



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people

From the AHURI Inquiry  
An effective homelessness services system

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## Executive summary

### Key points

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- Children and young people (aged 12–25 years) are one of the largest cohorts of users of homelessness services: in 2017–2018, there were 81,193 young parents and accompanying children (28%) and 43,200 young people presenting alone (16%).
  - Children and young people, as well as ‘people exiting institutions and care into homelessness’ are priority cohorts under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NAHA; 2018), and this is carried over into most of the state and territory strategies and plans.
  - The redesign of the youth homelessness services system is best conceptualised at the community level, as the ‘system’ where interaction between young people and services—including schools—actually takes place.
  - Thinking about the ‘community as system’ means that small-area data analysis of need, trends and outcomes should be developed into community-level focussed planning of the ecosystem of supports required by vulnerable young people.
  - There is a strong case in theory—and from practical experimentation—for adopting a system reform agenda that makes the shift from a program-oriented approach to a place-based cross-sectoral ‘collective impact’ framework for support and service delivery for at-risk and homeless young people.
  - A systemic implementation of a place-based community approach to early intervention involving proactive identification of risk, a tiered practice framework, an extended workforce of youth and family workers, and school welfare/wellbeing staff working under a formal collaboration and within a strong data-driven outcomes framework will begin to reduce the flow of young people into homelessness.
  - A policy imperative is to fund the development of youth-specific social housing options that provide the appropriate levels of support that young people need, while scaling up rents over time as young people progress through education or training and gain access to employment.
  - A systemic needs-based implementation of the Home Stretch agenda, which advocates the extension of support for all care-leavers until 21 years, would have a significant impact on a major stream of vulnerable youth becoming homeless.
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## Key findings

- A significant proportion (44%) of all individuals who need and seek help from homelessness services are young people and children. About 42,000 (16%) are adolescents and young adults presenting to services on their own, and this cohort remains at a higher level than in the decade prior to the federal government White Paper, *The Road Home* (FaHCSIA 2008).
- The known drivers of homelessness such as family conflict and domestic violence have not abated; more young people are now referred to care and protection services than were a decade ago, and housing affordability has not improved over that period of time. The issue of inadequate youth incomes and benefits is a subject of public debate and advocacy.
- Young people leaving out-of-home care (OOHC) into independent living arrangements are particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness.
- Between 40 and 50 per cent of young people exiting homelessness services move into a situation of further homelessness.
- Informants raised the developmental needs of adolescents and young adults in terms of the work of supporting them—but particularly in terms of how they might struggle to cope with a fully independent living situation.
- Engagement in education and training—as well as supported pathways towards employment—was raised as a crucial factor in the future options that homeless young people may or may not have. Given various programs and initiatives directed to addressing early school leaving, or providing supported accommodation linked to education and training, a strong cross-sectoral strategy and a more carefully considered deployment of interventions could be considered.
- Housing options for homeless young people are a subset of a broader housing affordability issue affecting the community and young people generally. Access to social housing remains highly problematic, and the very idea of youth-specific and youth-appropriate housing is not well developed at a policy level.
- Even at sites where there is innovation around early intervention and critical thinking about the homelessness services system, a common comment from frontline crisis workers is: ‘We need more crisis accommodation’. However, while this is understandable from a lived experience perspective, and perhaps intuitively, it does not amount to a cogent policy agenda informed by systems thinking.
- Place-based arguments and an interest in collective impact were found in most community sites where key informants were interviewed, primarily due to the purposive selection of sites and informants. However, in terms of system redesign, there are several funded Australian-developed community-based ‘collective impact’ models in Victoria and New South Wales (as well as overseas), as well as interest and incipient community development in a growing number of other communities.
- Aboriginal young people and Indigenous Australians are generally over-represented in homelessness services. The main advice from Indigenous and non-Indigenous informants in this study—who were mostly workers in the field—was that ‘culturally appropriate service provision and practice’ was not as widely available as needed. Also, it was suggested that Aboriginal young people needed a choice of Indigenous and non-Indigenous support options that are often not available.

## Policy development options

### Redesign systems with a focus on community-level organisation, planning, access and outcomes measurement

If systems thinking and planning is framed by a homeless service system for young people as a community-level ecosystem of institutions, services, programs and supports, then system redesign begins to consider new ways of joining up services and linking homelessness service providers with mainstream agencies, such as schools and educational programs. The focus is local programs, not centrally managed discrete programs. Also, within a pre-crisis early-intervention framework, risk of homelessness and homelessness as experienced by young people is more evidently linked with other emerging adverse issues in young people's lives, such as early school leaving, mental health issues, or drug and alcohol issues. In practical terms, community-level early intervention works across issues and thus needs to be cross-sectoral. The current funding environment remains siloed.

### Improved access through Youth Entry Points

A practical structural and organisational reform that potentially offers an efficiency dividend would be to develop Youth Entry Points on a regional and sub-regional basis in all Australian jurisdictions. The Victorian entry points are a feature of the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) system in that state, and serve to simplify contact with and access to support services in a more efficient manner. The entry point is provided by a group of services that meet together as a network—and this serves to foster greater cooperation among local and regional providers. Several communities in NSW have created local entry points on their own volition. South Australia maintains a central Youth Gateway. Experience and feedback from SA homelessness workers about entry points suggests that the central access point may not be the best approach.

### Invest in early intervention and prevention

There is a clear policy imperative to implement 'early intervention' to reduce the flow of young people into homelessness. The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) specifies children and young people as a priority cohort and early intervention and prevention as a key. The long-standing Reconnect program embodies practice experience, while the piloting of the 'community of services and schools' (COSS) model of early intervention provides both an experiential and research-evaluation evidence-base for implementation to scale.

The COSS model is a place-based model for supporting vulnerable young people and families to reduce disengagement from education and early school leaving, and to help where family issues are heading towards a crisis and possible homelessness—as well as other adverse outcomes. The outcomes achieved by the Geelong Project (TGP) of a 40 per cent reduction in adolescent homelessness and, at the same time, a 20 per cent reduction in early school leaving has demonstrated what a place-based approach is capable of achieving, and this is what has generated interest nationally and internationally (MacKenzie 2018c).

The success factors of the COSS model seem to be:

- Local community leadership in one of the participating key stakeholders, ideally the lead agency responsible for the early intervention support work.
- The construction of a formalised community collective through a community development process.
- A population-screening methodology that can proactively identify vulnerable youth and families before the onset of crises.

- A flexible practice framework that can efficiently manage proactive support to at-risk youth and their families, while still able to be reactive when crises occur.
- A single-entry point into the support system for young people in need.
- A data-intensive approach to risk identification, monitoring and outcomes measurement (utilising Sir Michael Barber's 'deliverology' [Barber, Kihn et al. 2011]).

### **Invest in youth-specific social housing for young people**

Homeless young people on their own are over half (54%) of all single people who seek help from homelessness services, but they are only 2.9 per cent of principal tenants in social and public housing in Australia (AIHW 2018a). The current business model of mainstream social housing means that providers are often reluctant to accept young residents because of their low and insecure incomes, and because they are regarded as high-risk tenants. What incentives or changes could increase the proportion of young people as resident in mainstream social housing is not clear.

### **Integrate Youth Foyers into the exit pathways for young people leaving Specialist Homelessness Services**

The Youth Foyer model has been widely accepted and supported as a housing model for at-risk or homeless young people, as it addresses their education, training and employment support needs. The commitment to education/training and employment pathways is a condition for access to this type of supported transitional housing. Over the past decade, foyers have been established in many jurisdictions and there are now some 15 foyers, or foyer-like projects, which have been developed to support about 500 young people (16–25 years) at-risk of homelessness or recovering from homelessness.

As Youth Foyers are a relatively expensive model, there are some questions that need to be considered:

- Should foyers strictly provide a pathway for young people recovering from homelessness? Or should they take in a wider population of at-risk youth?
- Should foyers be congregate facilities—as is currently the case—or a dispersed set of units connected to a nearby community hub?

In terms of the place of Youth Foyers in a redesigned homelessness service system for young people, their contribution to post-homelessness ('breaking the cycle') outcomes would be strengthened if their intake was restricted to young people exiting the SHS system.

### **Extend state care until 21 years**

The relationship between OOHC and homelessness has been understood since the mid-1990s (London, Moslehuddin et al. 2007). There have been many leaving-care initiatives and projects over the past two decades. Good practice knowledge about after-care support is well developed—yet the net national effort to prevent this cohort of young people from entering homelessness has been inconsistent and evidently inadequate. The national Home Stretch Campaign is 'a national campaign seeking to extend the current leaving care arrangements for young people in state care until age 21 years' (Home Stretch 2019), but on the basis of robust needs-based standards of care and support.

The Victorian Government has adopted the Home Stretch policy and programmatic requirements for 250 young people over five years, on the basis that this \$11.6m investment will have a significant impact, even if is not available to all young people leaving the care system. Based on the high proportion (variously reported as 30–60%) of homeless young people, a full and effective implementation of the Home Stretch agenda would have a significant effect on the number of young people becoming homeless.

## The study

This research project, *Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people, is part of a wider AHURI Inquiry into an Effective Homelessness Service System* that includes cognate studies of two other population cohorts – older Australians (Thredgold, Beer et.al. 2019) and families (valentine et.al. 2019). The project is aimed at identifying and proposing measures that could, if implemented, reduce youth homelessness and lead to improved outcomes for young people who experience homelessness.

The investigation was strongly informed by systems thinking that conceptualised the ‘system’ as a place-based community of interventions, programs and institutions that affect young people, and are, in turn, affected by young people—an ecosystem around young people that extends beyond the SHS. Of course, government policies, departmental guidelines, funding and contract management practices—and how these are conceived and implemented—also affect the local system, and what happens for the young people who need and seek help.

A key system concept in this study was the stock and flow model: stock being the number of young people in the SHS and flow being the number of young people moving into and out of homelessness. This is a widely applied system concept which, in this context, directs attention to the ecosystem of related activities, processes, institutions and programs beyond the SHS system that are relevant to addressing homelessness.

Stroh and Zurcher argue that implementing a ‘systems thinking’ approach involves the following process:

1. *Building a strong foundation for change by engaging multiple stakeholders to identify an initial vision and picture of current reality.*
2. *Engaging stakeholders to explain their often competing views of why a chronic, complex problem persists despite people’s best efforts to solve it.*
3. *Integrating the diverse perspectives into a map that provides a more complete picture of the system and root causes of the problem.*
4. *Supporting people to see how their well-intended efforts to solve the problem often make the problem worse.*
5. *Committing to a compelling vision of the future and supportive strategies that can lead to sustainable, system-wide change. (2012: 4)*

A premise of this study was that the most promising initiatives for system change are most likely to be found in some form somewhere among the many programs and services across Australia. Using purposive sampling, key informants were sought in community settings known for promising initiatives or innovation. Redesigning the homelessness system is about finding reforms and measures that promise to lead to better outcomes, especially where there is a strong evidence-base. These reforms are not just about changes to the SHS.

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