

The Role of Resilience in a Homeless Youth Population*

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Homeless young people are one of the most vulnerable populations in society. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of studies in the psychological literature detailing the links between homeless youth and a myriad of negative outcomes including poor physical and psychological health, substance abuse problems, violence and suicide. However, there are very few studies examining the ways in which positive characteristics, such as resilience, can protect against these adverse outcomes in a homeless youth population.¹

The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia study** not only explored a range of detrimental personal, social and economic costs associated with the experience of being homeless, but asked young people to report on a range of protective factors as well, including the personal characteristic of resilience.

What is Resilience?

While the literature may vary on an exact definition of resilience, most researchers agree that the key feature of resilience is in the ability for an individual to overcome and adapt to the presence of adversity and negative stressors. In simplified terms, resilience is the ability for an individual to 'bounce back' when faced with pressure, strain or negative events.^{2,3} In The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia Study young people who were homeless and at risk of homelessness were asked to rate their level of resilience three times over a period of three years.

Why is Resilience Important in Homeless Youth?

The experience of being homeless for young people is one rife with stressors and the most extreme response that a person may choose to deal with high-

level stress is suicide. Suicidality in this demographic is disproportionately elevated. In a five-year longitudinal study of 1,013 street youth in Montreal, Roy et al.⁴ found that suicide was the leading cause of death for homeless young people, with several studies positing that on average, attempted suicide rates for homeless youth could be as high as 40 per cent.^{5,6,7}

In The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia Study, first wave results revealed that 13 per cent of males and 20 per cent of females had attempted suicide or deliberately hurt themselves in a way that may have potentially harmed or killed them in the last six months prior to survey administration in 2012. For those who reported that they were not living in safe and secure accommodation at the time of survey administration, the suicide attempt rate in the last six months was 27 per cent.⁸ Above and beyond the lack of a stable home, a number of risk factors have been identified as being linked to suicide attempts and ideation in homeless young people including previous sexual/violent abuse, drug and alcohol problems and recent negative events on the streets.⁹

While it is evident that this population is extremely vulnerable to adversity, there is a growing body of literature beginning to focus on the reverse side of risk, in particular protective factors such as resilience. Rew, Taylor-Seehafer and Thomas¹⁰ posit that resilience is imperative in homeless youth because it helps to moderate the negative impact of extremely stressful life events. Cleverley and Kidd¹¹ found in their study of 47 Canadian homeless youth that high levels of perceived resilience were linked not only with less psychological distress but to lower levels of suicidal ideation. Similarly, Asante and Meyer-Weitz¹²

conducted cross-sectional research on 277 homeless children and adolescents in Ghana finding that perceived levels of resilience were significantly correlated with lower levels of suicidal ideation, violent behaviour and substance abuse.

The Role of Internal Strength to Face Difficult Times

While the aforementioned research on the positive links associated with resilience is promising, there is a clear gap in the research literature when it comes to exploring the particular aspects of resilience that are more pertinent to homeless young people. It has been suggested that resilience in a homeless population may be more related to self-reliance and independence as opposed to drawing on social support and resources from others. Qualitative research on homeless youth by Theron and Malindi¹³ has discovered intrapersonal assets such as agency, stoicism and reflection were connected to resilience in homeless youth. Importantly, this study found that even when external social resources such as role models or social services were related to resilient behaviour, they were only accessed because the young people themselves decided to seek out this assistance, indicating the underlying importance of internal processes.

An increased understanding of the factors that contribute to a young person's resilience is clearly beneficial in providing interventions to support homeless young people to cope with stressors, to stay strong in the face of adversity and to make good choices. The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia data will be examined in detail to explore the important role that resilience has on factors such as suicidality, psychological distress and quality of life. An understanding that once gained will serve to support

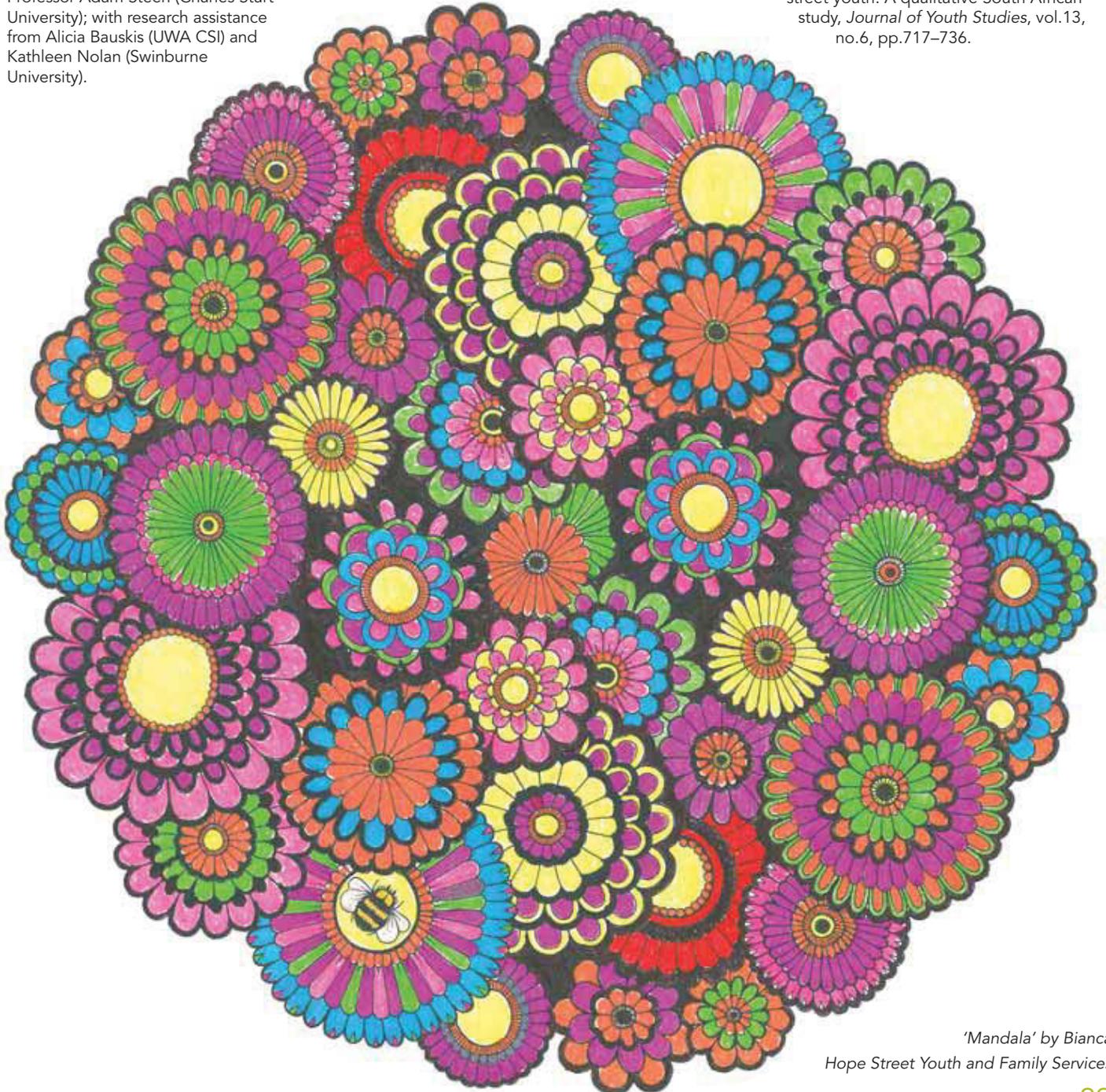
workers and clinicians to focus on strengthening young people's resilience to ensure better outcomes.

* This paper forms part of a literature review for Rachel Oldfield's Psychology Honours research project on the role of resilience in protecting homeless youth from adverse outcomes. It will be conducted throughout the course of 2015 at Swinburne University, supervised by Monica Thielking in conjunction with The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia research team, with a final report due in October 2015.

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Endnotes

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'Mandala' by Bianca
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