Homelessness outcomes: It’s not just about the house…

One of the challenges of measuring outcomes for people experiencing homelessness is the complexity of what matters to people in relation to their housing. It’s certainly not the case that “any house is a good house”. A full view of housing outcomes takes a rounded view of a person’s housing situation, including its personal, social and economic dimensions.

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Homelessness has major negative consequences and costs for individuals, communities and society. Ending homelessness is therefore a vitally important policy goal. Focusing on this goal honours the seriousness of the problem, and provides motivation and leverage for change.

“Ending homelessness” is not sufficient as an outcome measure

Despite its political and practice importance, however, the goal of “ending homelessness” does not by itself provide a sufficient framework for measuring housing outcomes. There are several reasons for this.

Differences in perspective

Ending homelessness is not always well aligned with the changes that people in housing difficulty see as important for themselves. Some people who fit the ABS definition of homeless do not self-identify as falling in this category, but may nevertheless want to improve their housing circumstances. Others may come to identify with (aspects of) the homeless subculture and may not necessarily be concerned with ending their homelessness per se, but with greater access to resources or better ways to manage the situation to their advantage.

Categorical view of outcomes

A focus on ending homelessness tends to encourage a categorical view of outcomes - either a person is homeless or they are not, and the primary aim of service delivery is to move them from one category to the other. This measurement approach lacks the ability to detect the incremental changes, setbacks and amelioration of difficulties that can make a big difference to people’s lived experience of their housing situation. This is particularly important in a context in which many people experiencing homelessness may not be able to access decent long-term housing quickly.

Focus on bricks and mortar

Setting ‘the end of homelessness’ as the main outcome indicator can tend to lead to a focus on obtaining “the house” (or flat, unit etc.) as the point of success. Although property availability is vital, a positive housing situation also involves a complex bundle of factors that affect the household’s lived experience of their housing circumstances. The ability to sustain a tenancy is closely linked to aspects of lived experience including affordability, amenity, location, safety, support, opportunity or restriction, stigma associated with the housing or tenure type, and other issues.

Need to measure outcomes over the longer term

Ending homelessness is a ‘boundary outcome’, signalling a transition between categories (homeless to housed) and in many cases between service systems (for example, homelessness to social housing, and perhaps others such as education or employment). Despite its significance, it is one point on a much longer
journey of housing and social participation for the household concerned. Ideally a homelessness outcomes model should reflect an understanding of housing outcomes that can be applied over the whole life cycle and across multiple service systems.

Outcomes framework based on housing situation

The model that we propose is based on the concept of the housing situation of a household, encompassing the physical nature of the dwelling (if any), the tenure or other occupancy arrangements that characterise the household’s residence there, and also a range of other contextual factors that have a profound impact on the suitability and sustainability of the accommodation arrangement for the household.

People are diverse, and preferences about housing situation differ from person to person (and from community to community). However, there are some fundamental aspects of a housing situation that are important to most people.

This outcomes framework groups these factors into six dimensions:

- **Dwelling** - The nature of the place of residence, including the extent to which it meets minimum community standards of amenity.
- **Control** - The extent to which the household has choice and control over their ability to remain in or leave the housing situation, including protection from sudden undesired loss of the housing situation.
- ** Appropriateness** – The extent to which the physical configuration of the place of residence meets the needs of the household, including area/number of rooms, privacy, suitability for physical abilities, health impacts from nature of dwelling, and other issues.
- **Affordability** – The extent to which the household can sustain the cost of the place of residence and other necessities.
- **Safety and support** – The extent to which the relationships and interpersonal dynamics associated with the housing situation are supportive or damaging for household members.
- **Facilitation** – The extent to which the housing situation facilitates access to services, resources, networks and opportunities (such as employment) that are beneficial to household members. This is often strongly linked with location.

Each of these six dimensions can be measured independently for any housing situation. The more of these factors that are rated positively, the more likely the housing situation is to support the health and wellbeing of household members and their ability to achieve their goals (Figure 1).
Where one dimension is sharply negative (for example, a lack of safety), or where multiple dimensions are more or less negative, the housing situation is likely to have an adverse impact on health and wellbeing, and is less likely to be sustainable.

Within this framework, a housing outcome can be measured by comparing two housing situations at different times for the same household. This comparison may identify a change in one or more of the dimensions of the housing situation, and evaluate whether this change has a positive or negative effect on the household. The comparison may also identify that the housing situation has not changed. Whether or not this is regarded as a positive or negative outcome will depend on the nature of the housing situation and its impact on the household.

A transition from homeless to housed will involve changes in a number of dimensions of a household’s housing situation. Some of these changes may be experienced as positive and others as negative – for example, the household may relocate to a dwelling that is physically great, but with more expensive rent and/or located in an area where they have less support. This can highlight aspects of the housing situation which may pose challenges for the household, helping focus the provision of support to sustain tenancies. The housing journey continues (Figure 2).

Risk

In addition to being able to measure the quality of a housing situation, it is useful to be able to measure housing risk. Not only does this potentially provide a lead indicator of impending homelessness, it helps to validate the outcomes achieved by services that assist in sustaining tenancies.

The focus here is on episodic risk, which relates to the likelihood that a household’s housing situation will end in an undesired manner in the foreseeable future. Episodic risk factors can be grouped into two main sets: those related to conditions of occupancy (for example, intervention of a landlord to end the housing situation), and those related to housing quality and safety (which may cause the housing situation to become unacceptable to the person or household). These factors can be translated into a risk measure through identifying clusters of indicators that indicate low, medium or high risk of housing breakdown.

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**FIGURE 2: HOUSING OUTCOMES ARE PART OF THE HOUSING JOURNEY**
The framework in practice

This housing outcomes framework can be applied in a range of ways. One approach is to develop short client-rated questionnaires that allow quantitative scoring of the dimensions of the housing situation. Using these periodically over a client’s journey, and/or following key alterations in housing circumstances, provides data on positive or negative changes in housing situation over time.

Lirata Consulting recently applied a variant of this framework in evaluating the 360 Degree Trial, a partnership program of the Victorian Department of Human Services, Australian Government Department of Human Services and HomeGround Services, which focuses on early intervention in people’s homelessness pathways. The evaluation used a typology of housing situations derived from the framework to analyse housing outcomes pre- and post-intervention.4

Conclusion

While ending homelessness is an essential policy goal, we suggest that an effective framework for measuring housing outcomes needs to recognise a broader range of outcomes linked to each household’s housing situation. Although this approach can be more complex, it reflects conversations that occur all the time in housing and homelessness services. Both workers and clients/tenants may find it useful to recognise a set of housing circumstances as a point in time in a housing journey – to hold the vision of positive, sustainable housing while also validating incremental outcomes along the way.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this outcomes framework is that it can apply to anyone – whether living in a penthouse or a park. People experiencing homelessness are not “some other category of human beings,” who require a whole different set of outcomes. Our framework for understanding housing outcomes should reflect this reality and be applicable to all of us.

Resources

The following resources may be useful in further exploration of homelessness outcomes:


About Lirata Consulting

Lirata Consulting provides expert, independent consulting services in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. We assist funders and service providers to clarify the outcomes that matter in their work, to measure these outcomes and to evaluate and improve programs and policies.

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Notes

1 A household here may be an individual person, couple, family, or other grouping. As the interests and goals of individual members of a household are not always aligned, we advocate overlaying this framework with a social justice and human rights lens that protects the interests of women, children, and those vulnerable to exploitation.

2 Place of residence is used here to refer to the physical location in which the household is residing, whether that is sleeping rough, in an improvised dwelling, vehicle or more conventional accommodation.

3 It is also useful to understand underlying risk and protective factors for homelessness, which provide a context against which episodic risk events play out.

4 The full and summary reports of the 360 Degree Evaluation are available online at: http://www.homeground.org.au/what-we-do/developing-evidence/