

# Beyond the 'At Risk' Individual

## What is this research about?

This research examines two differing approaches to ending homelessness by contrasting prevention strategies aimed at reducing poverty with strategies aimed at responding to individual cases of homelessness. As such, the structural factors that contribute to homelessness (shortage of affordable housing, poverty, unequal participation in the work force, and limited social welfare programs) are compared to the responses that are geared towards reducing individual 'at risk' cases of homelessness (financial support, assistance in maintaining existing housing, and help securing new housing).



## What you need to know

Between 340,000 and 440,000 people in Australia will experience homelessness over a given twelve-month period. Although the Australian government understands homelessness to be a preventable social problem and has set an ambitious goal to cut homelessness in half by 2020, current interventions mirror those that are in place in the UK and the US, which focus mainly on addressing the problem at the individual level, without regard for the root causes of homelessness.



### KEYWORDS

*affordable housing, prevention strategies, poverty reduction*

### VISIT

[www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca)  
for more information

### ARTICLE SOURCE

Parsell, C. and Marston, G. (2012), Beyond the 'At Risk' Individual: Housing and the Eradication of Poverty to Prevent Homelessness. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 71: 33–44.

## What did the researcher do?

The researchers evaluated the effectiveness of the Australian Government's homelessness prevention strategies. By focusing on Australian Government's 2008 White Paper on Homelessness, and considering alternative approaches used in other countries, the researchers compared differing approaches to both reduce poverty and to end homelessness.



### ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

**Dr. Cameron Parsell** is a Professor in the Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland, Australia. His research interests include poverty, housing, homelessness, and social policy.

## What did the researcher find?

The researchers found that Australia's social policy has not been properly developed to adequately address the fundamental causes of poverty and homelessness. According to the researchers, responding to the individual needs of those already homeless or those 'at risk' of becoming homeless either does nothing to address the fundamental causes of homelessness, nor is it useful for those not identified as 'at risk', but become homeless nonetheless. However, because the up-front financial costs required to make the structural changes necessary for homelessness prevention are expensive, and the fact that the benefits of needed change are not immediately recognized, strategies targeted at individuals already homeless are favoured by policy makers over strategies targeted at overall poverty reduction. The researchers also found that solely increasing the supply of affordable housing to be an inadequate approach to



ending homelessness because it overlooks common risk factors for homelessness. According to the researchers, these include domestic violence, mental illness, state care, and drug and alcohol misuse. After examining current literature on, and approaches to, ending homelessness and poverty reduction in Australia and abroad, the researchers found homelessness prevention strategies to be most successful when combined at three levels: *Primary prevention* which focuses on the structural causes by preventing new cases of homelessness, *secondary prevention* which focuses on intervening in the initial and easy to treat stage, and *tertiary prevention* which is used to slow the progression or lessen the negative effects suffered by individuals who are already homeless.

## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to reform policy such that poverty prevention measures are implemented to combat homelessness at both the structural and individual level. This would require a shift away from focusing solely on individual risks to including a focus on the underlying causes of poverty. These measures could include a guaranteed minimum wage, full time employment, income tax benefits and welfare transfers such that poor people are better equipped to be competitive in the housing market, combined with increasing the supply of affordable housing such that the likelihood of poor people becoming homeless is reduced.