Growing Wealth, Increasing Homelessness, and More Opportunities to Exercise Our Care to the Homeless

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❯ **Abstract_** *This article examines the paradox of increasing homelessness in Australia during an epoch of continued economic growth and unprecedented individual wealth. Official government statistics show a consistent trend in homelessness rising at a rate higher than population growth. Increasing homelessness takes place alongside increasing government funding for specialist homelessness services, and reduced government funding for social housing. Australia responds to the growing problem of homelessness, especially rough sleeping, with myriad ground up charitable initiatives that soothe the consequences rather than address the underlying causes. The article argues that these charitable responses to homelessness represent opportunities for the giver to exercise their compassion and care toward the homeless. The article shows that Australians design, celebrate and volunteer with responses to homelessness that are counterproductive to efforts to achieve housing justice. The charitable initiatives are embedded within policy failures that drive homelessness, and enabled through direct government funding, taxation policy and the uncritical public acclaim that charity to the homeless enjoys.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Charity, poverty of ambition, policy failure, ending homelessness*

Introduction

Drawing on the recent Australian experience, this article examines the paradox of the rate of homelessness increasing alongside increasing wealth and economic prosperity. In light of Australia's significant wealth, the article scrutinises some of the strategies adopted to respond to, but not to end, the growing problem. Homelessness in Australia has increased over the past 15 years. The official homelessness numbers, based on the Australian Bureau of Statistic's estimates from five yearly Census, demonstrate a consistent rising trend. Between the 2006 and 2011 Census, the number of people estimated to be homeless on Census night rose 14 per cent from 89 728 to 102 439. Similarly, the 116 427 people estimated as homeless on the 2016 Census night constitute a 14 per cent increase on the 102 439 people estimated as homeless at the 2011 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

The increasing rate of homelessness in Australia is greater than population growth. The Australian Homelessness Monitor from Hal Pawson and colleagues observed that the 14 per cent growth in homelessness between 2011 and 2016 is five per cent greater than the nine per cent growth in Australia's population during the period. Moreover, they found that the growth in homelessness is not evenly distributed across Australia. Rather, homelessness grew disproportionately high in some of Australia's major cities, such as Sydney, where both the economy and housing market experienced significant growth (Pawson *et al.*, 2018).

The uneven distribution of homelessness across Australia can be gleaned from the data on the rate of people who are homeless per 10 000 of the population by Australia's six states and two territories. Although the 2016 Census showed the national rate of homelessness to be 50 persons per 10 000 of the population – with Australia's three most populous States, New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland ranging from 42 to 50 persons per 10 000 of the population – we can see in Australia's Northern Territory the rate of people who are homeless is 600 per 10 000 of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

The Northern Territory thus, has a rate of homelessness that is twelve times greater than the national rate. Institutional racism in Australia drives and explains the phenomenally high rate of homelessness in the Northern Territory. Whereas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people constitute 2.8 per cent of the Australian population, they constitute 26 per cent of the Northern Territory population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Further, of the 13 717 people who were counted as homeless in the Northern Territory from the 2016 Census, 12 131, or 88 per cent, were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Official counts of homelessness nationally demonstrate an upward trend in the rate of homelessness during an epoch of economic success. It is the upward trends in homelessness, counterintuitively, that spurred newly appointed Federal Assistant Housing Minister Luke Howarth, to ask Australians to be positive about the homelessness rate. In 2019 the Assistant Minister rationalised the positive spin on growing homelessness in Australia because "it affects a very, very small percentage of the population" (Belot, 2019).

It is difficult to discern the positives from the upward trends in homelessness. Australia's first two decades of the Twenty First Century have been dominated by economic abundance. Australia has achieved recession free uninterrupted economic growth for the 28 years between 1992 and 2019, which the Australian Government proudly proclaims is "a new record among developed economies for uninterrupted expansion" (Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2019, p.3). Acknowledging that official unemployment rates can conceal underemployment and underutilisation (Mitchell and Carlson, 2000), Australia's unemployment rate depicts a similarly positive macroeconomic story. The 2018 unemployment rate of 5.3 per cent is equivalent to the OECD mean, and lower than the 6.8 per cent recorded in the European Union (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018).

Australia's macroeconomic conditions are reflected in individual wealth. The 2018 Global Wealth Report concluded that "Australia's wealth per adult in 2018 was the second-highest in the world after Switzerland", and if median wealth is considered, Australia's individual wealth is ahead of Switzerland as the highest in the world (Credit Suisse 2018, p. 55). It is this paradox of Australia's affluence and growing prosperity hand-in-hand with growing homelessness that this article engages.

Examination of this paradox is particularly pressing given that Australia, like other countries with advanced welfare states, not only has the financial means to address homelessness, but also the technical knowledge to do so. A developed body of empirical research demonstrates what is required to prevent and end homelessness (Mackie, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2016; Padgett *et al.*, 2016). Fundamental to the evidence base is the availability and accessibility of affordable and secure housing as central to solving homelessness. Although housing's centrality may seem intuitive, later we demonstrate the significant money and effort that is dedicated to homelessness responses that do not include housing. Alongside the necessity of housing as core to the solution of homelessness, the research shows how practices, integration, legislation, and purposeful models of intervention successfully prevent and end homelessness (Watts, 2014; Mackie, Johnsen and Wood, 2017; Parsell, Clarke and Vorsina, 2019).

We can therefore add to the paradox a rigorous evidence about what is required to end homelessness. Against the backdrop of the knowledge that exists to end homelessness – indeed, often knowledge generated through government funded evaluative research – together with Australia's positive economic circumstances, this article asks two questions. First, what are some of the strategies employed in Australia to respond to increasing homelessness, especially rough sleeping? Second, how can we understand Australia's responses to homelessness?

The article argues that many Australians are deeply sympathetic to people who are homeless, and this sympathy is embodied through pity for *the homeless*. From their pitied position, Australians respond to people experiencing homelessness through initiatives that enable the giver to exercise their compassion and care toward the homeless. The article shows that Australians design, celebrate and volunteer with responses to homelessness that are counterproductive to efforts to achieve housing justice.

Australia's Former Policy Ambition to End Homelessness

The paradox of increasing homelessness in Australia alongside economic prosperity is not a consequence of a lack of policy ambition. From 2008, Australian Commonwealth, state and territory governments committed to a new policy agenda that set ambitious objectives to permanently end homelessness. Through the setting of measurable targets, Australian policy committed to half the homeless population by 2020 and to offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it by 2020 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

Australia's formal homelessness policy released in 2008 understood the central role that a lack of affordable housing played in causing homelessness, and in turn, explicitly identified the need for additional affordable housing stock as central to achieve the homelessness reduction objectives. Through the formal policy and subsequent measures to stimulate the economy, in the wake of 2008 Australia had paused the disinvestment in social housing and had funded and delivered 20 000 new social housing dwellings across the country (Herault and Johnson, 2016).

The new homeless policy agenda in Australia, with clear recognition of the structural drivers of homelessness, constituted a positive progression. In the years prior to 2008, Australian homelessness and broader welfare policy had constructed people experiencing homelessness as deviant, dependent and responsible for their deprivation (Bullen, 2015). Rather than the provision of affordable housing, Bullen (2015) showed that homelessness policy prior to the new agenda of 2008 individu-

alised the problem. From the prevailing focus on the individual experiencing home-lessness, policy was predominantly a means to fund case management as a strategy to enable people to achieve self-reliance.

Australia's 2008 policy to achieve measurable and permanent reductions in home-lessness, with the understanding that affordable housing, prevention, and improving the service system was needed, constituted an optimistic era in Australian society. Parsell and Jones (2014) lauded the formal policy as embedded within a deep understanding of the multidimensional causes of homelessness with a firm recogni-tion of the state's role in addressing the structural barriers that people experience exiting homelessness. Indeed, although the government couched Australia's 2008 policy vision to address homelessness by evoking Australia's egalitarian identity, the formal plans to address homelessness relied upon rigorous research evidence. Herault and Johnson (2016, p. 130) observe that evidence based policy became the mantra to address homelessness, with "research evidence positioned in policy discourse as a key link between reducing homelessness and the selection of new homelessness initiatives."

Despite the optimism about the progressive policy that aimed to disrupt the struc-tural inequities that caused homelessness, the subsequent implementation of much of the policy did not meet the evidence based policy ideals. Parsell, Jones and Head (2013), for example, found that street to home initiatives adopted in Australia based on international evidence failed to include clear mechanisms for access to housing. Although the policies adopted had a rigorous evidence base from the United States, the policy transfer to Australia was incomplete, and thus the capacity of street to home to achieve the successes from elsewhere were limited accordingly. Likewise, the advocacy and funding of other Australian home-lessness policy was driven by intuition and personal experience rather than research evidence (Parsell, Fitzpatrick and Busch-Geertsema, 2014). Herault and Johnson (2016) observe that Australia's opportunity for service reform was wasted.

From 2008, governments in Australia implemented a rightly ambitious policy agenda, albeit with limitations derived from implementation challenges. The limita-tions notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged that many programmes funded through the policy agenda did achieve the significant outcome of enabling people to overcome barriers to housing access they had experienced prior to 2008 (Johnson and Chamberlain, 2015; Parsell, Petersen and Culhane, 2016). As Parkinson and Parsell (2018) observe, Australia has achieved important successes in adopting one-off projects and initiatives to end homelessness for people lucky enough to access the projects or initiatives. The successes of the models, however, have not been institutionalised within the system to address the housing and support system failures.

Beyond the limitations observed with homelessness policy not sufficiently addressing structural problems or other limitations driven by implementation problems, are the myriad and seemingly endless array of ground-up homelessness initiatives for *the homeless*. As demonstrated below, during the same period that governments announced unprecedented policy commitments to end homelessness through abundant economic times, Australia has also implemented a range of initiatives that do not include housing or housing outcome aspirations.

To Be With, But Not to End, Homelessness

Australians are deeply engaged in designing initiatives directed toward being with people who are homeless, but without ambition or activity to end their homelessness. In this journal a few years ago, we wrote about the charity movement in Australia that travelled the streets to wash the clothes of, and to provide mobile shower for, people who were homeless (Parsell and Watts, 2017). In the article, and drawing on Peter Singer's effective altruism, we argued that "careful and sustained attention needs to be given to whether the positive intentions of the giver achieve positive impacts for the receiver" (Parsell and Watts, 2017, p.66). We presented the argument that the good intentions of those who are interested in working with people who are homeless need to be set to one side, and instead empirical evidence should be used to assess the outcomes homelessness interventions achieve, especially housing outcomes.

Our analysis of mobile laundries and mobile showers as a response to homelessness raised concern about how these seemingly well intentioned initiatives distract from the underlying causes of homelessness as well as plans to end homelessness. Indeed, we argued that the celebration of these widely acclaimed initiatives for *the homeless* run the risk of normalising homelessness as a social fact (Parsell and Watts, 2017).

Despite the growing knowledge that has been generated about how evidence informed and housing led initiatives can permanently end rough sleeping and chronic homelessness, ground up and voluntary responses to people who are homeless are continually adopted in Australia. Consistent with the mobile laundry and mobile shower endeavours, the newly emerging ground up initiatives do not involve housing or have any aspiration or plan to contribute toward a housing outcome.

During late 2019 in Brisbane, Australia's third most populous city, the charity Beddown launched a two week trial to enable people who sleep rough to sleep in car parks on inflatable mattresses. The creator of Beddown said that, subject to the trial, he hoped to roll out the car park sleeping initiative to Melbourne and Sydney, Australia's two most populous cities (Silva, 2019). The promoters of the sleeping in car parks initiative say that they have been overwhelmed with support,

for example, from other charities providing mobile washing vans, volunteer hair-dressers, and free food (Silva, 2019). The Beddown website asserts that the pop up accommodation aims to "help restore health, dignity, and respect for our guests" (Beddown, 2019).

Sleepbus is another Australian charity, which commenced in 2016. After what the website says was a "year of research and development", the charity fitted out busses with beds so that people who are homeless can sleep in a bus. The website explains that each sleepbus has "up to 20 secure, climate controlled, individual sleep pods in twin cabins" (Sleepbus, n.d.) A bus pictured on the website has writing on the side that states "this bus provided 8 030 safe sleeps per year" (Sleepbus n.d.). Admittedly less prestigious than the Young Australians of the year award that the two creators of the mobile laundry charity received, the creator of Sleepbus won a 2017 Business Award for Victorian Charity of the year. A main-stream media outlet report lauded Sleepbus "as part of the solution to Australia's growing homeless problem" (McNally, 2016). Moreover, citing the wide public support Sleepbus had received through financial donations, the media uncritically reported Sleepbus as "quite cost effective" (McNally, 2016).

Citing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the right to dignity, shelter and health, the Australian charity Backpack Beds provides people who are homeless with backpacks that convert to beds. The website says that they supply approximately 5 000 backpack beds in Australia each year, and that demand outstrips supply (Backpack Beds, 2019). Again, the charity initiative is highly acclaimed; in 2011 Backpack Bed received the Australian Human Rights Award for Best Community Organisation (Backpack Beds, 2019).

Returning to the first research question motivating this article, we can see that Australians employ myriad responses to people who are homeless that aim to meet a minimal resource deprivation. The charitable initiatives above share similar premises. They aim to provide a basic human need that people who are homeless, especially those sleeping rough, have a constrained capacity to meet. In the absence of the amenity enabled through housing, people sleeping rough cannot readily wash their clothes or themselves, thus outreach transport brings this amenity to them. The basic amenity provided does not extend to housing, but rather some of the resources that are contained within housing are provided, such as beds or canvass material in a backpack that can be used as a bed, washing machines and showers. There is an intuitive appeal to these charitable approaches: by virtue of being homeless people do not have access to beds and washing facilities; this is observable to an onlooker, and this confronting observation motivates volunteers to address the resource deprivation. Reflecting on these responses, the remainder of the article addresses the second research question: how can we understand

Australia's responses to homelessness? We pay particular attention to examining and understanding these responses to homelessness in light of the abundance inherent in the paradox introduced at the beginning of the article.

Poverty of Ambition

We can tease out the nature and practices of the ground up charitable endeavours, as evidenced in the four examples above, to identify the implicit assumptions about people who are homeless. It is reasonable to assume that these charitable endeavours are driven by people's feeling of compassion for homeless people. Drawing on classical definitions of compassion developed by Aristotle and extended by Nussbaum, Crisp (2008) sets out compassion as a feeling rather than an action. We feel compassion out of the concern at others' suffering. Moreover, Nussbaum (1996) is optimistic about compassion, arguing that compassion can be a bridge between the individual and community.

The compassion people feel, for the downtrodden, for example, does not predict how they will act on their compassion. Even though compassion may help people move from "self-interest to just conduct" (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 57), compassion can motivate wrong action, including responding to the suffering of others' for self-interest (Crisp, 2008). Compassion is a useful feeling to induce concern about injustices other people experience, but it is an unreliable feeling to motivate action to most appropriately help people who are suffering (Crisp, 2008). Psychological research on giving, for instance, suggests that when people are pitied, and when their pitiful situation is deemed to be undeserving, people are more likely to donate to charities that address their situation (Dijker, 2001).

The existing knowledge on feeling compassion and pity as a means to donate do not provide clear insights into why the Australian public so widely supports the charitable ground up initiatives for homeless people, instead of supporting affordable housing initiatives, for instance. Dees (2012) identified a tension between science and charity that is pertinent to the current discussion: the tension between relieving suffering versus solving problems.

Rather than working to address the structural undersupply of affordable housing, people's compassion motivates them to respond to another's immediate suffering. Moreover, responding to immediate need, rather than preventing a social problem from occurring in the first place, is deemed more socially praiseworthy. It is for these reasons that Crisp (2008) advocates for rational consideration as more important in motivating right action to alleviate suffering rather than compassion. Dees (2012, p. 326) explains:

From a rational point of view, prevention deserves even more moral praise than helping one victim, but in the culture of charity, it is the immediate act of caritas that is most praiseworthy. This morality encourages people to direct action and resources to visible suffering rather than underlying problems… Caritas responds to names and faces, not counterfactual statistics.

The four examples noted above – mobile laundries and washing machines, beds in car parks, beds in buses, and beds in backpacks – all received significant social praise. They also received noteworthy acclaim, including positive media coverage and esteemed national awards, Young Australians of the Year and an award from the prestigious Australian Human Rights Commission. I know of no prestigious awards bestowed or glowing media coverage to individuals or organisations that have prevented or ended homelessness in Australia through increasing the supply of housing or changing tenancy legislation, for example.

Paul Bloom offers an explanation for why we celebrate direct actions to soothe poverty and tend to downplay fundamental structural change that solves problems. Bloom (2016) argues that our moral decisions are shaped by empathy: what we see in front of us influences not only what we focus on, but also the type of behaviour we adopt. When we see someone who is homeless we are motivated to respond to their immediate need for a shower or a bed in a car park for instance, rather than reasoning about what we can do to address the underlying problems that affect the many thousands of people [who are homeless, for example] that we cannot see. For Bloom (2016), empathy can lead people to do good things, but compared to rational assessment of evidence and the consequences of our actions, empathic responses about what problems we focus on and how we respond can drive behaviour that makes things worse.

It is the uncritical praise and celebration of activities that engage with the poor and relieve their suffering that offers some explanation to why these initiatives continue to grow despite economic conditions that unambiguously allow for resources to be allocated toward solving the problem of homelessness through housing. Indeed, Australian robust empirical research does demonstrate the cost offsets of ending rather than managing homelessness (Parsell, Petersen and Culhane, 2016); the research, moreover, which was funded by the state housing department, sits on shelves while the same housing department directly funds initiatives that soothe rather than end homelessness. Through a funding scheme that I am assured is not intended to be ironically named, Dignity First funding from an Australian govern-ment's housing department has provided more than a million dollars to charities to purchase and operate mobile facilities to provide cleaning, food, and hairdressing to *the homeless* on the street (Queensland Government, 2019).

Direct state funding for these charitable endeavours that soothe the symptoms of poverty are easy to challenge. When we have evidence that housing is the critical element required to end a person's homelessness, there is a direct link to the state's constrained capacity to deliver on housing solutions when the state department of housing instead funds mobile laundry, shower, and hairdressing facilities for people living on the street. Also worth critique, however, is the philanthropic and individual funding provided to support these charitable initiatives. When uncritically praising these soothing initiatives, the media point to the public support and public funding provided (McNally, 2016). Reich (2018) reminds us, however, that these acts of individual donation are not decoupled from our collective responsibility and collective actions. In countries such as Australia and many others, an individual donating money to a charity offsets an individual's taxable income, and thus the amount of tax a citizen is obligated to pay the state. Individual and collective charity must therefore be understood as firmly "embedded in political institutions, laws, and public policies" (Reich 2018, p.26).

It is perhaps no coincidence that government funding for charities that soothe the consequences of homelessness coincide with increased funding for homelessness services, including temporary homeless accommodation, and reduced funding for housing. Between the financial years 2012-13 to 2016-17, Australia has increased funding for specialist homelessness services by 29 per cent, and during the same period, reduced spending on social housing by 8 per cent (Pawson *et al.*, 2018). Diminishing government funding to social housing goes hand in hand with increased funding to homelessness providers. However, with declining levels of social housing, the homelessness service providers with increasing budgets have a constrained capacity to assist people access housing.

Government figures illustrate the consequences of reduced funding for social housing poignantly. Data on people accessing specialist homelessness services published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019a) show that "long-term housing options were provided to 5% (or 5200) of the 104600 (36%) clients needing this service." The state reduces funding for social housing, increases funding for specialist homelessness services, and then because social housing is in such short supply, the specialist homelessness services with additional funding are unable to support their clients to access social housing (because funding for social housing had decreased). The heavily residualised social housing sector in Australia has meant that housing providers have restricted access to people who can demonstrate they cannot access housing in the market. Despite the strict criteria for eligibility, there are 140600 Australians registered waiting for social housing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019b).

Without sufficient social housing, specialist homelessness services have a constrained capacity to contribute to housing outcomes, which is manifest in both the specialist homelessness service data use and increasing prevalence of homelessness counts identified in the Census. These policy and funding decisions create a fertile environment for ground up initiatives to respond to the consequences of policy failure. As Reich (2018, p. 9) observes, "growing inequality might be a foe to civic comity, but it is a friend to private philanthropy." Again, we have to see the ground up charitable initiatives as embedded within wider policy and structural levers.

The structural drivers of the undersupply of social and affordable housing create the conditions for people to experience homelessness, which evokes ground up initiatives that endeavour to soothe some of the consequences. Structural forces similarly support the growth of the charitable endeavours, through taxation policy for example, and the overwhelming social support these charitable endeavours receive, solidifies their perceived legitimacy as a mainstream response to homelessness. There is a vast and long established body of knowledge on the myriad detrimental impacts to the recipient of charity that is unable to reciprocate but rather reliant on the benevolence and moral authority of the giver (Mauss, 2011). Dees adds to these individual dynamics by pointing out how charitable responses to poverty have systematic consequences. He says charity:

> Is a complicated thing to do well. It can backfire in several ways, causing more harm than good. It has inherently perverse incentives of keeping the problems it addresses alive so that future generations can continue to exercise this virtue. This can lead to a ''charity industry'' that has a vested interest in problems remaining unsolved (Dees 2012, p. 327)

Building on the negative consequences identified in the charity literature, the charitable endeavours examined in this article embed the homeless' dependence on volunteers, on the one hand, and reify their positioning as in need of the care of the charitable, on the other (Parsell, 2018). By diverting funding from housing and distracting from attention to end homelessness, these initiatives form part of a charity industry that is neither motivated by nor directed toward solving homelessness. Moreover, by lining up at car parks to access stretcher beds, or in public spaces to have a volunteer wash one's clothes, or to enter a mobile shower attached to a van, the public continue to see people who are homeless as the other. We have argued that these charitable endeavours are predicated on a poverty of ambition (Parsell and Watts, 2017). By withholding housing and requiring *the homeless* to become reliant on these charitable measures, the necessity for these impoverished endeavours become validated.

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