

The Outsiders: More Than One Way to Criminalise Homelessness

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This is Louie's life.

It's not a case study, nor an 'example'. As one young person told us in a previous project: This is not a story. It's real life.²

Louie is no longer a teenager, and his 'real life' over the past four decades in inner-city Brisbane has been shaped by interwoven experiences of trauma, drug use and violence that ultimately led him to the Queensland Drug and Alcohol Court (QDAC). He became homeless after a relationship breakdown. Having been a long-term tenant in his former partner's home, the breakup left him with no rental history or references of his own; and the inadequacy of his Centrelink Newstart income meant even a room in a share house was unaffordable.³

The result was a fragmented combination of emergency accommodation and rough sleeping that reinforced Louie's earlier experiences of trauma, and affected his ability to comply with the residency and other conditions of his treatment order. Louie's strength over the years had been his connection to community and to family. When his housing was stable, Louie's capacity for connection was greater, and his drug and alcohol use decreased. With the relationship breakdown, Louie's now chaotic existence essentially funnelled him directly back into the justice system.

There is ample evidence of the impacts of incarceration on the life trajectory of those with a history of offending, and intersectional disadvantage in areas such as poor employment, housing, health and social outcomes.⁴ The effects of criminalising homelessness, however, can also be seen as a means of social control, and physical and social exclusion.

Public spaces have certain sanctioned, purposive uses — shopping, 'transiting', brief periods of sitting to rest or consume — that are often at odds with the way in which people experiencing homelessness use such spaces. In her study of public space and homelessness in Fortitude Valley, Anne Coleman⁵ noted that this unsanctioned use marks people out as 'outsiders', and that dominant groups have a range of ways to deal with outsiders. An increasingly common strategy is the use of 'defensive' or 'hostile architecture', designed to specifically exclude those who are homeless and create barriers to activities (such as lying down or washing) that are considered undesirable in public spaces.⁶

Direct surveillance and policing are even more visible approaches to social control. People experiencing homelessness, including young

people in our Anglicare youth services, talk of being forced to move on from areas where they have sought shelter, and being searched without cause. Repeated negative experiences with police and other authority figures can create resentment, tension and further traumatise people. Over time, this can impact on a person's self-identity, confidence and agency in being able to navigate the systems needed to exit homelessness.

For Louie, the sense of alienation had a further impact. As a long-term resident of 'The Valley', he felt disengaged from his own community. A sense of connection to the stories of a place, however small and individual they may seem, helps people to feel like they belong and that they have something to hold-on to. Cycling in-and-out of insecure accommodation breaks those links, and does little to support people as they address the multiple challenges of homelessness.⁷



In 2012, a similarly-themed issue of *Parity* was introduced with the following comment:

What stands out for us in the articles that promise hope ... is that people experiencing homelessness are not seen or treated as outsiders ... Being a member of the community ... implies relationships of mutual respect and tolerance, acceptance of diversity and inclusion.⁸

What this means for Louie is the opportunity to create his own future, supported by the type of help he needs, when he needs it. Anglicare Southern Queensland worked in partnership with the QDAC to facilitate a wraparound framework of support, counselling and practical assistance to help Louie rebuild his

family relationships and to sustain a tenancy. There are setbacks, as there are in anyone's life. But recognising and supporting Louie's right to enjoy the same basic rights and freedoms that we are all due, including the right to be considered and valued as part of his community, has made a world of difference to every aspect of Louie's life.

Endnotes

1. Trinity Commons project <trinitycommons.org.au>
2. Youth Voices project <anglicaresq.org.au/youth-voices>
3. Based on median rents, a single person on Newstart cannot afford a single Brisbane property in the private sector, including a shared rental. *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019*. Anglicare Australia, Canberra. Anglicare SQ local report, <anglicaresq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Anglicare-Southern-Queensland-Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-2019.pdf>
4. For example, Graffam, J, Shinkfield, A and Hardcastle, L 2008, 'The perceived employability of ex-prisoners and offenders', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, vol. 52, no. 6, pp. 673-685.
5. Coleman, A 2000, *Five star motels: spaces, places and homelessness in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane*. Doctoral thesis, The University of Queensland, Brisbane.
6. Johnsen S, Fitzpatrick S and Watts B 2018, 'Homelessness and social control: a typology', *Housing Studies*, vol. 33, no. 77, pp. 1106-1126; Harris, J 'Queen's Wharf and the spectre of 'hostile architecture'', *architectureAU*, 2 Feb 2018, <architectureau.com/articles/architects-cannot-absolve-themselves-of-ethical-responsibility-queens-wharf-and-the-spectre-of-hostile-architecture>
7. Anglicare Australia 2019, *Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into 'The Social and economic benefits of improving mental health'*, April <www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/240978/sub376-mental-health.pdf>
8. Coleman A and Farrell J 2012, 'Policing homelessness', *Parity*, vol. 25, no. 2.

