



research bulletin



Living in caravan parks in South Australia

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The research examined:

What is the current profile of caravan parks offering permanent accommodation, and the trends in supply?

How many people currently live in caravan parks?

What are the sub-groups of this population?

What are their housing pathways and intentions?

What are their perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of these uses?

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Across Australia there is growing concern about the increased use of caravan parks for long-term housing. Potential issues include tenancy arrangements, standards, isolation and the vulnerability of the resident population, especially families with children. Previous research has identified distinct sub-groups within the population: those who have made a life-style choice; workers; and marginal residents. These groups differ in terms of their characteristics, reasons for living in caravan parks, housing options, issues and concerns. This study has explored issues related to the changing use of caravan parks in South Australia. It has profiled the resident population and explored housing pathways and aspirations, as well as perceptions about the benefits and disadvantages of caravan park life. Methods included analysis of data from the ABS Census of Population and Housing, interviews with managers of facilities and a survey of residents. Findings have implications for policy and service delivery across a range of areas related to housing and homelessness, ageing and disability.

How many residents?

According to data collected in the ABS Census in August 2006:

- 5,500 people were living in caravan parks in South Australia in 3,030 dwellings or households, a decline of 28% from 2001. The greatest concentration were in the Northern Adelaide region.
- 414 caravan park households (13.7%) included dependent children, with 704 children under 14 years. The Northern Adelaide region had the highest proportion of families with children.
- Caravan park residents were more likely (than the SA population overall) to be living alone. They also tended to be older; were more likely to be male; on a low income; own their own dwelling and not be in the labour force. However, 30% were in full time employment and 61% of households had a combined income above \$500 per week.
- Analysis of Census data classified 748 caravan park residents in South Australia in 522 dwellings (13.6% of the caravan park population) as 'marginal'.

“Caravan park life is not for everyone - the people who do best here are those who work at keeping a good community.”

“You need to decide if the park is tourist or non-tourist: the two don't mix.”

“I can afford to live here and I really like it”

Key findings

Management

- At the time of data collection (2007) there were 225 current caravan parks in SA, of which 112 catered for non-tourists. Together they provided a total of 2,313 non-tourist sites. Larger parks targeted to non-tourists were particularly clustered in the Northern Adelaide region, where there were few tourist sites. With the exception of Roxby Downs, caravan parks in country and regional areas primarily catered for tourists.
- Considerable diversity was found in the nature, characteristics, focus and style of caravan parks across South Australia. This diversity is increasing, with facilities tending to become more specialised (catering for tourists or residents, or for different groups of residents). Diversity was also found in standards, amenities, costs and in management style and practices.
- Caravan parks are currently an affordable housing option for people on a low income. It is likely however, that the higher cost section of the market will increase over time, which may restrict access to people on the lowest incomes and result in a greater divide between facilities in terms of standards, costs and resident characteristics.
- Management strategies commonly adopted to ensure smooth running of parks include vetting potential residents, separating tourists from non-tourists and strict enforcement of park rules. Managers were generally very positive about retirees and workers as clientele, with negative comments and problems largely confined to marginal residents.
- Almost half reported having no formal agreement with residents. Where agreements existed they were extremely variable in nature, scope and formality¹.
- Only half of the parks accepted crisis housing referrals, with follow-up support, good communication and clear information indicated as vital to make these work.

Residents

239 caravan park residents were surveyed (estimated at 26.4% of the resident population). Respondents were assigned into one of three groups: those who had made a **lifestyle choice** (63%); **workers** (19%); or the **marginally housed** (18%). The full report contains detailed analysis of resident demographics and other variables, analysed according to these groups, as well as by region and age.

Those who have made a **lifestyle choice** are the largest resident group. These people are older, generally retired, and very high levels of satisfaction with park life. Whilst affordability was a major factor in their housing decision, they also valued the social and community aspects, safety and security, peace and quiet and reduced responsibilities of life in a caravan park and benefit from a considerable level of informal, mutual support. Their housing is generally of a higher standard than other groups and many have a strong sense of ownership and shared responsibility within the park. Security of tenure, rights and recourse were issues of concern to them. Many also have financial vulnerabilities which restrict future options or pathways out (although the majority wish to age in place). The results suggest that caravan parks are emerging as a form of low-income retirement village.

¹ This research was conducted prior to the introduction of the *Residential Parks and Caravan and Tourist Parks Development Plan Amendment (DPA)* in 2008.

“The big thing is security. We’d like a lease.”

“Everyone looks out for each other.”

“Living here with a child is okay but sometimes she gets up to mischief because she’s bored.”

Workers usually live in parks for relatively short periods and for quite pragmatic reasons, with location and convenience driving their housing choice. Although they were more likely than other residents to be living alone, a not insignificant minority were in family groups including children. They reported very high levels of satisfaction with caravan park life, although also the most disadvantages.

The **marginal** are the smallest group of residents and the most vulnerable. They were the most likely to be accompanied by children, tend to be less satisfied, have the poorest health status and were more likely to have come to caravan parks because of lack of choice, relationship breakdown or homelessness. They were more likely than others to feel isolated; have a disability; have transport problems; and need additional services. They were also more likely to cause difficulties for management and other residents and many facilities were very cautious about admitting them. They tended to be concentrated in certain parks (often with lower standards of amenity).

Although a high level of satisfaction for caravan park living was found, not everyone was happy. **Drivers of satisfaction** were both internal and external to the individual. Overall, those for whom caravan parks were an option of choice, rather than necessity, were more satisfied; whereas those who came into caravan parks because they had no other option or from negative housing pathways were less satisfied. Self-efficacy, choice and control were therefore significant factors. However, external factors were also influential, particularly the nature of the park, other residents, and the style and approach of management. Park management was found to have a far greater influence on day to day living than in conventional rental housing.

Consistent with previous research, **security of tenure, rights, recourse and the discretionary power of management** were issues of concern to many residents.

Future directions

The research found that the caravan park population is not inherently or universally vulnerable. Parks include, however, many people whose circumstances or characteristics place them at risk, to varying degrees, for reasons which include isolation, disability, housing pathways, age, family status and poverty. Further, there was no evidence that caravan parks, across the board, are a negative housing option: this housing form emerged with positives but also potential risks. Minimising these risks and maximising potential benefit is the challenge for policy, planning and service delivery.

Older residents: ageing in place

- Caravan parks have emerged as a positive housing option for older residents because of their affordability, security, ‘easiness’ and strong informal networks of care, support and relationship. The challenge is to build on these strengths to support ageing in place whilst minimising vulnerability and ensuring consumer protection.
- Increasing challenges and costs are likely to emerge for the caravan park industry due to their ageing population (physical infrastructure, the health and support needs of residents). This will also create issues for planners and regulators and for the aged and community care sector, including access to services and in-home care and keeping residents linked to the wider community.

“Life in a park is okay but I would like to live in a house but can’t afford it.”

“We have to learn to deal with health issues, particularly as they get older.”

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Marginal residents

- Because of affordability and other characteristics, caravan parks will continue to be used as a housing option by some of the most marginal members of our community. These are the most at-risk amongst the caravan park population and also the most problematic.
- Potential strategies include diversion from caravan parks (when it is clearly inappropriate), strategies to sustain tenancies or minimise risk (especially for families with children), partnership approaches with park management, assistance for residents to move to more suitable accommodation and ongoing attention to policy issues, including regulation and consumer protection.

Families with children

- Many children live in caravan parks, for reasons which remain largely unknown. Further research on why families live in caravan parks and the characteristics and needs of these families is recommended. Many appear to be a ‘hard to reach’ population, with high mobility patterns and also potentially high service needs. Families with children should be a focus in policy, planning and service delivery.

Consumer protection, planning and regulation

- SA has recently implemented major legislation initiatives in relation to caravan parks. The impact of these reforms should be monitored. A watching brief should also be maintained for other emergent policy issues.

Data sensitive planning

- The resident population is highly diverse with regional concentrations relating to age, vulnerability, employment and income status. Of special note is Northern Adelaide with a high concentration of younger people and families; and the Barossa with high numbers of the aged.

Research and future trends

- The caravan park population and industry continues to evolve and it is anticipated that there will be considerable changes over the next five years. Ongoing monitoring of caravan park population trends and broader housing patterns are warranted. Further research may focus on different groups or sub-groups. Evaluative and research strategies may be necessary to support and assess any innovations to address the needs of specific populations of interest.

This bulletin draws on the findings of the *Living in caravan parks in South Australia* research report. A full copy of the report can be obtained from the Department for Families and Communities Research Unit webpage at www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/