Accommodation in Crisis

Forgotten Women in Western Sydney

Catherine Robinson and Rose Searby

UTS

Centre for Social
Justice and Inclusion

ACCOMMODATION IN CRISIS
FORGOTTEN WOMEN IN WESTERN SYDNEY

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Parramatta Mission

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research project set out to identify the need for crisis accommodation of single homeless women in Western Sydney. It was hoped that this need would be identified through records of requests for assistance by homeless women in the region and through interviews with service providers in contact with homeless single women. While an obvious service gap is identified in this report, it is also argued that the recognition and numeration of, and response to single women's needs is bound up with many broader conceptual and structural difficulties, including:

- the invisibility of single women as a category of 'deserving' homeless people,

- the mismatching of crisis accommodation provision and models with likely crisis needs, and

- the lagging development of suburban infrastructure and growth of suburban homelessness.

In the Sydney region, these underpinning problems translate into a range of critical and immediate issues which shape the context of single women's homelessness, such as:

- the lack of a crisis accommodation facility designated for single homeless women in the Western Sydney region,

- mounting pressure on existing inner-city accommodation services and related inner-city support services in the areas of health, mental health and drug and alcohol dependence,

- the most vulnerable of single homeless women in crisis with complex needs being most likely to be without safe accommodation,

- a reinforcement of women's displacement and disconnection from familiar home territory and from key supports, family, health care, education and employment because of the lack of local service provision, and

- a reinforcement of single women's unsafe survival skills contributing to further risk, trauma, and cycles of homelessness.

The report calls for an end to community, government and service reliance on single homeless women to solve their own homelessness through resilient but unsafe survival practices. The report provides evidence of the need for the serious consideration of:

- the immediate provision of crisis accommodation facilities for single homeless women in Western Sydney,

- a thorough evaluation of single homeless women's need for crisis and other affordable housing options across New South Wales,

- a thorough evaluation of funding for existing crisis services, and

- a re-examination of single homeless women as a significant homeless group in Australia.

FORGOTTEN WOMEN?

> I hope they can see the need for the young women and for accommodation in
> the West. The West is so forgotten isn't it, when it comes to everything regarding
> homelessness?
>
> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

Background

Research continues to document the feminisation of homelessness (for example, see Jerome *et al*, 2003), and in particular the increase in the numbers of single women living homeless (Fitzpatrick, Kemp and Klinker, 2000: 27). With women from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds making up nearly half of the homeless population in Australia (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2003: 4), it is clear that community understandings of homelessness need to shift from stereotypical notions of the homeless, white, male 'down and out' (see also Klodawsky, 2006; Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen, 2006). Beyond changing images of homelessness, however, there needs to be a correlating shift in the focus of homelessness research (see also Fitpatrick, Kemp and Klinker, 2000: 27; Klodawsky, 2006: 366) and in the structure and provision of services for women experiencing homelessness. In particular, there is a need for a more complex response to the layers of issues which connect to sustain women's homelessness.

In 2002-2003, nearly half of the calls made to New South Wales' Homeless Person's Information Centre (HPIC)[1] were made by women (Department for Women, 2003: 3). Further, research on the status of inner-city women's crisis accommodation shows that there are not enough emergency accommodation beds for women in Sydney, no crisis services in the Western Sydney area, and yet consistent unmet need (Department for Women, 2003: 10-11). Research on squatting in the Parramatta area in Western Sydney suggested that the fall-out of the lack of provision of crisis and low-cost accommodation is the perpetuation of extreme risk, poverty, illness, and violence for women who move between transient forms of shelter (Robinson, 2003). This research also argued that the lack of women's crisis accommodation is a serious gap in Western Sydney's support service provision which has consequences for both women and men (Robinson, 2003: 20). In particular, Robinson (2003: 23) found that there 'is a need to address gaps in immediate short-term accommodation service delivery, including an overall lack of beds and a particular shortage of accommodation for "older youth" 21-30, and for women without children'.

A focus on single homeless women

In a context of service gaps and unmet demand, this project was initiated to produce a clearer picture of single women's need for crisis accommodation in Western Sydney. The project was undertaken with an awareness that the need in Western Sydney is linked to a shortage of crisis accommodation options across the city and NSW, and is also linked with the 'changing face' of homelessness in Australia. The project was instigated by Parramatta Mission and jointly funded by Parramatta Mission and UTS Shopfront. As the project had a limited budget ($4000), it was designed to focus on the local crisis in Sydney and to deliver in a short time frame an overview of relevant literature on single women's homelessness and of statistics and 'local knowledge' of

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1. The Homeless Person's Information Centre is operated by the City of Sydney Council and is a New South Wales state-wide emergency phone referral service for those in need of crisis accommodation.

single women's needs. As such, the report was envisaged as a pre-cursor to fully-funded research and as a tool for use by services for advocacy purposes at time of threatened closures of single women's homelessness services in Sydney.

The focus in this project on the accommodation needs of single homeless women specifically is a reflection of two important observations; that 'target groups' experience homelessness differently and that single homeless women are distinctly invisible in research, nationally coordinated Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) funding allocations, and service provision priorities. Single homeless people needing housing assistance, as Chaplin (2006: 12) suggests, are more likely to have high and complex needs and to struggle to finance alone what limited and poor quality single accommodation they might find available. In research conducted in US cities, Burt and Cohen (1989) show that compared to homeless women with children, single homeless women are more likely to be homeless for longer (several years), have higher drug and alcohol dependency rates, and rely much more heavily on shelters for food.

Interestingly these researchers suggest that 'in many ways homeless women with children differ from homeless single women even more than the latter differ from homeless men' (Burt and Cohen, 1989: 520), indicating the imperative for a serious focus both on the specificity and complexity of single women's needs. As research on single homelessness has similarly shown (May, 2000; see also Fitzpatrick, Kemp and Klinker, 2000), single homeless women are also likely to have trajectories through homelessness which reflect their mobility and ability to 'hide' their homelessness through a range of survival strategies and accommodation options outside of service networks (Klodawsky, 2006; Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen, 2006; Whitzman, 2006), although as May, Cloke and Johnsen (forthcoming; see also Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen, 2006) acknowledge, single women do remain visibly homeless on the street.

In Australia, single women receive the lowest amount (4%) of recurrent funding from SAAP for all primary target groups (AIHW, 2005: 5), and in New South Wales 'people were more often turned away from agencies that primarily target single women' (AIHW, 2006: 60). As Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen (2006: 438) suggest, 'support is often tagged to women's presentations in the gendered role of mother' thus further alienating and excluding single women with no children. As May, Cloke and Johnsen (forthcoming) similarly argue in reference to the British context, 'homeless policy has developed around a drive to protect the sanctity of the family, rather than women', a problem which is equally relevant to the Australian context. In the Western Sydney region there is currently no crisis accommodation facility targeting single homeless women yet as will be discussed, single homeless women in need of crisis accommodation can be expected to be the most vulnerable, sick and poor women absolutely at the end of options for even unsafe housing. Further, as will be explored specifically in Chapter Four, the invisibility of single homeless women in the Western Sydney area is doubled because of what could be understood as a 'state of denial' that homelessness occurs 'outside the 'big city'' (Whitzman, 2006: 386) in the 'purified space' (Cloke, Milbourne and Widdowfield, 2000: 715) of Sydney's outer suburbs (see also articles in Parity, 2006, 19 5).

A key aim of this report is to reinforce and evidence the need for a review of the New South Wales response to single homeless women, with particular focus on Western Sydney. The project indicates

that any review requires a focus on documenting need outside inner-city Sydney, examining more closely metro centres such as Parramatta, Liverpool and Campbelltown which amongst others host significant homeless populations requiring immediate support.

A brief overview of the research

A snapshot of SAAP data and statistical evidence generated specifically for the project by HPIC is presented in this report (Chapter Two) in order to approximate demand for services by single homeless women in Western Sydney. Given that the collection of SAAP data in Australia and New South Wales is tied to recorded demand for services, however, the lack of existing services in Western Sydney presents significant problems for a numerical estimate of 'need'. That is, if the visibility of single homeless women is tied to data collection at services, then the lack of services in Western Sydney guarantees that single women there remain invisible as a target group in need (see also, Edgar and Doherty, 2000: 4). In this context, HPIC call data provides an invaluable insight into single homeless women's needs for crisis accommodation in both Western and Greater Sydney.

Given the limits of existing research and the small body of relevant statistical evidence, this project also sought to document qualitative evidence from service providers about their experiences of demand for crisis accommodation services by single women in the Western Sydney area. This documentation of 'local knowledge' focused on service providers' perceptions of the scale of demand for crisis accommodation and of the key issues faced by single homeless women in need of crisis accommodation. Analysis of data from these interviews forms the core of the research report.

Following UTS ethics approval (HREC 2004-131A) in January and February 2005 service provider staff in contact with single homeless women in the Western Sydney area were consulted in qualitative interviews which were taped, transcribed, and thematically analysed. Interview participants (all de-identified in this report) were drawn from drop-in services providing health and other support services to women, youth services providing crisis accommodation to young women, and domestic violence refuges providing crisis accommodation to single homeless women. Eight interviews were conducted at services in Western Sydney and three at services in inner-city Sydney; some interviews included more than one staff member. Interview contacts were made through snowballing referrals and were limited because of the time-frame and small scope of the research. A group interview was also held with a further eight participants from HPIC staff who receive calls for emergency accommodation from women around Sydney and NSW.

It should be noted that the authors of this report also consider single homeless women's knowledge to be critical in the discussion of the need for crisis accommodation; this knowledge should be central in any large project or review conducted in the future. Further, it is also acknowledged that the complexity of who constitutes 'single women' is only partially captured in this report. Again, a larger project or review should make explicit the diversity of experiences within the category 'single homeless women' and illuminate important distinctions in complexity of need.

Structure of the report

Despite its necessary limitations, this report provides important insights into the crisis in accommodation options for single homeless women in Sydney and provides a significant preliminary analysis of the invisibility of single women as a category of high need. Chapter One provides a brief overview of key literature on women's homelessness in Australia. Chapter Two explores the very particular range of issues faced by single homeless women including their physical and conceptual invisibility in the broader landscape of homelessness. This chapter also includes a closer examination of available statistical data with particular reference to single homeless women in Western Sydney. Chapter Three focuses on the explicit need for crisis accommodation, critically examining the 'crisis' issues which lead women to 'end of the road' homelessness and the limited capacity of crisis accommodation to respond to them. Chapter Four focuses on the perceived impacts of the lack of crisis services in Western Sydney and the 'double invisibility' of homeless single women in regions without crisis services. The conclusion calls for a large scale review or research initiative into single homeless women's experiences and needs in New South Wales and in particular in Western Sydney, and challenges State and Federal governments, advocates and services to critically evaluate the place of single homeless women in the broader landscape of homelessness.

AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

> The causes of women's homelessness are rooted in social and gender specific explanations and any attempt to formulate an understanding of women's encounters with homelessness requires attention to the patriarchal relations which pervade present day...society.
>
> Doherty (2001: 9)

This chapter gives a short overview of the specific trajectories into homelessness experienced by women and provides the broader context for the discussion of single women's homelessness which follows. Of the significant body of literature and research on homelessness in Australia and internationally, only relatively recently has research focused specifically and entirely on women. There is now a clear recognition that women's homelessness is distinctly different to, and separate from, men's homelessness. Significantly, women are now included in a picture of the 'new homeless' which recognises the need for consideration of the complexity of factors that contribute to women's homelessness and the diversity of women who may be considered 'homeless' (Jerome *et al*, 2003: i).

Factors underpinning women's homelessness

The reasons for women's homelessness are as diverse as the women experiencing it (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 24) and women may occupy very different places within trajectories or cycles of homelessness. The initial causes of women's homelessness may often be compounded by additional difficulties whilst they are living homeless. In their discussion of why women may become homeless, Nunan and Johns (1996: 25) argue, for example, that it is not helpful to separate the 'cause' and 'experience' of homelessness. They suggest that homelessness is best understood as a continuum of experiences along a pathway or pathways that lead in and out of homelessness (see also Jerome, *et al*, 2003: 3-4). As such, the causes and experiences of women's homelessness can be understood as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, and thus women's homelessness may be related to multiple issues over any given period of time. Key factors in women's trajectories of homelessness are discussed below with particular attention paid to the socio-economic vulnerability of women, their experiences of violence within housing, and the invisibility of women's homelessness.

Socio-economic factors leading to women's homelessness

Loss of economic support or financial difficulties are seen as key causes of homelessness amongst women (Department for Women, 2003: 2). Due to limited access to paid work and caring responsibilities, women are often less able to materially respond to threatened or actual homelessness (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 38). Despite the apparent progress in terms of women's roles and place in Western society, the average female wage remains lower than the average male wage (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 37). As Nunan and Johns (1996: 29) state, 'despite changing perceptions and policy responses, gender inequality remains entrenched in personal beliefs, social values and cultural habits'. Single women are particularly vulnerable as they do not have economic security or support from partners and in addition they may experience unequal access to housing and full-time employment markets. This is a particularly significant issue given the rise in single women households and changing family structures in Western nations (Edgar, 2001: 45).

Housing access for women

Strongly linked to the vulnerable economic position of women, is the poor position of women in the housing market. Homewood (in Ibrahim and Nunan, 1994: 2) claims that women are disadvantaged in the current Australian housing system as a result of their socio-economic position and the manner in which housing is supplied. Some of the factors that have the potential to cause housing stress amongst women are the limited availability of public housing, the unregulated private rental market, and the high costs associated with private home ownership (Casey, 2002: np).

Public housing in Australia accounts for less than five percent of households and as such remains an under-developed tenure (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 42). The traditional association of public housing with 'welfare' housing has ensured that it is limited to families in need rather than as a housing option for low to middle-income families (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 42). The implications of this are significant as waiting lists are extensive and the demand continues to grow. It also means that the public housing stock can be poor quality and often physically unsatisfactory in terms of the lack of safety, privacy, and maintenance (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 43).

The private rental market in Australia offers different challenges for women. It may be difficult for women to maintain housing in this market as it can be characterised by insecurity of tenure through short term leases, lack of available rental houses, high establishment costs, and in some cases, poor housing quality (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 41). Often too, as Casey (2002: np) argues, high on going rental costs ensure that a disproportionate amount of a woman's income is spent on rent.[2] Further, the blacklisting of tenants by agents for reasons such as defaulting on rental payments or damage to property, can lock women out of rental markets. Women lease-holders are particularly vulnerable to blacklisting in situations of family breakdown, domestic violence and sexual abuse as they may flee the property which still, however, remains leased in their name.

Domestic and family violence, violence and abuse

Domestic and family violence against women is both a significant cause and continuing component of homelessness (see in particular AIHW, 2005: 31; Chung, *et al*, 2000; Gregory, 2001; Martin, 2003) and also strongly relates to structured gender inequality. More generally, escaping violence, incest, and abuse is also central in pathways of homelessness for women (see, for example, Cooper, 2004; Hodder, Teesson and Buhrich, 1998; Casey, 2002). Violence may include sexual violence and physical violence, the effects of which can be felt by anyone associated with the women experiencing the violence including children, partners, other family and friends. For young women sexual violence is the key reason for homelessness (Doyle, 1999: 22) and for women more generally, domestic violence is the key reason for homelessness (Jerome *et al*, 2003: 44-47). It is also important to understand the role that the long-term impacts of sustained sexual and physical torture play within trajectories of homelessness, mental illness, and drug use (see Cooper, 2004).

Drug and alcohol dependency and mental health disorders

Experiencing mental disorder is a key factor in initiating and shaping trajectories of homelessness through increased isolation, vulnerability and trauma, and exclusion from employment and housing

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2. Casey (2002: np) claims, for example, that a study conducted in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne found that low-income households (singles, young people and sole parents) spent about 50% of their income on rent.

markets (Robinson, 2004). Drug use and alcohol dependency are also factors which similarly contribute to trajectories of homelessness, and are often related to women's self-management of experiences of sexual abuse and violence and mental health disorders. Drug and alcohol dependency also places women at greater risk of further sexual abuse and violence (Kärkkäinen, 2001: 191). Substance abuse can further complicate access to and provision of accommodation where agencies may apply blanket rules of exclusion for people with drug and alcohol dependencies.

Substance abuse has also been linked to mental health disorders which can create further barriers for women in accessing and receiving services they require. Shelton-Bunn (2001: 8-9) argues, for instance, that where a woman has multiple issues such as substance abuse and mental health problems, treating these issues as mutually exclusive can result in women becoming homeless as neither issue is treated sufficiently.

Disability

Physical, intellectual, and mental disability can also be important factors in becoming homeless. Research shows that the risk of homelessness is often increased for those suffering from intellectual, physical and mental disabilities because of the absence of appropriately supported accommodation (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 35), low income, and expensive support needs (Skeat, 1999: 17). In particular, as Skeat argues (1999: 17), 'women with disabilities themselves have identified that access to crisis accommodation is a priority for them in dealing with homelessness issues'.

Specific research on women with disabilities is limited, however, and Nunan and Johns (1996: 33) state that there is very little information on this group and argue that disabled women are 'doubly invisible' due to being doubly disadvantaged (see also Skeat, 1999: 17). The powerlessness of disabled women can be a contributing factor to their homelessness where they are vulnerable to physical and mental abuse from 'carers', others in their homes, supported accommodation or institutions (Nunan and Johns 1996: 34). Further to this, their access to appropriate accommodation, crisis accommodation and safe and affordable housing is limited (Fernbacher, 1999; Jennings, 2003).

Access to support services

Women may require support services that range from housing to counselling to the teaching of life skills. Where women cannot or do not know how to access the range of services they may require, they may become homeless. Women who are long-term homeless may require extensive support to assist them in developing the life skills necessary for independent living. The issue of timely access to services, therefore, may be crucial in the prevention of homelessness and keeping women out of the cycle of homelessness. If women can access the services they need when they need them, then this may potentially stop the multiplicity of traumatic events that can contribute to long-term homelessness (see Robinson, 2004). Casey (2002: np) argues that this is specifically the case in relation to crisis support and accommodation services, where early intervention with provision of a range of services may prevent homelessness in the first place.

Invisibility and the cycle of homelessness

The cycle of homelessness which many homeless women experience is a complex trajectory of paths that may lead into, and out of, and back to, homelessness. The key concern of contemporary academic and policy discussion is not just how women become homeless, but also how they stay homeless. As discussed, homelessness can usefully be understood as a cycle of both causes and experiences of homelessness.

Women's invisibility is a key factor contributing to their homelessness (see Nunan and Johns, 1996, and Thörn, 2001, in particular). It could be argued, however, that this is particularly the case with single homeless women. The visibility of single homeless women as a significant homeless population is not well recorded as their lack of dependents enables greater mobility through 'couch surfing', swapping sex for shelter, and sleeping rough. It is precisely this invisibility, however, which continues to both perpetuate their immediate homelessness and their non-recognition as a significant group deserving of well-funded service intervention. More generally, however, as O'Grady and Gaetz (2004: 411) argue, 'hidden homelessness is a more common experience for women than is absolute homelessness (compared with men) in large part due to the dangers they face (including sexual assault)'.

Directly related to homeless women's invisibility are their feelings of loss, guilt, and shame in their ongoing struggle with homelessness. These feelings may lead to women concealing their homelessness, avoiding shelters, day centers and public spaces where they may potentially feel humiliated and ashamed (Edgar and Doherty, 2001: 228). Psychological trauma must not be underestimated nor overlooked in the part it can play in contributing to and keeping women homeless and in further perpetuating the cycle of invisible and ongoing homelessness (Hodder, Teesson and Buhrich, 1998; Robinson, 2004).

Defining 'women's homelessness': The place of single women?

As shown, there is a significant body of literature which focuses on women as an important group within the homeless population. This literature has traditionally drawn attention to the specific range of vulnerabilities which connect to produce and sustain women's homelessness. Existing studies have focused on establishing homeless women as a significant and deserving group whose trajectories of homelessness differ from men's. This literature has focused on the underpinning role of structured gender inequality playing out in women's general economic instability, their poorer access to the labour and housing markets, and their experiences of sexualised violence in particular.

While an understanding of the gendered issues contributing to women's homelessness has been well developed, the different trajectories women take through homelessness are less well researched and significantly, less publicly acknowledged. As Nunan and Johns (1996: 82) suggest, while gender inequality is a key common dimension of women's homelessness, women's experiences are extremely diverse. The non-acknowledgment of this diversity becomes problematic when, as Martin (2003: 6) argues, government ideology and dominant homelessness discourses present a 'totalising discourse' on homelessness, homogenizing the homeless voice.

There is a growing and important body of work which does recognise that women's homelessness is both complex and multidimensional, and as such, is a social issue that is 'fraught with difficulty' (Nunan and Johns, 1996: 7). Much contemporary literature concerning women's homelessness acknowledges these difficulties and argues for a need to clarify and expand the understanding of homelessness to include the diversity of women who are homeless in Australia.[3] Similarly, much of the literature acknowledges the fact that there are complex arrays of situations that can potentially contribute to and cause homelessness amongst women.

The emphasis of literature, policy initiatives, and public discourse in particular however, remains on women with children and issues of domestic violence. The focus of this research project is on single women specifically and as such reveals further complexities in attempting to understand the situation of homeless women. While many single homeless women experience domestic violence and have children in care, their particular experiences and interaction with trajectories of homelessness are not well captured through reference to domestic violence literature or through reference to literature on accompanied women's experiences of homelessness.

This project highlights the heightened invisibility of single homeless women to which the public and policy focus on women with children contributes. Single homeless women do pose a challenge to researchers and policy developers alike due to their increased invisibility and the diverse range of factors that influence their homelessness. This research suggests, however, that it is critical that further work on women's homelessness include this group more prominently in terms of exploring and addressing the experiences of both single women escaping domestic violence and single women experiencing homelessness.

3. See for example, issues of Parity on women and homelessness (1999, vol 12, no. 1) and young women and homelessness (2000, vol. 13, no. 3); Casey's (2002) work on single homeless women; Cate Nunan and Llewellyn Johns' (1996: 33) discussion on the cultural differences between Aboriginal and White Australians' notions of 'home' and ideas of housing, and their argument on the 'double invisibility' of disabled homeless women; Jane Homewood's discussion about discrimination against women from non English speaking backgrounds and Aboriginal women in the Australian housing system in Ibrahim and Nunan (1994); Lesley Cooper's (2004) report on women associated with bikie gangs. From the body of international literature, see for example, Arend (2003) regarding HIV positive women and issues faced by the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community in the USA, and Burt and Cohen's (1989) comparative study of single homeless women with other homeless groups. Coleman's (2000) work on Indigenous women using public space in inner-city Brisbane is one important starting point in recognising the specific issues surrounding the experience of homelessness for Indigenous women.

FORGOTTEN WOMEN:
THE PARTICULAR CASE OF SINGLE HOMELESS WOMEN

> And the thing that we've been told by a lot of the women that come through here is that they've managed...Cos they don't have their kids with them, then they can stay, [they can] manage to a few nights with some friends. They are actually more transportable. So, as a result, they get shifted around too many places before they end up in a refuge.
>
> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

The previous chapter provided a brief overview of some of the key factors which contribute to women's homelessness generally. The aim of this chapter is to further develop the claim that the experiences of homeless women are different and diverse and that single homeless women's experiences are not always best explained in relation to discussions of women and children's homelessness in particular but instead require separate and equal consideration in their own right. The chapter begins discussion of the particular case of single homeless women with an exploration of their representation in different forms of data collection in Australia and in Western Sydney in particular. It is argued that the problems faced in data collection on single homeless women strongly relate to their well hidden experiences of homelessness. Single homeless women remain less statistically visible particularly where visibility depends on accommodation service provision. It is shown, however, that this invisibility is also a more general hallmark of single women's trajectories through homelessness.

Making single homeless women visible: The problem of numbers

The following sections draw together relevant available statistics as an initial step in developing a picture of single women's homelessness. These figures are in no way intended as comprehensive, but instead provide some simple starting points for thinking about the ways in which homelessness becomes 'known' and how this is especially problematic for hidden homeless groups. Figures are drawn from SAAP data collection and from data provided by HPIC. Data is also drawn from research specifically on Western Sydney, and from service provider research participants.

National snapshot of SAAP

The SAAP Annual Report for 2003-4 (AIHW, 2005: 21) shows that in Australia more female clients (58%) received support than male clients (42%). It is important to note, however, that such figures do not distinguish between support given to women accessing SAAP services for women and children escaping domestic violence and support given to single women accessing homelessness SAAP services. This is an important point because although it may sometimes be claimed that women 'get their fair share' of support, it is clear that within this overall picture single homeless women receive a very small proportion of support. The Annual Report specifically notes the small number of agencies targeting single homeless women, and the fact that single homeless women received the smallest overall proportion of recurrent funding (4%) compared with much larger recurrent funding received by agencies targeting youth (35%) and women escaping domestic violence (27%) (AIHW, 2005: 5). The report also illustrates the overwhelming disparity in numbers of funded SAAP agencies in capital cities compared to other metropolitan and rural centres (AIHW, 2005: 7).

Snapshot of Western Sydney – HPIC data[4]

In NSW in 2002-2003, women made nearly half of the calls for accommodation assistance to HPIC (Department for Women, 2003: 3). In 2004, there was a total of 8767 calls to HPIC made from Western Sydney Local Government Areas (LGAs). Of these calls made from Western Sydney, nearly 2000 or 22% were made by single unaccompanied women. Nearly double the number of calls (3982) were made by single homeless women in City of Sydney LGAs (inner-city and CBD) though these calls made up a similar 20% of the total calls (19,934) from these LGAs. These figures reflect the significance of single homeless women's need for accommodation assistance across Sydney.

Out of the total number of 1,924 single women callers to HPIC from Western Sydney LGAs, where data was recorded, 651 reported that they had mental health problems and most callers described their source of income as 'disability support pension' (685). The majority described their primary reason for homelessness as 'family breakdown' (475 callers). This was followed by domestic violence (235), interpersonal conflict (212), mental health problem/psychiatric illness (127) and itinerant/long-term homeless (105).

The top three locations of these callers were Campbelltown, Liverpool and Blacktown. Most single women callers came from the 31-50 age group (645), although there were also a significant number from the 18-30 age group (564). The majority of callers reported their country of birth to be Australia (1313) and there were 158 calls from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women. The top three reported accommodation types amongst single women before they sought SAAP assistance were SAAP accommodation, 'living rent free in house/ flat' and 'private rental'.

Just scratching the surface

While these kinds of figures do start to build a picture of single women's homelessness, there is an obvious need for a systematic investigation into support provided to single homeless women and into particular geographical areas of need. It is vital to note, however, that there are significant limitations with data collection methods which only record amount of contact with services, rather than actual numbers of homeless people. This is not only problematic simply because the recorded frequency of contact may obscure actual numbers homeless, but more importantly because homeless people only become 'counted' when they contact services. As will be further argued, this is particularly problematic for those homeless groups who are less likely to have contact with services such as single women. Further, as the focus of this project is on single homeless women in Western Sydney, it is also important to note that combined with these statistical problems there is a general lack of data available on homelessness in the Western Sydney region (Western Sydney Strategic Plan for Homelessness, 2004: 12). This further obstructs a clear understanding of demands for support and accommodation services.

In terms of SAAP data, these data collection issues mean that homeless people only become visible once they have been provided with a period of accommodation support. In terms of HPIC data

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4. The HPIC data was kindly prepared for this research project by staff at HPIC. It relates to the calendar year January to December 2004. For the purposes of this project and as per HPIC methods of data collection, Western Sydney is divided into fourteen local government areas (LGA) and therefore defined as Auburn, Blacktown, Bankstown, Baulkham Hills, Blue Mountains, Fairfield, Holroyd, Hawkesbury, Parramatta, Penrith, Liverpool, Camden, Campbelltown, and Wollondilly. Although some of the accommodation services in these areas may at times take homeless single women, particularly those services for single women escaping domestic violence, there are no services in Western Sydney that offer crisis accommodation for single (unaccompanied) homeless women (Department of Women, 2003: 11).

collection, homeless people only become visible if they call the hotline. Further limitations include the fact that data is only call data and does not represent individuals. That is, callers may phone more than once and so some data may represent repeat calls. Significantly also, location statistics only represent the place from where the call was made, and may not truly represent where the caller is actually from. In other words, given the limited number of services for single women, particularly in Western Sydney, women usually move around support networks or to the inner-city and other metro service hubs. It is very difficult, therefore, to accurately record where women were when they initially became homeless or where women are attempting to settle. In turn, it is also difficult to gauge the demand for support and accommodation services in a particular area. Some of these issues are undoubtedly reflected in the higher call rates for single homeless women in inner-city Sydney. The higher rates may reflect the higher number of services supporting women who ring HPIC in the inner-city compared to Western Sydney, and may also be seen to reflect the pressure on the inner city because of the lack of services elsewhere.

Making single homeless women visible: Hidden trajectories of homelessness

It could be argued that despite some limitations, HPIC data gives the best indication of need as at least this data collection is not tied to the actual provision of accommodation support but to the request for assistance. As Watson (1999: 87, emphasis added) similarly argues, 'the point is that it is those statistics which register homelessness before it is institutionalised in hostels, on waiting lists or other forms of provision which are likely to give us the most accurate picture of homelessness'.[5] While it can be said then that close to 2000 calls for accommodation assistance came from single women in the Western Sydney area to HPIC in 2004, it is still likely however, that this figure, even allowing for repeat callers, does not give an accurate or full picture of the level or kind of assistance needed by single homeless women.

In order to gain an understanding about the level of need and issues faced by single women, other 'local knowledge' needs to be explored. A number of key themes were developed from qualitative interviews with service providers in contact with single homeless women from Western Sydney. It should be noted that the themes do overlap and in this way further reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of issues relating to single women's homelessness.

Invisibility

> And I think for women to end up in women's services they have hit the ropes
> far more than men. I think it's the last point of return for the women. I think it's
> because women perhaps are more networked, more able to use friends, to use
> mates, to couch surf, to use sex to get somewhere.
>
> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

Single women tend to adopt different solutions to their housing problems than women who have partners or children. This may be due in part because of the lack of services available to them but

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5. Watson (1999: 87) illustrates well the invisibility of single homeless women in her investigation of a statistical estimate gathered on the single homeless through hostels and refuges in London which argued that four-fifths of the single homeless were men. In contrast, her experience of the overflowing women's accommodation centre where she worked in London, plus an analysis of call centre data, showed that there could be at least as many single women homeless as men or even more. The earlier estimate simply highlighted that there were more shelters available for single homeless men, and that men were more likely to access drop-in and other services.

arguably it is because they are in a position to do so. That is, they have no dependents and therefore are more mobile and less reliant on what support structures do exist. As one service provider commented: 'They are… transportable'. Respondents argued that women may seek out male partners for protection (see also, Tomas and Dittmar, 1995) or 'couch surf' for periods of time with family or friends. Respondents also suggested that women may also choose to sleep rough rather than use accommodation services (particularly mixed gender services as Casey, 2002 notes) which they may perceive as unsafe or threatening, or may be prohibited from using due to their drug or alcohol addiction or challenging behaviours.

Many participants argued that those single homeless women accessing or trying to access crisis accommodation specifically are seen by many services as the most difficult, the most challenging, and the most unwell of homeless women. This perception is further compounded by women's capacity to survive until their situation becomes out of control which is the point at which they may contact crisis services for help. As one participant suggested, single women presenting to services tend to be 'long-term homeless [who have been] failed by the system'.

It was also suggested by participants that services do recognise the complexity of the needs of these women; they cannot adequately respond to their often very high needs which sometimes require specialist support. Some women are not accommodated by services which feel ill-equipped to respond to their needs and thus have no choice but to continue in their cycle of invisible homelessness.

The fact that single homeless women do not have any accompanying children serves to further add to their political and physical invisibility. That is, having accompanying children not only makes women more physically visible, but also more politically visible because of State obligations of child welfare and protection. As a single unit with no dependents, it is easier not to be noticed, easier to move around, and thus easier to escape the attention of government, support and accommodation services and indeed the general public. As one respondent explained:

> I think that there is a perception that if you have children there is a greater need. There's all the child protection issues that go along with being homeless, and being able to be a bit transient and bit a portable…You're not so portable when you've got three kids in tow. So, it seems like that need is quite apparent and I think women on their own tend to blend into the background.

One respondent also explained the particular difficulties women without children face in accessing domestic violence refuges:

> We get quite a few women who are victims of DV [domestic violence] and they haven't got children but when they actually leave DV they can't access women's refuges because they haven't got accompanying children. They really fall through the gaps.

Further, as several respondents argued, women without children tend to remain in violent housing contexts longer, a situation which again underlines single women's invisibility and attempts to 'manage' alone:

> They'll actually put up with a whole lot more than women who've got kids. We've had all sorts of horrendous injuries arriving here…

Single women with high and complex needs

> We're seeing people more affected by drugs, more traumatic backgrounds, children being removed. Probably we're seeing a second or third generation now of people who have never worked, education isn't a priority in the family. If that's all you know, you think that's all there is...
>
> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

Providers perceived an historical change in the numbers of homeless women with high and complex needs. Watson (1999: 90) too argues that though 'women are vulnerable to homelessness for structural reasons, in the last decade an increasing body of evidence has identified psychological factors and a history of abuse and violence as equally important'. Participants claimed that many single homeless women have mental illnesses that may be complicated with further problems or have stemmed from childhood sexual abuse problems. Drug and alcohol abuse is another factor that respondents saw as adding to the complexity of single women's homelessness. One respondent implied that it was almost a given that single women presenting at crisis services have high and complex needs, as those with less complicated problems would generally have stayed with a friend or family or had other means through which to respond to their situation.

Participants felt that for single women, accessing crisis services represented 'end of the road homelessness' and would be a last resort because of fears of unknown refuge accommodation and the stigma attached to single women's homelessness in particular (see also Doherty, 2001: 19). There are significant barriers for single homeless women accessing crisis accommodation, however this is especially the case for those with high and complex needs. Participants indicated that they knew of services – including their own service in some cases – that would not accommodate single women perceived to have 'high needs'. This barrier was seen to again contribute to the invisibility of single women's homelessness.

Lack of advocacy

> They're not high profile. Society thinks that women should be able to look after themselves, an image that women are quite independent and resourceful.
>
> Single homeless women are voiceless.
>
> (Service Providers, Western Sydney)

Considering single homeless women's invisibility and the complexity of their problems, their powerlessness is significant. One reason for this is that they have few advocates. Their invisibility, and fact that they can potentially fall between so many gaps due to a complex layering of experiences and circumstance, makes advocacy difficult and challenging. Like single homeless men, single homeless women present no one 'deserving' reason for their homelessness. Single women's lack of accompanying children and their possible distance from immediate situations of domestic violence also place them outside the target group of well-organised domestic violence policy and advocacy campaigns. Combined with this, the social stigma attached to being homeless is particularly apparent for single women. As one respondent explained:

> So there's that social stigma that's attached to being homeless and being a woman. There is a judgement about 'how did she let herself get like that'? One woman sat here and talked at length about it. She said: 'There's always been that social glorification of the bum and hobo. It was ok, and they went from town to town and did whatever. But for a woman, it was never acceptable to be homeless and on the street'.

Despite this, single homeless women remain their own advocates to some degree. Even though they are often without support from family, friends, government, advocacy and action groups, services, and community, their resilience and ability to stay alive is something that one respondent believed should be viewed positively: 'They are still alive, and I think we don't necessarily credit them with that.'

Definitions of homelessness: Looking beyond 'domestic violence'

As noted, single homeless women fall outside of the target of many women's services designed for women and children escaping domestic services. More broadly, it may be suggested that the landscape of homelessness is dominated by definitions of domestic violence. Within the domestic violence sector, however, as several participants pointed out, it has been very important to argue that women and children escaping domestic violence are not homeless but rather, are unable to live at home.

Unfortunately, however, due to the evolution of support and accommodation service provision into three sectors – generalist, youth, and domestic violence – single homeless women's needs are grouped in a generalist sector which has traditionally been focused on providing support and accommodation services for homeless men. In this situation, the place of single women in the conceptual, political and financial landscape of homelessness is overshadowed by domestic violence sector and the majority of SAAP funding for homeless women goes to those who are immediate victims of domestic violence. This has a significant impact on single homeless women who are not only excluded from the majority of women only services but also from the majority of funding available for women's homelessness. As one participant argued:

> And the women's DV sector, because of the feminist, women's refuge movement, are very clearly articulated that they take women and children escaping DV – only. And so that does make them quite exclusionary because quite often they will have vacancies and women not escaping DV who are in crisis, who may have all sorts of other traumas going on in their life...are excluded from those services.

This is a situation that also affects single women escaping domestic violence. It was noted by participants that within the NSW women's refuge movement there are only three of over sixty services that will accommodate single women without children. Accommodation at any of these three services is very difficult to obtain, and according to one respondent, often a single woman may have been shifted around a lot before they get to the refuge:

> And the thing that we've been told by a lot of women that come through here is that they've managed...cos they don't have kids with them, they can stay a few nights with some friends. So, as a result, they get shifted around too many places before they end up in an refuge. So there is actually a distance between the actual domestic violence crisis often and then arriving at our service. It is not as immediate for women who arrive with children.

Here, tragically, the lack of services and women's portability again mitigates against their possible eligibility for domestic violence accommodation services because of their lack of immediate danger from domestic violence (although importantly, not their lack of immediate violence of other kinds). In turn, this may set these women up for ongoing cycles of other forms of physical and sexual violence and unstable accommodation, including rough sleeping.

It is important to note that this discussion is not intended as an attack on the domestic violence sector but instead should be seen as an attempt to examine why single homeless women remain hidden on the streets as well as in advocacy and policy. The key argument here is that single homeless women deserve a greater voice in the landscape of homelessness and deserve the same capacity for an immediate emergency service response as those women escaping domestic violence, given their similar contexts of risk of harm.

All respondents acknowledged the continued critical need for services for women and children escaping domestic violence and credited the women's refuge movement with strength of purpose and leadership on behalf of women. However, in the light of the necessary exclusionary nature of domestic violence refuges, many of the respondents argued for the need for new service models to address women's homelessness and for the specific inclusion of single homeless women. These service models, it was suggested, would need to recognise the number of factors influencing women's homelessness and the complex array of women's presenting needs.

Single women: The self-managed homeless?

Through a discussion of available statistics and service providers' insights this chapter has argued that single homeless women have distinct trajectories into and within homelessness. It has been suggested that single homeless women can often be the most needy of homeless women, whose family and partner relationships have broken down, who have exhausted support networks, and whose children may be in care. Ironically, their invisibility helps to perpetuate their homelessness and isolation. Further, the multiple underpinning issues of single women's homelessness, combined with a lack of access to services or at worst no services which will accommodate them, ensure they remain gridlocked in the cyclical nature of homelessness without any exit strategies. The results of this context are significant and ensure that single women have had to develop hard-won resilience and risky survival strategies on their own. Many are, in essence, managing their own homelessness alone in an extremely difficult, unsympathetic, and uncaring social and political landscape.

MORE THAN SHELTER:
THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF SINGLE WOMEN IN 'CRISIS'

> The women that we're seeing currently...the majority would be in their late
> 20s, early 30s, chaotic behaviour, very hard to stabilise them at all, even for a
> conversation. Sixty percent are active drug users, most of them are living rough.
>
> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

It is clear that women's 'single' status produces a particular pathway of invisibility through homelessness. While the previous chapter provides an overview of the specificity of single women's experiences, this work also focuses on understanding the issues faced by those single homeless women who for a multitude of reasons access crisis accommodation services. It is argued that 'being in crisis' adds yet another layer to the complexity of single homeless women's situation. It is broadly understood that women using crisis services comprise a unique group and that the term 'homeless' for these women encapsulates a multitude of issues of which a need for shelter is just one (see also Casey, 2002; Burt and Cohen, 1989). The fact that a woman ends up rough sleeping or squatting and looking for crisis accommodation suggests that she has exhausted her safer housing options. It may also indicate that she is facing a range of other issues which have contributed to her extreme dislocation, such as partner-violence, sexual abuse, drug and alcohol dependency, mental ill-health.

Chronic crisis

This chapter explores research participants' views of the specific needs and experiences of those single women accessing or trying to access crisis accommodation facilities. Such facilities are mostly designed and staffed to provide accommodation on a short-term basis from overnight to up to usually three months. In some cases, women may use this short term accommodation as a 'stop-gap' measure before making the transition into longer-term accommodation. As reflected, however, in the staffing, support programs and general flexibility of crisis accommodation it is clear that while in theory it may provide a transition point to more stable accommodation, it is overwhelmingly used by clients who cannot make a smooth transition into more stable accommodation because of their high support needs.

Respondents in this research argued that crisis accommodation is often used by clients who require intensive and long-term support and who use crisis accommodation services on a long-term basis. Because of the greater number of youth services, young single homeless women's long-term use of crisis services was maintained by cycling through a number of youth crisis services over a long period of time (several years). Other long-term use of crisis services simply entailed clients staying well over the traditional three month 'crisis period' up to one year or even longer. One women's crisis service manager expressed her frustration at not being able to refer her single women clients on to other services or encourage independent living because she felt they did not have basic survival skills such as budgeting, cooking, literacy, and further that they needed intensive support with mental health or developmental disorders and other trauma. In turn, as the manager argued, this meant she could not take on new clients and instead regularly declined assistance to other single women in crisis.

As another service manager explained, a counter-productive culture of expected independence informs the operation of crisis and housing assistance more generally. It is clear, she suggested,

that the reality that some homeless people will require long-term ongoing support has not been appropriately registered in the current service framework, a situation which creates great stress. While the assumptions underpinning the crisis accommodation model have perhaps in the past been that a 'crisis' is temporary – a 'once off' situation – and that stability is achievable in the short term, the changing needs of homeless clients and the changing context of homelessness has meant that crisis accommodation services have by default been attempting to providing high support to those in chronic crisis. Given that these services were neither designed nor funded to provide high support, however, the 'appropriateness' of clients for an accommodation service becomes an issue as does the capacity of the service to provide the complexity of engagement their clients need.

Complex chronic issues

> I really worry about the most difficult and most high and complex needs clients.
> Where are they all going to?
>
> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

All respondents argued that women accessing or trying to access crisis accommodation services are distinctly different from those accessing or being referred to medium and long-term accommodation. Importantly, many respondents argued that the category of accommodation sought by women related strongly to the level of support accompanying accommodation. Women in crisis accommodation want and need long-term accommodation options but also often need the support offered in crisis accommodation services. Again, this paradox is a result of limited housing options which provide long-term accommodation with support rather than an expression that women only want and need crisis or short-term accommodation.

A closer consideration of the issues respondents felt women in crisis might be facing illustrates the often inappropriate 'fit' of crisis accommodation with the needs of women in crisis (see also Bisset, Campbell and Goodall, 1999; Cooper, 2004). Thrown into relief is the ultimate failure of crisis accommodation to serve a significant proportion of homeless women because of limited beds, but also because of a basic incapacity to support and respond in a skilled and effective way to some women's needs. As one participant commented, 'SAAP was never designed for the overflow of mental health services (and correctional services too), and that's what we're seeing.'

Service provider participants in this study easily articulated the key characteristics of single homeless women searching for crisis accommodation. The same characteristics were articulated by all service providers and included:

- being literally homeless,

- active addiction/s,

- mental/behavioural disorder,

- ex-offender,

- mild intellectual disability,

- experiencing generational poverty/dysfunction,

- childhood histories of sexual abuse, repeated throughout the life course,

- survivors of violence – domestic violence, family violence, neighbourhood violence,

- poor living and education skill levels,

- chaotic and risky behaviour.

Participants argued that in their experiences the single homeless women for whom crisis accommodation was the last safe housing option multiple combinations of the above issues were present. Women in 'crisis mode' were understood to be those women who because of extreme trauma, dislocation, and ill-health were extremely vulnerable, chaotic, and very suspicious of others. Women in crisis were understood to present many challenges to positive engagement by workers in services because of their drug and alcohol addictions, their non-compliance with medication because of the nature of their illness and/or their difficulties to remain organised whilst living transiently, and their unpredictable behaviour which often related to past traumas and specific kinds of drug use (for example, the use of amphetamine bases such as 'ice' or 'shabou'). One worker noted the particular difficulty presented to services by women with presumed mild intellectual disabilities. While these women were seen as the most vulnerable clients of all, often moving transiently between male partners, building relationships of support with such clients was seen to be extremely difficult because of the lack of capacity to offer stable alternative accommodation.

The limited crisis response

Overwhelmingly, participants argued that there is a specific lack of crisis accommodation beds for single women in inner-city Sydney and in Western Sydney areas. Casey (1999: 13) found the situation to be similar in Melbourne. All research participants currently providing some crisis accommodation to single women estimated that they turned away single women every day, and that overall they turned away about sixty percent of referrals. This seems consistent with earlier noted Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2006) research which reports that in NSW single women's homelessness agencies have the highest turn-away rate.

The paralysing situation produced by a shortage of beds and a shortage of funding to safely staff existing accommodation facilities was seen to directly and disproportionately impact on the most vulnerable of women in 'crisis' mode. Participants commonly noted the rising costs of providing twenty-four hour supported accommodation appropriately staffed with workers paid at award rates. The result of rising costs, many argued, is not just the immediate loss of beds, but a reduction in the intake of women with multiple issues. Insufficient funding of crisis services was seen to directly contribute to a context in which existing crisis services fail the target group they claim to support. As one participant argued:

> They [single women in crisis] really fall through the nets of most services. They continue to use drugs and alcohol - they can't while they are the services. They live really rough, they go with guys who treat them badly just for a week or two. They are really on the edge the whole time.

Given single homeless women's invisibility and capacity to live 'on the edge', it seems bitterly ironic that when they do become visible it is usually because their situation has become out of control and it is precisely at this time at which they are most likely to be excluded from service provision. This research shows that in their lists of the expected characteristics of single women accessing crisis services, service providers almost mirrored the list of characteristics most likely to result in exclusion from accommodation service provision in New South Wales:

> Overall, our inquiry found that the level and nature of exclusions in SAAP are extensive… Significant groups affected by exclusions are:
>
> • people who use, are affected by, or dependent on drugs and/or alcohol;
>
> • people who exhibit or who have previously exhibited violence of other challenging behaviour;
>
> • people with mental illness; and
>
> • people with disabilities, including people with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities and acquired brain injury (NSW Ombudsman, 2004: 8)

This list of general exclusions is further reinforced by the national picture of exclusions of single homeless women from SAAP (AIHW, 2003: 424). In 2003, an AIHW report demonstrated that the top three groups of single women excluded by service eligibility policies were:

• those unable to live independently/semi-independently,

• those exhibiting violent behaviour, and

• those with mental illness (AIHW, 2003: 424).

Many service providers were extremely distressed about the range of chronic and critical issues women in crisis face, but, as the NSW Ombudsman's (2004) report suggests, they were also quite clear about their own and other services' incapacity to accommodate women presenting with many of the key listed 'crisis' issues. While service providers acknowledged that their incapacity to hold on to women with 'high and complex' needs ultimately resulted in women rough sleeping or in a reinforcement of patterns of rotating crisis service use, other imperatives of staff and client safety, house dynamics, and appropriate and safe staffing and staff skill levels were key reasons given for the difficulties experienced in providing accommodation for many women in crisis.

One issue commonly discussed by managers from youth and women's services (crisis and domestic violence) was the significant impact of the lack of external support available to services, particularly in relation to mental health. The lack of external supports was seen to impact directly on the range of clients a service would support. For example, one service provider argued:

> When it comes to people with mental health, is it the mental health that's the primary concern? Like if you try and get someone into see mental health and they'll see them and say: 'We don't believe that they're unwell'. And the gap there is ok, if they're not that unwell, where is the services to help fix up all the other problems that might be compounding on the mental health issue? There isn't anything. They are just sent away back to a refuge which can't cope because they don't have staff to deal with it.

Kids that do present with self-harming, mutilating themselves, staff [in refuges] don't…it's hard to connect that with mental health, it's more seen as acting out. Staff can't deal with that. 'You'll have to find another refuge that deals with self-harmers'. Who advertises 'self-harming welcome here'?

Many service providers felt they would be more confident supporting women in crisis if they felt they could get the specialist supports they might need, including for example, a mental health crisis team or even police emergency response. Many service providers discussed having to make difficult decisions about which women to support because of overwhelming need and because of the very difficult range and mix of issues a household of women in crisis might present at any one time:

> Service Provider (Inner-city): St Vincent's, Darlinghurst are having their own crisis where they have no staff, there's no mental health crisis team available so we've had to have a look at our criteria and reduce taking in people with high needs in regard to mental health. So we're just taking in people with low-medium needs. So if they've got a high mental health, like schizophrenia or bipolar or something and they're not taking their medication or whatever then we're not taking them at the moment because we don't have that support from Darlinghurst.

> CR: So where do you think these women with higher needs going?

> SP: On the street. And we had a meeting with Darlinghurst last week and there were some outreach workers there and they were stating that on the street they're finding that there's more and more people, men and women, who have got mental health issues that are not being supported. We're not the only one that's withdrawn from high needs – other agencies have too at the moment, simply because we just can't get the support that we need.

> Service Provider (Western Sydney): Generally you don't get women with mental health or drug and alcohol issues [sticking] around in any one particular service for too long. There's several reasons for that. One is that they often don't fit into the communal living household. It's often very stressful and triggering for them. Women particularly with drug and alcohol issues…the rules of the house are that you can't use. So that makes it very difficult for them to maintain an ongoing tenancy with us, and the same rules apply at the exit units. The other thing is they can often be very disruptive in the house and we end up having to ask them to leave.

As suggested above, in general, women accessing or attempting to access crisis accommodation are usually facing a range of complex issues which are not easily resolved and which are certainly not resolved in a short time-frame. Homeless single women in 'crisis' are often utilising immediate and risky survival mechanisms under conditions of extreme stress and trauma because of long-term or chronic issues further exacerbated by the terrifying fall through the slim safety net that friends, family, and government may provide.

This research suggests that homeless single women in crisis are not in situations which require one service response (see also Casey, 2002). That is, they access crisis accommodation not because of the temporary nature of the housing offered but because of the high level of support offered and their lack of alternative options. However, overall this research found that service providers had little hope of finding and securing crisis accommodation for single homeless women in the Greater Sydney

area. They did not expect to be able to find beds on any given night for single young homeless women in youth services, for single women escaping domestic violence in domestic violence shelters, or for single women in generalist homelessness services. Further, it also became clear that participants understood the crisis accommodation client group as a unique and diverse group very likely to be facing intensely traumatic issues. In turn, participants argued that this meant that the few services operating beds for single homeless women (across the domestic violence, youth, and generalist sectors) were likely to be unable to cope with clients with 'high and complex' needs and that these clients were actively excluded by services or were moved or referred on.

'Have we really tried to work with these crisis women?': Challenging the crisis model

> '[We're] moving to a situation in which staff are working with clients who have 'potential' and who get good outcomes. People who still use drugs and alcohol will be a 'problem'. This [Federal] government would never allow the kinds of services this group might need. They are into case management, outcomes, outputs, moving into independent living in the community, fully employed…We're seeing people more affected by drugs, more traumatic backgrounds, children being removed. Probably we are seeing a second or third generation now of people who have never worked, education hasn't been a priority in the family. If that's all you know, you think that's all there is.'

> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

As well as recognising the failure of accommodation and other services to work with single homeless women in crisis effectively, many participants in this research questioned the suitability of the current service framework and the extent to which this framework itself contributes to poor service provision and exclusion. While all participants expressed great frustration and anger at the lack of crisis services for homeless women, many also recognised the need to offer a varied service response that may enable very diverse women with diverse needs to feel more control over the way in which they develop support and housing relationships.

In particular, developing a wider understanding and acceptance of the mismatch of time needed to address crisis issues, and the traditional crisis accommodation timeline of three months was seen as most critical in addressing the current crisis system (see also Nunan and Johns, 1996: 44). As Parker and Fopp (2004: 153) suggest, it is the two crucial healing factors of time and support which homeless women most value in emergency and medium-term supported accommodation facilities (see also, Bridgman, 2002). Participants likewise argued that crisis accommodation needs to be designed to respond to women's crises, ideally allowing timeframes of anything up to eighteen months or a negotiated timeframe focused around the readiness of individual women to make a move into alternative safe accommodation.

As already discussed, understanding the slow process of engaging with some women is central to the design and staffing of services. Many research participants, for example, argued that there needs to be a capacity for women to control their interaction with service providers, rather than to be forced

into 'case management'. Also, in some cases, it needs to be accepted that independent living is an inappropriate aim, and the continued pressure to 'fix' and move on clients simply contributes to high-cost circulating of clients through police, health, mental health, corrections and homelessness services. As one service manager commented:

> These women have demons. We haven't come up with a way yet to wipe away the pain and scarring…and for some people it means they will have a lifetime of self-medicating and doing all sorts of things to manage with their horrors the best way that they can.

In line with the views of many service provider participants, Casey (2002: np) reports that from single homeless women's points of view, flexible crisis service delivery is essential: 'The most successful service model reported by women who had experienced chronic homelessness were services that were respectful and allowed women to contact and engage and re-engage over time'. The underpinning imperative here, as Kärkkäinen (2001: 191) points out, is for 'housing policy and social work…to provide the support necessary to enable these people to have a home even if they can not live independently'.

More generally, many participants argued that the traditional refuge model dominating the current crisis service framework does not offer the best response in what can be usefully thought of as a 'new' landscape of homelessness in Australia (see also Anglicare, 2003; Jerome *et al*, 2003). The newness of the landscape of homelessness that some participants discussed revolves around the contemporary impacts of deinstitutionalisation, the broadening impacts of drug use, changes to staffing policies in refuges resulting in the downsizing of services, and the decrease in public housing and long-term affordable housing. In this new social and housing landscape participants suggested, there is an extremely vulnerable and 'high risk' population of homeless people competing poorly with others for decreasing housing and support options. Further, several participants expressed that the ideal of a space for camaraderie and shared healing underpinning the domestic violence refuge model has perhaps been outstripped by the intensity and complexity of many women's needs – needs better addressed in an 'individual housing unit with support' model rather than in the shared housing model.

In general, developing a service response which can holistically address the new range of single women's crisis needs was an imperative for all participants. Participants highlighted the need for crisis accommodation for single women immediately leaving domestic violence for example, as well as the need for crisis accommodation for those women experiencing chronic crisis which could include ongoing domestic violence, criminality, drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness and so on. All suggested that, counter-intuitively, it is clear that the most vulnerable of single homeless women are also most likely to have to sleep rough. In the current landscape of homelessness, it was strongly perceived that 'crisis' women are given less priority and further, remain trapped on the outside while beds are offered to compliant women (see also Nunan and Johns, 1996: 34). As one service provider argued, 'if there's one bed left and there's two women being referred at much the same time, it won't be the complex, most needy person that will get it in most places'.

Further, however, even though women more able to access crisis accommodation services may be more 'compliant', it was strongly argued by respondents that many of these women are not necessarily capable of independent living immediately. The lack of affordable long-term housing options with elements of support, including aged care facilities, was seen to contribute significantly to pressure on crisis services. Service providers were frustrated that they could not refer their clients on and were thus failing current clients and turning away women in need because of a service gridlock:

> And we do have women gridlocked into the service. We can't exit them. And it's the same, you speak to any services dealing with supported accommodation and they'll say the same thing. Women are being gridlocked into services or living in totally unsuitable situations just because we can't get them anywhere better. It's one of the major factors which is influencing the availability of crisis accommodation and also the sort of support we can offer.

While discussions of the most useful models of response to single homeless women are beyond the scope of this monograph, such discussion is necessary in order to assure that services develop to match the actual crisis needs of currently homeless single women. Such a discussion needs to include an understanding of the wider context of the gridlocking of crisis services because of the lack of long-term options for single homeless women of all ages. The broader question, also flagged by international literature (Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Kärkkäinen, 2001; Kennett and Marsh, 1999) about the changing landscape of homelessness and whether or not services are now struggling to respond to 'a new generation of homeless people', is also one which can be usefully asked in the Australian context. In Finland, Kärkkäinen (2001: 190) notes that 'traditional hostel accommodation is changing…The service provision for homeless women appears to be in a transition phase in seeking the right approach. New accommodation is being built, in the form of single small flats, designed to meet women's needs for safety and privacy'. Such models, which also allow for targeted support with substance abuse and mental illness, have clear staffing and resource implications. As Casey's (2002: np) work suggests, however, Australian homeless women interviewed also suggest that women-only (see also Nunan and Johns, 1996: 59) articulated service delivery including residential, transitional and rooming house accommodation was most successful in addressing homelessness.

The discussion of appropriate service models links clearly with a reassessment of who is homeless in Australia and what needs these homeless people have. The need for such a reassessment reflects changing dynamics in homelessness which have not yet been acknowledged. It is clear that single homeless women are not a visible or prioritised group in the landscape of homelessness. Further, it is also clear that the most vulnerable of single homeless women in 'crisis' have trouble accessing even those services most appropriately staffed to address their needs. As noted in Chapter Two, there is an initial need to register single homeless women's experiences more strongly as an important dimension of our overall understanding of homelessness in Australia. Once this has been achieved, a detailed analysis of what kinds of issues homeless single women are facing should in turn drive discussion of the design and implementation of the most appropriate service framework.

SINGLE HOMELESS WOMEN IN WESTERN SYDNEY:
A DOUBLE INVISIBILITY?

> I think what compounds here in this area is that there's all those suburbs that are out West, further out, say St Mary's, all the way out to Penrith, that are really high needs. People that didn't get the assistance when they were teenagers and then had babies. There's a whole new wave of teenagers and young women and men that are a product of those Department of Housing places at Mt Druitt, Bidwell. They built this fantastic big suburb, but no one put any of the infrastructure for the kids. So now when they're teenagers, they're out there with nothing to do and getting thrown out of home, and there's no services for them to go to.
>
> (Service Provider, Western Sydney)

The previous chapter discussed the particular issues single women in crisis are facing and the ways in which these issues in many circumstances mitigate against effective support and accommodation provision. This chapter focuses on the doubled invisibility of those women in crisis living in Western Sydney.[6] These women's doubled invisibility stems from their status as single homeless women attempting to survive in isolated suburban areas where it seems there is little recognition of, and certainly little response to their context of critical need. Whitzman (2006: 384) discusses a similar situation in Britain where 'a state of denial over the existence of homelessness and absolute poverty outside centres of large cities continues to be fed by politicians and developers'. British researchers have linked this denial of suburban homelessness to the idea that 'the suburbs' are safe, socially cohesive and 'family-friendly' in comparison to more 'degenerate' inner-city (Whitzman, 2006; Cloke, Milbourne and Widdowfield, 2000; see also Milbourne and Cloke, 2006). Such notions imply a particular spatial, social and gender order which might be expected to be challenged in 'big city centres' but not in the 'problem-free' space outside these (Cloke, Milbourne and Widdowfield, 2000: 716).

As noted by research participants interviewed for this project, the areas of Western Sydney not only lack designated single women's crisis accommodation facilities (see also Department for Women, 2003: 10) but are also generally service-poor (see also Darcy and Laker, 2001: 4-5). Further, as one service provider pointed out, the range of cheaper accommodation options available in the inner city is also lacking in Western Sydney:

> There's nothing out here apart from [domestic violence] refuges and medium term accommodation. There's no crisis service out here that I know of. If it comes to it, occasionally women end up in caravan parks. It would be very much a last resort to send, particularly a woman...for a woman to leave here and go somewhere like that, she's probably going to feel safer in the park. There's not boarding houses or guest houses even that you get in the inner west.

In 2001, Darcy and Laker (2001: 4) were already exploring 'the high demand and low supply of crisis accommodation services' in the Western Sydney area more generally. Their research responded to reports from HPIC, again repeated in this research, of an increase in calls from the Western Sydney region and the growing impossibility of finding beds for these callers in the limited inner-city services (Darcy and Laker, 2001: 4).

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6. Definitions of Western Sydney vary. The Western Sydney Strategic Plan for Homelessness (2004: 6) includes the eight Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Auburn, Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Holroyd, Nepean, Parramatta and Penrith, also the definition used by DoCS Metro West (WSSPH, 2004: 19). The Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WSROC) includes the above plus Bankstown, Fairfield, Hawkesbury and Liverpool. The Macarthur Regional Organisation of Councils includes these plus Campbelltown, Camden and Wollondilly (Holloway, 13 December 2004, personal communication). The consultations in this research were limited, but included services in the inner-city and in Auburn, Blacktown, Holroyd, Liverpool, and Parramatta LGAs.

All service provider participants in this research stressed the obvious service gap for single homeless women in particular in Western Sydney areas. This service gap is identified in the Draft Western Sydney Strategic Plan Against Homelessness (WSSPAH) (2004: 24) which notes that there are 'a limited number of services targeting women operating between the Auburn to Blacktown LGAs, especially for single women without children'. Although the complete lack of a designated service for single homeless women is not explicitly noted, an action of the strategy does include the follow-up of the findings of the Squatters Report (WSSPAH, 2004: 32) which makes this point clear.

The Plan stresses the importance of understanding Western Sydney as a unique area experiencing accelerated change with Parramatta, Blacktown, and Penrith amongst the fastest growing LGAs in New South Wales (WSSPAH, 2004: 7). With almost equal numbers of rough sleepers to the inner-city area (WSSPAH, 2003: np), it is clear that Western Sydney, and the current metro and service hub of Parramatta in particular, are also becoming centres of homelessness (see the Draft Homelessness Strategy for Parramatta City Council, 2002).

More generally, urban development is seen to be contributing to housing and service stress, particularly given high numbers of first and second generation migrants, Indigenous people, and young people an families now settling in the region (WSSPAH, 2003: np). Research also indicates that 'the need for affordable housing in the western suburbs of Sydney is considerable' and that 'housing stress is widespread across Sydney, but particularly in suburban Western Sydney' (Randolph and Holloway, 2002: 352-353). Specifically, as Chaplin (2006: 12) argues, the lack of affordable and available single accommodation in 'family-targeted' outer suburbs is also a critical issue, leaving those facing or already homeless with 'no where to go other than to gravitate towards the inner suburbs, both for housing and support services'.

Compounding what appears to be generalised housing and service stress, research participants saw particular issues affecting single women in the region. These included the concentration of women's prisons discharging women with little or no exit planning into the area, many areas of concentrated, generationally poor dwellings, and dramatic changes in housing and rental affordability and public housing availability. One service provider described what she thought as the distinctive characteristics of young homeless women from the Western Sydney region:

> CR: Do you think a lot of your clients are from local areas?
>
> SP: Yeah, St Mary's, Bidwell, Mt Druitt. I had one girl who was referred from Dee-Why...that was when I realised her needs were completely different to the kids that we normally deal with. She was educated, she was a very intelligent girl, she'd come from a 'good' family, no economic problems there, parents were still together, had lived within the one home all her life, had attended a private school. She had alcoholic problems and a more expensive drug habit. But these kids [from Western Sydney], their needs are completely different. They're coming from low socio-economic areas, most of them are coming from...there's either a family breakdown occurring, and they're then turfed because neither of the parents want nothing to do with it, or they're coming from single parent backgrounds, whether it be the mother's got drug and alcohol issues and can't cope or whether the step-father's sexually assaulting them or whether the father's got custody of the kids and

> can't cope anymore. And a lot of them don't have an education. A lot of them have dropped out in Year 7 or Year 8 and their parents aren't well educated. I would have thought it was totally different to Northern…and beach areas.

Participants argued that while traditionally Western Sydney was thought to be 'affordable' and have good availability of public housing, because of general housing stress across Sydney and a rapidly expanding population, as in inner-city areas housing costs and rents were in fact becoming intolerably high and public housing waiting lists were stretching to ten years. Participants also argued that because of Western Sydney's dispersed population and large geographical size, the homeless population remained more hidden than in the inner city, thus making inaction easier to justify. Further, it was also argued that poorer areas of Sydney were less able to attract service support because of the community's incapacity to exert pressure on government:

> They've centralised all the services in the inner-city to keep people off the streets because that's where they are going to be seen to be in the streets. So if they can pop them in a hostel for the night and then tell them to go back out the next day, that's seen to be doing something. The fact is that there's probably just as many people on the streets out here – it's just that they are spread out over a less concentrated area.

> I kind of have this feeling that in terms of why services are in the inner-city and not out West is also to do with political factors. Geographical areas that are wealthier will get more funding for services.

It is clear from other literature, as well as from participants in this research, that understanding the specific dynamics of the Western Sydney region and the rise of 'suburban homelessness' (Darcy and Laker, 2001: 4) provides an important context for understanding the comparable political and physical invisibility of this homeless population. For service providers in Western Sydney, however, the presence of homeless people, and in particular the presence of single homeless women in crisis is palpably real. The continued lack of accommodation services remains a source of distress and frustration. Therefore, for single homeless women, political and physical invisibility is in effect more than doubled because of the traditional focus on men's homelessness in the area, the lack of women's homelessness services, a policy and service focus on women and children escaping domestic violence, and as detailed in Chapter Two, the implications of single women's survival skills and their exclusion from the broader conceptualisation and numeration of homelessness.

Location matters: The impacts of homelessness and displacement

> Of [homeless] participants interviewed in the Western suburbs, the majority wanted to be located in the area as they wanted to maintain connections with family, local schools and other familiar services. But due to the lack of services or substandard housing available, they were forced to relocate to shelters of temporary accommodation out of the area or in the city.

> Darcy and Laker (2001: 18)

As well as discussing the general context of homelessness in Western Sydney and the lack of crisis accommodation services for single homeless women, most importantly the interviewees focused

on the impact this lack of services has on the homeless single women for whom Western Sydney is home. In terms of responding to single women's homelessness in Western Sydney, participants all felt that the location of services was critical and the fact that women who become homeless in their home area could not remain there caused considerable additional trauma, including placing women at risk and actually contributing to their homelessness. Given single homeless women's disproportionate reliance on support networks in survival (as argued in Chapter Two) the dissolution of such networks because of service gaps is particularly problematic.

Most commonly, single women who are homeless in the Western Sydney region are referred to two single women's crisis services and one over-night-only shelter in the inner city. All participants discussed the dislocating effects for women of having to move outside their 'home' territory. Three key themes arose in participants' discussions: single women's fear of the inner-city, single women's battle to keep connected with family and friends, and single women's attempts to keep a sense of stability in a time of crisis.

Fear of the inner-city

Participants argued that for many homeless single women from Western Sydney, but particularly those homeless for the first time, the inner-city is an alien environment. The areas in which the two generalist crisis accommodation services are based are Surry Hills and Kings Cross, both areas known for high violence and crime rates, and flourishing sex work and drug industries. Because of this, services in these areas are often also extremely problematic for women in chronic crisis fleeing debt, violence or drug-related issues, including their own drug-usage issues. For example, one participant commented:

> There seems to be a proliferation of services in the inner-city. It's a difficulty for many of the women who come here [refuge in Western Sydney]. It's too easy for them to use again, to work the streets, to get back into their old environment.

Participants reported that often women had no money to travel to take up inner-city crisis beds, even if they felt comfortable with this option. Predominantly, it seemed that many participants felt that women would often take risks to avoid having to travel or because they couldn't afford to travel. For example, women may choose to sleep rough and access day services or remain in risky accommodation situations as their fear of the inner city or of crisis refuges and their clients seemed greater than their fear in their current context in which, though perhaps dangerous, they at least knew what to expect:

> There are no services out West. So you get women who have never been homeless before and you're offering them accommodation in the city and they're reluctant to come into the city as they prefer to stay out West or try to find something else. They don't have money to travel.

> Many will point blank say: 'I'm not going' [to the inner-city]. So some will choose to visit the service everyday and just use drop-in facilities instead of taking up crisis accommodation. Most women would know we don't have a service in Western Sydney. Parramatta is different to the city. If you say to someone who's lived all their life in St Mary's that you're going to put them at Victoria St, Kings Cross, they're just not going to do it.

Drop-in service providers in Western Sydney noted that women clients travelled to use the meal, health and other support services in Western Sydney even if they had taken up accommodation in the inner city. Women also travelled to 'service hubs' in Parramatta and Liverpool from other parts of the region. Some women risked fines on public transport in order to return to their key supports in Western Sydney from the inner city. One participant also noted that in general there was a rise of homeless clients accessing services in Western Sydney even though they were based – on the streets, in refuge or unstable accommodation – in the inner city. Further, it was also suggested that homeless people were moving from the inner city to Western Sydney to take up squats in the many abandoned buildings across the region.

It was clear in participants' discussion that knowing local service providers in Western Sydney seemed extremely important in homeless women's choice and capacity to access services and build and maintain supportive relationships in their home territory. An explicit fear of the inner city and of inner-city services for women was seen to provide services with many challenges, however, given that they can not, in most cases, offer any alternative accommodation closer to home. The insights of participants also further support Darcy and Laker's (2001: 18-19) important research findings that though there is drift towards inner-city services by homeless people, there is also 'a much stronger trend that many people will forego emergency accommodation in order to stay in an area where they feel connected'. Likewise, Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen (2006: 454) make the important point that it should not be assumed 'that single homeless women are socially isolated from housed networks of friends and family'.

Keeping connected

A key issue for service providers trying to support homeless women from Western Sydney is the struggle to keep women connected with family (including their own children) and friends away from whom they may have had to move when referred to accommodation alternatives in the inner-city or elsewhere in the Sydney region. A further difficulty identified was also keeping women connected with key support workers in Western Sydney in drop-in centres, for example, or with other professionals in health and mental health facilities who have already established relationships with the women. An inner-city service provider commented:

> When they have been forced to move out of area, the main one [issue] I think is the sense of isolation and the financial aspect. A lot of them have family out in the Blacktown area. A lot of them have a counsellor that they have been in contact with and so if they want to continue to see that counsellor, they might be able to financially, chances are they probably won't. If it's a free counsellor, once they move out of an Area [designated Area for health service eligibility], they're out of Area so they don't have access to that service. Then the client needs to start the whole process of trying to create new support networks.

For services supporting young homeless women, keeping young people connected to the same school and group of friends was also seen as extremely important. But again this was made difficult by the lack of local accommodation services. As one service provider in Parramatta argued:

> The thing is also trying to keep them in the area because their support network is here, so you don't want to move them from Western Sydney to Botany. You want to keep them in that area or you want to try and place them somewhere back in the area where they're familiar with, like where they're going to school. Cos a lot of them that are coming here may still be going to school at say, Campbelltown or Penrith, so if that's where they are comfortable to be, and they can't go back with mum and dad, you want to get them where their friends are and where their doctor is, and their school is.

Quite apart from the emotional trauma and practical impacts of being displaced from key connection points, participants also discussed the financial impact on women of having to travel to maintain contact (see also Whitzman, 2006: 390-391). Participants worried that with changes to Disability Support Pension eligibility, homeless women's access to affordable public transport may further diminish. The emotional and physical isolation women endured, however, seemed to be the most significant issue from the point of view of participants, especially for those women trying to hold on to relationships with their children from a distance. Participants also discussed women's determination and resilience, however, in maintaining connection with at least elements of their 'homed' life but at great personal cost. Two inner-city service providers explained:

> I think the main issue that comes up for them is that if they are forced to leave the area that they're from, they're isolated from a whole lot of other supportive networks which they may have like family or friends. We have a client at the moment whose children are in care in Gosford area and so she needs to travel to Gosford every fortnight to have access visits. The main issue for her is that not only is it very tiresome for her travel that far but financially it's an actual cost. I believe that the financial aspect is about to get a whole lot worse.

> We have to listen and support the women as much as we can. If their children are out there [Western Sydney], or they have a job, they have to try to organise themselves that they can meet all those demands. We've had women who go to Gosford are every day, or up to the Blue Mountains and back. It's crazy, but they do.

The key issue here is that given the range of issues single homeless women in crisis may be facing, this extra financial, emotional, and physical burden of travel can actually be impossible and this has a devastating impact on women. This impossibility simply reinforces homeless women's sense of failure and abandonment and cuts the very connections needed to address their homelessness, such as employment, key health and mental supports, key supports amongst family and friends and so on. Service providers suggested that in some cases, the lack of accommodation services for women in their local home areas can actually contribute to women's homelessness, drive their disconnection, and obstruct their capacity to remain physically and mentally well and so be in a position to address their crisis situation of being homeless.

Keeping stable

Overall, the chaos of being homeless, as well as being homeless displaced from usual supports or familiar territory was seen as extremely problematic by service providers. In having to move away from their home area to find crisis accommodation, not only do homeless women lose the key

connections which practically and emotionally sustain them but they lose a broader framework of stability taken for granted within the homed community.

This lack of stability was seen by participants as a particularly distressing outcome of the lack of local accommodation services through which they could work with homeless women. Given that women are already extremely distressed and disoriented being literally homeless, participants strongly believed that the further displacement of women from their home areas is another powerfully de-stabilising experience:

> They end up going from place to place to place and nothing's ever put place for them to settle.

> A lot want to stay in south-west Sydney. I mean it is about knowing your local area, knowing your shops. I think they've got enough trauma and other stuff going on when they get a refuge, if it's a completely different area, it's just one more difficulty to experience. And they might have some minor contact somewhere, it might be someone in a shop, or in a chemist they go to, or…It's just something about some level of familiarity. And often we've had a few women who've been homeless on the streets in the area and still want to stay in the area after they've come in here. They've still made some attachment to their local area. And it may not be where they were historically, but they seem to want to stay out here. Just something in your life to feel a bit familiar and a bit normal I would imagine. There's something about having something constant and familiar in your life.

As with the maintenance of key family and support connections, participants argued that maintaining a spatial stability for homeless women is essential in providing the most positive context in which to survive homelessness. Just as for 'homed' women, place attachment and place familiarity – simply 'knowing your shops' – for homeless women too are incredibly important to the practical organisation of every day life, to psychological well-being and, in some cases, to actual survival. Because of the extremity of homeless women's reliance on their broader 'home' landscape, such as when rough sleeping, their intimate knowledge of this landscape and its more and less dangerous areas, its hiding spaces or safe communal spaces, becomes vital.

Crisis accommodation for single homeless women in Western Sydney

This research presents significant material documenting the need for crisis accommodation for single homeless women in Western Sydney. While detailing specific numbers of single homeless women in the Western Sydney area is extremely difficult, it is possible that targeted research may be able to produce good estimates. As argued throughout this report, however, it is not simply the lack of research which contributes to the invisibility of single homeless women in Western Sydney. The high mobility of single homeless women, their capacity to survive without accessing support services, and their greater toleration of violence all contribute to the under-estimation of the potential need for crisis accommodation.

Given participants' statements that single homeless women are turned away from both Western Sydney and inner-city accommodation services on a daily basis, and that the number of women of

all ages accessing drop-in services in Western Sydney is rising, it would seem that at the very least a fuller investigation of this service gap should take place. The clarity with which participants in this research detailed the severe impacts of the lack of local accommodation services on both homeless women in Western Sydney and on existing services further demonstrates the obvious need for a re-assessment of the service provision framework. Unlike some of the issues single women in crisis face, participants in this research argued that the unnecessary compounding of single women's trauma in homelessness through displacement from their stabilising network of familial and spatial connections is a problem which can actually by addressed through local crisis accommodation service provision.

Better documenting the needs and numbers of single homeless women with a last permanent address in Western Sydney is also a clear imperative for services. For example, although many of the services visited had started recording turn away rates, it was felt these records were incomplete or inaccurate. In general, this research further reinforces other statements about the need to quantify the needs of homeless people in Western Sydney more generally (WSSPAH, 2003: 7).

It is also clear, however, that the issue of providing a better response to single homeless women in Western Sydney does not simply hinge on documenting numbers in need. Understanding what is needed and by whom and why is also critical to a strengthened response to homelessness. Again, the practical and conceptual invisibility of single homeless women in Western Sydney is a particularly glaring gap in both funding and service provision.

While it would seem that there is need for a range of accommodation options to prevent the gridlocking of services, this report has made a particular case for the need for crisis accommodation services in Western Sydney. There are two reasons for this: firstly, because there are no services targeted in this area, and secondly, because, on the basis of consultations with a range of service providers in contact with homeless women in Western Sydney, it is clear that it is the most vulnerable single women in crisis who are least able to access and maintain other forms of temporary accommodation. Further, the lack of crisis accommodation may actually contribute to the initiation and prolonging of single women's homelessness and certainly contributes to their chaotic and traumatic experiences of displacement. It is clear then, that the tragic invisibility of single homeless women as a 'deserving' homeless group is not just doubled in Western Sydney, but is perhaps more correctly tripled in the contexts of their 'single' status, their potentially high crisis needs, and their attempts to survive in large regional areas without services.

SOLVING THEIR OWN HOMELESSNESS?

> The ability of women to hide their homelessness within the supportive confines
> of their social networks not only demonstrates an effective coping strategy, but,
> importantly, also has the potential of disguising the full extent of the problem from
> public gaze and hence as a welfare issue.
>
> Doherty (2001: 19)

This research project set out to identify the need for crisis accommodation of single homeless women in Western Sydney. It was hoped that this need would be identified through records of requests for assistance by homeless women in the region and through interviews with service providers in contact with homeless single women. While an obvious service gap is identified in this report, it is also argued that the recognition and numeration of, and response to single women's needs is bound up with many broader conceptual and structural difficulties, including:

- the invisibility of single women as a category of 'deserving' homeless people,

- the mismatching of crisis accommodation provision and models with likely crisis needs, and

- the lagging development of suburban infrastructure and growth of suburban homelessness.

In the Sydney region, these underpinning problems translate into a range of critical and immediate issues which shape the context of single women's homelessness, such as:

- the lack of a crisis accommodation facility designated for single homeless women in the whole Western Sydney region,

- mounting pressure on existing inner-city accommodation services and on related inner-city support services in the areas of health, mental health and drug and alcohol dependence,

- the most vulnerable of single homeless women in crisis with complex needs most likely to be without safe accommodation,

- the reinforcement of women's displacement and disconnection from familiar home territory, from key supports, family, health care, education and employment because of the lack of local service provision, and

- the reinforcement of single women's unsafe survival skills contributing to further risk, trauma, and cycles of homelessness.

Community, government, and services alike appear to rely on single women to solve their own homelessness and related crisis needs through their increased capacities for 'portability', for withstanding violence and abuse, for self-medicating health and mental health issues, and for swapping sex for shelter. It is clear, however, that service providers recognise the obvious unsustainability and inhumanity of this situation and are keen to work towards providing single homeless women with other choices in addressing their needs. The lack of strong advocacy groups for single homeless women, however, has left calls for a response unfocused. It should again be noted that nationally, agencies targeting single homeless women receive the lowest percentage (4%) of recurrent SAAP funding (AIHW, 2005: 5) and that in New South Wales single homeless women's agencies have the highest turn-away rate of potential clients (AIHW, 2006: 60).

This lack of attention to single women's homelessness is not just a phenomenon in Australia. International literature also makes calls for research on women's homelessness more generally, and research developed to inform or advocate for policy changes has clearly flagged the gaps between traditional service provision and what are possibly broader or generational changes in who is homeless and why in Western nations in the twenty-first century (Kärkkäinen, 2001; Kennett and Marsh, 1999). Further, a complex approach to homelessness is needed not only in terms of recognising the broad range of issues coalescing in the experience of homelessness but also in terms of recognising the significantly different trajectories through homelessness varying groups can experience. As Burt and Cohen (1989: 508) argue, 'good policy approaches to helping people leave homelessness or avoid it altogether can only come once we know something about the characteristics of different subgroups among the homeless'.

This research has highlighted three subgroups facing particular difficulty in the context of homelessness in Sydney: single women, those in crisis, and those in outer-metro areas such as Western Sydney. It is clear that there is a need for a wider review of the NSW response to single women's homelessness with particular focus on the service gap in Western Sydney. Also needed is a re-evaluation of current crisis accommodation models and further research should address the need for a broad range of housing exits for single people in suburban areas (see Chaplin, 2006) and for those single women with high and complex needs in particular (see Jerome *et al*, 2003 and LenMac Consulting, 2004).

Most fundamentally, however, this work links any discussion of particular service gaps such as that in Western Sydney with the need to re-evaluate single women's place in the landscape of homelessness more broadly in Australia. As Watson (1999: 98) also suggests, any response to women's homelessness requires not just discussion of housing provision but changes to the ways in which meanings and images of homelessness are understood. It is imperative that community, government and services alike should stop abusing women's resilience in the face of homelessness and complex crisis needs. In particular, this monograph calls for an end to the reliance on single women's homelessness as the key to solving gaps in the funding and provision of women's crisis accommodation.

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