

ON THE STREETS

It's been an icy night in Adelaide, cold enough for me to bring the family dog inside despite her shaggy winter coat. In the city centre, Brandon has also brought his dog in closer – to huddle for warmth on a night sleeping on the bricks of a deserted laneway.

I meet the pair a few hours later: a young man in a hi-vis jacket, blond hair tucked under a backward baseball cap, softly stroking the short, black fur of Little Fella, a bouncy black dog on a lead who stays close. When I ask Brandon if he has time to talk, he offers one of his two pillows to sit on, so I squat amid the tousled rectangle of his life: a couple of blankets on the brick floor, a few containers of donated food, a coffee cup.

How has he managed the night? "It was fairly cold," Brandon allows. "I've got a little, thin blanket to stop me feeling the cold from the bricks and underneath, but this is my main warmth: this is the queen-sized blanket. And I've got my dog. Yeah, it was pretty chilly last night but we got through it."

I've seen quite a few people like Brandon in Topham Mall over time, some of them using it to sleep or shelter, others to sit quietly with a sign asking for money. Begging doesn't mean they're homeless, of course, but every time I walk by I wonder why we're not smart enough to fix this.

How would Brandon fix homelessness among the rough sleepers of Adelaide? "I don't really know," he says. "But certainly it's possible if you get everyone on board – but it's going to be a hell of a struggle. There's a lot of homeless people. And there's a lot of homeless people who don't want to get off the street."

What might move him? "If I could click my fingers right now, and make something happen, I'd make someone walk past me and offer me a job," he says. "So I could get my arse off the street."

David Pearson is someone who thinks we are smart enough to fix the problem, to the point that nobody will need to sleep on our city streets. He's worked on homelessness for 15 years, including as an adviser to premiers Mike Rann and Jay Weatherill. More recently he headed social justice think tank the Don Dunstan Foundation, where he helped start the Adelaide Zero Project, inspired by the advice of a former thinker in residence and US homelessness expert Rosanne Haggerty.

Pearson says the root cause of homelessness is poverty. Well, with a regular income, you wouldn't sleep on cold bricks. More revolutionary is his insistence that we can get homelessness in Adelaide's CBD down, effectively, to zero and use that as a model for communities around Australia.

Pearson insists he's not dreaming. Nor is he talking about solving all homelessness right away: the initial target is rough sleepers in Adelaide's CBD and parklands. That numbered about 150 people until the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the South Australian government to offer hotel rooms to the homeless.

That move saw a surge in people from across the city and suburbs, and visiting Aboriginal people from the country, take up the opportunity for shelter. There have been about 550 people supported as part of this COVID-19 response, about two-thirds of them men, and about 40 per cent Aboriginal, put into almost 25 hotels and motels.

And yet, despite that offer, the Zero Project still counts about 80 people bedding down in the city's wintry streets and parks. Insane? It turns out, it's not so simple.

Pearson, an industry adjunct at UniSA, is chief executive of the Australian Alliance to



How a new move to learn the names and stories of the homeless is driving a bid to cut Adelaide's rough sleeper numbers to effectively nothing.

WORDS ROY ECCLESTON
PHOTOGRAPH MATT TURNER

GROUND ZERO

End Homelessness, through which he plans to help communities around the country rethink how they tackle the problem. Setting a zero target changes the mindset, Pearson says, and Adelaide has the chance to lead the nation.

People like Brandon do not need to be sleeping on the street, and we shouldn't tolerate it, Pearson says. "Inequality is one of the biggest challenges we face – and rough-sleeping homelessness is the most obvious physical manifestation of inequality in our society," he argues. "It's just not normal to

walk around and have people on the street with nowhere to live in a country as wealthy and prosperous as ours, in a city which is constantly recognised as one of the most liveable in the world."

In Australia, the latest figures put homelessness at about 116,000 people, with an estimated 8200 sleeping rough on the streets on any given night. In SA it is about 6000 people homeless – a third of them children. Most are in some form of temporary shelter or accommodation, sleeping in their cars, or couchsurfing with friends. But

on any night, pre-COVID estimates were that 400 – about 6 per cent – are on the streets across the state.

"Four hundred is not a big number," Pearson says. "It's not an insurmountable problem." The way to fix it, he says, has been pioneered in the US, where – despite its notoriety for homelessness – more than a dozen communities have effectively ended rough sleeping. Measuring and identifying the homeless is the key.

"You can't change what you don't measure," Pearson says. "So we're going out and



Anti-homelessness campaigner David Pearson and James Gant, who used to be homeless.

measuring it. It's not a revolutionary concept, that we should seek to understand the names and the needs of every single person sleeping rough.

"It sounds ridiculous, but we don't know exactly how many people are sleeping rough most of the time. And we don't know what their names are, and we don't know what their needs are."

In May 2018 and 2019 – but not yet this year because of COVID-19 – the Adelaide Zero Project surveyed who the people were. Providers like the Hutt Street Centre,

Neami's Street to Home project workers, and Baptist Care came together and in a "connections" week counted all the people they could find who were sleeping rough, meeting them to ask their names, and collate their details, including their health issues. That information was then shared with charities, welfare workers, government authorities, the city council, police, prisons and hospitals.

Keeping track of individuals and assessing the neediest gets urgent cases into housing sooner, Pearson says. That saves

lives and money. Living on the street means a person dies 30 years younger than average, he says, but costs governments more in emergency accommodation, hospital bills and police costs – and possibly prison cells – than it would to provide them housing.

But Pearson says the solution is not as simple as just a house.

"It's as much about mental health, and substance use, and domestic violence, and child protection ..." he says. Analysis of information collected from the rough sleepers shows about half had mental health problems, a large number also had physical health problems, and a third had at least three significant challenges. About a third were Aboriginal.

"If you give a house to someone who has severe mental health issues, substance abuse and a series of physical health issues, it's not going to be sustained," Pearson says. "And then we go, 'Right, these homeless people choose to be homeless; they don't want a house'."

Brandon is an example. His world seems lonely and inhospitable, a passing parade of legs that carry their owners to places he can't enter: nearby busy offices and noisy pubs and, later, warm homes and families. Now 25, he says he's been doing this since he was 13. At 19, Brandon came to Adelaide to find his father, but that didn't work out. He has at least three of those health issues Pearson lists.

"I dropped out of school when I became homeless in Year 8," Brandon says. "And hit the drugs pretty hard. A long story cut short: My best mate passed away a few weeks ago and because of that I quit the drugs. Cold turkey. And I haven't looked back. I started to go through some mental health problems, but since I've quit the drugs I'm pretty good."

And his general health? "Not very good," he says. "I'm a sufferer of HIV. So the cold is not my friend. It can turn into pneumonia."

So why is he here, when the state government has paid for beds during the COVID-19 crisis? The same reason he hasn't seen a doctor at the RAH for more than a year: he can't take his dog with him.

"I know, I know," Brandon says. "But I'm not leaving my best friend; he's been through thick and thin for me and I'm going to do the same. It's not that I don't want to get off the street, but I'm so used to it that it is just a way of life. It was hard at first, but it goes away after a while. You get used to it."

That sounds hard to believe. But everything is relative. While Brandon still sleeps on the street, another young man, 26-year-old James Gant, has finally made it into a house. His story shows that even for tough cases, the challenge can be met. It also shows how decisions a homeless person makes can seem like madness, until you see it from their perspective.

Gant – thin as a rake with tattoos up his arms – tells his tale with eloquence and insight. How he endured a violent home life, left school at 14, began delinquent behaviour, like smashing windows, and was taken in at 16 by white supremacists who lured him with shelter and protection.

In time, Gant says, he realised they were "full of shit" hypocrites. He went to Sydney to live with his grandmother, discovered alcohol and drugs, got into trouble with police and "by the time I was 21 years old I was completely bankrupt, spiritually and mentally".

Back to his parents' Adelaide home he went, suicidal and self-harming, and before long he was on the streets. "I wanted to find out who God was," Gant says. "Which was really weird."

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There's a lot of homeless. And a lot who don't want to get off the street.

ON THE STREETS

Gant was about 22. He conducted his own footpath social-advocacy campaign, decrying worker exploitation and child sex abuse. Passers-by judged him according to their expectations.

"They have their ideas," he says. "You've got to look miserable. If you're happy, 'He's faking it'. I'm like, 'What? I'm what? I haven't faked the last 20 years of my suffering'. They'll go, 'I'm not gonna give you food because you're a fake'. And they will hold their food in front of you."

The spot he chose to live was on Hindley Street, near a tattoo shop – a deliberate and illuminating choice, but more of that later.

"Eventually the street started to eat away at my self-esteem, my self-worth, and eventually it reduced me to an animal level," Gant says. "You see people walk by on a day-to-day basis and you look at yourself and no matter how hard you try, it will print an image on your mind: 'You are an animal, you are worthless'."

"You get woken up at 3am with a flash-light in the face, 'Where's your identification?'. It's like a dying star: it's going to implode or explode."

It was not all bleak.

"There is actually a lot of generosity of spirit," he says. "I've had people take the clothes off their own backs and put them on me. Give me money, and you get the whole speech – 'Don't spend it on drugs' – but given money in faith I'd spend it on good things. And brought backpacks full of food with towels and gloves. No matter at what stage in the year, summer or winter, someone provided for me at some stage."

After Gant's social advocacy came more drug abuse. He was able to move off the street for a while, but the homes he was given did not make him better. He was allotted a spot in a high-rise complex. "You pretty much got sent there if you had a drug or alcohol abuse issue, a criminal history or a mental health issue," he says. "And I had all three."

Gant felt his life had become a battle against two awful prospects: dying because of "this evil" (methamphetamines) or surviving as an "animal-level criminal".

"I wanted a safe place," he says. "I didn't know what a safe place meant."

In the high-rise, Gant could not get off the drugs, could not "unpack the trauma and the pain, and the fear in a place surrounded with domestic violence, women screaming, dudes dragging hammers down the hallway, people with machetes".

"I reckon there was a payday every day of the week, so someone just bought two flagons of sherry," he says. "Now they're screaming through the whole night. I began to realise I wasn't going to get better there. I used drugs to try to get through that."

Eventually he left for a safer place: the street. "I spent another six to nine months, even a year, on the streets before I got my next place," he recalls. "It was within the CBD. And people in those circles found out where I lived (and) I was held captive for three months. It sounds weird: 'held captive'. I could come and go as I pleased because it was my house. But they wouldn't leave it."

"I'd come from the street; I was an addict. It's common for criminals to find their way into young people's homes, people with a good nature. 'Oh yeah, you can sleep on the couch, bro; I wouldn't want to see an old mate suffer.' You put a blanket on them. You wake up, there's 20 of them."

Which all adds up to reasons some people prefer the street, even if to outsiders it seems like lunacy.

Brandon couldn't abandon his dog. Gant



Clockwise from above: Brandon and his dog Little Fella are homeless; a rough sleeper next to Westpac House, on the corner of King William and Currie streets in the CBD; SA Housing chief executive Michael Buchan. Photographs: Roy Eccleston, Russell Millard/AAP, Mike Burton/AAP



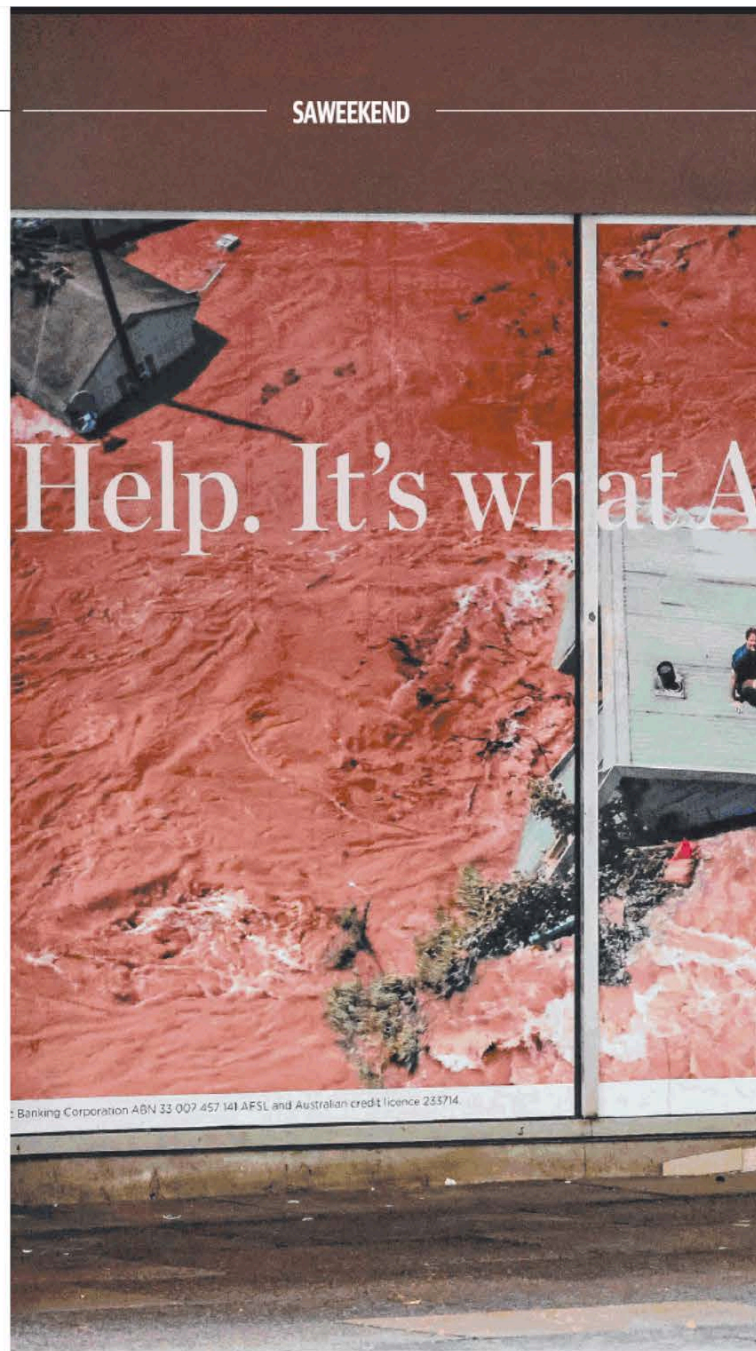
“Eventually the street started to eat away at my self-esteem.

felt safer; if he had to be vulnerable, then better to be where the cops and cameras were. "I used to sleep on Hindley Street for that reason," he explains.

"People thought I was insane. 'Why would you sleep on Hindley Street?' Because you pull a knife out, there will be a cop that responds within 30 seconds to a minute, and I'd be taken straight to the RAH. If I'm in a house, you could stab me 50 times and I could bleed out and no one would even hear me scream."

Yet all the time he was in the rectangle of Hindley, King William and Currie streets, Gant did want a house. A safe one. It took a lot of effort, he says, to turn up repeatedly at Housing SA, begging for a something that wasn't a "crack flat". Along the way he was helped by the outreach workers of Neami's Street to Home service.

Now Gant is in a small group of units in a suburb where he feels safe. He's stopped feeling like an animal and says he's remembering that "I'm a good person". He's also thinking of a job, maybe in hospitality. Something with meaning and purpose is



important to remedying spiritual poverty, he says. So homelessness is solvable? "It would be, looked through the right lens," Gant thinks. "It's not a criminal issue. We became homeless because we're homeless here (he points to his heart). Homelessness – poverty – is something inside of people."

Pearson says people like Gant and Brandon have learned how to survive their way, and change doesn't come easily.

"Sleeping rough is a full-time job," Pearson says. "To survive it is exhausting – to find food, to stay safe – and a lot of the time people get into the groove of that and know how to protect themselves and survive in that environment."

"And they want to get out of it, but they don't want to get out of it if it means going into a walk-up flat surrounded by drug dealers, and that's the only housing option provided to you. Or you go through the assessment process, the case worker promises the world, and can't deliver anything because there's no housing. That's pretty dispiriting."

"Or you agree, get rehab, two weeks go by,

you can't get into rehab, there's no space, they relapse. That's why they stay on the street. There are no good options. And when you go off the street, into a house, it's a whole new job. You've got to re-skill, got to learn how to pay bills, cook meals, and why would you re-skill if you know you're not going to survive? Why would you end one job and go into another if you know it's not going to be permanent?"

Michael Buchan, who runs the SA Housing Authority, which spends about \$70m a year on homelessness, agrees. He's at the centre of a Marshall government bid to reform the way the problem is tackled, with a \$20m homelessness prevention fund announced in March, and the appointment of former Hutt St Centre boss Ian Cox to run a new office for homelessness sector integration.

Buchan says the homeless, and not programs, need to become the focus. He wants to know from homeless people how they fell into their circumstances and what they think about the situation, and solutions.



"I've never been homeless, so how would I make a decision on how a person experiences it, without a homeless person telling me?" Buchan says. "How do we build those voices into the design of the system?"

One key issue is trying to prevent homelessness, but that is a problem with many causes, from poverty, as Pearson says, to domestic violence, drugs and mental illness. But the bottom line, says Buchan, is that the new system – still being workshopped in government and with non-government providers – is that it must be accountable to the "customer" who needs a house.

It's clearly possible. Of about 550 who were given COVID accommodation, just over 200 have been housed or supported to return home, 111 have left and 57 are in motels still, he says. The rest included many Aboriginal people who had been visiting Adelaide and returned to their lands.

Ian Cox says the Zero Project's beauty is it shows what can be done through a co-ordinated effort by multiple agencies and non-government bodies, when they focus on the individual person – their

name, their health, their needs. An added COVID benefit has been that individuals now get a 12-month healthcare package.

A prospectus for the new homelessness plan is due out in October and tenders will likely be called for the first \$6m in spending around the end of the year. One ongoing problem is the number of available homes, which has not suddenly increased. While many rough sleepers have been housed recently, Buchan admits that others who would have had a claim on those places have missed out.

That's why people like David Pearson and others are urging more private rental subsidies by government. He says the Zero Project sees about 11 people a month moved into homes, but it needs to be much more to make a real impact, and private rental subsidies could help shift another 50 a month into accommodation.

Buchan says these subsidies to help the homeless rent privately is "something we are looking at". But going into a home can have its own challenges for someone who's lived on the street – something Cox says he

saw at Hutt Street, and believes requires "relentless" daily follow-up by social workers.

At Topham Mall, Brandon acknowledges a house takes getting used to. He spent six months living with the friend who died recently. "It's very different, and I found myself, not exactly not pulling my weight – like I'd help around the house – but just certain traits and characteristics that I noticed. My messiness, forgetting to clean up after myself."

A home by yourself might also seem lonely, if you're used to the street. Brandon enjoys the comfort of strangers. "I've got my people, lovely people who walk past and buy me breakfast and buy me coffee and buy me blankets," he says. "I'm pretty well looked after. If it wasn't for that it'd be a struggle and a half."

He makes it sound almost normal, but it's not. As we talk a man comes up, glancing back over his shoulder, eager to share some news. Someone they both know is not far off, on the corner with Currie Street, injecting drugs. Brandon sounds shocked. "Really?"

"Yeah, he's having a shot down there!"

"What the f..k? That's unreal. How can people do that, man? There's a toilet right here, mate, if you have to do it..."

It's an unreal world, but one in which people tend not to walk by offering homeless people a job. In that case, what does make him happy right now?

"My dog," Brandon says. "And people smiling. People walk past and say 'hi' and they are polite, and that makes me happy."

His answer takes me back to St Kilda in Melbourne decades ago, when I interviewed a man on a park bench about why he was there alone in the night.

Robert Kendall's suit was grubby and his salt-and-pepper hair and beard wild. He was 55, but looked older. Like Brandon, he was keen to share his story.

"You get so lonesome you just want someone to talk to," he said. What made him happy? "Just to talk to you."

What he really needed was to be somewhere safe. One morning two years later, the bench that had become his home was empty. He'd been murdered the night before.