

**INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST  
RENTAL ACCOMMODATION**

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**Submission to the Standing  
Committee on Social Issues  
Inquiry into Homelessness  
and Low-cost Rental  
Accommodation**

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## Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into Homelessness and Low-cost Rental Accommodation

*'In a wealthy Country like Australia, no citizens should be forced into homelessness. A reasonable standard of housing should be available for all. A small number will need to be assisted with accommodation by governments or community organisations'* The Australian Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia: *A good house is hard to find*, June 2008

### 1. INTRODUCTION

'Homelessness' is a wide encompassing term. It can mean someone who is without anywhere to stay or someone who is vulnerably housed in temporary accommodation. For most people the immediate image is of a person sleeping rough on the streets, in a car, in stairwells, in empty buildings. Yet people are also homeless if their accommodation is not permanent, such as living with friends, or family, or squatting. People can also be 'homeless at home' i.e. they need to move into their own accommodation due to overcrowding. People are also homeless if they live in a hostel bed or 'bed and breakfast' accommodation, are at risk of eviction from their tenancy (whether public or private housing) or from their own home.

A shortage of affordable housing and immigration laws make it very likely that more people will become homeless. This presents Australia with new challenges regarding problems with documentation and funding, particularly with minors and those with no recourse to public funds.

In January 2008 the Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP and the Minister for Housing, the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, announced the development of a comprehensive long-term plan to tackle homelessness as a matter of national priority. In May 2008 the Government released a Green Paper entitled ***Which Way Home? A new approach to homelessness***. It sought public comment on the issues raised in the paper and also called for other issues and possible strategies to be identified.

WSROC commended the Government on making tackling the issue of homelessness one of its main priorities after a decade of neglect by the previous government.

In February 2008 the Senate established a Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia to look into and report on the barriers to home ownership. WSROC made a submission to the Inquiry noting that it believed the terms of reference were too narrowly drawn.

This submission has been prepared by WSROC in response to the NSW Legislative Council's Inquiry into Homelessness and Low-cost Rental Accommodation. WSROC welcomes the opportunity to present to the Inquiry and believes that urgent action is needed by all three levels of government. This will require more resources, more comprehensive and integrated policy and, above all, a national impetus.

### 2. BACKGROUND

It was estimated that at the time of the 2001 Census around 100,000 Australians were homeless. The rate of homelessness ranging from 1 in 253 people in the ACT to 1 in 35 in the Northern Territory Chamberlain and Mackenzie (2003).

The definition of homelessness used by the ABS differentiates between the 'absolute homeless' (primary homeless) and the 'relative homeless' (secondary and tertiary homeless). The former are people without conventional accommodation (living on the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, in parks etc.) The latter covers those staying in boarding houses, people

using Supported Accommodation Assistance Programs (SAAP) and other similar emergency accommodation services, or people with no secure accommodation staying temporarily with friends or relatives in private dwellings.

A third group, the 'marginally housed' (e.g. those living in caravan parks), is not operationally specified in the Census. At the time of the 2001 Census it was estimated that of the 26,676 persons classified as homeless by the ABS, 29% lived in boarding houses, 15% were accommodated in a SAAP program, 45% lived with friends or relatives and 11% lived in improvised dwellings. Hence the largest group were staying with other households on Census night. At that time it was estimated that 68,881 people were marginal residents of caravan parks in NSW, living in 4,531 dwellings.

The lack of comprehensive data on homelessness is of considerable concern. For example, there is little evidence on the percentage of people discharged from institutions who become homeless. People who have been living on the streets for up to 20 years are also neglected. Groups such as homeless men living in sub-standard boarding houses and women with disabilities with specific needs (over-represented amongst the homeless), are often over-looked, as are those with specific issues such as trans-gendered people.

The Green Paper placed a lot of evidence on the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) but there is a need for more consideration to be given to the needs of the homeless in mainstream services. SAAP is jointly funded by the Federal and States and Territories governments and provides traditional supported accommodation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) defines a homeless person as;

'A person who does not have access to safe, secure, adequate housing. A person is considered not to have safe, secure 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 support that a home normally affords; or
- places them in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security, affordability of that housing; or
- has no security of tenure – that is, having no legal right to continued occupation of their home

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

However, the SAAP service is but one component of a range of forms of temporary accommodation used by homeless people, which also includes squatting and rough sleeping. Homelessness is multi-faceted and affects different groups of people in diverse ways. The causes and consequences of homelessness vary between groups such as families, young people, women escaping domestic violence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with alcohol and other drug problems, people with mental health problems and so on.

WSROC is concerned that there has been an under-estimation of the problem by only including those seeking SAAP services and excluding homeless people who have not sought SAAP services or children living apart from their parents who either do not qualify for, or alternatively receive SAAP support. There is a need to reposition SAAP to enable the program to provide longer term support to clients. As part of this process, the existing crisis response within SAAP needs to be improved and better resourced. A new stream of funding should also be made available within SAAP for longer term support to clients. Additional capital funding for homelessness services under CAP would help to address unmet demand for SAAP services.

### **3. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HOMELESSNESS**

#### **3.1 Homeless Children**

A report by the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence in 2005 highlighted that in the EU and countries such as Canada the elimination of child poverty has been made a specific goal. However, until the new Federal Government launched its Green Paper in 2008, there had been no similar commitment from Australian governments to date.

In a 2004 report, Hanover Welfare Services estimated at least 90,000 Australian children experienced homelessness, of whom nearly half were aged 0-4 years and 43% were of primary school age.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 27) in May 2005 reported:

*“Homelessness remains a significant human right issue for children in Australia. In 2001 approximately 36,000 children were counted as homeless and 64,800 children and youth in 2002/03.”*

Four key areas of concern have been identified:

- A lack of follow up on notification of children at risk of harm as the result of exposure to domestic violence;
- Problems in dealing with domestic violence and child abuse allegations in family law proceedings;
- Concerns for children on contact visits; and
- A lack of services for children under 12 years of age.

For children there would appear to be no suitable services to deal with homelessness. For example one quarter of all SAAP clients were women with children and over half had experienced domestic violence or physical or emotional abuse. Despite these findings the previous Federal Government reduced homeless program funding in 2005-06 by 9%. VCOSS have also reported that the Victorian Government reduced funding for public housing from \$258.9 million to \$139.3 million.

#### **3.2 Drugs and Alcohol Issues**

For many, mental health problems and substance abuse are combined and they therefore need support for a very long period of time. Drug and alcohol services are focussing on prevention and there are new initiatives to reduce violence against women. These big picture issues, including mental health and homelessness, have common risk factors and often the same clients. There is a need for a COAG prevention agenda to target high risk areas and for more consultation with the homeless themselves.

#### **3.3 Mental Health Issues**

People with a psychiatric disability are at a particularly high risk of experiencing housing problems and form a significant proportion of the homeless population. Estimates vary about the proportion of homeless people who have a mental health problem and range from 25%-75% (Kadmos and Pendergast (2001, p.6). The same researchers in 2000 found that 46% of inpatients in public mental health acute units in Perth could have been discharged if there had been suitable community alternatives.

The Green Paper (page 27) reported that in Inner Sydney up to 75% of those homeless aged 18 years and over were found to have a mental health concern. Another study estimated that almost 30% of SAAP service users have experienced an intensive mental health issue.

The policy of de-institutionalisation has led to people with mental health issues taking up an increasing proportion of the public housing stock, or becoming homeless.

In NSW considerable concern has been expressed about the cutting of mental health services (e.g Callan Park has been closed and the facilities at Concord have also shrunk; even though both facilities are reported by health professionals as being needed). Magistrates are distressed at the lack of services, reporting many cases needing hospitalisation but a lack of beds.

This is a major issue and if there is to be an improvement in the homelessness problem then there should be a major review of this issue.

### **3.4 Indigenous Homelessness**

According to AHURI, there is a high level of housing stress among Indigenous Australians (AHURI, Southern Research Centre (2006). ACOSS have also emphasised the high level of housing disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians. On census night 2001, 8.5% of homeless persons were Indigenous (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2008a, p46), despite Indigenous people constituting less than 1% of the total population.

The Senate Inquiry Report into Housing Affordability in Australia recommended that (2.1) ...

*"Given the very high levels of housing stress, overcrowding and homelessness experienced by Indigenous Australians, all levels of government should give priority to addressing their high level of unmet need for public and community housing under all exiting programs and the National Rental Affordability Scheme."*

There is therefore a clear need for Federal and State Government intervention.

### **3.5 Migrants and Refugees**

Key issues for migrants and refugees include:

- A lack of clarity and understanding of where services can be accessed;
- The short time period that successful asylum applicants are given to find suitable accommodation and support;
- An agency focus on the process of gaining legal status, but minimal support given when people are accepted; and
- A reluctance from some agencies to offer housing or services if an applicant's status is not likely to be renewed (particularly for people granted humanitarian protection).

In March 2008 the new Federal Government re-stated its commitment to ending Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), although some new TPVs may be issued while the new system is put in place, and those currently on TPVs are still being treated in line with policies put in place by the previous government.

Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) are three year visas granted to refugees that the Australian Government classifies as 'unauthorised arrivals'. Unlike refugees who reside in Australia under a Permanent Protection Visa (PPV), those on TPVs have reduced access to government social services. In effect the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) penalises those who have been forced to flee human rights abuses but entered Australia undocumented. Access to services and a sense of security are severely limited for TPV holders.

For assistance upon release from detention, in finding accommodation, bond money, employment and learning English, TPV holders rely on the volunteers and the extremely stretched resources of church and community groups as shown in the following table:.

Temporary Protection Visas	Permanent Protection Visas
No initial accommodation offered	13 weeks initial accommodation
No bond assistance	Bond assistance
No English language tuition	510 hours English language tuition
Access to special benefit payment only	Immediate access to social security payments
Able to work but no employment assistance	Able to work and receive employment assistance
Able to receive Medicare	Able to receive Medicare

In March 2004 the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee released a report on poverty and financial hardship entitled *A hand up not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty*. Amongst other evidence presented at the Inquiry particular issues for migrants and refugees in Western Sydney were highlighted. For example, the two year waiting period for income support for migrants and refugees on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) was seen to be adding greatly to this group's risk of poverty and homelessness. TPV holders need access to intensive programs designed for people facing additional barriers to finding employment. The committee recommended that asylum seekers and new migrants should have guaranteed access to basic services, such as language programs and TAFE training courses, to enhance opportunities for employment.

### 3.6 Caravan Pak Residents

Extensive general and migrant population growth over decades has strained the provision of services and infrastructure. While Western Sydney is traditionally viewed as containing areas of low income housing there is plenty of research pointing to the fact that this affordability is diminishing. Alternative temporary and cheap accommodation options are limited and reducing in number. The closure of caravan parks in Parklea in Blacktown and Lansvale in Fairfield in recent years is symptomatic of the pressures of growth and redevelopment the region is facing, with the greatest impacts being on those most vulnerably housed.

Caravan park dwellers are particularly susceptible to housing risk, living on the margins of homelessness. Yet there has been little research undertaken in Australia into this issue. Mobile home park residents lease the land but only own the home. There is a need for more long term tenure and security for these residents.

One study by AHURI in 2004 entitled *On the margins? Housing risk among caravan park residents* looked at the marginal housing market – the caravan sector – and examined the extent to which low-income caravan park residents were vulnerable to homelessness. Youth, women (especially women with children escaping domestic violence), families and single men have been found to be the main social housing clients in caravan parks. They are also the five main target groups for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

The AHURI study noted:

*'It has long been recognised that bottlenecks in crisis accommodation for the homeless are due to a lack of exit points from crisis assistance into medium or longer term housing. This means that SAAP service providers are sometimes forced to exit clients into marginal accommodation. This has created a SAAP and housing policy paradox, where a potentially*



*large population of the incipient homeless inhabit a marginal housing sector that is located just beyond the remit of the SAAP sector (Bostock 2001). These are the households who form a major source of the potential homeless.*

While efforts have been made to integrate housing and homelessness policy to ensure that homeless people can access public housing, many low-income caravan residents have been evicted from public housing and/or private rental or cannot afford the bond required for rental housing.

Given it is recognised that early intervention is the best means of preventing homelessness, the lack of data undermines attempts to both inform early intervention policy and predict future levels of demand for government support services. The severe shortage in the supply of low cost housing, especially for people in need of urgent accommodation, is shown by the extent to which caravan parks are being used by crisis accommodation agencies. Few would suggest that caravan parks are suitable for crisis accommodation for SAAP clients either during or after the support period. Also of concern is that when people leave caravan parks there is little or no knowledge about why they leave or what their housing circumstances are after they have left.

### **3.7 Homeless Older Persons**

There are many factors that can lead to the elderly becoming homeless. They could be the chronic or traditional homeless, the de-institutionalised and those who have recently lost their home or have become temporarily homeless. Risk factors for this group include evictions, the death of a spouse, relative or significant other person, dementia and loss of income. There is a need for better knowledge of risk factors and triggering events in this age group to inform preventative measures. More responsive hospital discharge planning and the establishment of different levels of care would also help.

It is clear from the literature that is available that elderly homeless people have multiple needs extending beyond the lack of housing. They face physical and mental health problems and lack social support at a time when they are at their most vulnerable. Some have problems accessing shelters as a result of mobility needs and physical limitations. As the homeless elderly tend to stay in the system longer, and are less likely to be housed successfully, it is paramount that facilities and services are adapted to suit client needs.

Being homeless is also associated with a greater incidence of morbidity and mortality and a lifestyle that negates the pursuit of disease prevention practices and the treatment of health problems. The homeless elderly frequently suffer from dental problems and other health problems such as arthritis, hypertension, circulatory problems, diabetes, lung disease and stomach ailments and their health status is worse than that of the elderly in the general population.

The fastest growing areas of the Western Sydney region – Baulkham Hills, Camden and Liverpool - have experienced a significant increase in those aged over 65 years. There are emerging issues of housing stress. Many older people will now go into retirement without having paid off their mortgages and are attempting to support younger family members experiencing housing stress.

In parts of Western Sydney the current urban form of service provision is ensuring that the ageing population is completely car dependent and will be left stranded when they can no longer drive. This could lead to higher rates of premature institutionalisation.

### **3.8 Squatters**

Research by Catherine Robinson from the Urban Frontiers Program at the University of Western Sydney in May 2003, funded through the SAAP Co-ordination and Development Committee's National Research Program to Parramatta Mission, investigated anecdotal reports into a rise in the number of people squatting in the Parramatta area and a rise in the numbers of homeless men. It

was designed to add to the small but growing body of knowledge of homelessness in Western Sydney.

The research found particular concentrations of correctional services and services for those with mental disorders and forms of disability in the Parramatta area. At that time the location of corrective services meant that Western Sydney housed approximately half of prisoners in NSW, with ex-prisoners presenting at homeless shelters exhibiting high and complex needs. Many clients seeking supported accommodation were ex-offenders, a high proportion had a mental disorder and many received Veteran's Affairs Disability Pensions.

Research by Darcy and Laker in 2001 estimated that half the calls to the Homeless Person's Information Centre (HPIC) originated from Western and South-Western Sydney. It appeared that Parramatta was becoming a focus for homeless people due to a lack of services elsewhere in the Western Sydney region. There was a lack of accommodation services, particularly for women. While migration to the city may have been the choice for some, for others the importance of maintaining informal community and family support networks meant that many chose to stay in the area despite being able to find safe accommodation. It was argued that traditional models of service provision were needed to address the new and changing context of need.

Research by Colin Robinson (2003), for a committee looking into the homeless men's experiences of the accommodation services operating in Parramatta at that time, highlighted the itinerancy of men in accommodation services. It was deduced that the hostels were providing short-term accommodation for people whose multiple and complex issues required long-term support. It concluded that:

*“any attempt to examine the effectiveness of services should include the consultation of those who currently or recently have been sleeping rough or elsewhere in alternative temporary accommodation.”*

The UWS research showed that the Parramatta youth accommodation services were targeting fairly stable youth who could provide housing/behavioural references from previous accommodation, but rarely accommodated single women who had been squatting, as their target group included those fleeing from domestic violence and women with children.

A central issue was found to be drug use, with many squatters accessing methadone clinics in the Parramatta area. In general squatters were those who had slipped through service and income support gaps because they failed to meet certain criteria. Many were using it as a way to live rent-free while waiting for longer-term housing such as Department of Housing accommodation (often with waiting times over seven years).

Based on the data collected, the study suggested that conservatively at any one time there were at least 100 people living in abandoned buildings or sites around the Parramatta area. The research highlighted the following issues:

- The need to address gaps in immediate short-term accommodation service delivery, including an overall lack of beds, particularly for 'older youths' and women without children. For example single women at that time received the lowest amount of recurrent funding by SAAP for all primary target groups in NSW and young people received the highest amount.
- The need to address gaps in the provision of affordable longer-term accommodation – given the lack of Department of Housing accommodation;
- The need for alternative approaches to supported accommodation, moving away from the view that a lack of housing is a primary or straightforward issue for homeless people. Squatters suggested that accommodation services should respond holistically to clients' needs – through intensive casework, including addressing underlying self-esteem and re-occurring trauma and accommodating drug users and those clients with mental disorders;

- The need for greater consideration of self-empowerment in conjunction with the development of creative and holistic services and a move to resident control rather than institutional control. Human rights should replace anonymity and depersonalisation.

### **3.9 Low-Cost Rental Accommodation**

Western Sydney is often considered to be an area of affordable housing compared to the rest of Sydney. However, this does not mean that the housing is necessarily cheap for the people who live there.

A key issue for Western Sydney is the lack of adequate, affordable housing that provides reasonable access to work opportunities and community services at a cost that does not cause substantial hardship to the occupants. WSROC considers there is a pressing need for government intervention to help trigger private investment in the lower end of the housing market and particularly housing for rent.

**The huge increase in housing costs has severe economic and social consequences. It can:**

- **affect economic development and competitiveness;**
- **result in inefficient urban development and high transport costs;**
- **influence fertility rates and family cohesion;**
- **reduce retirement security; and**
- **adversely impact intergenerational equity and the social strength of local communities.**

In terms of rental in the lower value markets of Western Sydney, worsening levels of rental affordability are apparent. In these areas even relatively small changes have a big impact on what is left of a household's budget once the rent has been paid. If rents do continue to rise it is probable the most pain will be felt by those whose housing options are limited by location constraints and a lack of choice.

Sydney has a higher proportion of renters than the national average. Nowadays the great majority of low-income renters pay more than the benchmark 30% of their income on rent and many pay more than 50%. Overall more than 1.5 million lower-income Australians are incurring housing costs above the benchmark 30% of their income. This applies especially for renters and relatively recent purchasers. 2006 Census figures published showed national home loan repayments soaking up 31.6% of average household income, up from 27.7% in 2001. Research from the University of Western Sydney has indicated that household debt was roughly 25% of disposable income in 1990 and that proportion has risen to 150%. Other studies have pointed to the fact that development of new housing in Western Sydney is no longer affordable for increasing proportions of the population.

Housing affordability has deteriorated severely over the last decade. There has been a long running fall in real terms in funding for public and community housing over the last 10 years. There is also a shortage of affordable private rental accommodation at present. Up to 2006 rental prices only increased moderately and did not outstrip income increases. However, recent data has shown a price jump with a corresponding decline in availability of rental properties.

As noted above, there are a wide range of issues that can cause homelessness, not simply a lack of affordable housing. It is estimated that one in three low income households in Sydney are now in housing stress. As housing stress continues to impact on an increasing number of families living in areas of Sydney which were once considered to be 'affordable', the risk of becoming homeless is increasing.

The 2006 Census data has shown that income differences across Sydney are widening, as the richest areas have been getting richer quicker than the poorest areas. The greatest decline in housing affordability between 2001-2006 occurred in Holroyd, Auburn, Fairfield, Blacktown, Bankstown and Wollondilly, compared to relatively improved levels of affordability – at least for those living there – in the wealthier LGAs. This is because incomes have risen more quickly than

the increase in house prices in the wealthier areas and this has therefore not affected affordability levels.

In Greater Western Sydney (GWS) hidden inequalities in housing can stem from differences in the physical and social infrastructure provided in various parts of the region. The presence or absence of infrastructure provision, as well as limited employment opportunities, has been shown to directly affect the health and well-being of households. Poor public transport provision, limited employment opportunities and scarce community services are all factors which 'erode the 'real' affordability of housing in GWS.

In Western Sydney more families are falling behind on their mortgage repayments each week – with Wetherill Park being the nation's worst-hit suburb. Rental affordability is also worsening, particularly in areas that are traditionally considered the cheaper parts of Sydney. Many key workers can no longer afford to buy a house near their work, or even climb onto the housing ladder at all. There are now only three LGAs in the Sydney metropolitan area where the median house price is affordable for any key worker occupation (of which Penrith and Campbelltown are in the Greater Western Sydney region). Key workers are also being priced out of units in two thirds of LGAs in Sydney.

The proportion of housing rented from the NSW Department of Housing (DoH) has been dropping – with a loss of 3,334 DoH rental dwellings in the region since 1996. Also local authority approvals for new public housing have plunged to a quarter of a century low.

The Western Sydney region has for a long time been home to a high proportion of an overseas born population. In 2006, almost 40% of the West-Central Sydney sub-region's population were reported as speaking English not well or not at all compared with 37% in the South-West and 30% in the North-West. A lack of English skills is increasingly impacting upon a person's ability to find employment and find suitable accommodation.

High car dependency is exacerbating income dependency in many areas, with localities situated in the middle and outer suburbs as the most vulnerable to the socio-economic impact of oil price rises. . In these areas people are already suffering from a combination of housing stress and transport stress – a situation that is likely to get worse.

Transport costs are the third largest item in household budgets after housing and food, consuming on average 14.8% of the proportion of household income in Sydney. Many households in Western Sydney are highly geared making them more susceptible to default in the event of higher interest rates or economic downturn. Many will have little chance to rent or buy homes in locations near familiar social networks, employment or community amenities. All these factors point to an increased risk of homelessness in the future.

### **The Older Suburbs of Western Sydney**

There is evidence of increasing social polarisation across the region, with growing social diversity and physical obsolescence of the older suburbs built between the 1930s and the 1960s.

While Sydney's older inner city areas have experienced unprecedented pressures for densification and gentrification and the newest suburbs have undergone an upward transition in terms of social composition, the areas in between are ageing and becoming the major locations of urban disadvantage in Sydney and especially in Western Sydney.

It is now generally recognised that many of the social problems that have been encountered in areas that have experienced rapid urban growth have arisen from an imbalance in the age and household structure of the incoming population. The output of private builders in new release areas has traditionally been geared to the needs of a market dominated by the family purchaser.

Land use planning has resulted in ad hoc urban renewal with poor outcomes. There has been little understanding of the processes driving the changes or of the complex challenges these areas face.

There has been no concerted effort to link land-use planning with the social interventions that these areas require, or recognition of how the housing market plays a key role in generating and maintaining the disadvantage of these areas. The lack of an integrated approach to addressing complex urban problems is contributing to the socio-economic divide.

There is a growing divide between these older localities and the newer, more affluent housing estates. The spatial structure of Sydney is becoming increasingly polarised. In Western Sydney the most extensive areas of disadvantage have little public housing in contrast, areas of disadvantage in the inner city have high proportions of public housing.

The dwelling stock in the older Western Sydney suburbs, built of low cost materials using a mix of cheap construction materials, by today's standards lacks amenity and much of it is of fibro construction. Much of this housing is reaching the end of its life cycle.

Much of this poor quality housing has passed into the private rental market. Older owner occupiers are being replaced by more mobile renters; there are fewer higher end income earners or stable households to hold the community together.

There is a highly distinct demography. The areas contain high proportions of people born overseas speaking a language other than English, low income earners, very young families, high unemployment and low employment participation rates. Many of the medium density developments comprise walk-up flats. Most are in private ownership and are rented, with only a small proportion of people living in the social housing sector.

Yet these areas have many characteristics in common with the large public housing estates in south-west Sydney, since they share a common income profile, large populations of young families and have a high rate of turnover. The physical form is distinct and unpopular and is only accepted by people who have limited opportunities and may be socially stigmatized.

Selective migration is occurring between suburbs, with the older areas losing the upwardly mobile populations to the new fringe areas. The key feature of these older suburbs is a much more highly diverse housing market and greater concentrations of social problems. These, predominantly private sector areas, are now subject to intensifying pressures for change and renewal, especially where the housing occupies relatively large blocks of land. The change is largely unplanned and ad hoc.

Without intervention in the market, pockets of disadvantage in these middle older suburbs will continue to increase as social problems concentrate and investment drains further. There is a danger that Western Sydney may become an even more divided and polarised society. The growing inequality is not only about income inequality, it also has to do with opportunities to lead full lives.

Many of these older suburbs, despite being located on railway lines, have been losing population. This is clearly a matter of some concern since these areas are being targeted for urban consolidation. They are now the locations of some of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia. Land use planning in the past has failed to address the problems of these declining suburbs.

### **Overseas Experience**

The Australian affordable housing sector is tiny in comparison to North America and Europe. These larger affordable housing sectors have the capacity to offer a greater choice of housing options, whereas in Australia the products provided have been relatively undifferentiated and

aligned principally with the criteria and rules for public housing, especially in rent setting and eligibility.

The issues surrounding the physical renewal and associated social; change in ageing suburbs has attracted both policy and scholarly attention overseas but have received little attention in Australia.

There is a focus on high density development, with little consideration given as to who will live in these apartments. Unfortunately the socio-spatial implications of urban consolidation policies have not been well understood. The current planning ideology needs to be re-thought for existing socially disadvantaged areas, if socially regressive outcomes are to be avoided.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Poor social and economic circumstances affect people's health throughout life. The longer people live in stressful economic and social circumstances, the greater the physiological wear and tear they suffer and the less likely they are to enjoy a healthy old age.(from the Social Determinants of Health : the Solid Facts). Overseas research has also shown that social exclusion creates misery and costs lives.

It would appear that research into the complex issues outlined above has been taking place in separate silos. Yet the overseas evidence of starting capacity building very early in life is very persuasive. While aboriginal issues have been identified, very little has been done, either in the education system to address aboriginal concerns, or in the juvenile justice system to cater for youth needs.

The lack of safety in homes has been identified for many years and offences comprising domestic violence on children are gaining media attention. Many of the social security rules are very difficult for young people or CALD groups to navigate. A lot of training is required to upskill people in DOCS and DOH to deal with a range of interrelated issues, such as loss of housing through psychiatric admission. Workloads are huge, the accountability functions are lacking and it is unclear who actually needs housing – not just those in rent arrears.

There is a concern that there is a tension between a proposed national scheme to address homelessness and the 'wrapping around' procedures advocated in the Green Paper. Creating a 'home' is not just a service framework, but requires smaller home-based services encouraging people to participate in the development of their lives.

For many in Western Sydney there are now more opportunities and more choice. But there are still needs a more diverse range of housing and a greater social mix should be encouraged in both new release areas and the older areas undergoing urban revitalisation, to ensure that new developments cater for as wide a range as possible of different socio-economic groups. The aim is to develop communities where residents of all ages and income groups can live together.

In addition to being socially more equitable, such a strategy helps to reduce the peak demand for age specific services such as schools and health care and ensures a diversity of services exist to fulfil the full lifecycle of the community. It can also assist in redressing the socio-economic imbalance that currently exists in Western Sydney.

There is a need to counteract market failure with alternative forms of tenure, including co-operative structures which house people from across the socio-economic spectrum.

It is acknowledged that high levels of home ownership has had substantial benefits for public expenditure since it has saved on rental assistance payments. However, WSROC is of the view that rental assistance should be further targeted to ensure that those in affordable housing remain eligible, even when rents fall below market rates.

There should be greater acknowledgement of the distorting impacts that negative gearing and targeting has had on the housing market and the resulting tax haven it provides for high income earners, with measures put in place to avoid problems in the rental market if it were to be abolished.

Rather than simply adopting UK and US housing models, further consideration should be given to other forms of housing tenure successfully used in other parts of the world, such as Sweden, which shifted the co-operative approach beyond simply the provision of social housing.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Homelessness***

**Given the complexities and range of issues experienced by people at risk of homelessness WSROC recommends that:**

- 1. Australia should consider ratifying the UN Charter of the Rights of Children;**
- 2. The human rights framework currently provided for in the SAAP Act should be retained;**
- 3. State and Federal Government Departments should be required to review their policies and processes to ensure that they are not exacerbating the homelessness problem;**
- 4. The issue of de-institutionalisation of people with mental health problems requires an urgent whole of government review to substantially reduce the proportion of people with mental health problems becoming homeless.**
- 5. Strategies should be developed to prevent and respond to homelessness amongst women and children escaping domestic violence under the new National Action Plan;**
- 6. The Home Advice scheme should be expanded nationally. After five years the scheme should be evaluated to ensure that it continues to provide social and economic benefits to the community;**
- 7. Consideration should be given to expanding referral pathways to the Home Advice Scheme to include financial institutions, to better capture low income mortgagees at risk of becoming homeless;**
- 8. Applications under NRAS should be targeted to the development of new affordable rental housing in areas of greatest need and/or for communities needing affordable housing for key service workers;**
- 9. The Federal Government should increase funding for social housing over the next 10 years and identify how it will increase access to low-cost private rental housing for people who have experienced homelessness.;**
- 10. The following issues should be addressed in the SAAP:**
  - ongoing unmet demand;**
  - sufficient resources to support client needs, especially if this support will now be provided longer term;**
  - funding children as clients of SAAP in their own right; and**
  - increased workforce capacity and development.**

- 11. A new stream of funding should be made available within SAAP for longer term support to clients. This would include additional resources to enable agencies to broker relationships with mainstream services;**
- 12. The Household Organisation Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program should be made available as a national program and funding for Reconnect substantially increased;**
- 13. All Federally-funded homelessness programs should be included in an expanded National Affordable Housing and Homelessness Agreement;**
- 14. There should be greater linkage between SAAP and housing exit points. As part of this, targets for access to social housing should be adopted, including the number of people who leave SAAP and go into social housing and the number of people who are able to maintain tenancies in the long term;**
- 15. Additional capital funding should be provided for homeless services under CAP to address unmet demand for SAAP services; and**
- 16. A Commonwealth whole-of-government homelessness strategy should be developed, building on the above recommendations and existing State/Territory homelessness strategies.**

#### ***Low-Cost Rental Accommodation***

- 17. The Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments should consider the South Australian approach of adopting an ambitious, but not unachievable numerical overall target for improving the supply of affordable housing. Such targets should secure the sustained commitment across governments and encourage support from other sources;**
- 18. A more diverse range of housing and a greater social mix should be encouraged in both new release areas and older areas undergoing urban revitalisation, to ensure that new developments cater for as wide a range as possible of different socio-economic groups;**
- 19. The aim of these policies should be to develop communities where residents of all ages and income groups can live together. The lifestyle needs of singles, childless couples, families, people with a disability and the aged being catered for. In addition to being socially more equitable such a strategy helps to reduce the demand for age-specific services such as schools and health care, and ensures a diversity of services exists to fulfil the full lifecycle of the community;**
- 20. Alternative forms of tenure, including co-operative structures which house people from across the socio-economic spectrum should be developed;**
- 21. The impact of negative gearing needs to be assessed in terms of the impacts on the housing market and the resulting tax haven it provides for high income earners. Over time, the Federal Government should be urged to consider tightening the targeting for negative gearing or even its abolition;**
- 22. While it is acknowledged that high levels of home ownership has had substantial benefits for public expenditure, since it has saved on rental assistance payments, rental assistance should be further targeted to ensure that those in affordable housing remain eligible, even when their rent is below market rates;**



- 23. Rather than simply adopting UK and US housing models, further consideration should be given to other forms of housing tenure successfully used in other parts of the world, including the use of co-operatives to provide a broad range of housing and not just social housing; and**
- 24. There should be better regulation of institutions to prevent inappropriate lending practices and encouragement to lend for other forms of housing tenure.**
- 25. There should be increased funding for housing with a greater emphasis on:**
  - Better co-ordination of housing, planning and urban renewal policies with an emphasis on achieving affordable housing. Such targets would demonstrate the NSW Government's commitment to affordable housing levels in general, rather than as a token proportion of new housing development;**
  - A more integrated and co-ordinated approach to the 'affordability problem' with a focus on urban regeneration and renewal in low value, low amenity areas through housing-led initiatives;**
  - Greater understanding of how the drivers of demand operate and impact upon affordability levels in more local market contexts. Rather than focussing simply on issues of land supply; and**
  - Investigation into a range of tenure types such as shared equity (with conditions on re-sale as a way to protect affordability into the future); co-operatives; land trusts and other initiatives being investigated by the not-for-profit sector.**