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Homeless people: their risk of victimisation

As the recently released government paper on homelessness stated, each night there are about 100,000 homeless Australians, of whom 23 percent are sleeping in temporary accommodation such as boarding houses and another 14 percent are 'sleeping rough', that is, in parks or on the streets. Among this number of homeless people are 10,000 children under the age of 12, over 36,000 young people aged between 12 and 24, and 6,000 people over the age of 65 (Australian Government 2008).

Although homeless people are generally regarded as perpetrators of crime, a recent study highlights their risk of victimisation from other homeless people and the public. A UK study, based on interviews with over 300 homeless men and women living on the street and in temporary accommodation in three cities across the United Kingdom (London, Oxford and Cambridge), highlights the vulnerability of homeless people and the fear in which they live (Newburn & Rock 2005).

The study found that, compared with the public, homeless people were 13 times more likely to have experienced violence and 47 times more likely to have been victims of theft. Almost one-tenth of those interviewed had experienced sexual assault in the last year, around half had experienced damage to property and one-fifth had been a victim of burglary (presumably while in temporary accommodation). Almost two-thirds of homeless people reported having been insulted publicly and one-tenth had been urinated on whilst sleeping.

Homeless people perpetrate much of the violence against each other, many of whom suffer from a high level of mental health and other drug-related problems. However, nearly one-third of the violence experienced by homeless people is committed by the public (32% of violent acts, 33% of threats, 24% of the incidents of theft and 3% of sexual assaults). The study found that few homeless people report being the victim of a crime or anti-social behaviour because of their fear of the police and the social exclusion they may perceive or experience more generally.

The study calls for greater public understanding of the issues related to being homeless. Different strategies are required to address violence and other personal crime within the homeless community from those strategies that will reduce victimisation of the homeless by the public. There is also a need for the criminal justice system to take into account the particular situation in which homeless people are placed, as many may face difficulties appearing in court and paying fines, among other issues.

References

Australian Government 2008. *Homelessness: a new approach*. Canberra: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/new_approach/\\$File/homelessness_a_new_approach.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/new_approach/$File/homelessness_a_new_approach.pdf)

Newburn T & Rock P 2005. *Living in fear: violence and victimisation in the lives of single homeless people*. Crisis: London.