



Responding to Rough Sleeping in Brisbane

An Ethnographic Study - Summary Report

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The Study

Responses to rough sleeping in Australia range from law enforcement responses, to psychosocial support, to the provision of stable housing. Using Brisbane as a case study, our research sought to understand how these different kinds of interventions are connected and balanced against one another, and how they can be reconfigured to better support people sleeping rough. It also examined how surveillance of the homeless helps coordinate these different kinds of interventions. This short report provides an overview of the findings of this research. It describes how support services and other agencies work together to support rough sleepers to access stable housing, and how people who gain housing through these interventions can experience life-changing benefits. However, we also found that the undersupply and long wait-times for social housing mean that many people remain on the street for long periods. For these people, the monitoring and interventions of local agencies takes on a more punitive feel, as people are perpetually moved on and encouraged to access services that they feel are unable to provide them with the long-term housing outcomes they desire.

Key Recommendations



INVEST
in social
housing



ADVOCATE
using frontline
experiences



EDUCATE
frontline
workers



MINIMISE
coercive
interventions



MANAGE
expectations
of wait lists

Research Design

The research examined responses to rough sleeping in Brisbane from a systemic perspective: rather than focusing on the relative effectiveness of particular interventions, we investigated the interconnections between interventions, and examined their overall operations and effects. The research comprised six months of qualitative fieldwork in Brisbane in 2018. Fieldwork entailed researcher participation in, and observation of, a variety of settings in which local agencies come together to coordinate and enact homelessness interventions. These settings included interagency meetings, as well as joint street outreach activities, wherein support services, law enforcement and other agencies patrol Brisbane’s inner-city streets offering support to people sleeping rough.

Fieldwork also involved 40 in-depth interviews. Sixteen interviews were carried out with representatives from local agencies, including social service providers, charity organisations, police, public health and a public service organisation involved in the regulation of public space.¹ Coupled with our field observations, these interviews provided insight into the types of interventions deployed by local agencies; how they coordinated these interventions with one another; the rationale/objectives underpinning their activities; and details of their interactions with people experiencing homelessness. An additional 24 interviews were carried out with people with a lived experience of sleeping rough in Brisbane: 12 of whom were homeless at the time, and 12 had recently accessed housing with the support of a local service provider. These interviews explored people’s experience of street life, focusing on their interactions with local agencies, and the consequences of these interactions. For those in housing, we also discussed the process of exiting homelessness and what housing meant for their lives. The project received ethics approval from the University of Queensland’s Human Research Ethics Committee in May 2018. All research participants have been de-identified, and names presented in this report are pseudonyms.



Participant observation

(Approx 45 hours)

Interagency meetings
Outreach patrols
Service visits



Stakeholder interviews (n = 16)

Social services
Charities
Police
Public health
Public space regulator



Homeless interviews (n = 24)

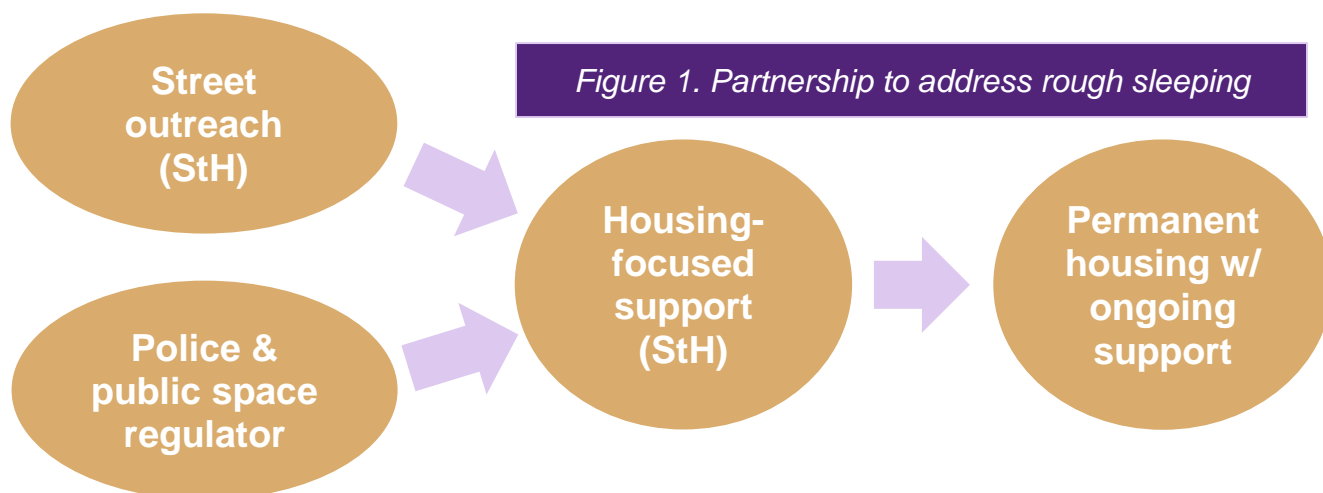
12 current rough sleepers
12 former rough sleepers

Key Findings

Brisbane’s housing-focused partnership to address rough sleeping

There are a variety of different programs and initiatives targeting people who sleep rough in Brisbane. These range from community-led charity operations (food vans, mobile laundries), to professionalised social services (drop-in centres, shelters, outreach services), to enforcement based responses (police, other public space regulators). There are differing levels of coordination between these interventions. However, a key partnership has been developed between Micah Projects, a not-for-profit organisation that provides housing-focused support to the homeless, and police and other public agencies involved in the management of public space. Through its Street to Home program, Micah Projects employs a “housing first” approach that aims to permanently end homelessness by providing people sleeping rough with unconditional access to stable, long-term housing, coupled with tailored support to address their ongoing welfare needs.ⁱⁱ It also conducts street outreach, which entails monitoring inner-city spaces to identify and offer support to people who are unable or unwilling to present at centre-based services.

The partnership with Micah Projects sees police and other public space regulators contributing to the goal of ending homelessness. These agencies engage in routine monitoring of public spaces, and therefore have frequent contact with people sleeping rough. These encounters have traditionally focused on the coercive management of people’s behaviour and movements, and this focus continues today to some extent. However, police and public space regulators increasingly use their encounters with people sleeping rough as an opportunity to refer them to Street to Home for housing support. They also now use their enforcement capacities, such as move-on powers, to incentive service engagement and prevent people becoming “entrenched” in the spaces and life-styles of homelessness by encouraging people to “keep mobile” and not occupy any given space for too long.ⁱⁱⁱ



Monitoring, data collection, and information sharing

The collection and sharing of information about people sleeping rough is a key part of the housing-focused partnership described above. People sleeping rough face a number of barriers to accessing and sustaining support, including restricted mobility (due to limited access to transport and storage facilities), physical and mental health issues, distrust of formal authorities, and the unpredictability of life on the street.^{iv} Agencies responding to rough sleeping in Brisbane have taken some important steps to addressing these barriers. Key to this is the street outreach activities undertaken by Street to Home, and supported by other agencies. Street outreach entails service providers engaging with people sleeping rough in situ, thus enabling them to identify and engage with people who would otherwise be unable or unwilling to access support. This outreach work is supported and augmented by police and other public agencies through the referral practices described above, and through sharing of information about the location and circumstances of existing Street to Home clients (see Quote 1).

Looking beyond street outreach, there is currently significant enthusiasm amongst policy makers and some academics about the power of electronic databases to address difficult social problems, particularly when linked across agencies.^v Most of the agencies that engage with people sleeping rough in Brisbane maintain such databases; however, there is currently limited capacity to integrate these or to share data in a systematic way, despite the strong partnerships between local agencies described above. Instead, information tends to be shared interpersonally through ad hoc communications or interagency meetings. At the time of our fieldwork, there were efforts to establish a shared database for the agencies involved in the housing-focused partnership. However, there was some scepticism amongst stakeholders regarding both to the viability and necessity of this initiative (see Quote 2). There is also little evidence that technical solutions related to linked data have the capacity to help address the broader structural factors driving homelessness, such as the supply and accessibility of affordable housing.^{vi}

Quote 1. Dimitri, Micah Projects “QPS and [local public service] have become our eyes, ears and intelligence. They meet somebody, they know they can refer them to us. They get their consent, refer them to us, then we know where the person is. So, that kind of level of interaction, communication, and referral processes are actually very good for Street to Home.”

Quote 2. Jackie, police officer “I don’t know, databases—someone’s got to manage it and run it. Does that mean then we will have to put it in our own and then a second one? Who’s going to [manage it]?... This I think why having the stakeholder meetings... where we can engage in the background is useful.”

Capacity of the partnership to produce positive outcomes

Our research found that the housing-focused partnership between Micah Projects, police and other public space regulators has the capacity to produce life changing outcomes for people sleeping rough: 167 people were housed and supported through the Street to Home program in 2018/19,^{vii} and our past research shows that the vast majority of people (92%) who access housing through this program remained housed at a 12-month follow-up.^{viii} People we interviewed who accessed housing through the program described the housing and support they received as highly beneficial, in some cases life changing. For instance, Bill described how he spent most of his adult life cycling between homelessness and incarceration before being supported by Street to Home into his current apartment, at which point he was able to turn his life around (see Quote 3).

Quote 3. Bill, formerly homeless

“This is the first time I’ve ever had a home... [In the past] everything’s fallen short because I’ve been on the street trying to survive and I’ve offended and gone back to prison... Then I met Micah the last time I got out of prison and I haven’t been back since. I’ve developed from there... to now I’ve got a home. I wouldn’t have done that without them.”

Impact of affordable housing supply and social housing waitlists

However, the capacity of the partnership to achieve these positive outcomes is limited by the inadequate supply of affordable housing in Brisbane. The Street to Home relies on the social housing system to access affordable housing for their clients. Street to Home clients are deemed “very high needs” by the Department of Housing, meaning they get priority access to the social housing system. Yet, decades of underinvestment in social housing mean that, as of July 2019, even people with priority status had spent around seven months (median) on the social housing waitlist. Anecdotal accounts suggest that people often wait even longer than official figures suggest, as they move on and off the waitlist due to missed correspondence or other bureaucratic reasons.^{ix} Hence, whilst Street to Home housed 167 rough sleepers in 2018/19, it engaged with over 800 rough sleepers,^x meaning the majority remained homeless at the end of that year.

Social housing waitlists, Brisbane

As of July 30, 2019, in the Brisbane City Council Local Government Area

The number of people on the waitlist for social housing was **5,136**

50% of “very high needs” (i.e. priority) applicants had been waiting **7 months or more**

25% of “very high needs” applicants had been waiting **14 months or more**

10% of “very high needs” applicants had been waiting **22 months or more**

Source: Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works (2019) 2019 Social Housing Register [WWW dataset]. URL <https://www.data.qld.gov.au/dataset/social-housing-register> (accessed 8 October 2019)



Stakeholders that we interviewed described the undersupply and long wait times for social housing as a barrier to their efforts to deliver housing focused support (see Quote 4). People sleeping rough also expressed frustrations at the unavailability of housing, as Quote 5 from Peter illustrates.

Temporary accommodation & perceptions of “service resistance”

The delays in accessing social housing mean that Street to Home often resorts to supporting their clients to access crisis and transitional accommodation whilst they wait, despite the fact that these accommodation options are inconsistent with housing first principles. Many people sleeping rough refuse offers temporary accommodation, as they perceive such options unsafe or unsuitable to their needs, as illustrated in Quote 6.^{xi}

The delays in people face in accessing permanent housing, coupled with their unwillingness to access temporary accommodation, has led to a perception amongst some stakeholders that many rough sleepers are “service resistant”. As one police officer put it in an interview, “I’ve never had any personal success of them ever getting a house... I don’t think it’s the fault of Micah, I’m not saying that, but more the choice of people that they don’t want to take the help.” Such views risk blaming people sleeping rough for their ongoing homelessness, whilst obscuring the impact of the inadequate housing supply and long waitlists for social housing. As research in other jurisdictions has shown,^{xii} such views can also result in increasing use of punitive, law-enforcement responses to people sleeping rough, which have in turn been shown to perpetuate homelessness.^{xiii}

Quote 4. Jackie, Police officer

“I think what I find hard about it sometimes is that stuff doesn’t happen quickly. People might still be homeless for extended periods... There’s not enough of it [housing]... It would be great if we could just get people and put them straight into a suitable place.”

Quote 5. Peter, sleeping rough

“I’m just amazed that there isn’t enough... housing for people to be able to get [off] the streets... It’s the housing that everybody on the streets have spoken to me [about]—that they’re disappointed in—that there could be a bit more so people could get into [it].”

Quote 6. Murphy, sleeping rough

“The only things available for homeless people—they have a list of places. If it’s not a share accommodation, boarding house—I mean, why can’t a homeless person that’s got medical problems get a nice little unit in a nice little street with nice little neighbours?... [Temporary options are] not suitable... [There’s] just that element of risk and the high anxiety.”

Supportive interventions experienced as punitive

For people who remain on the streets for extended periods, the housing-focused interventions of local agencies that we described above can take on a punitive or harassing feel, given that the housing promised is not readily forthcoming. Efforts by police and other public space regulators to keep people from becoming “entrenched” in the spaces or lifestyles of homelessness (e.g. by moving them on or encouraging them to keep mobile) create additional material and psychological burdens for people that compound the hardships of sleeping rough. People also reported experiencing routine monitoring and referral for housing support as “harassment” when housing did not materialise. Some also reported losing faith in the offers of housing support from local agencies, including declining trust and rapport with the Street to Home team. Steve’s experience (see Quote 7) was indicative of many of these issues.

These findings highlight that there is a risk of housing being seen as a false promise by people sleeping rough, and that trust in, and cooperation with, local agencies offering housing support will deteriorate as a result. This would further curtail the capacity of the housing-focused partnership to achieve the kinds of positive outcomes described above.

Quote 7. Steve, sleeping rough
“If it’s not the security guards, it’s the police... They’re just doing their job. But... where do you move-on to? The next bench? Then you’ve got your bags and all your stuff you’ve got to carry and protect...”

The police said to me, “We’re going to find you accommodation.” So, he gives me a card to go to Micah and I deal with the guy at Micah... I said to him the other day when I was in there, “What do you get paid for? Because all you’ve done since I’ve walked in here is sit in front of your computer, waste my time, get your data and information to make yourself look good.” I call them the mutual admiration society: “look how wonderful we are!” Well, you’re not f**king wonderful because there’s that many homeless people. He says, “You’re going to have to leave, Steve.” “I’m going anyway before I hit you over the head with your computer.”

Conclusions and recommendations

The research findings presented in this report show that a coordinated and housing-focused response to rough sleeping has the capacity to end homelessness for some of the most vulnerable people on the street. The key to the successes of this approach is the aligning of policing and regulatory interventions with the housing first approach adopted by support providers like Micah Projects. Monitoring and engagement with rough sleepers through street outreach is also key, and this can be augmented by the monitoring work that agencies like police carry out as part of their day-to-day work.

However, no matter how dedicated or well organised the efforts and interventions of local agencies are, they remain unable to adequately respond to rough sleeping whilst the supply of social and affordable housing remains at insufficient levels. As we showed, long delays in the provision of housing undermine the efforts of local agencies to secure housing outcomes for people sleeping rough. When housing is not forthcoming, people sleeping rough can lose trust in local agencies, and can experience their efforts to provide and encourage engagement with support as punitive and harassing.

Our findings also suggest that efforts to enhance monitoring/surveillance capacities through the establishment of a shared electronic database for local agencies is unlikely to provide its intended benefits whilst social/affordable housing remains at inadequate levels. In fact, previous research suggests that such initiatives have the capacity to divert attention from the problem of affordable housing by seeming to offer technical, practice-oriented solutions to problems that are essentially structural and political in nature.^{xiv}

Since this research was undertaken, the COVID-19 crisis has engendered a renewed focus on the problem of rough sleeping. It has not only revealed new depths to the disadvantage and vulnerability that people sleeping rough face (e.g. their heightened risk of exposure to the disease, their dependence on services that were forced to close). It has also revealed that public and other institutions have the resources and capacity to step in and address these vulnerabilities when there is the political and public will to do so. However, despite the deserved praise of efforts to accommodate people sleeping rough during the crisis (in hotels, vacant student accommodation, etc.), these efforts are not sufficient on their own to end rough sleeping for either current or future homeless populations. Now is therefore the perfect time for society to take the steps required to permanently end rough sleeping in Australia. To this end, we provide the following recommendations, based on our research findings.

Key Recommendations

Evidence base approaches should drive responses to rough sleeping. Evidence suggests that the most effective approaches are housing first and models of permanent supportive housing where people can access secure and affordable housing with a range of clinical and non-clinical supports integrated.^{xv}

Increased investment in social housing by State/Territory and Federal Governments to meet current and projected future demand in line with the recommendations of research from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI).^{xvi} This is necessary if evidenced based approaches like housing first are to function as intended.

Advocacy for increased investment in social housing from public and community organisations engaged in frontline responses to rough sleeping, including from police and regulatory agencies. Our research showed that these agencies are left to deal with the consequences of the undersupply and long wait times for social housing on a day-to-day basis. They are therefore well placed to articulate the need for, and potentially benefit of, affordable housing to governments and the broader public.

Better education for frontline workers about housing availability and the reasons why people sleeping rough refuse temporary accommodation. This is required to tackle perceptions of “service resistance” and other beliefs that blame rough sleepers for their ongoing homelessness, particularly amongst staff from law-enforcement and regulatory agencies.

Coercive/enforcement interventions should be minimised, and only used in cases where these are absolutely necessary (e.g. in cases where people sleeping rough pose a direct threat to their own or others’ safety). This includes “softer” interventions, such as moving people on or encouraging them to keep mobile, as the impact of these interventions have the capacity to compound over time, affecting people in ways that prolong their homelessness^{xvii} and undermining their trust in supportive interventions.

Better management of the expectations of people sleeping rough by local agencies regarding the availability and timeframes of social housing. Our research showed that, given the long wait times for social housing, there is a risk of people sleeping rough coming to see offers of housing support from local agencies as a false promise. This outcome will likely undermine the trust and rapport required for local agencies to achieve housing outcomes.

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Endnotes

ⁱ This last-mentioned agency has requested not to be identified in the research. Hence, from here in it is referred to as local public service or public space regulator.

ⁱⁱ Padgett, D., B. Henwood and S. Tsemberis (2016) *Housing first: ending homelessness, transforming systems, and changing lives*. Oxford University Press, New York.

ⁱⁱⁱ Similar practices are adopted in other jurisdictions internationally. See Johnsen, S. and S. Fitzpatrick (2010) Revanchist sanitisation or coercive care? the use of enforcement to combat begging, street drinking and rough sleeping in England. *Urban Studies* 47.8, 1703-1723; Murphy, S. (2009) “Compassionate” strategies of managing homelessness: post-revanchist geographies in San Francisco. *Antipode* 41.2, 305-325; Hennigan, B. and J. Speer (2019) Compassionate revanchism: the blurry geography of homelessness in the USA. *Urban Studies* 56.5, 906-921.

^{iv} Parsell, C., Clarke, A., & Vorsina, M. (2020). Evidence for an integrated healthcare and psychosocial multidisciplinary model to address rough sleeping. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 28.1, 34-41.

- ^v Australian Government. n.d. *About Open Data*. Available <https://data.gov.au/page/about-open-data>;
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- ^{vi} Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. New York: St. Martin's Press; Willse, C. (2015). *The value of homelessness: Managing surplus life in the United States*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- ^{vii} Micah Projects (2019) *Annual report, 2018/19*. URL <https://micahprojects.org.au/assets/docs/Annual-Reports/Micah-Projects-2019-AR-Web.pdf> (accessed 8 October 2019)
- ^{viii} Parsell, C., Jones, A., & Head, B. (2013). Policies and programmes to end homelessness in Australia: Learning from international practice. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 22.2, 186-194.
- ^{ix} This is also supported by research evidence from other jurisdictions. For example, see Clarke, A., Parsell, C., & Vorsina, M. (2020) The role of housing policy in perpetuating conditional forms of homelessness support in the era of housing first: Evidence from Australia. *Housing Studies*, 35.5, 954-975.
- ^x Micah Projects (2019) cited in note vii.
- ^{xi} This is a common finding in the international research literature. For an account of why people avoid temporary accommodation see McMordie, L. (2020). Avoidance strategies: stress, appraisal and coping in hostel accommodation. *Housing Studies*, 1-17.
- ^{xii} Murphy, S. (2009) "Compassionate" strategies of managing homelessness: post-revanchist geographies in San Francisco. *Antipode* 41.2, 305-325.
- ^{xiii} Herring, C., D. Yarbrough, and L. Marie Alatorre (2019) Pervasive penalty: how the criminalization of poverty perpetuates homelessness. *Social Problems* doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spz004.
- ^{xiv} Eubanks (2018) & Willse (2015), cited in note vi.
- ^{xv} Parsell et al. (2013), cited in note; Parsell, C., Petersen, M., & Culhane, D. (2016). Cost offsets of supportive housing: Evidence for social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 47.5, 1534-1553; Padgett, D., Henwood, B. F., & Tsemberis, S. J. (2016). *Housing First: Ending homelessness, transforming systems, and changing lives*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- ^{xvi} Lawson, J., Denham, T., Dodson, D., Flanagan, K., Jacobs, K., Martin, C., Van den Nouwelant, R., Pawson, H. and Troy, L. (2019) Social housing as infrastructure: rationale, prioritisation and investment pathway. AHURI Final Report No. 315, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/315>, DOI: 10.18408/ahuri-5314001; Lawson, J., Pawson, H., Troy, L., van den Nouwelant, R. and Hamilton, C. (2018) Social housing as infrastructure: an investment pathway, AHURI Final Report 306, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/306>, DOI:10.18408/ahuri-5314301.
- ^{xvii} Herring et al. cited in note xii.

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