibility. The temptation for Government is to limit the response to people who dwell on the streets, to get them out of public view, to tidy things up so the middle class is not confronted with poverty on its way to work in the morning. It's the cheapest and most visible response. Traditionally, there are no votes in an issue like homelessness – the electorate will respond positively if their beliefs about homeless people, which are predominantly that homeless people have created their own situation, are endorsed.

Public servants want to protect the interests of their home department. In a 'siloed' public sector,[1] the problem is defined differently depending on where you work. Policy makers in the Department of Housing are expected to conceive of the problem in terms of lack of housing options. Responses which fall outside housing provision are 'somebody else's problem'. Policy makers in the Department of Health are expected to conceive of the problem in terms of health services infrastructure. The Department of Health, in fact, may wonder why homelessness is an issue for them at all. Beyond the provision of standard health services what more can be expected of them? So the logic goes. Thus response to homelessness will in large part be determined by which silo is given the responsibility for addressing it.

Homeless people, the users of 'homeless services', are a diverse group with diverse needs. Homeless people are often treated as a homogenous group and their perspectives are most often completely overlooked or are so filtered and homogenised that their diversity disappears. Their pathways into homelessness are very different and consequently the solutions to improving their situations will need to respond in kind. For example, those who are suddenly homeless through a series of financial stresses can often be assisted quite simply through material relief and re-housed quickly. Others may only ever wish to remain in boarding house accommodation where they have established a network and feel secure. For a small group, any form of accommodation is unwanted, there is often deep mistrust of Government and society at large and self-determination is everything. For this group

the most simple and basic assumptions cannot be made – we expect people to want permanent accommodation but fail to understand the frightening implications and bewilderment for these individuals when, for example, they are presented with a front door key. The perspectives of homeless people are as varied as the individuals themselves. Their perceptions of homelessness may have more to do with exclusion and the experience of being ostracised and marginalised. Issues of safety, privacy and personal support may be important solutions for homeless people as they navigate their lives through the service system.

Whose Definition?

The 'problem' of homelessness is also dependent on its official definition and how it is counted. There are two main sources of data on homelessness in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses three levels of homelessness, based on the work of Chamberlain and MacKenzie,[2] and provides data based on these three groups:

- Primary homelessness – people living in improvised homes, including sheds, tents, humpies or in other rough accommodation, and people sleeping out, for example, on park benches.
- Secondary homelessness – people staying in emergency or transitional accommodation provided under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program including hostels, shelters, refuges, boarding houses. This category also includes people who are housed with other households because they have no accommodation of their own.
- Tertiary homelessness – people living in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis.

The major program that supports homeless people in Australia is the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), a joint Commonwealth-State funded venture that provides emergency accommodation and other support services through a network of service providers. Data collected through the program provides a rich source of information about service users. The SAAP data collection defines a homeless person as a person who does not have access to safe, secure and adequate housing. A person is considered not to have access to safe, secure and adequate housing if the only housing to which they have access:

- Damages, or is likely to damage, their health; or
- Threatens their safety; or
- Marginalises them through failing to provide access to adequate personal amenities or the economic and social supports that a home normally affords; or

- Places them in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing; or
- Has no security of tenure – that is, they have no legal right to continued occupation of their home.

A person is also considered homeless if they are living in accommodation provided by a SAAP agency or some other form of emergency accommodation.

Edges Blur, Definitions Collapse

These two definitions may help justify a range of actions. Depending on our perspective (politician, service provider, public servant) we may use different parts of these definitions to support our policy approach. Who is in and who is out? A Government will argue that its attention to rough sleepers, to the exclusion of all others, addresses the problem of homelessness. On census night 2001 there were an estimated 14,200 rough sleepers in Australia (primary homelessness), whereas there were another 14,300 sleeping in emergency or transitional accommodation (secondary homelessness) and 22,900 people living in boarding houses (tertiary homelessness). So a focus on primary homelessness will respond to less than a third of people defined as homeless by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

How do these definitions apply to Indigenous people? For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in remote communities, housing overcrowding is a significant issue, clearly placing them within scope of the SAAP definition of homelessness. But homelessness and dispossession are entirely differently experienced by Indigenous people and may have nothing whatsoever to do with the built environment. 'Homelessness' is the lived consequence of colonialism and has resulted in devastating outcomes across the board. Building more accommodation to ease overcrowding, will not, of itself, ease the entrenched, historical homelessness experienced by Indigenous Australians.

How do the definitions apply to people who live in caravan parks on a long-term basis? Chamberlain and MacKenzie have identified caravan park residents as an added group of policy interest for those attempting to address homelessness. This is a group that does not fit within either the ABS or the SAAP definitions of homelessness but who are marginally housed and lack the minimum community standard of accommodation of a dwelling with a separate bathroom and kitchen which has an element of security of tenure. Should we make policy to ensure people living in caravan parks are better housed?

Homelessness is a difficult and complex problem which is not politically sexy and cannot be solved within a short time frame, in dramatic fashion. The policy solutions adopted by Government

in Queensland have been moulded by how the issue is defined, to whom policy-makers have turned for interpretation of the issue, what information has been used to inform the scope of the response and, inevitably, by how the issue has been presented in the media. Not only are the wishes and intentions of homeless people themselves missing in the policy response, there is also no sense of a deliberate and logical policy design process. While this does not in itself doom initiatives to failure, the lack of critical thinking leaves some of us wondering how success will be measured.

Notes

1. Public service departments are sometimes described as silos, where each is individually pursuing its own objectives in isolation from the endeavours of its brother and sister departments.

2. Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie have researched and written about homelessness in Australia since 1990 and have made a significant contribution to our understanding of the issue. Among numerous publications perhaps the best known is the series *Counting the Homeless* (for example, Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, 2004. *Counting the Homeless: Queensland*, Swinburne University and RMIT University, Melbourne.)