

A SNAPSHOT OF THE PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH

StreetCount 2015 was successful in engaging a range of people sleeping rough including diversity of gender, age groups, period of sleeping rough and Indigenous background. Although people were not formally asked about their family situation, through their stories a number of people mentioned that they were grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters.

The term 'sleeping rough' is a misnomer – as most of the people we talked to were not able to 'sleep' very much at all.

Who is sleeping rough?

Of the 83 people sleeping rough who participated in at least one interview:

- 19% were females, 81% were males
- 62% were between 30-49 years old
- 19% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 29% had been sleeping rough for 10 plus years.

Where are people sleeping rough?

- People slept in a range of places. Couch surfing, parks, street, squats, under bridges, train stations and alleyways are the most commonly reported places. The majority of people moved every few days.

Looking after belongings

- One of the hardest things to manage when sleeping rough is looking after belongings. On a daily basis belongings are stashed, stolen, lost and/or carried around all day. Access to lockers and replacing ID and personal papers when lost were raised as issues.

Services used

- People used a range of services on a daily/most days basis. For most of the participants, public transport and food were used daily or most days. Other common services used were showers, laundry, food vans, day centres and libraries.
- On a four-point scale rating how helpful services had been, the majority of people rated services as 'helpful' or 'very helpful'.

Filling in the day

- Daily life for most people meant 'just dealing with getting food and shelter'. Boredom and having nothing to do all day were commonly reported. Most people socialised with other people sleeping rough. Very few people were in contact with or visited their family.

Relationships with others

- Many people related stories of random goodwill from people in the community, others related feeling humiliated and ignored. People sleeping rough often helped out other people in the same situation. Relationships could be complicated between people however with drugs, alcohol, violence, disruptive behaviour and distrust commonly being present.

Safety

- About half of the people did 'not feel safe'. 'Always needing to be alert', 'always watching your back', 'always on the lookout for people that might harm you' were frequent comments. Safety – or feeling unsafe – was the main reason why people moved where they sleep every few days.

Impact on health and wellbeing

- Trying to stay mentally stable, exposure to drugs and alcohol, a lack of sleep and dealing with the cold were commonly reported as having an impact on health and wellbeing. Trying to function on little sleep and/or interrupted sleep has a significant impact on mental and physical health.

Hopes and the future

- In six months' time many people hoped to be in their own home. Along with this people wanted a job and to be in a good mental and physical state. Other people expressed no hope for their future and took things one day at a time.

The journey

- Of the 83 people who undertook a first interview, 34 of these people participated in between two and nine interviews over a ten-week engagement period. Relatively little change was identified in their daily lives over multiple interviews. For most people the services used, places they slept and the need to move every few days remained relatively the same. Week after week, most people hoped to be in safe, secure and stable housing in the future. The destination of people who did not continue to participate in interviews is unknown; however during this period only three people gained some form of housing or accommodation.

What would make a difference?

Housing and accommodation were the main things that would make a difference to people. Other suggestions for improvements to services or initiatives that would make a difference to people included:

- More showers and laundry facilities
- Increased number of lockers and access to lockers 24/7
- Access to open spaces and facilities where people sleeping rough could play sport, get fit at a gym, and/or participate in team games
- Places where people can paint or be involved in creative, artistic expression
- More centres where homeless people can go to relax, sit comfortably, catch up with people
- A womens' place where women can go and relax and talk
- Shelters or places where people sleeping rough can be sheltered from the rain and cold
- More security around the hot spots where people are sleeping rough
- Better weekend services – especially food services
- Increase fresh food and vegetarian options available through the food services
- A job or engagement in study, with study options ranging from learning to read, adult education type courses, work skills through to tertiary studies
- 'Living skills course' to support people in the transition from homelessness to housing.