



Australian Population Association

12th Biennial Conference

population and society: issues, research, policy

15-17 September 2004 - Canberra, Australia

Inhabiting the margins: A geography of rural homelessness in Australia

Neil Argent and Fran Rolley (frolley@metz.une.edu.au)
University of New England

Abstract

In a country in which the ownership of a two or three bedroom home with a quarter-acre block has long been seen as a readily attainable goal for all who worked and saved conscientiously, homelessness is often seen as both a paradoxical and peripheral issue. As in many other developed world societies, the homeless in Australia are largely invisible to the mainstream population. To the extent that it is acknowledged at all, homelessness is dominantly represented as an urban issue, involving 'roofless' people, sleeping rough. Yet statistics from the 1996 and 2001 national censuses reveal that homelessness in rural areas of Australia often exceeds national and State averages. This paper examines the different and shifting spaces and scales of rural homelessness in Australia. It begins with an overview of the geography of rural homelessness across the country in 2001. The regional dimension of the issue is explored within New South Wales, focussing on the spatial unevenness of the homeless population, the nature of their housing deprivation, and their socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Especial attention is paid to Indigenous people's experiences of homelessness. Finally, via case study research in two selected regions, the paper examines the causes of rural homelessness at a local scale, as well as the causes of its relative invisibility as a significant public issue, worthy of concerted research. The complex interrelationship between particular sub-groups within Australia society, regional and local housing markets and Federal and State welfare agencies and their respective local 'gatekeepers' are also explored.

Paper prepared for the 12th Biennial Conference of the Australian Population Association, 15-17 September 2004, Canberra.

