Hidden Homelessness – research report on homelessness in Tauranga

This report was commissioned by Tauranga City Council (TCC) and the Bay of Plenty District Health Board (BOPDHB) on behalf of the Tauranga Homelessness Steering Group. The research was undertaken by Rachel Hatch, a third year social work student from Waikato University who was working on a student placement between both organisations in the latter half of 2016.

The current housing situation in Tauranga has led to an unprecedented number of homeless people in our city, including families and working couples. We know 'homelessness' takes many forms, from those who are without any place to call home, to the 'hidden homeless' – people who might be staying in night shelters, boarding houses, overcrowded houses, or living in a car, garage or sleep out without electricity or water.

Background

This research project was commissioned by Tauranga City Council (TCC) and the Bay of Plenty District Health Board (BOPDHB) on behalf of the Tauranga Homelessness Steering Group. A multi-agency Homelessness Steering Group was established in June 2016 to bring together agencies to combine our efforts to make sure all our community has a safe place to live. This is a community-led collaborative project focused on addressing priority gaps for individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Group developed an action plan to find solutions to accommodation need and one priority was conducting research to better understand the scale and nature of homelessness in Tauranga to provide an evidence base for decision making.

Project objectives

- Determine the size and extent of the homelessness problem in Tauranga;
- Describe living environments of those who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness;
- Identify issues impacting on people due to being homeless.

Key research findings

- The risk of becoming homeless in Tauranga has increased.
- There are two distinct groups of homeless people requiring different approaches:
    - Transitional group – require support in getting into housing, outreach services, easier access to services via a housing hub;
    - Chronic or episodic group – require supported housing and wrap around support services.
- Staying with family and friends should be viewed as a temporary, short term option. Research indicates that homeless families with children move between family and friends on numerous occasions. This may result in families, particularly children becoming even more transient and unsettled. Police also indicate children experiencing this transience are more vulnerable to abuse.

- Women with children are the most invested in hiding their homelessness due to fear of Child Youth and Family involvement.
- Those in part-time or unstable employment are more likely to live in overcrowded conditions.
- The presence of a Men's Shelter in Tauranga has given single men an element of housing security in the short term.
- There is a lack of emergency accommodation for women and children and couples with children.
- A lack of affordable, suitable and secure housing throughout Tauranga is impacting on the delivery of health and social services and on the ability of individuals and families on a low income accessing secure housing.

Project limitations

The research was undertaken in Tauranga during 2016 by a third year undergraduate social work student from Waikato University, Rachel Hatch. Rachel was working on a student placement between TCC and BOPDHB. The limitations of the research project are addressed within the report and include the short timeframe an undergraduate student placement lends to a research project. The limited timeframe meant some service providers did not have time to complete surveys and so were not able to be included in the data.

The scope of an undergraduate student research project however well designed, carried out and reported will always be that, a student research report. It is therefore important to note this report is a 'conversation starter', sets a precedence for data gathering around the scope and nature of homelessness in Tauranga, and provides a basis to build on future research.

Recommendations

Recommendations in the report confirm combatting homelessness requires a multi-agency approach to tackle the range of factors leading to homelessness. Other recommendations centre on addressing the findings listed above.

Understanding the gaps in how we respond to homelessness has provided an evidence base for our strategic focus on identifying accommodation options for homeless women and families and looking at ways to improve how homeless people can access services. The multi-agency Homelessness Steering Group continues to work together, and recently expanded the geographical scope to include Western Bay of Plenty District Council.