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Reconnect evaluation 2016



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Executive summary

Overview

Mission Australia conducted an outcomes evaluation from March to October 2016 across all of its seven Reconnect sites. The evaluation considered a range of measures mapped to the outcomes that Reconnect aims to achieve. All current clients were asked to complete a questionnaire over two data collection periods and data from 57 clients was analysed for this evaluation.

Overall, improvements were found in clients' wellbeing, sense of control and support, housing permanency, family cohesion and financial condition of the family. The evaluation also found that Reconnect services fill a significant gap in existing regional service systems, including a central role in supporting schools to connect young people to other services in the community.

The Journeys Home study found that homeless people with no contact with family are the least likely to exit homelessness, suggesting that not only are families important in preventing homelessness but also in assisting individuals out of homelessness.

The findings of this evaluation are reflected in past Reconnect evaluations, demonstrating that Reconnect is a highly effective youth focussed early intervention service model, assisting young people and their families with reconciliation and reconnection (where safe). There is an acute need for this service for young people, families and communities. This service model can achieve the type of evidence-based outcomes that need to be funded into the future.

Method

Mission Australia's Research and Evaluation team conducted an evaluation of the seven Reconnect sites operated by Mission Australia nationally.¹ This evaluation collected quantitative and qualitative data to assess participants' outcomes and to understand the role that Reconnect services play in service provision for young people in their local regions.

Quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire completed by clients at two separate points in time. The sample was analysed across two distinct cohorts:

- **Matched clients** – 19 clients that completed the survey at both wave one and wave two.
- **Service duration** – 38 clients that completed the survey either at intake (0-4 weeks after service commencement) or at follow-up (8-16 weeks after commencement).

The survey tool used included the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), an internationally validated measure of subjective wellbeing.

Additionally, qualitative data was gained through semi-structured interviews conducted with 13 stakeholders identified by staff across all sites.

Results

A summary of the analysis for the service duration clients is as follows:

¹ Broken Hill, NSW; Christies Beach, SA; Gold Coast, QLD; Kings Cross, NSW; Mandurah, WA; Toowoomba, QLD; Whyalla, SA.

- Clients' personal wellbeing improved considerably throughout the time clients were supported by Reconnect, rising from 'challenged' (61.7 on the Personal Wellbeing Index scale) to 'normal' wellbeing (71.2).
- Client's housing permanency improved throughout the time they were receiving service support with Reconnect. At intake, the most recent time clients had a permanent place to live increased from a standardised score of 68.5 at intake to 86.2 at follow-up.
- The proportion of clients indicating that they did not have support in a time of crisis reduced by almost half, decreasing from 15.8% at intake to 8.7% at follow-up.
- Levels of family cohesion improved considerably over service length. The proportion of those indicating their family's ability to get along as 'poor' decreased dramatically from 42.1% at intake to 4.2% at follow-up, while those indicating this was 'very good' increased from 10.5% at intake to 29.2% at follow-up.
- Reported levels of financial resources in the family appear to have stabilised over time. A much greater proportion of cases reported that their family had 'mostly' enough money to meet their needs after 8-16 weeks, with 41.7% giving this response at follow-up compared to 15.8% on intake.
- The proportion of clients rating characteristics of their housing as 'adequate or better' appears to have either remained steady or increased between intake and follow-up. The greatest increase was seen for 'your housing needs in general', rising from 64.6% at intake to 80.0% at follow-up.

Stakeholder interviews were transcribed and organised thematically. A summary of findings from these interviews is provided below:

- Most stakeholders reported positive views about the outcomes and supports provided to the young people they referred into Reconnect.
- Positive outcomes for young people engaged with Reconnect included: improved school attendance; improved coping skills; improved stress management; increased socialisation; improved conflict resolution skills; and improved communication skills.
- The age range for referral should be expanded to include younger children. Schools in particular recognised that intervening earlier in the life cycle is critical in addressing homelessness risk factors and would be beneficial for children under 12 years old identified as at-risk.
- Reconnect's unique intervention with families could potentially be expanded by supporting and training other local community services to effectively approach and assist families and young people identified as at-risk.
- Reconnect fills an important service gap and if the service operations of Reconnect were limited or removed this would have a dramatically negative impact on their community. The

unique service model of Reconnect was seen to be effective in providing early intervention for young people at-risk of homelessness.

The greatest changes were seen in clients in the initial phase of engagement with Reconnect services. This indicates that intervening early with intensive case management can result in considerably improved client outcomes across a range of indicators, preventing more expensive interventions in the future by addressing the risk factors for homelessness early.

Recommendations

Mission Australia calls on the Commonwealth Government to guarantee the continuation of the Reconnect program for another five years, and give consideration to the following:

- extending resources for additional staff in existing Reconnect services, particularly in communities with high levels of homelessness risk, socioeconomic disadvantage and child protection involvement;
- expanding the program to additional locations of high child and youth homelessness;
- expanding the Reconnect service model and capacity of this program to support an extended age range of 10-18 years. This could be subject to review after a period of time to assess whether this meets the needs of the local community; and
- enabling the program to adopt more place-based, community-led approaches which work collaboratively with local schools, government agencies and youth support services into the future.

Introduction

Mission Australia's Research and Evaluation team conducted an outcomes evaluation across their seven Reconnect sites from March - October 2016. The evaluation collected both quantitative and qualitative data designed to determine whether client's improved across outcomes identified in consultation with Reconnect staff. Quantitative results were collected through an evaluation questionnaire developed by the Research and Evaluation team and piloted with Reconnect clients and staff. Qualitative information was gained through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with stakeholders identified by staff across all seven sites.

Background

About 44,000 children and young people in Australia are homeless.ⁱ The 2011 Census reported that one quarter of Australia's homeless population were aged between 12 and 24 with a further 17% (17,845) being children under 12 years old. Children and young people therefore account for over 40% of all homeless Australians.ⁱⁱ

Young people are over represented in the homeless population. For example, the rate of homelessness for young people aged 19-24 years is 88 per 10,000, compared to 49 per 10,000 for the general population.ⁱⁱⁱ It is generally accepted that these figures underestimate the extent of youth homelessness, primarily because young people who are couch surfing are often recorded as having a usual address, although in fact they may be unable to return there. Also, analysis of the *Journeys Home* data notes that young people are more likely than older people to cycle in and out of homelessness.^{iv}

Within the youth homeless population, particular groups have been identified as over-represented or at increased risk of homelessness, including young people leaving out-of-home care, young people from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background and new migrants and refugees.^{v,vi}

The pathways into homelessness for young people are often complex, although some factors appear to consistently impact on this transition. These include individual factors such as family breakdown, unemployment, poverty, alcohol and drugs^{vii} and experiences of out-of-home-care, as well as structural factors such as the labour market and service support system. However, individual factors should not be considered in isolation, rather both individual and structural factors should be understood as interrelated in contributing to pathways into youth homelessness.^{viii}

Young people experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of developing a number of negative health, social, educational and economic outcomes. Results from Swinburne University's *The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia* study found that, when compared to the general population, young people experiencing homelessness had higher levels of psychological distress, much higher incidence of reported non-suicidal self-injury and attempted suicide, significantly higher unemployment rates, greater likelihood of leaving school early, poorer health outcomes and higher prevalence of mental health conditions.^{ix}

Research has found that instances of homelessness at a young age are associated with longer periods of future homelessness and that many of those who are chronically homeless experienced their first instance of homelessness before age 18.^x This finding emphasises the need for early intervention with young people experiencing homelessness to interrupt the pathway from first

instances to future or chronic homelessness, and thereby prevent the negative outcomes associated with this.

Effective early intervention has been shown to lead to long-term improvements for young people, their families and communities. These interventions must address the risk factors and build protective factors – such as positive family relationships and community connection – to ensure their success.^{xi} In particular, maintaining contact with family and consistent contact with an effective support service have been found to assist young people to transition out of homelessness.^{xii,xiii}

Successful early intervention also has the potential to save significant public expenditure. *The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia* study revealed that the total costs of health services and the justice system due to young people experiencing homelessness amounted to an average of \$17,868 per person per year, excluding the lifetime impact of early school leaving and low employment engagement. The total annual cost to the Australian economy in health and justice services for these young people amounted to an estimated \$747million. This study estimated that if only 5% of young people could be diverted from entering the homelessness system each year, a total saving of approximately \$60m annually could be made in reduced health and justice services and Specialist Homelessness Services usage.^{xiv}

The strength of the relationship between young people at-risk of homelessness and the service staff supporting them is also a central factor in both engagement with services and transitions out of homelessness. Building trust and rapport and conveying respect and acceptance of young people accessing homelessness support services is key, particularly as the experiences often leading young people into homelessness can cause these individuals to distrust and disengage with the services designed to support them.^{xv,xvi}

More recently, Swinburne University's Geelong Project team highlighted the importance of community-level service collaboration or 'collective impact', ensuring that young people at-risk are identified early and supported through secondary education. The Geelong Project, along with other pilot sites adopting this model, works to develop a variety of practice innovations to realise more effective early intervention local service systems targeting young people at-risk of homelessness. It will be important for services like Reconnect to continue to adopt more place-based, community-led approaches which work collaboratively with local schools, government agencies and youth support services into the future.^{xvii}

Reconnect

Reconnect aims to prevent at-risk young people moving into homelessness through community based early intervention with young people, their families and the wider service system. Reconnect works to ensure that the young person is able to access secure accommodation, stabilise their living situation, maintain family relationships and reengage or increase engagement with employment, education, training and the wider community. To achieve this, Reconnect sites employ a variety of interventions including counselling, group work, mediation and practical support with both the young person and their family.

Reconnect is also able to broker support from other services to provide additional resources to the young person, including accommodation and specialised mental health services. Importantly,

Reconnect collaborates closely with other support services, community stakeholders and networks – including schools – ensuring both that the needs of the young person are met and that capacity is built across the community to provide effective early interventions for youth homelessness.

The target group of Reconnect is young people aged 12-18 years who are experiencing homelessness or are at-risk of homelessness and their families. The age range is increased to 12-21 years for Newly Arrived Youth Specialist Reconnect services. There are currently over 100 Reconnect services operating in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote locations around Australia, including a number of specialist Reconnect services.^{xviii}

Past evaluations of Reconnect

Reconnect has been shown to be an effective program. The Federal Department of Social Services' 2013 *Departmental Review of Reconnect* found that overall the program was achieving positive impacts for clients while 'meeting or exceeding' key performance indicators.^{xix} The 2006 *Counting the Homeless* project found that the number of homeless young people decreased between 2001 and 2006, reversing a consistent upward trend in the youth homeless population since 2011.^{xx} This has generally been attributed to the impact of the Reconnect program and improvements in the level of school support over the same period.

A longitudinal evaluation of Reconnect commissioned by the Federal Department of Family and Community Services in 2003 found that overall Reconnect provided significant positive outcomes for young people and families. In particular, the study found that Reconnect improved stability and the living conditions of young people and had a large positive effect on achieving family reconciliation through increasing the family's capacity to manage conflict and improve communication.^{xxi} Three quarters of the young people and parents involved with the program reported an overall improvement in their situation.^{xxii} Additionally, this study found that, of the Reconnect services investigated, all had a significant positive impact, relative to their own capacity, on building community capacity for early intervention for youth homelessness. This study found that Reconnect was able to build community capacity in the following ways:

- Increasing community infrastructure for early intervention;
- Building capacity through collaboration approaches and by strengthening service networks;
- Building capacity by assisting other organisations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention;
- The national infrastructure supporting the Reconnect program has been highly effective in contributing to the level of impact made by Reconnect services in building community capacity for early intervention.^{xxiii}

Method

Mission Australia conducted an evaluation of the seven Reconnect sites operated by Mission Australia nationally. These services included two sites in New South Wales (Broken Hill, Kings Cross), two sites in South Australia (Christies Beach, Whyalla), two sites in Queensland (Gold Coast, Toowoomba) and one site in Western Australia (Mandurah).

Data collection

This evaluation collected both quantitative and qualitative data to assess participants' outcomes and understand the role of each Reconnect site within the service structure of their local region. Quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire completed by Reconnect clients while qualitative data was gained through semi-structured interviews collected from a variety of stakeholders identified by Mission Australia's Reconnect staff.

Quantitative

Quantitative data was collected over two points in time ensuring that longitudinal analysis was able to be conducted to establish change in outcomes of clients over time. A full census of clients from each site was conducted in March/April and September/October 2016.

Mission Australia developed an evaluation questionnaire for Reconnect clients that included questions across the domains of wellbeing, control, family cohesion, financial stability, support and housing adequacy. These questions were developed in consultation with Reconnect staff to map to the outcomes of the Reconnect service. Case workers in each Reconnect site encouraged all clients to complete this questionnaire and provided literacy support where required.

To ensure that the questionnaire was age appropriate, two versions of the questionnaire were developed – a student version intended for use by young people under the age of 18 and an adult version intended for use by clients over 18. Both versions of the questionnaire included the same questions, however the student version included slightly adapted wording for some questions to ensure they remained accessible for younger clients. In the case of low levels of literacy, clients of all ages were able to complete the student questionnaire.

Matched clients

As clients were able to be identified through a client ID, cases were matched between wave one and two where possible, ensuring that individual clients were able to be followed over time and allowing for longitudinal analysis. Overall, 19 clients were able to be matched between data collection periods. The average length of time between waves was three months.

At wave one, the average length of time clients had been in the Reconnect service was four months, while at wave two the average length of time in the service was seven months. As some clients completed their first survey after a period of service engagement ranging from 0-12 months, it was decided to also conduct analysis based on service duration.

Service duration clients

Using administrative data, the 'support start date' for all clients in the full dataset was identified to determine the service duration between intake into the Reconnect service and the date of each survey's completion. Surveys were then grouped according to service support length at the time of completion. Surveys completed from between 0-4 weeks formed an 'intake' cohort, while surveys completed after a service support length of 8-16 weeks formed a 'follow-up' cohort. These durations were designed to reflect a similar duration between data collection periods as occurred in the matched cases analysis. Overall, 19 surveys were completed after a service support length of 0-4 weeks, while 24 surveys were completed after a service support length of between 8-16 weeks.

Qualitative

As a result of feedback provided by Reconnect staff, Mission Australia's Research and Evaluation team were asked to conduct a series of qualitative interviews with stakeholders to gain a greater understanding of the role Reconnect plays in their local community and the effectiveness of their referral pathways. Each service provided a list of contacts to approach for interviews. Research staff from Mission Australia drafted a list of key questions in consultation with Reconnect staff to assist in guiding the interviews. Questions explored the local context, community engagement and partnerships, referrals and client support. Key themes and experiences were drawn out to provide a clearer depiction of the role that Reconnect plays within the community. A schedule of the interviews is provided in Appendix A.

A total of 13 stakeholder interviews were conducted with interviewees coming from a range of schools, non-government organisations (NGOs) and governments departments or services. Of these, 5 interviewees were from metropolitan areas and 8 were from regional areas. Of the respondents, 7 were in positions in the schools and 6 were in NGO or welfare related positions.

Results

Quantitative

Demographics

The matched cases data set included 19 clients. The average age was 15 years. Just over half (52.6%) clients were female and 9 (47.4%) were male. Overall, 2 (10.6%) clients identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, while for 4 (21.1%) clients Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status was unknown. One client (5.3%) indicated that they came from a culturally and linguistically diverse background and all clients indicated that they were born in Australia. On intake, the majority (58.3%) of clients were living with their immediate family, 16.7% were staying with friends short-term and the remainder (16.6%) were either living with extended family long-term or living in a shared household.

The service duration data set included 38 clients. The average age was 16 years. 24 (63.2%) clients were female and 14 (36.8%) were male. Overall, 7 (18.4%) clients identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, while for 3 (7.9%) clients Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status was unknown. Four clients (10.8%) were identified as coming from a culturally and linguistically diverse background and 6.1% of clients indicated that they were born overseas. On intake, the majority (56.3%) of clients were living with their immediate family, 11.1% were living with extended family, 11.1% were staying with friends, 7.4% were living alone, 3.7% were living with carer/s, 3.7% were living in a shared household and the remainder (3.7%) were in 'other' accommodation.

The results reported below show that, for the service duration clients, there are greater positive outcomes made across the range of indicators compared to the matched cases. The most significant gains were made when the client first receives services, although smaller gains were still being made in later months. This suggests that intervening early with intensive case management can result in considerably improved client outcomes across a range of indicators, preventing more expensive interventions in the future by addressing the risk factors for homelessness. Nevertheless, further improvements are still achievable after a period of service intervention, as seen in the matched cases, indicating the on-going success of the services in achieving outcomes for clients.

Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)^{xxiv}

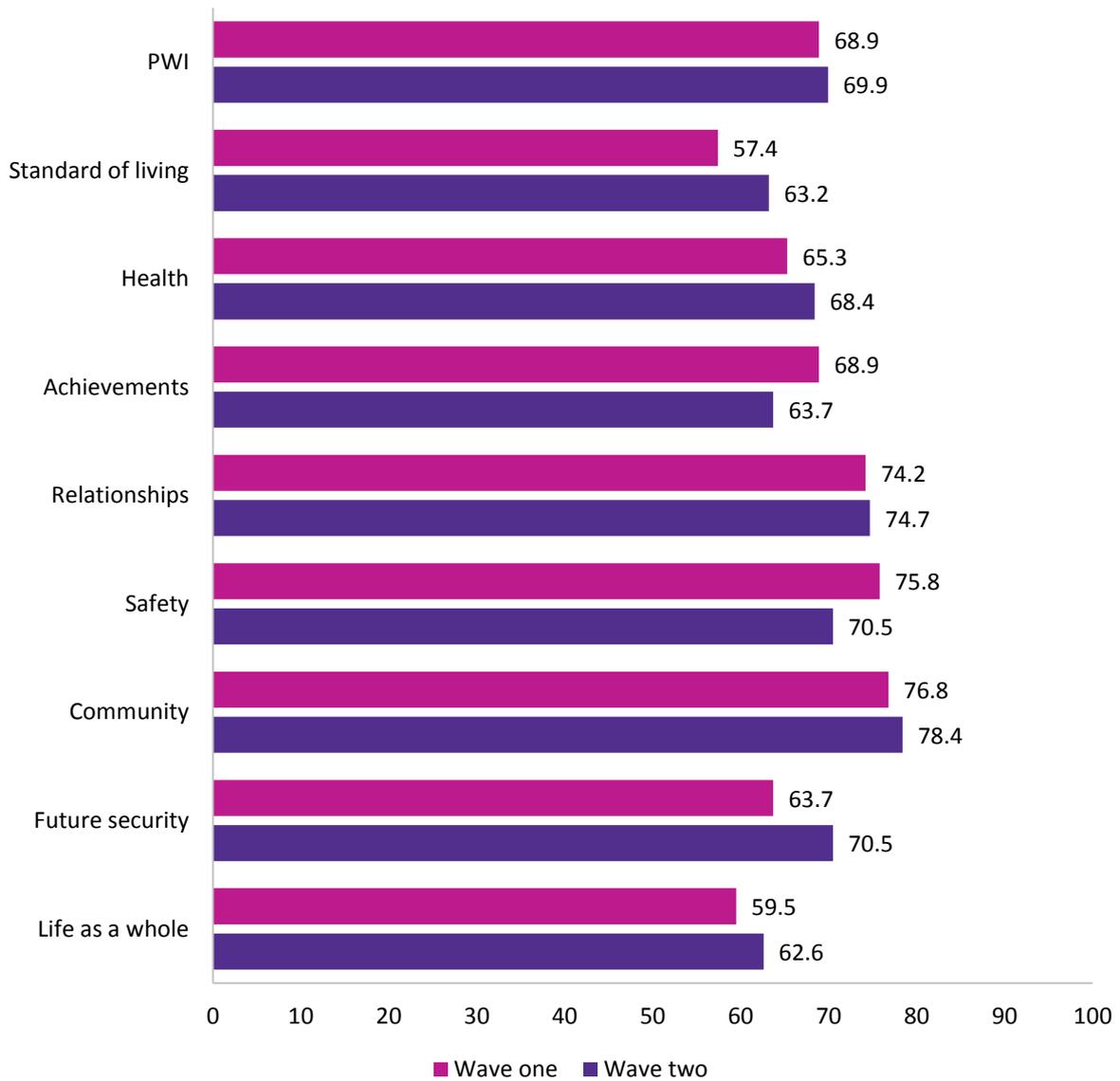
The PWI is a measure of subjective wellbeing which is sensitive to fluctuations in a person's circumstances. The PWI encompasses the constructs of satisfaction with the following domains: standard of living; health; achieving; relationships; safety; community; future security. It also includes a stand-alone question on satisfaction with life as a whole. Survey participants are asked to rate their satisfaction with these domains on a scale of 0-10. The scores on these seven domains are averaged to form a single composite personal wellbeing score that is standardised onto a 0-100 point scale, where 0 is completely dissatisfied and 100 is completely satisfied.

The following guidelines are given by the developers of the index for the interpretation of individual subjective wellbeing scores as measured by the PWI:

70+ points	'Normal': A person is likely to be experiencing a normal level of wellbeing
51-69 points	'Challenged': Personal wellbeing is likely to be challenged / compromised
<50 points	'High-risk': Very low personal wellbeing / strong likelihood of depression

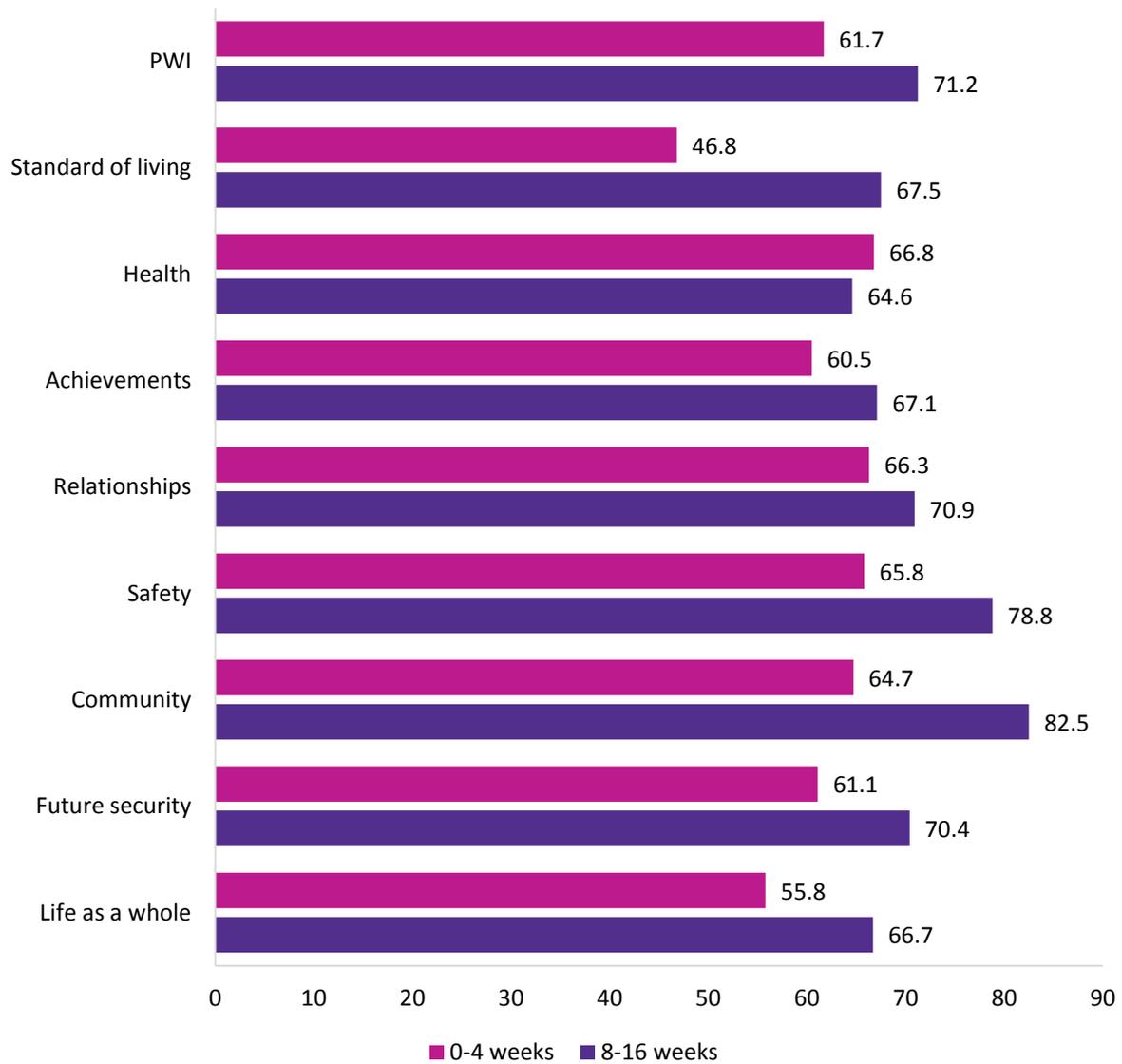
Overall, the PWI score for matched clients (N=19) remained relatively steady between waves, shifting from 68.9 to 69.9. Improvements were seen across the majority of PWI domains, but particularly across the domains of future security and standard of living.

Figure 1: PWI results, matched clients



In analysis based on service duration, there was notable improvement in the overall PWI score, rising from 61.7 (within the range where wellbeing is likely to be ‘challenged/compromised’) at 0-4 weeks to 71.2 (within the range of ‘normal’ wellbeing) at 8-16 weeks, shown in Figure 2. Notable improvements were also shown across the domains of standard of living, community, safety and life as a whole.

Figure 2: PWI results, service duration clients



Sense of control

Reconnect clients were also asked to rate on a scale from 0-10 the level of control they felt over their lives at the time of being surveyed. The mean score from each cohort was standardised into a score out of 100 and presented in Figure 3 and 4 for each cohort. As can be seen in Figure 3, matched clients indicated an overall improvement in the level of control over their lives, with scores rising from 53.7 to 60.5. Levels of reported control also rose over the course of service delivery, with scores shifting from 44.7 to 56.3 over time. It is notable that levels of reported control are relatively low for this group, indicating that autonomy may not be present for a considerable portion of young people identified through Reconnect as experiencing or being at-risk of homelessness.

Housing permanency

Reconnect clients were asked to indicate when was the most recent time that they did not have a permanent place to live. Respondents were able to select from this list of items:

- in the last week;
- in the last month;
- in the last three months;
- in the last 12 months;
- more than a year ago;
- never, I have always had a permanent place to live.

Responses were categorised from 1-6 and standardised into a score out of 100, presented in Figures 3 and 4. Figure 3 shows that, for matched clients, permanency of housing remained steady between waves. Comparatively, there was a considerable shift (68.5 to 86.2) in the permanency of housing score between those at intake and those in the Reconnect service at follow-up from 8-16 weeks, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 3: Control over life and housing permanency, matched clients

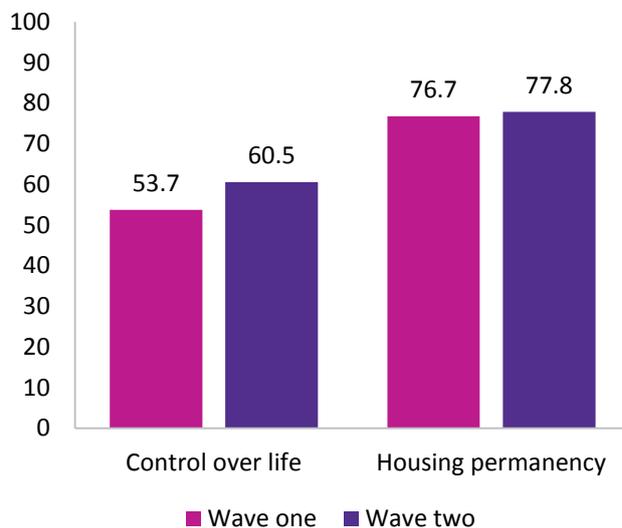
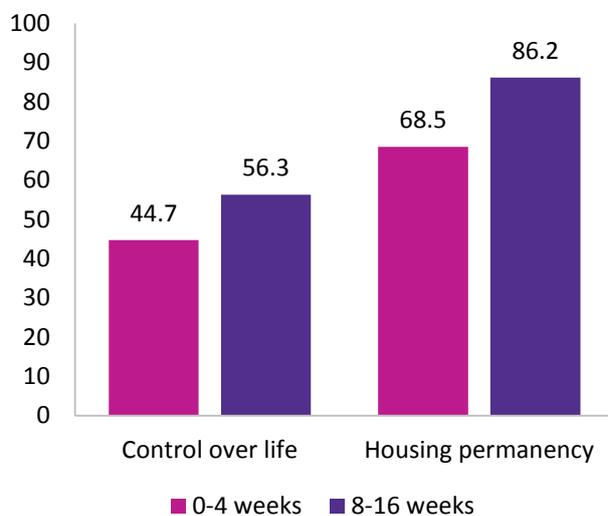


Figure 4: Control over life and housing permanency, service duration clients



Support in a time of crisis

Clients of Reconnect sites were asked to indicate whether they could ask someone who did not live with them for support in a time of crisis. The proportion (from a total of 100%) of clients who indicated that they did have support is presented in Figures 5 and 6. Increases in this proportion can be seen for both matched clients between waves and cohorts compared over service duration.

Figure 5: Support in a time of crisis, matched clients

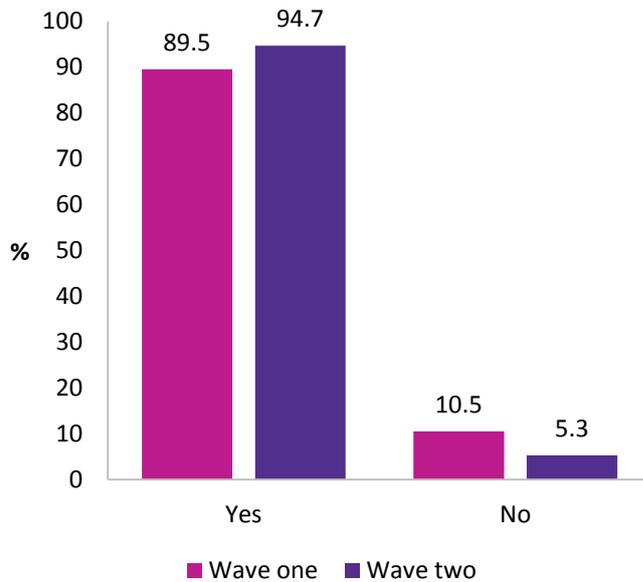
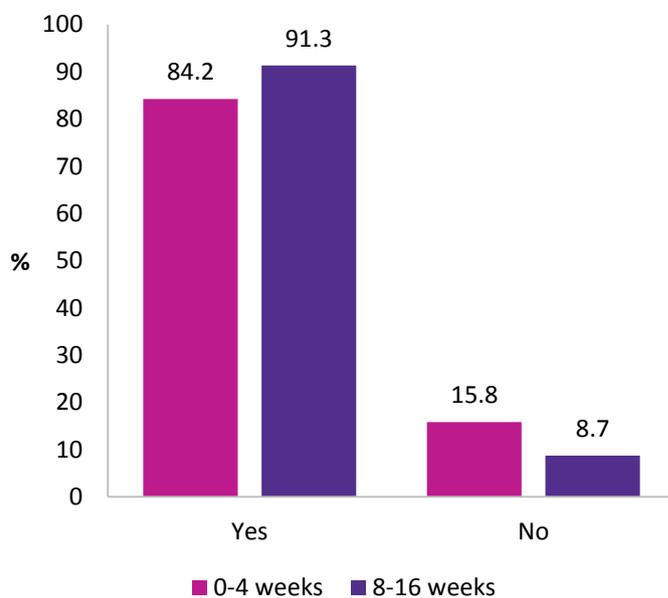


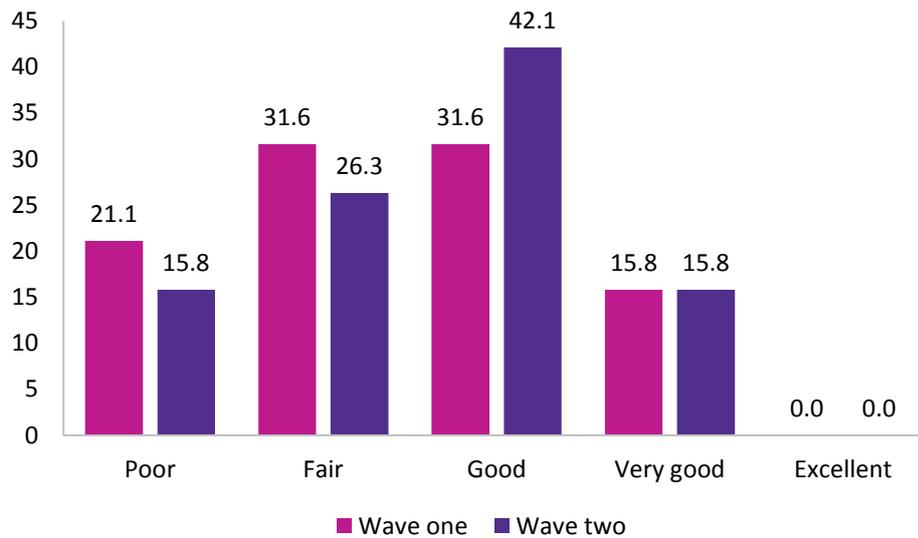
Figure 6: Support in a time of crisis, service duration clients



Family's ability to get along

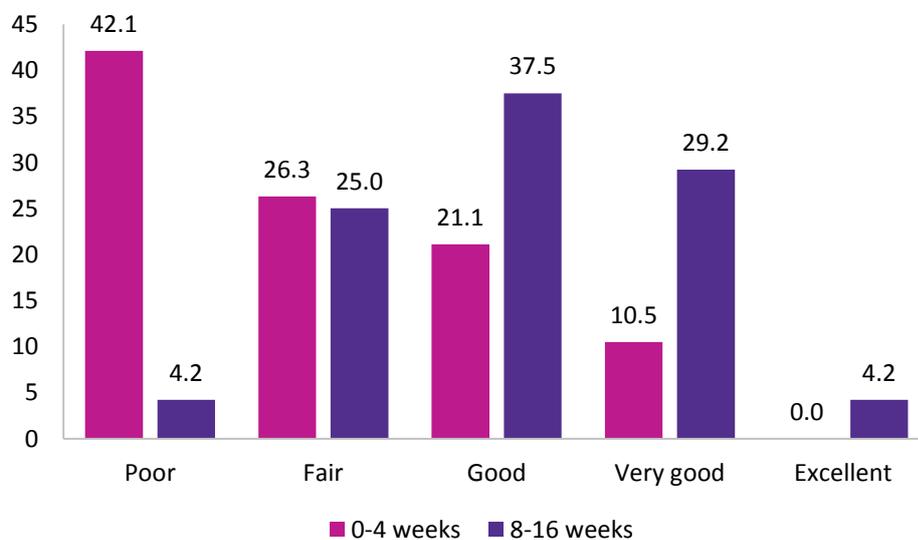
Respondents were asked to rate how well they thought their family got along on a 5 point scale, ranging from 'excellent' to 'poor'. As seen in Figure 7, reported levels of family cohesion appear to have improved for matched clients. The proportions of clients reporting that their family's ability to get along was 'fair' or 'poor' decreased over time (wave one = poor: 21.1%; fair: 31.6%, wave two = poor: 15.8%; fair: 26.3%) while the proportions of those reporting that this was 'good' increased over time (wave one = good: 31.6%, wave two = good: 42.1%).

Figure 7: Family's ability to get along, matched clients



As seen in Figure 8, reported levels of family cohesion improved over the course of service delivery. The proportions of clients of Reconnect services reporting that their family's ability to get along was 'poor' decreased considerably for those with longer service length (0-4 weeks = poor: 42.1%, 8-16 weeks = poor: 4.2%) while the proportions of those reporting that this was 'good' or 'very good' increased with longer service length (0-4 weeks = good: 21.1%; very good: 10.5%, 8-16 weeks = good: 37.5%; very good: 29.2%).

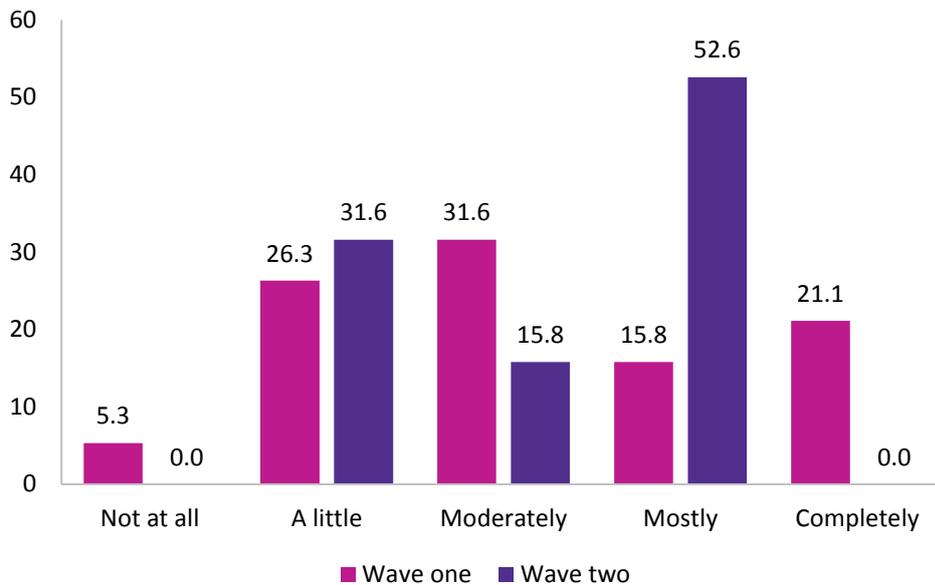
Figure 8: Family's ability to get along, service duration clients



Family has enough money to meet needs

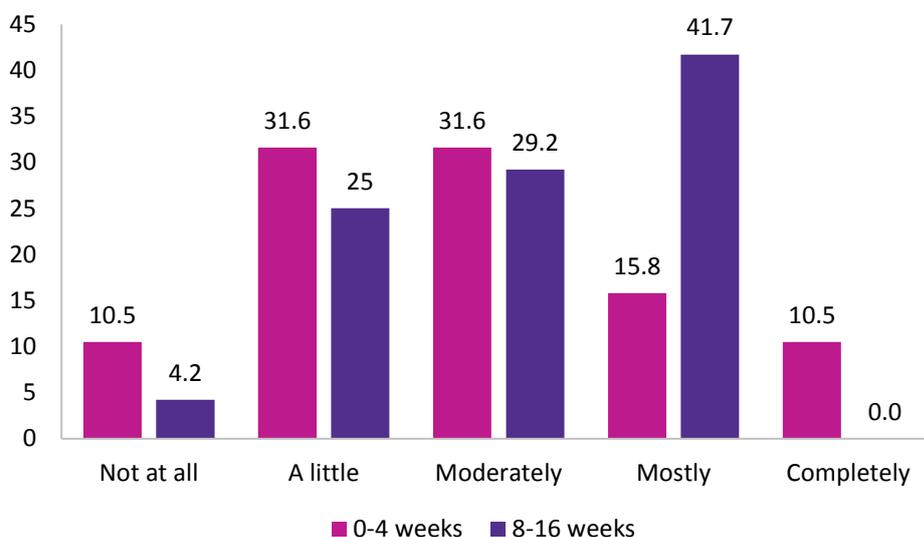
Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which their family has enough money to meet their needs on a 5 point scale, ranging from 'completely' to 'not at all'. As seen in Figure 9, reported levels of financial resources in the family appear to have stabilised between waves. More than three times the proportions of cases reported that their family had 'mostly' enough money to meet their needs in wave two (52.6%) compared to wave one (15.8%).

Figure 9: Family has enough money to meet needs, matched cases



As seen in Figure 10, reported levels of financial resources for the family also improved over service duration. The proportion of clients of Reconnect services reporting that their family had 'not at all' enough money to meet their needs more than halved between 0-4 weeks (10.5%) and 8-16 weeks of service intervention (4.2%). Conversely, the proportions of those reporting that their family had 'mostly' enough money to meet their needs increased with service duration (0-4 weeks = mostly: 15.8%, 8-16 weeks = mostly: 41.7%).

Figure 10: Family has enough money to meet needs, service duration clients

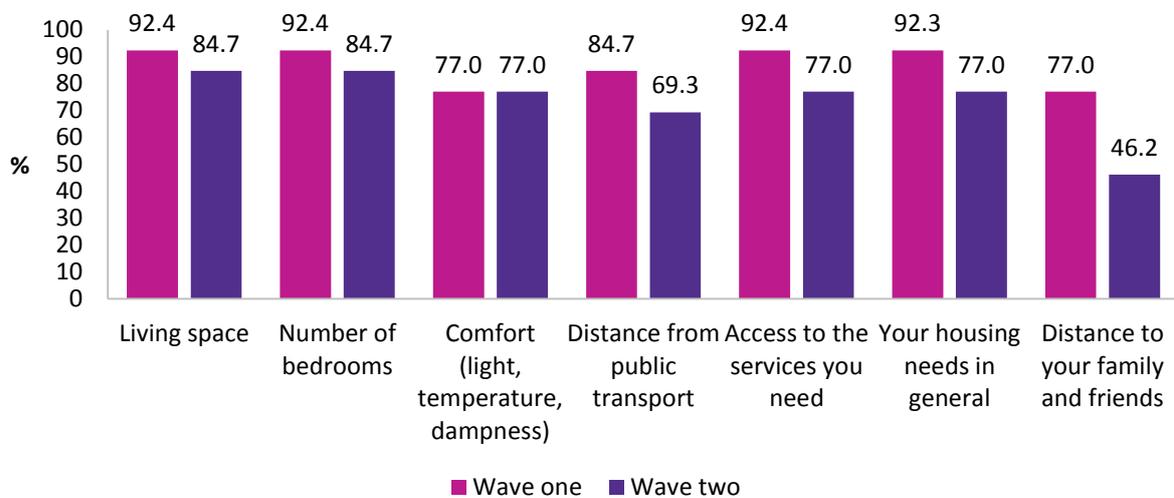


Housing adequacy

Clients were asked to rate the adequacy of their housing across a number of key characteristics listed in Figures 11 and 12. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a 5 point scale, ranging from 'much less than meets my needs' to 'much more than meets my needs'. To simplify results, this scale was collapsed into 'not adequate' or 'adequate or better'.

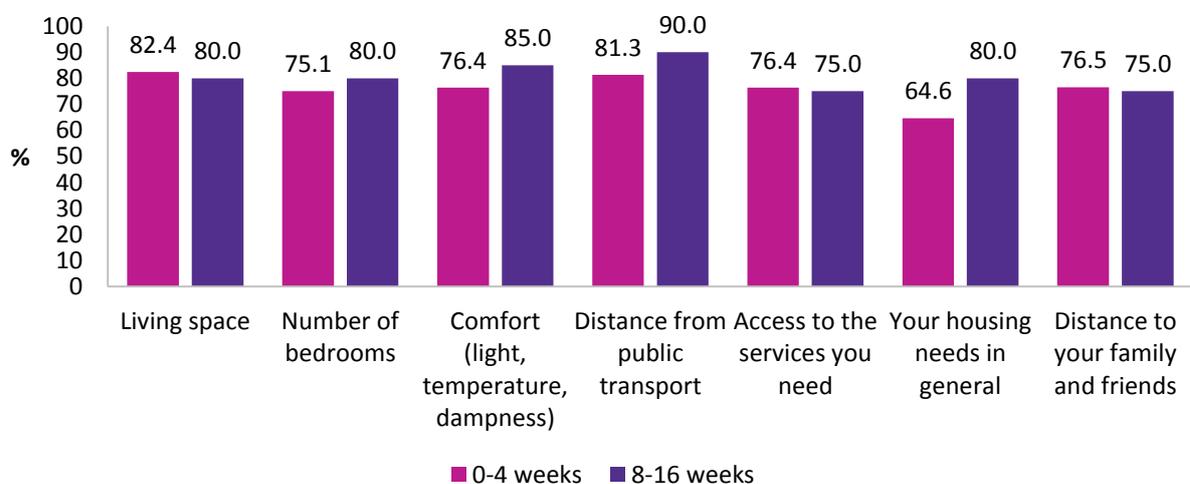
The proportion of respondents indicating that their housing was 'adequate or better' has been presented for matched clients in Figure 11 below. While the majority of respondents indicated that almost all items were 'adequate or better', the proportion indicating this decreased over the three month period between surveys. As the matched client cohort had been accessing Reconnect for differing lengths of times, further examination of this data is required to interpret these results.

Figure 11: Housing adequacy, matched cases



As seen in Figure 12, the proportion of clients rating characteristics of their housing as 'adequate or better' appears to have either remained steady or increased for the intake and follow-up clients. The greatest increase was seen for 'your housing needs in general', rising from 64.6% at intake to 80.0% at follow-up.

Figure 12: Housing adequacy, service duration



Qualitative – stakeholder interviews

Feedback from the 13 stakeholders interviewed has been collected into key themes and is summarised below:

Strengths

Overall, stakeholders were positive about the outcomes and supports provided to the young people they referred into Reconnect. Stakeholders felt that Reconnect was able to successfully establish rapport with the young people they worked with and that clients could see the benefit of their engagement in the service. While improvement in family relationships was seen as a key outcome, many stakeholders also identified a number of other positive outcomes for young people engaged with Reconnect, including: improved school attendance; improved coping skills; improved stress management; increased socialisation; improved conflict resolution skills; and improved communication skills.

Communication and collaboration in the community

Building strong working relationships with service support staff throughout the community was seen as a key strength of Reconnect. Many stakeholders reported that ongoing communication, including updates on clients' progress, challenges faced and client outcomes overall, was an important element of this relationship. Stakeholders reflected that the positive relationship of support and trust developed between Reconnect staff and their service/school was central to their continued use of the service.

Communication was seen as essential for successful referrals and was seen as one of the main reasons stakeholders felt referrals pathways were working. Services reflected that while clients could often be seen quite quickly, if a wait time was required they would be advised and updated on the status of referrals and that estimated wait times were often reliable. This had the benefit of allowing stakeholders to communicate back to future clients, which was seen as important when working with young people. This was especially important in more regional areas where staff were not always available in person.

The role of communication between stakeholders and Reconnect was considered paramount, with many services recognising its role both within the referral process and their partnership as a whole. Stakeholders consistently referred to Reconnect staff as accessible and responsive to services and young people's needs despite their high caseloads and complex clients. Stakeholders often shared the view that Reconnect staff were highly responsive with any new developments or pressing issues for clients. This focus on communication was also seen to extend to the young people and families that Reconnect staff engaged with, as staff were seen to have the knowledge and ability to successfully build rapport with clients.

What I find really beneficial is that they sort of have their finger on the pulse and they have access to other services and are able to refer young people and their families if they feel like they need further support in other areas. So they do that as well as case management. It's that wrap around support for young people who don't have very strong family connections –

School Counsellor, Regional

Flexibility to respond to community need

Stakeholders related that Reconnect was considered a vital service in most areas, often considered the only service which had the flexibility to work with young people and their families using a case management approach. For schools, Reconnect's ability to provide services outside of the normal school environment was seen as pivotal to their success.

A number of stakeholders spoke about initiatives that had allowed Reconnect to create soft entry points and engage more broadly with their local communities in ways which were responsive to community need. The flexibility to explore and pursue these local initiatives was seen as central to Reconnect's role in the community.

Additionally, staff from satellite towns were highly appreciative of the willingness and commitment of Reconnect to take on referrals from young people in their region, despite being a significant distance from regional centres. Many stakeholders related instances of Reconnect workers taking the time to pick up and transport young people to and from their community so they could access Reconnect along with other support services unavailable locally. Stakeholders recognised that this activity was not ordinarily provided within the Reconnect model but acknowledged that it was greatly needed and otherwise unavailable.

The case management provided by Reconnect was considered an invaluable component of the Reconnect model and was seen to provide holistic support to young people as well as assisting them with accessing other supports, including education, training, employment, health and mental health services. For most sites Reconnect was also the only program that provided this form of case management support.

They're very flexible, and it definitely complements the services we have. I feel like I can pick up the phone and talk to the worker at any point. And I particularly like it when I make referrals and I can request this worker because I have seen how they work with young people and the improvements they have helped the young person to achieve, and their family. I know what that person is like so I like to refer to them because I can trust that the young person is going to get a good service

Counsellor (NGO), Regional

Strong community partnerships

The majority of stakeholders had very positive reflections on their partnership with Reconnect. The program was seen to have positive relationships both with stakeholders and other services in their area. Stakeholders reflected on the active engagement of the Reconnect program in participating in local youth network meetings and community events and on its ability to refer and liaise with other services required by young people and their families. Reconnect was also seen as having played a positive role in reducing stigma associated with accessing support services and building positive relationships with families that were otherwise disengaged from their local community.

Stakeholders across several sites commented on the active role Reconnect took in addressing concerns in the wider community. This role manifested through participation in community boards, involvement in community events, provision of additional services to address key community concerns and development of soft entry points into Reconnect. The program was seen to be effectively and actively engaging in community capacity building and consistently tailored their service offering to assist in meeting service gaps within the community.

Almost all stakeholders had positive feedback around the referral processes that Reconnect employed, stating that referrals were simple and met their needs. Where referrals were not appropriate, Reconnect staff were often able to provide advice and guidance to support access to other more relevant services. Reconnect workers were considered to be highly knowledgeable about the service map in their community.

Many stakeholders identified the issue of ongoing trauma and of young people's involvement with the child protection system throughout their community. In this regard, the work that Reconnect does was seen to be imperative in providing early intervention and support that worked towards addressing some of the stigma and conflict seen to be intergenerational within the community.

We are working with extremely vulnerable kids, so we need to feel that the person we are working with at external community agency is going to provide the type of support that they need; you know the best support that we can offer to a child ... we have students that have lots of trauma in their background

School Counsellor, Regional

Trust

The development of trust with Reconnect staff contributed significantly to stakeholders' decision to refer and partner with the service. While the concept of trust was strengthened by good communication and the effectiveness of staff, it also tied closely to the successful outcomes occurring throughout clients' engagement with Reconnect. A number of stakeholders commented that trust, built through a strong professional relationship, was the main reason they chose to refer young people into Reconnect, particularly for those in metropolitan areas where there were slightly more service options available. The majority of stakeholders felt that the commitment of staff and their dedication to the program translated directly into the support they provided to clients.

The staff have been there a long time. And I think that's quite important for a community like ours. I think if you're the new person on the block it is quite difficult. You know you've already got long term relationships; the trust is already there so having long term staff is definitely a benefit

Youth Worker, Regional

Challenges

Service access

For services in regional or remote areas, stakeholders noted that the physical isolation of some young people and the challenges they faced in accessing services was a major issue in supporting them through services like Reconnect. Stakeholders commented that some Reconnect sites in regional and remote areas were often required to cover large geographical areas which meant they may only be available once a week or once a month in a particular area. A lack of youth orientated activities in regional areas was also noted, particularly for young people who were not engaged with sport. The lack of easily accessed allied services and staff capacity was also noted as a constraint in getting good outcomes for young people in regional areas.

Staff resources

A minority of stakeholders indicated that the resources and staffing of some sites were not able to adequately respond to service demands in their area. Stakeholders suggested that some sites appeared to be understaffed or that a high turnover of staff in some sites meant that staff could not build the strong community relationships required to consistently and appropriately respond to the needs of clients. Stakeholders acknowledged that Reconnect staff in these sites were working to the best of their abilities but with limited capacity to meet the high support needs of their region.

Some stakeholders indicated that consistent communication was dependent on building a good relationship with Reconnect staff and that this relationship often took time to build. Stakeholders reflected that long-term Reconnect staff had a positive influence and reputation within the community which was seen by some stakeholders as helping break down the stigma around service intervention within their areas.

Employing skilled staff was seen to be integral to the success and effectiveness of both partnerships and the service provided to clients, and maintaining the levels of skills needed was seen as difficult with high levels of staff turn-over. Skilled staff were considered vital due to the complex needs of clients and the sensitivity required to successfully engage with young people and their families. As one stakeholder noted, young people referred into the service had often experienced trauma within their home and required experienced and sensitive staff to guide them throughout their engagement with the service.

I see young people that initially turn up ... particularly in that age group that might be resistant initially to a support worker or a youth worker... and the conversation with me might be, 'no, I'm fine I don't need that, I'm ok' and I often have to really encourage them to allow me to make a referral or allow me to give a number to one of the youth workers. But once a referral is made, rapport is built very quickly and then the young person has a solid support in their life which was previously absent. That's what I see. It's extremely reassuring from my perspective

Youth Worker, Metropolitan

Future directions

Stakeholders were asked if there were any additional supports or services they felt their local Reconnect could provide for their community. Stakeholders indicated that they were aware of the limits placed on the program by its funding requirements and acknowledged that many Reconnect sites were already being flexible and creative in how they developed support pathways for young people in their communities within these constraints. Acknowledging this, stakeholders put forward a number of suggestions for evolution of the Reconnect service model into the future.

First, stakeholders suggested that the age range of the program could be expanded to include clients from 10 years old. Stakeholders from schools noted issues such as family conflict beginning to impact on children at a younger age than in the past and that there were currently no services for these children and their families in their area. Intervening earlier in the life cycle is critical in addressing homelessness risk factors and it would be beneficial for these children and families if the age range of Reconnect was broadened.

Many stakeholders also commented that communities would benefit from increased resources and staff in the Reconnect program. A number of sites acknowledged that while the service was invaluable, they had to prioritise and be mindful of the current capacity of Reconnect when making referrals. These stakeholders had often identified family conflict and family breakdown as particular issues within their community and indicated that they would ideally refer young people earlier or with less complex issues if Reconnect had more capacity.

Finally, stakeholders suggested that parental engagement should form a more central role in the Reconnect service model. Many services noted the unique way Reconnect worked with families and suggested that this could be expanded either through group programs aimed at parents within their community or by supporting and training other services within their community to more successfully approach and assist families and young people identified as at-risk.

Summary

Overall, almost all stakeholders indicated that Reconnect filled an important service gap and that removing or limiting its service operations would have a dramatically negative impact on their community. This was particularly the case for schools who have very limited ability to provide the supports they identify as required for their students outside the school setting. However, this feedback was also received by other stakeholders who noted that service reductions (such as the cessation of the Youth Connections program) had caused a direct negative impact on the young people they supported and the needs of their community.

The focus of Reconnect beyond the delivery of one-on-one support to collaboration and engagement activities within their local community allowed trust to be built between service users and community services, while also allowing the Reconnect service to offer tailored support to address specific local issues. The unique model of the Reconnect program was seen to be extremely effective in providing early intervention for young people at risk of homelessness.

If I didn't have Reconnect there I would probably struggle myself to find those other services ... those services are just not there, so I feel like Reconnect really does have that central role

School Counsellor, Regional

Policy recommendations

The *Journeys Home* study found that people experiencing homelessness who have no contact with family are the least likely to exit homelessness, suggesting that not only are families important in preventing homelessness, but they also appear to be important in assisting individuals out of homelessness.^{xxv} It also found that family's play an important role in reducing the duration of homelessness and assisting individuals out of, and sustaining their exits from, homelessness.

Youth focussed early intervention services such as Reconnect can assist young people and their families with reconciliation and reconnection. They can teach skills such as conflict resolution and resilience to enable the family to get along better so that the young person can return or stay at home (where safe).

Reconnect is the only homelessness program where service providers are directly funded by the Commonwealth Government (rather than the Commonwealth providing funding to State Governments, which in turn fund service providers). It is currently uncertain if Reconnect will be refunded beyond June 2017 and there is also uncertainty around which level of government may be responsible for its operation into the future.

Reconnect services need guaranteed long term funding. This evaluation shows that this program is too valuable for this degree of uncertainty. The findings of this evaluation strongly indicate that Reconnect services play an important and unique role for young clients and their families and within the communities they are placed, including a central role in supporting schools to connect young people to other services in the community and that removal of Reconnect would create a gap in the early intervention framework of local communities.

Mission Australia calls on the Commonwealth Government to guarantee the continuation of the Reconnect program for another five years, with consideration of the following:

- extending resources for additional staff in existing Reconnect services, particularly in communities with high levels of homelessness risk, socioeconomic disadvantage and child protection involvement;
- expanding the program to additional locations of high child and youth homelessness;
- expanding the Reconnect service model and capacity of this program to support an extended age range of 10-18 years. This could be subject to review after a period of time to assess whether this meets the needs of the local community; and
- enabling the program to adopt more place-based, community-led approaches which work collaboratively with local schools, government agencies and youth support services into the future.

However, should responsibility for all service delivery be devolved to the States in the next round of Commonwealth-State negotiations, Reconnect services should continue to be funded at the State and Territory level.

Conclusion

This evaluation highlights the significant positive contribution that Reconnect services are making to young people's lives, the lives of their families and the broader community. In both the cohorts analysed (matched and service duration) improvements were seen in personal wellbeing and across a range of other indicators of homelessness. Importantly, the greatest changes were seen in clients in the initial phase of engagement with Reconnect services. This indicates that intervening early with intensive case management can result in considerably improved client outcomes across a range of indicators, preventing more expensive interventions in the future by addressing the risk factors for homelessness.

Nevertheless, further improvements are still achievable after a period of service intervention, as seen in the matched cases, indicating the on-going success of the services in achieving outcomes for clients.

Reconnect is the only Commonwealth funded homelessness program for young people and, as findings from stakeholder analysis revealed, it provides an essential service through the flexibility of the service model to the local context and through its ability to work with families, schools and other agencies to achieve the best outcomes for young people at risk of homelessness. The uncertainty of funding for this program needs to be addressed as a matter of priority. There is an acute need for this type of service for young people, families and communities and this service model can achieve the type of evidence based outcomes that need to be funded into the future.

Endnotes

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Mission Australia Reconnect Evaluation Survey - Student

2016

Sources

Mission Australia's Reconnect evaluation survey draws on a number of existing sources. These include:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *General Social Survey*, 2014.
- Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) – Wave 5*, 2012.
- Cummins, R.A., & Lau, A.L.D., 2005, *Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children (PWI-SC) (English)*, Manual, 3rd Edition.
- Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey – Wave 1*, 2001.
- The World Health Organisation, *The World Health Organisation Quality of Life-(WHOQoL) Bref*

Information Sheet

The purpose of the Mission Australia Reconnect evaluation is to collect information which will assist Mission Australia to better understand the outcomes and impact of its Reconnect services.

The information collected will be stored on your case file in line with the conditions explained in the consent form, the 'handling of your personal information' leaflet and your privacy statement. Any information used for reporting purposes will have all identifying information removed to make sure your confidentiality and privacy are protected.

The Reconnect survey will take 5 - 10 minutes. The Reconnect survey includes questions on:

- Your health and wellbeing
- Your social connections
- Your housing

Completion of the Reconnect survey is entirely **voluntary**. Your consent is required prior to the completion of the survey and for us to contact you in the future in regard to the completion of a follow-up Reconnect survey. You may withdraw consent at any time, without your service being withdrawn or altered in any way.

If you come to any question which you do not want to answer, just go on to the next question.

Thank you for agreeing to take part

Consent

Mandatory item: Please tick here if you:

- Have read and understood the above information
- AND you consent to participate

Today's date is:

 / /
d d m m y y y y

Background Information

1. What is your name?

First name

Last name

2. What is your Client ID?

Please check with a staff member if unsure.

3. Which Reconnect site do you currently attend?

- Reconnect - Toowoomba
- Reconnect – Gold Coast
- Reconnect – Whyalla
- Reconnect – Far West
- Reconnect – Southern Early Intervention Service
- Reconnect – Peel (Mandurah)
- Reconnect - Inner City (Sydney)

Meeting Your Needs

12. How much **control** do you feel you have over your life now?

No control	Mixed										Complete control
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<input type="checkbox"/>											

13. In general, how would you rate your family's ability to get along with one another?

Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent
1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>

14. Does your family have enough money to meet their needs?

Not at all	A little	Moderately	Mostly	Completely
1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>

15. When was the most recent time you **did not** have a permanent place to live?

- In the last week
- In the last month
- In the last three months
- In the last 12 months
- More than a year ago
- Never, I have always had a permanent place to live

16. If you needed to, could you ask someone (who does not live with you) for any support in a time of crisis?

Support includes advice; emotional support; help when ill or injured; help with family or work responsibilities; emergency money, accommodation, or food.

- Yes
- No

The following question is optional. Please only complete this question if you feel it is relevant to you.

Housing						
17. Thinking about the housing you live in now, how well do the following things meet your needs?						
<i>Tick one box on each line</i>						
		Much less than meets my needs	Less than meets my needs	Just meets my needs	More than meets my needs	Much more than meets my needs
a	Living space	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
b	Number of bedrooms	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
c	Comfort (e.g. light, temperature, dampness, etc.)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
d	Distance from public transport	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
e	Access to the services you need	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
f	Your housing needs in general	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
g	Distance to your family and friends	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>

Mission Australia helps people regain their independence - by standing together with Australians in need, until they can stand for themselves.

Contact us

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