Ending Homelessness: research and practice

Dr Cameron Parsell, presentation notes 20.11.15

What evidence is good evidence, how to gather and track?

Whenever we think about the relationship between research evidence and any kind of public policy formation, for example, housing or homelessness policy, we are confronted with two key points:

First, there are many sectors of society other than academic researchers who contribute evidence, or at least say that they contribute evidence. These stakeholders include: ministerial advisors, consultants, think tanks, media, trade unions, community organisations, and business organisations. Researchers produce evidence and make claims for evidence among other voices, and by no means do, or should, researchers have the last say on what constitutes good evidence.

A salient example of the many forms evidence assumes in the policy making process is the Common Ground model of supportive housing. In a paper I wrote with colleagues, we looked at the knowledge hierarchies involved in Australia's take up of Common Ground. It was apparent that there was no study anywhere in the world published that demonstrated the effectiveness of Common Ground. When we examined the processes involved in policy advocacy and policy adaption, we identified that firsthand experience and intuition were afforded more weight in policy decisions than was evidence generated from peer review research.

Second, despite claims to the contrary, neither research nor the policy formation process is politically neutral. Stakeholders, including researchers, use research, or discard research, that speaks to their interest. Extending well beyond the housing and homelessness policy and practice context, the past five years of climate change research and policy makes highlights the ideological, political and subjective ways that research is used to inform or undermine public policy. Professor Keith Jacobs made an important point about the political climate that impacts academic researchers conducting housing and homelessness research. He notes that academic researchers experience pressures that mean some questions, such as the government's role in increasing the supply of affordable housing to address homelessness, are too sensitive to be examined or funded. The political and ideological context influences not only how research will be used, but it also influences what types of research will even be commissioned.

From this premise of the messy and political research process, and recognising the multiple legitimate voices to claim evidence, a few notes about good housing and homelessness research.

Effectiveness: if we are thinking about the effectiveness and impact of a housing or homelessness intervention – and almost always we should – evidence that is based on research that involves baseline data, and ideally a control group, is really powerful. Although there are lots of practical reasons why doing this type of research is difficult, all too rarely do we fund or think about commissioning this type of rigorous research. Rarely in Australia is there a culture of developing rigorous and methodological complex (and often expensive) research to tell us if our housing and homelessness interventions are working.

A further challenges to researching the impacts of our housing and homelessness interventions is time. Because many of the outcomes we could realistically hope to achieve with housing and homelessness interventions will take many years to materialise, we need data that examines

people's outcomes and experiences over time. Our research on the mainland, together with other research from other parts of Australia and internationally, clearly indicate that if housing is allocated to people deemed to be the most in need (however that is defined) after one or two years many of the intentions of housing as a mechanism for people to improve their lives are not observable.

Often when we think of research and generating evidence we think of researchers coming in and collecting new data with surveys and interviews. Often we are much better served, however, by accessing and drawing on existing data that is already held. There is loads of loads of existing data that will provide really robust evidence that we can use to think about housing provision. Centrelink and other Commonwealth data sources are clear examples. It is crucial to think about the way big data can help us generate evidence. In addition to big data, housing and homelessness services collect masses of data that could be used for research. Rather than just identifying outputs, the administrative data that service providers collect can be structured in a way to build strong sources of evidence.

I am conscious that my comments about research evidence thus far has been directed exclusively toward quantitative data to determine measureable outcomes, impacts and effectiveness. As I have tried to suggest this type of quantitative data in indeed significant, but research must be sophisticated and designed well so as to take account of housing as home, and all the complexities that go with housing. To have a comprehensive evidence base we need research evidence that takes account of people's subjective and interactional relationships with place and the other people they live with and near. Much of the significant work done by people and organisations involved in housing and homelessness provision cannot be captured by quantitative measures of effectiveness alone.

Research likewise needs to examine how homelessness, or public housing status, does not constitute an identity that tells us anything about the values, aspirations and thoughts of people who are homeless and people living in social housing. What I am saying is that evidence needs understand the people using homelessness and housing services, because an understanding of the people in critical for the formation of policy and practice to meet their needs. If we base our policy and practice on assumptions about tenants and homeless people as the 'other', it is likely that the policy and practice will be incongruent with their needs.

How to use evidence to make things better

I am reminded by Professor Keith Jacobs who says that it is not the job of researchers to conduct the scientifically rigorous research and then passively sit on and blame governments and the community sector for not taking the research on. Instead, researchers have a strong role to play in actively working with governments and community organisations to feed the research back into practice and policy.

I would add that it is critical for researchers to work with governments and community organisations to develop the research questions and research objectives. Researchers will often have valuable research skills and the legitimate and privileged position to disseminate the research, but determining useful and appropriate housing and homelessness research projects will invariably involve researchers closely engaging with people on the front line as well as government and funders. I am reminded of a research grant that I assessed written by university researchers who thought up a study to give homeless people phones, the idea being that homeless people of course would not have a phone, and from this assumption, homeless people will not be able to keep in

contact with their case worker. The university researchers proposed to give homeless people a phone and then measure the effectiveness of such an intervention. My comment as assessor was, I think the researchers should talk to people who are homeless or people who work with them, and then they will suddenly find that people who are homeless do indeed have phone. Although this is a funny example, it does clearly show how university researcher can develop totally inappropriate research when they have little understanding of practice and people's everyday reality. Academic researchers have a central role in working with people in the sector to develop research projects; I am on the strong view that those in the sector could advance their practice and the results that they are working toward achieving if they too closely engage and seek out academic researchers for the purposes of building an evidence base.

Policy transfer: uninformed transfer (lack of knowledge about the context where policy was borrowed); incomplete transfer (critical features of the policy not borrowed, i.e., Housing First in Australia); and inappropriate transfer (poor understanding of differences between host and borrowing context, i.e., the health and welfare system differences between Australia and the United States)

Positive examples

There are numerous examples of research that has achieved positive results for people who are homeless or other groups enduring poor housing. I will briefly some of these, and perhaps they serve as examples to reflect upon and ask how useful or informative this research has or could be for Tasmania.

Moving away from **managing** people who are homeless to permanently ending homelessness. This research has many forms, but no doubt the most influential and rigorous comes from Housing First studies conducted in the United States. This research rests on the philosophical premise of housing as a human right, and empirically, it is supported by experimental studies which show that preparation programs are not as effective as enabling people immediate access to housing.

Research that I have been involved with extends some of the Housing First research, and the research questions what I argue to be the misguided notion of **housing readiness**. Instead, the research shows that under certain housing and support conditions – very active and purposeful conditions – people who have exited chronic homelessness can indeed immediately exit homelessness and sustain a tenancy. Focusing on the person as not being housing ready misses the point that we can alter the structural, institutional and resources conditions to mitigate the problems that lead to tenancy failure.

In the United States initially, and now also in Australia, there is a significant movement toward first examining, and then funding, homelessness and housing programs on the basis of **cost effectiveness** or **cost benefit analysis**. In the US where there are profoundly different normative ideas about the provision of welfare and social justice, the work of Dennis Culhane and others has been instrumental in showing that in some cities and for some individuals (i.e., those with complex needs), providing permanent housing and ongoing support services is cheaper than keeping people homeless. This

type of research is really difficult to conduct (although the actual principles are quite simple). Moreover, the cost benefits to ending rather than managing homelessness are directed toward the broader state based system, rather than just the housing provider or is responsible for most of the cost.

There are also examples where research probably shows what many already knew, but nevertheless the research actually has significant impacts. Our research from last year funded by the Queensland Mental Health Commission where we examined the implications of the state's new antisocial behaviour legislation in public housing on tenants with mental illnesses is a case in point. The research showed what everyone hear would probably know: it is problematic to allocate a person social housing because of health problems such as mental illness and addiction, and then after housing has been allocated and tenants provided with no support (and little thinking given to the links between state funded housing and state funded mental services), the housing provider issues antisocial behavioural strikes to tenants behaving in a way that is deemed antisocial (that could have probably been anticipated as probable behaviour at the time of allocation). Although our research was by no means ground breaking, it was used to great effect by the QMHC to change practices with the DHPW and to educate health providers.

Questions to ask:

- What is the role of housing in vulnerable and excluded people's lives? Is it a means to ensure other functions of society work?
- Should we focus our energy on ensuring that people in poverty and those excluded have access to decent and affordable housing, or should we think more optimistically about what role housing has (as part of a broader system) in enabling people to improve their lives. For many the provision of secure and affordable housing will be sufficient for them to improve their lives; for some people, perhaps a minority, the provision of housing alone is insufficient.
- Pindari: the current research is examining the dynamic interaction between the service providers and the service users to enact change in people's lives. The approach espoused in one of the study sites is positioned as a movement away from managed care – the rejection of wrap around support. The research assumes that people using housing and social housing services are not passive recipients of services who will achieve or not achieve certain outcomes based on the presence or absence of a program.

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