

Dr Julie Moschion, Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research

Presentation given at the Alliance Francaise on 10/05/2019

Please do not cite without permission (moschion@unimelb.edu.au)

Good evening everyone and thank you for coming.

Before anything else, I would like to thank the Alliance for organising this exhibition and this presentation today. Homeless people are at the same time very visible – we see people sleeping rough in the streets – and very invisible – we don't know who are the people staying in boarding houses or couch surfing when we see them...And mostly we rarely get to know their story. My hope for tonight is that the photos and my talk will debunk some of the myths around homelessness and give a face to those people and their stories.

To give you a bit of context about myself and the research I am going to talk about tonight, I am a Senior Research Fellow at the Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research at the University of Melbourne. I moved from France to Australia after my PhD 10 years ago and have been with the Melbourne Institute, working on homelessness, ever since. I am an economist so I quite fancy my complicated statistical methods but I'll try to avoid my cherished jargon.

In the past 10 years, the research on homelessness has made a huge step forward in understanding what leads people into homelessness, and also what does not (despite what common sense / observation may suggest). This research mostly comes from Australia.

But let me go back for a minute or two. In 2008, the Labor government released a major new policy on homelessness, *The Road Home*. A part of the strategy was to develop a national research agenda to improve our understanding of homelessness. In this context, the Australian Government commissioned the Melbourne Institute to design and implement a new longitudinal survey, since named Journeys Home (JH). The research I will be talking about tonight is based on this survey.

Journeys Home is a completely unique data source, one if not the richest in the world. It has opened up unique opportunities to explore what triggers homelessness. There are 4 specific features that make Journeys Home so special. First the sample is broad which means that it covers all types of homelessness - not just one specific type, for example those leaving in boarding houses (which is what convenience samples do). In Australia, homelessness is defined broadly. In essence, the definition seeks to identify situations in which housing conditions do not meet standard requirements to qualify as a decent "home". Are therefore categorized as homeless, people: sleeping rough or squatting in abandoned buildings; staying with relatives or friends temporarily with no alternative; staying in a caravan park, a boarding house, hotel or crisis accommodation. This is the homelessness I'll be talking about tonight. But just a side note that the results I'll be talking about are not specific to this definition: you find the same results if you restrict it to those sleeping rough or squatting.

A second unique feature of JH is that it includes respondents who are not homeless at the time of the survey but are facing some housing difficulties or have experienced homelessness in the

past. This is important because you can compare people who are homeless with people who are not but are otherwise quite similar. Third, we followed respondents over 3 years.

This is crucial to understand the transitions in and out of homelessness and relate that to other transitions that may be related to homelessness (in and out of drug use for example).

Fourth we collected very extensive information on things which could be related to homelessness (such as substance use, experience of violence, mental health issues...). The combination of those 4 things was completely novel when we started in 2010 and still has not been successfully replicated elsewhere (despite people wanting to do so in the US for ex).

So, let's go back to the main question: why do people become homeless?

When you see a homeless person in the street, do you ever think about what might have led them there? And do you think that drugs might be involved? If you do, you are not alone: if you look at the first graph that you have on your document, you can see that 91% of the general public say that drug addiction is the main reason why people are homeless. In contrast, when you ask people who are or who have been homeless, only 10% say that drug use is the reason they first became homeless. You can see that on the second graph.

So, is drug use an important cause of homelessness, or is it not?

We have looked at two drug use behaviours: daily cannabis use and weekly use of other illicit/street drugs (ie hard drugs). Consistent with general opinion and past research, drug use and homelessness are associated: respondents who have used drugs regularly more often have experienced homelessness than those who have not used drugs (86% vs 70%).

So what can you do with that information? Well not much. Ok, so substance use and homelessness tend to coincide, and both are behaviours that a policy maker may worry about and want to reduce in the community. But what do you actually need to know to design programs that will reduce homelessness (for example)? What you really want to know is what caused homelessness, not just what coincides with it. Because if drug use just coincides with homelessness, then reducing drug use will do nothing to homelessness. And in fact, there are other reasons why drug use and homelessness may coincide. It could be that homelessness actually leads to drug use, or that other characteristics and events make people more prone to both homelessness and substance use (e.g. certain personality traits such as risk-taking or adverse childhood circumstances such as sexual violence).

So what do we do from here? I'll spare you the details of the method but essentially, what we are doing is going beyond observing a simple statistical association and getting to causality. And what we find is both surprising and actually not so much. It turns out that substance use matters way less than what one may think; in fact, its effects appear closer to what people who have experienced homelessness think. We find that only the use of cannabis daily increases the risk of becoming homeless and only for men. We find no effect of hard drugs, for neither gender. So it appears that looks can be deceiving.

Another common assumption about the causes of homelessness is the role played by domestic and family violence. Looking at the first graph below, it is also ranked very high by the general public, and close in numbers to drug use. Homeless people also rank it high: it is the second

cause they put forward but at a much lower rate than the general public: only about 20% say that they became homeless because of it. What is the story behind this discrepancy?

Again, the question is not really about whether people who become homeless are more often confronted to violence and abuse: we know that they are, before becoming homeless and while they are homeless.

They are confronted to violence at home from parents and partners and outside the home from people they know and people they don't know. The question is whether this is the reason they find themselves without a home. And again the picture provided by a thorough analysis of the data provides a nuanced and maybe unexpected view: it matters more for men than women.

More specifically, when women experience violence and become homeless, they exit homelessness after that. This is because there are domestic violence housing programs supporting women through those difficult transitions. This result suggests that those programs work, at least in the short run. For men however, violence leads to homelessness and that's it, there is no going back to secure accommodation in the short run. As it turns out, for men, violence as a cause of homelessness is not a thing: it is absent from the policy debate. Maybe it should not.

Incarceration is another case in point. It is widely believed that incarceration leads to homelessness. Again no doubt that people who experience incarceration during their lifetime also experience homelessness at higher rates. But again to design the right policies and identify where current programs are lacking, it is useful to pay attention to details.

In essence, how do the experiences of incarceration and homelessness coincide with each other? Does homelessness happen before or after incarceration? Are those experiences happening straight after each other or is there some kind of delay?

The data reveals that incarceration leads to homelessness but not straight after release. Homelessness only starts increasing 6 months after release. For the first six months ex-prisoners seem to find adequate support, whether from their families or from the government. But once that phases out, that's when the troubles start. This indicates where policy programs can be developed and really make a difference.

One last usual suspect for causing homelessness that I'll talk about tonight is mental health issues. Comparing the two graphs below, it is ranked very high by the general public and not that high by people who have experienced homelessness. There has not been any recent serious study looking at whether mental health is a cause of homelessness so I don't have any results to present. My suspicion is that yet again, we will find a strong coincidence but no causal relationship. Homeless people suffer more mental health issues than other people creating this association that people have in mind. However, mental health issues could result from homelessness itself or other traumatic experiences also associated with homelessness generating the statistical association that we observe. I am tempted to go with what people with an experience of homelessness say: it is probably not the main deal. And there again support programs may be helping.

So what is the main deal? Well let's look at the graph of what people with an experience of homelessness say: "relationship/family breakdown or conflict" is way above anything else, actually they cite this 3 times more than the next most cited answer!

We cannot identify conflict with the data very well, but we can identify family breakdown.

There are 2 types of separation: the separation of one's parents and one's own separation from her partner. We've studied the effect of parental separation on youth homelessness and what we find absolutely matches what the respondents say: family breakdown matters a lot! If the separation happens before the child is 12, the risk of homelessness increases dramatically for both boys and girls. If the separation happens after the child is 12, the risk of homelessness only increases for boys.

This result is extremely important for policy makers in a context of rising housing costs and diminishing family benefits that are putting low-income single-parent households under extreme financial pressure. This is not to say that we should try to deter people from separating! Rather, we should think hard about how to quickly support families that breakdown to avoid them entering homelessness.

To put the results into perspective, the last graph compares the effects found for drugs and parental separation. Those are the only two that are directly comparable because the method used was exactly the same. It turns out that individuals who have experienced homelessness know better than the general population: parental separation has a much larger effect on homelessness than regular substance use – it is on average 6 times as large (twice larger for men and ten times larger for women).

This is pretty much what I had to say. Obviously, this talk was limited to a few key points and by no means I am suggesting that what I have not covered is not relevant.

And, by no means am I suggesting that we should not worry about drug use, domestic violence and incarceration. I am just highlighting that those do not play the role that we tend to think they do in determining homelessness.

What are the takeaway points from this talk?

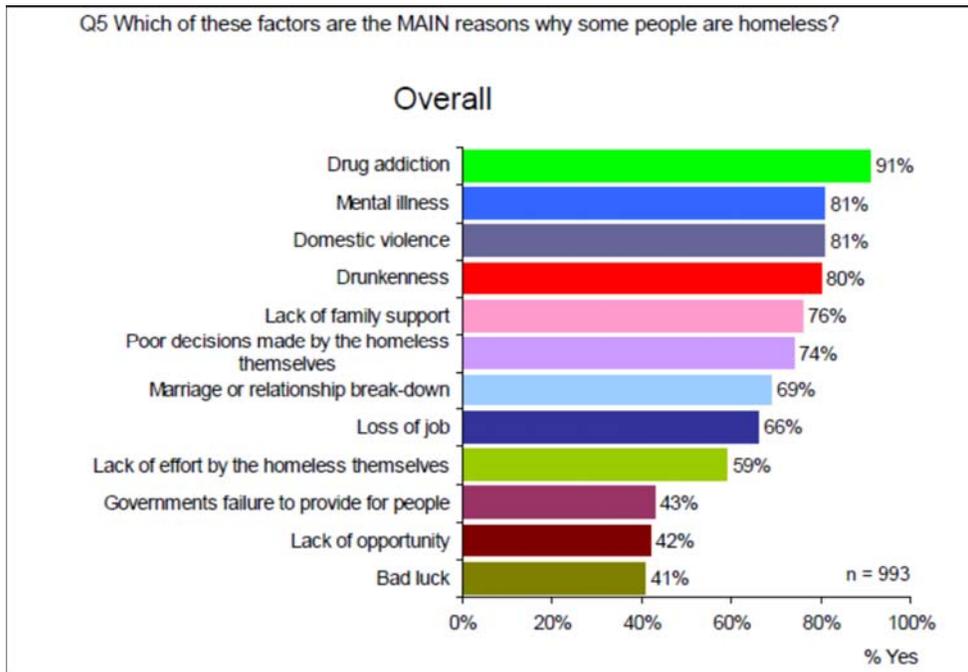
Number 1, let's go beyond preconceived ideas. People's experiences with homelessness are much more complex than we think, and this has huge implications for policymakers. The more nuanced roles that drug use, domestic violence and incarceration play in causing homelessness highlight a few areas for policy action: boys' use of cannabis daily, men as victims of violence and the delayed effect of release from prison. In addition, the important role of parental separation needs to be a priority in the design of programs addressing homelessness.

Number 2, in terms of the relative importance of different factors leading to homelessness, men and women are different. Policy interventions need to allow for this.

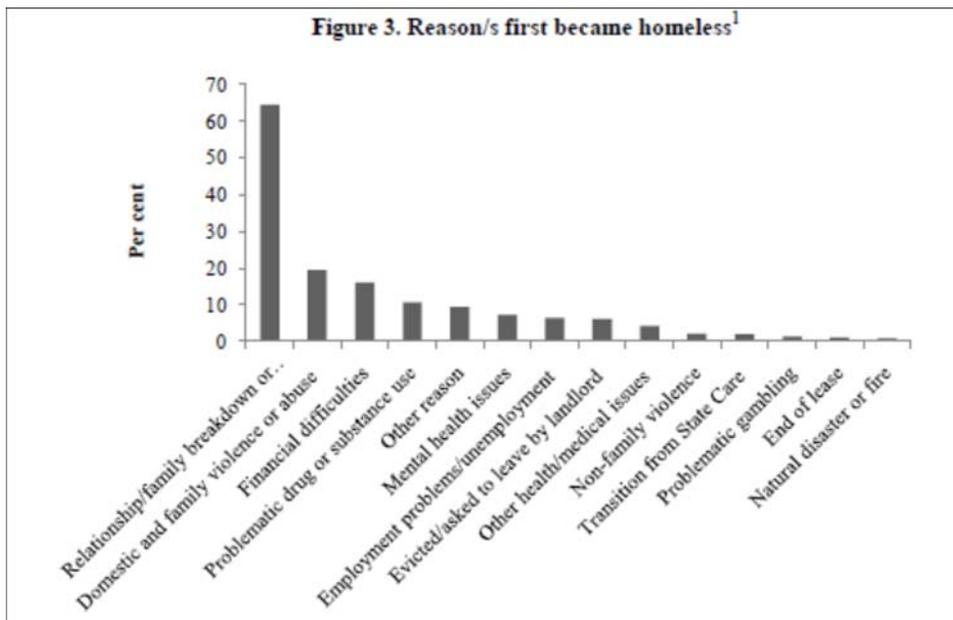
Number 3 and most importantly: we must listen to people who have had an experience of homelessness. Their voices are challenging the myths surrounding homelessness and enabling us to design more targeted and effective policies to help end homelessness.

Thank you for your attention.

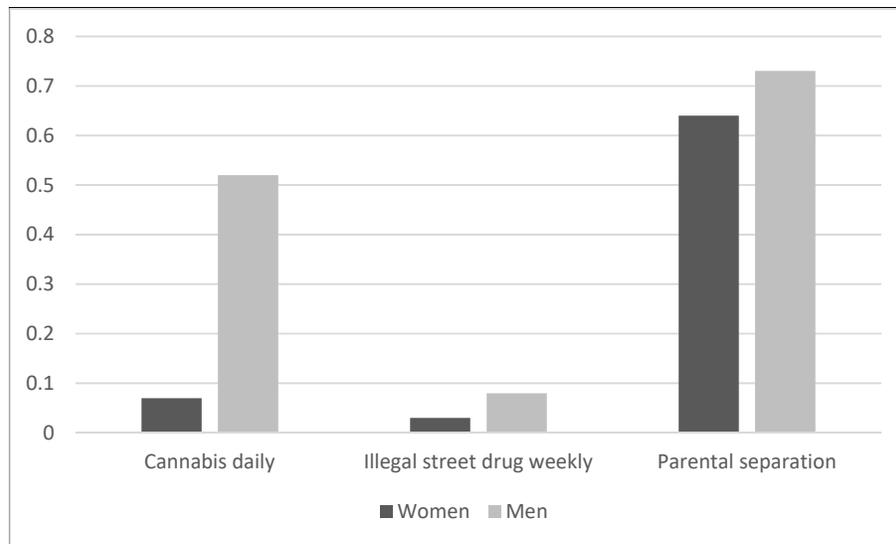
Homelessness: what circumstances and events lead people to lose their home?



Hanover Welfare Services Research Report, October 2006



Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, Journeys Home Research Report 1, July 2012



Moschion, J. and van Ours, J. (2019), Do Childhood Experiences of Parental Separation Lead to Homelessness?, *European Economic Review*, 2019, 111(1), 211-236

McVicar, D., Moschion, J. and van Ours, J. (2019), Early Illicit Drug Use and the Age of Onset of Homelessness, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A*, 182(1), 345-372

Key takeaway points

- Let's go beyond preconceived ideas: the more nuanced roles that drug use, domestic violence and incarceration play in causing homelessness highlight a few areas for policy action: boys' use of cannabis daily, men as victims of violence and the delayed effect of release from prison. The important role of parental separation needs to be considered in the design of programs addressing homelessness.
- Men and women are different: policy interventions need to allow for this.
- We must listen to people who have had an experience of homelessness. Their voices are challenging the myths surrounding homelessness and enabling us to design more targeted and effective policies to help end homelessness.

References

Diette T M & Ribar D. (2018), A longitudinal analysis of violence and housing insecurity, *Economic Inquiry*, 56(3), 1602-1621.

McVicar, D., Moschion, J. and van Ours, J. (2019), Early Illicit Drug Use and the Age of Onset of Homelessness, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A*, 182(1), 345-372.

Moschion, J. and van Ours, J. (2019), Do Childhood Experiences of Parental Separation Lead to Homelessness?, *European Economic Review*, 2019, 111(1), 211-236.

Moschion J & Johnson G. Homelessness and incarceration: A reciprocal relationship? *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 2019, 1, 1-33.