



Exploring the possibility of Registry Week in South Australia

Introduction

Shelter SA is the peak body for housing in South Australia. Shelter SA's vision is for every citizen to have a safe and affordable place to call home. Systems advocacy, research and community consultation are the basis of Shelter SA's work. Homelessness is strongly tied to the lack of affordable, appropriate and secure accommodation available to people living on low incomes and those who experience other traumatic life events. A relatively small proportion of homeless people are rough sleepers – that is they are sleeping outside without shelter or in temporary, inadequate or unsafe accommodation - they are particularly vulnerable citizens.

The Department of Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI) first implemented the Inner City Rough Sleeper Street Count (the Street Count) in 2007 in partnership with eight local community organisations. The Street Count seeks to monitor levels of rough sleeping¹ in the Adelaide inner city area² by conducting two surveys yearly. Shelter SA has previously commented publicly about the Count - the methodology used, how the results have been politicised in the past³ as well as the ethics of enumerating homeless people⁴.

On 4 August 2016, the Don Dunstan Foundation held its Addressing Homelessness conference in Adelaide, "Home is where the heart is: Building hope for mental health recovery". The conference keynote speaker was Rosanne Haggerty from Community Solutions, a former Adelaide Thinker in Residence, who was instrumental in informing the delivery of homelessness services in South Australia. Shelter SA was very pleased to hear Rosanne talk about the benefits of working with rough sleepers using "by name lists" and the success of the 100,000 homes project in New York. By name lists are based on a methodology called Registry Week.

Building on Shelter SA's previous work, this report compares the strengths and weaknesses of the Street Count with Registry Week methodology and contains recommendations about a way to enhance the rough sleeper data collected and how it is used to advocate for housing solutions for participants. At present, Adelaide, nor any other major centre in South Australia, has adopted the Registry Week as a means of evaluating and acting upon rough sleeper issues.

¹ See Mackenzie and Chamberlain definition of homelessness <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/what-is-homelessness>

² Government of South Australia Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (2016) *Inner City Rough Sleeper Street Count*, Adelaide

³ <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=12576>

⁴ <http://www.sheltersa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/Shelter-SA-When-You-Dont-Know-Where-Youre-Going-2012-FINAL.pdf>

Key Findings

The findings of this review are strongly in favour of Registry Week as a tried and tested methodology with strengths identified as follows:

- Robust and proven methodology;
- Health and vulnerability focus;
- Provides much more information than numbers as the basis of advocacy for housing;
- Allows for community ownership and action;
- It is inexpensive to conduct;
- Can cover wider geographic areas;
- Draws upon various spheres of society including government, community and business as a response to rough sleeping; and
- Situates responsibility for vulnerable people within the community.



Registry Week

Community Solutions in the United States of America established the Registry Week initiative, serving as the mainstay of the successful 100,000 Homes Campaign for 100,000 homeless people, which sought to identify the most vulnerable citizens and prioritise them for housing⁵. Since its inception, several community organisations have implemented Registry Weeks across Australia, seeing projects undertaken in Perth, Melbourne, regional and metropolitan Queensland and Sydney.

Registry Week requires the cooperation of local communities, organisations and additional community services to assess the vulnerability of rough sleepers over a specified time. Trained volunteers enter the community, and administer surveys which include a Vulnerability Index (VI-SPDAT) assessment. An internationally recognised tool, the VI-SPDAT assesses the health and social needs of rough sleepers using several domains of inquiry⁶ and matches them with the most appropriate support and housing interventions that are available⁷. Survey answers are through self-reporting by the rough sleepers combined with an objective assessment by trained volunteer

⁵ Community Solutions (2012) *Know Who's Out There* available at: <http://100khomes.org/read-the-manifesto/know-whos-out-there> [accessed 27 July 2016]

⁶ Domains of inquiry are, History of Housing, Risks, Socialization and Daily Functions and Wellness

⁷ VI SPDAT

surveyors. The VI-SPDAT is publicly available globally and free and provides for consistency in the distribution and assessment of surveys, producing accurate and reliable data.

By comparison, the Street Count records the age, gender, and cultural identity of participants (if they identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) however, there is little to no consideration of physical and mental health or family issues⁸. Unlike the VI-SPDAT, the Street Count questions are not organised into categories of inquiry and are unexpansive. It is unclear whether the basis of the Street Count survey is a recognised standardised measurement tool, whether rough sleepers were involved in a validation process or if elements are adopted from tools like the VI-SPDAT. Having a systematic questionnaire, based on evidence, with design validity and testing procedures in place is vital for data quality, particularly for the minimisation of measurement error⁹.

Purpose

Registry Week aims to harness rough sleeper data by providing services for participants with priority given to those who are most vulnerable. The Street Count seeks to monitor numbers of rough sleepers in the Adelaide inner city area¹⁰. DSCI do not provide any information as to whether they use the data gathered to pursue support services for rough sleepers. There is an ethical disparity between the two initiatives, as the aim of any task informs the subsequent procedure and execution of research and how data is used and reported are important.

Geographic Scope

Perth Registry Week was conducted in seven city council areas¹¹, in partnership with the Western Australian Department for Child Protection and Family Support, comprising a region of 1195.8 km². Comparatively, the Street Count only surveys the Adelaide inner city region of 15.57 km². The Street Count succeeds in particularising its inquiry to the Adelaide inner city specific region. More social and economic services are located within the central limits of a city, and so it is likely to attract more individuals seeking such services. The availability of services in conjunction with a greater population density within a capital city is likely to see the probability and prevalence of rough sleeping to be higher than suburban or regional averages. Unlike the Registry Week in Perth, the Street Count however fails to acknowledge any significant population centre outside of the immediate inner city limit. To limit the geographical scope of a survey, is to bound the breadth of data collection, and quarantine the issue of homelessness and rough sleeping within an isolated pocket of Adelaide. Data is less likely to be accurate or representative of the rate of rough sleepers within Adelaide or the rest of the State. Measuring rough sleeping in wider geographic regions, including regional areas, should be encouraged acknowledging that a local focus is still important to Registry Week approaches in order to harness a local response.

⁸ Question 12 asks participants whether they had any dependant children who stayed with them the previous night they slept rough. However no questions concerning spouses, children above eighteen or additional family members are presented to participants.

⁹ http://www.istat.it/en/files/2013/12/Handbook_questionnaire_development_2006.pdf

¹⁰ Government of South Australia Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (2016) *Inner City Rough Sleeper Street Count*, Adelaide

¹¹ City of Perth, City of Kwinana, City of Rockingham, City of Vincent, City of Joondalup, City of Wanneroo, Town of Victoria Park

Inclusiveness

The Street Count restricts participant diversity to solely rough sleepers and excludes other individuals who are residing in temporary, unaffordable, inappropriate or unsafe accommodation, who are also technically homeless. In 2011, there was a revision of the Street Count methodology to survey individuals who had slept rough the previous night¹². The Street Count's limited timeframe varies dramatically from the VI-SPDAT methodology, which increases the usefulness of the data because surveyors assist client recall by placing their accommodation (if any) of the past six months into context¹³ and may be conducted over a whole week or as an ongoing measurement. Of one hundred and fifty surveys distributed by the most recent Street Count, only eighty-nine people who were willing to participate had slept rough the previous evening¹⁴ and were eligible to participate. To place such limitations on the eligibility of potential participants raises issues concerning the accuracy and reliability of the data and the ethics of the Street Count. Data is skewed in favour of minimising the rate of rough sleeping and is likely to represent a significant undercount.

Duration of Surveys

The Perth Registry Week extends for two weeks, previously adapted from one week increasing the accuracy and reliability of the data. Registry Week is conducted once every few years. Though conducted twice a year every year, the Street Count occurs only on one specific date, over two hours in the early morning. The potential limitations of such a restrictive timeframe are evident. Such a 'snapshot' of the rates of rough sleepers at these specific times is inaccurate and unrepresentative of the true rate of rough sleeping in Adelaide. Anecdotally, potential participants in the Street Count avoid surveyors as some people are surveyed on multiple occasions.

Costs

Felicity Reynolds, the Chief Executive Officer of the Mercy Foundation, generously contributed to the information Shelter SA was able to collate about Registry Week by presenting at a stakeholder forum attended by representatives of the inner city homelessness service providers and State Government. Felicity said that focus of Registry Week is not simply about the collation of data it is also about conceptualising additional solutions for housing and social support services. Registry Week data makes it possible to achieve community engagement through the involvement of politicians, community organisations, local businesses, media and non-government organisations in response to specific needs. In addition to the VI-SPDAT which is available at no cost, staff and volunteer labour costs are minimal. The training of volunteers typically involves information sessions about Registry Week, including providing time for volunteers to familiarise themselves with the VI-SPDAT and practicing how to appropriately conduct a survey. Surveys can be printed professionally or reproduced more inexpensively by photocopier. Felicity stated that, should South Australia wish to implement a Registry Week, the Mercy Foundation will train volunteers for free, in addition to offering a free data analysis services through its partnership with the Micah Foundation.

¹² Government of South Australia Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (2016) *Inner City Rough Sleeper Street Count*, Adelaide

¹³ VI-SPDAT

¹⁴ VI-SPDAT

Although there is no formal Registry Week in Tasmania, Common Ground Tasmania (CGT)¹⁵ uses a similar method. CGT evaluated a number of survey methodologies to prioritise access to their accommodation and determined to adopt the VI-SPDAT as a health based approach to the collation and analysis of rough sleeper survey data¹⁶. Since 2011, The Greater Hobart Homelessness Survey has used the information it gathers to ensure the most vulnerable people are the priority for appropriate housing and that support services are matched with their needs¹⁷. The costs of the Hobart Survey were met by independently by CGT as well as some private donations (for example, thirty cameras were donated by a local business)¹⁸. Engaging multiple supporters, government, independent organisations or individuals, means that research is conducted in a more credible and responsible manner and results that are independent of governments and political influence. South Australia, as a much larger State than Tasmania, has the necessary, minimal resources required to conduct a Registry Week.

Conclusion

The strong methodology, meeting the challenge of projects like “100,000 Homes” and associated advocacy combine to reinforce that Registry Week is a highly desirable way forward to address rough sleeping in South Australia. Shelter SA seeks comments and feedback on this discussion paper. We invite expressions of interest from all community members, stakeholders and service providers to attend a discussion to progress Registry Week in South Australia. Please email us at sheltersa@sheltersa.asn.au to reserve your place and we will advise of the date in the near future.

Acknowledgement:

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¹⁵ Liz Thomas, Managing Director, Common Ground Tasmania

¹⁶ As per email correspondence with Liz Thomas from Common Ground Tasmania

¹⁷ Common Ground Tasmania (2013) *Frequently Asked Questions*, available at: <http://www.commongroundtas.com.au/live-at-common-ground> [accessed 18 July 2016]

¹⁸ As per email correspondence with Liz Thomas from Common Ground Tasmania