

WELCOME

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning (or good evening to our international guests). And welcome to this 2nd national conference on youth homelessness.

In opening our first national conference in 2019 I set out in some detail our progress (and lack of progress) over the 3 decades since my report as federal human rights commissioner in 1989.

That report is a matter of record. this morning I will only address, briefly in the time available, our progress (or the lack of it) in the last two years.

I will focus on several areas of very serious concern to me – and I apologise if the time available means I omit some of the issues of concern to you.

Two recent parliamentary inquiries (a Federal Inquiry into homelessness in Australia - and a Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry) - have produced, respectively, an interim report and a final report. But from my perspective as a “Practitioner” those reports – and several recent budget proposals - have not yet effectively addressed several major challenges.

Given the recent crises affecting millions of Australians, homelessness – including among young people – is rapidly increasing.

STRESS FACTORS:

The Covid 19 pandemic followed closely on the heels of widespread bush fires and floods. The latest evidence is that these events have been extremely stressful – including for many young Australians – particularly our most disadvantaged young people. And we now have:

- House prices which are for many completely unaffordable.
- Rents which are completely unaffordable – for a very large number of people - (including in our major cities and in many coastal and regional towns as well.)

at the same time as:

- Federal Government scaling back “rental subsidies” (the “National Affordability Rental Scheme” introduced in 2008).

There is an increased risk of homelessness for many thousands of people – and the evidence I have is supported by warnings coming from numerous community associations dealing with homeless people and people already in serious financial difficulty.

“PROGRESS” SINCE 2019

In spite of some progress in Victoria and New South Wales since 2019

- The failure to progress early intervention to stem the flow of young people into homelessness is one of the biggest policy failures. (* see notes below re pat McGorry and early intervention)
- The slowness and under- investment in implementing a secure system of leaving care support is another area of major under development – with very serious consequences for the young people concerned.
- The needs of young people have not been factored into housing strategies and plans (such as those in Victoria) for increasing the supply of social and affordable housing.

HUMAN RIGHTS I:

My 1989 report on homeless children was the first national inquiry in Australia based on “human rights” (we had spent the previous 5 years negotiating the international “convention on the rights of the child – which Australia quickly ratified) that convention is a treaty – a treaty which is binding on Australia as a matter of international law.

And in 1994 (in the Teoh case) we got the high court to rule that the Australian government and all government officials are obliged to respect the rights of all children set out in that convention – including:

- * The right to adequate housing
- * The right to special protection and
- * The right to protection from abuse and exploitation

- and not to make decisions, or implement policies, that are inconsistent with or violate those rights.

Homelessness needs to be addressed in that paradigm and analysed in that context –

- that is, that adequate shelter is a basic human right - not just a housing issue, not just a welfare issue!

HUMAN RIGHTS II:

Australia has also ratified the convention on “the rights of people with disabilities”. That convention is also a binding treaty.

It stipulates that people with disabilities (including psychiatric and intellectual disabilities) are entitled to special protection because of their vulnerabilities.

So, children and young people have legal rights to special protection because they are vulnerable.

- children and young people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable.

- and homeless children and young people – including those with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities – are among the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR PAT MCGORRY APRIL 2021

One of the most impressive witnesses in my National Inquiry on human rights and mental illness was Professor Pat McGorry – subsequently named Australian of the Year.

In a recent interview he indicated:

1. “At least one million young Australians a year are affected by serious mental illness” we know that many thousands of those have schizophrenia – (expert evidence indicates approximately 10% of those young people will take their own lives if they don’t get adequate care.)

(The evidence is clear; these young people are disproportionately represented in our homeless population.)

2. “Two million Australians each year don’t get appropriate care for their mental illness”.
3. “Early intervention is the key to better outcomes”. “headspace” is very successful but now has lengthy waiting lists.
4. “Politicians understand there are problems – but for them to respond – the community needs to rise up”

Homelessness and mental illness.

The evidence in my national inquiry on human rights and mental illness in 1993 clearly established that approximately 75% of homeless people seeking shelters had histories of major mental illness.

Subsequent reports confirmed those figures and, disturbingly, an increasing number of the homeless were younger and younger people suffering serious mental illness or mental disorders

Last year, a survey conducted by “headspace” (run by Professor Pat McGorry) found 75% of young people reported their mental health deteriorated during the covid-19 pandemic.

Many “headspace” mental health centres now have waiting lists of 3 to 4 months. “There’s been a surge in need and we can’t meet it” McGorry said.

“A national approach is desperately needed”.

LIFELINE – SUICIDE – HUMAN RIGHTS

Recently I had to address 100 Lifeline counsellors in Sydney. More than 50% of their calls are related to mental illness and mental health problems.

Lifeline has recently had to reduce their age for counselling to 15 – due to increasing demand. And in the last 12 months their calls have increased from 2000 to over 3200 calls per day.

They have also had to introduce (in addition to phone and face-to-face counselling) a texting service – increasingly being used by young people in the 12 to 19 age group.

In the first eight months of this financial year, they have had over 45,000 texts seeking help.

CHILDREN IN THE “CARE” OF THE STATE

In my original report, I said it was outrageous that young people legally “in state care” were prominent among the homeless.

In 2015 a National Homelessness survey found that 63% of all our homeless young people had been in “State care”.

It is inexcusable that that situation has hardly improved. The Commonwealth and State Governments are failing in their legal as well as moral obligations to these children and a national approach is urgently needed.

REGIONAL CITIES AND RURAL AREAS

In my original national inquiries, we found that the problem of homelessness – and indeed homelessness for particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, was especially acute in rural and regional areas – yet we found that those were precisely the areas in which there were the fewest services, the most unsatisfactory services – or in many cases no services at all.

Many young people paid with their lives for this neglect (our youth suicide rate in regional and rural areas was 300% higher than in our major cities)

Unfortunately, the latest evidence indicates this is still an extremely serious problem.

There is a chronic undersupply of available psychiatrists, psychologists, and counsellors – and in many areas no affordable professional care is available for families of modest means – let alone those in financial difficulty.

WE CAN END HOMELESSNESS -THE NEED FOR ADVOCACY

I've been around our system in various capacities for long enough to know that when governments say they can't afford appropriate care for the most vulnerable people in our country – that's a lie!!!

We are one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We can afford what we choose to afford. the only question is – do we give it a priority?

There are 196 countries in the world.

The Australian economy is \$1.7 trillion. That is more than the total wealth of the economies of 102 of the world's poorest countries. (Their national wealth combined totals approximately 1.5 trillion).

And our extraordinary wealth rose almost 2% in the march quarter this year.

Where are our priorities? Are they with:

- Our homeless and at-risk young people
- Our indigenous young people
- Our young people with disabilities
- Our young people battling with mental illness – who often self-medicate with drugs and alcohol and sometimes an unholy combination of those in order to cope with the pain of what they are suffering.

CONCLUSION

So, we certainly have the resources to end homelessness – and the ability to look after vulnerable young Australians – both in our major cities and regional and rural areas.

And we have both a moral and legal responsibility to respect and protect the human rights of the most vulnerable children and young people in our country.

We have the resources – but do we have the resourcefulness?

I believe we do.

This conference aims to launch a national project to jointly develop a National Strategy to end youth homelessness.

All Australian governments have been approached or are currently being approached to join this project and contribute financially – as has the community sector and our philanthropic sector.

Our association has worked in close cooperation with government, the community and the philanthropic sector for 30 years (at the request of Government, and after careful preparation, we will, tomorrow, officially take over responsibility for homeless and at-risk children in the “Inner West” of Sydney – as well as the Northern Beaches).

In conclusion, I would like to give my full support to this collective movement for a National Strategy and a commitment from Government to ending – or at least greatly reducing youth homelessness.