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Strategies to prevent homelessness, and offer support to people who have become homeless to resolve their situation, are one of the centre planks of the Australian Government’s agenda on social inclusion. Homelessness, at all ages, and in all family situations, is rightly seen as an extreme form of social exclusion and one that must be tackled urgently and with a more concerted and sustained focus than previously. Both research and practice tells us that all types of homelessness and marginal housing situations reflect and reinforce a range of disadvantages that people experience including insufficient money and material resources, poor mental and physical health, and incapacity to get a job or engage in education and training. Experience of homelessness can itself contribute to and compound disadvantage, for example, through, loss or theft of personal possessions, triggering of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and family break up. For children homelessness can bring trauma and affects their routines and friendships and they are more likely to go on to experience homelessness as adults. Failure to address the exclusion faced by families in these circumstances can negatively influence their life experiences and future prospects (Spinney, 2008). Many of the contributions to this edition of Parity elaborate upon these themes and the need for both policies and programs to address homelessness that cut across traditional policy divisions and different levels of government.

It is heartening to see specific goals against which we can chart progress in addressing homelessness. The clearest goals are in the White Paper on Homelessness, The Road Home, to halve overall homelessness by 2020 and to offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who seek it by 2020 (Australian Government 2008). Let us imagine for a moment that all of this is achieved; a considerable advance would have been made in addressing the deep social exclusion associated with becoming homeless. However, apart from the obvious fact that even if these targets were met there would still be people who are homeless in Australia, there are also other ways in which people experience social exclusion through not having a safe, secure and affordable home or a sense of belonging to a place. There is after all a difference between living in a dwelling and having a home. A sense of home is important to us all in developing a sense of identity and self-worth. This is relevant to this discussion of the role of home and place in social inclusion, because participating and being included are intrinsically wrapped up in our sense of identity. The view we have of ourselves in the world affects our perception of our right, and ability, to participate in that world.

A useful way of looking at the role of home and place in social inclusion is to distinguish between exclusion from housing and exclusion through housing processes more generally (Cameron and Field 2000). In the rest of the article we explore how this distinction can be useful in expanding policy debates about homelessness, housing and social inclusion. There are many ways in which people are excluded from housing, many of which revolve around the ways in which the rental market operates in Australia. Most of the research on this is about the well-documented affordability problems of people trying to access the private rental market. Recent research indicates why affordability problems matter in a broader sense too, finding that the financial pressures associated with paying too much of the household income on housing has many consequences including cutting back on necessities, reduced access to services, living with risk, worry, stress on family relationships, and a lack of security and stability (Burke and Pinnegar 2007). Exclusion from housing is not, however, only based on an ability to pay. Research into the private rental sector highlighted the effects of agent/landlord risk management practices which mean...
that vulnerable people identified as high risk renters can be excluded from the sector, and forced into undesirable living arrangements (Short et al 2008). The consequence is that some people do not have a home, although they may have shelter. These include women returning to live with violent ex partners or moving in with people who may pose a risk to them or their children; children boarded out with friends and relatives while their parent(s) try and stabilise their situation; people living in motels and hotels, those in informal sublet arrangements, and those sharing with friends on a temporary basis in what appear to be shared households. Furthermore, the option of social housing is not available to some people as a result of administrative decision-making, for example, tertiary students, households with poor tenancy histories, and recent refugees and migrants whose sponsorship arrangements have broken. Exclusion from housing can thus refer to a much broader group than rough sleepers or people who come to the attention of support agencies because of their homelessness.

It is also important to consider the ways in which people can be excluded through housing processes more generally. We have known since the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia in 1975 that the private rental sector is strongly associated with social and economic disadvantage and this continues to the present. Whilst social housing can and should provide exit points for people exiting homelessness services, targeting of allocations in this way does not address the ways in which individuals and families are excluded and displaced through the operation of the private rental sector. For example, as a result of evictions ‘without grounds’, unexpected rent increases, and excessive rent increases and accommodation. In this context, it is heartening to see a growing awareness of the links between market factors and institutional settings, which make secure occupancy in rental housing difficult to achieve for some lower income and vulnerable people. Funding by the Australian Government on research into the links between homelessness and tenancy law and practices is a good example of this (National Shelter 2010).

The housing processes which contribute to exclusion are, however, even broader than this when we take into account cumulative experiences of housing insecurity over time. This is an important contributor to social exclusion particularly when linked with other types of insecurity, for example in family relationships. Recent research has highlighted six interconnected dimensions of housing insecurity which can have quite profound effects. These are frequent moves over which people have little control, instability in housing in which people do not know if or when they may have to move next; lack of safety, lack of privacy, a lack of physical comfort and a lack of belonging (Hulse and Saugeres 2008). The important point is that low income people who privately rent over long periods, particularly in the private rental sector, experience housing insecurity in these ways even though they are ‘housed’.

Experience of housing insecurity over time reflects a lack of control over living circumstances that makes it difficult to establish a sense of home and a feeling of belonging which are at the core of social inclusion. For example, not knowing whether and when a next move will occur, and having no control over this, makes it more difficult to connect with neighbours and to make plans about education, work, or children’s schooling. Frequent unplanned moves disrupt social connections for adults and children and may compromise children’s educational opportunities. Lack of safety associated with particular types of housing, such as some boarding houses, or a particular neighbourhood, means that it is difficult to connect socially and engage economically.

Although the research evidence is far from perfect, it appears that lacking a home and a place to belong in the sense outlined above is an important contributor to mental and physical health problems, in particular anxiety disorders and depression. Whilst there is some recognition of this in terms of the ‘homeless population’, it would appear that many more people than this are affected. This is perhaps not surprising in view of some long-standing research about the importance of ‘ontological security’ to mental health; referring to a stable self which derives from a sense of order and continuity in life experiences. Furthermore, the qualitative research evidence points to a strong association between poor health and lack of social connectedness, and economic participation. Thus, it would appear that having a home and a sense of belonging is important for health and well-being and is a necessary condition for engagement in social and economic life, which lies at the heart of the idea of social inclusion.

The growing body of research evidence suggests that it is inaccurate to conceive of a dichotomy between people who are homeless and those who are not; rather there is a continuum on which some people experience housing insecurity at different times in their life. The people currently defined as homeless are in a sense the visible tip of the proverbial iceberg. For some of these people, housing insecurity is combined with other issues in quite complex ways such that intensive support services are required as well as accommodation.

However, this is not the case for all homeless people. The growing body of research into family homelessness, for example, tells us that homelessness is associated primarily with an inability to find sustainable accommodation when family relationships break down, for a variety of reasons including domestic and family violence (Hulse and Kolar 2009). Research also indicates that people are excluded from independent housing through the access requirements of the private and social rental sectors and make their own arrangements which range from the unsafe to the unsatisfactory. Finally, more people are excluded through processes which create housing insecurity; often associated with the operation of the private rental market. Cumulative experiences of housing insecurity make it difficult for people to have a home and a sense of belonging which is at the core of the concept of social inclusion.

Bibliography
For a more detailed review of the literature see our forthcoming positioning paper:

Housing, Public Policy and Social Inclusion (forthcoming) Hulse, Jacobs, Arthurson and Spinney, AHURI, Melbourne.


