

THIS IS NOT LIVING

Chronic homelessness in Melbourne

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IT'S A 'CATCH 22' SITUATION YOU KNOW. HOMELESSNESS DRAGS YOU DOWN AND THE LONGER YOU'RE DOWN WITHOUT ANY OPPORTUNITY OR ANYTHING GOOD HAPPENING, THE MORE IT CAN HAVE AN IMPACT.

Jason (38)

CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS AND THE JOURNEY TO SOCIAL INCLUSION

Thousands of Australians become homeless at some point in their lives. For many, homelessness is a relatively short experience and they quickly move on with their lives. Others find themselves entrenched in homelessness for years. Researchers and policy makers often refer to this group as 'chronically homeless'. People who experience chronic homelessness have high rates of physical and mental health problems, substance abuse issues and histories of traumatic life experiences. They are more likely to sleep rough for long periods of time and most find it difficult to access the services they require. As a group they often have few, if any family or mainstream connections, and while some endure acute isolation, others become deeply mired in the homeless subculture.

The economic and social costs of chronic homelessness are significant and reducing the number of people who experience chronic homelessness is now a major policy focus in many Western countries including Australia.

Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI) is a three year initiative that aims to improve the health, well-being, and the social and economic participation of people who are chronically homeless. J2SI provides intensive, long term support for each person including therapeutic and skills building services.

J2SI is a significant departure from existing approaches. It draws on local and international research that shows that individuals who are chronically homeless can make a permanent transition out of homelessness when they are provided with individually tailored, on-going, intensive support that is linked to appropriate and affordable housing.

J2SI is being evaluated using a longitudinal randomised control study . The evaluation involves seven surveys over four years of 84 people who are chronically homeless. Just under half of the participants (n=40) are being supported by J2SI and the remaining 44 (the control group) are receiving assistance from existing services. The table (opposite) provides a profile of the 84 participants drawn from the benchmark (initial) survey.

These data starkly illuminate the participants' histories of adverse childhood experiences, illness and chronic social exclusion, but they tell only part of the story. To understand what it is like to experience chronic homelessness it is important to talk to people and hear their stories.

SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS of the PARTICIPANTS

Female (%)	49
Single (%)	81
Mean age (years)	36.5
Receiving government benefits (%)	96
On government benefits for 2 years or more (%)	90.5
First experience of homelessness at 18 or younger (%)	54 ^a
Highest educational attainment – year 10 or below (%)	75 ^b

GROWING UP

Percentage who reported being sexually molested	53 ^j
Percentage who were in State out-of-home care	38 ^c
Percentage who have children under 18 years of age	42
Percentage whose children have spent time in State out-of-home care	68 ^d

PRISON

Have been imprisoned (%)	56
Have been charged with criminal offences (%)	87

HEALTH

Report IV drug use (%)	71
Report a chronic health condition (%)	93
Report three (3) or more chronic health conditions (%)	50
Mean number of emergency room visits, last six months	1.5
Mean number of days hospitalised (general admission), last six months	3.26
Mean number of psychiatric ward visits, last six months	0.7
Mean number of days hospitalised in a psychiatric unit, last six months	4.85

HOMELESSNESS

Ever slept rough (%)	89 ^k
Has been in SAAP accommodation previously (%)	89 ^l
Mean number of moves, last six months	5.8 ^m

VIOLENCE and EXCLUSION

Victim of physical violence, last six months (%)	42 ^e
Threatened with physical violence, last six months (%)	56 ^f
Felt that other people looked down on them because of their homelessness (%)	70
Do not feel accepted by family (%)	69 ^g
Do not feel accepted by friends (%)	42 ^h
Do not feel accepted by society (%)	63 ⁱ

Valid N sizes - a,c,e,g=82; b,k=83;d=37; f,i=81; h,m=79; j=60; l=77. All others N=84

INTRODUCTION

This report draws on in-depth interviews we conducted with participants from the J2SI evaluation. They all shared with us their experiences of chronic homelessness. They described what it's like to sleep rough, live in squats and stay in rooming houses or crisis accommodation. They talked about how it felt to experience the stigma of homelessness and the impact this had on them. They talked about the barriers and challenges they face on a daily basis and how they deal with them. And, they shared with us their aspirations and hopes for the future.

The challenge for us was to organise these stories in a way that preserved their integrity but also highlighted aspects of homelessness that are commonly misrepresented by the media and often misunderstood by the community. The approach we take is to focus on the impact the experience of homelessness has on people's sense of ontological security. In doing this we are acutely aware of imposing order on what is an extremely varied experience, but the idea of ontological security nonetheless provides a useful lens through which the underlying processes that lead to and perpetuate chronic homelessness can be better understood.

WHAT IS ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY?

Ontological security is the basic need we all have for safety, predictability and continuity in our day-to-day lives. In order to feel ontologically secure, we need to feel there is a sense of order and certainty in our world.

Our homes are a crucial site through which ontological security is established and sustained. They are a place where we entertain friends and family, where we relax, play and argue, where we do mundane and routine things and where we escape from the stresses of everyday life.

In order to feel secure we need to have a safe roof over our heads, and the reassurance that we won't lose our home at any time. We need to feel in control of our social and material environment and have power over who enters and leaves our home. We need a safe and private haven that we can return to and escape from the unpredictability and uncertainty of the world around us.

Our homes are just one, albeit important, source of ontological security. We also need to have a secure and positive sense of who we are, what our purpose is and where we fit in the world.

We need to engage in meaningful social activities, have stable, reliable social networks and feel accepted by others. It is important for all of us to feel socially connected and trust the people around us.

People experiencing homelessness have little ontological security. They frequently live in unsafe and inadequate housing where they have no security of tenure and little control over who moves in or who comes and goes. The tenuous nature of their accommodation also makes it difficult to plan for the future.

The stories in this report illustrate that what we take for granted is often denied to people experiencing homelessness. Like everyone else, people experiencing homelessness try to create a sense of order and purpose in their lives. However, in seeking control over their social environment, the strategies people develop often create additional barriers that make it more difficult to get out of homelessness. The idea of ontological security highlights a paradox - people experiencing homelessness, like every one else, actively seek a more stable, meaningful and secure existence but, because they have little access to even the most basic emotional and material resources, their actions and the structures that shape them, often perpetuate homelessness.

There are two sections to the report. The first section explores the ways in which the people we interviewed endure the absence or loss of safety, stability, security and autonomy and the impact this has on their physical health, wellbeing and crucially, on their sense of self and identity. The second section examines the ways in which people try to create safety, stability, security and autonomy, and how they aspire for 'normality', structure and routine that the wider community takes for granted.

'I SPENT LAST NIGHT RUNNING AWAY FROM FOUR GUYS IN THE PARK' Brett (39)

SECTION 1

ENDURING ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

Public discussion commonly focuses on the causes of homelessness and while this is important, it means the lived experience of homelessness is often neglected. Being homeless is a dangerous experience and living in fear can have a profound impact on people's physical and mental health. For Brett (39), the threat of being assaulted while sleeping rough is very real.

I spent last night running away from four guys in the park. That's what I did last night 'cause only about a month ago I got ... me nose broken, both me eyes closed. I got caught while I was asleep.

Rick (30) also lived in a constant state of fear during the times he slept rough.

I didn't like it and it was scary because you close your eyes and you don't know when somebody is going to come up and kick the shit out of you, you don't know what is going to happen next.

The way Rick dealt with this was to:

... walk around and you just continue walking around to all hours of the night until you are so tired that you can't do anything but sleep and that's pretty much how you have to do it. So you are that buggered that you have to sleep.

Victor (39) describes the effect sleeping rough has on his ability to cope with day-to-day living.

You're on edge all the time ... well even if I go to the Mission sometimes you know like because I've been on edge from sleeping out all the time, like I'm on edge with everything ... So someone might say something to me and I'll just go off.

Shirley (34) and Evie (37) both talk about the physical toll of sleeping rough.

It was scary, it was cold, uncomfortable and takes so much out of you, you're just so tired, I mean if there's a bit of sun or something out, you could just fall asleep on a grass patch somewhere but you can't because you got to, you know make sure you're safe. And you just end up just being so tired and run down because you're not really sleeping (Shirley).

I just find it constantly tiring because you've got nowhere to rest, if you just want to have a rest you can't you're sitting in a room full of people sitting up, yeah you can't rest that's the worst. When I got back into a place the first thing I did was sleep for three months till I wasn't so stiff and sore anymore (Evie).

People who sleep rough are not the only ones to feel unsafe. Malcolm (42) describes what it's like to live in a rooming house and how important it is to have the skills to cope with living in a threatening environment.

Rooming house experiences are pretty rough. They are, or they can be pretty rough. Almost like a jail on the outside of jail, but fortunately I think I had the sort of skills to cope with that sort of thing, whereas a lot of people wouldn't ... For a lot of people they can't handle the pressure of other people being around and the things that go with rooming houses, like people borrowing things off each other. I saw a lot of, I saw quite a bit of violence and drunken, alcohol related violence.

Some of the participants even report feeling unsafe in crisis accommodation facilities which are specifically designed to assist people experiencing homelessness.

They can be pretty rough at (inner city crisis accommodation facility), at times. A lot of stand-overs. A lot of people trying to hassle you for money, hassle you for drugs (Raj, 37).

Constantly worrying about how to stay safe is just one aspect of the homeless experience. Many of the participants talk about having no control over their living environment and the hazards of living in such close proximity to other people. For some, this means the people living around them constantly change

and they have no control over who moves in or out of their accommodation. For others, being homeless means a loss of privacy and personal space. Patrick talks about how difficult it is to relax when you don't have your own personal space:

**'YOU CAN'T GO TO A ROOM FOR TIME OUT OR ANYTHING'
Patrick (42)**

... people that live in houses they've got somewhere to go, you know, they've got their home to go to. When you're in the squattys you haven't got a home to go to really. You've got a place to go to but it's not a home, like, I don't kick back, flip the telly on with the remote control or nothing like that. You can't go to a room for time out or anything.

Jason (38) describes what it's like to have no control over who moves into the rooming house he lives in. He refers to the constant upheaval and turmoil caused by people with multiple issues moving in and out of his living environment.

It's not a safe place, no boarding houses are, because you don't know who you're living with. You know you get transients, you get drug addiction, you get mental illness. In all cases there's mental illness underlying all the other problems ... so, you know yeah it's just a lot of bad factors you can't screen for. You know people aren't going ... to admit (that) stuff when they apply, so it's very hard you know. Those people get weeded out within the first few months, you know they bash people, they do things, and finally they get thrown out, but I've been here for three years and I've had to see a whole heap of crap.

In rooming houses it is hard to maintain privacy and distance from others. Jason explains how hard it is to avoid getting involved in other peoples' problems.

I don't want to know about other people's problems and I don't want other people knowing about my problems. And that's my biggest hate about this place, people come to me every day and tell me so and so did this and so and so did that, and so and so's a dickhead, piss off, get out of my room. I don't want to know 'cause the least I know, the least I can be called in on. And it's crazy you know, but the more I try and keep to myself, the more I get dragged in the bullshit. Go figure.

Rick (30) voices the experience of many of the participants when he talks about the poor quality of some rooming houses he has been forced to stay in due to a lack of choice.

I stayed in a rooming house where they were charging \$165 a week ... They're assholes okay, they rip off elderly pensioners, drug addicts, everything like that, okay. They will take a house that is not fit for human habitat, okay. There is no water running, the toilet doesn't work, you know what I mean, there is no fridge, the stove doesn't work, there is no heating, holes in the walls. They will charge you \$165 a week for a room with a bed that's full of bed bugs and a little chest of drawers ... and you sort of have to make your own little home out of that for \$165 a week, so they're a rip off.

**'YOU'VE GOT NO REAL
BASE TO WORK FROM'
Sharon (45)**

Many people think of homelessness as literally being without any form of shelter (sleeping rough). These stories show that rooming houses and crisis accommodation may provide shelter from the elements, but they are far removed from the notion of home as a place of safety and security and a refuge from an unpredictable, and at times, threatening world.

A lack of stability often reinforces the participants' feelings that they have little control over their circumstances. Many of the participants find it difficult to get on with their lives or plan for

the future while living with the constant threat of losing their accommodation.

Sharon describes her life as being on hold or in limbo. She points out how difficult it is to make plans and get on with her life when faced with such uncertainty.

I can't set my life's path on any real direction at the moment because there's no base. To have direction in your life you need a base ... You can't really get involved in outside activities because you don't know where you're going to be ... I lose paperwork, important paperwork all the time because it's not a permanent place, you can't set stuff up. You can't, like once you've got your own place you can set things up. I can get a filing cabinet, put a filing cabinet there and store all me paperwork, or you know what I mean? There's right down to the small stuff like that. There's just so much, and I guess it's a loss of direction because you don't know where you're going.

Living with such uncertainty also has an emotional impact. For Sharon, the importance of finding somewhere permanent to live is that:

... I'd at least have that basis to start from. I'd have that foundation. And I'd have some hope in my life. At the moment there is no hope.

Patrick (42) describes what it's like to have no stability or security and how this makes it hard for him to focus on the future. As a result he lives very much in the moment. Researchers describe this as a present orientation (Snow and Anderson, 1993; Johnson et al 2008). Patrick, like many others, recognises that the only way to survive is to:

... take it day-by-day. Yeah. Day by day. Just day-by-day, like, if someone said to me do you want to go to Sydney tomorrow I probably would go, I'd probably go because you're not leaving anything behind. No, you're not leaving anything behind. There's nothing tying you here.

For some people the long term effects of homelessness are such that stability is something they find hard to imagine, let alone obtain. Suzanne, a 27 year old, told us that she is:

... stuck in a cycle of drugs and like I haven't, it can be used as an excuse, but I haven't really had stability for a long time, so I really don't know how to get stability because I haven't had it from such a young age ... like I want it, but I don't really know how to take the steps and then to be concreted steps to stay, you know, what I mean? Like it's hard to explain.

Some participants have few rights or little security of tenure. This creates a great deal of anxiety and frustration. Jason (38), for instance, tells us what it's like to have little security of tenure in a community rooming house.

It's dehumanising, it makes you feel like you don't have any rights especially here ... I mean this a supposedly (a) community run boarding house and I feel I have less rights here than I do in any private one. They recently went for an eviction for no reason, they were going to throw me out, based on allegations of disgruntled tenants I'd had arguments with. You don't have any rights whatsoever. I mean boarding houses two days notice to vacate, what's that?

Patrick describes what it's like to live with the constant threat of getting kicked out of his squat.

Everyone needs a place to live. It's not really living in a squat. It's existing ... Squatting ... is not living because it could be closed down at any time.

'A LOT PEOPLE HAVE THAT DEADPAN LOOK, JUST EXHAUSTED AND THEY'VE GIVEN UP' Jason (38).

The emotional toll of homelessness is significant. Feelings of hopelessness and despair are common. Some of the participants are caught in a poverty trap and cannot afford to rent a proper place. After countless attempts to get out of homelessness they have given up. Others find that the environment they live in is so disheartening that they lose their motivation to help themselves and slip into a state of despondent paralysis.

Aidan (28) constantly fights feelings of despair because of the situation he is in:

... I pay \$600 a month so between me and my partner we pay \$1200 a month for a rooming house and we could have our own place for the amount of money we pay a month, but there's just no way we can save it's too difficult...so I just throw my hands up and say well what's the point of trying it's never going to happen.

Sharon (45) describes similar feelings of helplessness and powerlessness as she repeatedly tries to overcome structural constraints in the housing market.

You finally find something in your price range, and you go to inspect the properties and you fill out the applications and there's about 30 other people filling out the applications, and you hear them offer them more money. Couples who are working. They're going for a place in my price budget, \$150.00/\$160.00 a week, and they're offering up to \$50.00 more in rental money. How can I cope with it? How can I compete with that? And it's just frustrating that, you know. And it just causes you to feel like this is how it's going to be from now on. You're going to be homeless. And it causes you to feel hopeless, helpless, and a real powerlessness and destitute. You're at the mercy of others, and I hate ... having no control over your life.

Jason struggles to find the motivation to help himself.

And homelessness you know, it's not conducive to helping yourself, it's not a good setting to want to help yourself. You think why, what's the point? This is what I've got to come back to. Why should I help myself?

Being around people who have given up can also be discouraging.

I just look at the other faces there and the majority of them have just given up on life. They're just going through the paces of getting up and they're eating and going back to sleep and they're just waiting to die. Walking the treadmill . . . A lot of people have that deadpan look, just exhausted and they've given up and that's on the streets (Jason).

Being homeless is often accompanied by feelings of self-blame and demoralisation. As Maureen (43) tells us, no matter what you do, or how hard you try, a powerful sense of despair lingers in the background.

When I was sleeping in the car ... I would just drive around ... try and drink the day away really just get rid of it ... till the next day which would become a perpetual sadness.

As well as fuelling feelings of despair and hopelessness, a lack of control can also contribute to feelings of shame and low self-worth. Some of the participants don't feel accepted by broader society and feel as though they are treated differently because they are homeless. This can often result in chronic social isolation. Raj (37) describes how he cut himself off from the people who were important to him as a way to cope with his feelings of shame.

I never really had a lot of friends in my life and most of my friends all work and the old friends that I grew up with at work and all got married... but back in my younger days I never got in contact with old friends and family, really. I was too ashamed of myself.

A lack of access to even the most basic resources contributes to people's embarrassment and shame. Suzanne makes the point that it is hard to maintain your appearance when your social resources are so meager.

Just remaining, trying to be human, like just the simple things that people take for granted like showers and cleanliness. As a young woman you want to be able to brush your hair and wash your clothes and freshen yourself up, you know and then to go out on the streets and be viewed a certain way, you know, because you are not whatever, you know, approachable because of the way that you look or the way you smell or whatever. I think that's a huge thing for me.

When people's physical appearance declines it has a strong impact on their sense of self and they are often embarrassed and avoid social contact with others.

People look at you different ... You just want to hide all the time you don't want to go near people, you don't want to walk like up any main street, you stick to all the back streets so you just don't want to be seen because why do you want to see a homeless person you know like (Victor, 39).

Malcolm (42) describes himself as being different to others because he lacks all of those things viewed by society as being 'normal':

'PEOPLE LOOK AT YOU DIFFERENT' Victor (39)

(homelessness) separates you from society, because, or you feel, yeah, really you do become separated from society cause you don't live the same as other people. You don't have a home to go to. You don't have something to do with yourself like a job ... your hygiene becomes poor because you don't have access to washing facilities. Your diet, your eating, becomes

affected because you don't have access to food the same as you would if you have your own home.

Malcolm goes on to suggest that people who are homeless are feared by broader society due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of what it's like to be homeless.

A lot of people if they find out you've been homeless shy away from that and they think you belong to some other group, not to them, cause it's never happened to them. And then again some people, some other people may have been through it themselves and they understand how it could happen and they accept it ... A lot of people don't realise that actually it doesn't take much for anyone to end up that way.

The participants were acutely aware that homelessness is a strong social signifier, one that draws on a range of prejudicial stereotypes that condense all that is sick and disordered about society. Suzanne notices that other people:

... just see you as a homeless person or they see you as a thief, like homelessness usually comes with the labels of being a thief or you know, a junkie or this and that and that's not always the case either. Just because you are homeless, it doesn't mean that you are all those things as well.

Jason describes the way he deals with the shame and embarrassment of being homeless. For Jason, the stigma of homelessness, its physical impact and a feeling of constantly being judged by others contributes to his ongoing exclusion from broader society.

I've cut all ties with everyone good and bad in my life and it comes down to where I'm living, I'm homeless, I'm in a boarding house. I don't want people to know I'm living here ... the only social life I see that people have, it only includes people within this social ... circle, you know like rooming houses and free feed places and handout places, Centrelink and these people's lives are wrapped up in the homelessness system. I have to think and truly believe that they would have different friends and different lives if they weren't in this system somewhere.

SECTION 2

SEEKING ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

In an unpredictable and chaotic environment people develop strategies in an attempt to gain control over their circumstances. Social relationships among people who are homeless are important because they provide a sense of belonging and acceptance and counteract the loneliness and isolation that many people experience. As Malcolm tells us:

'YOU HAVE TO HAVE FRIENDS TO STAY SOMEWHERE THIS LONG, BUT ... THEY CAN BE A LIABILITY'
Jason (38)

Homeless people do look after each other. They will give each other money, food, anything. They will share whatever accommodation or squat, wherever they may be sleeping, they'll share that spot ... they'll give each other advice as to services and things, so they're pretty good ... homeless people tend to help each other a lot.

Researchers often use the term the homeless subculture when referring to these friendships. Friendships among people experiencing homelessness are often forged on the basis of shared experiences but they generally lack depth and are opportunistic in nature. Suzanne tells us that:

... they are never real friendships anyway ... there's no solid foundation in the friendship, like you know, like we could be friends today, but tomorrow... youse are kind of living off each other... it's not a friendship at all, it's more an association and everyone wants to call it the brotherhood on the streets.

While friendships are an important source of social interaction and social validation for people experiencing homelessness, the texture of most friendships is fragile as they are built on a foundation of self-preservation.

It is hard to explain because you do know that you are not friends, like you are not friends like when your primary school best friend, you need the people around for that socialisation and I guess they don't judge you because they are in the same position and you don't judge them and you have an understanding of you know, all those sorts of things. But at the same time, you don't ever really trust them, like it's not a friendship, like you wouldn't trust them to hold onto your wallet while you run in and get a coffee or you know what I mean? There is nothing like nutritious about the friendships (Suzanne, 27).

Social relationships among people experiencing chronic homelessness are complex – they fulfil a need for social contact but equally they can create problems. For many participants, particularly those in rooming houses, it was the lack of privacy that created the most problems for them.

You haven't got your own free time which I reckon is good for your own health and wellbeing. Just to have time alone, even an hour a day, a half an hour a day. But you don't get that (Patrick, 42).

In order to create a private space for themselves some people withdraw from social contact. For Malcolm (42) this means avoiding others.

If you're living in a rooming house you try to keep to yourself. It pays to keep to yourself as much as possible ... You respect people's privacy, you make sure you're not living out of each other's pockets ... You got to make sure you don't get into debt with anyone else at the rooming house. Just things like that are important in order to get by in rooming houses. A lot of people that have troubles in rooming houses it's usually over money they've borrowed, food they haven't replaced, or something like that. It causes problems.

Shirley describes using similar strategies to survive living in a rooming house.

Just by keeping (to) myself and trying not to get involved in other people's domestics or problems and to not try and be the helper or the rescuer. And you know, I'm good at listening to people and things like that but yeah, I've got to stop that and start putting myself, my own needs first.

'Minding your own business' in such a cramped and volatile environment can be difficult, as Jason points out.

First and foremost is try to keep to yourself. Don't talk about other people and their bullshit and their problems. People need to just go about their own race, stop whinging about other people in the house and what they're doing unless it's personally affecting them, do your own thing. But people don't seem to ever do that, especially when they live in a close environment like this, they want to know what everyone else is doing.

However, keeping to yourself creates its own problems. Maureen was marginalised when she tried to keep to herself.

To be a part of them is to be part of the group. One place I lived in I decided not to get familiar with everybody ... it became them and me instead of us and that was a horrible feeling even though I didn't particularly like them.

The interviews also highlight the strategies people develop to introduce structure to their daily activities. Over time these strategies develop into routines which provide some predictability and structure to day-to-day life.

Yeah you go up to the Sacred Heart and you have coffee and lunch and that's a

good place to hang out during the day. Access Health used to have couches and after lunch I used to go into Access Health and sleep on their couch because I had trouble sitting up straight and I'd sleep on their couch all day and then sit up and drink all night and then go back to their couch again and sleep during the day again and then sit up and drink all night (Evie, 37).

The structure that Patrick creates in his life gives him a sense of purpose.

Well, we get up and we go have brekkie at the meeting place up here in Sacred Heart work out when they want us, the drop-in centre, then they'll find they have activities on the board and one day's art, Tuesday there's an outing, you can go bowling or something; Wednesday, night, I played pool all night, so that's playing competition pool. So I've been playing a few games of pool each day. You can't watch TV so seeing a TV is like, there's a telly.

But he still has to contend with the boredom that characterises homelessness.

I don't drink, I mean, I try not to drink. I do drink because sometimes it gets so friggin' boring and you've got nothing, you've probably had a meal at the Mission or something and... you've got probably 10 bucks to spend, it's so boring you've just got to spend it on alcohol or drugs or something.

Over time, however, these routines can harden and homelessness eventually:

... becomes habitual. They don't know how to live like a normal person anymore. That's sad when that happens (Jason, 38).

And breaking routines of displacement is difficult.

Once you're in that vicious cycle . . . it's hard to get out of it once you're in it. You get caught in the circle and it's revolving doors. You know I should take a step back and sometimes talk to someone. Once you get caught up in the cycle of that, sometimes it's hard to break. You become used to it (Jason, 38).

Once caught in a vicious cycle it becomes increasingly difficult to keep sight of the bigger picture, as Malcolm tells us.

When you're homeless it's not easy to get a place and to get a place you've really got to spend every day focussed on doing what you need to do in order to get your place or to keep your attitude right to get a place because you can fall into a cycle of behaviour in homelessness where you just do the same thing over and over again and you just don't get out of that cycle.

**‘MOST PEOPLE ON THE STREET END UP DRINKING ALCOHOL OR SOMETHING TO TRY TO SMOOTH OVER THE ROUGH EDGES’
Malcolm (42)**

Alcohol and drugs are widely perceived to be common causes of homelessness. What is not well understood is that the high prevalence of alcohol and drug use

among individuals who are homeless is commonly a consequence of homelessness itself. People use alcohol and drugs for a variety of reasons, but it is often to cope with the dangers, stress and anxiety they face.

I took drugs to cope with it. And that’s how I coped. I probably managed to cope with it because I was on drugs. I don’t know how a sober person could really cope with it. But it must be even harder. Most people on the street end up drinking alcohol or something to try to smooth over the rough edges (Malcolm, 42).

For Jason (38), heroin made:

...everything a lot easier. If I’d had a real bad fix, like nowhere to sleep, just have a shot of heroin, gees you can go and nod anywhere for four hours. It doesn’t matter

And for Lisa (46), drugs quite simply made being homeless:

... a little bit easier though.

Alcohol and drugs sometimes provide structure and purpose, or alleviate boredom. But, most of all, they provide a brief escape from the uncertainty, fear and despair that characterises being homeless.

**‘I’D GIVE ANYTHING TO HAVE A ROOM, YOU KNOW, WITH A TELLY AND A FEW PICTURES ON THE WALL’
Patrick (42)**

Despite all the difficulties and challenges that the participants face on a day-to-day basis, few unconditionally accept homelessness as a way of life. People have aspirations for the future, for a more settled, less stigmatised existence. Their aspirations contain all of the basic elements of

ontological security – a desire for autonomy, control, privacy, stability and continuity. These elements form the very basis of ‘normality’ – an aspiration the participants frequently talked about. Raj (37), a rooming house resident explains that:

A normal life situation is having a full time job, paying off bills, paying off electricity, paying off the gas bills, whatever, it’s gas or electricity, paying rates, if you own your own house and that, maybe paying rates, paying just the general things in life like with bills. Knowing that you could come home and cook whatever you want to cook.

Knowing that you got all the food there. Knowing that you don't have to worry about getting kicked out or moving on. That's a normal life situation.

Social researchers argue that defining normality is problematic as it is a value laden construct, but for Victor (39) who is sleeping rough, it is pretty straight forward:

... normal life is just a stable life, not to you know not to be chopping and changing all the time, just to be in one spot for a little while, for a long while.

Aidan shares his hopes for the future.

I always dream not necessarily plan but I sort of fantasise about this; I always think that I'm going to get my own place, I'm going to join a gym, I'm going to do some dance classes or martial arts classes and I'm going to get a job and it will all be fine, I always think that's what I want to do. So hopefully one day I can do all that.

And, for Shirley, having her own home would provide a safe space where she could re-build her relationship with her daughter.

It's having a safe home where I can have my daughter and myself and having affordable housing so not always worrying about how am I going to pay the rent. And yeah, just having a, you know, safe family unit, you know I find if you're going to too expensive housing, you're always stressing how are you going to pay the rent. And I think affordable housing which is 25 per cent of your income, is much better.

For Patrick, autonomy and stability would provide the foundation for other opportunities.

I want my own place so I can do my own work, my own projects and without any interference, without people saying, "No. You should do it this way, you should do it that way." And also because when you've got a place an address like that I can go back to school.

And Jason simply wants his own space so that he can get back control of his life.

Going down the bank every week and making a payment, week, month, whatever. Taking a dog for a walk, simple things like that. Yeah little things, pay day, not having to wake up and not owing money for something. I can't hardly put it into words you know. It's been so long. Have control back I guess, control of my life. It's hard to elaborate, but my own place gives me back that control of my own life basically. Give me 15 square meters and I'm happy as a pig in shit and mud. I just need a bit of space, I just need my own space. Being able to find a place, banging my head against a wall trying to rent privately. I've given up on that. I want to do it properly you know. Freedom means a lot.

CONCLUSION

Policy makers, service providers, the media and even the public draw on a vast array of facts and figures to make sense of homelessness. Amid this proliferation of 'information' and 'evidence' it is easy to lose sight of the fact that homelessness is a lived experience that has a profound impact on the people who experience it. These stories remind us of that.

At the most basic level homelessness is about absence – the absence of stability, control and security. It is about the absence of a safe place to stay and the absence of stable friendships. It is about the absence of a meaningful, valued place in society. It is about the absence of ontological security.

People who experience homelessness actively seek ways to survive each day as best they can and to exit homelessness as quickly as they can. They are extremely resourceful and adaptable. Ultimately, however, the more effective people are at surviving, the more complicated it becomes to exit homelessness.

The experiences of people who live homelessness highlight that no matter how difficult their circumstances are, and no matter how many times they endure public condemnation, they retain aspirations for a better, more stable life. As a community we have a fundamental responsibility to provide the resources and support that enables people experiencing homelessness to realise their aspirations.

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... IT'S JUST ALL OVER A SILLY HOUSE ... THERE'S PEOPLE THAT HAVE GOT THEIR OWN HOUSES, WOULDN'T THINK OF IT BUT YOU KNOW, I DON'T THINK THEY REALISE HOW LUCKY THEY ARE TO HAVE A HOUSE, YOU KNOW THEIR OWN PLACE WHERE YOU CAN CALL HOME.

Shirley (34)



This is the first in a series of five reports on the J2SI evaluation.

The next four reports provide a full analysis of the housing, health, social and economic outcomes of the participants in the J2SI evaluation.

- The second report is due for release in July 2011.
- The third report is due for release in July 2012.
- The fourth report is due for release July 2013.
- The final report is due for release in July 2014.

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