

Housing risk among caravan park residents

CARAVAN PARKS ARE USED AS LONG-TERM, TEMPORARY AND CRISIS ACCOMMODATION, AND AS HOLIDAY ACCOMMODATION. ONE THIRD OF CARAVAN PARK DWELLERS REGARD THEMSELVES AS PERMANENT RESIDENTS.

KEY POINTS

- According to the 2001 Census, 61,463 people are permanent residents of Australia's caravan parks, an increase of about 6263 people compared to the 1996 ABS Census.
- Three permanent resident sub-groups live in caravan parks: older people who choose caravan park living as their primary form of housing for lifestyle reasons; people who travel with work and do not wish to tie themselves to any one residency; and people who are unable to access other forms of housing either in the private, public or community housing sectors.
- Most people who are permanent residents of caravan parks live in very basic conditions, with minimal facilities and amenity compared to conventional forms of housing.
- The issues and risks confronting all residents in caravan parks are much the same today as they were more than a decade ago. They include lack of security of tenure, inadequate housing standards, risk of homelessness, minimal access to community, health and education services and a lack of knowledge about, and lack of support in asserting, tenancy rights.
- A range of early policy interventions are required to assist low-income and unemployed households to avoid having to meet their housing needs by living in a caravan park.

CONTEXT

Traditionally, caravan parks were developed as short-term holiday accommodation in locations convenient for and sought after by tourists. Understandably, most parks were not equipped with the services or facilities to cope with long-term living. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s however, people have increasingly turned to caravan parks as a form of permanent residence.

It was not until the mid-1980s that there was official recognition that people lived in caravans as a housing solution: prior to 1986 it was illegal to live permanently in a caravan park. So it is not surprising that, until recently, the problems faced by permanent residents in caravan parks have not been a priority for government and voluntary welfare agencies.

People living long term in caravan parks have been described as living "at the margin" of Australian society; a circumstance brought

Based on research by Ed Wensing, Darren Holloway and Martin Wood, of the AHURI UNSW-UWS Research Centre. The research integrated quantitative and qualitative data to develop a typology of caravan park residents who are at risk of homelessness.



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about by poverty, legal restrictions, geographical and social isolation and sometimes cultural traditions. Previous research has found that those with little choice but to live permanently in caravans should be considered 'homeless'.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research involved a number of complementary data sources. The quantitative component involved analyses of ABS Census results (1986-1996 and preliminary 2001) and the ABS Survey of Tourist Accommodation. A postal survey of the 245 local Councils in New South Wales, South Australia and Northern Territory was conducted seeking information about the number of caravan parks in each local government area and the characteristics of caravan park residents. A total of 106 responses were obtained (43% response rate).

To supplement the quantitative information and understand why people are living in caravan parks, two focus groups with caravan park residents identified as being in vulnerable housing situations were conducted in each of the three case study States/Territories. Caravan parks with a known high proportion of long-term dwellers were selected. Over 40 structured interviews were also undertaken with a range of stakeholders including tenancy advice workers, community representatives, State housing authority officers, SAAP agency workers, caravan playgroup workers, community representatives, park managers, and local planners across the three case study jurisdictions to provide an understanding of the local circumstances affecting policy and practice in relation to caravan parks.

FINDINGS

CARAVAN PARKS

Despite some difficulties with data continuity, the number of short-term caravan parks increased between 1992 and 1997, whereas the number of long-term parks decreased during this period.

The survey of local councils in the case study jurisdictions identified the following key issues of concern: the financing of necessary improvements to parks, such as the upgrading of parks as regulations change, the financing of upgrading infrastructure like access roads, and the increasing costs of providing facilities as clients' needs change, and an increasing lack of permanent sites.

PERMANENT RESIDENTS OF CARAVAN PARKS

The estimated number of people usually living in caravan parks based on the 2001 ABS Census was approxi-

mately 61,463, an increase of about 6263 compared to the estimate based on the 1996 ABS Census.

The tenure of long stay arrangements can range from 'owner renters' to 'renter renters'. 'Owner renters' are those who own their own caravans or cabins and rent the site from the park owner or operator. 'Renter renters' are those who rent the caravan as well as the site. Most caravan parks will have a mix of on-site caravans and sites that are available to those who own their own vans.

The nature and extent of permanent arrangements in caravan parks varies depending on a number of factors. These include the state or local government licensing or planning controls, which regulate the number of sites that must be provided for tourists or as permanent sites, and on the degree of legislative protection available to the residents of caravan parks. These controls differ between and within the various jurisdictions and, according to caravan park industry associations, greatly influence the 'supply' of sites for permanent residency.

Caravan parks as a lifestyle choice – retirees

In 2001, 23% of individuals living in caravan parks were aged over 65, which is nearly double the Australian average of 12%. Another 19% of residents were aged between 55 and 64 years.

In this age group there is a large proportion of retirees who either own their dwelling but rent a site or rent both the caravan and the site. Many of them are on low, fixed incomes from superannuation or pensions and have been living in caravan parks for several years. They have made a choice, sometimes a constrained choice depending on their circumstances.

The current rate of closure or change in caravan parks has meant an overall decline in the number of caravan sites available for permanent accommodation. This can lead to the owners of caravans who rent a site (often the elderly) facing the loss of their only investment; they also face the prospect of homelessness if an alternative site cannot be found. This is especially the case if the cost of relocating the caravan or cabin is greater than its capital value, or if they cannot pay the necessary upfront costs to move to another park.

Caravan parks as a lifestyle choice – itinerant workers

Itinerant or seasonal workers in construction, farming and fruit picking or other low paid jobs, make a lifestyle choice to live long term or permanently in caravan parks. They tend to be renter renters (renting both the site and the caravan) so they can move with the availability of work, although, according to caravan park industry association sources, there are

a significant number of construction workers who own their dwelling in manufactured housing estates in and around Sydney. (Manufactured housing estates are groups of demountable dwellings, providing basic accommodation, which are generally established to serve the needs of workers on large-scale infrastructure or construction projects.) For this group, the caravan park is an affordable and flexible form of housing.

Caravan parks as a housing option of last resort

A distinct group of people move into a caravan park as a last resort because they have no other suitable alternative. These people simply do not have the financial means to gain access to housing in any of the mainstream sectors and may be on a public housing waiting list. Many have rent debts, do not have money for a bond and rent in advance, or have a range of personal crises in their lives and have complex support needs. They may have been homeless previously. A substantial proportion of those living in caravan parks as a last resort are unemployed or on sickness benefits, or are no longer in the active workforce.

In 2001, 62% of households in caravan parks earned less than \$500 per week. This is more than twice the percentage than for Australia as a whole (29%). Those who were employed were in low paying occupations; 80% of individuals in caravan parks had no recognised post-school qualifications. In 2001, almost 10% of people who lived in caravan parks were unemployed. Such residents (sometimes with disabilities) have often been unable to maintain tenancies in the private rental market. These residents are likely to rent both the dwelling and the site and the current rate of closure or change in caravan parks could easily result in this group of people losing their housing of last resort.

Focus group participants confirmed that 'homelessness' is a circumstance relative to personal experience and perceptions of what constitutes adequate and appropriate housing. Many of those who are in a caravan park as a last resort did not necessarily see themselves as being homeless, but saw it as a transitory arrangement while they got their lives together. They expressed strong feelings of wanting more permanent housing arrangements and did not see a caravan or any other type of dwelling in a caravan park providing that.

Caravan parks as crisis accommodation for the homeless

The extent to which caravan parks are being used by crisis accommodation agencies is indicative of a severe shortage in the supply of low cost housing, especially for people in urgent need of accommodation. Several crisis accommodation agencies said they preferred not to refer people in crisis to caravan parks, especially

if there were children involved, as caravan parks could often exacerbate existing problems or tensions due to cramped living conditions, lack of privacy and the practical difficulties associated with having responsibility for more than one child in a caravan when the toilet and bathroom facilities are the communal facilities. But sometimes there were no alternatives.

Focus group participants and key informants pointed out that current housing policies do not prevent caravan parks becoming a permanent primary place of residence. They cited the decline of funding for public housing, the decline of public housing stock numbers in some jurisdictions and the enormous pressure on the public housing system to accommodate those in greatest need. Also cited were declining levels of affordability in the private rental market, high access costs, discrimination by private landlords against low income or disadvantaged people, and an overall lack of investment in low cost private rental housing. Barriers of entry into home ownership were not mentioned because, for most long-term residents in caravan parks, home ownership was not an option.

The overwhelming impression from the focus group discussions and the key informant interviews is that there are very few options to help people leave caravan parks. The focus groups identified that people do move from caravan parks into public housing or private rental housing, yet there was little mention of this in the key informant interviews. Many tenancy advice workers said they had little or no knowledge of why people leave caravan parks and what their housing circumstances were once they left. There has been very little research into where people go when they leave caravan parks, in terms of their housing options and whether they go back up the housing choice ladder or whether they move to other forms of marginal housing.

CAVEATS

There is a considerable lack of detailed information about the characteristics of individuals and households who reside in this sector of the housing market. The lack of comparability of data over time and various problems associated with the Census data make it very difficult to examine trends and the current situation in the caravan park sector.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There is little doubt that caravan parks will continue to play a significant role in the housing market for both short and long term purposes, as a lifestyle choice as well as a stop-gap measure by individuals or households that may have no other choices. Of the three sub-groups identified by this research,

there are policy implications to be considered in relation to retirees and those using caravan parks as crisis accommodation.

The elderly are over represented in the caravan park permanent resident population (almost twice as many as the population at large). Ageing of the population implies that this number could rise. For policy frameworks that rest upon the principle of 'ageing in place' it will be more difficult to achieve positive outcomes for those in caravan parks. As this group predominantly own their vans/cabins, and permanent sites are reducing in number, they are at risk of having to move – a decision over which they have little control. If a caravan park closes or changes market sector, the elderly owner of a caravan or cabin in that park is particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

Second, the locations of caravan parks (city fringes and tourist destinations) can render it more difficult to provide access to the support services that enable ageing in place that are more readily available in city locations.

This group of elderly owners of caravans and manufactured homes are also unlikely to have an asset of sufficient value to fund entry to a hostel or nursing home, should the need arise. Their caravans depreciate in value over time and, with fewer sites available upon which to locate such a dwelling, that depreciation can be rapid.

Current practice of using caravan parks as crisis accommodation or as exit routes from supported accommodation appears to be in response to severe shortages of affordable housing alternatives. Few would suggest that caravan parks are an appropriate form of crisis accommodation for SAAP clients either during or after a support period. This is of particular concern given that most people who are permanent residents of caravan parks live in very basic conditions with minimal facilities, lack of security of tenure,

minimal access to community, health and education services and a lack of knowledge about, and lack of support in asserting, tenancy rights.

The pressing policy issue, and it is not new, is to increase the availability of different forms of housing assistance appropriate to the needs of individuals and families as their circumstances change over time. For example, some people will require improved affordability outcomes whilst others might require improved security of tenure. The value of these different aspects of housing assistance needs to be recognised and means of delivering them to people as their needs arise developed.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 70109 *On the margins? Housing risk among caravan park residents*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) by typing the project number into the search function. The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

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