

CHAPTER 6

THE INCIDENCE OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Conventional methods of enumerating populations, such as Census, are based upon counting people where they live. Not only do people move in and out of homelessness but the methodological problems involved in counting people without a fixed residence are formidable.

(Homelessness, Health, and Human Needs, United States Institute of Medicine, National Academy Press, Washington D.C. 1988, at page 2. This report was compiled under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences at the request of the United States Congress.)

INTRODUCTION

6.1 There are no reliable measures, in fact there are very few measures at all, of the incidence of child and youth homelessness. In 1982 the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare stated that:

So unreliable are the statistics available on the extent of youth homelessness that the Committee was hesitant to refer to them at all...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.'

Many homeless people are 'hidden' and evidence from people in frequent contact with them is likely to be a more reliable guide than Census or other official survey efforts to count individuals. It is also difficult to quantify the chronically (long-term) homeless and to distinguish them from those who are away from home only briefly and from those who are in temporary crisis. Between 12,000 and 15,000 young people run away from home each year, according to a recent study by an Australian criminologist.' Available evidence suggests that a relatively high proportion return to their families after very short periods of time. Due to the lack of government or other data, however, it is very difficult to assess accurately how many children and young people are homeless.

ESTIMATES OF TOTAL HOMELESS YOUTH

6.2 There have been sporadic attempts to quantify youth homelessness prior to the Commission's Inquiry. These are described in Dr Rodney Fopp's Report *Homeless Young People in Australia: Estimating Numbers and Incidence* (see Appendix D). A 1978 survey in Victoria concluded that 15,000 people aged 12-25 would be homeless in Victoria in the course of a year.' A 1980 survey in Brisbane concluded that over 2,000 young people per year were homeless in that city alone.⁹ A 1979 Adelaide study concluded that a minimum of between 5,500 and 6,000 young people were in need of housing assistance in metropolitan Adelaide.⁵ A 1980 survey updated this figure to 9,000 young people per year.'

6.3 Several previous attempts have been made to give national estimates:

1983 Evaluation of the Youth Services Scheme	12,382 requesting crisis accommodation that year.
1985 Study into Homelessness and Inadequate Housing	15,000-50,000 homeless at one time.
1987 SAAP National Client Data Collection	5,833 used SAAP services over 3 months in NSW, SA, Tas, NT and part of Vic.'

6.4 What is clear is that the proportion of young people (those under 25) among the homeless population grew rapidly during the 1970s.⁸ Evidence presented to the Inquiry strongly suggested that the number of homeless young people has continued to grow throughout the 1980s and many witnesses in frequent contact with homeless youth testified that the average age of the homeless population is decreasing.' These witnesses were invariably people actually working in youth services, including

accommodation services, so that the population they describe are children and young people approaching such services for help.

6.5 In a number of cases, organisations were able to give the Inquiry a regional overview, while others — individual services — provided more limited statistics. These are summarised in the following Table.

TABLE 1: NUMBERS OF HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE BY GEOGRAPHICAL AREA		
<i>Geographical Area</i>	<i>Each Night 12 Month Period</i>	
<i>States</i>		
NSW (a)		31,548
Vic (b)	2,400	
Tas (c)	1,000-1,400	
ACT (d)	50-60	
<i>Capital Cities</i>		
Sydney Metropolitan Area (e)		9,634
Sydney Inner City (1)	200-500	
Brisbane (g)		2,000-3,000
Brisbane Sth-Eastern Suburbs (h)		1,526-3,052
Adelaide City (1)	20-30	500
Hobart (j)		400
Darwin (k)		369
<i>Regions</i>		
Illawarra (NSW) (1)		2,000+
Hunter (NSW) (m)		500
Barwon (NSW) (n)		520
Gold Coast (Qld) (o)		1,500
<i>Other Cities, Towns</i>		
Alice Springs (NT) (p)	20-100	
Broome (WA) (q)	100	
Albany (WA) (r)		200
Cessnock (NSW) (s)		196
Wollongong (NSW) (t)		639
Bowral (NSW) (u)		162
Westport (Vic) (v)		911
Sources: (a)(v) i ^o		

6.6 The Inquiry has approached all numerical estimates given in evidence with considerable caution. There is no doubt that, in spite of the care with which the above figures were compiled, they are all susceptible to criticism. Either they are estimates or they count requests for a service and may involve significant double counting, especially over a 12 month period. As we do not have comparable estimates for every State, and as a proportion of young people are highly mobile, even travelling between States over a 12 month period, an aggregation of the estimates in the Table above will give no clear indication of the numbers of homeless children and young people.

6.7 The SAAP Review conducted during 1987 made an attempt to quantify, by means of a survey of SAAP services, users of services under all three SAAP sub-programs. Unfortunately it proved impossible to do this accurately as many services did not respond to the survey. However, homeless children and young people are not confined to the YSAP services. They also use General Supported Accommodation Program (GSAP) services and Women's Emergency Services Program (WESP) services. The SAAP Review reported that, in the three months April to June 1987, 1,103 children and young people used

GSAP services and that over 50% of the clients of WESP services were children (although the total number of WESP clients was unknown)."

68 Other national figures which might be thought to give some more precise indication of the incidence of homelessness among children and young people are also seriously deficient. For example, only about 4,000 young people (the majority aged 16 and 17) receive the Young Homeless Allowance (YHA) from the Department of Social Security or its equivalent for full-time students (independent rate of Austudy) from the Department of Employment, Education and Training. (In Chapter 14, Income Support for Homeless Young People, we detail the serious difficulties facing applicants in satisfying the eligibility criteria for these allowances.) Evidence given in all States to the Inquiry suggests that over 80% of young people resident in youth refuges receive no income whatsoever, let alone the elusive YHA. We have concluded, therefore, that the number of people in receipt of these allowances is a significant but not substantial proportion of the total number of homeless children and young people. This conclusion is supported by a great deal of evidence, including the Tasmanian Government's recent estimate that between 1,000 and 1,400 young people are homeless and at risk in that State although only 75 are in receipt of YHA.^o

69 Another national figure is the 1986 Census count of people in night shelters and refuges on 30 June 1986. 699 children and young people under 15 were recorded as living in hostels for the homeless, night shelters and refuges on that night and another 623 aged 15 to 19 were also so recorded: a total of 1,322. Evidence to the Inquiry suggests, first, that only one-quarter to one-third of young persons who request accommodation at such refuges can be accommodated; second, that a substantial number of homeless young people will not approach refuges for various reasons, including fear of being returned to homes where they have been abused and fear of being institutionalised; and, third, that the numbers of homeless children and young people have grown dramatically over the past two to three years (for several reasons, including rapidly rising accommodation costs, particularly in several capital cities, over the last 12 to 18 months). Taking these factors into account, a substantial upward revision of the Census figure is needed to obtain a realistic estimate. A number of reputable agencies with expertise in this area have put the number of homeless Australians as high as between 80,000 and 100,000 and estimate the number of homeless young people at around 40,000.³

6.10 In order to obtain a greater degree of accuracy than evidence presented would alone have made possible, the Inquiry commissioned a consultant to assess all available data and arrive at a 'best estimate'. This task was performed by Dr Rodney Fopp, who concluded that there were, at the very least, 8,500 homeless 12-15-year-olds over a 12 month period and 3,500 16 and 17-year-olds at a given time (including 16 and 17-year-olds 'at serious risk' of becoming homeless): a total of twelve thousand children and young people as a conservative minimum figure.^o In a recent report, the Australian Institute of Family Studies estimated that there are in excess of 17,000 homeless 15-19-year-olds in Australia. No estimate of the number of younger children was attempted.^o Based on Dr Popp's research summarised below, the Inquiry considers that both of these estimates are extremely conservative.

ESTIMATE OF HOMELESS 12-15 YEAR OLDS

611 Dr Fopp found the task of estimating the number of 12-15-year olds who are homeless difficult. He determined that the most accurate information available was the 1987 survey of YSAP services by the National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH).⁶ Over the 12 month period July 1986 to June 1987, 103 of the 280 YSAP agencies received 13,709 referrals. Dr Fopp took this figure as the basis for his calculations of homeless 12-15-year-olds. Extrapolating from the 103 responding agencies he estimated that 37,513 referrals would have been made to the 280 agencies. The NYCH data, however, was not disaggregated by age. Dr Fopp, therefore, reasoned that the proportion of referrals in that age range would be similar to the proportion in

the smaller SAAP National Client Data Collection (1987): 23%. This proportion of the estimated total referrals to YSAP agencies yields a total of 8,521 referrals in the 12-15 year age range." This is clearly a very conservative estimate, in spite of the risk that some referrals were double counted.

ESTIMATE OF HOMELESS AND AT RISK 16-17 YEAR OLDS

6.12 Available data does not allow us to undertake the same exercise in respect of 16 and 17-year-olds. Dr Fopp looked instead to statistics collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in February 1988 on labour force status. He reasoned that young people who had no employment and who were not members of a family were probably facing extreme difficulties finding or retaining adequate housing. 47 in every 1,000 unemployed 16 and 17-year-olds are in this situation: 3,534 young people.'s Thus this figure probably includes both homeless young people and those at risk of becoming homeless. The proportions in each category, however, are impossible to determine with precision. The figure, nevertheless, is certainly conservative — based on probabilities and on all the evidence presented to the Inquiry.

6.13 In particular, it should be noted that the following are not included in Dr Fopp's estimate:

- young people who are employed and earning low salaries and wages;
- young people who have low incomes as a consequence of part-time employment; and
- young people who are not in the labour force and whose family status is unknown."

ESTIMATE OF HOMELESS AND AT RISK 15-24 YEAR OLDS

6.14 Dr Fopp also calculated the likely minimum number of 15-19 and 20-24-year-olds who are either homeless or at risk of becoming so. In February 1988 there were 13,047 young people aged 15-19 who were unemployed and not members of any family and 28,367 20-24-year-olds in the same situation: a total of 41,414 aged 15 to 24.

That the young unemplo'ed who are not family members (either living alone or not alone) experience acute housing difficulties is a reasonable assumption since the unemployment benefits rates are known and many surveys attest to the difficulties in 'making ends meet' when the unemployment benefit is the main or sole source of income."

AGE RANGE

6.15 The Inquiry received considerable evidence to the effect that the average age of young people presenting to youth services has decreased dramatically over the past two or three years. Evidence in Sydney pointed to children as young as 10 years old living 'on the streets' of Kings Cross" and significant numbers of homeless 13 and 14-year-olds in Sydney's 'western suburbs where one witness stated:

Even though the average age in Mt Druitt has risen, the young people passing through our place are no longer between 15 and 18 but tend to be 12 to 14-year-olds.²²

A Melbourne youth housing group told the Inquiry that 'over the last 18 months to two years' they had seen 'an increasing number of young people aged between 14 and 16."

6.16 In Adelaide the Inquiry heard that the majority of young people on the streets of the city, without accommodation, were aged between 14 and 17 years." Another Adelaide youth service, one which assists between 3,000 and 3,500 young people each year to find accommodation, advised that the average age of its clients in 1987 was 14 years, significantly lower than in previous years.²⁵ In Brisbane, one youth service reported that the average age for male residents in 1986 was 16 years and for females, 15.2 years.'

6.17 A Perth streetwork program contacted 101 young homeless people aged 15 and under in the period March 1987 to January 1988 (one-third of whom were Aboiigines)." The average age of residents and users of a drop-in centre and shelter for young people aged from 12 to 25 in Perth was 16 to 17 during 1987." Of 613 people seeking assistance from a Perth youth accommodation service between

February 1987 and February 1988, 64% (392) sought accommodation), 12% (75) were aged under 16 years and almost two-thirds, 61.3% (376) were aged under 18. Of the 106 young people accommodated over that period, 20% (21) were under 16 years of age and a further 50% were 16 or 17 years old."

6.18 In Darwin the Salvation Army presented evidence that the average age of people seeking assistance was decreasing." Also in Darwin the Inquiry received evidence that most of the 58 homeless students at one Darwin high school were aged between 13 and 15." In Alice Springs more than one-quarter of the women seeking crisis accommodation at the women's refuge were aged between 12 and 18 years." In New South Wales the Wollongong Youth Refuge stated that the average age of residents in 1987-88 was 15.3 years," the Salvation Army in Newcastle reported homeless children as young as 12" and the Cessnock youth refuge reported that the youngest boy accommodated had been 9 and the youngest girl, 12 or 13."

OTHER DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES

6.19 Approximately equal numbers of boys/young men and girls/young women are referred to or request assistance from youth services. It is of concern, however, that some services, in spite of this, still assist a majority of boys." It appears that girls may, in some cases be reluctant to utilise mixed services."

6.20 Some services reported approximately equal numbers of male and female residents," while others assisted a considerably higher proportion of females." Some services reported that the average age of homeless girls was slightly less than that of homeless boys."

6.21 A significant proportion of homeless youth are supporting parents. In the Northern Territory, the Inquiry was told that 20% of births in 1983 were to women younger than 19 years.' The Inquiry was also told that in Queensland in 1985, 7.8% of births were to women under 20." The King Edward Memorial Hospital's Adolescent Clinic in Perth has averaged 100 pregnant 14 to 18-year-olds per year since opening in 1985." Many of these young women experience accommodation problems. Of the Perth Clinic's clients, for example, 40% live at home but the pregnancy (or the baby) add significantly to the stresses in the household and these women are looking for independent accommodation; 14% live with unsupportive and actively negative parent(s) and are in urgent need of alternative accommodation; 13% are living at home with families whose culture and rules pose limits on their independence' and these young women often move from relative to relative without taking their babies; 7% are living in households which reject them and/or the baby; and 4% are actually homeless."

CONCLUSION

6.22 Like the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare,' we therefore conclude that it is impossible to state precisely how many homeless children and young people there are in Australia. Sufficient research has now been compiled, however, to enable the Inquiry to estimate that there are at least 20,000 to 25,000 homeless children and young people across the country. We stress that we consider this to be a conservative estimate. Dr Fopp's considered conclusion, based on all the evidence available, was that the likely figure is actually 50,000 to 70,000 children and young people who are homeless or at serious risk.

6.23 The Inquiry notes with particular concern the almost total lack of data concerning the numbers of homeless children which has to date been compiled by Federal and State Governments. For reasons mentioned in this chapter, this is certainly not an easy task — but it must be urgently addressed so that government and community responses to this extremely serious problem are adequate.

Notes

1. *Report on Homeless Youth*, (Parliamentary Paper No. 231/1982) at 30.
2. P. Wilson, *Transcript* at 562.
3. R. Fopp, Appendix D, pars 3.2(1).
4. *Id*, para 3.1(4)
5. *Ibid*.
6. *Id*, para 3.1(iii).
7. *Id*, paras 3.3(i), 3.3(ii) and 3.3(iv).
8. *Id*, paras 2.1-2.2.
9. Anglicare (Tas), for example, reported that in 1985 the average age of young people assisted was 18-19. In the last three years that age had dropped to 16-17: T. Howe, *Transcript* at 1486.
10. (a) Based on the numbers of requests for accommodation at youth refuges over 5 months in 1987 (13,145): Youth Accommodation Association (NSW) survey: D. Annis-Brown, *Transcript* at 29.
(b) Survey by Youth Accommodation Coalition (Vic): 600 young people accommodated in youth refuges each night; only one quarter of total requests: D. Otto, *Transcript* at 902.
(c) Estimate of young people homeless and at risk made by the Department of Housing: S.120F, Tasmanian Government, at 3.
(d) Study for ACT Schools Authority-total people, ages unspecified: P. Dugdale, ACT Health Authority, *Transcript* at 597.
(e) Almost 75% of requests for accommodation made to youth refuges in 1987 were made in the metropolitan area: D. Annis-Brown, Youth Accommodation Association (NSW) *Transcript* at 29, 102.
(f) Estimate by Sydney Health Service: hard core of 200: T. Smyth, Sydney Area Health Service, *Transcript* at 23.
(g) Estimate by Teen Challenge Brisbane: J. Boulenez, *Transcript* at 255-256.
(h) Number contacted by Salvation Army Outreach Service Brisbane (3,052 aged 12-25) in 1987; 50% slept out of home regularly: G. Loughery, *Transcript* at 276.
(i) Nightly estimate by a city crisis and information centre: L. Parkinson, Hindley Street Youth Project Adelaide, *Transcript* at 1279. Annual estimate - average number assisted per year by a streetwork program: M. Henley, Service to Youth Council Adelaide, *Transcript* at 1260.
(j) Based on the total number of young people contacted over a six month period in 1987 by a streetwork program (177 people - doubled and some added for reported increase over late 1987): R. Hughes, Stepping Stone Streetwork (Tas), *Transcript* at 1463.
(k) Total accommodated (169) plus total in contact (200) over April 1987-April 1988 by sole youth refuge: A. Buxton, Casey House Darwin, *Transcript* at 1606.
- (l) Based on total requests (918) for accommodation over 5 months January-May 1987: N. Clay, Wollongong Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1793.
(m) Estimate of number of children leaving 'home each year, by Salvation Army welfare worker: S. Hindle, SOS Crisis Centre Newcastle (NSW), *Transcript* at 1946.
(n) Based on a survey of 60 youth services in region by Barwon Youth Accommodation Committee: 40% of 1,000 young people seeking assistance were in need of emergency accommodation: J. Cooke, Barwon Youth Accommodation Committee (Vic), *Transcript* at 1196.
(o) Number of 'detached people' aged 12-25 assisted by a streetwork program over 12 months: G. King, Gold Coast Youth Service (Old), *Transcript* at 366.
(p) Estimate of numbers on the streets on a week night by an outreach program: Anon., *Transcript* at 1726.
(q) Estimate of numbers of homeless people under 25 each night by Broome Youth Accommodation Council (WA): D. Lange, *Transcript* at 859.
(r) Number accommodated by a youth refuge in 1987: S. Starn, Young House Albany (WA), *Transcript* at 749.
(s) Total referrals in 1987-88 to youth refuge: L. Wheatman, Cessnock Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1957.
(t) Total referrals in 1987-88 to youth refuge: N. Clay, Wollongong Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1793.
(u) Two-thirds of total referrals (244) over 18 months, January 1987-June 1988, to youth refuge: C. Kean, Bowral Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1879.
(v) Total referrals 1986-87 to youth refuge: J. Perham, Western Port Youth Refuge (Vic), *Transcript* at 1103.

- II, C. Chesterman, *Homes Away From Home: Final Report of the National Review of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program* (1988) at 14.
12. S.120F, at 3.
 13. See, eg., Sydney City Mission, *The State of Society Today* (1988) at 2. See also, 'Winter misery for 100,000 homeless' 25-26 July 1987 *Weekend Australian*.
 14. R. Fopp, Appendix D, paras 5.4, 5.9, 5.10.
 15. F. Maas and R. Hartley, *On the Outside: The Needs of Unsupported, Homeless Youth* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, Policy Background Paper No. 7, 1988) at 30.
 16. R. Fopp, Appendix D, para 5.8.
 17. *Id*, para 5.9.
 18. *Id*, para 5.4.
 19. *Id*, para 5.5.
 20. *Id*, para 4.20.
 21. V. Pearson, Sydney Area Health Service, *Transcript* at 148.
 22. V. Dwyer, Bidwell Youth Emergency Accommodation Unit Mt'Druitt (NSW), *Transcript* at 129.
 23. H. Ryan, Box Hill Open Family Inc, (Vic), *Transcript* at 1172.
 24. L. Parkinson, Hindley Street Youth Project Adelaide, *Transcript* at 1278.
 25. M. Henley, Service to Youth Council (SA), *Transcript* at 1260.
 26. J. Boulenez, Teen Challenge Brisbane. *Transcript* at 255-256.
 27. P. Connors, Perth Inner City Youth Service, *Transcript* at 665.
 28. S. Higharn, Streetsydie Perth, *Transcript* at 682.
 29. S.44, Victoria Park Youth Accommodation Service (WA), at I.
 30. A. Davies, *Transcript* at 1636.
 31. J. Bailey, Driver High School Palmerston (NT), *Transcript* at 1653-1654.
 32. E. Tyson, Women's Community House Alice Springs (NT), *Transcript* at 1772.
 33. N. Clay, Wollongong Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1792.
 34. S. Hindle, Salvation Army SOS Crisis Centre Newcastle (NSW), *Transcript* at 1943, 1945. See also G. Gordon, Newcastle City Mission (NSW), *Transcript* at 1937.
 35. L. Wheatman, Cessnock Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1967.
 36. NYCH Survey, MO 'Neil, *Transcript* at 1070.
 37. An Adelaide accommodation service reported, for example, that when the service was for mixed use and the number of residents averaged 20 to 25, only one-third were girls and they tended to stay for shorter periods. The service is now for young women only and the average number of residents is about the same: R.Moss, Red Cross (SA), *Transcript* at 1282.
 38. Wollongong Youth Refuge (NSW) in 1987-88 -- 78 females:70 males, N. Clay, *Transcript* at 1793; Barwon Youth Accommodation Committee (Vic) survey of 60 services in Barwon region in 1987 - roughly equal numbers, J. Cooke, *Transcript* at 1196; Port Augusta Youth Shelter (SA) in 1987 -61 females:52 males, D. Brown, *Transcript* at 1393; Hebron House Brisbane in 1986 - 136 females:163 males, J. Boulenez, *Transcript* at 255-256; Cessnock Youth Refuge (NSW) in 1987-88 =56 females:57 males, L.Wheatman, *Transcript* at 1957; Streetsydie Penh in 1987 - equally male and female but often have more young women than men using the service, S. Higharn, *Transcript* at 682.
 39. Shire of Flinders (Vic) youth worker in 1987 - 25 females:14 males, in Jan-Feb 1988 - 17 females:3 males, S.McKenzie, *Transcript* at 1120.
 40. L. Wheatman, Cessnock Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1957; T. Howe, Youthcare, Anglicare (Tas), *Transcript* at 1486; J. Boulenez, Teen Challenge Brisbane, *Transcript* at 255-256.
 41. A. Buxton, Casey House Darwin, *Transcript* at 1606-1607.
 42. C. Tilbury, Adolescent Parents Support Group (Old), *Transcript* at 303.
 43. M. Horsman, King Edward Memorial Hospital Adolescent Clinic (WA), *Transcript* at 675.
 44. *Id*, at 675-676.
 45. Report on Homeless Youth, *op cit*.