Introduction

Contemporary society appears to be forever changing. Attempts to gain and maintain control over anything vulnerable, large scale production, adopting a global perspective, the accumulation of wealth and an exponential emphasis on image seem to be the characteristics of the western realm.

Primarily as a result of technological advances, changes occur at a faster pace than in previous decades, with new products launched by the hour, key decisions being made by the minute and breaking news stories, complete with images, released by the second. Some people thrive on change whilst others attempt to resist it as best they can whilst others still may just crave to even gain access to what is available.

Much progression in this capitalist society may not be of concern to a particular group, as their low socio-economic status, minimal participation and perceived negative approach to life remains relatively constant. At times, those visible members appear to be oblivious to the hustle and bustle of the city or unconcerned about image. It is this group of homeless persons who are the undeserving victims of continuity.

This article attempts to address the extent to which homeless persons, now numbering around 100 000 Australia wide, are able to change their situation. Through investigating time spent being homeless, their rights and environment, examining homelessness through the macro world and the age and gender of homeless people, it is aimed that a greater degree of social and cultural literacy will be achieved.

Definitions

Homelessness is a broad concept. It incorporates those ‘who have inadequate access to safe and secure housing. This entails a lack of not only cooking and self-care facilities, but also a lack of privacy, and base from which to conduct daily activities’¹, most of which a typical member of society would take for granted and learn to expect for the future. It is not wrong to expect these things. In fact, it is considered a right.

Obstacles in collecting and collating accurate data exist due to the fact that not all homeless persons seek assistance or make use of specialised services. Many are transient, so identifying a certain number is quite difficult. A significant portion does not seek welfare assistance, perhaps as a result of fear, lack of information or ill health. Several thousand are predicted to not fill out Census forms for a variety of reasons including no address, language difficulties, literacy challenges, and scepticism of bureaucracies.

Environmental change

The most publicly recognisable group is those people 'sleeping rough'. This stems from their immediate environment where makeshift dwellings are constructed or tents, parks, cars and derelict buildings seem to provide some form of shelter. Over 14 000 people live this type of existence Australia wide³. They are the most publicly recognisable group, many of which have immediate
health complications and/or substance addictions.

Others often slip under the public radar. These groups include 'those people staying in shelters and refuges and those staying temporarily with family and friends, some renting in caravan parks and boarding houses.' Plus, those in highly transient situations often move between the above forms of shelter.

Such a volatile physical environment can lead to numerous secondary issues such as intermittent or no employment. A continued absence of income then limits choice and purchasing power (with a specific emphasis on renting) in a number of areas, which can then lead to a decline in morale and self-esteem, therefore negatively affecting the social environment and interactions. Conversely, unemployment is one of the main causes of homelessness.

**Time for change**

The duration of time periods spent homeless have the potential to greatly impact the psychological, emotional and physical state of those concerned. The longer they are 'sleeping rough', the greater the chance of poor nutrition and a severe lack of medical attention if required. This then decreases life expectancy. The location of St Vincent's Hospital in Darlinghurst, Sydney as a public health facility is in close proximity to a large number of homeless persons. Catering for the treatment of ailments, injuries and substance abuse crises, staff must confront the issue of homelessness on a weekly basis.

Homeless youth tend to have a high turnover rate, (shorter time periods spent homeless), as they are more likely to return to their families. However, this is thought to be a considerable factor causing longer-term homelessness later in life. If a young person has spent significant periods away from home, without contact, on a number of occasions, they are more likely to become homeless.

**Some small change**

Some homeless persons resort to begging. These individuals are amongst one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Australian society. It is a strategy used only as a last resort to satisfy immediate needs and homeless people often find it humiliating, demeaning, frustrating and time-consuming.

A contentious decision made by the Victorian Police to adopt a 'zero tolerance' approach to begging last Christmas sparked outrage from some community and charity groups. Calls for proactive measures rather than reactive punishment made headlines in the media.

The fact that begging remains a punishable offence by law reflects the values and priorities of persons in society. Rather than being arrested and charged or imprisoned, it has been suggested that education about such matters addresses these inequalities in society more effectively than simple punishment mechanisms.

For example, Lynch reports on a system in Florida whereby officers undergo training programs, which raise awareness of homeless peoples' needs. Police are encouraged to refer the homeless to shelters and other social services rather than fining or arresting them. Not only has this Policy resulted in the successful intervention of over 750 people, but has also fostered greater understanding and more positive relationships.

It is also noteworthy to point out that whilst giving people small change is a nice gesture, often it is better and more effective to have a conversation, buy them a meal, donate to a charity committed to the cause or volunteer to help out.
The right to change

A Victorian state government survey last year, targeted at over 200 homeless people aimed at investigating what rights were considered most important. Obviously, a primary concern is the right to housing. In a few states at least, a shortage of crisis accommodation and limited funding means that dozens of people 'sleep rough' every night.

One activist reports that a range of other rights are perceived to be or actually are violated and affect homeless people on a daily basis. Firstly, the right to be treated with dignity was noted highly with a desire for greater understanding. Secondly, the right to freedom from discrimination was raised, in an effort to prevent judgements from being made against those who are unemployed, homeless or are dependent on social security. This is an interesting point considering a range of legislative acts addressing equal employment opportunities exist to prevent precisely this from occurring. Thirdly, participation in decision-making processes is sought after for groups of homeless people as they claim they are the individuals who know what is most needed and in the appropriate measures.

Homeless persons should have equal access and input to a range of opportunities similar to those enjoyed by mainstream society. A lack of permanency in shelter should not dictate the privileges and rights to which citizens are entitled.

Policy change in the macro world

A National Homelessness Strategy was launched in May 2000 and is aimed at holistic and a strategic approaches concerning Australia's homeless. It falls under the umbrella of the Department of Family and Community Services, aimed preventing homelessness, early intervention if it does occur and working in a unified manner with relevant agencies and crisis transition and support.

The strategy reaffirms the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), which was established in the 1980s and is responsible for the various networks of refuges and shelters available. The Commonwealth provides 55% of SAAP funding leaving the remaining 45% to be propped up by States and Territories. Totals over $224 million have been generated in the past but no real increase in funding has been evident over the last two budgets. In addition, a number of other programs exist at the macro level including Rent Assistance, the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement, the Crisis Accommodation Program and Emergency Relief Program.

Funding and programs are without doubt beneficial, however a complication arises in the financial deficit between the Centrelink and what is recommended by the Henderson poverty line. The Henderson Poverty Line was developed in the early 1970s whilst Professor Ronald Henderson was undertaking research in to Australian Poverty. It estimates amounts that individuals and families require to meet essential living costs and represents only a basic living standard. When compared to Centrelink payments, it can be found that the gap between the payment and the poverty line is quite large. Under 21 year olds tend to experience the largest deficit where Centrelink payments in the December quarter (2004) were at least $150 below what is recommended. Other groups worst hit are singles with three or more children (over $80 below) and couples with 2 or more children (over $80 below).

How is society to reduce the number of homeless people when inequalities seem to be institutionalised and where the less fortunate echelons are systematically held back? Governments must address every day, dilemmas such as requests for funding from unrelated groups in society, respond to pressure in making decisions which may benefit one group more than another, inquiries, action and research. But, this is the nature of politics.
Disadvantage due to age, gender and disability

Just under half of all homeless persons in Australia are under 25 years of age, with a concentration in the teenage bracket. A small portion of these teenagers attend school and TAFE but the majority are unemployed and this can often trigger a downward spiral.

Doherty\(^1\) writes of a successful program aimed at assisting homeless youth. The former premier of NSW, Bob Carr, opened 'Exodus House' in 2002. It was established by a Uniting Church Minister, Bill Crews who began taking homeless youths off the streets in the 1970s and became dejected at the proportion of these people who were then later involved in fatal car accidents, drugs or jail.

The relaxed and informal approach to rules, power and authority is quite different in this institution, but appears to achieve a purpose. Students call staff by their first names, wear whatever they please and are accepted for who they are. But all are expected to build upon their strengths. Exodus aims at educating students first, then addressing welfare concerns. This has been a controversial approach at times, but has evidently been successful given that a number of clients have achieved a School Certificate.

Once a previously middle aged male group, the profile of homeless people has experienced a dramatic shift. Now, more than ever, facilities and support are required for women and families who are forced into homelessness as a result of domestic violence. Previously, a smaller proportion of women were accessing the SAAP. Currently, just over one third of women seeking SAAP were escaping domestic violence and alarmingly, two thirds of children SAAP clients were accompanying these women. This is of grave concern, as it appears to be a rapidly growing group. To the extent that one in two women are unable to be accommodated on a daily basis.\(^1\)

A double disadvantage is experienced by indigenous females. A disproportionate representation of these people are SAAP clients (24%) considering they are a group comprising just 2% of Australian society.\(^1\)

Also, those with a disability, (one quarter of SAAP clients in 2003 had a disability), were more likely to be male and older than the average age of 30. Although attempts have been made to seek a positive outcome given 92% of the requests for services and help for these people were met, including referral to specialist services if SAAP could not directly meet them.\(^1\)

Case Study - A Life change

One evening a rather well established businessman and restaurateur Jeff Gambin, sat down on a park bench Sydney CBD to clear his head after a hectic night at work. A homeless person sat beside him and offered his blanket. Although a little surprised at being mistaken for a homeless person, Jeff was overwhelmed and humbled by this man's offer of his only possession and suddenly put life circumstances into perspective.

'Just Enough Faith' was founded as a result and has been providing Sydney's homeless with nutritious food every night, regardless of weather or public holidays, or funding since 1993. He and his wife have used over $7.5 million of their own money and now rely on much goodwill, volunteers and donations as operating costs amount to approximately $15 000 per week.

Gambin and his wife operate with a broader perspective in that they also attempt to help make life changes in some people with whom they come into contact. Hope is built through providing assistance in job applications, preparations for interviews, opportunities to acquire skills on a self-sufficient farm, and a fresh start of employment in a Norton St restaurant.
Not only did Gambin undergo a life change and shift in perspective but he and his team have facilitated fresh beginnings in the lives of many homeless persons throughout Sydney.

**Future Change**

Homelessness is a problem that will not just vanish. People will continue to endure hard times and transient housing arrangements but the challenge is to deal with this proportion of people in a manner that will make a difference to their micro world.

It is not the small pocket change that creates a boost in morale or brightens a young man's day but a change in perception exuded from the general public, a redirection in government priorities and funding and a shift towards inclusivity and participation in decision-making.

From this article is can be seen that there is an acute need to minimise homeless persons' time spent 'sleeping rough', providing enough room in refuges and shelters and initiating proactive educational programs. Perhaps then, the continuous cycle of low income and low self-esteem can be broken with a view to these people experiencing some positive changes.

**Questions**

1. What do you do when you see a homeless person? How do you react?
2. Highlight or underline course concepts and terminology.
3. Define 'capitalist society, bureaucracy, intermittent.
4. Describe the difference categories of homelessness.
5. Does the increasing prevalence of homeless persons reflect the values of our modern society?
6. Research the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. There are 30 articles, to which every global citizen is entitled. Select which ones homeless people may be denied.
7. Investigate the programs and action of at least one charity operating throughout Australia. Provide a profile of the organisation and details of their successes. What difficulties may they encounter and how may these be overcome?
8. How may this article have contributed to increased levels of social and cultural literacy?
9. Is tolerance the answer to solving social problems such as homelessness? Devise a solution.
10. How could you help reduce inequalities in society such as those associated with housing?

**ENDNOTES**

4. Ibid
5. Ibid
13. Ibid