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Social Justice for homeless young people

The recent comments by the Federal Opposition Leader Tony Abbot demonstrate a lack of awareness of the issues confronting homeless young people in Queensland.

On any given night in Australia 105,000 people are homeless. Nearly 26,800 were Queenslanders. Nearly 10,000 or 37% of these were children and young people under 24 years of age- nationally nearly 44,500 young Australians are without safe and secure shelter.

“Young peoples’ homelessness is caused by family breakdown and violence. Poverty and lack of affordable housing underpins and compounds the situation” says Maria Leebeek.

To discuss public policy and the government’s response to social policy there needs to be discourse based on evidence - both in terms of the reasons why people become homeless and what the best solutions are in addressing homelessness. It is concerning to hear the Opposition leader quote the often misused section from the Gospel of Matthew “*You will always have poor people with you*” as the reason for not continuing to support the current government target for ending homeless. Many theologians would probably argue that this quote is taking the gospel out of context and that Jesus Christ walked in solidarity with the poor, championing injustices especially institutional systems that disadvantaged people.

It has been this Federal government's aim through the White Paper on Homelessness to engage business, community and government in addressing youth homelessness. What has been vital in this approach has been to acknowledge that a whole of community response is required, and that many homeless people find themselves in as situation through lack of adequate integrated support systems and resources.

"Most youth homelessness is invisible", says Maria Leebeek Executive Officer of the Queensland Youth Housing Coalition. The majority will be 'couch surfing': staying with friends, relatives or strangers until their welcome wears thin.

There is a need to address the underlying causes of youth homelessness. The Census data has shown that effective early intervention measures such as Queensland Youth Support Coordinators in schools program and Reconnect services have contributed to a 20% drop in homelessness for young people aged 12- 18 years of age. These measures provide young people with an opportunity to continue their education and/or training and employment pathways, as well as providing a much needed support system.

There is currently a lack of affordable housing for many young people on low incomes who are becoming homeless as a result of not being able to find housing.

The research also demonstrates that if we can support young people leaving the State care system more effectively, especially with regard to housing and support, we may find a drop in the numbers of adult homeless as statistically a large % of the homeless have been wards of the State.

It will be these structural improvements to how we can support homeless young people that will ensure that people have better life experiences and that as a society we will have greater social inclusion, not a narrow literal interpretation of the gospel that seeks to justify blaming the homeless young people for their circumstances.

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