

When home is a caravan park

Denise Hogarth, Judi Geggie, Gus Eddy

It is only since 1986 that relocatable dwellings in caravan parks have been recognised as a category of permanent residence for census purposes. This fact highlights the apparent invisibility of a small but significant proportion of the Australian population. Recent literature has implicated high differentiation of the population, urban sprawl, and high rates of internal (particularly intra-urban) migration in the transmission of disadvantage. In this article, staff of the National Dissemination Program of the Hunter Caravan Project apply that analysis to their own experience of caravan park residency issues. Some very practical suggestions are made for addressing some of those issues as they apply to children.

Introduction and theoretical approach

The Hunter Caravan Project has worked with mobile communities in thirty caravan parks in the Hunter (NSW) since 1986, and has drawn attention to the needs of families who are often overlooked by the general community. Initial funding for the project came from the Dutch philanthropic organisation, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, which aims to improve the educational, health and social status of children aged from 0 - 8 years. The more recently formed National Dissemination Program of the Hunter Caravan Project, which also utilises funds from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, works to place the issues of families living in caravan and manufactured homes on the national agenda. The program facilitates an ongoing dialogue between health and community services, local government, residents, operators, and government departments - to share information and create a climate for change.

Project staff have adopted an ecological view of child development, similar to that proposed by developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). According to this

Judi Geggie (Executive Project Officer), Gus Eddy (Senior Project Officer) and Denise Hogarth (Project Officer) work for the National Dissemination Program of the Hunter Caravan Project based at the Family Action Centre of The University of Newcastle.

This article is based largely on a paper delivered at the 23rd AASW National Conference, Newcastle, 1993.

Contact: The National Dissemination Program, Univ. of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, 2308. Tel: 049 216 840; Fax: 049 216 934.

view, the individual is regarded as being at the innermost level of an environment composed of many eco-systems which bear different degrees of relationship to him or her. The complex of relationships at the innermost level is called the micro-system. Linkages between micro-systems are of two types: one, called meso-systems, in which the developing child directly participates; and another, labelled exo-systems, in which s/he does not. All systems of an individual's environment are nested within a macro-system. The individual and his/her systems are, by definition, mutually shaping, regardless of patterns of direct and indirect participation within those various systems.

A collection of single settings like home, the school, health systems etc. constitute the micro-systems of children. Relationships between the home and the school, and use of child health facilities are both examples of meso-system, and conditions of parental employment and housing tenancy exemplify exo-system. Factors like culture or sub-culture, social class, religious affiliation and systems of law and government may each define a particular macro-system for the individual. Caravan and manufactured home living can currently be regarded as denoting membership of a particular sub-culture or macro-system. This in turn defines, to varying degrees, characteristics of the exo, meso and micro systems which are nested within it.

The National Dissemination Program of the Hunter Caravan Project is committed to ameliorating conditions for children. The use of Bronfen-

brenner's model as a theoretical framework for intervention means that children's needs are addressed by promoting and facilitating positive change in the environmental systems with which they inter-relate. Each level or system becomes a focus of attention since each is distinctively relevant to development. The family micro-system, is usually the one of most immediate importance to the child. Therefore, improving conditions for children is very much a matter of improving conditions for their families.

In his 1972 pre-election speech, former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam claimed that well-being was dependant more on where one lived than on what one earned (quoted in Troy 1981:17). Our purpose here is to reflect on the relationship between living place and well-being for caravan residents and their children.

Caravan residency and disadvantage

Current Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe asserts, in his foreword to 'Mobility and locational disadvantage within Australian cities' (Maher et al 1992:iii) that:

...locational disadvantage is increasingly being recognised as a major social issue.

In the same publication the authors make the point that:

...location becomes important because there are spatial constraints on the availability and use of a range of resources which are not universally available but are located unevenly in geographic space. (1992:10)

Thus, in their view, it is not only '...the attributes of the dwelling itself' or '...the social milieu within which the dwelling is situated' (1992:11) which provides utility (satisfaction). They perceive satisfaction to derive from a complex of factors. Significant among these are the location of the dwelling with respect to a variety of both publicly and privately provided goods and services. Also important in providing satisfaction are the availability of passive and active open space, and the relative location, type, and accessibility of employment (1992:11).

In locations which impose disadvantage with respect to resources and accessibility, there are individuals and groups who are poorly equipped to access whatever resources are available. Maher et al identify low income, unemployment, single parents and overseas-born from a non-English-speaking background as primary variables which can characterise reduced facility in accessing resources. In addition, they identify age structure, housing occupancy status, low or no vehicle ownership, and family size as secondary variables. (1992:67-68)

In locations which impose disadvantage with respect to resources and accessibility, there are individuals and groups who are poorly equipped to access whatever resources are available.

Field workers of the Hunter Caravan Project would say from observation that there is a marked correlation between caravan park living and the examples of locational disadvantage described above. They would also contend that parks house higher concentrations of groups identified by many of the primary and secondary indicators of socio-economic disadvantage proposed by Maher et al than can be found in the general population. In terms of the model outlined above, caravan parks can, and often do, comprise a macro-system wherein sub-systems are depleted of developmental opportunities for children, and over supplied with risks. Currently the ational Dissemination Program is working to

supplement the scant research data which is available in this area. Nevertheless there is some evidence in support of the observations of field workers.

A consultant's report to Wyong Council (Plant Location International, 1990) provides comparisons on demographic characteristics between persons living permanently in caravans or mobile homes, and the population generally. Their statistics (1990:16) showed, in respect of park residents in the Wyong local government area (LGA):

- 56.5% with incomes less than \$12000 compared to 35.9% in the Wyong LGA, 45.7% in NSW, and 39.0% in Australia.
- 42.1% unemployed compared to 16.2% in the Wyong LGA.
- 6.0% in one-parent families compared to 6.7% in the Wyong LGA, 4.5% in NSW, and 4.4% in Australia.
- 8.0% in nuclear families compared to 23.3% in the Wyong LGA, 10.3% in NSW, and 13.1% in Australia.
- 42.9% in lone person households compared to 20.6% in the Wyong LGA, 36.8% in NSW, and 34.5% in Australia.

Thus, Wyong park dwellers were relatively disadvantaged in respect of all but one of the primary indicators.

While both the age profile of park dwellers and the size of their households were similar to those of the population generally, car ownership rates were not: 28.5% of park dwellers were in households with no car compared to 14.0% in the LGA, 18.7% in NSW, and 16.2% in Australia. Given that caravan parks are seldom sited to best advantage in terms of access to public transport, or indeed to a variety of other services, low levels of car ownership is a significant risk factor in this particular macro-system.

Traditionally, the placement of camping and/or caravan parks in relation to outlets for goods and services has been less a consideration than their placement in relation to travel routes and desirable holiday venues. Many parks in NSW are situated in 'Scenic Protection Zones' or 'Rural Zones'.

Numerous are in environmentally sensitive locations. Moreover, they do not possess the infrastructure to cope with intensive forms of permanent residential development.

(Plant Location Intern'l 1990:42)

Yet the introduction of Ordinance 71 and continuing improvements in the quality of manufactured homes may cause the current resource availability problem to be exacerbated.

Because permanent residents of caravan parks have not officially existed in the statistics or in legislation until recently, the constraints on the availability and use of resources which characterise caravan park living have had little chance of being addressed. Both the cost of new infrastructure and the perceived under-utilisation of existing infrastructure in comparatively resource rich locations would indicate little change in resource availability for caravan park dwellers in the foreseeable future.

Maher et al state that:

...The high rates of mobility (internal migration) in our metropolitan areas suggest that many persons identified as having restricted residential choice (income, single parenthood, etc) have moved - or been forced to move - to areas which are less well endowed in terms of access and service provision. (1992:108)

The statement touches on the complex issue of choice. There are reasons, namely lifestyle and affordability, which cause people to choose caravan park living (Meldrum 1992:13; Plant Location International 1990:15). In each case, however, benefits can be questionable, or at the least, highly dependent upon circumstances. Renting or financing costs can be very high, and resale values very low in comparison to more traditional housing. Can a family which moves into a caravan because there is no rental bond required up-front and because they do not have the wherewithal to furnish a house or apartment really be said to be exercising choice? Lifestyle based choices usually focus on the benefits of community. However, the realisation of such benefits is dependent on a variety of factors eg the ability to overcome resource disadvantage and quality of park management.

Parker (1981, in Duffy 1987: 547-548) notes the difference in outcomes on school based indicators between children whose parents freely choose the caravan lifestyle and those who are less well adapted. Thus, on this issue as well, it is not only opportunity, but also the human attitudes which are brought to bear on it, which determine well-being.

Issues for families who live permanently in caravan parks

The Hunter Caravan Project in its work has found that park dynamics and standards vary. At one end of the standards continuum there is the well planned, well maintained community environment and, at the other, is the environment where standards are poor and there is little evidence of planning. Caravan park communities can be supportive places to raise a family as a result of an active community lifestyle, or they can be communities where poor park facilities make family living difficult and fear of eviction a constant companion. If caravans and manufactured homes are to be regarded as viable alternative forms of housing, then living in them must afford as equitable a balance of opportunities and risks as is available in other Australian households. Factors which may inhibit the achievement of equitable outcomes include: the negative effects of mobility; inadequate security of tenure; locational isolation; environmental and planning factors; educational and health factors; general community stigma; and ownership and finance.

Negative effects of mobility

- inhibited access to community services;
- poor image of 'authority', low self-esteem, wary of interference;
- continual need to break down barriers to access and information in new locations;

Inadequate security of tenure

- fear of eviction if owning or renting van/mobile home;
- prevalence of feelings of powerlessness, despite legislation to ensure rights of residents;
- reluctance of residents to raise issues of concern with managers/owners;
- lack of awareness of their tenure rights on the part of some residents;

Locational Isolation

- poor or inadequate public transport (often only the school bus);

- location on the fringes of towns/cities often on low grade land, eg, reclaimed swamps;
- poor access to shops and services;
- restricted availability of and access to social and support networks;

Environmental and planning factors

- poor drainage on some parks;
- unsatisfactory amenities (particularly for family groups);
- cramped living which can increase family stress;
- lack of a sheltered areas other than caravans for either adults or children;
- inadequate provision for recreation;

Educational and health factors

- poor access to education, child care, job prospects;
- lack of confidence, low social skills often exacerbated by a mobile lifestyle;
- living conditions often not conducive to academic achievement;
- often poor nutrition and inadequate health care;

General Community Stigma

- inability to access certain goods and services with caravan park address;
- lesser status - park residents still seen by some as second class citizens;
- political invisibility - not a vote catching issue;
- non availability of rebates on electricity charges for pensioners and invalids;
- poor access to mail and lack of privacy in mail delivery;

Ownership and Finance

- despite legalisation of permanent residency in parks in most states, ownership of land by tenants is rare;
- it is difficult to impossible to obtain as favourable finance conditions for the purchase of a 'mobile' unit, either caravan or manufactured home, as are available to other home purchasers.

Nowhere have these difficulties been better summarised than in Bishop Peter Hollingworth's speech delivered

to the World Planning and Housing Congress in Adelaide in 1986. He described caravan park living in the following terms:

It is estimated that there were up to 150 000 persons living permanently in caravan parks, and even this figure could be an underestimate. Behind the popular mythology of the mobile caravan dweller, following the sun along the beaches, is the hard reality of families living permanently in caravan parks which possess no security of tenure, quite inadequate physical and sanitary conditions, being located on the fringe of urban areas far from schools, shops transport and other amenities. Whilst caravan parks may suit some people's needs, there is a growing problem in an area such as this, which still has not been adequately addressed.

(1986:7)

The pity is that it has still not been adequately addressed!

Implications for children

Difficulties associated with caring for children in a caravan park are numerous. Usually there are solutions, but finding them can require changes in perception and/or spending priorities.

Examples of difficulties imposed by the lifestyle are to be found in normal household routines like bathing and toileting of children. These are difficult to carry out given the usual provision of facilities in park amenities. If family bathrooms with a bath, a shower, and a toilet were to be provided in ablutions blocks, parents could deal with these routines in much the same way as they would if living in a house or flat. Activities equally fundamental to human well-being, cooking and sleeping, are also affected by the particular arrangements imposed by caravan living. Because these are carried out at the caravan, they are challenges to the resourcefulness of the resident rather than to the priorities, budgetary or otherwise, of management.

Children living in caravan parks often fail to access community services such as health services, preschools, and playgroups. This inequity could be addressed by these and like services being brought onto the park. There are issues here for service providers, for park owners and managers, and for residents.

Children's safety can be a significant issue on parks. Inadequate fencing, exacerbating safety risks for children playing on roads, and their vulnerability to victimisation by other people who may or may not be strangers, are causes for concern. If parks were to be designed with families in mind then fencing adequate to the task of protecting children from wandering would be the norm rather than the exception. Often park rules prohibit residents from erecting restraining fences around their own caravans. This, if combined with insufficient provision of fenced off recreation space, can substantially increase security risks for children.

Supervision by caring adults other than parents is a safety net that can be provided in a community setting. Meldrum (1992:15) identified a wide variety of goods and services exchanged informally by park residents whom she surveyed. Obviously, a roster for watching out for each other's children is something that a group of parents could arrange amongst themselves, maybe with the support of a park worker operating within a Community Development Model.

In terms of protecting children from predatory adults or even from other children, common sense dictates the same rules on caravan parks as it does elsewhere. Parents need to know where and with whom their children are spending time and to be aware of the characters of those people. As elsewhere, knowing everyone in the community does not ensure child safety. However, in combination with supportive attitudes and adequate facilities of the types outlined above it does improve the outlook.

Also lacking, in many instances, are the social and physical developmental opportunities which are taken for granted in other circumstances. On a well planned park, facilities providing play opportunities for children would be available. Community norms would, hopefully, facilitate the safe and effective use of whatever spaces, structures and/or equipment were made available as part of that planning.

Conventional wisdom holds that children are entitled to opportunities for friendship with other children. One of the disadvantages that children who live in caravan parks may suffer is denial of access to friends who live outside the park. Their own parents may restrict their movements outside the park, or parents of other children may invoke strictures against visiting or playing on the park. What motivates some service providers, like doctors for instance, to be reluctant to service parks, can range from sheer snobbery, to real or perceived difficulty of access, to difficulty in finding the

largely unsupervised, or virtually following their children around in order to maintain adequate supervision. If some of the provisions for children that have been outlined above could be implemented, then circumstances would favour normal access to opportunities for friendship with other children. Residents running activities for park children with the support of management, and using the facilities provided, would enhance both the social and physical development opportunities available to their children and the whole Community Development Process within the park.

Implications for services

Maher et al concluded that population mobility can be implicated in the occurrence of either or both of social and locational disadvantage (1992:113). Obviously, a high correlation between the two in a specific location provides the grounds for greatest concern.

In their study, Maher et al did not refer to caravan parks or their populations. However, observation and the little data that is available would indicate that what they have to say is directly applicable. Their view of intra-urban mobility as a process and an outcome delineates the phenomenon which has all but made many caravan parks, or significant portions thereof, into de facto residential developments.

If components of the population already defined as disadvantaged (as indicated in the report to Wyong Shire Council) are in some way further penalised by relocating to poorly resourced and serviced areas

(eg many caravan parks) then social justice issues are raised. It may be that some community service workers share the general community perception that caravan parks are a housing option only for holiday makers, transients and itinerant workers. Caravan parks have been a long term housing option for many years, and will continue to be so in the future, due to projected high



The Hunter Caravan Project activity van in use at a local caravan park

person/s for whom they are looking. If adults have those perceptions in respect of their own relationship with caravan parks and their inhabitants, how much more strongly would these perceptions be held in respect of their children?

Often parents must choose between restricting their children's movements to the van and its annexe, allowing them free rein of the park

levels of unemployment and increasing housing costs. Recognition of the fact of long term caravan, and increasingly, mobile home residency is vital to adequate provision of community services.

Caravan park owners and managers can be as much victims as beneficiaries of the growth of parks as de facto residential estates. The skills, both personal and technical, required to run a camping ground are different from those required to manage a residential development. It is no more just, or even useful, to blame one victim than it is to blame another. Parks are private property and the sensitivities and need for support of all, operators and residents, are equally worthy of respect. Service delivery which is flexible can be tailored to meet the needs of both.

While the image of transience in respect of people in caravan parks is overdone, it is nevertheless true that populations fluctuate. Thus a real familiarity with life in a particular park necessitates an on-going presence. The establishment of cordial working relationships with operators can be invaluable in staying in touch with community needs and developments. Managerial support facilitates

both community service presence and sharing of much needed information.

Conclusion

Awareness of the points outlined in this paper may assist in the utilisation of the potential for the development of supportive caravan park and mobile home estate communities, using a Community Development approach and building on the strengths of residents and managers. Such an approach would have significant impact on the well being of children resident in caravans and manufactured homes.

Currently, there is a stigma attached to caravan park living. While some of the stigma is attributable to prejudice, some is traceable to conditions which actually do exist, at least to some extent, in most caravan parks. Prejudice is indefensible. So are the living conditions of many people, caravan park residents included. Caravan parks cannot be regarded by residents, by owners and operators, or by the community generally, as a viable residential alternative until, in fact, they demonstrably and consistently are. This will take good will and a concerted effort.

References

Bell M. (1992) *Internal Migration in Australia*, Canberra: AGPS

Bronfenbrenner U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Duffy E.P. (1987) Itinerant Children in Schools: A Neglected Social Issue, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 22, pp542-552.

Hollingworth P. (1986) *Human needs in Australia in the context of housing and planning*, transcript of address to World Planning and Housing Congress, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Melbourne.

Maher C., Whitelaw J., McAllister A., Francis R., Palmer J., Chee E. & Taylor P. (1992) *Mobility and locational disadvantage within Australian cities*, Canberra: AGPS

Meldrum S. (1992) *Lifestyle Aspects of Residents Within a Caravan and Relocatable Home Park*, Survey report to the Hunter Caravan Project, The University of Newcastle, Newcastle NSW.

Plant Location International (1990) *Report on the costs of living permanently in mobile home parks: 1990 Review*, A Report to the Wyong Council, Sydney.

Social Policy Research Centre
**1995 National Social
Policy Conference**

CALL FOR PAPERS

**Social Policy and the
Challenges of Social Change**

July 5-7 1995
University of New South Wales

We invite papers presenting results of research, conceptual approaches, or new issues for debate on the following topics:

Work and Welfare • Social and Economic Inequality
• Community Services • Citizenship and the Mixed Economy of Welfare
• Family, the Life Course and the State • Open Section

If you wish to offer a paper, please send the title, an abstract of no more than 200 words, and an indication of the area to which your paper is most relevant, to:

1995 Social Policy Conference Papers
Social Policy Research Centre
University of New South Wales
Sydney NSW 2052

or fax (02) 385 1049

The closing date for abstracts is **15 March 1995**.

Selection is the responsibility of the Social Policy Research Centre.

If you have further questions, please telephone Marilyn McHugh on (02) 385 3863.

Call for Papers