



Easy to overlook big issue of homelessness

In the wake of the World Youth Day celebrations, and as we count down to the start of the Olympic Games in Beijing, it is easy to get caught up in the excitement of mass events at the expense of other important events and issues.

An enormous crowd will gather in Sydney today for the Papal Mass to mark World Youth Day.

At the same time, a much smaller, though no less important, crowd will gather at the Docklands in Melbourne for the opening match of The Big Issue's Community Street Soccer National Championships.

Throughout the course of the World Youth Day celebrations an estimated 100,000 pilgrims slept rough in temporary accommodation provided by about 700 schools and church parishes throughout the Sydney region.

At the same time an estimated 100,000 Australians are homeless on any given night, including 10,000 children.

I don't make this comparison in any attempt to denigrate or diminish the importance of World Youth Day or the Catholic Church. I am proud Australia and Sydney played host to the 2008 World Youth Day.

Witnessing the faith and energy of young people from around the world gathered here in Australia has been truly inspirational.

It has also been a fantastic public display of good-natured, responsible and well-behaved young people, which is helpful in dispelling the myth that all youth are wild lunatics.

Rather, the comparison is an attempt to remind us that homelessness remains a serious problem in Australia at a time when there are a lot of other big and impressive events fighting for our attention.

The problem of homelessness struggles at the best of times to be front and centre on the public agenda, due in large part to the fact it is "out of sight" and therefore, regrettably, "out of mind".

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the Australian Government are working hard to change this with the recent launch of the Green Paper - Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness.

Kate Ellis



But this comparison is also an attempt to remind readers of the great work of The Big Issue - a not-for-profit company established in Melbourne in 1996 which aims to help people who are homeless, unemployed, or marginalised in other ways to get back on their feet.

Working from the principle that a hand up is often more important than a handout, The Big Issue helps people to rebuild their self-confidence through self-employment as well as earn some extra money to help support themselves and to lead independent lives.

In an earlier column I talked about the power of soccer (football to the purists) to break down political barriers throughout the world and to bring countries together in a way that



HOPE: Big Issue vendor Adam Smith captained the Street Soccerroos at the Homeless World Cup last year

national politics often struggles to match. The Big Issue recognised this potential some years ago and introduced Street Soccer as a further way of helping to empower people who otherwise live at the margins of our society.

The success of Street Soccer, and of the subsequent Homeless World Cup to help promote the problem of homelessness internationally, has been profound for those involved.

The Big Issue has found people who participated in Street Soccer subsequently started to enjoy such effects as more stable housing arrangements, better educational outcomes and better family relationships.

The Community Street Soccer National Championships being played in Melbourne may be small by comparison to the World Youth Day events in Sydney. But in its own way it is just as important.

The Australian Government has made a commitment to provide \$3 million over three years to support the great work and growth of Street Soccer in Australia.

For people competing in the championships there is the opportunity to be selected to play for Australia in the national Street Soccerroos team against teams from other nations in the 2008 Homeless World Cup to be held in Melbourne in December.

As the saying goes, faith comes in many forms. World Youth Day is an amazing demonstration of religious faith and personal commitment.

The Big Issue and Street Soccer are also examples of the power of faith and self-belief - that through social engagement even the most disadvantaged and marginalised people can become better and grow stronger emotionally, physically and mentally.

For more information about Street Soccer, go to www.bigissue.org.au/street-soccerroos.

It is timely to remember that through events both big and small there is an opportunity to reflect on that which is good, that which unites us and that which gives us hope.

We probably don't do enough of it.

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