

Evaluation of the Severe Domestic Squalor Project



Research Findings



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RESEARCH FINDINGS



1.1 Background

The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales was commissioned by Catholic Community Services (a division of Catholic Healthcare) to evaluate the Severe Domestic Squalor Project (SDS). The Project aims to: facilitate holistic assessment and support for people who are living in squalor; foster sustainable solutions for clients; and to educate service providers working in the community about how to respond when situations of squalor are encountered. This report uses a logic model framework to assess the outcomes experienced by clients who have exited from the Project, learning outcomes from the service model, and compares the costs of the Project to the outcomes. A mixed method approach was used which included: an analysis of program data collected upon referral, entry into and exit from the Project; interviews with 12 stakeholders and eight clients; analysis of expenditure data; and an analysis of training evaluations. This is an important piece of research as it is the first in Australia to systematically collect evidence about the consequences associated with living in squalor, as well as the benefits of targeted support for people in these situations.

1.2 Key findings

Profile of referrals

SDS surpassed its commitment to DADHC to provide services to 157 clients during the one year pilot: 218 people were referred to SDS between 1 August 2008 and 31 July 2009. Analysis of the demographic profiles showed that:

- Referrals were 55 per cent male and 45 per cent female and were, on average, 62 years of age. A little over half of the referrals (58%) were younger than 65 years of age.
- Referrals were received from 12 services; the largest number of referrals was received from Housing NSW (20%), followed by Home and Community Care (17%), Community Mental Health (17%), and Community Health (12%). This reveals that situations of squalor are problematic for a diverse array of organisations.
- SDS received referrals from 17 local government areas. The highest number of referrals came from Sydney local government area (33%).

Service principles

- Successful interventions in situations of squalor should be based on the following principles:
- Respect for clients and non-judgemental attitudes.
- Develop trust and rapport.
- Move slowly and do not expect that living situations will change overnight. Quick fix solutions are usually unsustainable and can jeopardise relationships of trust.
- Provide consistent, ongoing support.
- Communicate regularly and honestly with all parties involved, including clients and other services.

The future of SDS

The prevention and reduction of homelessness is a current government priority and the NSW government has recognised that addressing severe domestic squalor is an important element of reducing tenancy evictions. SDS has been successful in reducing housing insecurity, linking clients with appropriate services, and improving living conditions. Without receiving recurrent funding it is unlikely that:

- Situations of domestic squalor in Sydney can be addressed sustainably;
- The implementation of the Severe Domestic Squalor Guidelines will be effectively achieved; and
- Evictions and housing insecurity in situations of squalor will be systematically reduced.

1.4 Conclusion

SDS not only met its contractual obligations to DADHC but provided high quality services to an underserved and vulnerable group of people. A commitment of further resources is needed to sustain the changes that have been measured in this evaluation and to provide others in the community with access to this unique service.





experience positive changes in social contact and community participation. Baseline and exit information on these key indicators was available for 57 clients. The findings show that:

- As a result of their involvement with SDS, clients experienced a significant decrease in the number of consequences experienced as a result of living in squalor.
- They were significantly less likely to experience safety, health and fire risks and to be denied access to services due to OHS risks. They were also less isolated from the wider community, and had lower risk of being evicted from their current home. These outcomes are important given the current policy environment which emphasises homelessness prevention and social inclusion (NSW Government, 2009).
- SDS achieved greater involvement from agencies that can appropriately address underlying issues experienced by people living in squalor. Clients leaving SDS recorded higher levels of involvement across most service areas, particularly community services (21% increase) and aged care services (18% increase).
- Although service coordination is an essential element of fostering sustainable solutions, working together was impeded by conflicting definitions of risk and autonomy; strict service boundaries between human service agencies; and the time consuming and costly nature of interventions.
- Upon entry, client property conditions were extremely poor: 11 per cent of the sample did not have functioning running water and 16 per cent did not have functioning lighting.
- The living conditions of SDS clients at baseline were poorer than those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, who are widely recognised as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia. The most comparable statistic to the data collected by the Project is that of functioning kitchen facilities: five per cent of Indigenous Australians do not have working facilities for preparing food, as compared with 23 per cent of the SDS clients (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004).
- Client living conditions improved significantly over the course of their involvement with the Project; clients had a significant decrease in global ECCS scores. They also experienced a 29 per cent increase in access to their

kitchen areas, and 23 per cent increase in access to sleeping areas.

- As a result of the reduction in consequences associated with squalor, changes in living conditions, and increased service involvement, clients experienced other changes in their lives:
 - Social contact improved considerably for clients leaving SDS, of whom 81 per cent were reported to have a regular support network. This represents a 14 per cent increase on baseline measures.
 - Clients experienced a 21 per cent increase in employment related activities (to a total of 31% of the sample) and a 12 per cent increase in volunteering.

Community education

In addition to services provided to clients, SDS aims to educate the broader community about how to respond to situations of squalor by providing advice on a squalor hotline and running training sessions. SDS was contracted by DADHC to provide 30 training sessions for a maximum of 600 people.

From 1 August 2008 - 30 July 2009, the Project ran 32 training sessions for a total of 748 participants. Participants had largely positive responses to the training, and reported that the sessions were clear, well presented and relevant to participants' work. An estimated 1000 calls for advice was also received on the squalor hotline. This confirms that SDS provided a substantial amount of education to the community and exceeded its obligations to DADHC.

Service model

This section of the report draws on qualitative data from the 12 stakeholder interviews and eight clients to assess the benefits and limitations of SDS service model and the role SDS plays in the broader service system. Financial data also analysed and compared to the outcomes of the project to determine the costs and benefits of SDS. The analysis shows that:

- Benefits of the model include the provision of individual, flexible, holistic, ongoing and expert support. Another benefit is the development of partnerships with existing services.





- The Project was limited by a lack of resources. Furthermore, sustainable solutions could not be achieved for all clients because SDS could not link people in with the appropriate supports.
- Other challenges facing the Project centred on the degree of risk that is acceptable in situations of squalor. Further discussions within the broader community are required to gain consensus around whether living in squalor in the community constitutes an acceptable risk.
- All stakeholders and most clients believed the Project fills an important gap in the service system. Without it, stakeholders were concerned that people living in squalor will again be subject to short term, unsustainable interventions and that partnerships between services will be jeopardised.
- SDS support cost \$2427 per accepted client; each training session cost about \$700 per session. The expenditure has resulted in strong positive outcomes for clients of the Project.
- If the Project is refunded, it will require more sustainable staffing levels as the Project deals with some of the more complex situations in the community. For this reason, a baseline cost of \$4000 per client is both more realistic and still inexpensive for the government.

1.3 Recommendations

Service model

This evaluation has shown that people living in squalor can have complex issues and that the situations can result in difficult ethical dilemmas for professionals. Service models best suited to address situations of squalor should include the following elements:

- Case management;
- Service coordination;
- Flexible and individualised support;
- Ongoing support;
- Holistic assessment and support;
- Staff supervision;
- Sharing expertise and advice with others through both formal and informal approaches (e.g. training and telephone advice); and
- Sustainability.

- People referred to the Project lived in a mix of public housing (54%), privately owned homes (39%) and rental accommodation (7%). The large proportion of people in public housing suggests that this is a complex group with multiple sources of disadvantage.
- Over one third (41%) of people referred to the Project lived in insecure accommodation as a result of living in squalor.
- Of the 218 referred clients, 208 were assessed by 31 July 2009 and 53 per cent (n=110) were accepted for further service. Of those who were not accepted, 18 per cent refused services and 13 per cent required immediate placement or hospitalisation.
- Clients accepted into the Project experienced a number of consequences associated with living in squalor: 85 per cent experienced safety risks, 71 per cent were unable to receive services, 54 per cent were isolated, and 41 per cent had an insecure tenancy.
- People who were accepted into SDS were more likely to experience safety, health and fire risks and to have an issue with hoarding. They were also more likely to be denied access to services due to OHS concerns.
- People who were not accepted were more likely to be over the age of 65, to have age related problems or cognitive impairments, as well as poorer physical and mental health. This indicates that people with these characteristics were less appropriate for SDS services, because it was felt that sustainable solutions could not be achieved where they currently lived. Even though they were not accepted, SDS was involved in organising other interventions for these people, such as guardianship or placement in more appropriate accommodation.

Client outcomes

SDS provides holistic assessments for people living in squalor. People who are willing to cooperate in the intervention and for whom a sustainable solution can be found are accepted for further intervention. Interventions are focused on three key areas: reducing the consequences associated with squalor; addressing any underlying impairments; and improving client's living conditions. As a result, clients are expected to

