



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Homelessness in young people aged under 16 years: A literature review

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Headline issues from the review of literature

- 1) The specific needs of young people living independently from their families who are aged under 16 years and homeless are not well researched.
- 2) Policy in this area is rarely targeted to the specific legal and practical circumstances of this group – policy gets lost between policy that addresses services for children (family homelessness and child protection) and policies appropriate for young people aged 16 and over.
- 3) The processes that precipitate youth homelessness typically commence before a person's 16th birthday.
- 4) A range of programs and services are required that can provide a holistic response with sufficient flexibility to meet the varied needs and circumstances of individual young people, reflective of the multiple pathways and influences on homelessness.

Introduction

This literature review has been commissioned by the Commissioner for Children and Young People to inform development of further work required to investigate homelessness in young people under 16 years of age who are living independently from their parent/s or guardians. A previous literature review explored the issue of children and young people in families who were homeless.¹ The project was proposed in response to concerns of practitioners in the youth accommodation sector in Western Australia that the needs of this group of young people were not being adequately met within current arrangements. For the purpose of this project, the term 'independent homeless aged under 16 years' will be used to describe the young people targeted by this project, to distinguish them from children and young people who are homeless with their parent/s or legal guardian.

The purpose of the literature review is to collate and consider the relevant literature, on the incidence of homelessness in this cohort, particular problems encountered, and the issues to be addressed when developing policy to meet their needs. The literature review will summarise the relevant findings of previous studies, determine their applicability to Western Australia and identify gaps in the literature. The literature review will also outline policy responses and suggested models of service delivery. The literature accessed will be restricted to journal articles, books and reports available in English from countries that are culturally similar to Australia, with similar infrastructure to support young people who are homeless.

Most of the research about homelessness among children and young people either relates to children and young people who are homeless with their families or, where there is a focus on young people who are living independently from their parent/guardian, is found in studies that included older young people (sometimes up to 25 years old) where it is difficult to separate out the issues and needs of the younger cohort. No studies were located with an exclusive focus on independently homeless young people aged under 16 years. The paucity of information in this specific cohort of young people makes it difficult to accurately determine the specific challenges and needs they experience. From existing literature it became clear however, that the pathway into homelessness for many young people commenced before their 16th birthday.²

¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People (2015) Children who are homeless with their family. <http://www.cryp.wa.gov.au>

² Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., & Keys, D. (2005). Young people, drug use and family conflict: Pathways into homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence*, 28(2), 185-199. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.002

The literature review is organised around four key areas:

1. Definitions of homelessness.
2. The incidence of young people who are independent homeless and under 16 years of age.
3. The factors influencing pathways to homelessness.
4. Policy frameworks and models of service delivery.

Definitions of homelessness

An agreed definition is crucial to any study of homelessness as it informs estimates of incidence, which influences funding, policy and planning³. However the complexity of the policy, cultural and service delivery challenges has resulted in a range of definitions of homelessness. Researchers usually use a culturally referenced definition of homelessness that includes young people who are 'rough sleepers' who live in public places, in cars or squats, young people who move frequently between forms of temporary and insecure accommodation, for example those who are staying with friends, couch surfing or living in insecure temporary or short-term shelters or refuges, and those who are in medium-term accommodation but lack adequate access to facilities and security of tenure. This is sometimes referred to as 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' homelessness.^{4 5}

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)⁶ references the European typology of homelessness (ETHOS) definition of homelessness in constructing its own definition for statistical purposes. The ETHOS definition provides four main situations in which people could be considered homeless:

1. Roofless - no shelter of any kind, sleeping rough
2. Houseless - has a place to sleep but of a temporary nature such as a refuge or shelter
3. Insecure - facing possible eviction due to tenancy issues, domestic violence etc.
4. Inadequate - living in unfit or severely overcrowded conditions.

³ Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2008). Counting the Homeless. Retrieved from Canberra:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2050.02006?OpenDocument> 23rd February 2017

⁴ MacKenzie, D., & Chamberlain, C. (2008). Youth homelessness 2006. Youth Studies Australia, 27(1), 17-25.

⁵ Johnson, G. (2009). Four Aspects of Youth Homelessness. Parity, 22(8), 12-14.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) Information paper – A statistical definition of homelessness. Information paper 4922.0. Retrieved from www.abs.gov.au 27 January 2017.

The National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH) has adopted this broad definition to capture the various ways in which young people can be considered homeless.⁷ The ABS has constructed its definition of homelessness for statistical purposes on three elements, adequacy of the dwelling, security of tenure, and control of and access to space for social relations.⁸ In differing from the ETHOS definition, the ABS does not include people who are living in detention arrangements (such as justice facilities or immigration detention) for while these people may be at risk of homelessness upon release, they are currently not considered homeless.

For the purpose of this project the ETHOS definition of homelessness will be used to include the breadth of arrangements where young people aged under 16 may find themselves without a home that adequately meets their needs for security, stability, privacy and safety.

Incidence and profile of homeless young people aged under 16 years

Information on young people aged under 16 years and independently homeless is primarily found within studies that focus on a broader age range, with varying parameters, for example, 12–18 years, 12–20 years, 14–25 years. No studies were found that focus exclusively on the under 16 years age bracket. Three surveys of school students aged 12–18 years, conducted in 1995, 2001 and 2006⁹ are the closest studies in terms of their scope and applicability.

Official counts of homeless young people often under estimate numbers.¹⁰ A review¹¹ of the 2006 Census returns found that hostels for homeless people had not always been correctly identified in the returns and this led to an undercount of homeless people in all age groups. It also found that estimating and counting numbers of young people aged 12–18 who are independently homeless is difficult for several others reasons. Firstly they may not be counted at all especially if they are sleeping rough, in sheds or in improvised shelter. Secondly, they may be counted, but not necessarily identified as homeless, for example if they are couch surfing with friends, or, as with older homeless people, they may have been living in

⁷ Chamberlain, C. (2014). Homelessness in Australia: an introduction. Sydney, NSW, Australia: UNSW Press.

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) Information paper – A statistical definition of homelessness. Information paper 4922.0. Retrieved from www.abs.gov.au 27 January 2017.

⁹ MacKenzie, D., & Chamberlain, C. (2008). Youth homelessness 2006. *Youth Studies Australia*, 27(1), 17-25.

¹⁰ Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2008). Counting the Homeless. Retrieved from Canberra

¹¹ *ibid*

a hostel or boarding house that is not correctly identified as such in the census.¹² To address this problem, and to develop a more accurate estimate of the numbers of young people who are homeless, the ABS supplemented the 2006 Census with the homeless school student survey¹³. This detailed survey was conducted in Victoria.

Various other searches of the census data were conducted to identify homeless people who may not have been correctly classified.¹⁴ These approaches were used in combination to develop an estimate of the youth homeless population. As a result of this work it was estimated that in 2006 across Australia 21,940 young people aged 12–18 years were homeless, representing 21 per cent of the homeless population nationally. Approximately 4,280 of these young people lived in WA. The report included only young people who were living independently from family and did not collect data on young people who were homeless as a part of a larger family group.

The gender profile of the homeless young people surveyed who were aged 12–18 years was unusual because it was the only homeless population cohort where women outnumbered men (53% female to 47% male). This ratio has been stable across the three surveys of homeless school students aged 12–18 years conducted in Victoria between 1995 and 2006¹⁵ and is consistent with other surveys about youth homelessness¹⁶. Even though it might be the case that young women who are homeless are more willing to make themselves visible by asking for help, the difference appears to be consistent across different data sets, even when methodologies for data collection vary. It is not clear from the literature why this gender difference arises and whether it is related to family dynamics (for example, greater parental restrictions on young women); to less safety for young women in the family (for example a higher likelihood that young women have faced sexual

¹² Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2008). Counting the Homeless. Retrieved from Canberra

¹³ MacKenzie, D. and Chamberlain, C & (2008). Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006 Retrieved from Canberra
https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/youth_homelessness_report.pdf 23rd February 2017

¹⁴ Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2008). Counting the Homeless. Retrieved from Canberra

¹⁵ MacKenzie, D. & Chamberlain, C., (2008). Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006. Retrieved from Canberra
https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/youth_homelessness_report.pdf 23rd February 2017.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2016b). *Young people presenting alone*. Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/presenting-alone/>

abuse from male relatives); or because of acknowledged differences in bio-social developmental maturity of young women in early teenage years (which means they are more likely to mix with older partners and perceive themselves to be more mature).

The census adjustment process was not repeated for the 2011 Census, and the unadjusted number of homeless young people aged 12–18 years was estimated to be 5,424, a 75 per cent reduction from 2006.¹⁷ The apparent decrease in youth homelessness in 2011 was claimed by the ABS to have arisen because of over-estimation in 2006. This explanation is rejected by youth homelessness researchers who contend the reduction occurred primarily because many who would have been counted in 2006 were not counted in 2011.¹⁸ ¹⁹ The suggestion that the figure for youth homelessness in the 2011 Census is accurate is not consistent with other data. The most recent data for 2014–2015 shows that 41,780 young people aged 15–24 approached specialist homeless services. Of these, 21 per cent were under 18 years.²⁰ However, the number of young people using specialist homeless services is much lower than the total number of homeless young people. This means comprehensive recent data for the rate of youth homelessness, even for 12–18 year olds, is not available.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in homelessness statistics. Research has shown that up to 17 per cent of the total homeless population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander²¹ and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were 8.7 times more likely to use specialist homelessness services than non-Aboriginal people²². This is likely to be an underestimate due to general under representation of Aboriginal Australians in census data and because of culturally different concepts of homelessness.

¹⁷ Bessant, J. (2012). The politics of counting youth homelessness: the magic of numbers and the amazing disappearing act. [online]. *Alternative Law Journal*, 37 (2), 116-121. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1037969X1203700210>

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Johnson, G. (2009). Four Aspects of Youth Homelessness. *Parity*, 22(8), 12-14.

²⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2016b). *Young people presenting alone*. Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/presenting-alone/>

²¹ Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2008). *Counting the Homeless*. Retrieved from Canberra

²² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2016a). *Indigenous clients*. Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/indigenous-clients/>

Research has shown that Aboriginal young people aged 12–18 are 11 times more likely than non-Aboriginal young people to experience homelessness.²³

Proportionally, the population of homeless Aboriginal people is more likely to be younger than the population of non-Aboriginal people with research reporting about 4 in 10 (42%) homelessness Aboriginal people were aged 18 or under compared to fewer than 1 in 4 (23%) non-Aboriginal homeless people.²⁴

Without accurate figures on youth homelessness generally (and 12–15 year olds, in particular), it is very difficult to evaluate the effects of more recent changes in policy and strategy on rates of youth homelessness.

Factors influencing youth homelessness

The literature on the reasons for youth homelessness has identified many correlations between youth homelessness with adverse life experiences (child abuse, exposure to violence and lack of material support and emotional support), with difficulties in family life (family instability and conflict and parental difficulties with substance abuse or mental health problems), and with personal survival strategies that are not socially sanctioned (drug usage, excess alcohol, petty crime). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported that in 2014–2015, for young people (15–24) the most common three reasons for seeking specialist assistance from specialist homeless services were: housing crisis (21%), family or domestic violence (15%), and relationship or family breakdown (12%).²⁵

The correlation between state care and homelessness has been explored in a number of studies. In a study in Victoria between one third and two thirds of people who were homeless reported abuse as a child and had spent time in the care of state authorities.²⁶ Further research questions some of this analysis. Using a 21-item questionnaire, this study surveyed 692 young people and asked them to identify the relative importance of various factors to their decision to leave home. The study found family conflict, and anxiety or depression, but also the desire for adventure and independence. This study did not find that many young people identified sexual

²³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014. Homelessness among Indigenous Australians. Cat.

no. IHW 133. Canberra: AIHW.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2016b). *Young people presenting alone*. Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/presenting-alone/>

²⁶ Liddell, M. (2005). Childhood abuse, limited intervention and homelessness: Pathways to the mental health and justice systems. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 1(2/3/4), 263-275. doi:10.1080/17449200600553217

abuse. However, it was acknowledged that it is possible that the questionnaire methodology influenced young people's response, and the questions may not have been sufficiently nuanced.²⁷

Lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) young people are over-represented according to an American study of Latino young people aged 19–24 years.²⁸ This study found that for Latino LGBTQ young people, coming out had exacerbated existing family tensions. Although this is a culturally specific study it is consistent with the findings of other Australian studies of other cultural groups, which found that for some young people coming out precipitates homelessness.²⁹

Other Australian studies of homeless young people (age range 12–25 years) have found higher than usual level of psychological disorders, unusually high experience of violence and higher rates of use of drug use than young people who had not left home and increased reported levels of family conflict. However, research into how family conflict, drug use and homelessness was related, indicated that there were no simple correlations, sometimes drug use led to family conflict and homelessness, but in other instances family conflict precipitated drug use, and in a few instances conflict and homelessness preceded drug use. This study is discussed in more detail later.³⁰ Higher levels of violence are more likely to be experienced both before and after becoming homeless³¹.

Youth unemployment and the effects of changes in the availability of employment has received less attention in the literature on homelessness, even though poverty and financial stress is associated with homelessness. Studies³² have found that when the youth unemployment rate rose sharply youth homelessness increased sharply, but that subsequent gradual reductions in the youth unemployment rate since then

²⁷ Rosenthal, D., Mallett, S., & Myers, P. (2006). Why do homeless young people leave home? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 30(3), 281-285. doi:10.1111/j.1467-842X.2006.tb00872.x

²⁸ Castellanos, H. D. (2016). The Role of Institutional Placement, Family Conflict, and Homosexuality in Homelessness Pathways Among Latino LGBT Youth in New York City. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 63(5), 601. doi:10.1080/00918369.2015.1111108

²⁹ Macdonald, R., & Cooper, T. (1998). Youth suicide and young gay men. *Youth Studies Australia*, 15(4, December).

³⁰ Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., & Keys, D. (2005). Young people, drug use and family conflict: Pathways into homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence*, 28(2), 185-199. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.002

³¹ Jordan, L. (2012). Spaces of trauma: Young people, homelessness and violence. *Youth Studies Australia*, 37(4), 11-17.

³² MacKenzie, D., & Chamberlain, C. (2008). Youth homelessness 2006. *Youth Studies Australia*, 27(1), 17-25.

have not shown a consistent relationship with youth homelessness. Similarly, the impact of housing affordability is frequently discussed in the literature on adult homelessness.³³ This topic receives less attention in the literature on youth homelessness, and when discussed is frequently presented as a peripheral issue. Some exceptions to this do argue that the prevention of youth homelessness must address structural issues such as housing supply and affordability, and income support and poverty reduction.^{34 35 36}

Using a different approach Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006) described what they called the youth (homeless) career. They conceptualised homelessness as a process of adaption to homeless culture and the development of a homeless identity that may cause or be caused by exclusion from non-homeless culture. They developed a 'typology' based upon case histories submitted by service providers. This model proposed that there are five stages (and four transitions).

- 1) 'at-risk student
- 2) 'in and out of home'
- 3) homeless school student
- 4) homeless unemployed youth
- 5) chronic homelessness.

The transition points occur first when a young person makes a temporary break from their family; then, a permanent break; then, when the young person drops out of school; and finally when the young person transitions to a chronic homeless lifestyle where drugs and prostitution are normalised. Critiques of this model argue that the typology implies a singular linear trajectory rather than multiple and different pathways in and out of homelessness³⁷. The second objection rejects the assumption that homeless young people embrace a homeless identity, rather than merely adapting to the realities of their lives based upon lack of alternatives.³⁸ The theory that young people want to be homeless, moves responsibility and blame onto the person who is homeless, and deflects attention away from structural causes of

³³ Parsell, C., Jones, A., & Head, B. (2013). Policies and programmes to end homelessness in Australia: Learning from international practice. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 22(2), 186-194. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2397.2012.00884.x

³⁴ Mallett, S. (2009). Youth Homelessness Prevention and Early Intervention: A Brief Historical Overview of Key Frameworks in Australia. *Parity*, 22(2), 5-7

³⁵ Lazzari, J. (2008). Youth Homelessness in Australia - a Road Map for the Future. *Just Policy : A Journal of Australian Social Policy*(48), 48-50.

³⁶ Matheson, T. (2005). Pathways out of homelessness. *Parity*, 18(7), 12-13.

³⁷ Johnson, G. (2009). Four Aspects of Youth Homelessness. *Parity*, 22(8), 12-14.

³⁸ Johnson, G., & Chamberlain, C. (2011). Are the Homeless Mentally Ill? *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 46 (1), 29-48.

homelessness such as affordable secure housing, marginalisation of some groups of young people and lack of material and emotional support for some young people.

Several international studies examined the homelessness experience including that of sub-populations. Research on homelessness in the United States of America suggests that paternal imprisonment leads to family homelessness while maternal imprisonment leads to foster care – but that only the father’s incarceration increases the child’s risk of independent homeless by late adolescence.³⁹

Research by Hamilton, Poza, and Washington (2011) on women veterans in the United States of America strongly links homelessness with trauma (both military and prior trauma that led women to seek the security they thought joining the military would provide). They also found that a sense of pride in personal independence and self-sufficiency fosters a reluctance to ask others for help because being dependant is viewed as a form of weakness. This self-perception increases risk of homelessness because it reduces help-seeking. No similar studies have been reported in Australia.

Multiple studies have shown correlations between a variety of factors and homelessness. Correlations should not be assumed to imply causation. The relationships between risk factors and youth homelessness is complex and not well understood.

Some researchers have explored the causal relationships between pairs of risk factors and homelessness. Researchers examined, for example, whether homelessness is caused by, or causes, drug and alcohol use;⁴⁰ or whether mental illness and psychological distress precede or follow homelessness;⁴¹ and how experiences of violence and trauma relate to experiences of youth homelessness.^{42,43} In each case the researchers found variation and complexity, which indicated that pathways into homelessness were highly variable. An implication of this is that researchers and policy makers must exercise caution to

³⁹ Wildeman, C. (2014). Parental Incarceration, Child Homelessness, and the Invisible Consequences of Mass Imprisonment. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 651(1), 74-96.

⁴⁰ Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., & Keys, D. (2005). Young people, drug use and family conflict: Pathways into homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence*, 28(2), 185-199. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.002

⁴¹ Johnson, G., & Chamberlain, C. (2011). Are the Homeless Mentally Ill? *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 46(1), 29-48.

⁴² Jordan, L. (2012). Spaces of trauma: Young people, homelessness and violence. *Youth Studies Australia*, 31(4), 11-17.

⁴³ Martijn, C., & Sharpe, L. (2006). Pathways to youth homelessness. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62(1), 1-12. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.05.007

avoid overly simplistic universal generalisations about the causes of youth homelessness.

For example, in one study⁴⁴ the relationship between drug use and homelessness was found to be complex. The researchers identified four different pathways into homelessness that implicated drug use. In the first pathway, the young person's drug use led to family conflict, which was a direct cause of homelessness. In the second pathway, family conflict led to the young person's drug and alcohol use, which led to homelessness. In the third pathway, family conflict led to homelessness, which led to the young person's use of drugs and alcohol. In the fourth pathway, drug or alcohol use by another family member led to family conflict, which led to homelessness. In this study, only 20 per cent of young people reported that their drug use was a primary cause of their homelessness. The same percentage reported that physical violence between family members was a cause of their homelessness. The study also found that problematic drug use was uncommon as an outcome of homelessness but found that poorly resolved family conflict was the most significant common factor.⁴⁵

Similarly while trauma often precedes homelessness, homelessness often results in re-traumatisation. Another study examined how traumatic experiences and psychological disorders was causally related to homelessness. They interviewed 35 young people and concluded that childhood adversity and trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and drug and alcohol problems were pre-cursors in several pathways to homelessness. They also found the experience of homelessness frequently re-victimised young people and led to a broader range of psychological disorders.⁴⁶

Rosenthal, Mallett, and Myers (2006) found gender differences in responses to some items on their questionnaire. They interpreted this to mean that there were different clusters of reasons that prompted young people to leave the family home.

Research shows that Aboriginal people experience significantly greater levels of disadvantage across all indicators. They are more likely to experience family and domestic violence,⁴⁷ are over represented in youth justice and out-of-home care,⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., & Keys, D. (2005). Young people, drug use and family conflict: Pathways into homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence*, 28(2), 185-199. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.002

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Martijn, C., & Sharpe, L. (2006). Pathways to youth homelessness. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62(1), 1-12. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.05.007

⁴⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014. Homelessness among Indigenous Australians. Cat. no. IHW 133. Canberra: AIHW.

experience higher levels of poverty⁴⁹ and are less likely to access private housing.⁵⁰ The importance of addressing the additional factors experienced by Aboriginal young people and providing culturally sensitive and responsive services is essential to consider.

These studies indicate the diversity of experience for young people who become homeless, and illustrate that it is important not to 'homogenise' young people's experience. Some studies also state that young people and people do not always recognise that they are 'homeless', even though they do not have a stable place of residence, especially when they are couch surfing, or in insecure accommodation.⁵¹

Addressing youth homelessness

In 2008, the economic cost of youth homelessness in Australia was estimated as close to one billion dollars per annum and early intervention for homeless prevention and support was judged to be cost effective.⁵²

From a policy perspective, youth homelessness has the characteristics of what has been referred to as a 'wicked problem'.⁵³ Wicked problems are social complex, multi-causal, with many interdependencies. There is no clear solution, there is a risk of unforeseen consequences in any policy intervention, responsibility for the problem spans organisational boundaries and there has been chronic policy failure. Simplistic or singular linear policy approaches are unlikely to be effective or optimal when

⁴⁸ SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2016, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014. *Homelessness among Indigenous Australians*. Cat.

no. IHW 133. Canberra: AIHW

⁵¹ Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2008). *Counting the Homeless*. Retrieved from Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2050.02006>

⁵² Eldridge, D., MacKenzie, D., Clay, N., & Dethlefs, W. (2008). *Australia's Homeless Youth: A report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Homelessness*. Retrieved from Brunswick, Victoria: Retrieved from National Youth Commission, http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/australias_homeless_youth-2008.pdf

⁵³ Briggs, L. (2012). *Tackling wicked problems: A public policy perspective*. Canberra: Australian Public Service Commission Retrieved from <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/archive/publications-archive/tackling-wicked-problems>.

policy makers encounter wicked problems where interrelationships between correlating factors are complex, poorly understood and variable.⁵⁴

Most recent studies of homelessness have used the metaphor of 'pathways' to homelessness. This approach has the advantage that it is able to encompass both individual psychological characteristics and societal sociological factors.⁵⁵ This approach is also able to reflect the diversity of young people and their experiences through the multiple pathways into and out of homelessness. A social ecological theoretical framework has also been recommended.⁵⁶ This approach is consistent with a pathways approach and could also serve to give emphasis to how individual choices may be shaped by context. Some studies discuss pathways out of homelessness for young people and found that some factors aided this process, including support of another person and trigger events, such as having a baby.⁵⁷ From a policy perspective, identifying young people's pathways into and out of homelessness is important to provide effective policy responses.

This can be illustrated more clearly in examining the previous example on the relationship between drug use and youth homelessness where four drug-related pathways into homelessness were identified.⁵⁸ Because the relationships varied, each pathway would require different preventative strategies; different policy responses; and a service system flexible enough to accommodate this variety. The common factor identified in this study was unresolved family conflict and while intervention at an individual level may have addressed some of these issues the impact of broader, structural factors on the source of family conflict also need to be considered. It has been observed that in homelessness research there is often a focus on personal factors and insufficient attention to discourse on homelessness and structural factors that influence choice and personal experiences.⁵⁹ In the context of this observation, this would lead to questions about how family conflict

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Clapham, D. (2003). Pathways approaches to homelessness research. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13(2), 119-127. doi:10.1002/casp.717

⁵⁶ Piat, M., Polvere, L., Kirst, M., Voronka, J., Zabkiewicz, D., Plante, M. C., Goering, P. (2014). Pathways into homelessness: Understanding how both individual and structural factors contribute to and sustain homelessness in Canada. *Urban Studies*, 52(13), 2366. doi:10.1177/0042098014548138

⁵⁷ Couch, J. (2011). 'My Life Just Went Zig Zag': Refugee Young People and Homelessness. *Youth Studies Australia*, 30(2), 22-32.

⁵⁸ Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., & Keys, D. (2005). Young people, drug use and family conflict: Pathways into homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence*, 28(2), 185-199. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.002

⁵⁹ Clapham, D. (2003). Pathways approaches to homelessness research. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13(2), 119-127. doi:10.1002/casp.717

was connected to access to material resources; to over-crowded or insecure family housing; or to the experience of racism. For example, how overcrowding or racism affects parental coping and mental health, and how this in turn, affects the capacity of parents to offer emotional support to their children.

An overview of policy approaches to youth homelessness in Australia

Policy attention to youth homelessness commenced in the mid-1970s and has mostly been based upon a rights perspective, as enshrined in different international conventions, including the Convention on Economic and Social Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Different policies have emphasised different rights, including the rights to shelter, the rights to education, to health care, rights to employment, and rights to family. When community-based youth refuges were established following the introduction of the *Homelessness Persons Assistance Act 1974*, they were modelled on women's refuges.⁶⁰ This approach emphasised young people's right to shelter. These refuges were small and local, and provided unconditional accommodation that was not time-limited in the early years. Community-based refuges were often managed by committees that involved local people, and were staffed by live-in house parents, who were sometimes unpaid. The recommendations of the Senate Standing Committee on Youth Homelessness⁶¹ in 1982 led to the establishment of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) with a youth-specific stream. This provided youth refuges with greater financial stability.

Criticism of youth refuges states that they provided a short-term solution that failed to address underlying issues of access to incomes and available and affordable of longer term youth housing necessary for independent living, however this infrastructure did not eventuate.⁶² By the end of the 1980s, stays at youth refuges had become time-limited with the presumption that youth refuges would only provide immediate crisis accommodation.⁶³

In the 1980s, the policy approach also treated youth homelessness as a rights issue, but broadened the rights considered to include the right to education, the right to

⁶⁰ MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

⁶¹ (Australia. Parliament. Senate. Standing Committee on Social, 1982) Referenced in MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

⁶² MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

⁶³ Ibid

work and rights to health care. The Burdekin Report⁶⁴ raised the profile of youth homelessness and led to the proposal that homeless young people needed well-connected support services that covered education, employment and support to stay in school. This led to initiatives like the Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSY) in 1991, the Job Placement, Employment and Training program (JPET) in 1992, and Students at Risk program (STAR).⁶⁵

Criticism of this approach notes that many of the Burdekin report recommendations were not implemented, especially recommendations on the need for adequate income for young people to live independently and the need for exit pathways to permanent independent accommodation.⁶⁶ After a change of government, the Morris report⁶⁷ recommended a change of focus away from support for homeless young people and towards initiatives to prevent youth homelessness. This eventually led to the Reconnect program. The Reconnect program emphasised the young persons' right to family (and sometimes the rights of families, especially parents). Funding under SAAP, was maintained but reduced in real value and youth refuges became a residual safety-net service for young people failed by other systems, especially the care and justice systems.⁶⁸

In 1998 the Western Australian Auditor General undertook a review of accommodation and support services provided to young people aged 12–17 years who were unable to live at home. This review concluded that support services for young people in care 'were either in short supply, not readily accessible, or inequitably provided' and concluded that this could increase risk of long-term financial dependency, and also risks of anti-social behaviour.⁶⁹ The report affirmed it was difficult to place young people aged 12 and over in foster care, and the incidence of multiple foster placements was high (39%). The report also noted that 18 per cent of young people in care had parents who had been in care, that many

⁶⁴ Burdekin, B., Carter, J., & Dethlefs, W. (1989). *Our Homeless Children: Report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service Retrieved from <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights/publications/our-homeless-children>.

⁶⁵ MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs (1995) A report on aspects of youth homelessness. Parliament of Australia. www.aph.gov.au

⁶⁸ MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

⁶⁹ Auditor General of Western Australia. (1998). *Accommodation and support services provided to young people unable to live at home*. Perth, Australia: Government of Western Australia.pp.29

suffered trauma in their lives and faced multiple educational, justice, health and addiction problems. The report made recommendations for better coordination of services provided by different agencies, better customisation of services, better planning and support for the young person to live independently after they leave care (because family reunion was not a usual outcome) and improved case management both in terms of continuity and frequency of meeting. The report also concluded that pressure on non-government organisations to compete undermined collaboration and that commercialisation of care was problematic and did not recognise the true cost of quality service provision.⁷⁰ The Gordon report⁷¹ also identified the need for better collaboration across government departments and with non-government service providers.

In 2007, the Rudd government commissioned the White Paper *The Road Home*.⁷²⁷³ This paper suggested that the way to reduce homelessness was to address three different aspects:

1. 'Supply' - prevent young people coming into the system.
2. 'Stocks' - improve and expanding services to those already in the system and provide pathways to enable people within the system to leave the system
3. Prevention of re-entry - through post-vention to break cycles of homelessness.

To support this approach various services for young people were funded including: headspace, youth mental health services; Reconnect (family conciliation services) and care schools (schools that focus holistically on both educational and welfare needs of young people).

The changing policy approaches have been underpinned by a shifting discourse on the way young people are viewed. The initial youth refuge movement responded to the visible need for youth accommodation and the failure of institutional responses,

⁷⁰ Auditor General of Western Australia. (1998). *Accommodation and support services provided to young people unable to live at home*. Perth, Australia: Government of Western Australia.pp.29

⁷¹ Gordon, S., Hallahan, K., & Henry, D. (2002). *Putting the Picture Together, Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities*, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia. Perth, Western Australia: State Law Publisher.

⁷² Commonwealth of Australia (2008) *The Road Home: A national approach to reducing homelessness*.

Retrieved from: http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/australia_the_road_home_2008.pdf

⁷³ MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

such as large children's homes. It was premised on assumptions that local communities *ought to* manage and shape local responses to youth homelessness. Post 1995, the focus changed to homelessness prevention. This was premised upon assumptions that wherever possible, young people *ought to* reside with their families and be supported by them.

As the age for compulsory education and training has risen in Australia, and availability of full-time youth employment has diminished, this has lengthened the period of normalised dependency for young people. The third assumption that underpins recent policy (and a significant change from the policy of the 1970s) is that full-time paid work for young people *ought not to* be considered the norm, and instead young people *ought to* spend their time in full-time education or training and hence in a financially dependent role. For young people aged 12–15 years who are without or estranged from family support current policies provide few practical options, relying rather on either intervention from the child protection system or family reunification strategies.

Another change in the discourse over time relates to how homeless young people are presented and perceived. Initially the focus was on structural causes of youth homelessness (poverty, lack of affordable youth housing, lack of full-time youth employment, lack of access to income support whilst at school, the lower rate of youth allowance payments compared with adults, the low level of youth wages), and the moral duty to provide adequate support for young people who lack family support.

More recently, some prominent academic research studies^{74 75 76} have focused exclusively on discussion of young people's responsibility for their homelessness (drug and alcohol misuse, mental health issues, wilfulness) or placed responsibility on their families (poor parenting, single parents, blended families). While these studies have been interesting and offer some insights into individual and family dynamics that contribute to homelessness, they have diverted attention away from underlying structural factors related to poverty, full-time youth employment availability, income support and housing supply for young people. Other

⁷⁴ Martijn, C., & Sharpe, L. (2006). Pathways to youth homelessness. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62(1), 1-12. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.05.007 Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15985321>

⁷⁵ Rosenthal, D., Mallett, S., & Myers, P. (2006). Why do homeless young people leave home? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 30(3), 281-285. doi:10.1111/j.1467-842X.2006.tb00872.x

⁷⁶ Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., & Keys, D. (2005). Young people, drug use and family conflict: Pathways into homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence*, 28(2), 185-199.

contemporary researchers and lobby groups^{77 78} argue that from a policy perspective, it is important to understand that the personal and family stresses that precipitate youth homelessness are responses to social exclusion, and stress caused by poverty, and lack of availability of affordable housing.

The idea that it is normal for young people to live with their families and to be financially dependent on them well into adulthood is a recent and historically unusual assumption, especially for working class young people and their families.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁷⁹ asserts children 'should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.' This description presents an aspirational view of the family that is not the lived reality of all children and young people. Where families are unable or unwilling to provide a safe, nurturing environment, under the UNCRC it is incumbent on government to provide special protection and assistance to children and young people.

The UNCRC also supports the right of the child to express their views in decision making processes that affect them, and that these be given 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'⁸⁰ However, the decision making authority generally remains with the legal guardian until the child reaches the age of majority, which in Australia is 18 years of age.

Making judgements about individual maturity and the understanding of young people is not an unfamiliar concept. In juvenile justice, judgements are made about the understanding of young people aged 10–14 years to determine criminal responsibility.⁸¹

⁷⁷Council to Homeless Persons. (2014). *CHP's position paper on the VHAP Reform Project: A Framework for Ending Homelessness* Melbourne: Council to Homeless Persons Retrieved from <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/131224-CHP-position-paper-on-VHAP-FINAL-.pdf>

⁷⁸ Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G., & Johnsen, S. (2013). Pathways into Multiple Exclusion Homelessness in Seven UK Cities. *Urban Studies*, 50(1), 148-168.

⁷⁹ Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. (1989). Convention of the Rights of the Child. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

⁸⁰ Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. (1989). Convention of the Rights of the Child. Article 12. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

⁸¹ White, R. (2008). Concepts Shaping Juvenile Justice. *Youth Studies Australia*, 27(2), 45-51.

The right of children to make decisions autonomously prior to the age of majority has also been the subject of legal debate. The Gillick judgement,⁸² which was brought into Australian law through Marion's case,⁸³ affirmed that a minor's right to autonomy increases with their maturity and competence (sometimes termed 'Gillick competence'), and that parental rights diminish as a young person becomes able to assume responsibility for their own life. For independently homeless young people aged 12–15 years, issues relating to autonomy and Gillick competence are especially relevant. The concept of the 'mature minor' has been established in the provision of health services particularly to young people.

Strategies and models of service delivery

Discussions about models of service delivery usually categorise them according to the purpose of service. There are four main types of policy and strategy for homelessness services for young people:

1. Strategies that aim to prevent homelessness
2. Strategies that provide crisis services and better support to young people who are homeless
3. Strategies that create an exit point to secure housing
4. Strategies that stop the re-occurring cycle of homelessness (sometimes called post-vention)⁸⁴

Applying these different types of strategy to young people aged under 16 years who are independently homeless or at risk of becoming so, reveals the particular challenges and needs of this cohort of young people.

Prevention is often suggested as the primary and preferred strategy. The Reconnect program was evaluated and found to be effective at preventing homelessness by supporting early family reconciliation,^{85 86} but the goal of family reconciliation or

⁸² House of Lords (1986) *Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbeach Area Health Authority and another*. <http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKHL/1985/7.html>

⁸³ Harrison, M. (1992). What's new in family laws? Parental authority and its constraints: The case of Marion. *Family Matters* (32).

⁸⁴ Lazzari, J. (2008). Youth Homelessness in Australia - a Road Map for the Future. *Just Policy : A Journal of Australian Social Policy* (48), 48-50.

⁸⁵ Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2005). Youth homelessness: four policy proposals. *Youth Studies Australia*, 24(2), 32-38.

⁸⁶ MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

resolution of family conflict is not always possible or an appropriate response, especially where a young person has experienced abuse in the family.⁸⁷

In terms of prevention and early intervention, the school-based welfare and support programs for homelessness prevention that are found in some states, especially Victoria, were found to be effective as a means of providing support to school students at risk of homelessness.⁸⁸ The role of the school as a uniform provision site for early intervention has also been supported.⁸⁹ This is appropriate provided young people have not already disengaged from school. Referral to youth-specific specialist services in drug and alcohol, domestic and family violence and youth mental health was also considered important in preventing homelessness.⁹⁰

Reflective of the understanding that there are multiple pathways into homelessness, a range of strategies for prevention and early intervention are also required. Creating a cohesive service system with flexibility to respond to different scenarios and needs requires a level of coordination and community-based models where funding for local coordination to link school and services has been proposed.⁹¹

The provision of accommodation and crisis services to this age group is more problematic. The existing emergency short-stay supported accommodation, transitional medium term accommodation and integrated Foyer-type accommodation is available to older young people⁹², but not usually to young people aged 12–15 years. It has been recommended that young people under 16 years who cannot live with their families should be placed in out-of-home care, and only recommends Foyer-style integrated housing education and support services if young people are 16 or older.⁹³ Criticism of this observes that the 12–15 year old age group are rarely prioritised by the child protection or care system;⁹⁴ the practical difficulty of finding

⁸⁷ Johnson, G. (2009). Four Aspects of Youth Homelessness. *Parity*, 22(8), 12-14.

⁸⁸ MacKenzie, D., & Chamberlain, C. (2008). Youth homelessness 2006. *Youth Studies Australia*, 27(1), 17-25.

⁸⁹ Fildes, J. (2016). Home and away: Child and youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 29(3), 6-8.

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Chamberlain, C., & MacKenzie, D. (2005). Youth homelessness: four policy proposals. *Youth Studies Australia*, 24(2), 32-38.

⁹² MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

⁹³ Fildes, J. (2016). Home and away: Child and youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 29(3), 6-8.

⁹⁴ Eldridge, D., MacKenzie, D., Clay, N., & Dethlefs, W. (2008). *Australia's Homeless Youth: A report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Homelessness*. Retrieved from Brunswick, Victoria:

and maintaining out-of-home placements for young people once they reach their teens; and, the poor outcomes for young people leaving the care system.⁹⁵

There is very little explicit discussion of exit points for young people aged 12–15 years. One exit point that is mentioned is family reconciliation, but for those young people for whom this is not possible, at present there are few alternative exit points. It has been suggested that many young people who had been homeless would require post-vention support through needs-based outreach for an extended period of time to avoid them becoming homeless once more.⁹⁶

Appropriately supported accommodation is required to meet the needs of young people with differing levels of independence.⁹⁷ A range of alternative models to the care system or the traditional accommodation programs have been proposed for young people aged under 16 years, such as the use of an adolescent community placement program. Under this arrangement young people board with families, but in a relationship that is more independent than foster care. Reflective of the pathways into homelessness, services need to provide trauma-informed care and holistic responses to meet the needs of the client group they serve.⁹⁸

It is important to ensure that supported accommodation is accessible to all communities; to redevelop employment programs, provide drug and alcohol services, mental health programs for young people; and to link youth housing with education and training support.⁹⁹ Any new system of intervention should first address problems with care and protection.¹⁰⁰ To this end, the National Youth Commission (NYC) called for an Inquiry to expose issues and develop proposals for a national response that strengthen care and protection for young people aged 12–17 years and to provide them with better needs-based support on leaving care.

The needs of Aboriginal children and young people are also critical given the greater burden of disadvantage. Culturally secure and responsive services are required to address the particular needs of Aboriginal children and young people and their

⁹⁵ Create Foundation (2010) What's the answer? Young people's solutions for improving transitioning to independence from out of home care. November 2010. create.org.au

⁹⁶ Lazzari, J. (2008). Youth Homelessness in Australia - a Road Map for the Future. *Just Policy : A Journal of Australian Social Policy*(48), 48-50.

⁹⁷ Tsorbaris, D. (2008). Editorial: Youth Homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 21(6), 3.

⁹⁸ Hamilton, A. B., Poza, I., & Washington, D. L. (2011). "Homelessness and Trauma Go Hand-in-Hand": Pathways to Homelessness among Women Veterans. *Women's Health Issues*, 21(4), S203-S209. doi:10.1016/j.whi.2011.04.005

⁹⁹ Lazzari, J. (2008). Youth Homelessness in Australia - a Road Map for the Future. *Just Policy : A Journal of Australian Social Policy*(48), 48-50.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

families. More research is required to understand the differences in cultural definitions and understanding of homelessness in order to more accurately capture the extent of the problem and to provide policies, services and supports that meet these needs appropriately.¹⁰¹

Summary

Despite the limited information on the extent of homelessness in young people aged under 16 years it is clear that there is a cohort of young people who experience homelessness at this age and there is also a gap in adequate policy responses to meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

Further research is required to find out about the extent of the problem and the diverse experiences and support requirements of young people aged under 16 years who are homeless and living independently. Such research should underpin the development of responses to effectively meet the needs of this vulnerable group of young people.

Youth homelessness is agreed to be multi-causal, and the relationships between the risk factors are both complex, and variable between individuals. Multiple pathways into and out of independent homelessness mean that services need to be able to respond in multiple ways according to what will be most appropriate and effective in different circumstances, and for different young people and families. From a policy perspective it is very important not to over-simplify the issues, or to assume that a 'one-size fits all' response will be effective. Both innovation and evaluation will be important to identify new approaches that work, to gain a more complete understanding of how and why interventions work and because some approaches that are tried will fail.

It is cost effective to intervene early to support young people who have become independently homeless. The model of prevention/crisis support/exit points/post-vention is helpful as a way of considering service organisation and the role of a variety of mainstream organisations such as schools and health care providers, and specialist organisations such as child protection and homelessness services needs further exploration.

Effective responses to addressing the needs of families to provide supportive and nurturing environments and resolve conflict wherever possible should be explored. More options are also needed for service responses for young people aged 12–15

¹⁰¹ Memmott P, Birdsall-Jones C. & Greenop K. (2011) Why are special services needed to address Indigenous homelessness? Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland.

years who cannot live with their families, and this needs to be adapted to the individual maturity of the young person.

The over-representation of Aboriginal people in homelessness statistics also indicates the need for culturally appropriate responses and the need to address the issues of structural problems such as poverty, racism and disadvantage.

Extended post-vention support (up to 25 years) may be required because other social policies, such as income support, tacitly assume ongoing familial support until this age.