

Homelessness in our midst by Denis Fitzgerald

Kairos

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The public face of homelessness is often an unkempt person sleeping out of doors. Just minutes from Parliament House in Melbourne people are often sleeping in a tram shelter, under the verandah of an electrical substation, and in church grounds. On Census night in 2006, 16,000 Australians were 'sleeping rough', including 1500 families with children.

But homelessness extends beyond this. In 2006 67,000 people were moving between various forms of temporary accommodation, such as emergency shelters and hostels. Another 22,000 lived in private boarding houses, without their own kitchen, bathroom or security of tenure. They slept under a roof, but did not have a home as most Australians understand it. That means, roughly one in two hundred Australians – 104,676 people – was 'homeless' on census night 2006.

We know quite a bit about the homeless from the Australian Census, from welfare agencies, and other sources. We know that although only 2% of the population are indigenous Australians, they account for 9% of the homeless and 16% of those sleeping rough. 12% of the homeless are children under 12, and a further 12% are under 18. Surely we can do better for the vulnerable members of our wealthy society.

Homeless people often have interconnected needs that range far beyond the need for safe and sustainable accommodation. There are women and children who leave home because of family violence; those released from prison who need to start a new life; residents of boarding houses who need safer and more dignified lodgings; older people who need to be included in a caring community.

Many Catholic agencies are working with these Australians – to recognise and respond to the dignity of each person. They also help those at risk of becoming homeless. And they advocate to change policies and structures that contribute to homelessness, and prevent people escaping it.

Catholic agencies work alongside other community agencies, and in partnership with Governments. They also complement the initiatives of parishes and other parts of the Catholic community. They receive extensive support from individuals, parishes, and other support groups. This volunteer input, donations, and prayer is essential to their work. But more support is always needed.

Catholic agencies working with the homeless in Melbourne include the St Vincent de Paul Society, Sacred Heart Mission, Corpus Christi Community Greenvale, St Mary's House of Welcome, Bethlehem Community, McAuley Community Care for Women, Jesuit Social Services. They can be contacted directly, or through Catholic Social Services Victoria, on 9287 5566 or cwade@css.org.au

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