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Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice



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Foreword | *It is generally accepted that a person's living situation, in particular their experience of homelessness and housing stress, can have both long-lasting and wide-ranging consequences. For criminal justice practitioners, the task of limiting homelessness and preventing crime remain key policy priorities in need of ongoing and integrated research.*

This paper provides a much needed examination of homelessness and housing stress among Australia's criminal justice population. Using data from the AIC's Drug Use Monitoring in Australia program, this study examines the prevalence and nature of homelessness among a sample of police detainees. It is the first of its kind to examine a broader range of homelessness experiences and the reasons why some offenders have few choices but to 'sleep rough' or seek accommodation support. Importantly, the authors estimate that 22 percent of the detainee population is homeless or experiencing housing stress in some form; much higher than has been previously estimated. This research reaffirms the need for intensive accommodation support services to complement criminal justice responses to crime and those who have contact with the criminal justice system.

Adam Tomison
Director

Homelessness and housing stress among police detainees: Results from the DUMA program

Jason Payne, Sarah Macgregor and Hayley McDonald

The Australian Bureau of Statistics, using the 2011 Australian Census, has estimated that on any given night in 2011, approximately 105,000 Australians were homeless (ABS 2012). The majority resided in either severely overcrowded residential dwellings (39%) or in supported accommodation designed specifically for those without a permanent place of residence (20%). Among them, young males, Indigenous Australians and those born overseas were overrepresented. Yet despite all the information that has been collected, there remains a significant gap in the national conversation about the causes, correlates and more importantly the consequences of homelessness (including primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness; see Homelessness Taskforce 2008) in the Australian context.

The idea that a person's living situation can influence their involvement in criminal activity has long been acknowledged, with homelessness in particular having been the focus of extensive theoretical and empirical criminological research (see Grimshaw 2002). Although long recognised as an important indicator of social disadvantage, homelessness as a cause of crime found renewed attention with the release of Hagan and Macarthy's (1997) detailed depiction of youth crime and homelessness in two Canadian cities. Titled *Mean Streets: Youth Crime and Homelessness*, the authors examined qualitative and quantitative data to explore the often difficult and challenging circumstances faced by homeless youth. Their study lent significant support to the idea that homelessness, together with relative deprivation and monetary dissatisfaction, is one of a number of 'strains' that can influence individuals to engage in criminal activity (see also Agnew 2006).

In more recent years, the international literature has largely focused on the relationship between homelessness and the recidivism of prisoner and parolee populations (see Aos, Miller & Drake 2006; Lipsey & Cullen 2007), concluding most recently that stable accommodation has some role to play in reducing post-release reoffending, even if the evidence of a direct and substantial causal relationship is far from conclusive (O’Leary 2013). In the literature, a number of different explanations are commonly used to describe the correlation between homelessness and crime, including that:

- by virtue of living in a public place, people who are homeless are more susceptible to committing public order offences such as trespassing and public urination;
- those without stable accommodation may have little choice but to engage in ‘survival offending’ such as shoplifting and squatting;
- substance abuse as a coping mechanism may lead to offending behaviour in order to fund habits; and
- police may specifically target homeless populations because of perceived community safety issues, or because homeless populations are more visible to street policing operations (Kirkwood & Richley 2008).

Most importantly, however, Hagan and McCarthy’s (1997) *Mean Streets* served as a timely reminder that as a group having frequent contact with the criminal justice system, the homeless face a set of unique challenges for which evidence-based policy and interventions are needed.

For policymakers and practitioners in the criminal justice sector, information about homelessness in its various forms can be crucial to the management of offenders and the prevention of crime. In the courts and corrective services arena in particular, questions of accommodation stability and quality are of key concern when developing individual offender management plans and community supervision orders. For ex-prisoners, the question of housing and accommodation is equally important and all Australian jurisdictions currently operate some form of ‘post release’ program that aims to identify secure housing and accommodation options for offenders upon their release from prison.

Development of such programs stems from evidence that secure housing remains an important protective factor for the reintegration of former inmates and that offenders who do not establish adequate and secure housing upon their release have higher rates of reoffending and imprisonment than those who do (Baldry

et al. 2006, 2003; Dawson et al. 2011; Meredith 2007; Zhang, Roberts & Callanan 2006). Further, a lack of housing may force individuals to live in unfavourable situations, including with friends or acquaintances who are themselves involved in criminal activity, which may in turn influence them to reoffend (MCREU 2003). Thus, as Baldry et al. (2002) noted, ensuring those released from prison have adequate accommodation is likely to help to reduce recidivism.

Yet, in Australia, there are few data collection systems capable of capturing reliable information about homelessness, and for those that do, the diversity of information collected across a number of important domains is limited. The Australian Census, for example, employs a number of unique data collection and enumeration techniques to estimate the prevalence of primary (sleeping rough or living in an improvised dwelling), secondary (having no usual address, but staying with friends, relatives or in specialist homelessness services) and tertiary homelessness (living in boarding houses or caravan parks with no secure lease or private facilities; ABS 2011; see also Homelessness Taskforce 2008). However, the nature of the information collected in the Census significantly limits detailed contextual analysis.

Table 1 Locations where police detainees lived or stayed in the 30 days prior to being detained

	Spent most of the time		Spent at least one night	
	n	%	n	%
A house or apartment rented or owned	436	46	462	49
Someone else’s house or apartment (permanently)	295	31	320	34
Someone else’s house or apartment (temporarily)	123	13	243	26
Shelter or emergency housing	13	1	23	2
Prison	12	1	16	2
Halfway house	6	1	8	1
Drug or alcohol treatment program	9	1	12	1
Hospital or psychiatric hospital	4	0	19	2
On the street with no fixed address	42	4	76	8
Long grass	8	1	8	1

a: One detainee did not specify a location for most of their time in the past 30 days

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC DUMA 2011 [computer file]

Table 2 Summary of living situation and homelessness, including reasons for staying in temporary accommodation

	n	% negative reason ^a	% positive reason ^a	n adjusted homeless ^b
All of the time in permanent accommodation	613	n/a	n/a	0
All of the time on the street or in emergency accommodation	55	100	0	55
All of the time in someone else's house (temporary location)	106	60	40	64
All of the time in an 'other' temporary location	40	100	0	39
Most of the time in permanent accommodation, but some of the time in someone else's home (temporarily)	90	31	69	28
Most of the time in permanent accommodation, but some of the time in an 'other' temporary location	28	100	0	28
Most of the time in someone else's home (temporarily) and some of the time in an 'other' temporary location	17	82	18	14
Total	949			228

a: Percentages within categories are calculated on valid sample size and exclude missing data

b: Estimates in each category are derived by multiplying the total sample with the proportion of negative reasons estimated from the valid sample

Source: AIC DUMA 2011 [computer file]

With respect to homelessness and crime, there are also no national data collection programs with the capacity to capture information about the criminal justice experience of the general homeless population. Instead, as a proxy measure, the housing and accommodation status of those already in the criminal justice system is examined with the view to extrapolating these data and interpreting them in a policy context. The Australian Institute of Criminology's (AIC) Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program is Australia's largest and longest running survey of police detainees from whom housing and accommodation information is collected. In 2008, the AIC reported that almost one in 10 detainees interviewed between 1999 and 2006 were self-identified as living on the street, having no fixed address or living in crisis accommodation at the time of their apprehension (AIC 2008).

It is important to note that the data collection instrument used by the DUMA survey had the capacity to identify primary homelessness (ie 'sleeping rough'), but failed to adequately capture information about detainee experiences of secondary or tertiary homelessness (see Homelessness Taskforce 2008). In particular, many detainees often report living in 'someone else's house', which without further information is assumed to be some form of stable long-term accommodation.

However, as suggested by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2008, 2003), this may not be the case in many situations because secondary and tertiary homelessness also includes moving frequently between various forms of accommodation, living temporarily in the households of others, or living for extended periods of time in boarding houses. Similarly, others have argued that the definition of 'housing' should also include the security of one's accommodation and the extent to which an individual feels satisfied with their living conditions (McRae & Nicholson 2004). According to these authors, even for those not defined as homeless, housing stress itself can be linked to a number of unfavourable outcomes, including crime (McRae & Nicholson 2004).

Finally, it is worth noting that there has not yet been a detailed analysis of the criminal offending or drug use profiles of those DUMA detainees who are considered homeless or living in unstable, temporary accommodation. This is a particular weakness of the Australian literature since various international studies have found that homelessness and crime intersect within a complex web of other, potentially more important causal mechanisms. These include alcohol and drug abuse problems (Mallet, Rosenthal & Keys 2005; Martijn & Sharpe 2006; Rota-Bartelink & Lipmann 2007), mental health problems (Crane et al.

2005; Morrell-Bellai, Goering & Boydell 2000; Rosenthal, Mallett & Myers 2006), family problems including relationship breakdown and death of a family member (Mallett, Rosenthal & Keys 2005; Martijn & Sharpe 2006; Rosenthal, Mallett & Myers 2006), domestic violence (Baker, Cook & Norris 2003) and financial problems (Crane et al. 2005; Morrell-Bellai, Goering & Boydell 2000). Causes of homelessness can vary and it is unlikely that individuals become homeless as a result of one single factor, but rather a number of challenges that each contributes to less favourable living situations.

Recognising the limitations of existing Australian research, the AIC developed a set of new questions on housing and accommodation for short-term inclusion in its DUMA survey. This current paper explores these data with the aim of estimating the prevalence of homelessness (including primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness) within the criminal justice population. It explores the reasons given by detainees for their unfavourable living situation and estimates the confidence detainees have in securing better quality accommodation after their release from custody. Finally, this paper explores the drug use and criminal offending characteristics of those considered homeless or suffering from accommodation stress with the view to identifying opportunities for intervention.

Table 3 Reasons for staying in temporary locations

	n	%
Family/relationship breakdown	42	25
Financial circumstances/job loss	31	19
Drug problem	24	15
Property eviction	20	12
Court or justice order	18	11
Alcohol problem	17	10
Domestic violence	14	8
Lack of family or social support/death of a family member	13	8
Recent arrival (no means of support)	8	5
Mental health problem	8	4
Gambling problem	2	1
Can't explain	18	11

Note: Multiple responses permitted, percentages do not sum to 100

Source: AIC DUMA 2011 [computer file]

Methodology

This study examined the living situations of a sample of adult police detainees who were surveyed through the DUMA program within 48 hours of their arrest.

Commencing in 1999, the DUMA program is Australia's largest and longest running data collection system on drugs and offending, and captures information on more than 4,000 alleged offenders (not yet convicted) each year across nine locations throughout the country. At the time of data collection for this research, DUMA operated from sites in New South Wales (Bankstown, Parramatta and Kings Cross), Queensland (Southport and Brisbane), Western Australia (East Perth), South Australia (Adelaide), Victoria (Footscray) and the Northern Territory (Darwin), and comprised a two-stage methodology using an interviewer-administered self-report survey, followed by voluntary urine testing. DUMA is unique in this regard, with urinalysis providing a reliable and objective measure of the prevalence of very recent drug use among the police detainee sample. Regular analysis of DUMA data facilitates ongoing monitoring of drug use rates, including the timely provision of data to local law enforcement, health and criminal justice practitioners. For further information about the DUMA program see Sweeney and Payne (2012).

This study used self-report data from 947 adult police detainees who were interviewed in the second quarter of 2011 as part of the DUMA program.

Results

Prevalence of accommodation stress

To estimate the prevalence of homelessness, police detainees were asked two questions. The first sought information about each detainee's principal place of residence. For the purposes of this report, the principal place of residence is defined as the single location where each detainee had lived for 'most of the time' during the 30 days preceding their arrest. The results are presented in Table 1 and indicate that:

- forty-six percent of detainees lived most of the time in a house or apartment that they owned or rented;
- a further 31 percent lived most of the time in someone else's home or apartment which they considered a permanent place of residence;
- thirteen percent of the detainees who reported living most of the time in someone else's house or apartment were in what they considered a temporary arrangement. Overall, this suggests that nearly one in three of those living in someone else's home did not consider this living arrangement to be permanent

(a distinction not previously possible with the DUMA survey);

- nine percent of detainees reported living most of the time on the street (4%) or in other temporary accommodation (5%). This group included those who were living in a shelter or emergency housing (1%), in prison (1%), in a halfway house (1%), in a drug or alcohol treatment program (1%), in a hospital or psychiatric facility (<1%), or in the 'long-grass' (1%), a term commonly used in the Northern Territory to describe the mostly Indigenous phenomenon of sleeping rough in the bushland or grasslands not far from major towns and cities.

In the main, these data support previous findings from the DUMA survey (AIC 2008) which found that one in 10 detainees could be classified as sleeping rough or living in a temporary situation for most of the time in the past 30 days. However, if the definition of homelessness is expanded to include situations in which detainees were living temporarily (albeit for most of the last 30 days) in someone else's home, then the prevalence of homelessness could be at least 13 percentage points higher. This would mean that 22 percent of the total proportion of detainees were living in temporary or unstable accommodation for most of the preceding 30 days.

Recognising that detainees may face a range of both long and short-term

accommodation challenges, a second series of questions sought to identify any other locations at which detainees may have spent at least one night, even if their principal place of residence was their own or someone else's home on a permanent basis. The results of these questions suggest that while 22 percent of detainees lived for most of the time either on the street or in temporary accommodation, a further 12 percent of those with permanent accommodation had temporarily lived elsewhere for at least one of the past 30 days. This brings the total number of detainees living for all or some of the time on the street or in temporary accommodation to 305; 32 percent of the total sample.

In the specific case of living on the street with no fixed address, the proportion doubled from four percent (those who did so for most of the time) to eight percent when including those who did so for at least one night in the past 30 days.

Although these data suggest that as many as one in three police detainees had lived either on the street or in a temporary location at least once in the past 30 days, it is important to acknowledge that not all instances of temporary accommodation occur for negative reasons. It is plausible, for example, that some detainees had cause to stay at someone else's home for reasons not related to any instability in their long-term living situation. Similarly, it is possible that a detainee may have spent time in hospital or in drug treatment as part of a long-term, ongoing treatment program, which did not constitute a disruption to the normal permanent living arrangements.

To account for this, a follow-up question was included in the DUMA survey that sought to identify the reasons why a detainee had been living on the street or

in a temporary location. Detainees were presented with a list of reasons from which they could select multiple options. The options given in the DUMA survey were principally negative in perspective, focusing on the adverse reasons identified in the literature for housing instability. Detainees who could not identify the appropriate reason for their temporary accommodation were afforded an opportunity to specify an 'other' reason, which was recorded verbatim by the DUMA interviewer and later coded by the AIC.

The specific reasons for living in a temporary location for some or all of the time are detailed later in this report (see *Factors influencing homelessness*). For the purposes of this section however, these reasons were dichotomised into those that were adverse or negative and those that were positive or favourable. The ratio of positive to negative reasons is presented separately in Table 2 for five mutually exclusive categories of detainees, with the results indicating substantial differences between each group. Almost all (98%) of those who lived in a temporary location (not including someone else's home) for all of the past 30 days cited a negative reason for doing so. This was not the case for those living all of the time (but temporarily) at someone else's home, of whom only 60 percent cited a negative reason.

Of those living most of the time in a permanent location and some of the time at someone else's home, only 31 percent cited a negative reason for doing so. This confirms that not all persons living temporarily in someone else's home can be accurately classified as homeless or experiencing housing stress.

For those living most of the time in someone else's home (temporarily) and some of the time in another form of temporary

accommodation, 94 percent cited a negative reason.

Using these data, it is possible to recalibrate the estimate of homelessness among police detainees, taking into account only those who were living in temporary locations for adverse reasons. Doing so yields a final estimate of 23 percent, or 222 detainees, who were homeless or experiencing accommodation stress in the 30 days preceding their arrest.

Factors influencing homelessness

Accommodation instability can occur for many different reasons and understanding this diversity may aid the development of targeted prevention strategies. In this study, family or relationship breakdowns were the most frequently reported reason for having recently lived in a temporary location, with 25 percent of the sample nominating this response (see Table 3). This was followed by difficult financial circumstances/job loss (19%), having a drug problem (15%), being evicted from property (12%), or being required by court or other justice order to reside in a location not considered permanent (11%; see Table 3). Fourteen detainees (8%) nominated an incident or series of incidents of domestic violence, while 13 detainees (8%) cited a lack of social or family support. Mental health problems were reported by four percent of the sample, while gambling problems were cited by just two detainees (1%).

What is most striking about these data is their diversity—that it appears the risk factors and triggers for homelessness among police detainees are many, varied and unlikely to be sufficiently addressed through a 'one size fits all' policy approach to prevention.

Table 4 Confidence in future accommodation prospects

	n	%
Confident	832	88
Not confident	114	12
Total	946	100

Table 5 Demographic, drug use and prior criminal justice characteristics

	Primary homeless		Secondary/tertiary homeless		Not homeless	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Male	43	90	108	87	598	86
Female	5	10	16	13	98	14
Indigenous status^a						
Indigenous	13	27	32	26	127	18
Non-Indigenous	35	73	92	74	567	82
Age						
Average age	34		45		28	
Current most serious offence^b						
Violent	12	26	35	28	184	27
Property	11	23	23	19	138	20
Drug	4	9	6	5	58	9
Disorder	3	6	8	6	42	6
Breach	12	26	39	31	155	23
Other	5	11	13	10	99	15
Prior police contact (past 12 months)*						
Arrested	28	72	73	64	276	43
Not arrested	11	28	41	36	370	57
Drug use^c						
Alcohol (self-report past 48 hours)*	29	60	67	54	285	41
Cannabis(test positive)	24	59	47	49	229	43
Opiates (test positive)	6	15	9	9	50	9
Amphetamines (test positive)*	12	29	28	29	100	19
Benzodiazepines (test positive)	10	24	25	26	90	17
Any illicit drug (test positive)* ^d	33	80	71	74	330	62

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

a: Indigenous status is self-identified

b: The most serious of all charges recorded to the current episode of arrest

c: Detainees may test positive or use multiple drug types

d: Any drug includes cannabis, amphetamines, opiates and benzodiazepines

Source: AIC DUMA 2011 [computer file]

Demographic differences

Detainees who identified as homeless or as experiencing housing stress were generally older and were significantly more likely to have been using alcohol and illicit drugs in the days preceding their arrest. Table 5 compares a range of demographic, drug use and prior offending information for detainees classified as homeless (primary, secondary or tertiary) and those who were not. To overcome the limits of small sample sizes, those experiencing secondary or tertiary homelessness have been grouped into a single category. The results can be summarised as follows:

- The overwhelming majority of police detainees are male (86–90%) and there was no statistical difference in the gender ratio when comparing those who were homeless and those who were not.
- A larger proportion of the primary homeless population identified as Indigenous (27%) compared with the secondary/tertiary (25%) or non-homeless population (18%), although this result was not statistically significant.
- The average age of detainees experiencing primary homelessness was 34 years. This compares with 28 years for those not experiencing homelessness. The secondary/tertiary homeless population

was the oldest group, having an average age of 45 years.

- There was no significant difference between the groups with respect to the most serious offence for which they had been arrested; however, both the primary (72%) and secondary/tertiary (64%) homeless populations were significantly more likely than the non-homeless population (43%) to have reported a recent history of police contact.
- Eighty percent of the primary homeless population tested positive to at least one drug at the time of their arrest. This was marginally higher than those experiencing secondary or tertiary homelessness

(74%) and significantly higher than those not experiencing homelessness (62%).

With respect to specific drug types, amphetamine use was significantly higher among both the primary and secondary/tertiary homeless populations.

- Two in every three primary homeless detainees (60%) had been drinking alcohol in the 48 hours prior to their arrest. As with drug use, this was marginally higher than the secondary/tertiary homeless population (54%), but significantly higher than the non-homeless detainee population (41%).

Overall, these comparative differences confirm Hagan and McCarthy's (2007) conclusion that homelessness and housing stress compete within a complex web of other risk factors that may promote more active engagement in the criminal justice system. Although the DUMA study collects only limited information about risk and protective factors, these data nevertheless highlight frequent prior contact with the police, along with significantly higher rates of drug and alcohol use as important considerations.

Discussion

Homelessness has long been recognised as an important factor influencing participation in crime. However, in Australia, there is comparatively little literature that estimates the prevalence of homelessness among the criminal justice population and importantly, its links to other risk factors. Since 1999, the AIC's DUMA program has consistently reported that around one in 10 detainees were 'sleeping rough', either on the street or in emergency accommodation for most of the time preceding their arrest. However, it is only recently that DUMA has expanded its survey to capture both secondary and tertiary homelessness, and by doing so yielded a much higher prevalence of housing stress among the detainee population, which is estimated in this study to be 22 percent. Further, the study also estimates that more than one in 10 police detainees remain uncertain about their housing and accommodation situation and

are not confident of having somewhere to live when they are released.

Having arrived at a more accurate picture of the prevalence of homelessness, attention was drawn to the somewhat difficult circumstances faced by those involved in the criminal justice system. Importantly, this study is the first of its kind to examine the factors underlying homelessness among an Australian detainee population. It found that family/relationship problems were the most frequently cited reason for needing to live on the street or in a temporary location, with financial problems, property eviction and other drug problems also frequently cited. These findings are generally consistent with other national and international literature on this topic (see Caton et al. 2005; Tessler, Rosenheck & Gamache 2001). However, perhaps the most important finding from this study was the diversity of reasons given by detainees, suggesting that efforts to address housing stress among this population requires a more individualised policy and program response tailored to individual needs.

Finally, comparative analysis across a range of demographic, prior offending and drug use indicators confirmed previous research regarding the complexity of homelessness and its links to a range of other challenging life circumstances and risk factors. In particular, homeless detainees reported comparatively high rates of illicit drug and alcohol use, along with a more recent history of contact with the police and the criminal justice system. Taken together, these results suggest that responding to crime and repeat offending requires an adequate and planned response to both substance use and housing stress in tandem, rather than seeking to address each issue in isolation (see for example Baldry et al. 2003; Borzycki & Baldry 2003). For those working with offenders in drug courts or drug diversion programs, the potential risks posed by homelessness are significant and should not be ignored. Greater appreciation for the potential of homelessness to undermine treatment retention and relapse prevention should help to inform strategies for responding quickly

and in a timely fashion to homelessness, even if only for secondary or tertiary homelessness.

For corrective services agencies, these data not only confirm a relatively high prevalence of homelessness among the police detainee population, but also the links between homelessness and prior criminal justice system contact. Further, these data highlight the extent to which detainees are uncertain about their future housing prospects, adding support for current approaches that identify safe and secure housing as a significant priority for successful post-release reintegration. Importantly, the links to drug and alcohol use suggest that even if secure housing is found, other factors such as drug relapse may significantly diminish its protective/crime preventative influence.

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