Homelessness in Australia - new insights using PLIDA

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What this research does

- We use the Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) dataset to provide insight into how individuals fall into homelessness and demonstrates the role that the PLIDA dataset can play in understanding this form of entrenched disadvantage in the community.
- ‘We’ are:
  - Dr. Katrien Stevens (University of Sydney)
  - Dr. Rosanna Scutella (RMIT & Uni. Of Sydney)
  - Professor Guy Johnson (RMIT)
  - Colleagues from Mission Australia
- The research is presented in an AHURI report that is currently under review.

The genesis of this research

- Given theme of session - *Research in academia and in practice: working together for greater impact* – useful to reflect on how we got here.
- Genesis of research was in 2020/ 2021 when Mission Australia engaged with the Life Course Centre aka ‘ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families Over the Life Course’
- Idea was to merge MA data with what was then called the Multi-Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP), later renamed PLIDA
- The MADIP/PLIDA is administered by the ABS and contains administrative data from various agencies and government departments (such as MBS, PBS, Centrelink/DSS and ATO amongst others) that can be linked and used to undertake research.

The PLIDA and the original idea

- PLIDA provides multiple opportunities to undertake research so as to understand the experience of Australians.
- A central spine provides the opportunity to link information about individuals and their characteristics (such as those captured by the Census) and their experiences through interaction with government agencies
- Our aim was to link client records from MA and merge these into PLIDA to understand the pathways into and out of homelessness drawing on the employment and income support records available in PLIDA
- Getting to that point proved more challenging than anticipiated….

The PLIDA and the original idea

- There were at least three challenges:
  - Was it feasible (in a technical sense) to merge data from an NGO with PLIDA?
  - Ethics/ privacy concerns
  - $
- After a false start in 2022, project funded in 2023 and commenced in 2024
- Special note for:
  - ABS
  - AHURI
  - PMC

The project

- The requirement for a PIA – Privacy Impact Assessment
- Undertaken by Mission Australia for the ABS prior to data merging commencing – including consultation with stakeholders
- Appropriately, a protracted process but ultimately completed to the satisfaction of the ABS
- In the background other developments:
  - Commencement of analysis of PLIDA in DataLab – drawing on the Homelessness Operational Groups indicator in the 2021 Census
  - Reformulation of the project to focus on the analysis of PLIDA and the use of income support by those identified as homeless or marginally housed pre- and post 2021 Census
  - The merged data became available for analysis

Disclaimer

- Please note that the results presented below use Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA), 2021, Census of Population and Housing, ABS DataLab and DOMINO Centrelink Administrative data module. The analysis draws from the 2021 Census and the DOMINO data collected between 2011 and 2025.
- Findings based on use of PLIDA data accessed via DataLab.

  “The results of these studies are based, in part, on data supplied to the ABS under the Taxation Administration Act 1953, A New Tax System (Australian Business Number) Act 1999, Australian Border Force Act 2015, Social Security (Administration) Act 1999, A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999, Paid Parental Leave Act 2010 and/or the Student Assistance Act 1973. Such data may only used for the purpose of administering the Census and Statistics Act 1905 or performance of functions of the ABS as set out in section 6 of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975. No individual information collected under the Census and Statistics Act 1905 is provided back to custodians for administrative or regulatory purposes. Any discussion of data limitations or weaknesses is in the context of using the data for statistical purposes and is not related to the ability of the data to support the Australian Taxation Office, Australian Business Register, Department of Social Services and/or Department of Home Affairs’ core operational requirements.

  Legislative requirements to ensure privacy and secrecy of these data have been followed. For access to PLIDA and/or BLADE data under Section 16A of the ABS Act 1975 or enabled by section 15 of the Census and Statistics (Information Release and Access) Determination 2018, source data are de-identified and so data about specific individuals has not been viewed in conducting this analysis. In accordance with the Census and Statistics Act 1905, results have been treated where necessary to ensure that they are not likely to enable identification of a particular person or organisation.”

The results

- Preliminary and under review
- Comparison groups were needed
  - Around 100,000 HL on Census night, around 2/3 of the HL aged 25-59 years in 2021 matched to administrative data
  - Comparison groups were the marginally housed (MH) identified in Census (3/4 matched) and other low income HHs (LIH)
  - Employment rates: MH > LIH> HL (but were similar)
  - NILF: HL > LIH > MH (but were similar)
  - LT health conditions: LIH > HL > MH
  - Mental health condition: MH = LIH > MH
- Some caveats

The results

- Sample size advantages of using Census
- Detailed information on homelessness type – operational groups
- Some of the patterns observed
  - Long term health conditions: (Accom. for HL) > (Stay with other HHs) > (Rough sleepers) > (Boarding house) > (Severely crowded dwellings)
  - Mental health conditions: (Accom. for HL) > (Stay with other HHs) > (Boarding house) > (Rough sleepers) > (Severely crowded dwellings)
- Many factors will explain these results inc. matching and diagnosis rates

The results

- Individuals in Census can be matched to income support use
- The homeless are heavy users of income support pre- and post 2021 Census, i.e. a five year window around the Census
- Most of the homeless identified in 2021 receive ISP for the full year
- The marginally housed and the low income groups are similar in terms of ISP receipt/ use or reliance
- Important caveats around the timing and COVID

The results

- Individuals in Census can be matched to different types of income support
- The homeless exhibit sustained use of income support, especially unemployment benefits, pre- and post 2021 Census.
- Increasing trend in DSP receipt pre and post Census
- Declining use of parental benefit
- The marginally housed and the low-income groups are similar in terms of ISP receipt
- Important caveats around the timing and COVID – leads to spikes in patterns of ISP receipt.

Some final (penultimate) comments

- The analysis to date indicates that there is sustained use of ISP pre and post a spell of homelessness
  - Slide versus cliff experience
  - Results not dissimilar to that for the United States
- Policy implications
- There are many next steps -
  - 2016 homelessness indicator
  - Other data in PLIDA such as MBS, PBS etc
  - Analysis of the merged data

Some final comments

- This project is novel and demonstrates the need for …
  - Patience
  - Resources
  - Constant communication with and insights from partners – more now than ever
- The project should be viewed as a one small step in part of a larger agenda
  - Merging NGO data with other data sources
  - Inform both the NGOs and policymakers
  - Ultimately deliver better outcomes for Australians

Thank you and happy to take questions