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THE POLITICS OF COUNTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

The magic of numbers and the amazing disappearing act

JUDITH BESSANT

No-one wants to see young people who are no longer able to stay at home with their parents living in situations that are neither stable nor safe. Most Australians also appreciate that youth homelessness is typically a result of factors beyond the control of young people, like poverty, lack of affordable housing, parental divorce or separation, family conflict and violence, sexual abuse or mental health problems. Since the Burdekin Report of 1989 first put the issue on the national agenda, youth homelessness has been a point of some political sensitivity as the numbers of young homeless have stayed stubbornly high through the 1990s and into the 2000s.

It seems now, however, that the Gillard Labor government has some great news. In recent years, two separate ways of measuring homelessness were used, both drawing on data from the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics (‘ABS’) census, both producing different results. The first measure was presented by two Melbourne-based academics, Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie (at RMIT University and Swinburne University respectively), who had been working with the ABS since 1996 to devise and refine their methodology. In 2008 they estimated a total of 105,000 homeless people. That figure was then incorporated into the federal government’s white paper The Road Home and informed the then newly-elected Labor government’s 12-year plan to halve the number of homeless people by 2020 with a 20 per cent reduction by 2013. The second estimate or ‘correction’ was carried out by the ABS in 2011, using a different methodology that produced a much smaller estimate. According to this recount, there was a total of only 63,469 homeless with around 5,424 young homeless people aged 12 to 18 years of age. This second ABS calculation suggests the first over-rated the number of homeless people in Australia, and suggests a reduction of over 75 per cent gives a more accurate account.

Given the fantastic outcome produced by the ABS’s recalculation, we might think that the beleaguered Gillard government, keen for good news stories, would now be breaking out the champagne and issuing a storm of press releases. Oddly this hasn’t happened. Why? What is going on? The answer lies with a few inconvenient truths about how governments deal with the contradictions of modern politics. It also provides a salutary lesson in the dark arts of politics — and in this case, statistics.

Counting the homeless

Since Brian Burdekin reported on the scale of youth homelessness, Australian governments have asked the ABS to count the homeless.

To count the homeless, the ABS relies on the national census taken every five years, like the one Australians filled out in early August 2011. On census night, the head of the household filling out the census form is asked to say whether anyone staying in the household that night has ‘no usual address’. This question gets responses that notoriously undercount young homeless people. This is likely to be because respondents typically ignore ‘teenagers’ who are simply ‘sleeping over’ because it is assumed they lived with parents, when in fact they may have nowhere to live. It is also clear that the ABS faces all kinds of other difficulties in the task of counting the homeless, which is not as easy as we might think. There are practical problems like finding and contacting people who don’t have stable housing and a regular address. It is difficult because many young people do not take to the streets and ‘sleep rough’; for most, homelessness is staggered and progressive. Many young homeless people cope with being forced to leave the parental house by ‘couch surfing’ with relatives or friends. They may not even consider themselves to be ‘homeless’, yet they cannot go home. It’s an arrangement which involves moving from one place to another when they have outstayed their welcome, and this can last for years. For these and other reasons, categorising and locating homeless young people is not easy.
It was these kinds of problems which Chamberlain and MacKenzie set about addressing in the early 1990s. Drawing on plenty of practical experience based on working with young homeless people, Chamberlain and MacKenzie advised the ABS on how to improve the methodology for counting the numbers of young homeless people. They also devised some practical ways of finding, identifying and counting the numbers of young homeless people. This included making an amendment in ABS estimates by using a census of homeless school-aged students. Their approach acknowledged the extent of the limitations of the census data and helped produce better estimates of the extent of homelessness. It also received widespread acceptance from policymakers and other researchers in the field. Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s approach was used to estimate that, on census night 2006, there were 21,940 homeless young people aged between 12 to 18 years.

Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s methodology was subject to some criticism; indeed, in their 2006 analysis, Chamberlain and MacKenzie themselves identify significant methodological issues. In March 2011 the ABS engaged in a review process. Given these difficulties, the ABS, supported by the Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (‘FaHCSIA’), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (‘AIHW’) and various representatives from some state governments, assessed the methodology that had hitherto been used. Part of the critique was that categories used by Chamberlain and MacKenzie were too inclusive and, as a result, they over-estimated the number of homeless people.

Changes to counting the homeless

In this context, the ABS decided it would be best to rethink the ways it ‘counted’ the numbers of young homeless people. Accordingly, the ABS decided to revert back to its previous approach based on using the national census without significant adjustments or fieldwork testing. In this way it also decided to ignore the value of using researchers with direct practical experience of working with young people. In ways which replicate so much other ‘social science’ ‘empirical research’, the ABS privileged methods of data collection and analysis carried out by researchers who are disconnected from the fields of social action which they claim to ‘know’.

It was that recalculation or new approach which produced the almost magical reduction in the numbers of young homeless people to only 5,424 (a much smaller estimate than that made using Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s approach).

Furthermore, according to the ABS, 50 per cent of young homeless people are in Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (‘SAAP’) services. This is an extraordinary finding, almost certainly a major overestimate, which omits many thousands who sleep in cars or caravans, ‘couch surf at a mate’s place’, squat, ‘sleep rough’ or use some other kind of improvised shelter. According to the ABS’s new estimation, around 19 per cent of young homeless people are ‘couch surfing’. Yet ask any experienced youth worker and the guesstimate will be more like 70 per cent. According to the ABS, another 17 per cent of young homeless people are in rooming or boarding houses. Again, youth workers will tell you that service providers do not refer young people to boarding houses because of the risk of violence, sexual harassment and illicit substance abuse.

Is this apparent dramatic drop in the number of young homeless people good news? Should resources specifically target groups ‘recognised’ as homeless while others miss out? The answer is no. Thousand of young homeless people have not magically secured stable and safe accommodation. They disappeared from the books in the recalculation because the ABS changed the way they counted homelessness. To count the homeless, the ABS decided to rely only on the census and not to incorporate the school census; this process guarantees a much smaller figure.

In doing this, the ABS has simply deployed an old ‘trick’, one that is very similar to the way the unemployment problem was reduced in the late 1970s. Until 1979, to count unemployment the ABS had for a long time used a sample of households. The people in that sample were then asked if they had worked, even for a few hours, during the survey period. If they said they had not worked, but had looked for work in the survey period, then they were counted as ‘unemployed’. However, if they said they had given up looking for work, they were then not classified or counted as ‘unemployed’. Then, in 1979, as unemployment figures remained persistently high, the ABS changed the definition of unemployment so that fewer people fitted that category. The ABS did
this by adding the word ‘actively’ to the relevant question so the issue became whether a person who had not worked in the previous weeks ‘had actively looked for work in the period prior to the survey’. Adding the word ‘actively’ redefined and narrowed the category of unemployed. ‘Actively’ meant, quite specifically, whether or not the jobless person had taken part in government approved job-search activities. This simple change in definition, which made ‘actively’ looking for work part of the unemployment classification, had a magical effect on the unemployment data — it declined sharply.

Like the ABS’s 1979 change to counting unemployment, the recent and apparently simple change in technique in how youth homelessness gets counted has very real and major political, policy and resourcing implications. If the official number of homeless youth drops by three quarters, then it follows that less funding for youth support services is required. This latest modification to counting young homeless people does not mean the problem has been reduced or solved, just as the people wanting waged work did not get a job in 1979. All those young people who are homeless have not found somewhere safe and secure to live. It just means that the official numbers suggest a reduction in the scale of the problem.

Reduced funding for youth housing, homelessness and allied support services will have a significant impact on many disadvantaged young people. Among other things, it will likely reduce funding to early intervention programs in schools and other education providers, housing services and other programs that currently support young people (and parents) at risk of homelessness. This will impact negatively on the lives of young people who are currently homeless or at imminent risk.

One response to this new approach to counting youth homelessness is to be annoyed or upset about the ABS ‘misbehaving’, because they appear to have subverted the practice of producing ‘objective’ statistics. However, the problem with drawing that conclusion is that counting the number of ‘homeless’, ‘unemployed’ or ‘the poor’ is never an objective account of what is going on. One consideration that informs this claim is the way modern governments use statistics as a central tool for managing social problems and regulating people.

‘Lies, damn lies and statistics’

Official statistics have played a vital role in the policy-making practices of government in the Anglo-American world since the first decades of the nineteenth century.17 Foucault and Hacking point to the ways the practice of counting people is part of the development of what Foucault calls ‘bio-politics’,18 which involves governments in the practice of what Hacking19 calls ‘making up people’. Bio-politics refers to the ways governments identify ‘problematic’ or ‘deviant’ groups in the population whose conduct is seen to threaten the social order, or whose existence represents a challenge to the way ‘normal’ people live or ought to live, as a prelude to then managing those groups. In effect, statistical exercises play a key role in the development of modern techniques of regulating the lives of very large numbers of people.

If modern governments are going to develop welfare, medical or legal policies and systems to regulate, manage or treat certain ‘problem populations’, they need first to establish the scale of the problem represented by the problematic populations. This can present difficult issues, as the ABS’s recasting of the homelessness statistics demonstrates.

To discover the numbers of people who are ‘unemployed’, ‘poor’, ‘criminal’ or ‘homeless’, statistical agencies (like the ABS) need to ‘invent’ the kinds (or categories) of people to whom labels like ‘poor’ or ‘homeless’ are then applied. By ‘invent’ I mean only to say that, to count the numbers of people who are ‘homeless’, statistical agencies first need to say what criteria define this condition. Contrary to commonsense, being ‘homeless’ or ‘unemployed’ is not a self-evident or objective matter. This is because the criteria that define ‘the condition’ need to be specified. And as Wittgenstein demonstrated, all categories (like ‘poverty’ ‘unemployment’ or ‘madness’) are essentially indeterminate.20

Before the ABS starts counting homeless people, it must define the condition of ‘homelessness’. This is achieved by determining what criteria will be used to classify people as ‘homeless’. These conditions are not self-evident or immediately clear. Continuing the unemployment analogy, officially being unemployed doesn’t mean you don’t have a job. That definition would mean we
would need to include babies, children, very old people, sick people in hospital and so forth in the
category ‘unemployed’. That is why the ABS defines ‘unemployment’ as not having a job when a
person is able and willing to have one, but for reasons outside their control they cannot secure
one.21 This means for example that a person can never be unemployed according to the ABS if
they decide to stop working and are not ‘actively’ looking for work. In other words, the ABS
considers unemployment to be ‘involuntary’.

Establishing the criteria for being ‘homeless’ depends on what we mean by ‘not having a home’ or
‘not living in a home’. It is not clear from this question, however, what is meant by the claim that
someone ‘has a home’: the category of ‘homelessness’ is not clear or self-evident. Does
homelessness refer to the housing options that are left if you don’t ‘own’ a house or apartment or a
caravan, do not ‘rent’ some form of accommodation or stay with people who do? A young person
‘couch surfing’ at a mate’s place may not be identified as ‘homeless’ by the householder
completing the census form, as it does not register that the person does not have a usual address.
There is considerable judgment and evaluation of complex situations that takes place before we
can estimate the numbers of people who fit the criteria for being counted, in this case, who are
‘homeless’.

The ABS view appears to be straightforward: being ‘homeless’ means not having ‘a usual
address’. This means that a very wealthy person who decides to spend $2000 a day every day
living in a luxury hotel could be counted as homeless, while a person with little disposable income
who has been living rent free in a squat for three years and who plans to live in the squat for
another three years is not homeless. In this way, like so many other categories, ‘homelessness’ is
actually a decidedly uncertain category. If we are to use it to estimate the numbers of young
people who are homeless, we need some agreement or clear criteria to decide whether specific
cases fit the category.

The categorization of youth homelessness is further complicated by the classification of ‘youth’.
The ABS currently defines young people — or youth — as 12- to 18-year-olds as opposed to the
broader definition of 12 to 25. Legally, the term ‘child’ refers to persons under the age of 18,
although that can vary depending on what is being discussed (for example, a criminal offence as
opposed to educational status). According to the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the
Child (‘UNCROC’) a child is also a person up to the age of 18.

‘Youth’, however, typically refers to those aged 12 to 15, or those under 25. As the ABS explains:

The United Nations General Assembly defines ‘youth’, as those persons falling between the
ages of 15 and 24 years inclusive. This definition was made for International Youth Year, held
around the world in 1985. All United Nations statistics on youth are based on this definition, as
illustrated by the annual yearbooks of statistics published by the United Nations system on
demography, education, employment and health. The ABS commonly uses the age group 0-14
years for children and 15-24 years for youth although this does not necessarily apply to all
output.22

‘Youth homelessness’ cannot simply be defined in an arbitrary way, that is, by a group of experts
deciding to define it in a particular fashion. Such statistical categories need to refer to or reflect a
social consensus about what the category includes. Yet the main point remains: basic social
categories like ‘unemployment’ or ‘homelessness’ are ‘invented’. Disputes about the numbers of
people who fit the criteria cannot be resolved in the same way a disagreement about the number
of ‘chairs’ in a given room can be resolved, because homelessness is not objective in the sense
that chairs in a room are.

The problem of how the people who meet the criteria are to be discovered so they can be counted
is a completely separate problem that requires different kinds of technical solutions like the use of
censuses or sample surveys of the population. This is particularly difficult for ‘hidden’ populations
like the homeless, but an analysis of the methodology is outside the scope of this article.

The politics of counting youth homelessness

There are clear and contradictory political dimensions to the way the revised ABS approach to
counting the homeless has been managed. The deeply contradictory logic of contemporary neo-
liberal regimes involves a politics directed towards withdrawal of government support, while enhancing individualization and talk about moral responsibility. Economic liberalism resurfaced in the political and policy-making communities in the 1980s and has had a devastating impact on the capacity and willingness to provide civic staples (for example, decent public education, health and welfare systems, a healthy labor market) which once provided a basic framework of support for young Australians. This is to say nothing of the social impact of changing value frameworks expressed, for example, in privileging the right of ownership or the value of competition, which reinforce individualism. Old ideas about individual responsibility resurfaced with significant implications for disadvantaged groups and those who had limited resources to practice self-responsibility.

The contradictory politics of neo-liberals is demonstrated in the way they want to know the size and scale of social problems to defend the social status-quo as ‘the best of all possible worlds’, while at the same time wanting to minimise the economic impost on tax payers in general and on business in particular. This is one of the current, persistent and incompatible ‘structural contradictions’ in advanced capitalist democracies or the modern welfare state. This contradiction arises between the need to legitimize basic social problems (which raise doubts about the fairness of the social order) and the inability of governments to manage the fiscal politics needed to solve these legitimation problems. For example, governments adopted a ‘welfare state model in the 1940s based on full-employment; by the 1970s states were asked to cut large scale interventions and welfare spending while unemployment was blowing out as a major socio-economic and political problem. In this way states were caught between trying to fix the problem, heeding calls for reduced welfare spending and a smaller state, and the electorate wanting welfare and support for basic civic staples. These tensions in the USA produced tax cuts, which the electorate demanded, and enormous budget deficits to fund all the programs which the electorate also wanted.

Compounding this are ongoing political contradictions: ‘the right’ is unable to show how the economy can do without the welfare state and not develop a strategy to get rid of it. ‘The left’, on other hand, critiques the welfare state for not adequately protecting the basic rights of citizens and for helping to ‘control’ or manage those who are disadvantaged.

How youth homelessness is now being handled by governments, particularly the latest development in respect to how it is being counted, can be explained in part by these tensions. Youth homelessness is a major problem which governments were first forced to acknowledge in the wake of Burdekin’s report for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It is one of many social problems which the modern state is required to manage while giving effect to neo-liberal ideas about shrinking the state. One way of managing the tensions between securing the well-being of disadvantaged groups and ‘the need’ to cut spending is to produce data that reduce the problems and thus reduce the need for resources. This ameliorates some of the politics of crisis on the principle that ‘out of sight is out of mind’.

Concluding comments and a way ahead
We are witnessing the collapse of a once relatively stable consensus about the categories of homelessness. Replacing that consensus is political game-playing, and intense disagreements about the status of various groups and whether they can be, and ought to be, rightly described as homeless. For those with an interest in reducing the official figures on homeless people, the strategy is relatively straightforward. Those conventionally described as homeless, like older people who live in caravans — ‘grey nomads’ — are no longer considered to be homeless. Women living with their children in temporary accommodation to escape family violence are no longer described as homeless, because it is said they have homes even though they cannot safely live in them. New arrivals from overseas with no permanent address are no longer homeless; they are re-defined as waiting to buy or rent. Indigenous young people living with relatives who are not their parents, and who are not being identified as being without a permanent address on census night, are no longer defined as homeless. Abracadabra, the problem of homelessness – and more specifically youth homelessness – dramatically shrinks.

In a policy context shaped by a ‘new’ social inclusion discourse and commitment by the federal
government to reducing homelessness by half, it is ironic that the process of achieving this - by statistical means - will not alleviate the problem in any practical or real way. It can only exacerbate the problem. Reducing youth homelessness by the means described above will make the situation for homeless young people worse, especially if it results in a reduction in funding for services and changes to the policy agenda which see homelessness become less of a priority.

There is evidence that the political uses to which the recent change in the ABS approach to counting the homeless can be put is well underway. Gary Johns, economist, former junior Minister in the Keating government, member of the ‘free-market new right think-tank’ Institute for Public Affairs (‘IPA’) and now academic at the Australian Catholic University, is one of the first ‘cabs off the rank’ in this latest political ‘game play’. Writing for the neo-conservative newspaper The Australian, Johns noted that, ‘It seems Kevin Rudd got one thing right. In 2008 he promised to halve homelessness by 2020, and by goodness homelessness has been halved.’ Without worrying about the basis of the ABS recalculation of the extent of homelessness, Johns moved swiftly to the policy implications:

[N]ow that homelessness is half what was previously understood to be the case, what should happen to all of the extra funds? If 55 per cent was meant to reduce homelessness by 50 per cent, presumably 55 per cent should wrap up the revised homelessness? If only it were that simple. The whole episode has uncovered a dark corner of the welfare game. Lobbyists seek to spin the numbers to place maximum pressure on politicians to screw more money from the taxpayer. All that stands between the taxpayer and the lobby is the ABS.30

Claims by the likes of Johns that the 2020 target has been met so we can now presumably halve the funding are not helpful. They do not demonstrate any real insight into what is happening in the lives of many young Australians. Should claims that we have somehow met the 2020 target because the ABS have changed how homelessness is counted mean the abandonment of the government’s policy commitments31 and all the work that has gone into setting a new national agenda? Does that mean for example that we throw the National Agreement on Affordable Housing out the window? I suggest not.

While the new way of calculating may help meet the political imperative of reaching the 2013 target of a 20 per cent reduction in homelessness and the 2020 target of 50 per cent, the new counting method that dramatically reduces the size of the youth homelessness problem will do little to help Australia ensure some of our most disadvantaged citizens have their basic right to an adequate standard of living met or that we meet our obligations to international conventions of which we are signatories.32 It is also a scenario that will undermine the government’s own social inclusion policy agenda and subvert any duty of care toward some of our most disadvantaged young people.

If Australia is to be a decent society then it does matter that young homeless people are adequately supported.33 Given that almost half of all homeless people in Australia are under the age of 18 this ought to be a priority.34 Since youth homelessness has not mysteriously vanished, but remains stubbornly real and affects the lives of thousands of young people, it is vital that their disadvantage is not exacerbated. The formal systems of assistance currently available cannot meet the needs of all those requiring support. Any further reduction in services can only make it more difficult for those already dislocated and traumatised to access decent services before their circumstances further decline.

If we are serious about reducing youth homelessness, then a longer term view that goes beyond the term of political office is required. Investment in early intervention services like ‘Reconnect’ that are specifically designed to help young people reconcile differences with their parent/s, schools and communities, and reunite them, is critical. Given that reconciliation is not always possible, or indeed desirable because many young people do not have parents able or willing to support them, or because there is a history of abuse or neglect, we also need proper investment in services that support those who are homeless and reduce the prospect of young people remaining homeless. This needs to be accompanied by investment in employing qualified youth workers in schools and local governments, who will support and work with young people and their families before they become homeless.

More broadly, measures like the provision of adequate income support so that homeless young
people can actually afford a secure, decent home is an obvious policy response. The prospect of this, however, is often thwarted by prejudices and misinformation like the idea that young people ‘choose’ to live on the streets, or that providing support to live in safe and secure accommodation ‘encourages runaways’. Given the prevalence of such prejudices, a targeted education-cum-health promotion campaign aimed at ameliorating these discriminatory views would be helpful. The Youth Allowance payment is significantly less than the equivalent allowance for those over 21 years of age, and is well under the generally accepted poverty line figure in Australia. Inadequate payments have a negative impact because they are not enough to provide for basic needs like food, housing and health care, let alone enable a young person the opportunity to pursue what they value, including a most basic sense of well being.

Attention to the youth labour market with a view towards job creation plus the removal of the youth wage would mean that young people who are homeless have a chance of getting work with an income that allows them to pay the rent and support themselves. Finally, affordable housing of the type outlined in the National Affordable Housing Agreement would take us some way closer to alleviating the problem of homelessness in Australia.

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6. What we saw instead was a decision to step back a little and the development of a position paper that reviewed the counting methodology used and a call for submissions: see ABS, Position Paper - ABS Review of Counting the Homeless Methodology (ABS, 2050.0.55.002, 2 August 2011).
7. HREOC, above n 2.
8. Rachel Uhr, Couch Surfing in the Burbs: Young Hidden and Homelessness (Community Connections, 2004); see also Jasmin Packer, ‘You Stay at their Place, They Stay at Yours: Mates Helping Each Other out of Homelessness,’ (July 2005) Parity.
9. April Veness, ‘Neither Homed nor Homeless: Contested definitions and the personal worlds of the poor’ (1993) 12(4) Political Geography 319. To indicate the scale of the problem I also refer to SAAP ‘turn away data’ eg, AIHW, People Turned Away from Government-funded Specialist Homelessness Accommodation 2009-10 (2011) and to the many people on public housing waiting lists: Carol Nader, ‘Crisis in public housing’, The Age (Melbourne), 31 January 2011.
11. See, eg, Chamberlain and MacKenzie, above n 3, Ch 3.
12. ABS, above n 6.
13. ABS, above n 5.
14. Ibid.
21. Stricker and Sheehan, above n 16.
27. HREOC, above n 2.
31. See FaHCSIA, above n 4.
36. UNICEF, above n 34.
37. Junior wages ensure that many young people receive lower payment than co-workers over the age of 21 for work that is of equal value. It’s a discriminatory law informed by prejudicial age-based stereotypes of young people which assumes that, because a person is under 21, they have a family able and willing to support them by compensating for their low wages, and that they should be reliant on the support of a family. This however is not the case for many young people, and it is certainly not an option for homeless young people.