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Innovative local initiative reduces youth homelessness as well as early school leaving

- An innovative place-based model for responding to youth homelessness has reduced adolescent homelessness in Geelong by 40 per cent while also reducing early school leaving.
- The Community of Schools and Services model relies on a 'collective impact' approach whereby key local stakeholders collaborate to identify vulnerable youth and families and deliver pre-crisis early interventions.
- The research consulted key informants and examined local community data in three states (NSW, VIC and SA) where innovation was known to exist, in order to explore the possibilities for system reform and to identify promising interventions ripe for systemic implementation.

With between 60 and 70 per cent of Australians who ever seek help from Specialist Homelessness Services having left school before completing Year 12, new AHURI research has identified measures that reduce youth homelessness as well as early school leaving.

The research, '[*Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people*](#)' was undertaken for AHURI by researchers from Swinburne University of Technology and the University of South Australia.

Examination of a case study in Geelong, Victoria (The Geelong Project) showed that where an innovative 'community of schools and services' early intervention model (COSS Model) was used to support vulnerable young people and families, there was a significant 40 per cent decrease in adolescents (12–18-year-olds) entering the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system, but at the same time also a reduction in disengagement from education and school.

'The COSS model of early intervention is an exemplar of what is being called 'collective impact' and relies on strong local community leadership; proactively identifying vulnerable youth and families before the onset of crises, and a flexible practice framework that can provide efficient support' says lead researcher Associate Professor David MacKenzie from Swinburne University of Technology. 'The outcomes achieved by The Geelong Project has demonstrated what a place-based approach is capable of achieving, and this has generated interest nationally and internationally'.

The study also looked at a number of other promising support programs that can help prevent young people becoming or remaining homeless including a NSW-based social housing for youth initiative which is similar to the Canadian Housing First for Youth program—a youth-appropriate form of Housing First that provides a rapid-rehousing option for young people who are homeless.

Other initiatives examined in the study included subsidised private rental housing options such the NSW Youth Choices program; and youth foyers that tie education with supported accommodation but with a mandated linkage with exit points from Specialist Homelessness Services.

In particular, programs that support young people after they leave state care at age 18 have demonstrated success in enabling young people into independent living and a successful transition into secure housing.

‘Our research supports the Home Stretch campaign, which seeks to change the current leaving care age for young people in state care from 18 until 21 years,’ says Associate Professor David MacKenzie. ‘The process of leaving care is one of those transitions where if support can be delivered—and delivered appropriately, sufficiently and for as long as necessary—it should be able to prevent a young person who leaves care becoming homeless.’

The research underpins that changes to supporting young homeless people should look at new ways of joining up services and linking homelessness service providers with mainstream agencies such as schools and educational programs, with a focus on local communities, rather than centrally-managed targeted siloed programs.

The report can be downloaded from the AHURI website at <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/327>

For media enquiries please contact:

Anthony Smeaton
Head of Marketing and Communications
Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
Phone: 0404 544 101
Email: anthony.smeaton@ahuri.edu.au