AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

Youth homelessness in rural Australia

YOUNG PEOPLE FACING OR EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AUSTRALIA HAVE DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES TO THEIR URBAN CONTEMPORARIES. THE FOYER MODEL IS ONE RESPONSE THAT COULD HELP YOUNG RURAL PEOPLE ESTABLISH THEMSELVES, WITHOUT RELOCATING THEM TO CITIES AWAY FROM THEIR SUPPORT NETWORKS.

KEY POINTS

- Young people (aged 16-25 years) in rural areas experience homelessness very differently to their urban peers, due to limited employment and education options and inadequate formal support networks. Young people in regional centres, such as Mt Baker, Mt Gambier, Launceston and Ballarat, preferred to stay in the region rather than access accommodation and emergency services in larger cities or towns, indicating that family and friendship support was essential to their wellbeing, connections that would be lost by relocation to urban services.

- Gender is particularly significant in the pathway into and experience of homelessness affecting the reasons why young people are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness and their ability to access services and accommodation. Further, race, sexuality, the presence of children and/or pets, employment status, and disability has an effect on young people's access to services and accommodation.

- Children and youth who had been placed into the care system and were under the 'care of the Minister' are very likely to experience homelessness, particularly in the context of insufficient foster places for vulnerable teenagers. Additionally, young people from low-income families who have previously experienced homelessness are more likely to become homeless themselves.

- Young people, generally, do not access services until they become homeless and often access services in an ad hoc manner, including Centrelink. This is generally due to the fact that they are not aware of services that can support them before they become homeless. Additionally, the young people are unlikely to be aware of the variety of benefits and assistance available to them (including through Centrelink), generally only accessing assistance through pre-established connections. This is particularly true for young men.

Two AHURI projects have examined the issues faced by young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness in Australia.

*The first project, led by **Professor Andrew Beer** (AHURI Southern Centre), examined government policies, services and models of good practice in meeting the needs of homeless young people in rural areas of Australia. The project notes the potential of the 'Foyer model' for application in rural Australia, which was the focus of the second project led by **Professor Bill Randolph** (AHURI UNSW/ UWS Research Centre), which evaluated the Miller Live 'N' Learn Campus (Miller Campus) (based near Liverpool, NSW), the only youth Foyer model implemented in Australia to date.*

AHURi
Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

www.ahuri.edu.au

KEY POINTS

- Amongst suggestions of improved funding and whole-of-government responses, the Foyer Model is a potential option for homeless youth in rural areas. The projects acknowledge the potential apprehension of rural communities to this model and the possible social stigmatisation, however, policy makers are encouraged to consider Foyer Models in rural areas, as they provide a productive model for young people living in rural areas.

- For vulnerable young people, the Miller Campus is a positive intervention that bridges the transition from uncertain housing, unemployment, ill health and violence to a more secure future. This model warrants further development and support from governments.

- It is important that policy, program and funding responses to youth homelessness in rural/regional areas consider that young people's experiences are defined by gender, cultural group, sexuality and health status, and are substantially different to those of their urban contemporaries. Safe spaces for young women escaping family and/or sexual violence and mental health services for young men need to be substantially increased.

CONTEXT

The increasing incidence of youth homelessness, in both metropolitan and rural areas, raises questions about an effective, immediate policy and program response. These two research projects provide options for increased funding, services and assistance options. The favoured option being the Foyer Model that provide an effective, integrated accommodation, skills training and job search support for young and often homeless people.

The initial concept of a 'Foyer' (meaning a 'place of welcome') for young vulnerable people began in post-war France. Using this model, Miller Live 'N' Learn Campus (Miller Campus), sponsored and supported by the New South Wales Department of Housing (DoH), provides accommodation and life-skills and training opportunities for young people aged 16-25 with low support needs and who are in vulnerable housing situations.

Analysing the causes and effects of homelessness of vulnerable youth the research finds that the Miller Campus offers a positive option for providing useful, holistic assistance that promises long-term, positive consequences, rather than a band-aid effect.

METHODOLOGY

The first project combined a review of relevant literature, an analysis of current initiatives affecting youth homelessness, visits to youth accommodation services and other support services (Bunbury/Busselton in Western Australia, Mount Gambier and Mount Barker in South Australia, Launceston in Tasmania and Ballarat in Victoria) and focus groups with young, homeless people.

However, the second project concentrated on an initial assessment of outcomes for the young residents with a view to the findings assisting the campus management to further develop the project. Staff, management and two rounds of resident interviews were completed during 2004 using structured interview instruments. Different versions of the question schedule were prepared for residents, project workers and project management.

FINDINGS

Rural youth homelessness

Homelessness amongst young people in rural areas, generally, takes the form of secondary[1] or tertiary[2] homelessness, contributing to their relative invisibility. Young people living in rural areas face many of the challenges confronting urban youth, but are also distinguished by a number of factors that make their experiences of homelessness distinctive including: difficulties in finding employment where labour markets are 'thin' with a premium placed on experience, and tight, often expensive, rental housing markets that offer sub-standard housing and often discriminate against youth. The research shows that there are limited support services in rural areas for young people and those that exist tend to be concentrated in the larger regional centres.

There is a strongly developed sense of community amongst many homeless young people, valuing friendship and support networks and placing considerable priority

---

1 Defined as moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends, relatives, youth refuges, night shelters, boarding houses, hostels and other forms of emergency accommodation.

2 Defined as living permanently in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.

on staying within a familiar physical environment rather than relocating to metropolitan regions that are perceived by the young people as 'dangerous'.

The project proposes the development of a Supported Learning Tenancy (SLT) in rural Australia, utilising the main features of the Foyer model and providing a local and holistic response to the housing, support and training needs of young people at risk of homelessness. In addition to providing accommodation and support services (such as counselling), the SLT would reinforce the local community networks available to young people in rural areas, through education and employment.

The Foyer model

There are a number of principles behind the Foyer model, as initially developed and implemented by the European model, on which the Miller Campus is substantially based, with local management being a key feature.

Each Foyer is managed by a steering group made up of local members of the public, elected representatives, business people and professionals who share the desire to enable young people to take their place in society. The local management of the Miller Campus enables the community to be involved in the project and has the added benefit of providing further employment and education opportunities for the residents. The model presents an affordable, secure housing option for young people, providing them with the confidence and security to seek employment and build their life skills and social networks.

The model provides training and support together with advice (on employment, administrative paperwork and Centrelink assistance) in the framework of a mutual contract. Foyer models encourage a social mix and are based on the principle of group living, with peer group support and the opportunity to draw on a wide range of experiences and training. In this model, differences are valued and a culture of respect for the individual promoted in the context of group solidarity.

The proposed SLT would incorporate housing, education, employment and counseling assistance into a holistic service for young people. This would provide an effective policy solution that incorporates life skills training – including education in the skills needed to sustain a

tenancy – as well as more formal skills acquisition through school and tertiary education. This perspective recognises the complex needs of many homeless young people.

However, the project recognises that the SLTs would only ever find application in the larger regional centres because of the funding and programs needs to have sufficient demand and support from the wider community. Additionally, the reliance on the community to provide education and employment opportunities limits the number of rural towns these programs could be established in, as many towns have low employment options and no tertiary education facilities.

Interim evaluation of the Miller Campus model

The Miller Campus provides some insights into the potential of the Foyer model for other areas. The interim evaluation finds that, in addition to the benefits previously discussed, another positive benefit of the campus has been to provide residents with counseling and emotional support, in some cases lowering the incidence of depression and risk of suicide. In the context of a private housing market, which fails to deliver appropriate and affordable housing to single young people, the Miller model offers an opportunity to develop a coherent alternative.

The key attraction of the Miller Campus for young people is the secure accommodation, opportunities for independent, secure living, and thereby, the opportunity to concentrate on education, training and employment. The positive outcomes reported by the current residents who have been part of the initial concept are testament that this model deserves further development and substantial funding support from governments.

The Miller Campus aims to prevent a number of negative outcomes for young people including school drop out, poor mental health and criminal activity. Evidence collected in the research indicates that the program has helped to stop a number of young people from dropping out of education and becoming homeless. Further, initial outcomes during the first year of operation show positive results with residents sustaining their involvement with education, completing their courses and engaging in employment. Although the Miller Campus is still in the initial phases, there were also emerging

positive outcomes reported in terms of the life skills, social interaction and improved emotional robustness of the young people. However, it is still too early to see the outcomes for moving on to independent accommodation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As local networks are central to the prevention of primary homelessness amongst young people in rural areas, and as access to support services (to date) has been unlikely, the advertisement of services and programs, particularly those focussed on prevention of homelessness, through pre-existing networks, such as schools and TAFE is particularly important.

To prevent cyclical homelessness for young people, life skills training – including skills to obtain and maintain a tenancy, healthy cooking and budgeting – must be provided as well as more formal skills acquisition, through school, TAFE and university.

As young men and women face, or experience, homelessness for very different reasons (for example, sexual and domestic violence, and mental ill-health) they require responses that are safe and supportive of their gendered experience.

The proposed development of SLTs, based on the Foyer model, may be funded within existing Australian Government and State Government policy frameworks such as the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) or the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA).

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI projects 70020, *Evaluating the Miller Foyer pilot project* and 40160, *Developing models of good practice in meeting the needs of homeless young people in rural areas.*

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

• Positioning Paper

• Final Report

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.

AHURi

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

www.ahuri.edu.au