School students who are homeless: finding solutions

AUSTRALIA HAS SOME IMPRESSIVE PROGRAMS IN PLACE TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS AMONG SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN. PREVENTION PROGRAMS SUCH AS SCHOOL FOCUSED YOUTH SERVICES (VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT) AND EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS SUCH AS RECONNECT (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT) PROVIDE A MODEL FOR OTHER JURISDICTIONS AND WOULD REDUCE YOUTH HOMELESSNESS.

KEY POINTS

- Over the past decade, there have been major improvements in the welfare infrastructure in some schools and there are now much stronger links between schools and community agencies.

- To know how to prevent and intervene in youth homelessness one must understand its causes and its different stages of development, and this understanding should inform program development and implementation.

- Preventative strategies operate as broad based activities directed to all students in schools to build protection against homelessness.

- Effective prevention programs include:
  - **funding for community network meetings** to support an exchange of information, to provide a forum for discussing issues and to assist in developing personal and professional relationships which help 'to get things done';
  - **national benchmarks for student welfare** in secondary schools to implement good practice strategies, and appropriate resource levels for student support services.

- Early intervention strategies focus on assisting particular young people who are at the earliest stages of homelessness.

- Effective early intervention strategies include:
  - **family mediation services** to co-ordinate and foster a range of services and supports required on a case-by-case basis;
  - **community residential placement schemes** to provide an accommodation option that gives homeless school students an alternative to crisis accommodation facilities.

CONTEXT

Schools are strategic sites for the prevention of, and early intervention into, youth homelessness. The 1994 national census of homeless school students found that homeless teenagers usually have their first

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experience of homelessness while they are still at school. This census estimated that:

- 25,000 to 30,000 students experience a period of homelessness each year;
- there are 12,000 homeless students at any one point in time; and
- most homeless students drop out of school.

Over the past decade, there has been an explicit attempt in all states and territories to build an early intervention and prevention capacity in schools, but how well various initiatives are working on the ground has not been well researched.

METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this study was to investigate prevention and early intervention practice through case study examples and to construct policy recommendations for programs to assist homeless young people of school age. The research draws on three qualitative data sets: 1220 case histories from the second national census of homeless school students, 377 case histories of young people in Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) agencies, and 100-plus field interviews with school and agency welfare staff.

FINDINGS

A key finding is that to know how to prevent and intervene in homelessness one must understand its causes and its different stages of development.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: CAUSES AND 'CAREERS'

The risk of homelessness is higher for young people from disadvantaged social backgrounds. Family conflict is held to be a major cause of youth homelessness. However, it is not pre-determined what will happen when young people are in conflict with their families. Teenagers and parents can negotiate family conflict in different ways, and there are different possible outcomes. Welfare staff in schools and youth workers can make a difference, because the factors that contribute to young people becoming homeless – such as labour market and housing market conditions, and social background – do not pre-determine everything else that happens in their lives.

The notion of a 'homeless career' describes how people go through various stages before they develop a self-identity as a 'homeless person'. In reality, young people may progress down the career path but also resolve issues and cease to be homeless. The model is useful because it draws attention to the different types of interventions needed at different points on the 'homeless career'. Preventative strategies are broad based activities directed to all students in schools to build up protective factors. Early intervention strategies focus on assisting young people who are at the earliest stages of the homeless career, or who are attempting to remain at school and make the transition to independent living.

SOLUTIONS TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: PREVENTION, EARLY INTERVENTION AND SCHOOL WELFARE TEAMS

In order to undertake 'prevention', schools need a strong welfare infrastructure, as well as programs targeted towards students with special needs. Preventative strategies typically focus on promoting student well-being, building resilience, supporting social learning and connectedness. Many schools now have extensive welfare teams, including pastoral care programs and special programs both within and outside the mainstream curriculum. The table opposite provides an illustrative list of such programs across the States and Territories.

SCHOOL WELFARE PROGRAMS

Overall, there has been an improvement in the welfare infrastructure in many schools, but this improvement has not been uniform across the country. There is a lot of variation between schools. Homeless students are more likely to be identified in schools and assisted successfully where good quality preventative strategies are in place.

Early intervention strategies come in two forms. First, they can focus on young people who are in the 'in and out' stage, or perceptibly at risk of homelessness. These strategies focus on family reconciliation. Second, early intervention can mean supporting homeless students to remain at school and make the transition to independent living. This may involve 'family reconciliation', but these students do not return home.

For some independent students, school is the point of stability in their life and they are determined to complete their education. They need help with income and accommodation, but not long-term support and counselling. Others experience an emotional crisis following the breakdown of family relationships. Everything starts 'to go wrong at school'. These students need help with income and accommodation, as well as long-term support and counselling. They are at great risk of 'dropping out'.

All schools require an experienced welfare team to provide ongoing support and counselling for homeless teenagers and other young people at risk. The welfare team must have the capacity to engage parents

State/Territory	Scale and type of program
New South Wales	790 school based counsellors and 46 district based student welfare consultants
Victoria	Every secondary school has a student welfare co-ordinator, larger schools more than one, and 41 workers to facilitate coordinated service delivery
Queensland	Each medium to large secondary school has at least one guidance officer and 13 youth support co-ordinators covering 35 schools (this will be increased to 113 positions by 2005)
South Australia	290 equivalent full time student welfare co-ordinators (400 workers) in secondary and primary schools and 135 generic welfare officers in district offices
Western Australia	Schools with 500 plus students have a nurse, a psychologist, a school based police officer and a part-time chaplain, and 166 welfare officers in district offices.
Tasmania	Social workers and guidance officers managed through district offices and some youth workers in schools
Australian Capital Territory	High schools typically have one full time counsellor and senior colleges have a welfare team. New initiative is youth workers in all secondary schools
Northern Territory	Counsellors in schools in Darwin and Alice Springs as well as a home-school liaison officer and in many cases a community based police officer

(or carers), as well as students. In some cases, parents are reticent to visit schools for these discussions, and schools need a capacity to carry out home visits. Welfare staff must also have the capacity to support some families and students for a sustained period of time. Schools that were doing well always had positive school leadership on issues of student welfare, a full-time school counsellor, a well-organised welfare team, clear procedures for case management, regular meetings, and close links with local services.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Several jurisdictions have begun to give some content to the rhetoric about 'whole of government' responses to homelessness. Victoria and Western Australia have developed homelessness strategies. South Australia has created a Social Inclusion Unit with 'reducing homeless-ness' as one of the key goals for the current government. The Australian Capital Territory has undertaken a strategic project focusing on young people. A national policy framework to co-ordinate and integrate Federal and State/Territory programs would add further value to existing initiatives.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION POLICY

Funding community coordination
Welfare staff in schools must know what community services are available so they can make appropriate referrals, and bring services into schools. In some states, schools and welfare agencies participate in community network meetings that exchange information and act as a forum for discussing issues. One of the main benefits of network meetings is that staff form personal and professional relationships, and this helps to get things done, despite institutional barriers. These networks have developed most effectively in Victoria, which has a School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) program. SFYS funds 41 workers to foster co-ordinated service delivery between schools and community agencies. The researchers came across a number of school clusters where the development of an interagency community was outstanding. The Victorian initiative is impressive and provides a model that should be developed nationally.

National benchmarks for student welfare
A national policy framework on youth homelessness could include national benchmarks for student welfare in schools. Such standards would not prescribe any one model for how student support services should be organised, but would specify the appropriate level of resources and various service delivery parameters. A first step towards national standards would be to initiate a national review of pastoral care and student welfare services in Australian schools. Even though a response to youth homelessness may be the trigger for a review, welfare staff deal with a range of issues – substance abuse, suicide, and early school leaving – which are often inter-related. The main objective of the proposed review would be to draft national standards, and to recommend good practice strategies for schools and agencies.

Primary school welfare teams

There are young people in secondary schools who come from families that have problems going back many years. Other students come from families that break down before the student is 10 years of age. These children enter the state care and protection system before their teenage years, often experiencing multiple foster care placements. They are particularly at risk of homelessness. There is a case for providing more adequate welfare support in primary schools, following Victoria and South Australia's lead.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS EARLY INTERVENTION POLICY

Family mediation services

Some early intervention strategies focus on young people who are either acutely at risk, or in the 'in and out' stage. An evaluation of the Australian Government's Reconnect program found that most of these teenagers were still with their parents at final contact, and some who had been in temporary accommodation had returned home. The evaluation found a significant improvement in the capacity of young people and their families to manage conflict, better communication, and improved attitudes to school. Across Australia, there are an estimated 15,000 students seriously at risk at any time. Currently Reconnect assists about 5500 to 6000 clients a year. There is a strong case for expanding Reconnect two to three-fold to ensure that service provision matches the need for these services. This is necessary if early intervention is to begin to reduce youth homelessness over the longer term.

Community residential placement schemes

A student's 'homeless career' often begins with temporary stays with friends or relatives. A minority go to youth refuges (SAAP). After that, some attempt to move into shared households, while others look to SAAP for accommodation.

However, SAAP agencies work with many clients who have been homeless for long periods of time.

About two-thirds of SAAP clients aged 12 to 18 are unemployed. A significant proportion of SAAP clients have complex needs, including problems with substance abuse and dealings with the criminal justice system. Students using SAAP services come into contact with the 'homeless sub-culture'.

There is a pressing need for an accommodation option that gives homeless school students an alternative to SAAP. Most homeless teenagers stay temporarily with other households when they first leave home. These informal arrangements could be turned into longer-term placements for homeless students, if they were funded through an improved adolescent community placement scheme.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 30156, *The Development of Prevention and Early Intervention Services for Homeless Youth: Intervening Successfully.*

Reports from this project are available on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) by typing the project number into the search function.

Papers available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

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