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**AUSTRALIA'S STRENGTHS AND
CHALLENGES IN RESPONDING TO
HOMELESSNESS: AN
INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON**

**A Discussion Paper for the National Homelessness Conference,
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Introduction

The emergence of a new national Labor government in Australia with an articulated commitment to social inclusion has placed homelessness on the political and policy agenda. Another feature of the new Australian government, particularly emphasised by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, is comparing Australia's policy progress internationally through the use of clear and identifiable benchmarks. Considering this context how does both the incidence of homelessness in Australia and the Australian policy and service delivery response compare with other developed countries in the world?

This paper intends to provide some information, opinion and perspective in attempting to answer this question. It is reasonable to state that is difficult to be completely definitive about this for a number of reasons. Firstly, information and data about homelessness in developed world, despite developing over time, is limited and patchy, has different methodological and definitional approaches and, in some countries, has tended to be obtained on a regional or city basis and not nationally. Secondly, developed countries have different government administrative arrangements and political and policy cultures which can make comparisons difficult. This is well documented in many studies attempting international comparisons. However, there is sufficient information to draw some conclusions and to form further questions and scope for inquiry.

The paper will provide a brief overview of homelessness in the major English-speaking countries of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. These nations have been chosen because, arguably, they are the most comparable to Australia and there is more information available. Also, the Council to Homeless Persons, has recently been involved with a study tour to North America, organised by the Victorian government, and so can provide some observation and anecdote to add to data and research. It is not the intention of this paper to provide comprehensive information about homelessness in each country. This is available through various sources which could form the basis of a future paper.

However, the main purpose of the paper is to generate discussion and debate about the level and extent of homelessness in Australia when compared internationally and the strengths of and challenges to Australia's policy approach. Where does Australia sit in responding to homelessness? What can we learn from the experience and approach of other similar countries and how do we interpret this? What role does international literature on homelessness play in developing our future policy on homelessness?

Homelessness in the United States

Numbers of People who are Homeless

Some cities and regions in the United States have arguably the highest levels and rates of homelessness in the developed world. The definition of homelessness used in the United States is narrower than Australia and generally refers to people living on the streets or in emergency shelters and transitional housing. This could mean, that homelessness as defined by the Australian cultural definition is considerably higher in the United States than official figures suggest.

In the most recent ‘point in time’ count, undertaken by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in January 2006 recorded 759,101 people in the United States who experienced homelessness either on the streets or in shelters. Of this group:

- 44 percent were living on the streets or ‘unsheltered’
- 52 percent were single adults and 48 percent were families with children
- 21 percent were considered to be chronically homeless
- African-Americans represented about 44 percent of the sheltered population
- 14 percent of all homeless adults who accessed a shelter were veterans
- 38 percent of those using a shelter were reported as having a disabling condition.¹

An extensive survey of homelessness service providers estimated that 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, in the United States are likely to experience homelessness in a given year.²

Data collection on the numbers of people who are homeless in the United States appears to be more political and controversial than in Australia. There does not appear to be a universally accepted general figure. Over the past three decades, advocates, journalists, members of Congress, academics and public servants have publicly disagreed with each other regarding the extent of homelessness in the country.³ Whilst the numbers referred to above are not necessarily opposed to one another, they seem to represent the two ends of the data debate.

Some evidence suggests that homelessness has been increasing in the United States in the last three decades. A 1991 study examining homelessness “rates” (the number of shelter beds in a city divided by the city’s population) in 182 U.S. cities with populations over 100,000 found that rates tripled between 1981 and 1989.⁴ A 1997 review of research over the past decade (1987-1997) in 11 communities and 4 states found that shelter capacity

¹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2008) The Second Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (HUD, Office of Community Planning and Development)

² Burt, Martha et al., (2001) Helping America’s Homeless (The Urban Institute Press)

³ Kondratas, Anna, (1991) ‘Estimates and Public Policy: The Politics of Numbers’ Housing Policy Debate 2(3): 631-47

⁴ Burt, Martha (1991) ‘Causes of the Growth of Homelessness during the 1980s’ in Understanding Homelessness: New Policy and Research Perspectives (Fannie Mae Foundation)

more than doubled in 9 communities and 3 states during the time period.⁵ A recent study conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found 23% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet due to lack of resources. For families, the figure was worse with 29% of emergency shelter requests for families being denied. The same study found that during the past year, request for emergency shelter increased in the survey by an average of 9 percent. Requests for shelter by homeless families alone, increased by 5 percent in the past year.⁶

The highest numbers of people experiencing homelessness are in the more populous states. The 2006 point in time estimates recorded 177,722 people who were homeless in California, 69,930 in New York, 62,229 in Florida and 49,242 in Texas. In California, over 70 percent of the recorded homeless population were living on the streets. The concentration or 'rate' of homelessness is particularly high in the District of Columbia (includes Washington DC), Arkansas and Nevada.⁷ The large cities of Los Angeles (60,000), New York (48,000) has very high numbers of people experiencing homelessness. Numbers are also relatively high in Detroit (15,000), Las Vegas (14,000), Houston (12,000), and Denver (10,000).⁸

Chronic Homelessness

In the United States, there are approximately 150,000 to 200,000 chronically homeless individuals nationwide at a point in time, about 20-25 percent of the homeless population.⁹ Chronic homelessness refers to people who have experienced homelessness for longer than one year and have what is referred to as a 'disabling condition'. However, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development has a relatively strict and tight definition targeting people with substantial and diagnosed mental health and substance abuse issues.¹⁰ Research examining administrative data demonstrated that although those experiencing chronic homelessness were only a small proportion of the homeless population, they used up more than 50 percent of the services.¹¹ This group tended to cycle between homelessness, hospitals, jails and other institutional care settings.

⁵ National Coalition for the Homeless (1997) Homelessness in America: Unabated and Increasing (NCH, Washington DC)

⁶ U.S. Conference of Mayors (2006) A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities

⁷ HUD (2008), p71-2

⁸ Homelessness Research Institute (2007) Homelessness Counts (National Alliance to End Homelessness)

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ The American Department of Housing and Urban Development have a very developed definition of what constitutes chronic homelessness. A person who is 'chronically homeless' is an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has at least 4 episodes of homelessness in the past 3 years. In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g. living on the streets) and/or in an emergency homeless shelter. A disabling condition is defined as a diagnosable substance abuse disorder, serious mental illness, developmental disability including the co-occurrence of two or more of these conditions. A disabling condition limits an individual's ability to work or perform one or more activities of daily living.

¹¹ Kuhn, R & Culhane, D.P. (1998) Applying cluster analysis to test of a typology of homelessness: Results from the analysis of administrative data American Journal of Community Psychology, 17(1), 23-43

Family Homelessness

It is estimated that every year 600,000 families with 1.35 million children experience homelessness in the United States, making up 50 percent of the homeless population over the course of the year.¹² On any given night, approximately 100,000 families are homeless.¹³ Lack of affordable housing is identified by U.S. researchers and policy makers as the primary cause of homelessness among families. A key issue for families to exiting shelters is whether they receive or access a housing subsidy. Housing vouchers are largely used to rent in the private market.¹⁴ One study demonstrated that families exiting shelters were 21 times more likely to remain stably housed with a subsidy.¹⁵ However, although 5 million households receive federal housing assistance, there are 10 million families eligible for housing subsidies that do not receive a subsidy because of lack of funding. Most cities have waiting lists that stretch from two to five years for housing units and rent subsidies.¹⁶

Youth Homelessness

Researchers estimate that about 5 to 7.7 percent of young people in the United States experience homelessness each year.¹⁷ Local community programs, funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, served over 500,000 homeless and runaway youth in 2005.¹⁸ Over 2,500 homeless and runaway youth were turned away from shelter and housing in 2005 due to lack of bed spaces.¹⁹ Youth transitioning out of foster care are at high risk of becoming homeless. Every year, between 20,000 and 25,000 youth, ages 18 and older, age out of the foster care system.²⁰ Twenty-five percent of former foster youth nationwide reported that they had been homeless at least one night within 2.5 to 4 years after exiting foster care.²¹

¹² Culhane, D (2004) Family Homelessness: Where to From Here? (NAEH Conference on Ending Family Homelessness)

¹³ HUD (2008)

¹⁴ Burt, M (2001) 'What will it take to end homelessness?' (Urban Institute, Washington DC)

¹⁵ Shin, M, Weitzman, B, Stanjanovic, D, Knickman, J, Jimenez, L, Duchon, L, James, S, and Krantz, D (1998) 'Predictors of homelessness among families in New York City: From shelter request to housing stability' American Journal of Public Health 88 (11): 1561-1657

¹⁶ Shin, M, et al (1998)

¹⁷ Robertson, M & Toro, P (1998) Homeless Youth: Research, Intervention, Policy (National Symposium on Homelessness Research, Washington DC, US Department of Health and Human Services)

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2005) Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System

¹⁹ National Network for Youth, (2005) Statement for the Record FY2007 Labor-HHS-Education Related Agencies Appropriations before the Subcommittee on Labor-Health and Human Services-Education-Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives

²⁰ Allen, M & Nixon, R (2000) 'The Foster Care Independence Act and the John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program: New catalyst for reform for young people aging out of foster care' Journal of Poverty and Policy

²¹ Anne E Casey Foundation (2004) Kids Count Data Book (Washington DC, Annie E Casey Foundation)

The Family and Youth Services Bureau, part of the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, administers the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs. The three programs include:

- The Basic Center Program, which provides financial assistance to meet the immediate needs of runaway and homeless youth and their families, including emergency shelter, reunification when possible, food, clothing, counselling and facilitating access to health care;
- The Transitional Living Program which supports projects that provide long-term residential services to homeless youth ages 16 to 21 for up to 18 months; and
- The Street Outreach Program, which provides funds to private and non-profit agencies performing outreach efforts designed to move youth off the streets.²²

The Administration requested \$102 million in fiscal year 2008 for these programs (\$40 million for Transitional Living Program (TLP), \$47 million for Basic Centers (BC), and \$15 million for Street Outreach), essentially the same funding levels as last year. However, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, HHS, and Education has recommended a \$10 million increase for these programs, while Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, HHS, and Education recommended a \$20 million increase for the consolidated account which funds the TLP, BC, National Runaway Switchboard and training and technical assistance activities.²³

Veterans who are Homeless

In 2006, approximately 195,827 veterans were homeless on a given night. It is estimated that 336,627 were homeless over the course of the year. Veterans represent about 26 percent of the homeless population but only 11 percent of the civilian population aged 18 years and older. It is estimated that approximately 44,000 to 64,000 veterans were chronically homeless. About 467,877 veterans were severely rent burdened and were paying more than 50 percent of their income on rent. The major causes of homelessness amongst veterans are lack of income, physical health, mental health and disability, substance abuse, weak social networks and a lack of services to meet current need. California, Florida, Texas, New York and Louisiana have the highest numbers of homeless veterans. Washington DC has, by far, the highest percentage of veterans who are homeless at 7.51 percent. In Louisiana, 3.28 of veterans were homeless and in California, 2.26 percent were homeless. In the state of New York, the number of homeless veterans increased by 66.5 percent between 2005 and 2006.²⁴

Homelessness and Prison Re-entry

The United States has one of the highest rates of people in prison in the world. In the mid 1990s, the OECD recorded a prison population per 100,000 people in the United States of

²² National Alliance to End Homelessness, (2008) Legislative Update: Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Cunningham, M, Henry, M, Lyons, W, (2007) Vital Mission: Ending Homelessness Among Veterans (National Alliance to End Homelessness, Washington DC)

738. The next highest was Poland on 228 and Australia's rate was 126.²⁵ Between 1980 and 2006, the number of persons under correctional supervision in the United States (probation, jail, prison or parole) increased by 291 percent from 1,842,100 to 7,211,400. The incarceration rate per 100,000 persons increased from 139 to 501 in the same period.²⁶

Each year, more than 650,000 people are released from state prisons in the United States, and an estimated nine million are released from jails.²⁷ The number of people released from prison has increased by 350 percent over the last 20 years.²⁸ More than 10 percent of those coming in and out of prisons and jail are homeless in the months before their incarceration. For those with mental illness, the rates are even higher – about 20 percent. One study found that 22 percent of jailed inmates in New York City reported being homeless the night before arrest.²⁹ In urban areas such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, the percentage of parolees who are homeless is as high as 30 to 50 percent.³⁰ About 49 percent of homeless adults have reportedly spent five or more days in a city or county jail over their lifetimes, and 18 percent have been incarcerated in a state or federal prison.³¹ In a study of 50,000 individuals who were released from New York State prisons and returned to New York City between 1995 and 1998, the risk of release increased 23 percent with pre-release shelter stay and 17 percent with post-release shelter stay.³² A qualitative study found that people released from prison and jail to parole, who entered homeless shelters in New York City, were seven times more likely to abscond during the first month after release than those who had some form of housing.³³

Domestic Violence

Whilst data is limited, data collected by the National Network to End Domestic Violence in 2006 found over 22,000 people, 12,000 children and 10,000 adults received housing services in one night from domestic violence programs. It is likely that this is an undercount because only 62 percent of services participated.³⁴ While the basic shelter needs of most people fleeing domestic violence are met, the Network data showed that in

²⁵ OECD Social Indicators

²⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Corrections Statistics

²⁷ Harrison, P, & Beck, A, (2006) Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2005 (US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington DC)

²⁸ Lynch, J, & Sabol, W, (2001) Prisoner Re-entry in Perspective

²⁹ Metraux S and Culhane, D, (2004) 'Homeless Shelter Use and Re-incarceration Following Prison Release: Assessing the Risk', Criminology and Public Policy 3, no.2 201-222 and Michaels, D et al (2002) 'Homelessness and indicators of mental illness among inmates in New York City's correctional system' Hospital and Community Psychiatry 43, 150-155

³⁰ California Department of Corrections (1997) Prevention Parolee Failure Program: An Evaluation (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Corrections)

³¹ Burt et al

³² Metraux and Culhane

³³ Nelson, M, Deess, P, & Allen, C, (1999) The First Month Out: Post Incarceration Experiences in New York City (Vera Institute of Justice, New York)

³⁴ National Network to End Domestic Violence, (2007) Domestic Violence Counts: A 24-hour census of domestic violence shelters and services across the United States (National Network to End Domestic Violence, Washington DC)

one 24 hour period, an estimated 1,740 people could not be provided with emergency shelter and 1,422 people could not be provided with transitional shelter.³⁵ Many women who are homeless in the United States have been subjected to violence even if they do not reveal this as their immediate reason for their homelessness. One study in Massachusetts found that 92 percent of homeless women had experienced severe physical or sexual assault at some point in their life, 63 percent had been victims of violence by an intimate partner, and 32 percent had been assaulted by their current or most recent partner.³⁶

Homelessness Service Funding

In the early twentieth century, homelessness in the United States (and other Western countries) was linked to unemployment and being without family or a place of belonging. The public discourse generally referred to mobile itinerant men who travelled the country looking for work and staying in cheap hotels and boarding houses. This group was particularly highlighted during the Great Depression where some towns had an influx of this group. Later studies in the 1950s and 1960s described a population, mostly of single men, who were housed, lived steadily in a particular part of a city, but lived by themselves, often in a motel.³⁷ These people were considered to be homeless at the time. Little or no direct government funding was provided for services for these people at this time.

The 1980s appeared to be the time when governments in the United States became active in responding the homelessness. This was perhaps precipitated by the recession in the early 1980s. However, it was state and local governments, providing funds for shelter services which were most active. The Reagan administration took the view that homelessness should be addressed at a local and regional level. Between 1984 and 1988, when very little federal money was available, the total dollars committed to shelter services in the United States increased from \$300 million to \$1.6 billion. The share of this much larger figure coming from state and local governments had increased to 65 percent in 1988, from 37 percent in 1984.³⁸

However, throughout the 1980s there was political pressure on the federal administration to become involved in the funding of homelessness programs. In 1987, Congress recognised homelessness and inaugurated a major federal effort to address it through the Stewart B McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. Most McKinney Act programs required their recipients to match federal dollars with a certain percentage of funds and this generated more funding for homeless services than what had previously been available. In the early years, this funding went towards fixing, renovating and building structures that could serve as shelters. The number of shelter beds in the United States increased by about half in the Act's first three years. The types of shelters were changing for the first time with the provision of transitional shelters, primarily for families and the mentally ill,

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Bassuk, E, Melnick, S & Brone, A (1998) 'Responding to the needs of low income and homeless women who are survivors of family violence' *Journal of American Medical Association*, 53(2): 57-64

³⁷ Bahr and Caplow (1974), Bogue (1963) Wiseman (1970)

³⁸ Burt, Martha et al, *Helping America's Homeless* (The Urban Institute Press)

and specialised permanent housing with supportive services for people with disabilities established.

Between 1987 and 1993, under Republican administrations, McKinney Act programs were funded significantly below authorised levels. The arrival of the Clinton administration in 1993 led to changes in homelessness policy. Funding for McKinney Act programs was increased. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recognised that funding for homelessness services had developed haphazardly throughout the country. The new approach emphasised ‘continuum of care’ and coordination approach between providers in a region and funding was then provided to what are known as Continuum of Care regions. There was also increased attention on rural homelessness and administrative data began covering rural areas for the first time.³⁹

Whilst the federal government provided an initial injection of funding for homelessness assistance programs, funding, in real terms, has fluctuated since. In 1995, Congress provided \$1.72 billion dollars (in constant 2008 dollars) to homelessness assistance programs. The following year, a new Congress slashed funding by 28 percent, and whilst rising a little, has never reached the 1995 level.⁴⁰ Between 2001 and 2006, actual funding for Homelessness Assistance Grants increased by only 3.2 percent.⁴¹ Homelessness funding now represents less than 1/2000th of federal spending, down one third since 1995. HUD homeless assistance funding represents about \$480 per homeless person.⁴²

Public Space and Legal Issues

Many local authorities in the United States have developed laws that penalise people who are homeless in public space. Through measures ranging from anti-camping laws to selective enforcement of public intoxication laws, cities continue to implement measures that criminalise being homeless. The following section of this paper regarding public space and legal issues is drawn from an extensive report undertaken by The National Coalition for the Homeless and The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.⁴³

Types of Criminalization Measures

The criminalization of homelessness takes many forms, including:

- Legislation that makes it illegal to sleep, sit, or store personal belongings in public spaces in cities where people are forced to live in public spaces;
- Selective enforcement of more neutral laws, such as loitering or open container laws, against homeless persons;

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ National Alliance to End Homelessness, (2007) HUD’s Homeless Assistance Programs (NAEH, Washington DC)

⁴¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness (2006) Explainer: How Much Does the Federal Government Spend on Homelessness (NAEH, Washington DC)

⁴² NAEH (2007)

⁴³ The National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2006) A Dream Denied: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities (Washington)

- Sweeps of city areas where homeless persons are living to drive them out of the area, frequently resulting in the destruction of those persons' personal property, including important personal documents and medication; and
- Laws that punish people for begging or panhandling to move poor or homeless persons out of a city or downtown area.

Criminalization Measures have increased

City ordinances frequently serve as a prominent tool to criminalize homelessness. A report by the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty found, in surveying 224 cities that:

- 28% prohibit “camping” in particular places in the city and 16% had citywide prohibitions on “camping.”
- 27% prohibit sitting/lying in certain public places.
- 39% prohibit loitering in particular public areas and 16% prohibit loitering citywide.
- 43% prohibit begging in particular public places; 45% prohibit aggressive panhandling and 21% have citywide prohibitions on begging.

Since a previous report of 67 cities in 2002 there has been a:

- 12% increase in laws prohibiting begging in certain public places and an 18% increase in laws that prohibit aggressive panhandling.
- 14% increase in laws prohibiting sitting or lying in certain public spaces.
- 3% increase in laws prohibiting loitering, loafing, or vagrancy laws.

The Meanest Cities

The report identifies the top 20 meanest cities based on the number of anti-homeless laws in the city, the enforcement of those laws and severities of penalties, the general political climate toward homeless people in the city, local advocate support for the meanest designation, the city's history of criminalization measures, and the existence of pending or recently enacted criminalization legislation in the city. The top 5 are:

1. Sarasota, Florida: After two successive Sarasota anti-lodging laws were overturned as unconstitutional by state courts, Sarasota passed a third law banning lodging outdoors. This latest version appears to be explicitly aimed at homeless persons. One of the elements necessary for arrest under this law is that the person “has no other place to live.”
2. Lawrence, Kansas: After a group of downtown Lawrence business leaders urged the city to cut social services and pass ordinances to target homeless persons, the city passed three “civility” ordinances, including an aggressive panhandling law, a law prohibiting trespass on rooftops, and a law limiting sleeping or sitting on city sidewalks.
3. Little Rock, Arkansas: Homeless persons have reported being kicked out of bus stations in Little Rock, even when they had valid bus tickets. Two homeless men reported that officers of the Little Rock Police Department, in separate incidents,

- had kicked them out of the Little Rock Bus Station, even after showing the police their tickets. In other instances, homeless persons have been told that they could not wait at the bus station “because you are homeless.”
4. Atlanta, Georgia: Amid waves of public protest and testimony opposing the Mayor’s proposed comprehensive ban on panhandling, the City Council passed the anti-panhandling ordinance in August 2005. In the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Atlanta stood firm in its resolve to criminalize panhandlers. A Katrina evacuee who was sleeping in his car with his family after seeking refuge in Atlanta was arrested for panhandling at a mall in the affluent Buckhead neighbourhood, even after he showed the police his Louisiana driver’s license, car tag, and registration as proof that he was a Katrina evacuee. In addition, during the first week in December, the Atlanta Zoning Review Board approved a ban on supportive housing inside the city limits.
 5. Las Vegas, Nevada: Even as the city shelters are overcrowded and the city’s Crisis Intervention Center recently closed due to lack of funding, the city continues to target homeless persons living outside. The police conduct habitual sweeps of encampments which lead to extended jail time for repeat misdemeanour offenders. In order to keep homeless individuals out of future parks, the city considered privatising the parks, enabling owners to kick out unwanted people. Mayor Oscar Goodman fervently supported the idea, saying “I don’t want them there. They’re not going to be there. I’m not going to let it happen. They think I’m mean now; wait until the homeless try to go over there.”

Constructive Alternatives to Criminalization

While many cities engage in practices that exacerbate the problem of homelessness by pursuing criminalization measures, more constructive approaches do exist in some cities around the country. The following examples can serve as more constructive approaches to homelessness:

- Broward County, Florida. The Taskforce for Ending Homelessness, Inc., a not-for-profit agency that provides outreach, education, and advocacy services for the homeless population in Broward County, has partnered with the Ft. Lauderdale police department to create an outreach team made up of police officers and a civilian outreach worker who is formerly homeless. In its five years of operation, the Homeless Outreach Team has had over 23,000 contacts with homeless individuals and has placed 11,384 people in shelters. Estimates suggest that there are at least 2,400 fewer arrests each year as a result of the Homeless Outreach Team.
- Pasadena, California. The Pasadena Police Department and the Los Angeles Department of Health has partnered to form the Homeless Outreach Psychiatric Evaluation (HOPE) Team. The program created three teams of mental health and law enforcement officials to provide compassionate assistance to persons in need of mental health assessment and services.

- Ohio. In Ohio, the three largest cities, Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati, fund teams of trained workers to go out under the bridges and visit the encampments near the rivers to assist those outside the service system. The critical component to the success of these programs is that they do not put a lot of restrictions on the assistance that they are offering and offer help at nontraditional hours when other services are closed, providing a vital link between mainstream services and a population that resists congregate living.
- Washington, DC. The downtown business community in Washington, D.C., created a day center for homeless people who may not have anywhere to go during the day when shelters are closed. Through the Downtown D.C. Business Improvement District, business owners fund this day center that can serve up to 260 people per day, with indoor seating, laundry, showers, and a morning meal.
- San Diego, California. In 1989, a public defender from San Diego created the nation's first Homeless Court Program, which is a special monthly Superior Court session held at local shelters for homeless defendants to resolve outstanding misdemeanor criminal cases. Homeless courts expand access to the judicial system and assist homeless defendants by addressing outstanding warrants and criminal offenses to remove barriers to benefits, treatment, housing, and employment.

Hate Crimes

Hate crimes and violence against homeless persons has become a nationwide epidemic, with 472 reported cases of violence against homeless people over the past 7 years, resulting in 169 deaths. Only two states (California and Maine) have passed legislation with elements addressing this issue. No state has added homelessness to its hate crimes statute. However, legislation is pending in Massachusetts. In 2006, legislation was introduced in both Maryland and Florida. It lost by one vote in the Maryland State Senate. And the Florida Legislature ended its session, therefore killing the bill. Advocates/providers plan to have the legislation reintroduced in the next legislative sessions in both Maryland and Florida.

Food Sharing Restrictions

In the past few years, many cities have adopted a new tactic – one that targets not only the homeless but also individual citizens and groups who attempt to share food with them including:

- The Las Vegas city council passed an ordinance that bans “the providing of food and meals to the indigent for free or for a nominal fee” in city parks;
- The City of Wilmington, North Carolina, passed an ordinance that prohibits the sharing of food on city streets and sidewalks;
- The Orlando, Florida, City Council passed an ordinance that prohibits sharing food with more than 25 people in city parks without a permit and limits groups to doing so to two times a year.

The U.S. Conference of Mayor's 2006 Hunger and Homelessness Survey reported an average increase of 7 percent in the overall requests for emergency food assistance, with 74 percent of surveyed cities reporting an increase. In addition, 23 percent of the requests for emergency food assistance went unmet and 18 percent of requests made by families went unmet.

A study published by the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness surveyed homeless people nationally and found:

- 28% sometimes or often do not get enough to eat, compared with 12% of poor American adults.
- 20% eat one meal a day or less.
- 40% went one or more days in the last 30 days without anything to eat because they could not afford food, compared with 3% of poor Americans.

According to a report by the General Accounting Office, most homeless people are probably eligible to receive food stamps, but only 37 percent receive them.

Punishing for violating food sharing restrictions can be extreme:

- In Orlando, police arrested a man who served food to 30 people in a public park for violating a city ordinance that prohibits sharing food with more than 25 people without a permit. He faced a penalty of up to a \$500 fine and 60 days in jail for violating this law.
- In Dallas, anyone caught sharing food with a homeless person without a permit may be fined up to \$2,000 and/or jailed for up to six months.

Some cities have developed some constructive alternatives including:

- The City of Cleveland contracted with the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless to bring religious congregations, Food Not Bombs, and individuals who serve food to homeless people together to improve and coordinate outdoor food programs.
- In Oregon, after first implementing an extended year-round free lunch program for children, the Coos Bay Public Schools have begun offering the meals to adults as well for the price of \$1.
- San Francisco has taken advantage of a provision of the Food Stamp Program that allows authorized restaurants to accept food stamps from homeless individuals.

Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness

In recent years in the United States there has been a greater effort to develop regional and community plans to end homelessness, particularly chronic homelessness. Since 2000, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Bush administration have endorsed the idea of planning to end chronic homelessness in ten years and the Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) challenged 100 cities to create plans to end homelessness.

Over 300 communities have undertaken efforts to end homelessness and over 180 communities have completed plans to end homelessness. Two thirds of plans commit to ending all homelessness and one third focuses on chronic homelessness. Many plans contain strategies for families, young people and former prisoners. About one-fifth of plans involve currently or formerly homeless people. A majority of plans contain:

- The creation of data systems
- Emergency prevention (e.g. one-time rental or utility assistance, negotiating an eviction with landlords)
- Prevention activities (e.g. discharge planning from correctional facilities, foster care systems or mental health facilities)
- Outreach programs
- Provision of permanent housing and advocacy for more permanent housing
- Linking people to mainstream services once housed to avoid homelessness again.⁴⁴

Many plans initiated by local government or city administrations have led to reductions in chronic and street homelessness. Some examples include:

- In Denver, Colorado street homelessness was reduced from 1,000 to 600 since 2005.
- In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, street homelessness was halved over many years.
- In Portland, Oregon, the estimated number chronically homeless individuals was reduced from 1,600 to 660.
- In San Francisco, California street homelessness was reduced by 40 percent over a three year period.⁴⁵

Whilst the plans have outlined good strategic directions, challenges for many regions have included the development of clear numeric indicators, establishing timelines, implementing bodies and identifying funding sources. An on-going and increased role of the American federal government is also seen as crucial.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Cunningham et al (2006) A New Vision: What is in Community Plans to End Homelessness? (Washington DC, National Alliance to End Homelessness)

⁴⁵ Various local American publications including from the Denver Homelessness Initiative, New York Times, Citizen's Commission on Homelessness in Multnomah County and National Alliance to End Homelessness: San Francisco Community Snapshot.

⁴⁶ Cunningham, (2007)

Homelessness in Canada

Numbers of People who are Homeless

Like the United States, the recording of data on homelessness mostly relates to people living on the streets or rough sleeping and in emergency shelters. Another difficulty in Canada is they have established no regular national count with national estimates being based largely on a collection of municipal counts.

Given this, it is estimated that the homeless population in Canada ranges from between 200,000 and 300,000.⁴⁷ This is based on a government initiative undertaken in 2005 which estimated the population to be 150,000.⁴⁸ Local and regional street counts have shown substantial increases in homelessness since that time.

In Toronto, Canada's largest city, more than 30,000 households attend the city's homeless shelters on an annual basis.⁴⁹

Homelessness appears to have been increasing in Canada throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Street counts of homeless people have increased, sometimes at triple-digit rates.

In 1960, there were 900 beds in the city's shelter system and 1.6 million people living in Toronto. By 2006, Toronto had 4,181 shelter beds in a city of 2.6 million.⁵⁰

Calgary's homeless population grew to 3,436 people in 2006, an increase 740 percent between 1994 and 2006; this is an average increase of 40 percent every two years.⁵¹

In Greater Vancouver, the homeless population almost doubled from 1,121 persons in 2002 to 2,174 persons in 2005.⁵²

In the City of Edmonton, 2,618 people were recorded as being homeless in 2006, an increase of 19 percent from the previous count in 2004.⁵³

In January 2007, the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) reported that "almost one-quarter of Canadian households – more than 2,700,000 households – are paying too much of their income to keep a roof over their heads.

⁴⁷ National Housing and Homeless Network, (2007) 'Homelessness', The Globe and Mail

⁴⁸ National Homelessness Initiative (2006) A Snapshot of Homelessness in Canada

⁴⁹ Toronto Shelter (2006) Support and Housing

⁵⁰ Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1960 and Toronto Shelter (2006) Support and Housing; Statistics Canada

⁵¹ City of Calgary (2006) Results of the Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary, Enumerated in Emergency and Transitional Facilities- by Service Agencies, and on the streets

⁵² Goldberg, M et al (2005) On our streets and in our shelters: Results of the 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia, Vancouver)

⁵³ Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing, (2006) Out in the Cold: A Count of Homeless Persons in Edmonton

Characteristics of the Homeless Population

In parts of Canada, street homelessness is very high. In Edmonton, 68 percent of the recorded homeless population was living on the streets (or 'absolute homelessness').⁵⁴ In Greater Vancouver, 52 percent of the recorded homeless population was living on the streets. This had increased by 238 percent or 800 persons since 2002.⁵⁵ A study undertaken in Ottawa found that 45 percent were living on the streets.⁵⁶ In contrast, in Calgary, only 12 percent of the recorded homeless population is living on the streets.

According to several Canadian street counts, at least 70 percent of the recorded homeless population was male. In Edmonton this was 70 percent, in Greater Vancouver 73 percent and in Calgary 78 percent. In Ottawa, 56 percent of people who were using shelters were single men.⁵⁷

Aboriginal Canadians are disproportionately represented amongst the recorded homeless population. In Greater Vancouver, Aboriginal people were 30 percent of the recorded homeless population compared to 2 percent of the general population. In Calgary, 17 percent of the recorded homeless population was Aboriginal. A higher proportion of Aboriginal Canadians were living on the streets with much lower proportions living in shelters.⁵⁸

Families with children have not traditionally been a high proportion of Canada's homeless population. In the regional street count, 2 -10 percent of the recorded homeless population were families with children.⁵⁹ However, there is some evidence that during the 1990s the incidence of family homelessness increased in most centres.⁶⁰ This was attributed to worsening housing conditions, increasing poverty, fewer jobs for unskilled labour and a political climate unfavourable to the plight of the homeless. It is quite possible that larger number of families with children in Canada were marginally housed in temporary accommodation. About 80 percent of families attending shelters were single mothers with children.⁶¹

The number of young people aged 24 years or less recorded as being homeless varied between regions. In Greater Vancouver, 296 young people (15 percent of the total) were recorded as homeless on the census night. In Halifax, 90 young people (34 percent of the total) were recorded on the census night.⁶² The City of Toronto has estimated that 6,000 young people aged 15-24 years have stayed in emergency shelters over a year,

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Goldberg et al (2005)

⁵⁶ The Alliance to End Homelessness (2005) Experiencing Homelessness: The First Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa

⁵⁷ Street counts in Edmonton, Greater Vancouver, Calgary and Ottawa

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2003) Family Homelessness: Causes and Solutions

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Canadian municipal street counts

approximately 20 percent of all households staying in shelters.⁶³ Reasons provided for youth homelessness include family violence, lack of affordable housing in some areas, poverty and economic pressure on young people in rural areas to move to larger centres with little or no resources, lack of job readiness, education or experience, gaps in child welfare and protection services, lack of eligibility for income assistance and gaps in social services for young people with mental health problems, addictions and dual diagnoses.⁶⁴

High numbers of people who are homeless in Canada have to survive with no income. In Greater Vancouver, only 45 percent received income support, 23 percent of the recorded had absolutely no income, 14 percent had part-time or casual employment, 5 percent derived an income from binning or bottle collecting, 5 percent from illegal activities, 3 percent from panhandling. The sheltered homeless were more likely to receive income assistance than the street homeless.⁶⁵

Why is Homelessness Increasing in Canada?

Federal Government withdrawal from Income and Welfare Systems

From 1966 to 1996, the federal government helped fund welfare under the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), initially sharing 50 percent of the cost with the provinces and territories. This funding was subject to conditions – national standards – including that welfare be provided to people when in need. In 1995, the federal government announced its plan to eliminate the Canada Assistance Plan. In 1996, CAP was replaced with a new funding system that scrapped most of the conditions for federal money for welfare. It also dramatically cut the amount of transfer payments, leaving the provinces to make up the loss or cut social programs.

In Canada, welfare is run by provincial and territorial governments and some municipalities as well, resulting in at least 12 distinct welfare regimes throughout the country. This means that welfare rates and rules vary greatly across and within jurisdictions, although there are some common patterns. All jurisdictions use as their common criterion a needs test requiring applicants to show that they have exhausted most of their liquid assets and that any available income is insufficient to meet their own basic needs. Welfare benefits are not taxable income and are not normally indexed. Therefore, they are not automatically adjusted to cost-of-living increases. The welfare systems contain some financial incentives to work. Laws in all Canadian jurisdictions empower welfare authorities to decrease, interrupt, or nullify benefits if a client classified as employable refuses a reasonable job offer or quits a job without cause.⁶⁶

⁶³ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2001) Environmental scan on youth homelessness

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Goldberg et al

⁶⁶ Prince, Michael (1998) 'Holes in the Safety Net, Leaks in the Roof: Changes in Canadian Welfare Policy and their Implications for Social Housing Programs' Housing Policy Debate Volume 9, Issue 4 (Fannie Mae Foundation)

Throughout the 1990s, many provinces made policy changes to welfare that resulted in less ‘generous’ and more restrictive programs.

Between 1992 and 2001, according to the OECD, Canada’s social security and welfare expenditure as a percentage of GDP fell from 12.39 percent to 9.18 percent.⁶⁷

The Example of British Columbia

In British Columbia, the number of people receiving welfare has been on the decline since 1995. Despite this, in 2002, the provincial government introduced dramatic policy changes designed to shrink the welfare “caseload”. Some of these changes were unprecedented in Canada. Many of them dealt with how people access welfare – the eligibility rules and application processes that people must navigate in order to receive assistance.

Three key changes to the eligibility rules and application process have driven the reduction in welfare caseloads:

1. **The three-week wait:** Welfare is understood to be an income of last resort (people must have exhausted their assets and all alternate sources of income). Yet, beginning in 2002, when people first seek assistance, they are required to conduct a three-week job search before an “in-take interview” is conducted. And in practice, this wait can be four to six weeks.
2. **The two-year “independence” test:** To be eligible for assistance, applicants must demonstrate that they have earned a minimum level of income for two consecutive years – they must prove they had at least \$7,000 of employment income or 840 hours of employment per year for two years running. The rule does not recognise other forms of independence, such as surviving on the streets. This new eligibility rule can deny benefits to an individual regardless of their financial need.
3. **The implementation of electronic “alternate service delivery” systems,** including directing initial enquiries to a 1-800 line and the compulsory use of an on-line computer orientation.⁶⁸

A major study found that the implications of these eligibility rules and application processes are that:

- It discourages delays and denies people who need help, particularly the most vulnerable.
- The government’s narrative about more people leaving welfare for work is not supported by the evidence. Fewer people are entering the system and accessing assistance. The caseload reduction is mainly a front-door story.
- The application system is now so complicated that many people need help from an advocate to successfully navigate the process.
- Many people are diverted to homelessness, charities and increased hardship.

⁶⁷ OECD (2007) Social database

⁶⁸ Wallace, Bruce, Klein, Seth & Reitsma-Street, Marge (2006) Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC (CCPA, Vancouver) p7

- In some cases, denying people assistance reduces their ability to be self-sufficient.
- The arbitrary two-year “independence” test, which refuses welfare to people regardless of their need, is now the third most common reason for denying assistance. Between 2002 and 2004, approximately 4,000 applicants failed to gain assistance as a result of this new rule.
- The welfare application process assumes people are employable, yet many who apply are not, and as a result they are not able to comply with the application requirements.
- Welfare applicants are frequently unaware of their rights, and are not made aware of various exemptions to the eligibility rules when they apply.⁶⁹

There is a strong connection between the welfare changes, eligibility rules and application processes and homelessness. The City of Vancouver’s Homelessness Action Plan found that the number of homeless doubled between 2001 and 2004, and notes that, “In 2001, about 15 percent of the street homeless were not on welfare. By early 2004, this had increased to 50 percent, and by summer 2004, more than 75 percent of the street homeless reported they are not on welfare.”⁷⁰ Similarly, a study of Victoria-based social service agencies reports major increases in demand for all type of emergency assistance, including food and shelter.

A considerable proportion of those denied or discouraged from assistance have been left with little or no income. These people have directed by the Ministry to food banks, shelters, and other charities. Some remain in abusive relationships or turn to the sex trade.

For those receiving welfare assistance in British Columbia, it cannot be considered ‘generous’. A single person considered to be employable receives \$510 per month - \$325 for shelter and \$185 (or about \$6 per day) for all other needs, including food, clothing, transit, telephone etc. For a single parent with a child, the monthly welfare payment is \$969 - \$520 for shelter and \$449 for all other needs.⁷¹

These amounts are lower than what people on welfare received in British Columbia 12 years ago (and after taking inflation into account, they are substantially lower).

Between 2004 and 2005, welfare income in most provinces was being reduced for most target groups.⁷²

The Welfare Situation in Ontario⁷³

⁶⁹ Ibid, p8-9

⁷⁰ Goldberg et al

⁷¹ Wallace et al

⁷² Prince, M

⁷³ This section refers to Oliphant, M & Slosser, C (2003) Targeting the Most Vulnerable: A Decade of Desperation for Ontario’s Welfare Recipients (CCPA)

Between 1993 and 2003, social assistance rates were not raised. (Over the same period, the federally funded Old Age Security system and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (OAS/GIS) rates for low-income seniors were adjusted 40 times to keep pace with inflation).

Prior to 1993, the longest period of time without an increase in social assistance in Ontario was just 3 years, with 23 increases in the 26 years since 1967.

In Ontario in 1995, welfare rates were cut by 21.6%. The combined effects of that cut and of inflation have been to lower the purchasing power of social assistance by over 37%. Average rents have increased by 24% since 1995, faster than the rate of inflation.

Children continue to be negatively impacted by low social assistance rates. About 200,000 children are currently on the welfare rolls and 121,000 children go to food banks every month in Ontario.

There has been a 41 percent increase in child poverty in Ontario since 1989.

The Ontario government takes away the National Child Benefit Supplement (a federal benefit intended to help low-income families with children) from families on welfare, thereby punishing the very people the benefit is intended to help.

Benefits for single people (\$520 a month) are one third of the poverty line. For single parents with one child (\$957 a month) and other families with children benefits are little more than about one half of the poverty line.

Reports from the City of Toronto show that late payment of rent was more prevalent for people after leaving welfare than on welfare. The report found that the number of people receiving no income in the Toronto had increased by 58 percent between 2000 and 2002.

In Ontario, social assistance cheques are comprised of two portions: the basic needs allowance and the shelter allowance. The shelter allowance has been structured as one flat rate across the province that varies only by family size. As such, the shelter allowance maxima are the same everywhere across the province, despite the vast difference in rent levels.

As a result of the increasing shelter gap, the average family of four in Toronto receiving social assistance diverts \$244.25 from the food budget (basic needs allowance) to meet the cost of rent; in Peel \$298; in Windsor \$141, in Ottawa \$158; and in London \$157. The Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto reports that the average family on welfare in the Greater Toronto Area spends 70% of income on rent.

The shelter allowance was considerably more generous prior to the welfare cuts implemented in 1995.

The basic needs allowance does not meet the cost of basic needs. In some cities such as Ottawa and Thunder Bay, the basic needs allowance for a single welfare recipient does not even cover the monthly cost of nutritious food. A family of four in those cities has just \$2 and \$7, respectfully, for all other monthly basic needs once the cost of the nutritious food basket is deducted.

Virtually every municipality in Ontario has made the link between the low shelter allowance, housing instability and homelessness.

The minimum wage, frozen at \$6.85 per hour since 1995, is so low that work is no longer necessarily a route out of poverty for many families.

Little Investment in Social Housing

In 1993, the federal government budget for social housing programs across Canada was limited to about \$2 billion in annual operating subsidies. At this time, over 600,000 social housing units had been built, representing roughly 6% of total housing stock in Canada (or 16% of all rental stock).

From 1993 to 2002, no federal money for new affordable housing was provided (even when budgets returned to surplus in 1997).

In 2001, the federal government agreed to a framework agreement with the provinces and territories wherein it would eventually commit \$1 billion towards affordable housing over a five-year span. The entire plan is called the Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI).

Outside the framework of the AHI, \$1.6 billion over two years was then pledged in the 2005 federal budget. Most of this money was then allocated to three housing trust funds in the 2006 federal budget.

From 1993 to the early 2000s, British Columbia and Quebec were the only provinces to fund the building of new affordable housing projects. Yet, even with the added new affordable housing in British Columbia, there has been a constant waiting list for affordable housing of roughly 10,000 applicants over the last eight years. Supply did not meet demand, and homelessness continued to increase, especially from the late nineties.

In Ontario, the lack of funding for social programs and social housing has contributed to continuous and dramatic rises in homelessness.

After years of debate stretching back to the 1980s, rent supplements have become quite popular in Ontario since 2001, especially as vacancy rates increased. One of the more well-known rent-supplement programs of recent years is the one created to help house former residents of Toronto's Tent City squatter camp. The Emergency Homelessness Pilot Project (EHPP) began in September 2002, almost immediately after Tent City residents were removed from their squat.

Administered by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, the EHPP pays a rent supplement directly to the landlord. It covers the affordability gap, dollar for dollar, up to a maximum of \$865 for a bachelor or one-bedroom apartment.

However, in some cases it was far from a panacea. During the Tent City re-location, it was often challenging to find landlords willing to accept tenants - the stigma that goes along with a formerly-homeless person receiving social assistance. Some tenants found it demoralising to be repeatedly rejected on this basis – and with the difficulty of finding landlords, tenants often had to settle for “slumlords”.

Rent supplements can also have a significant inflationary impact on low-end rental units.

In 1998, Ontario government implemented the Tenant Protection Act (TPA). The TPA is a developer friendly piece of legislation which deregulated the price of private market rental housing in an effort to increase the supply of housing while lowering prices. Instead of the strict rent controls which existed under the previous Landlord and Tenant Act, landlords were now free to set rents to whatever the market would bear on vacant units, while also enjoying greater scope for cost recovery of capital expenses, and an automatic annual increase based on the rent increase guideline set by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

In the 2006 election platform, the federal Conservative party promised a \$200 million yearly tax-credit plan. This is to be based on the U.S. model.

Under the plan, tax credits would be sold by the Canada Revenue Agency and administered by a provincial ministry who would effectively outsource the job of marketing the tax credits to firms. The firms that market the tax credits would be called “syndicators”. Provincial housing agencies would oversee a competition process wherein wealthy individuals who already own real estate would bid on the tax credits. Bidders would make offers to invest in rental housing being developed by either non-profit or for-profit developers that meets various affordability criteria. Bidders making the most appealing offers would be awarded tax credits by the provincial agency (the latter would award the credits it has received from the Canada Revenue Agency. At tax time, individuals receiving tax credits would then use the credits to reduce their net rental income. They would also get to use the capital cost allowance from a building as a deduction in the computation of their net rental income. In effect, the wealthy person is buying a share of the property. They won’t receive any rental income but will be able to deduct the “loss” generated from the capital cost allowance.

The Lack of an Integrated National Homelessness and Housing Strategy

Under the first phase of the National Homelessness Initiative between 1999 and 2004, approximately \$365 million was spent on emergency shelters, transitional housing and support services. Almost all the funds spent annually on affordable housing between 1993 and 2003 has been to sustain existing units.

After a decade long moratorium on housing investment, federal spending resumed in 2003 and by 2006 had increased to \$2.03 billion in 2006, slightly higher than pre-moratorium levels of \$1.98 billion in 1993.⁷⁴

However, advocates argue that Canada's new affordable housing budget actually represents a 25 percent decline when adjusted for inflation, since average shelter costs increased by more than 20 percent between 1993 and 2006.⁷⁵

The New Homelessness Partnering Strategy

The new Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) was announced by the federal government on December 19, 2006. The HPS replaces the National Homelessness Initiative, which expired on March 31, 2007. The new Strategy, which began on April 1, 2007, provides \$269.6 million over two years to prevent and reduce homelessness by helping to establish the structures and supports needed to move homeless and at-risk individuals towards self-sufficiency and full participation in Canadian society.

This new strategy builds and improves upon the National Homelessness Initiative by focusing on a "housing-first" approach to homelessness in Canada. By working with communities, provinces and territories, partners in the private and not-for-profit sectors and Aboriginal partners, the Strategy encourages an effective alignment of federal/provincial/territorial investments and helps homeless individuals and families to access the range of services and programs that they need to move towards self-sufficiency.

Under the HPS, the federal government will offer the provinces and territories the opportunity to enter into bilateral partnerships, improve collaboration and develop linkages between the federal homelessness programs and provincial/territorial social services to help communities make strategic investments that will best serve their homeless populations.⁷⁶

Costs of Homelessness

Advocates in Canada are calling for an end to one-off or one-time funding and the development of an integrated strategy. They are using the costs of homelessness arguments similar to those in the United States. It is estimated that the current cost of homelessness in Canada ranges from \$4.5 billion to \$6 billion annually.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ ⁷⁴ Laird, G (2007) *Shelter - Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada's 21st century paradox* (Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership, Calgary)

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Human Resources and Social Development Canada Homelessness Partnering Strategy Website www.homelessness.gc.ca

⁷⁷ Laird (2007)

The daily cost of maintaining a bed in some shelters is comparable to some of Canada's low-security prisons, roughly \$80 per day; no frills dormitory accommodation runs between \$20 and \$50 per day. One study found that Toronto taxpayers pay two and a half times as much for homeless shelters as for rent supplements. The Blueprint to End Homelessness in Toronto states that "shelters cost ten times as much as social housing." It also states that "A plan to move half the sheltered homeless into homes would require 1,850 rent supplements and would cost the city \$15.5 million annually. That would be offset by the expected \$43 million in shelter savings."⁷⁸

The cost of homelessness is greater for people who are not easily warehoused, such as youth, children and families, who comprise a growing percentage of Canada's homeless. In 2001, the cost of keeping a youth in a shelter was estimated to be between \$30,000 and \$40,000 per year – roughly \$95 per day. There are additional cost-benefit reasons for investing in families: putting that same youth in detention, according to Canada's Department of Justice in 2001, can cost over \$250 a day, or \$100,000 a year.⁷⁹

Homelessness in Europe: A Brief Summary of Major Statistics

Austria

There is no research based evidence of homelessness in Austria. A survey of services in 1998 found 21,000 people who were homeless during the year (about 0.3% of the population). Approximately 2,000 people were sleeping rough, about 12,000 people were in shelters and supported accommodation for the homeless (about 25% of this group were women) and about 7,000 were migrants from non-European Union countries living in refugee camps and facilities for migrants. The survey indicated considerable local and regional differences in standards of supported housing, target group specific services and levels of individual support.⁸⁰

Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic there is no national system of data collection or registration of homeless people and no authority at a national level is explicitly responsible for data collection on homelessness. A combination of regional data collection reveals that about 4,689 people across the Czech Republic were sleeping rough or staying in an overnight shelter. About 2,279 people in Prague were found to be living on the streets during 2004.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Wellesley Institute (2006) The Blueprint to End Homelessness in Toronto (Wellesley Institute, Toronto)

⁷⁹ Laird (2007)

⁸⁰ Schoibl, Heinz (2006) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistical Update, Austria (FEANTSA, Salzburg)

⁸¹ Edgar, Bill & Meert, Henk (2006) Fifth Review of Statistics of Homelessness in Europe (FEANTSA, Brussels)

Denmark

Danish statistics on homelessness mainly consist of the annual national statistics on the use of the use of homeless hostels. There is no national statistics on people sleeping rough or people receiving support due to homelessness. A leading outreach service estimates that on a given night 150-300 people sleep rough in Copenhagen. About a quarter of this group are characterised as mentally ill. In Denmark's second largest city Aarhus, municipal and county officials estimate the number of rough sleepers on a given night to be less than five. During 2005, 7,722 people stayed 24-hour hostels run by NGOs under contract from Danish counties and municipalities.⁸²

Finland

In 2004, 8,008 households were recorded as homeless in the National Housing Market Survey. Of these, 470 were sleeping rough or in night shelters, 1,436 were staying in hostels, 1,264 were living in institutions and care homes, 283 were prisoners to be released with no housing and 4,192 were living temporarily with friends or relatives. About 95 percent of households recorded as homeless were single people. Only 357 families were recorded as being homeless. Only 19 percent of single people recorded as homeless were women. About 19 percent of single people recorded as homeless were young people under the age of 25.⁸³

Data in Finland reveals that homelessness has been declining since 1987. In 1987, over 18,000 people were recorded as homeless. The current figure is less than half of that.⁸⁴

France

National data collection in France can be difficult due to a range of national and regional funding arrangement for accommodation and services. Nationally funded shelters have good data coverage but not those funded by local authority social assistance. In 2001, 86,000 people were recorded as sleeping rough in France. This data was collected by mobile outreach teams called Les Maraudes (du Samu Social). The sleeping rough group is considered the most socially isolated and usually have mental health and drug and alcohol issues. Emergency accommodation centres for people who are homeless in France comprise 38,000 places which can be in dormitory type structures or bedrooms from 2-4 people but can also include hotel rooms that associations rent and make available to homeless families. The duration of stay in these centres is between one night and seven nights, possibly extended to 14 nights.⁸⁵

⁸² Benjaminsen, Lars (2006) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistical Update, Denmark (FEANTSA, The Danish National Institute of Social Research, Copenhagen)

⁸³ Karkkaainen, Sirkka-Liisa (2005) Finland National Report 2005 for the European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistical Update (The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health STAKES, FEANTSA, Helsinki)

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Zidi, Dalila (2005) French National Report: Statistics Review (FEANTSA, Paris)

Germany

In Germany, there is no federal system of data collection. Only a minority of the 13 provincial areas have data collection systems. A coalition of service providers estimated that 292,000 were homeless in Germany in 2004 with 20,000 people sleeping rough. The validity of this figure is questioned and is considered empirically flawed. In 2005, the North Rhine-Westphalia region, the most densely populated region in Germany, recorded 16,900 homeless persons temporarily accommodated under the police law. Between 1994 and 2005, the numbers of homeless persons in this region has declined by 73 percent. In the East German region of Saxony, 1,280 people were recorded as homeless in 2005. Between 1997 and 2005, the number of homeless persons recorded in Saxony has declined by 54 percent. In 2004 in Berlin, 6,670 homeless people accessing temporary accommodation were recorded. Between 1994 and 2001, the number recorded in Berlin declined by 43 percent. Since then numbers have increased marginally. There is some consistent evidence that homelessness in Germany has been declining since 1997 and has been halved in less than a decade.⁸⁶

Greece

There is no statutory organisation involved in data collection on homelessness in Greece. Using recent assessment of social workers, it is estimated that 6,000 people were sleeping rough in Greece during 2006. About 5,000 were refugees and undocumented migrants. It is estimated that there are about 350 rough sleepers in the centre of Athens. It is estimated that no more than 1,000 people are using low budget hotels for accommodation. Services comprise the main shelters run by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and two converted hotels in central Athens run by the Municipality. The total occupancy of these shelters is approximately 300 users. About 50 women stayed in shelters for women escaping domestic violence. There are no supported accommodation services for women in Greece.⁸⁷

Hungary

The Social Act 1993 gave the first definition of homelessness and is still in force. Social services provide data through two official information collection systems. Nearly 15,000 people in Hungary in 2005 were recorded as living on the streets or in overnight shelters in 2005. The NGO Shelter Foundation recorded 8,000 people living in public places and in emergency shelters in Budapest on a winter's night in 2005.⁸⁸

Ireland

⁸⁶ Busch-Geertsema, Volker (2006) German National Report 2006 for the European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistical Report (FEANTSA, Bremen)

⁸⁷ Sapounakis, Aristides (2006) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistics Update (FEANTSA, Research Institute "Kivotos", Athens)

⁸⁸ Gyori, Peter (2006) Hungarian National Report 2006 for the European Observatory on Homelessness: The Statistical Update (FEANTSA, Budapest)

A statutory assessment of the number of homeless people in Ireland is carried out every three years under the Housing Act 1988. In Dublin, the assessment is carried out by an independent research agency and involves a rough sleeper count. Combining both counts for 2005, 4,414 people were recorded as homeless in Dublin. In 2005, 2,015 people were recorded as homeless in Dublin. Of these 185 people were recorded as rough sleeping. There is some evidence of a decline in homelessness in Ireland over the past decade. Official statistics show about a 16 percent decline between 1999 and 2005.⁸⁹

Italy

There is no national data on homelessness in Italy and no organisation with specific responsibility for collecting data on homelessness. The Government Commission on Social Exclusion conducted a survey of homelessness in 2000. From this, about 30,000 people were recorded as having no abode or 'without a roof' or 'without accommodation'. This figure is considered a serious underestimation by social workers in the field who suggest up to 80,000 people.⁹⁰

Luxembourg

The Ministry of the Family and Integration commissioned the CEPS/INSTEAD to conduct a study in 2006 on homelessness. The results are not available at the time of writing.⁹¹

The Netherlands

The Dutch cabinet and the four largest cities (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) presented a plan in February 2006 entitled Homelessness Action Plan 2006-2013. The plan is intended to reach out to the roofless people living in four cities (now estimated at over 10,000) and provide them with individual service pathways and sources of income, healthcare and employment. This should enable more extensive information about the extent of homelessness in the Netherlands. The Amsterdam local authority carried out a survey in 2006 which identified 2,630 people who were homeless, of whom 1,211 were living on the streets or in cars, small tents, squats and other such places.⁹²

Norway

Norway conducted its first national survey in 1996 and as part of a national strategy to prevent homelessness (called Pathway to a Permanent Home) and has recently completed its third national survey. The 2005 Census recorded 5,500 people as homeless in Norway

⁸⁹ Wafer, Una (2006) Counted in 2005: A periodic assessment from a weeklong survey of people experiencing homelessness in Dublin (Homeless Agency, Dublin) & Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2007) Strategy for the Prevention of Homelessness

⁹⁰ Tosi, Antonio, (2005) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistical Update, Italy (FEANTSA, Dipartimento di Architettura e pianificazione, Milan)

⁹¹ Edgar & Meert

⁹² Wolf, Judith & Mensink, Connie (2006) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistics Update, The Netherlands (FEANTSA, Radboud University, Amsterdam)

equal to 1.2 persons per 1,000 inhabitants. The Census recorded 500 people who were living on the streets or in shelters. About 120 of this group were in Oslo.⁹³

Poland

The Department of Social Welfare and Integration aggregates data from agencies receiving subsidies under the National Prevention Programme against Exclusion of the Homeless and Threatened with Homelessness. However there are no comprehensive nationwide quantitative research or data sources on homelessness in Poland. According to a range of opinions and social welfare data collection, there is some consensus that there are about 60,000 to 70,000 homeless people in Poland with up to 300,000 people who experience homelessness periodically or share apartments with friends and family members.⁹⁴

Portugal

There are no official statistics on homelessness in Portugal. In 2003, outreach service figures recorded 3,057 people across the country were sleeping on the streets or in other public spaces. The survey found that in addition to those living on the streets there were 2,319 situations a low budget hotel or short-stay hostel was arranged and 2,202 people were staying in short-stay homeless hostels.⁹⁵

Spain

In December 2005, the Spanish Institute of Statistics published the results of the first nation-wide survey carried out by the Spanish Administration on a representative sample of the homeless in Spain. The survey mainly focused on how many service centres were serving the homeless in Spain and although the principal aim of the survey was not to reach an estimation of the number of homeless, it did offer a total number of 18,500. At the end of 2005 further estimate was of 21,900 people was developed by the Spanish Institute of Statistics. The estimate was of people who were being attended by the network of centres located in cities of more than 20,000 inhabitants. About 8,218 people or 37.5 percent were living in public space or in unfit accommodation and 8,454 or 38.6 percent were living in a shelter or residence hall. About 83 percent of the homeless population are men and almost half are immigrants from other countries particularly Morocco, Romania, Algeria, Portugal and Mali.⁹⁶

⁹³ Dyb, Evelyn (2006) Roofless People and Use of Public Place: A Study in Oslo (FEANTSA, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Oslo)

⁹⁴ Wagnanska, Julia (2006) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistics Update, Poland (FEANTSA, Warsaw)

⁹⁵ Baptista, Isabel (2005) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistics Update, Portugal (FEANTSA, CESIS, Lisbon)

⁹⁶ Cabrera, Pedro Jose (2006) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistics Update, Spain (FEANTSA, Comillas University, Madrid)

Sweden

The Swedish government commissioned the National Board of Health and Welfare to develop methods to counteract homelessness during the period of 2002-2004 and they have carried on this role. In 2005, the survey recorded 940 people sleeping rough and 2,060 were recorded in overnight shelters. In 2006, 70 people were recorded as sleeping rough and 363 people were recorded in overnight shelters in Stockholm.⁹⁷

United Kingdom

The key data source on homelessness in the United Kingdom is the data on actions taken by local housing authorities under the homelessness legislation. The summary data published by central government departments represent the 'official' homelessness statistics for the United Kingdom. The official statistics generally represent a flow of applicants through a process, including exiting from homelessness and, in some cases, repeat presentations. This information only includes data on households who seek assistance from local authorities, hence homeless households who either did not know they could seek assistance, or considered they would be unlikely to receive help are not counted. Data collected across the United Kingdom varies significantly enough to preclude publication of UK-wide figures.

In 2005, the estimate of people sleeping rough for the whole of England was 459, significantly lower than the figure of 1,850 recorded in 1998. In 2003, 328 people were recorded as sleeping rough in Scotland. There are no official statistics of the number of people in night shelters in the UK. One estimate is that there 8,875 shelter/emergency/hostel places across the UK in 2002.⁹⁸

In 2006-07, 115,430 households were found to be homeless by local authorities. Between 2003-04 and 2006-07, these figures have decreased by 47 percent. In the five years prior to this, figures had increased by 31 percent.⁹⁹

There is a basic gap in the UK in that no agency appears to be taking an overview of homelessness data collection and the figures for the four jurisdictions (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and therefore not enabling a credible national total. Many annual street counts have ceased in England and have been suspended in Scotland raising questions about government assumptions that it is no longer an issue and may not re-emerge again. Data collection does not adequately cover the hostel system especially for accommodation not included under homelessness legislation and therefore official statistics.

⁹⁷ Sahlin, Ingrid (2006) Statistics Update Sweden: European Observatory on Homelessness (FEANTSA, Goteborg University, Goteborg)

⁹⁸ Anderson, Isobel (2006) European Observatory on Homelessness: Statistics Update, United Kingdom (FEANTSA, University of Stirling, Scotland)

⁹⁹ Ibid

Conclusion

How does the extent of homelessness compare internationally?

Determining Australia's 'ranking' internationally in terms of comparisons regarding levels of homelessness is difficult. Data is improving in many countries but is still patchy. There are different data collection methods and whilst many countries collect regional data they do not have an estimated national figure. Further to this is the question of which countries Australia should be compared in relation to homelessness? Should every country in the OECD be included in the comparison regardless of political history, population and different administrative arrangements?

However, on the data and information available it is possible to make some observations and preliminary judgements. In my view, Australia sits with a large group of countries between the United States, which has the highest numbers and rates of recorded homelessness where data is available and a small number of European states like Sweden and Finland which have higher government provision of welfare and social spending and tend to have lower numbers of people who are homeless.

Over the past decade, the circumstances of various countries have differed with regard to homelessness although data is patchy. There is sufficient evidence from the United States to demonstrate that homelessness has increased throughout the 1990s, building on increases in the 1980s. In the last few years, it appears the homelessness population has remained at about the same level, with national point in time data collected in 2006 mirroring that collected in 2005. Data collected in several Canadian regions and centres indicates rapid increases in homelessness since the mid 1990s. Changes in welfare policy, social spending and no investment in social housing have contributed to this. In Hungary, the annual average of the number of clients recorded as attending temporary hostels and overnight shelters more than doubled between 2002 and 2003. Australia's census data, recorded since 1996, that the level of homelessness has remained the same. Service data suggest marginal annual increases since 2000. The United Kingdom, Germany and Finland provide some evidence to suggest that homelessness is declining in those countries although data should be treated with caution.

What stands out in some countries is the very high level of street homelessness. This can vary greatly also been major cities. Although more data collection is required, it appears that outside some cities in the United States and small number of European cities, street homelessness is quite low. In some southern European cities, particularly in Spain and Greece, the level of street homelessness is influenced considerably by immigration. The table below reveals the level of street homelessness on a given night in various cities

Table 1: Street Homelessness in Various International Cities

City	Country	Number
Los Angeles	United States	50,000
Detroit	United States	10,000
Las Vegas	United States	9,000
Budapest	Hungary	8,000
New York	United States	4,400
Prague	Czech Republic	2,300
Edmonton	Canada	1,800
Amsterdam	The Netherlands	1,200
Vancouver	Canada	1,100
Lisbon	Portugal	900
Sydney	Australia	900
Melbourne	Australia	800
Madrid	Spain	620
Athens	Greece	400
Copenhagen	Denmark	300
London	United Kingdom	200
Dublin	Ireland	185
Stockholm	Sweden	70

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness (United States), FEANTSA (Europe), various reports

In most countries, the proportion of people living in primary homelessness (on the streets or in improvised dwellings), is low compared to the numbers living in temporary, insecure and inappropriate accommodation and housing.

Key Policy Factors Influencing the Extent of Homelessness

A preliminary analysis of some literature regarding homelessness in several Western countries suggest that there are three broad government policy factors which have an influence on the level of homelessness in Western developed countries. These are:

1. The level of social spending (epitomised but not exclusive to social security spending)
2. Investment in and eligibility criteria for social housing
3. Sustained national investment in a national homelessness services response, preferably as part of a national homelessness plan.

It is highly likely that, on further investigation, there would be a range of other factors.

General Social Spending

There appears to be a general correlation between the level of social spending of Western countries and the extent of homelessness. This is further highlighted when government spending on working age welfare expenditure as Table 2 below indicates. Whilst Australia's welfare spending is about the OECD average, welfare expenditure in the

United States and Canada is considerably lower. Spending in Nordic countries is well above the OECD average. Australia's welfare expenditure on families is in the top bracket of OECD countries whereas our incapacity related spending is comparatively low. The proportion of government expenditure on old age is considerably higher in the United States compared with Australia and Canada. Spending on active labour market programmes is low in Australia (\$117 US per head) and Canada (\$114.2) and extremely low in the United States (\$53.4) compared with the OECD average (\$172.1).

Table 2: Public Social Expenditure in Various OECD Countries: 2003

Country	Comparative Level of Homelessness	Working Age Welfare Expenditure (US\$)	Working Age Welfare Expenditure (% of GDP)	Social Expenditure (% of GDP)
United States	High	464.1	1.3	16.2
Canada	Medium	306.8	1.0	17.7
Australia	Medium	762.1	2.5	17.9
OECD		722.7	2.5	20.7
Sweden	Low	1772.2	6.0	31.3
Norway	Low	2004.9	5.4	25.1

Source: OECD SOCX database 2007

Canada provides the best example of how changes to and disinvestment in the social security system impact on the level of homelessness in the country. Street counts have revealed substantial increases in Canadian cities over the past decade with some cities recording a doubling of their recorded homeless population. A contributing factor for this seems to be that in 1996, a federal social security system was replaced with a new funding system that scrapped most of the conditions for federal money for welfare. It dramatically cut the amount of transfer payments, leaving the provinces to make up the loss or cut social programs. There are currently at least 12 distinct welfare regimes in Canada.¹⁰⁰ In addition, government social security and welfare expenditure declined dramatically from 12.46 percent of GDP in 1992 to 9.02 in 2000.¹⁰¹ There is no evidence to suggest that expenditure levels have adjusted much since this time.

Australia's public and social security expenditure during the same period remained about the same, if not marginally increased. Social security and welfare expenditure in the United Kingdom as a percentage of GDP is about 4 percentage points higher than Australia and Canada, although it did experience some decline during the 1990s. Expenditure in the United States is 4 percentage points lower and has barely changed in a

¹⁰⁰ See Prince, M (1998) Holes in the Safety Net, Leaks in the Roof: Changes in Canada Welfare Policy and Their Implications for Social Housing Programs (University of Victoria, Fannie Mae Foundation, British Columbia) & Wallace B et al (2006) Denied Assistance: Closing the Front Door on Welfare in BC (CCPA, Vancouver)

¹⁰¹ IMF, Social Security and Welfare Expenditure Tables

decade.¹⁰² Recent data indicates that Australia compares well with OECD countries regarding welfare expenditure on families.¹⁰³

Investment in Social Housing

The United States, Australia and Canada have considerably small social rental sectors compared with England and other European countries. In the United States, the social rental sector is 3.2 percent of housing stock, in Australia it is 4.9 percent and in Canada 6 percent. In contrast, England is 18.3 percent and the Netherlands 35 percent.¹⁰⁴

The social rental sector is declining in most countries with the exception of France and the Netherlands. In England the size of the social rental sector fell from about 30 percent in 1980 to 18 percent in 2005.¹⁰⁵ In Canada, from 1993 to 2002, no federal money for new affordable housing was provided (even when budgets returned to surplus in 1997). From 1993 to the early 2000s, British Columbia and Quebec were the only provinces to fund the building of new affordable housing projects. In 2001, the federal government agreed to a framework agreement with the provinces and territories wherein it would eventually commit \$1 billion towards affordable housing over a five-year span.¹⁰⁶ Australia's public housing expenditure has been declining in real terms of over a decade. Nominal investment has remained about the same over the period.¹⁰⁷

The English housing framework determines that the allocation of social housing is targeted towards those considered the most poorest and vulnerable. This practice has been adopted by most Australian state public housing authorities, particularly Victoria. In many European countries, including Sweden, France, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, the poorest households are often excluded from the mainstream social housing rented sector and may be housed in cheaper, lower quality social housing.¹⁰⁸

National Homelessness Plans and Programmes

Apart from the Netherlands and Norway, no country appears to have developed a substantial national homelessness plan or national social housing plan with long term targets. The Dutch plan, launched in 2006, focuses on a client centred approach using individually planned service pathways and client managers assigned to all clients and watertight collaboration between all the parties and agencies involved, structured both at the administrative level (local authorities as policy coordinators) and at the operational level (field managers commissioned by the local authorities).¹⁰⁹ The Norwegian strategy,

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ AIHW (2008) Australia's Welfare (AIHW, Canberra)

¹⁰⁴ Fitzpatrick, S & Stephens M, (2007) An International Review of Homelessness and Social Housing Policy (Department for Communities and Local Government, London) p25

¹⁰⁵ Ibid p26

¹⁰⁶ Laird, G (2007) Shelter - Homelessness in a growth economy: Canada's 21st century paradox (Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership, Calgary) p4-13

¹⁰⁷ FACSIA (2007) Housing Assistance Act 1996: Annual Report 2005-06

¹⁰⁸ Fitzpatrick, S & Stephens, M (2007) p77

¹⁰⁹ Wolf and Mensick (2006)

entitled *The Pathway to a Permanent Home*, was launched as a national strategy in 2004. It aims to prevent homelessness for people threatened with eviction and for people leaving prison or institutions, improve the quality of night shelters by implementing quality agreements in service contracts and reduce reliance on temporary accommodation and the length of time people stay there. Under the strategy, homelessness is targeted as a housing issue in which support needs of individual homeless people are one route to achieving access to adequate and secure housing. Although it is a national strategy, responsibility for its implementation is at the municipal level.¹¹⁰

Some national homelessness planning initiatives have been developed in other countries. In the mid 2000s Canada announced the federal National Homelessness Initiative and this was followed by the National Homelessness Partnering Strategy. The emphasis of this strategy was to enable linkages and coordination between services rather than substantial long term investment of programs.¹¹¹ Since 2000, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Bush administration have endorsed the idea of planning to end chronic homelessness in ten years and through the Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) have challenged 100 cities to create plans to end homelessness.¹¹² The Netherlands launched a Homelessness Action Plan in 2006 which aimed to provide people living on the streets with ‘individual pathway plans’ including housing, income, healthcare, employment and meaningful activity. In England, homelessness initiatives focused on helping rough sleepers sustain a lifestyle away from the streets.¹¹³ Under the previous government, Australia had a small National Homelessness Strategy featuring a series of demonstration and research projects.

Most countries provide various degrees of homelessness shelter and supported accommodation responses. Many of the European states with stronger social housing sectors are able to provide a greater link with long term permanent housing. The United States has developed a shelter system since the late 1980s which has never received consistent or adequate federal funding is unable to meet the high demand.¹¹⁴ International reports acknowledge that Australia’s homelessness programme, whilst it has capacity issues, has considerable strengths. Support provision is considered relatively comprehensive; it is based on a sophisticated understanding of homelessness and is assisted by rigorous data on the scale of the problem.¹¹⁵

Homelessness is a significant issue for many countries around the world including Australia. Information and data about homelessness internationally is improving but is

¹¹⁰ Edgar, Bill (2006) National Strategy to prevent and tackle homelessness. The pathway to a permanent home. Norway 2006 (European Housing Research Ltd, Peer Review and Assessment in Social Inclusion, Brussels)

¹¹¹ Ibid & Human Resources and Social Development Canada website: www.homelessness.gc.ca

¹¹² National Alliance to End Homelessness (2007) What is a Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness? (NAEH, Washington)

¹¹³ Fitzpatrick, S and Stephens, M (2007) p74

¹¹⁴ See National Alliance to End Homelessness (2007) HUD’s Homeless Assistance Programs (NAEH, Washington DC)

¹¹⁵ See Greenhalgh, E et al (2004) Recent International and National Approaches to Homelessness (AHURI, Brisbane) & Fitzpatrick, S and Stephens, M (2007)

still patchy and there are considerable methodological, definitional and conceptual issues. Most Western countries do not experience the level of homelessness that occurs in the United States particularly the numbers living on the streets and moving in and out of shelters. There is some evidence to suggest that homelessness increased in many countries from the 1980s onwards. Canada experienced big increases in the 1990s influenced by a decline in social spending and changes to its welfare arrangements. For many European countries, immigration is a significant factor in their homeless populations. In Germany, Finland and arguably the United Kingdom, there have been some signs of decline in homelessness. An examination of the international literature does suggest that countries with higher social spending and commitment to social services have lower levels of homelessness. The literature also indicates that those countries with larger social housing sectors with more ability to assist and enable low income people to access and sustain housing have a better record in responding to homelessness. Most countries have developed some national homelessness initiatives without committing to a comprehensive and long term national plan.

Australia is well placed to prevent, reduce and respond more effectively to homelessness. We have a national homelessness service delivery programme which is very well regarded internationally, a sophisticated and broad definition of homelessness, a good knowledge base and many innovative service responses. Whilst we can learn from the approach of many Western countries about their response to homelessness, we also have much to contribute to international discussions.

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