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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Past and Present Policy Representations of Youth Homelessness in Australia

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Youth homelessness has become an increasingly prevalent issue across the country. Research suggests that those who experience homelessness when they are young are more vulnerable to experiencing long-term homelessness throughout the life course. This is problematic because homelessness can have considerable negative impacts on individuals' lives, as it often leads to poor educational and occupational attainment, and mental and physical health issues.

Given the severity of the problem, Australian governments have introduced policies to improve strategies for preventing youth homelessness and ameliorating its negative effects. However, to date these policies have made little progress in addressing the issue. This demonstrates the need for further research into youth homelessness policy to improve understandings of how such policy interacts with service provision, and to what effect.

One aspect of policy which has piqued the interest of scholars in recent years is the way social issues are represented through policy discourse. Discourse can be described as the way particular words and forms of language are used to construct a representation of a topic. This is important, as the way a policy represents a problem can influence the way the problem is addressed.

This research examines representations of youth homelessness in two seminal Australian policy documents published 20 years apart, revealing the impact these representations have had on approaches to service provision. In doing so, it questions and challenges dominant discourses surrounding youth homelessness, and demonstrates how policy-makers' use of language impacts on the solutions implemented to address the issue. Overall, this research suggests that greater communication and collaboration is needed between governments, communities, and homeless youth themselves in order to provide this group with the support they need to make a sustainable transition out of homelessness.
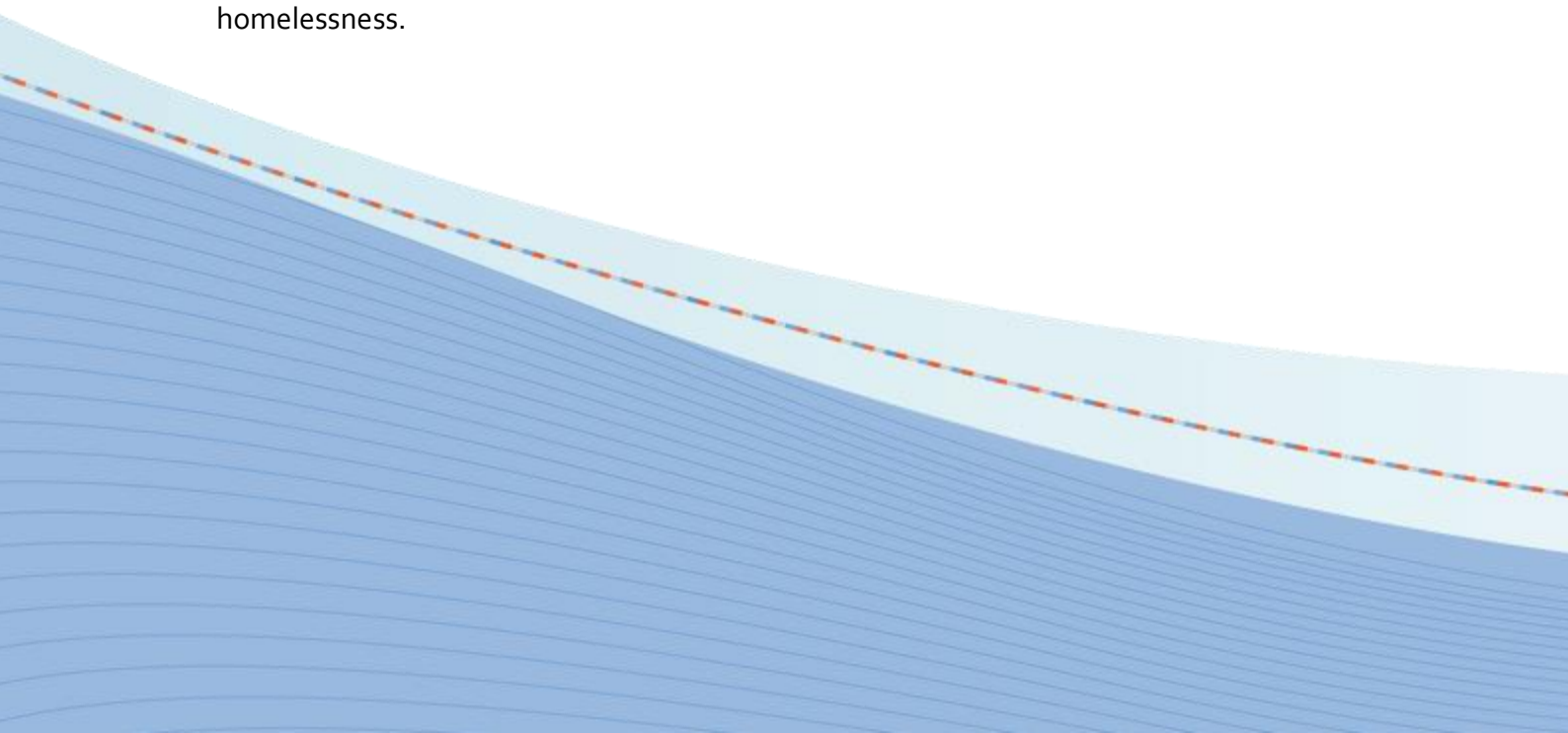
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Abstract

Despite the heightened policy attention youth homelessness has received over recent decades, it remains an ongoing critical issue within Australia. Previous research suggests that the way policies represent a problem can influence how the problem is addressed. This study investigates how Australian policies represent youth homelessness, and explores how these representations influence the nature of support services available for homeless youth. This is achieved through a critical discourse analysis of youth homelessness policy documents from 1989 and 2008. The analysis suggests that the earlier policy highlights the responsibility of the government to care for and protect homeless youth, whereas the later policy places greater emphasis on the need for social inclusion. These values reflect the political contexts of the time, and directly influence the approaches taken to service provision in response to the policies. Further, both policies fail to adequately engage the voices of homeless youth. This is considerably problematic in terms of contemporary youth services, as it directly contradicts many services' underlying assumption that youth have agency and the ability to improve their own circumstances. Overall, the analysis suggests that greater levels of informed discussion are needed between governments, communities and, importantly, homeless youth themselves to ensure their needs are effectively addressed through policy.

Keywords: homelessness; critical discourse analysis; young people; policy; Australia

Introduction

Australian youth are currently overrepresented in the nation's homeless population. Recent census data suggests that although youth aged 12 to 24 only make up 17% of the general Australian population, they currently account for 25% of Australia's homeless population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Not only does this demonstrate youths' susceptibility to homelessness, but it suggests that this group may be particularly vulnerable to the many social, educational, psychological, and physical health difficulties to which homelessness can lead (Johnson, 2012).

Youth homelessness is not a recent phenomenon, however, and since the 1980s a rising social interest in the issue has led to the establishment of a number of government policies and services aiming to reduce its negative effects (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008; Parsell, Jones, & Head, 2013). These policies and services have evolved over time in accordance with changing social contexts and political attitudes (Minnery & Greenhalgh, 2007). In more recent years, growing rates of homelessness throughout Australia have led governments to take new approaches to strategic policy in an attempt to permanently reduce rates of homelessness (Parsell, Jones, & Head, 2013).

The way these policies represent youth homelessness is a particularly important issue, as policy representations may influence the way a problem is addressed (Marston, 2002). However, despite the continued severity of youth homelessness and the large body of literature surrounding homelessness in general, to date there has been limited research on policy representations of homeless youth, or their implications. The research that does exist tends to place greater emphasis on representations in the media and general social discourses, rather than those found specifically in a policy context (Brueckner, Green, & Saggers, 2011; Zufferey, 2014).

The current study aims to address this gap in knowledge by improving understandings of how policy representations practically affect approaches to service provision for homeless youth. The data used in the study are drawn from two Australian policy documents: *Our Homeless Children* (1989) and *Australia's Homeless Youth* (2008). As these are the only Australian policies which address youth homelessness specifically, it is important to consider them in the context of social and political change. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used in this study, as it provides a framework to analyse the relationship between discourse and society, and to understand discursive problems

surrounding policy representations (De Melo Resende, 2009; Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2011). An understanding of the impact of representations of youth homelessness is critical to drive public sentiment and social policy and ensure vulnerable youth are provided with effective support to transition out of homelessness.

Literature Review

Causes of homelessness

The presence of youth homelessness in Australia has raised considerable public and scholarly debate surrounding how the issue should be conceptualised (Collins & Curtis, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Neale, 1997). One approach is to view homelessness as a result of structural factors, such as a lack of available housing or high rates of unemployment (Neale, 1997). Another approach is to view homelessness as a result of individual factors, such as drug and alcohol abuse, as well as other ostensibly irresponsible behaviours (Neale, 1997). This approach was prevalent within homelessness literature prior to the 1970s (Blumberg, Shipley, & Shandler, 1965; Jordan, 1965). Since then, there has been a tendency to divide individual causes into two categories: those for which the individual is considered responsible (such as drug abuse and mental illness) and those which are, to a large extent, beyond the individual's control (such as family breakdown and domestic violence) (Johnson, 2009; Neale, 1997). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the latter category became prevalent (see Ruddick, 1988; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997; Zorza, 1991). Since then, there has been a decreasing focus on causes beyond the individual's control, with an increasing number of studies focusing on substance use and mental illness (see Kamieniecki, 2001; Merscham, Van Leeuwen, & McGuire, 2009; Nyamathi et al., 2005). Although such studies shift responsibility back towards the individual, this shift is contentious within the broader literature.

Within the literature, then, there exists a dichotomy between individual and structural causes of homelessness. According to Zufferey and Chung (2006), this dichotomy allows people experiencing homelessness to be portrayed as either undeserving or deserving of social support. Neale (1997) suggests that each side of this dichotomy is perceived as having a different cause, which is often reflected in proposed

solutions. For example, where an individual is considered responsible for their situation and hence underserving of support, responses are often limited to minimal and basic service provision. On the other hand, where an individual is considered deserving of support, a more intensive and humanitarian response is viewed as appropriate (Neale, 1997). Several studies suggest that as individual explanations have become more prevalent throughout discourse, policy and practice have placed increasing emphasis on individuals taking responsibility for their own circumstances (Neale, 1997; Wyn & White, 1998). Others suggest that both individual and structural factors are now acknowledged as legitimate causes of homelessness (Johnson, 2012; Kidd, 2012).

Theorising homelessness

While to date there have been several approaches to theorising homelessness, common themes exist within academic and political discourses. Although early literature relied heavily on quantitative methods to measure the size and demographics of the homeless population (see Rosenthal, 1991; Rossi, Wright, Fisher, & Willis, 1987), contemporary approaches take more qualitative forms to examine the causes, meanings, and effects of homelessness (Collins & Curtis, 2011; Hoolachan, 2016). One example of this approach is an ethnographic study by Williams and Stickley (2011), which uses interviews to investigate how individuals construct narratives of their own homeless experiences, and how these experiences shape their identities. The shame and stigma attached to homelessness were found to negatively affect individuals' identities, prompting them to find alternative ways to manage and reshape these identities. Such research has thus been able to effectively engage with young homeless individuals in an attempt to understand their experiences (Farrugia, 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2000; Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008; Williams & Stickley, 2011; Wyn & White, 1998). This has been highly beneficial, as qualitative research provides a basis for thorough and complex understandings of social problems (Hoolachan, 2016).

Although qualitative research approaches have made considerable progress in terms of exploring youths' homeless experiences and investigating how these experiences are situated within wider social systems, such research often ignores issues relating to dominant discourses surrounding homelessness and the impact these discourses have on the lives of homeless individuals. Wyn and White (1998) attempt to

address this issue by investigating the impact of assumptions surrounding the scope and influence of agency and social structure on the construction of youth issues, such as homelessness, unemployment, and marginalisation. The study highlights the influence that underlying assumptions and problem constructions have on research, policy, and practice.

While to date there has been limited research focusing on policy representations of homeless youth, there is a growing body of literature which investigates how homeless individuals in general are portrayed in policy, both within Australia and internationally (Burnett, Ford-Gilboe, Berman, Ward-Griffin, & Wathen, 2015; De Melo Resende, 2009; Marston, 2002). Many of these studies employ a critical discourse analysis framework (Burnett et al., 2015; Marston, 2000; Marston 2002; Rogers & Marshall, 2012). A CDA framework allows such studies to explore the relationship between policy outcomes and actual social practices, as well as the way dominant social systems are perpetuated through social actions.

Limitations of current literature

Despite youth homelessness being a prominent policy focus in the past three decades, attempts to address the issue have to date made limited progress (Australian National Audit Office, 2013). While there is currently substantial literature surrounding homelessness in general, little research focuses on policy implications for youth specifically. Further, there exist considerable gaps in relation to how youth homelessness is represented in policy, and the effect these representations have on the provision of services for homeless youth.

The considerable debate which continues to surround the issue highlights its continued relevance and the need for deeper understandings of homelessness. This is particularly true in regards to research surrounding the relationship between policy and discourse. As discourse can influence the way a social problem is perceived and addressed, it is important to question dominant social assumptions surrounding youth homelessness and the potential these assumptions have to shape social policy.

Research Design

Policy selection

The sample used in this study consists of two Australian policy documents: *Our Homeless Children* (1989) and *Australia's Homeless Youth* (2008). These policies are significant as they both focus on youth homelessness specifically, and are the only two Australian policies to do so. Further, in looking at documents written almost 20 years apart, this study is able to view the intentions set forth by the earlier document, and analyse the effect they have had on policy implementation and future frameworks. The analysis thus aims to provide a deeper insight into how youth homelessness discourses have changed in response to broader programs of reform relating to the state and welfare provision.

Conducting CDA

As proponents of CDA argue, it is important to question dominant social discourses and consider how they shape, and are shaped by, social policies (Marston, 2002; van Dijk, 1993). Bacchi (2009) proposes a method for analysing discourse which is consistent with the CDA approach. She refers to this method as the 'What's the problem represented to be?' approach, and uses it to analyse how a social problem is represented in policy (Bacchi, 2009). This approach posits that policy solutions are inherently influenced by representations of the problem, as social understandings and perceived importance of social problems are constructed through language and discourses. This approach involves answering six core questions, namely: (I) "What's the problem…represented to be"; (II) "What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation"; (III) "How has this representation…come about"; (IV) "What is left unproblematic"; (V) "What effects are produced"; and (VI) "How/where has this representation…been produced, disseminated and defended" (Bacchi 2009, 2). Although Bacchi does not identify as a CDA researcher, her approach is consistent with the core aims and assumptions underlying CDA, and provides a useful, practical guide for conducting a discourse analysis. Thus, while CDA is a theoretical methodology, Bacchi's six questions link theory with method and allow analyses to be conducted thoroughly and systematically.

I began the analysis by inductively coding the two policies and creating an index of recurring themes for each document. I then revised both indexes and sorted them into a hierarchical structure of main themes and related sub-themes. I re-coded the documents according to the new indexes and synthesised the data into thematic charts according to the index themes, taking notes relating to more abstract concepts throughout the process. This helped to refine the categories and ensure the meaning and relevance of each piece of data were considered carefully and methodically. Once I had coded and sorted the data, I read and interpreted it with the aim of answering Bacchi's (2009) six questions. Upon answering the questions, I extracted the main themes which arose, and discuss them presently.

Our Homeless Children (1989) - The Burdekin Report

In 1989 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission conducted a national inquiry into youth homelessness to ensure Australia was upholding the basic rights of vulnerable youth (Burdekin, 1989). This inquiry resulted in the release of *Our Homeless Children*, otherwise known as the Burdekin Report, which has since contributed significantly to policy debates and service provision. It was the first Australian inquiry to focus on youth homelessness, drawing community attention to the issue and sparking a dialogue for political action and social change (Johnson, 2009; National Youth Commission, 2008).

Impact of knowledge and assumptions

Inherent in a CDA is the exploration of the knowledge and assumptions which underlie a policy's problem representation. This helps deepen understandings of the policy's conceptual foundations, which in turn allows us to see how such foundations influence perceptions of the issue (Bacchi, 2009). Such an exploration of the Burdekin Report reveals that it positions youth homelessness as a problem caused predominantly by family issues, such as abuse, incest, or neglect.

> *...most homeless children leave their homes because of severe conflict in*
> *the family and...a significant number leaves home at least partly because*
> *of abuse...* (Burdekin 1989, 18)

Situations involving violations of children's basic rights are foregrounded throughout the report, effectively attributing the 'fault' of homelessness largely to factors that are beyond the children's control. Violence, abuse, and neglect are all viewed as major causes of youth homelessness in the literature of the 1980s and early 1990s (Ruddick, 1988; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997; Zorza, 1991), and the Burdekin Report is no exception. Its portrayal of youth as victims - and victims who deserve assistance - is consistent with Zufferey and Chung's (2006) and Neale's (1997) arguments that the deserving/undeserving binary is both culturally embedded in Australian homelessness discourses, and largely reflective of the perceived causes of homelessness.

According to the Burdekin Report, not only are these young people *deserving* of assistance, but they are explicitly positioned as *requiring* assistance, most notably in the form of care and protection.

> *The right to protection against neglect or abuse means that governments have a particular obligation to ensure that children without a home because of neglect or abuse are not faced with a lack of adequate housing.*
> (Burdekin 1989, 36)

Underlying this positioning is an assumption that children and youth do not have the capability or capacity to address their problems independently, let alone contribute to effective solutions.

> *...people detached from their families who are under 16 years...are among the most vulnerable people in our society, yet they are left, in far too many cases, to fend for themselves.* (Burdekin 1989, 161)

Such ideas create an us/them binary throughout the text, positioning 'us' as privileged and 'them' as victims in need of the care that 'we' are able to provide. Although binaries can be found throughout many policies and debates, those which arise in housing and homelessness discourse are notorious for positioning 'us' and 'them' against each other, thereby legitimating the social exclusion experienced by homeless individuals and fostering animosity between the groups (Bacchi, 2009; De Melo Resende, 2009; Marston, 2002). In contrast, the Burdekin Report seeks to bring the 'us' and 'them' together, reiterating Australia's 'duty' surrounding child protection. This reflects the report's

conceptualisation of youth homelessness as beyond the youths' control, and subsequent positioning of youth as unable to deal with homelessness independently.

Construction of subjectivities

As subjects and their associated identities are constituted both in and through discourse, it is important to consider how problem representations within the report constitute and impose identities onto subjects (Bacchi, 2009; Farrugia, 2010). As mentioned briefly above, the report positions homeless young people as extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. In naming the report *Our Homeless Children,* Burdekin indicates that those in question are children rather than youth, despite the scope of the report including individuals up to age 18 and older. This provides the foundation for the portrayal of youth as unable to look after themselves. This is reflected in the opening paragraph of the report.

> *The fact is that there are homeless children and young people dying in Australia, some from suicide, others simply from neglect. That is not something our nation can ignore.* (Chairman of the Inquiry, quoted in Burdekin 1989, 3)

This serious depiction of youth homelessness provides the central foundation for the report's ongoing argument: homeless children and youth are desperately in need of care and protection. This reinforces children and young people's reliance on adults, and risks being paternalistic. This supports Kelly's (2006) assertion that discourse often positions at-risk youth as opposite to entrepreneurial subjects, foregrounding their lack of agency, reflexivity, and rationality (Kelly, 2006).

Consistent with the positioning of homeless children as lacking agency is the report's engagement with homeless children's voices. Despite interviewing a number of homeless children and young people, the report only discusses quotes which pertain to their past experiences of homelessness, largely ignoring any opinions they may have about the effectiveness of homeless services or future directions. This inclusion of youths' voices further portrays them as victims in need of care and protection.

> *I was on the street when I was 12 years old, and I did not know anybody*
> *and I was very, very scared.* (Homeless young person, quoted in Burdekin*
> 1989, 149)

> *Homelessness to me was a feeling of death. There is nowhere to go...and*
> *no-one who cares.* (Formerly homeless person, quoted in Burdekin 1989,
> 49)

It has been well established that an understanding of homeless youths' experiences is vital if their needs are to be addressed (Farrugia, 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2000). Homeless youths' needs are often multiple and diverse, ranging from accommodation and education support, to counselling and mental health support (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Despite this, within the Burdekin report there is a striking absence of contributions by young people suggesting how services could better meet their needs: all such suggestions come from adults, primarily those in the service sector. Notwithstanding these adults' experience in service provision and genuine concern for the youth involved, denying these youth the opportunity to participate in discussions about their own futures reinforces the idea that homeless children need looking after and adults know best how to do that. This failure to give homeless youth agency or power in determining their own outcomes may intensify their alienation from the broader community (Farrugia, 2010). While such a discourse may be beneficial in influencing the community to view homeless youth in a sympathetic way, its limitations lie in its potential to hinder the acceptance and inclusion of homeless youth into the community.

Attribution of responsibility

The ways in which policy attributes responsibility for addressing youth homelessness is an important aspect of this analysis, as problem solutions are constrained by the perspectives and resources of those addressing them. The Burdekin Report, then, positions parents as primarily responsible for raising and caring for their children. The report repeatedly states that:

> *Traditionally it has been accepted that parents will support their*
> *children both financially and emotionally...until such time as they*

become employed and independent. (Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare, quoted in Burdekin 1989, 10)

Where families are unable or unwilling to provide adequate nurture and support, the report explicitly places responsibility onto the government to ensure these children are cared for.

…governments also have a duty to assist and protect the child directly…to guarantee the child's rights should these rights not be accorded adequate protection by the family. (Burdekin 1989, 34)

According to the report, however, governments have largely failed to uphold these responsibilities.

…to date little attention has been focused on the plight of children detached from their families. They appear to have been largely ignored in the development of the Commonwealth's strategy to eliminate child poverty. (Burdekin 1989, 27)

As such, the report emphasises the need for support to be revised to adequately recognise and cater to homeless youths' needs.

When considered alongside the Burdekin Report's conceptualisation of youth homelessness as a result of factors largely beyond the individual's control, holding the government responsible for these youth is consistent with the findings of a number of other researchers (Batterham, Hollows, & Kolar, 2011; Lee, Lewis, & Jones, 1992). For example, Batterham and colleagues (2011) argue that people perceive governments to be responsible for addressing homelessness when it is caused by factors beyond the individual's control, such as family breakdown or a lack of housing. This belief is consistent with a welfarist political rationality, which was prevalent at the time the Burdekin Report was written, and focuses on the responsibilities of the state for providing government, security, and direct support to its citizens (Rose, 1996). Overall, this may help to explain the relationship between the Burdekin Report's representation of youth homelessness as a social welfare issue, and its positioning of the government as responsible for addressing the problem.

The attribution of responsibility discussed above indicates that there are particular expectations within the report regarding the solutions which are necessary, or indeed plausible, for addressing youth homelessness. The report pays particular attention to the need for early intervention and support services to address family breakdown issues, which are presented as a significant cause of homelessness.

> *Family reconciliation is a major means of preventing long-term homelessness and should be a primary aim of youth accommodation services…* (Burdekin 1989, 211)

In addressing these issues, the report aims to prevent youth homelessness from occurring. Again, the report places responsibility for achieving this aim onto Australian governments, and urges them to establish new initiatives to solve the problem.

In response to the increased social focus on youth homelessness which came about as a result of the report, the government increased funding for homeless services and initiated prevention tactics in an attempt to address the issue (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2005; Johnson, 2009). One notable example is the Prime Ministerial Taskforce on youth homelessness, which was established by the Howard Liberal National Party Coalition Government soon after the report was released. In accordance with the strategies discussed by Burdekin, this taskforce focused on early intervention and prevention strategies to address the issues involved in family breakdown (Mackenzie & Coffey, 2015). This links back to the issue of family responsibility as, if families are supposed to care for children and are failing to do so, then implementing family interventions seems the first logical step. As the Taskforce states:

> *The Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme signals the Government's intention to increase the service emphasis on early intervention strategies - that is, before the first key transition, a permanent break from the home and family, is reached. This will…assist family reconciliation through early intervention.* (Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce 1996, 10)

This new focus on early intervention led to the establishment of the Reconnect program throughout Australia, which provides family counselling and reconciliation support

(MacKenzie & Coffey, 2012). Due largely to its emphasis on working with youth as well as their families, Reconnect has been found to improve communication and conflict management within at-risk families, and lead to lower incidence of unstable accommodation and higher levels of engagement in education and employment (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2005; Flatau, 2012). This family-oriented approach to youth homelessness prevention clearly reflects the Burdekin Report's focus on family responsibility for caring for youth, and family breakdown as a primary cause of youth homelessness.

Despite the success of family support services such as Reconnect, in foregrounding family issues as the primary cause of youth homelessness, the Burdekin Report places little emphasis on the need to address more structural causes of youth homelessness, such as high rates of youth unemployment and a lack of affordable housing (Kidd, 2012; Minnery & Greenhalgh, 2007). In ignoring such areas for potential support provision, the Burdekin Report may have limited the scope of services targeted at youth, effectively reducing the service sector's ability to address the wide range of needs homeless youth experience.

Australia's Homeless Youth (2008) – The National Youth Commission Report

Almost twenty years after the release of the Burdekin Report, the National Youth Commission conducted a follow-up inquiry (National Youth Commission, 2008). The resulting report, *Australia's homeless Youth,* argues that, despite the initiatives introduced after the Burdekin Report, a new approach is needed if Australia is to effectively address youth homelessness. The National Youth Commission's suggested approach focuses on social inclusion, a concept which has since been heavily utilised in the creation of government policy (MacKenzie & Coffey, 2015).

Impact of knowledge and assumptions

Considering the time gap between the Burdekin Report and the National Youth Commission Report, it is unsurprising that the more recent report draws on a considerably different body of knowledge. Recent literature places particular emphasis on substance use and mental illness, which contentiously shifts responsibility towards

the individual (Kamieniecki, 2001; Merscham, Van Leeuwen, & McGuire, 2009; Nyamathi et al., 2005). The National Youth Commission Report fits squarely within this literature, paying particular attention to youths' multiplicity of needs. In accordance with the recent shift in the literature and broader policy discourses towards individual responsibility, the report implies that there is a limited, yet critical, expectation for individual responsibility from homeless youth who require support. This responsibility is implied in the report's acknowledgement and support of youths' efforts to actively try and improve their situations.

> *She had to fight like hell to get back to school…[now] one of the main head*
> *people there who absolutely refused to have her on the place, is now saying*
> *it's a pleasure to have her…She's doing physics, chem, psychology, maths,*
> *English and graphics and starring on every single one.* (Service provider,
> quoted in National Youth Commission 2008, 276)

This expectation for individual responsibility is not surprising given the report's positioning of youth as young adults with agency, despite their substantial support needs. Having said that, the expectation for individual responsibility is mitigated by the considerable emphasis the report places on the critical role of community groups and, to a lesser degree, governments in providing the support required by youth to take responsibility for their circumstances.

> *…community organisations…provide supported accommodation and*
> *related services in order to help people who are homeless to achieve a*
> *degree of self-reliance and independence.* (National Youth Commission
> 2008, 207)

Similarly to the Burdekin Report, the National Youth Commission Report creates an 'us/them' binary between the community and homeless youth. However, rather than positioning 'us' as responsible for caring for 'them', this binary encourages 'us' to support 'them' in becoming one of 'us'. This reflects the report's ongoing theme of social exclusion as the primary problem surrounding youth homelessness, and encourages communities to take more responsibility for homeless youth.

Consistent with this focus on individual and community responsibility are contemporary ideals of neoliberalism (Miller & Rose, 2008). Neoliberal ideas are centred

around the creation of the individual actor, who is ascribed with qualities such as choice, responsibility, and control over their life (Miller & Rose, 2008). Neoliberal individuals and communities alike are expected to take responsibility for their own outcomes, including social cohesion, security, and health; ideas which are clearly reflected in the National Youth Commission Report (Miller & Rose, 2008).

Construction of subjectivities

The report's positioning of homeless youth as neoliberal individuals goes hand in hand with the assumption that these youth have a degree of agency in determining their own outcomes. The report often positions youth as partly responsible for the situations they find themselves in.

> *...personal substance use is perceived by many young people as being an important reason why they leave home prematurely...young people's substance use places [strain] on families.* (National Youth Commission 2008, 162)

Positioning homeless youth as responsible for their own lives enables the report to imply that, naturally, youth should be actively making the effort to improve their circumstances. This idea of individual responsibility is furthered through the report's use of language and metaphor. The 'homeless career' is one such metaphor which is not uncommon within contemporary discourse. Fopp (2009) argues that this metaphor inherently involves reference to the labour market, drawing attention to the lack of employment career many homeless individuals face. This involves connotations of deviance, which is largely connected to ideas about choice and individual inadequacy (Fopp, 2009). The report's use of the term, then, implies that youth make decisions which set them on a trajectory towards homelessness. This idea is supported by the report's discussion of homeless youth who have succeeded in overcoming a number of personal barriers, ultimately helping themselves to improve their circumstances.

> *[Homeless youth who use substances]...are not necessarily locked into long-term problems with addiction. The Inquiry heard accounts of reduction in use...[and] stable abstinence from a number of witnesses...*

> *without specialised treatment or support.* (National Youth Commission
> 2008, 163)

This example suggests that although homeless youth may be marginalised and downtrodden, they maintain the capacity to determine their own futures to a certain degree. This concept is raised numerous times throughout the report, and once again aligns with ideas of the neoliberal individual.

Interestingly, one aspect of the National Youth Commission Report which is inconsistent with its overall positioning of youth as active agents is its treatment of homeless youths' voices. In a way very similar to the Burdekin Report, the National Youth Commission Report only includes quotes from young homeless people that relate to their feelings and experiences of homelessness. Once again, any important decisions regarding youths' needs are made by adult professionals. One service provider believes:

> *…You really have to stabilise the accommodation before you can look at securing employment for them.* (Service provider, quoted in National Youth Commission 2008, 332)

While on the surface this may seem like a legitimate notion, it is in direct opposition to the findings of Fitzpatrick's (2000) study, which does take youth's perspectives into account. Fitzpatrick's (2000) interviews with homeless youth reveal that most youths' top priority is finding an appropriate job, followed by adequate income and secure accommodation. Not only does this conflict in opinion demonstrate the potential different perspectives of service providers and homeless youth themselves, but it also highlights the importance of actively engaging youth in discussions about their own futures. The report's failure to acknowledge youths' voices implies that youth lack the capacity to make decisions about their lives, despite the report explicitly positioning youth as independent agents.

Although it is not uncommon to find conflicting discourses within a single text, this particular contradiction is problematic as many of the report's recommended changes to support services require a significant degree of personal responsibility. This means the report is explicitly basing service provision frameworks on the assumption that youth have the capacity to think and act for themselves, while simultaneously treating them as though they do not. This contradicting approach may cause problems for homeless youth,

as they become increasingly marginalised when their voices are ignored and this hinders their ability to become responsible self-supporting individuals as neoliberal society, and policy, expects (Farrugia, 2010). This may in turn increase the social exclusion and withdrawal they experience and ultimately exacerbate learned helplessness (Williams & Stickley, 2011).

Attribution of responsibility

When attributing responsibility for addressing youth homelessness, the National Youth Commission Report suggests that, far from the caring role ascribed by the Burdekin Report, the government's main role in supporting youth is that of providing funding. The role of physically providing care and support for homeless youth is instead given to individuals, communities, and non-government organisations. The report emphasises the importance of social inclusion through its repeated references to the social isolation and barriers to social participation many homeless youth face.

> *The absence of specialist and appropriate labour market options for disadvantaged young people has ensured that homeless young people have been largely excluded from participation in the 'full-employment' Australian economy.* (National Youth Commission 2008, 4)

Given the implied importance of social participation and the neoliberal political context at the time, the report's focus on community responsibility is positioned as a natural and justifiable response. This focus on community responsibility is further evidenced in the report's many references to 'community building' and the apparent need for 'communities of service'.

> *There is no agreed common national approach for ensuring that communities have sufficient capacity to respond to homelessness and related issues…The idea of 'communities of services' implies active community building with some resources devoted to facilitating better coordination of local systems.* (National Youth Commission 2008, 339)

This quote implies that communities are responsible for addressing homelessness, but require adequate capacity and resources to do so. The responsibility for providing these resources is given to the government. This again speaks to the changed role of the government under neoliberalism: that of supporting communities rather than directly providing services (Rose, 2001). In suggesting that the government support communities, who in turn are responsible for supporting homeless youth, the report is effectively distancing the government from a responsibility for homeless youth.

Interestingly, Australian governments at the time also highlighted the importance of social inclusion and community building in a number of homelessness policies. These themes can be found throughout policies such as: *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* (2008); *A Stronger, Fairer Australia* (2009); and *Queensland Strategy for Reducing Homelessness 2012-2020* (2010). Together, these documents demonstrate the recent policy shift away from ideas of homeless youth needing care from the government, and towards ideas of supporting youth to be included, and contributing, members of society. In promoting social inclusion and community building, the National Youth Commission Report is providing a channel through which youths' social participation can be achieved. This emphasis on community is consistent with the shift away from the 'welfare state' mentality which has been occurring since the 1990s (Miller & Rose, 2008). This shift has seen the government take an increasingly detached role in welfare support provision and, in limiting government intervention, it has led to an increasing emphasis on individuals' rights and responsibilities to participate in their communities as social citizens (Rose, 1996). The government, then, must provide its citizens with the conditions necessary for a prosperous society, while the citizens themselves "must deserve to inhabit it by building strong communities and exercising active responsible citizenship" (Rose 2001, 4).

Proposed solutions

Themes from the above investigation of the attribution of responsibility reflect the community-oriented nature of the recommendations put forward by the National Youth Commission Report. Given the report's focus on social inclusion and community responsibility, many of its proposed solutions focus on the coordination and integration

of services at the community level, and ways to facilitate the participation of vulnerable youth in education and employment.

> *To deal with the complex multiple problems that a significant number of homeless youth have and to seriously support these young people into the workforce, will require new linkages between specialist services, SAAP and employment programs.* (National Youth Commission 2008, 226)

While governments responded positively to the service provision frameworks suggested in the report, resulting changes largely failed to benefit homeless youth specifically. A prime example of this is the government's 2008 White Paper, *The Road Home,* which drew on the National Youth Commission's findings and consequently introduced a broader homelessness policy framework (Australian Government, 2008; MacKenzie & Coffey, 2015). This framework, the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA), focuses on providing direct social housing for those in need (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Within the NAHA is the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), which focuses on preventative measures and improving service responses. This agreement emphasises the importance of integrating and coordinating services with the aim of fostering social participation (Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

This approach to social inclusion is largely consistent with the report's expectation for homeless youth to become fully participating members of society with the help of support services; services which should, ideally, achieve effective coordination at the community level. A recent review highlights the NPAH's success in helping services to achieve this goal:

> *The NPAH has been valuable linking the housing and homelessness sectors. It has promoted much more discussion between services...* (National Shelter 2013, VI)

Despite the progress the NPAH has made, current services continue to face difficulties housing and supporting youth (National Shelter, 2013). This is interesting when considered in regards to how the National Youth Commission Report positions youth. As the report positions youth as young adults, in need of support but largely capable of improving their situations if they are determined to do so, service responses

which followed appeared to take the same basic approach to addressing the problem: they adopted the view that homeless youth are young adults and do not require attention over and above what is required by the general homeless population. As a result, these responses were applied to issues of homelessness in general, and did little to address youths' specific needs.

Conclusion

This study investigated how youth homelessness has been represented in Australian policies over a 20-year period. Overall, the earlier document, *Our Homeless Children* (1989), frames young homeless people as children who are in need of care and protection, and places the onus of this care on the government. It highlights the role that abuse and family breakdown play in causing youth homelessness and, as a result, subsequent changes to service provision focused largely on improving family relations through early intervention strategies. In contrast, the later document, *Australia's Homeless Youth* (2008), frames homeless young people as adults in their own right who have a degree of responsibility for their situation. However, it also recognises that vulnerable youth require substantial support; a responsibility which is largely placed on the community. The report thus highlights the importance of community building and social inclusion, and responses to the report involved integrating services and helping vulnerable youth become actively participating members of society.

While a lack of engagement with youths' voices was a problem in both documents, it is arguably particularly problematic in *Australia's Homeless Youth* (2008) due to the largely neoliberal nature of modern service approaches. That is, the report treats youth as passive subjects in a political context where services require them to be active agents. This may serve to limit youths' ability to effectively utilise such services. Overall, then, this CDA suggests that representations of youth homelessness in Australian policy have changed considerably over the two decades separating these two documents, and the values within each report largely reflect the political and social contexts of the time. These representations have had a direct influence on service approaches for homeless youth, which highlights the impact that discourse can have on social action.

Although the investigation of social discourses surrounding youth homelessness is crucial for understanding how the problem is conceptualised and addressed, it must be noted that homeless youth may have different experiences and views about their situations. The use of CDA makes it difficult to take these experiences into account; a limitation which has been encountered by a number of studies within the homelessness literature (see De Melo Resende, 2009; Zufferey, 2014). Indeed, by not seriously taking account of youth who experience homelessness from their positions, studies such as these may inadvertently further exclude their voice and reify problematic identities imposed upon them. Nevertheless, CDA allowed this study to examine the power relations and social assumptions surrounding youth homelessness, and question dominant discourses within the texts.

To help minimise further exclusion of homeless youths' voices, there is the opportunity for future research to include interviews or focus groups with homeless youth to explore their ideas and opinions about policy and service provision. The combination of interviews and policy analysis could be extended to include the views of policy-makers and enactors, in order to investigate the processes behind the creation, interpretation, and implementation of youth homelessness policy. This would allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between policy as written and policy as practiced, and a more nuanced approach to the construction of discourse. This may in turn weaken the power and dominance which surround hegemonic policy approaches, and ultimately contribute to more effective youth homelessness policy in Australia.

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