The Australian Youth Homeless Experience: Evidence from a Longitudinal Survey of Homeless Youth*

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Background

“There was a period where I felt vulnerable, the worst time of my life. Scariest thing that has happened to me was being homeless even for a short time”
— Study participant, aged 24

There are too many Australians who are homeless, living without shelter or a place to call home. Young people make up some 42 per cent of the Australian homeless population. Having no safe and secure accommodation can make everyday activities such as attending secondary school, engaging in further training, or getting a job difficult in the extreme. The choices many young homeless people make, in order to cope or survive the homeless experience, may put them at further risk of harm. We need to know more about the impacts of homelessness, about the experiences and lives of young people and about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of homelessness programs if we are to better respond to the needs of young homeless people.

The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia research study attempts to understand both the experience and impact of homelessness on young people and its personal and societal costs. It is the first national youth homelessness study of its kind in Australia. Close to 400 young Australians were surveyed over three consecutive years. The majority of those surveyed (close to 300) were either homeless or at very high risk of homelessness, in an unstable housing situation and receiving support from homeless services at the time of first interview.

In this paper, we provide selected findings from the first wave of data collection.

The Sample
The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia study sample is made up of one group comprising homeless and at risk of homelessness young people and another comprising disadvantaged, but not homeless, young people. The latter are young people who are out of work and seeking some type of employment (‘job-seekers’). At the time of the first interview, respondents in the homeless group were receiving support from a specialist homelessness service or a Reconnect service while those in the job-seeker category were receiving support from a Job Services Australia agency.

Participants in the homeless youth sample were aged 13 to 25 years, with the median age being 18. More than half of the homeless respondents (61 per cent) were female. The majority of the homeless group (85 per cent) were Australian-born, with 12 per cent identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI).

Education and the Labour Market

Homeless youth aged 15 to 25 are more likely than young people generally to leave school early. This leaves them in a vulnerable position in terms of their entry to the labour market.

Only one third (31 per cent) of homeless young people over the age of 18, at the time of first being interviewed in the study, had completed Year 12. In comparison, 57 per cent of the job-seeking group over the age of 18 had finished Year 12.

Although our study points to high rates of early school leaving among young homeless people aged 18 or over, we also found that two-thirds of current school-aged homeless or at risk of homeless people (those 18 and under) reported that they were still at school or at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or university at the time of completing the first wave of the Survey. Staying connected to education and training while homeless shows the resilience of the young people involved and the strong support of agencies assisting young homeless people and those at risk of homelessness.

The unemployment rate (unemployed people expressed as a percentage of the labour force) among homeless youth in the sample was a staggering 84 per cent. Nearly one-quarter (22 per cent) of homeless young people have never had a paid job in their lifetime. This compares with only six per cent of young job-seekers who had never been in paid employment.

The findings from our sample of young people differ significantly from the general youth population where the unemployment rate among young people aged 15 to 24 years was 14 per cent in 2014.

Over one third (39 per cent) of homeless youth in the study were classified as not in the labour force (did not currently have a job, and were not actively looking for work or available to start work). For those homeless youth not in the labour force, 51 per cent were currently continuing their education, and 29 per cent had children in their care (76 per cent of the young homeless respondents in our sample not in the labour force are female).

Mental health problems in this group were significant with 60 per cent of the group reporting diagnosis of a mental health condition in their lifetime.
Both groups identified the absence of necessary skills or education as one of the main barriers to finding work. A ‘lack of permanent accommodation’, and ‘own poor health or disability’, were identified by young homeless people in particular as circumstances that affected their capacity to find work.

Early Homelessness Experiences

Just over half of the homeless youth reported first having slept rough prior to turning 18.

Fifty-two percent of the homeless group reported that they had slept rough (in parks, on the streets etc.) prior to turning 18. Early onset rough sleeping was also high in our job-seeker group with 18 per cent of job-seekers reporting having slept rough at least once prior to turning 18. This latter finding illustrates the close connection and spill over relationship between unemployment and homelessness and the need for different service systems to be well integrated.2

Our results are in line with an earlier study on intergenerational homelessness3 indicating that homelessness is present for many homeless people from an early age and is often a precursor for long periods of adult homelessness.

Targeted interventions in youth-based homelessness programs will act to end the homelessness cycle and will prevent homelessness progressing to the next generation.

Figure 1 presents estimates of the number of times homeless youth experienced different forms of homelessness under the age of 18. Couch surfing is the dominant form of homelessness prior to the age of 18 with 86 per cent of the homeless group reporting that they had stayed with (non-immediate) family and friends as they had nowhere else to live prior to the age of 18.

Out of Home Care and Violence in the Home

Our study confirms the very strong relationship between homelessness, foster care and other out-of-home care arrangements.

Two thirds of the homeless group in the study reported that they had been placed in some form of out-of-home care by the time that they turned 18 (63 per cent), a significantly higher number than that of the job-seeking group (18 per cent). To give one reference point to these figures, in June 2013 there were 40,459 children in out-of-home care, equating to less than one per cent (0.78 per cent) of all Australian children.4

Of the homeless youth who were placed in out-of-home care, 63 per cent had been placed in residential care, 45 per cent in kinship care and 33 per cent in foster care. Homeless youth were first placed in out-of-home care at a median age of 14.

Almost half (48 per cent) of homeless youth reported police coming to their home because of violence between parents or guardians on at least one occasion. Of those who ran away from home because of violence between parents/careers, the median age of their first experience leaving home was only 10.

Mental Health of Homeless Young People

The prevalence of mental health conditions was high in the homeless youth sample, with 53 per cent reporting that they had been diagnosed with at least one mental health condition in their lifetime.

Rates of reported mental health conditions were particularly high among young women, where 55 per cent reported diagnosis by a medical practitioner of at least one mental health condition in their lifetime (compared to 50 per cent of young men).

Of those homeless youth who had been diagnosed with a mental health condition in their lifetime, less than half (44 per cent) had been prescribed medication. Women were more likely to be taking medication for their mental health condition at the time of being questioned (43 per cent), while only one in five (19 per cent) homeless young men were currently taking medication for a mental health condition. Similarly, over the last 12 months, the proportion of young homeless women who had received support from a medical practitioner, or some form of mental health service or specialist was double (48 per cent) the proportion of men (24 per cent) who had received similar support.

The Kessler 10 (K10) is a 10-question self-report measure of non-specific psychological distress based on questions about the level of nervousness, agitation, psychological fatigue and depression experienced in the most recent four week period. In this study, the measure was utilised to measure the extent of psychological distress experienced by participants in the month leading up to the survey.

The levels of distress experienced by participants varied greatly between the homeless and job seeker groups. The proportion of the homeless group who experienced very high or
high distress was 57 per cent, compared to 35 per cent of the job-seeker group. In contrast to this, only 12 per cent of male and 19 per cent of female Australians aged 18 to 24 fell into the category of experiencing high or very high levels of distress.\(^6\)

However, the levels of psychological distress among the homeless group was similar to levels of psychological distress recorded in the Australian adult homeless population in a recent homelessness study, where 62 per cent recorded high or very high levels of psychological distress.\(^4,7,8\)

Furthermore, there is a notable divide between young women and men within the homeless and job seeker groups in terms of levels of distress. In the homeless group, 51 per cent of males experienced very high or high distress as compared with 61 per cent of the homeless female group. In comparison, 31 per cent of males and 41 per cent of females in the job seeker group experienced this level of distress.

Respondents were asked to reflect on the last six months of their life and identify whether they had harmed themselves without the intention of killing themselves (such as scratching, cutting, burning), or whether they had attempted suicide or deliberately hurt themselves in a way that may have potentially harmed or killed them.

The incidence of reported self-harm and attempted suicide is very high among homeless youth particularly among young women.

One in five (20 per cent) homeless young women had attempted suicide in the past six months compared to around one in ten (12 per cent) young men. More than one in four (28 per cent) of young homeless women engage in non-suicidal self-injury behaviours compared with 17 per cent of young men.

Just over half (55 per cent) of homeless youth who had attempted suicide in the past six months had not received any counselling or professional support for this.

For those who had attempted suicide in the past six months and had received support for this, 59 per cent reported that the counselling or support helped them to either stop having or cope effectively with suicidal thoughts.

**Summary**

The findings of this study underline the seriousness of youth homelessness as a social issue in Australia and the need for action at all levels and sectors of government and the community to overcome this problem.

Of great concern are the findings around non-suicidal self-injury and suicide attempts, particularly for young women. Special care needs to be taken when working with homeless youth to ensure that their mental health and emotional needs are addressed and safety plans are in place to reduce risk.

The study also highlights the fact that homeless youth, in many cases have experienced difficult early lives, which have contributed to their future trajectory into homelessness. Out-of-home care experienced prior to turning 18 was a significant indicator correlated with homelessness as was early experiences of family violence. The results highlight the need for strong early intervention programs for families and children and a sustained effort to curtail this insidious social problem.

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**Table 2: Levels of Psychological Distress (Kessler 10)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K10 Level of Distress</th>
<th>Homeless young people (per cent)</th>
<th>Job-seeking young people (per cent)</th>
<th>General population 2007 (aged 18 to 24) (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High or very high</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Endnotes**


