

Achieving Housing Stability in Western Sydney: Stemming Inner City Drift

An evaluation of a Mission Australia early intervention service aimed at stemming the flow of homeless people from Western Sydney into the inner city found that no participant followed-up at six months had ‘drifted’.

Overview

Specialist homelessness services in inner Sydney report a significant number of homeless people move from their community of origin, such as Greater Western Sydney (GWS), to inner city locations, such as central Sydney. This has policy and service delivery implications including: the dislocation of homeless people from potential supports such as networks of friends and family; pressure to concentrate support services within inner city locations; and movement of people away from areas where housing is relatively more available and lower cost.

In 2010, the NSW Government funded Mission Australia to implement the Inner City Drift Project (ICDP) to better understand whether early intervention and client-centered approaches in GWS can reduce the movement of homeless people into inner city Sydney. The project has concluded and an independent evaluation has been completed. This showed improved tenancy outcomes for GWS residents and found that no participant followed up after six months had drifted into the inner city.

This project and evaluation have informed Mission Australia’s ongoing service delivery development, including a commitment to place-based integrated service delivery models and to working in partnership with other agencies. Also, lessons from the ICDP reinforce the focus in Government policy and program design on understanding the needs of the homeless population and where their social supports are, early intervention for people at risk of homelessness, allocation of homelessness resources to reflect demographic needs, rapid re-housing, support for sustaining tenancies and specific programs (such as Connect 100 in Sydney) to assist homeless people stay in or near their local communities.

Background

In 2010, the NSW Government through Housing NSW (now the Department of Family and Community Services, FACS) provided funding to Mission Australia to deliver an early intervention service based in GWS with the objective of identifying homeless people at risk of drifting into the city and providing support to enable them to remain in their community of origin. This was known as the Inner City Drift Project or ICDP.

Inner city drift was identified as a key service system issue in the *Regional Homelessness Action Plan for Coastal Sydney 2010-2014*. Inner city service providers had noticed a growing proportion of people from GWS coming into the city to access services. The research literature confirms that inner city drift is driven by insufficient capacity of the informal and formal support systems available at the local community level. Historically, the inner city Sydney service system had been funded to a higher relative level, which may have had the unintended consequence of drawing people in from outer regions, including GWS, where support services were fewer and more fragmented.

The ICDP became operational in 2011 with a service model of short-term case management, referral and brokerage, with partnerships with other agencies to facilitate housing and support options for clients in GWS.

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted by the Centre for Health Research at the University of Western Sydney and independent consultants. It included a literature review, qualitative research and surveys. The survey measured tenancy outcomes of 99 clients, 49 of whom were able to be followed up at 6 months. The majority of the participants were male (59%), single (58%) and born in Australia (62%) with an average age of 36 years. Approximately one-third (35%) had self-referred to the ICDP, while 25% were referred from Centrelink and 29% were referred by Housing NSW. Further detail about the methodology is at Appendix 1.

Findings

• Prevention of drift into the inner-city

At the outset of the project, and based on the limited information available, three categories of drift risk were defined: low, moderate and high. Drift risk was determined to be low, moderate or high by caseworkers using a Risk Assessment Tool. Among clients identified to be at low risk of drift, the eventual outcome of moving into the city typically resulted from a lack of accommodation options in GWS. Those with moderate risk tended to require a degree of formal support to sustain tenancies and their accommodation decisions were influenced by where they could obtain the best support within the system. High drift risk was reflected in a cluster of vulnerabilities – including incarceration, substance misuse and mental health disorders – that made it more difficult for an individual to sustain a tenancy as well as conform to the requirements of the formal support system (including supported accommodation services).

So, you know, we deal with some very high needs, perhaps some people who are in the middle and just need a little bit of support to get them going, and others who may need one-off support. So there's a whole bag, there's a whole mixture.

(caseworker)

The most striking finding of the evaluation was that all participants followed-up at six months, whatever their drift risk, had remained in the GWS area. Given that the follow-up group was similar to the total sample in terms of demographics, it is likely that the participants not followed-up in the evaluation also did not drift.

• Improved tenancy outcomes for GWS residents

The second major outcome achieved by the ICDP was the high rate of new and sustained tenancies among participants at follow-up. This outcome was observed across all categories of drift risk.

Figure 1 compares the proportion of people that were housed at baseline and follow-up according to their initial level of drift risk.

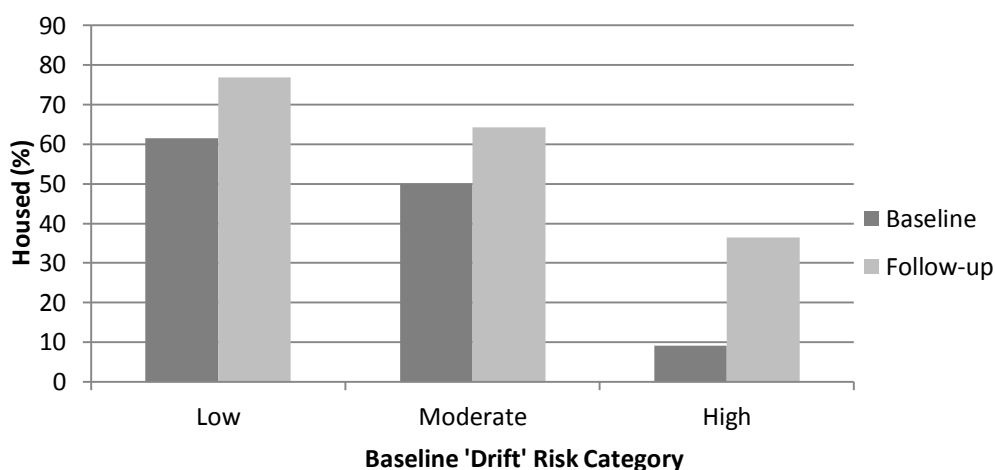


Figure 1 Proportion of participants housed at entry to the ICDP and at 6 month follow-up by baseline category of drift risk (n=49)

The proportion of participants housed decreased as drift risk increased and this is evident at both baseline and follow-up. In addition, the proportion of participants housed at follow-up increased for each category of drift risk. These results are strongly suggestive of the effectiveness of the ICDP in keeping people housed in GWS.

- **Meeting clients' needs**

The ICDP demonstrated an ability to work with clients across a wide range of needs. The key drivers of success were system-wide integration of services and a client-centered approach. This included an ability to comprehensively assess clients' needs, make the appropriate referrals and coordinate access to services. This was achieved through the development of strong partnerships and a trustworthy and expert reputation within the service system. The ICDP was seen as resourceful and responsive to client needs, and this appeared to be driven by a focus on longer-term solutions rather than crisis responding. Finally, the ICDP practiced client-centered care by delivering the earliest intervention possible and persisting with clients despite numerous setbacks.

Research Limitations

While this research has contributed new knowledge to our understanding of inner city drift, further research is needed to ascertain its prevalence and to establish the factors that strengthen people's resilience in the face of homelessness and thus prevent the likelihood of inner city drift occurring.

It is possible that the follow-up period of six months in this study was not long enough to detect drift. There was no pre-existing data on the prevalence or characteristics of inner city drift to inform either the sample size or the follow-up period. The lack of a comparison group also made it difficult to determine whether the ICDP prevented drift or simply slowed down its trajectory, particularly given that some participants had escalated drift risk at follow-up. Longitudinal research is needed to document the sustainability of tenancies and explore the extent to which service models such as the ICDP prevent inner city drift in the longer term.

Lessons Learned

This is one of the first projects to examine the construct of drift and to attempt to measure the likelihood or propensity of drift among people accessing a specialist homelessness service in Australia. It therefore provides important lessons for policy and practice.

- **Working in partnership was critical to early intervention and prevention**

The service model developed at the outset identified assessment and referral pathways as critical to the ICDP's early intervention and prevention focus. Integral to this was the need to work with 'first to know' agencies, with the two key agencies being Housing NSW (now FACS) and Centrelink, since most people with accommodation and/or financial difficulties have contact with one or both of these services. Thus, significant effort was applied to developing referral pathways between the ICDP and these organisations.

A major adaptation of the original service design was the establishment of satellite sites within Housing NSW and Centrelink sites. This change was in response to the poor attendance by clients referred from these two agencies. The satellite sites enabled the ICDP to more effectively capture referrals and identify clients early in their trajectory of risk, which was strongly linked to the success of the ICDP in achieving positive housing outcomes for clients.

There were other important partnerships that the ICDP developed. This included a relationship with a real estate agency in Fairfield that developed opportunistically following the successful housing of a client in one of their properties. The ICDP also became an important partner in the Liverpool Triage Project which comprised fourteen agencies across the Liverpool area. The project aimed to provide clients accessing Housing NSW's Temporary Accommodation Program with immediate support, rather than waiting until they had exhausted their allocated number of support days. Clients assessed as eligible through the Liverpool Office of Housing NSW were referred to the ICDP for triage and rapid support.

So [the ICDP caseworker is] able to build the relationships with people, and our staff aren't afraid to go over and talk to [the ICDP caseworker] and just run a question by [them] and say, 'I've got this situation, what do you think?' Sometimes [they'll] say yeah, refer them over to me and sometimes say, 'just tell them to contact this, this and that'.

(HNSW/Centrelink worker)

In contrast to the Liverpool service system, the Parramatta service system has had many years of interagency development. Thus the ICDP was able to tap into an existing network of services and assume an effective case co-ordination role within this system. The findings demonstrate that a program like the ICDP cannot be replicated as is; implementation should be nuanced to reflect the features of the service system that exists in each area.

- **Caseworker strengths contributed to success**

The ICDP caseworkers were viewed by the other stakeholders as having:

- i) expertise in assessment and referral;
- ii) strong partnerships and personal relationships with key agencies in the sector;
- iii) the capacity to take on a case coordination role with clients; and
- iv) the resourcefulness to respond to a wide range of needs.

These characteristics were offered as explanations for why the ICDP was successful in preventing homelessness among 'at risk' clients as well as assisting those already homeless to attain more secure and long-term housing.

- **An early intervention and client-centered approach improved service system capacity**

Underlying the ICDP was the centrality of clients' needs and this was evident in the 'no wrong door' approach to referrals, undertaking the earliest possible intervention with a client and the ongoing and committed relationship between the client and the service regardless of the number of setbacks experienced in a client's journey out of homelessness. All of these conditions worked to reduce the number of short-term transitions and focus on the attainment of a long-term solution to stabilise the client within their local community.

In addition to (or perhaps as a consequence of) the client-centered and integrated approach of the ICDP, it also improved the capacity of the service system to respond to the needs of clients within GWS and prevent overflow to the inner-city service system. This was achieved by filling a gap in the service system (case management/coordination) as well as increasing inter-agency awareness within the sector.

The notion of the earliest possible intervention is illustrated in the following example.

Clara was referred to the ICDP by HNSW for assistance in obtaining housing. At the time of her referral, Clara was 38 weeks pregnant with twins. Her partner had left her soon after finding out she was pregnant. Although Clara had a consistent employment history, she had to stop working when she developed medical complications related to her pregnancy. Additionally, one of the twins had been identified as having a serious health problem that was likely to need continuing medical treatment after birth.

Clara sought assistance from HNSW who provided her with temporary accommodation. During this short time she found a rental property but was told it was unaffordable, reliant as she was on Newstart Allowance with a rental subsidy. HNSW were unable to assist her with this property despite the fact that she would soon receive a substantial increase in income on the parenting allowance and the one-off 'baby bonus' payment.

The ICDP was able to provide brokerage so that Clara could obtain the property immediately rather than her relinquishing the property and having to find another. She gave birth less than one week after she moved into the accommodation. The ICDP also helped Clara to liaise with Centrelink so she received all entitlements as soon as she gave birth.

From a case management perspective, the intervention period was very short but it gave the client some stability and allowed her to prepare for the birth of her children. Had Clara not received support when she did, she may have been homeless at the time she gave birth, which would have resulted in a mandatory child protection notification.

- **Flexible brokerage allowed responsiveness to clients' needs**

The ICDP also had access to brokerage which was used flexibly and collaboratively with other agencies to prevent homelessness and a cascade into drift. In many ways, the availability of brokerage alongside the provision of case management placed the ICDP in a unique position to respond to a range of client needs. Moreover, decisions regarding the expenditure of brokerage were considered by many stakeholders to be sensible, despite a difficult fiscal environment.

... [ICDP is] not afraid to spend a dollar and not afraid to justify that dollar spent. Whereas if you ring up and want particular, maybe other organisations, they might say, "Well they don't fit my criteria." Shut the door.

(caseworker)

It was apparent that the arbitrary restrictions on the use of brokerage (commonly in place by other agencies) were not necessary because the focus on long-term housing stability for clients provided the framework for all case management decisions.

- **Clients with complex needs require both intensive and specialist supports**

For clients with low to medium needs, the extent of the ICDP's relationship with other agencies seemed to be sufficient to leverage the requisite level of support from within the system. In contrast, the ICDP appeared to be less effective in securing good support (non-tenancy) outcomes for clients identified as having high and complex needs, particularly those with serious mental illness or a substantial forensic history.

In part, this appeared to be driven by a lack of formal partnerships and information sharing arrangements with the Health and Corrective Services agencies. There was some contact with clients who were discharged from psychiatric or correctional facilities into temporary accommodation and who were then later referred to the ICDP when this temporary accommodation either came to its natural end or ended prematurely. The findings of the evaluation highlighted the need for support to be provided early, and this appeared to be particularly pertinent for individuals with high and complex needs. Additionally, the chronic and severe nature of the problems experienced by some clients meant they often overwhelmed individual agencies. Agencies found it difficult to continue to support clients in the context of persistent breaches with support arrangements and tenancy agreements.

The original model of the ICDP included a Complex Needs Panel that would provide case review and case planning for individuals who required greater interagency collaboration to address their needs. This speaks not only to the intensity of support required for such clients but also to the specialist nature of the support needed to address particular needs. This is clearly beyond the capacity of any small team of caseworkers who may have specialist knowledge and skills with respect to homelessness and housing but not the requisite drug and alcohol, mental health and disability expertise typically provided by health services. Unfortunately, the resources were not available to establish the Complex Needs Panel as had been originally planned.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the future design of early intervention homelessness programs include:

1. Placing the client's needs at the centre of service delivery efforts. This includes a 'no wrong door' approach to referrals, the earliest possible intervention, and continuing to support the client in their journey out of homelessness over the long-term and regardless of any setbacks.
2. The importance of an assessment tool or approach which helps services understand the homelessness histories of the clients and develop support networks in a location that best support their needs.
3. Working in partnership with 'first to know' agencies. Integrating with local service systems allows intervention at the earliest possible opportunity.
4. Allocating sufficient resources to create the connections between services and bringing about system integration.
5. Engaging skilled and experienced caseworkers.
6. Including flexible brokerage to enable better client outcomes.
7. Providing an in-built capacity for more intensive and specialist supports for clients with complex needs and better coordination with health and corrective services including the capacity to delegate case management to the most appropriate service provider where necessary.
8. Using place as a platform for service delivery. Consideration needs to be given to the appropriate level of service, the configuration of services and the accessibility of services to meet local needs.

Conclusions

The ICDP demonstrated the benefit of an early intervention and client-centered approach to reducing the risk of inner city drift and to improving tenancy outcomes for residents in GWS. In this regard, it sits firmly within the strategic directions of both the national and NSW frameworks for the prevention and resolution of homelessness.

The success of the ICDP confirms that measures to stop inner city drift can be effective, facilitating the gradual reallocation of homelessness resources to better reflect demographic needs and, over time, reducing the level of homelessness in the inner city locations.

The evidence from this evaluation confirms that people's ability to access vital support resources can improve clients' tenancy outcomes so that urban migration is reduced or prevented. Funding of the service system should build capacity and augment existing services within the sector in GWS to provide a better response to homelessness in local communities.

The ICDP evaluation supports the development of specific programs (such as Connect 100 in Sydney¹) which assist homeless people by helping them stay in or near their local communities where they have a greater prospect of reconnecting with family or social networks if safe and appropriate, and where accommodation may be cheaper.

¹ FACS (2014) 'Connect 100: Fact Sheet' June 2014, accessed at:
http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/273EF113-E228-464D-B85C-FFE1AF5AF4AF/0/Connect100_FS.pdf

Importantly, the ICDP's positive findings also support the need for the integration of early intervention, rapid re-housing and sustaining tenancy approaches within homelessness service provision. They contribute to other Australian research on the benefits of integrated practice for achieving good outcomes for clients, such as the MISHA project.²

This work has informed Mission Australia's ongoing service delivery development. We are committed to integrated service delivery, incorporating early intervention approaches into service models and to working in partnership with other agencies. These service delivery principles are also key foundations for other Mission Australia homelessness services including MISHA, Common Ground and the Mission Australia Centre (MAC) at Kingswood.

Mission Australia has committed to reducing homelessness and strengthening communities as our strategic goal. The lessons learned from the ICDP will continue to drive our practice in achieving these goals.

For more information the full report can be found at:

www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/research/homelessness

² Research report *MISHA: From Homelessness to Sustained Housing*, 2014, accessed at:
<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/research/homelessness/MISHA-report-from-homelessness-to-sustained-housing-2010-13.pdf>

Appendix 1 - Evaluation Methodology

The project utilised a mixed methods approach and was undertaken in several stages.

There was little evidence upon which to develop appropriate measures of drift and so one of the first tasks of the project was to develop a better understanding of what drift was and how it might be assessed. As such, this is formative research and further work is needed to confirm and elucidate the findings presented here. The research had three distinct phases:

Phase 1 involved a review of the literature on the migration patterns and geographical movement of the homeless population. Information was also collated from meetings and workshops held during the development of the ICDP. Additionally, a small qualitative study was undertaken with people accessing inner-city homelessness services and who had originally resided in Greater Western Sydney. This study tracked people's pathways into the inner-city service system, including the reasons for each move and the type of support accessed along the way. The output from Phase 1 was the development of a risk assessment tool for inner city drift.

Phase 2 involved a process evaluation of the ICDP that aimed to understand the implementation of the ICDP and the factors that may have contributed to the success or otherwise of the service. This included in-depth interviews with ICDP staff, focus groups with external stakeholders, and a brief on-line survey with 'first to know' agencies (such as Centrelink, Housing NSW and Corrective Services).

Phase 3 was an outcome study that was designed to determine whether the ICDP met its objective of establishing and sustaining tenancies for people in GWS and preventing the subsequent drift of people into the inner city to access services. A 6 month longitudinal survey was undertaken with a sample of 99 clients that accessed the service between November 2012 and July 2013. This data was supplemented by secondary data analysis of administrative data collected by the ICDP, including the assessment tool developed in Phase 1. Additionally, data was obtained from the Homeless Persons Information Centre for calls originating from Bankstown and Fairfield. These two sites have similar populations of people needing support for housing problems however the ICDP only operated in Fairfield.

Appendix 2 – case study

Anna is a 20 year old female with no reported physical or mental health issues. Her main source of income is the Youth Allowance. Anna is in contact with her family and has no children of her own.

Anna grew up in the family home in the Liverpool area. She left home early, around 16 or 17 years of age, owing to conflict within the family. While completing Year 12, Anna lived in various youth refuges and worked part-time to support herself. When Anna was made redundant and could no longer afford to pay rent, she moved back into the family home in the Liverpool area. She lived there for one to two years until family conflict again led her to move out. After losing another job, she sought assistance from HousingNSW who placed her in temporary accommodation nearby and referred Anna to the ICDP.

An ICDP caseworker conducted an assessment at the HNSW office on the same day. It was determined that Anna was eligible for bond assistance (given her income of Youth Allowance) and that she was capable of living independently with some support. The day after the assessment, the ICDP caseworker contacted another NGO in search of accommodation vacancies. They were able to successfully identify a medium to long-term supported accommodation property in the Merrylands-Guildford area. The bond assistance enabled Anna to move into the property as soon as she was accepted (which occurred seven days after her initial assessment with the ICDP). Linking Anna in with supported accommodation enabled the ICDP to transfer the case management to another service that could provide her with on-going individual assistance with employment, reconnecting with family as well as learning how to apply for and maintain a private tenancy.

Anna was deemed at moderate risk of drifting into the inner city. A key factor that determined her level of drift risk was her history of living in refuges and her previous contact with the service system. Additionally, the presence of ongoing family conflict meant Anna did not have the necessary social support a young person needed when transitioning from school to employment and into independent living. It also meant there was little to keep her connected to the GWS. Without the assistance of the ICDP, Anna may have been bounced around the service system. Instead, the ICDP was able to identify a supported accommodation option for her and, importantly, link her into long-term case management support.

ICDP Case Study (#5) — Moderate Drift Risk

