# Reducing homelessness and improving outcomes for young people

**Based on AHURI Final Report No. 327:** Redesign of a homelessness service system for young people

## What this research is about

**This research identifies measures that could reduce youth homelessness and lead to improved outcomes for young people who experience homelessness. The findings are based on a community-level analysis of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) data and sites of innovation in three states: South Australia, NSW and Victoria.**
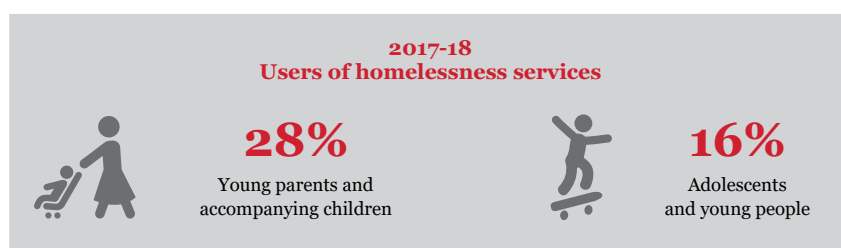
## The context of this research

Children, adolescents (aged 12–18 years) and young adults (aged 19–24 years) are one of the largest user groups of homelessness services: in 2017–2018, there were 81,193 young parents and accompanying children (28%) and 43,200 adolescents and young adults presenting alone (16%).

The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) requires that states and territories have a homelessness strategy to redress this situation; young people and children are a priority group.

## The key findings

- Adolescents tend to become homeless due to family issues and conflicts that may well reach the level of violence, together with other issues that may complicate a family situation—such as mental health or drug and alcohol problems.

- Younger adolescents are more likely to be able to return to live with their family—or at least with a family member—even after an experience of homelessness.

- Young adults approaching homelessness services are more likely to have been living independently of their family of origin, and their experience of homelessness is more likely to be triggered by domestic violence and a resulting family breakup or a financial and housing crisis.

- Private rental remains an important option for housing after homelessness for about one-quarter of adolescents aged 12–18 years and for one-third of young adults. However, 40–50 per cent of young people exit the SHS into situations of homelessness. The delivery of rapid rehousing and permanent safe and secure youth-appropriate housing remains a serious gap within the local service systems.

- Homelessness services reported that the complex issues and experiences of Indigenous young people were much the same as for other young clients:
  - culturally appropriate practice involves understanding and knowing how to work with the young person—and with their family.
  - Aboriginal young people need choice: some will not want to be supported by an Aboriginal organisation, while for others, this would be the most appropriate option—if it existed.

**2017-18
Users of homelessness services**

**28%**
Young parents and accompanying children

**16%**
Adolescents and young people

Source: AIHW Report on homelessness services, 2017–18

### Understanding young people and the homelessness services system

In order to understand the interactions of young people entering and leaving the homelessness services system and other connected or related systems, such as schools, the research analysed local homelessness client data (i.e. numbers of SHS clients who were young people) using purposively sampled community case studies from three states: South Australia, NSW and Victoria.

#### Case study: South Australia

Three South Australian communities were compared: City of Playford, City of Salisbury (both in the northern corridor of disadvantage) and Limestone Coast (around Mount Gambier, which is where early intervention along the Community of Schools and Services model [COSS model] – detailed below was trialled for a short time in 2017–18).

Over the two-year period there was a dramatic escalation of school-aged young people (12–18-year-olds) in the City of Playford turning up in the SHS system, some increase in the City of Salisbury, but the level of demand in the Limestone Coast was stable.

However, there was a relatively small increase for 19–20-year-olds over two years in the Northern Corridor communities, and a slight decline in the Limestone Coast.

#### Case study: NSW

In NSW, four communities were compared over a two-year period: Albury, Northern Rivers (on the NSW–Queensland border), South Coast and Blacktown (in western Sydney).

In terms of school-age young people, there was a decrease in adolescents presenting and being accepted as SHS clients, except for Albury, where there was a very small increase.

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The decline in 19–20-year-old SHS clients in Blacktown followed the pattern for 12–18-year-olds. There was little change in Albury, a small decrease in the South Coast and a small increase in Northern Rivers. In all four areas there was a small decrease in young adults 21–24-years-old receiving assistance through the SHS system.

#### Case study: Victoria

Data exists for SHS clients in Geelong over a longer period (2009–2016). There was a significant 40 per cent decrease in adolescents (12–18-year-olds) entering the SHS system through the Youth Entry Point. The other age cohorts showed no significant change.

The decrease in adolescent homelessness in Geelong can be attributed to the early intervention delivered to secondary school students through the work of The Geelong Project (TGP) using the COSS model. As this program has not yet been extended to early school leavers the two other age cohorts show no significant change.

### Support interventions for adolescents and young adults

#### COSS model

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.

The outcomes achieved by The Geelong Project (TGP) of a 40 per cent reduction in adolescent homelessness and a 20 per cent reduction in early school leaving has demonstrated what a place-based approach is capable of achieving.

Four of the community sites— Geelong, Albury, Mt Gambier and Northern Rivers—implemented, in part or whole, the place-based COSS model of early intervention.

The COSS model of early intervention is an exemplar of 'collective impact'. It involves collaborative decision-making at executive and worker levels within a community collective of agencies and schools, under a formal memorandum of understanding.

The success factors of the COSS model seem to be:

- local community leadership as a participating key stakeholder, 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 reactived 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.

### My Foundation Youth Housing (MFYH)

Co-developed with the NSW Government, MFYH is a property manager that works in partnership with youth agencies that provide support to the company's social housing residents in the community. It includes a pilot program known as Transitional Housing Plus, a support model premised on a gradual preparation of young residents for independent living in private rental properties. Rents are increased over a five-year period to the market rent in the community of residency. The criteria for Transitional Housing Plus (Youth) are that participants:

- be 16–25 years at time of referral
- be experiencing homelessness or be at-risk of homelessness
- be unable to resolve housing needs in the short- to medium-term
- have the capacity to transition to private market housing within five years through active involvement in a personal case plan
- be able to be housed safely with the Transitional Housing Plus property.

Over the first three years, MFYH has gone from 74 properties and 100 tenants, to 500 properties under management and 650 tenants 'housed with support'. Nearly all residents (95%) are engaged with support services, and about 85 per cent are engaged in education and training or employment.

### Housing First for Youth (Canada)

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)—a youth-appropriate form of Housing First—is a rapid-rehousing option for young people who are homeless, including those whose homelessness can be described as a chronic condition. The underpinning principles are:

- immediate access to housing with no preconditions
- youth choice and self-determination: in operational terms, it should include:
  – some choice about location of housing and the type of housing appropriate to the individual
  – some choice about which services they are prepared to accept
  – access to education and training
- a harm-reduction policy for young people with substance use and addiction issues
- positive youth development orientation: support for wellbeing that is acutely aware of young people's development needs in adolescence and young adulthood
- individualised and client-driven supports: a youth-focussed needs-based approach to providing support, which recognises that each young person is an individual with their own needs and is on a unique recovery pathway
- social and community integration: for young people to become a part of the community where they live and should include reconnection with family members where that can be achieved.

A major difference between Housing First for older adults is that HF4Y 'must go beyond assisting young people merely to become independent but rather to enable them to make a successful transition to adulthood.'

### Subsidised private rental housing

The private rental market remains the main housing option for young people who cannot or do not return to live with family members, and who leave SHS and need independent housing.

The NSW program Rent Choice Youth provides support, is open to 16–24-year-olds who 'don't have a place to live', who are 'willing to engage with a support provider' and who want to study or train with a view to achieving employment.

### After leaving care programs

Good examples of leaving-care programs include the St Luke's Anglicare leaving-care and after-care support service, which offers a program for young people making the transition to independent living. Support includes:

- case management and therapeutic support
- connections to housing, education, training and employment
- transition units for independent living
- life-skills training
- family and practical support.

The service was demonstrably successful in enabling positive transitions for young people into independent living and particularly effective in providing care-leavers with a successful transition into secure housing.

### Home Stretch campaign

Home Stretch is a national campaign seeking to extend the current leaving care arrangements for young people in state care from age 18 until 21 years.

The Victorian Government has adopted the Home Stretch policy and programmatic requirements for 250 young people over five years for a $11.6m investment.

The process of leaving care is one of those transitions at which support can be delivered—and if delivered appropriately, sufficiently and for as long as necessary—should be able to prevent a young person leaving care experiencing homelessness.

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> *Early school leaving has been—and largely still is—framed as a school problem, while youth homelessness is often simplistically framed as purely a housing problem. However, youth homelessness and early school leaving are intimately interrelated.*
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**Youth Foyers and education**

Around six to seven out of every 10 Australians who ever seek help from SHS left school before completing Year 12, and never recovered their education. Early school leaving has been—and largely still is—framed as a school problem, while youth homelessness is often simplistically framed as purely a housing problem. However, youth homelessness and early school leaving are intimately interrelated.

Foyers are a form of supported housing linked tightly to education, training and employment outcomes. There are now at least 15 Foyers or Foyer-like projects that support about 500 16–25-year-olds at-risk of homelessness or recovering from homelessness.

A previous longitudinal study of the Education First Youth Foyer model in Australia finds that the model 'substantively improves participants' education, employment, housing, and health and wellbeing outcomes, and these improvements are largely sustained a year after exit.'

The reported educational outcomes were reported: on entry, 42 per cent of residents had completed Year 12 or a Certificate III, but two-thirds (67%) had achieved this level of education by the time they left the Foyer, and three-quarters (75%) a year later, and this is compared with the entry level education of young people entering SHS transitional accommodation which is about the same as for the Foyer, but the education level at exit was lower (54%).

Claims based on comparison of young people in a post homelessness program with homeless young people in SHS services is questionable. The report argues that foyers should be more strictly mandated to intake from young people leaving SHS settings.

## What this research means for policy makers

- Redesign systems with a focus on community-level organisation, planning, access and outcomes measurement, and 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 on local, rather than centrally managed programs.

- Improved access through Youth Entry Points on a regional and sub-regional basis in all Australian jurisdictions. The Victorian entry points are a feature of the SHS system and serve to simplify contact with, and access to, support services. The entry point is provided by a group of services that meet together as a network, which serves to foster greater cooperation among local or regional providers.

- Invest in early intervention and prevention to reduce the flow of young people into homelessness.

- Invest in youth-specific social housing for young people.

- Integrate Youth Foyers into the exit pathways for young people leaving Specialist Homelessness Services.

- Extend state care until 21 years (the Home Stretch agenda).

## Methodology

This research compiled system and purposively sampled qualitative data from local community support systems for young people in three state jurisdictions (NSW, SA and Victoria) and was complemented by information from informants at a community level, as well as from responsible administrators.

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