

Living on the margins: the worlds of older private renters in Sydney

Alan Morris*

In this study I explore the world of older private renters in Sydney. I illustrate that for those older renters who are forced to live in unsubsidised privately rented dwellings, everyday life is extremely difficult and government policy in regards to providing affordable housing is seriously flawed. For most older private renters, financial stress is enormous and the most basic items are difficult to acquire. The level of hardship was determined mainly by the rent a person was paying and by family connections. Those residents who had managed to somehow acquire relatively cheap accommodation and who had strong family links were in a very different position to those who were paying a relatively high rent and had no family connections. A theme running through the study is that the Commonwealth Rent Assistance policy is not giving older renters access to affordable accommodation and the policy in regards to the provision of affordable housing has to be re-examined so as to allow those older Australians who are not homeowners or who have not managed to access public housing the chance to live out the last chapter of their lives in dignity.

Introduction

Like that of all advanced economies, Australia's population is ageing. Thus in 2001, 2.7 million Australians, or about 12.7 per cent of the population, was 65 and over and by 2050 it is expected that about one in four Australians will be 65 and over (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001). Historically, home ownership within this age cohort has been very high. In 2002–03, approximately 80 per cent of older Australians owned their home outright, 3 per cent were paying off a mortgage and another 13 per cent were renters (ABS 2005). About 195,000 older Australian households rented — 44 per cent (approximately 86,000 households) were renting from private landlords and receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA); 45 per cent were living in public housing; and 'most of the remaining 11% rented from community and church groups, housing cooperatives or caravan parks' (ABS 2005).

The high levels of outright home ownership among older Australians has been crucial in ensuring that most of this age cohort has been able to sustain themselves

* School of Social Science and Policy, University of New South Wales.

adequately in their retirement, despite not being employed and being mainly dependent on the government aged-pension for income (Morris et al 2005a; 2005b; Yates 2002, v). At present, about 80 per cent of older Australians are on the age pension; of these, two-thirds are on the full pension and one-third are on part pensions (Gittins 2006). Owning their home outright not only means that they do not have to worry about the mortgage or rent, it also gives owners the scope to use their home as surety in times of financial need. In Sydney, from the mid-1990s and up until 2003, many older homeowners saw their net worth increase dramatically as housing prices soared by as much as 20 per cent a year (Yates 2002; Wade 2006). Despite the Sydney property market declining by 5 per cent in 2005, an international survey carried out at the beginning of 2006 found that Sydney still had the seventh most expensive residential property market in the world (Wade 2006). Older Sydneysiders who had the good fortune to own their homes became asset rich.

The United Nations Human Rights Program on Housing concluded that 'within the overall context of an enabling approach, Governments should take appropriate action in order to promote, protect and ensure the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing' (UN Habitat 2003). What I argue in this paper is that primarily because of changes in government policy, an ever-growing proportion of older Australians (65 and over) are not able to access adequate housing, or they are only able to do so if they commit themselves to severe financial (and invariably personal) stress. I am referring to older private renters.¹

In Australia, the primary government policy shift in the area of affordable housing has been an ever-decreasing emphasis on public housing and a constant bolstering of the CRA. The CRA is an income supplement to assist households on income support who are renting in the private rental market.² In 2001–02, the CRA 'provided \$1.8 billion of assistance to private renters' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2004, 1). A total of 909,062 Centrelink clients received the CRA in June 2002 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2004, 2).

1 Of course, other groupings who are renting in the private market are also struggling, most notably single parents (Burke and Hulse 2002). However, I would argue that older people renting privately are in a different position in that their working lives are effectively over and their ability to seek out different housing options is limited.

2 In March 2006, the maximum CRA a single person could receive was \$100.60 a fortnight. The amount a renter is allowed to claim is dependent on the rent being paid. For every dollar in rent over \$89.60, 75 cents is paid, up to a maximum of \$100.60. There is no regional variation.

The government's diminishing emphasis on public housing is indicated by the fact that funding for public housing dropped by 25 per cent between 1990–91 and 2000–01 (Hall and Berry 2004). Following the 1999 Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA), the number of public housing dwellings 'decreased from 362,967 dwellings in 1999–00 to 345,335 dwellings in 2003–04' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005a, 297). An older person is only put on the priority waiting list for public housing once they reach 80. Of course, many older renters do not live this long. The only additional social housing stock is being provided by the Community Housing Sector. In 1999 there were about 38,000 community housing dwellings in Australia (Wordsworth et al 1999).

In this article, using in-depth interviews, I examine the situation of 18 older private renters in Sydney. The research was conducted in the first part of 2005. Participants were found mainly through advertisements placed in seniors publications and websites and came from a wide range of Sydney neighbourhoods. They were paid \$30 for their time. Besides one couple, all of the participants were living alone. Of those living alone, five were male and 11 were female. The rents of seven of the 18 participants were subsidised in one form or another — three rented their unit from the church, one rented from a tenant association, the couple rented a unit owned by their son and one participant was being helped by a friend. Nine participants were between 65 and 69; eight participants were between 70 and 74; and one participant (she was extremely well) was 92. I illustrate that the government's policies on affordable housing are having a very grave impact on this grouping, more especially on those older private renters who do not receive any help with the rent other than the CRA. Despite the CRA, many are suffering serious financial and, related to this, emotional stress. Being totally dependent on the vagaries of the Sydney rental market was having a serious effect on their quality of life, as well as their ability to sustain themselves adequately and to avoid social exclusion. I show that the difficulties that this group faces do vary. The rent they had to pay was the key factor determining their degree of difficulty and there was a good deal of contingency in regards to finding affordable but adequate accommodation. Some participants had been fortunate and had managed to find relatively cheap but adequate accommodation and this certainly helped them cope. The strength of participants' family connections and, in a couple of instances, their social connections outside of the family, was another key mitigating factor. Those participants who had strong family ties were generally helped in various ways by family members, most commonly by children, but siblings and, in a couple of cases, nieces and nephews were also important sources of financial and emotional support.

The article first discusses the rents being paid by the participants. It then examines the financial situation of older renters and how the lack of financial resources affects

their everyday lives. The relationship between financial hardship and isolation is then explored. I also briefly examine anxiety around security of tenure. Finally, the importance of family connections is analysed.

Rents

All of the participants spoke of how difficult it was to find adequate, affordable accommodation in Sydney while being dependent on the aged pension and the CRA. Participants came from all over Sydney, so the difficulty was not confined to particular neighbourhoods.³ A male participant, who at the time of the interview lived in a single room in a boarding house and was paying \$100 a week (he was the only participant interviewed who resided in a boarding house), expressed the difficulty in the following way:

Most rental accommodation I've found, I mean I've been renting for seven years, eight years, ... and most of them basically are substandard accommodation ... And they tend to charge as much as possible for as little as possible. ... Finding good accommodation is very difficult. [Michael.]⁴

The National Centre for Social and Economic Modeling (NATSEM) concluded:

Families and singles were regarded as being in housing stress if their estimated housing costs exceeded 30 per cent of their disposable income and that the income unit was in the bottom 40 per cent of the income distribution. [Harding, Philips and Kelly 2004.]

Although all of the informants lived in modest accommodation, most were suffering from housing stress. Some were suffering from what can be termed acute housing stress, with over half — and, in a couple of cases, all — of their income being spent on rent. In the latter scenario, the two participants in question had to draw from their savings constantly. Weekly rents varied from a low of \$70 to a high of \$295. The few participants who were not suffering from housing stress were living in accommodation that was subsidised by a family member, a friend or the church. Thus, the participant paying \$70 a week was living in the garden cottage of a wealthy friend; at the time of the interview, she was extremely agitated as the house had been sold and she had no idea what she was going to do. The two participants paying \$100

3 The median rent for all dwellings in Sydney in September 2004 was \$275 a week and in inner Sydney it was \$330 (NSW Department of State and Regional Development 2005).

4 All of the names used are pseudonyms.

a week were living in a Baptist Church-owned housing complex for older people. A couple paying \$120 a week were living in a flat owned by their son. Besides the participant who was renting a room in a boarding house for \$100 a week, all of the participants who were residing in unsubsidised, private rented accommodation were paying at least \$140 a week. Four participants were paying \$200 or more a week.

At the time of the interviews, the income of the older renters interviewed was around \$580 a fortnight — constituted by the aged pension and the CRA. The participant paying \$295 a week had some capital, which she had to draw on every month in order to survive: '... I'm short of between \$500 and \$700 a month' (Betty). Those paying \$150 a week were spending just over half of their income on rent. The rent that participants had to pay was usually the key factor shaping their everyday quality of life. One participant expressed this in the following way:

So living in Sydney is cheap. I could manage on the pension ... if I didn't have the high rent. ... there is no question; people should be able to manage on that pension, if they're not paying high rent. If I was to get somewhere with cheaper rent, I would manage fine. ... Yes, I would manage well. [Paul, who was paying \$220 a week.]

Participants were adamant that they were not prepared to live in unsavoury conditions or in a boarding house; however, in order to avoid doing so they had to devote a considerable part of their income to rent. The one participant who was living in a boarding house had to endure shared facilities; 'rough' and difficult fellow residents; and shocking physical conditions:

Well it's an old house that's been converted. Downstairs what would have been four rooms is eight bedrooms. Upstairs, I'm not really sure of, but I'd say that, that's probably ten rooms, maybe more, and it's only partitioned. It's cold. ... The furniture is substandard. There's gaps in the floorboards. There's gaps in the walls. You know, it's exceedingly miserable and bloody cold. Especially now that winter is coming on, but that seems to be the standard. [Michael.]

A lot of older people (and younger people) would find it difficult to maintain their health in this situation.

Financial hardship among older private renters

Not surprisingly, the fact that the bulk of their income was going towards paying the rent meant that participants, more especially those who did not have access to some form of subsidised rent, endured constant financial stress. Paul, a 65-year-old male informant, described his financial situation in the following way:

And of course the major, well my only income is through the aged pension which I got, but my main outgoing is \$220 a week for rent and so it means that there's a very skinny situation as far as surplus. ... I don't have anything except the pension [and the CRA] that comes in and I literally have to budget to the last dollar, even less than the last dollar.

The purchasing of food was a meticulous process. Several participants said that after paying the rent and other essentials, they had about \$30 a week for food:

So I don't eat all the right food because I can't afford to buy all the right things. ... I buy according to price and not according to quality ... [Also] I suppose not being able to go and have a coffee or something, so some of the things go in the mouth as a kind of compensation or something to make you feel good. [Rod.]

You never have any over because you know you live on rice and spaghetti and things like that, and then if you have some more money, you buy some fish and stuff like that ... I might have fruit maybe once a month or once every couple of months. ... and it's not only your food you've got to buy, it's your toiletries, your washing up powder and soap and toothpaste and all those things that you have to buy as well. [Peta, whose rent is \$220 a week.]

Clothes were luxury items that participants rarely purchased new:

Apart from the shoes that I have to buy to get around ... I don't buy new clothes. I never buy new clothes ever. I go to — there's three opportunity shops in Rockdale and I always go to the opportunity shops. [Leanne, whose rent is \$150 a week.]

Those participants who were paying over \$200 a week were particularly vulnerable. After paying the rent, Kathy, a 70-year-old woman, was left with \$17 a fortnight:

And at that point in time, well, the rent he wanted was \$270 and I got him down to \$250. ... So I pay \$500 a fortnight. But of course for my pension I get \$517. So I have \$17 for two weeks.

She had to constantly dip into her capital of \$80,000, which she had obtained from selling her mobile home. This situation was causing her enormous stress:

Yes, and I don't want to use it [her capital] all. I don't like using it but obviously I have to ... And then once the end comes to using that bit of capital, I'm in big trouble. ... Yes, I'm on medication for depression ... I think that's helping. Just to keep me going, otherwise I'd become quite suicidal really. ... It's a battle that can get you down.

She felt that the rent she was paying was reasonable (she was in a small cottage) and that it would have been very difficult to find anything cheaper in the area. She had

to live in the neighbourhood in question to be near her children, as she often looked after her grandchild in the afternoons after school.

Well this is quite good, \$250 is quite good. Anything cheaper, \$230, my daughter-in-law pays \$230 for a unit, so yes, it would be, for a unit which, again I have my little dogs, which would be such a traumatic experience to get rid of them, I just don't know what I would do ...

Participants coped with their constant monetary concerns in different ways. Many turned to St Vincent de Paul or the Salvation Army for help. It was evident that in some instances, without this assistance, going hungry was a possibility:

Yesterday I got money. I pay all of everything, then I buy two things for myself and then I got no money to buy the grocery. Then I go and talk with Salvation Army. They give me the voucher for \$20 to buy the food. [Nirvana, 65-year-old widowed participant, whose rent was \$140 a week.]

Being dependent on charity was not an easy option. Peta had the following comment:

I feel terrible. You know you feel, you're like somebody going with a begging bowl or something like that, but I mean when the time comes that you just don't have quite enough to pay your electricity or your phone, well rather than get it cut off, well they'll help you out.

Besides for the basics of rent, food, electricity and the phone, participants often found themselves in situations where they were required to pay out relatively large amounts of money. This created a lot of anxiety. As one of the participants said: 'But, at the end of the day, if something goes wrong that I don't plan on, it throws me quite out, you know. There's no room for error. No room at all.' Common out-of-the-ordinary expenses were health issues not covered by Medicare, most notably dental work, glasses and physiotherapy:

I paid \$500 and something for dental treatment just a few months ago. Again I was lucky that I had that little bit of money to be able to do that because I've always had a thing of wanting to keep my own teeth. ... And I've always said I don't care if I get wrinkles, that's fine, as long as I've got my own teeth and don't have to put them in a jar next to the bed I'm happy. And of course we don't get any free dental at all now. [Julie.]

I've just had cataracts taken off, and that's made conditions of life good. But then I've got to get new glasses. ... I have to find, you know, \$700 or something. I remember when I got these glasses, and so it does impact on all sorts of things. [Craig.]

Medicines were a major expense for some of the participants:

I sort of rely on having a very understanding pharmacist where I have an account. And I'm going to have to pay them when I can. And what happens now like I've done today where I've rung up and said to Centrelink, there's an availability of \$500 that they give in advance, so I'll get that and I'll go and pay my pharmacist's account, and a few other bills and things. [Paul.]

Maintenance of basic household items was a major concern. Participants often could not afford to repair or replace basic items:

Well, I've had a few things break down since I've been here that I can't replace. I mean I haven't got a microwave oven, that's sitting out on the back out there ... And I don't own a vacuum cleaner and I haven't got a heater. [Peta.]

A participant spoke of the hardship she has endured since her washing machine broke down:

The machine is break down. ... Then I call the man to come and look and repair. But can't repair. Lot of money to do repairing. But I can't get another one. What I do, then I go and talk with Salvation Army, can you help me for the washing machine? Nearly every two months I go [to the Salvation Army]. I haven't got a machine. Sometime I wash by hand. And now the day is come I can't wash by hand [due to health reasons] ... [Nirvana.]

The psychological effects of the constant financial battle were significant for several participants. Some managed to maintain an optimistic disposition, but others were worn down by it: 'I've been going through a big depression ... It gets me down, you know, when I think how my life was once and what it is now' (Peta). The following brutally honest comment reflects the despair that Debbie, an older private renter, had experienced:

Of course you do [want to be part of the mainstream]. Otherwise, you do get depressed and I believe that's why people suicide. ... And there have been times when I've thought, what is the point to life? I really have thought this can't go on, you know.

Those participants who had managed to acquire cheaper accommodation appeared to be less stressed, but even they had to watch every cent. Also, because they had relatively more disposable income, they were more inclined to hang on to 'luxuries' like a car or insurance premiums:

When you sort of add it up you say you get, I think the pension now comes to about \$570 or something with your rental allowance, but when you've got car insurance and the petrol and I've got a funeral plan, and I've paid all them since I was working, and I thought now why should I give them up when I've paid so much into them, so I still keep it going. ... I think I get left with about \$60 [a fortnight]. Well, that's enough to live on. [Kate.]

Poverty in old age does have a particular quality. There is a sense that there is no way you can get out of it and there is no chance of going back or starting again. Julie expressed this in the following way:

I think that makes it, like a few of my friends, older women, they feel like they've wasted their lives a little bit I think. ... My girlfriend said to me, why am I in this position, why did I do this to myself?

Limited financial resources and isolation

Their limited finances contributed to older renters finding it difficult to avoid social isolation. Loneliness was a great fear and a reality for several of the participants:

I've become very isolated. I used to, before I had the hip [operation], I used to play tennis, and I loved to play tennis and it was a good way of keeping the weight off and being active. But I really can't afford [the tennis]. I've found a few clubs that I could go and play in. I'd like to get back to it, but they say, 'Ah the fees are this and you pay it annually', and I can't come up with \$150 or \$200 or whatever. [Paul.]

Participants complained that because of financial constraints they could never contemplate entertaining people or reciprocating. This situation encourages isolation:

Oh, it's embarrassing when you have people being so kind to you, to me, yes, and my neighbours next door, they entertain a lot, and they always invite me, because that lady, I was a nurse, she was a nurse. ... I was in the workforce until I was 74 and so I'm used to being surrounded by people and it's very lonely living like this. [Brigitte.]

Lack of money meant that they had to turn down invitations:

And the big thing is, too, again, ego or vanity or something, that you don't like telling people that I can't go to this function because I can't afford to go, so I make excuses. I ring up and say I'm ill or have to go to a funeral, or something. [Julie.]

But you know, if I wanted to go out with my niece ... she rings up, 'Auntie Kate, we're going here. Do you want to go?' I have to say 'no' because I know I can't afford it. [Kate.]

There was frustration around the inability to partake in leisure activities:

I would like to go the theatre. I would like to go occasionally to something relaxing, but you can't go outside the door without it costing money. Can't go outside the door. [Sue.]

Ill health also had an impact, but often it appeared to interact with general exhaustion brought about by the desperate endeavour to find enough money for everyday living:

But you know, I'm reaching the stage now where I don't go out because I haven't got the energy. I just have not got the energy. [Julie.]

The rise in public transport fares from \$1.10 to \$2.50 in January 2005 was a huge blow for many of the participants. It put a serious brake on their movement:

And quite often it's ... little things like now with the train travel going from \$1.10 to \$2.50. It's a pretty small amount, but it's substantial in my sphere ... [Paul.]

I want to go out sometime, I've got no fare to go. Before it was all right, it was \$1.10, now \$2.50. Very hard to find it. [Nirvana.]

For some of the older renters, running a car was vital for lessening isolation:

Every morning I go out just to, there's a park which is too far to walk, but it's dog friendly. And having the two little dogs I can put them in the car and I can have an hour and a half, two hours walk sharing with the dogs and that is my, well for me that's quite important, sharing with my dogs and for me health-wise it's good. ... So without the car I couldn't do that. [Kathy.]

The car represented independence and gave Kathy possibilities, but it was also a source of great anxiety in terms of running costs.

Kathy had tried to overcome the rent burden by moving out of Sydney. The move had been disastrous. She had felt isolated and depressed and had eventually sold the mobile home she had purchased and moved back to Sydney to be close to her children and grandchild:

Because the pension is not a huge amount and one doesn't expect it to be a huge amount. But it's nearly impossible to rent in Sydney and ... and when I went to the caravan park, I

thought, well, it's only an hour away from Sydney ... but you're getting into a group of people that are not like-minded, so you're counteracting that as well. And that adds to the isolation rather than helps to build sort of a community.

Anxiety around security of tenure

For most participants, a source of much anxiety was being forced to move due to rent increases or the landlord selling the building. Paul was extremely concerned that the landlord was about to increase his rent of \$220 a week. Any rent increase would mean that he would have to find alternative accommodation:

And it's upsetting, the [lack of] security and my landlord sort of, he was very good and I was able to keep paying him all the time, at the moment I think I'm two weeks behind, but when I get this money I'll try and bring it up to date with him. But he sort of got a little, you know, edgy about it, and then he ... was sort of saying, well, there hasn't been an increase for a couple of years and we're really looking to increase it. So I just couldn't [afford it]. If he put it up, I'd have to go. There's no way in the world that I could do it.

Another participant was sure that the house she was renting would be sold in the near future:

These are the last four houses and they're just waiting for the right price and they'll be gone. I mean, I won't be here that long because they are waiting for the right price from the council because they've already been offered, yes, they've already been offered, but they didn't accept the offer ... [Kathy.]

Asked what she would do if her lease was not renewed, she responded: 'I don't know. I don't know. I really don't know. I don't know.'

Participants coped by just hoping that there would not be a rent increase: 'I don't think about it. I don't want to think about it.' [Peta.]

A participant who lives in a church-owned complex, and thus has security of tenure and a reasonable rent, spoke of his enormous relief at not having to worry about unsustainable rent increases and eviction:

Ah, we're in a different world [in this complex]. ... Sure they've got rules and regulations here, same as everybody else, but with private rental, you've got the sword hanging over your head all the time. [Sam.]

The importance of family and social connections

The extent and intensity of family connections varied a great deal. Some of the participants had no family or social connections, and for others contact with children was sporadic. Those participants who had close ties with their children spoke about the range of functions their children performed and they were usually more relaxed about their situation. For some of the participants, their children played a major role in ensuring that they had enough food: 'I know my son is very good. I can't stay without food. My son can help me when I got no food' (Nirvana).

One participant, who had a very positive disposition (his rent was subsidised), spoke passionately about his daughter: 'As I said, I'm grateful, I've got a wonderful daughter, and if I need anything, or if I'm in strife, she's there' (Sam).

Some of the participants had at least one meal with a sibling or a child each week and their supplies were sometimes topped up in unusual ways. Thus, a participant who visits her sister every weekend described how her grandson kept her supplied with fish:

So I'm lucky there. Every time, if I'm going down there at the weekend, well he'll get all the fish that he's caught and he'll take it into the co-op and they will snap freeze it for him and I bring it home. [Jean.]

Several of the participants received help from their children with larger items or repairs:

And they [her daughters] said if ever you need anything, any bills to be paid, and when she found out, you know, she said, 'you should get a computer' and I said, 'Ah, no, I'm not interested'. Well, she got me one. [Jean.]

Clothes were often bought for participants by family members:

I know my sisters, always buy me outfits or something. My daughters always buy shoes and stuff for presents. So I'm lucky there. But if you have to do that, if you haven't got anyone, you wouldn't be able to do it. I think that I'd like to go out and buy something, yes, but no, you just can't. [Jean.]

The knowledge that, if all else failed, it would be possible to move in with a child was comforting; however, in all cases there was a fierce determination to remain independent for as long as possible. This was combined with a great reluctance to leave familiar surroundings and activities:

I have two daughters and one I don't have anything to do with really ... but my other daughter ... she's been supportive in as much as she can. I may even, you know, as a last resort go and live down in that part of the world [in southern New South Wales], but I'm reluctant to do that because other infrastructure such as medical and I belong to a local church and it's been a great solace. I work there voluntarily, which is a great thing because it keeps my mind [active] ... and also a little bit of self-esteem. ... That was the sort of thing that I was doing when I had a professional career. So that's good and I also have a bit to do with [the local] Rugby Union. I go down on Saturday and do the scoreboard for them. [Paul.]

Participants were sometimes spared the trauma of unexpected events and expenses through a generous landlord or a supplier of services in the neighbourhood. Thus, Paul, who had to take medication on a daily basis, was very reliant on his pharmacist helping him out:

I sort of rely on having a very understanding pharmacist where I have an account. And I'm going to have to pay them when I can.

Another participant told of how her landlord paid her physiotherapy bills:

The doctor says no, I need another three months of physio, but that was \$45 a visit. I was supposed to go three times a week. I could only afford to go once a week. And both my daughters were sending me money and I said, 'ah yes, just send me \$45 and Sarah would send me \$45, and that was it. So then John [the landlord] said, 'Ah go to physio. I'll ring my physio up'. He said, 'You go and see him'. And he was very good. He gave me, I don't know, but he said it was free. And I wonder if Jack and his wife paid for it. I don't know. [Jean.]

Conclusion

The research indicates that older renters in Sydney who are living in unsubsidised accommodation are an extremely vulnerable grouping and that many of them suffer severe financial hardship and social exclusion. The degree of hardship was shaped to a large extent by whether a participant was fortunate enough to find reasonably priced accommodation and whether they had strong family connections. About half of the older renters interviewed had minimal or no family connections. Most of these participants found everyday life especially hard, as they knew they had no fallback.

The research shows that the CRA is not resolving housing stress for many older Sydney private renters, and what I have called 'acute housing stress' is fairly common. A person in this situation will be spending at least half of their income on

rent, and the purchasing of even the bare necessities will be a constant struggle. Any unexpected expense is likely to catapult the individual concerned into a financial and personal crisis. Either the CRA needs to be revised so that the assistance given does indeed relieve housing stress, or new policy has to be put in place to make renting privately affordable (see Berry and Hall 2005). Clearly, the provision of adequate and affordable social housing could be a central means for alleviating the enormous difficulties that many older renters in Sydney face. In a major survey of public housing tenants, the most common reasons given for why public housing had improved their quality of life (71 per cent said it had) was that 'they feel more settled' and secondarily they were 'more able to manage their rent and money' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2004, 7).

From a human rights perspective, what is fundamentally unjust is the way events during an individual's life course, usually beyond the control of the individual concerned, had such a negative impact on their lives in their retirement years. The individuals interviewed were being punished for not becoming homeowners in their life course. The question that needs to be asked is why, in such an affluent society, should an older person who happens to not be a homeowner be forced, due mainly to the inadequacies of the government's affordable housing policies, to live out their remaining years in such stressful and parlous circumstances? The injustice of this situation is heightened by the fact that homeowners receive enormous benefits from government. Yates (2002, 43) has calculated that in 2000, \$1 billion was allocated per annum in 'direct assistance to home ownership plus \$17 billion in indirect assistance'. In stark contrast, 'just under \$2b [was allocated] for rent assistance to private renters and just under \$1b for public outlays on public housing' (Yates 2002, 43).

The Australian Government's withdrawal from the direct provision of housing is certainly not unique. Across the OECD, governments are now coping 'with the housing needs of the poor through standard income transfer mechanisms, such as housing allowances, rather than by direct subsidies to housing production' (Castles 1998, 263). In the present phase of welfare state restructuring, it is up to the individual to acquire decent affordable accommodation. Providing affordable housing is no longer viewed as part of government's repertoire.

In Australia, homeownership is certainly becoming more difficult. A recent survey by the OECD concluded that 'Australia has by far the most overvalued houses in the Western world' and housing stress is becoming more and more common (Colebatch and Topsfield 2005). The ABS found that 'the age profile of homeowners and purchasers has shifted over the last twenty years, with a decline in home ownership among younger adults' (ABS 2004). The implication is that over the coming decades, more and more older Australians will be depending on the private rental market for

their accommodation and almost all of them will be dependent on the aged pension for their income. Despite superannuation, the government has estimated that in 2050, 75 per cent of older Australians will still be dependent on the pension for their income. Half of the 75 per cent will draw the full pension (Gittins 2006). We can only hope that as the number of older renters increases, government will be more prepared to develop policies that will ensure that older renters are able to live out the last chapter of their lives in accommodation which is adequate and affordable. ●

References

Agreement National Data Reports 2004–05 (2005) *CSHA Community Housing* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2001) *2001 Census of Population and Housing Commonwealth of Australia* Australian Government, Canberra

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) *Social Trends, 2004, Australian Social Snapshot Against a Backdrop of Change* Australian Government, Canberra

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) *Social Trends 2005, Housing Trends: Housing Trends for Older Australians* Australian Government, Canberra

Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) (2002) *Public and Community Housing: A Rescue Package Needed* ACOSS Report, 14 October, Sydney

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2004) 'Commonwealth Rent Assistance, June 2002: a profile of recipients' 14 (May) *Bulletin*

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005a) *Australia's Welfare, 2005* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005b) *2005 Public Housing, National Social Housing Survey — Key Results*, cat no Aus 78, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006) *Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement National Data Reports 2004–05, CSHA Community Housing* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra

Berry M and Hall J (2005) 'Institutional investment in rental housing in Australia: a policy framework and two models' 42(1) *Urban Studies* pp 91–111

Burke T and Hulse K (2002) *Sole Parents, Social Wellbeing and Housing Assistance* Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne

Castles F (1998) *Comparative Public Policy: Patterns of Post-War Transformation* Edward Elgar, Cheltenham

Colebatch T and Topsfield J (2005) 'Home prices "world highest"' *The Age* 1 December

Community Housing Federation of Australia (2006) *Community Housing Snippets* Community Housing Federation of Australia, Canberra [Online] Available: <www.chfa.com.au/portal/community_housing_home.htm>

Gittins R (2006) 'Demolishing a few of the super myths' *Sydney Morning Herald* 14 June

Hall J and Berry M (2004) 'Sustainable financing for public housing authorities' 41 (April) *AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin*

Harding M, Philips B and Kelly S (2004) *Trends in Housing Stress* National Centre for Social and Economic Modeling (NATSEM), Canberra

Morris A, Judd B and Kavanagh K (2005a) 'Marginality amidst plenty: pathways into homelessness for older Australians' 40(2) *Australian Journal of Social Issues* pp 241–51

Morris A, Judd B, Kavanagh K and Naidoo Y (2005b) 'Older marginalised people: pathways into and out of a marginal housing situation' 11(1) *Australian Journal of Human Rights* pp 119–38

New South Wales Department of State and Regional Development (2005) *Living in NSW* New South Wales Government, Sydney

Residex (1999) 'How we made it through the nervous 1990s' [Online] Available: <www.residex.com.au/index.php?content=article4>

UN Habitat (2003) *United Nations Housing Rights Program* UN-Habitat, New York

Wade M (2006) 'Slump hits home' *Sydney Morning Herald* 7 February

Wordsworth T, Wallace P, McRae K and Wilson D (1999) *Community Housing Mapping Project Data Report* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra

Yates J (2002) *A Distributional Analysis of the Impact of Direct and Indirect Housing Assistance*, positioning paper, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne