Mission Australia

TRANSFORM

Hearing directly from vulnerable young Australians

SNAPSHOT 2010

Macquarie Group Foundation

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, around 48,000 young people across Australia participated in the eighth annual Mission Australia *National survey of young Australians*. The survey asked young people aged 11 to 24 years about what they value, their concerns, where they go for advice and support and who they admire. This publication focuses on the responses of three more vulnerable groups of young people – those who were homeless, in out-of-home care, or involved in the juvenile justice system. Young people who are homeless, in out-of-home care or in juvenile justice can be vulnerable in a number of areas which are fundamental to wellbeing, including meaningful relationships, educational achievement, secure housing, physical and mental wellbeing and financial security. This publication provides background on these young people, hears directly from them and makes some policy recommendations for enhancing their wellbeing.

HOMELESSNESS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The most common reason for young homeless people leaving home was conflict with parents.

On any night there are an estimated 105,000 homeless Australians of whom 43% (around 45,000) are aged under 25 years (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2008). Although homelessness among 12 to 18 year olds decreased by 16% between the 2001 and 2006 Censuses, youth homelessness remains a significant problem with close to 22,000 young people in this age group homeless on an average night (MacKenzie and Chamberlain, 2008).

There are three levels of homelessness:

- *Primary or direct* homelessness – people who lack conventional secure accommodation and may be living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting, or using other forms of temporary shelter;
- *Secondary* homelessness – people who move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another, such as crisis accommodation facilities or staying with friends and family;
- *Tertiary* homelessness – people who live on a medium to long-term basis in boarding houses, where their housing is considered to be below the minimum standards of a self-contained residence (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2008).

The causes of homelessness are multiple and varied, and include structural factors, such as the availability of affordable housing, and individual factors such as family conflict.

Youth homelessness is different to the general homeless experience. A study of young homeless people in Melbourne found that the most commonly reported reason for them leaving home was conflict with parents, with other reasons including anxiety or depression, desire for independence or adventure, violence at home, and personal alcohol and substance abuse (Rosenthal et al, 2006).

The conflict causing the initial break from home can often be resolved through early intervention, making this a critical time for active support. If this is unsuccessful, the young person might become a 'homeless student', where they may typically be living with friends whilst still attending formal education. Some will withdraw from school, attempt to find work and try to transition to independent living. Most, however, remain unemployed. Eventually when arrangements with friends break down, the young person becomes chronically homeless (National Youth Commission, 2008). Importantly however, research shows that most young people who engage with the homelessness assistance services do not remain homeless over the long term (Mallett, 2010).

OUT-OF-HOME CARE

In June 2009 there were just over 34,000 children in out-of-home care.

Out-of-home care is the placement of a child or young person (up to the age of 18) in alternative accommodation because they are unable to live with their parents, often because of abuse or neglect (Richardson, 2009). Out-of-home care arrangements can include accommodation with a foster family, relative or in a supported residential lodging. In June 2009 there were just over 34,000 children in out-of-home care in Australia, a 9.3% increase since 2008 and a 44% increase over the past four years (AIHW, 2010).

Young people leaving care encounter difficulties far earlier in life than their peers, with those not experiencing secure and stable care most at risk of outcomes such as low levels of educational attainment, marginal employment, transitional housing, poor mental health, and lower expectations of the future (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006).

JUVENILE JUSTICE

On any given day in 2007-08, there were approximately 4,700 young people under juvenile justice supervision in Australia, excluding NSW for which data was reported separately. Around 87% of these young people were under community-based supervision and 13% were in detention. A substantial majority (about 84%) were male and about half were aged between 14 and 16 (AIHW, 2009). In NSW, 4,554 juvenile justice community-based orders commenced in 2008-09 and the average daily number of young people in custody was 427 (NSW Department of Human Services, 2009).

A variety of factors can contribute to a young person becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, including substance abuse, poor parental supervision, problems with school or work, poor personal or social skills, homelessness, and neglect and abuse (Department of Human Services, 2009).

NATIONAL SURVEY OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

Table 1: Demographic data on respondents

	Homeless %	Out of home care %	Juvenile Justice %	Other housing %*
Studying full or part time	65.4	79.6	67.8	89.5
Main source of income				
— Government allowance	27.5	17.4	26.2	3.6
— Parents/ family	40.5	64.8	50.9	73.8
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	15.0	16.5	20.0	4.2

* Those living with family, in a share house, at boarding school or living alone. The vast majority live with their family.

The *National survey of young Australians* collected a range of demographic data. Three hundred and twenty eight young people who were homeless or in insecure housing participated in the survey, as did 225 in out-of-home care and 460 living in a juvenile justice centre or prison. Table 1 shows that, compared with other survey respondents, young people in these three groups were:

- Less likely to be studying;
- More likely to rely on a government allowance as their main source of income; and
- More likely to be of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE VALUE?

Around 40% of homeless young people highly valued feeling needed and valued.

Table 2: What young people value

	Homeless %	Out of home care %	Juvenile Justice %	Other housing %
Family relationships	66.9	67.3	57.7	76.1
Being independent	55.9	44.7	46.1	32.3
Friendships (other than family)	42.6	49.8	42.1	61.4
Feeling needed and valued	39.1	30.2	36.0	25.8
Physical and mental health	22.1	29.7	30.1	31.2
Getting a job	20.8	17.7	19.4	17.8
Financial security	16.9	14.7	23.1	13.7
School or study satisfaction	15.4	26.2	20.4	22.0
Spirituality/faith	13.2	14.5	14.6	12.6
Making a difference in the community	8.7	7.2	11.5	8.0

Note: Data is aggregated and includes items ranked 1, 2 or 3 by respondents.

Respondents were asked to rank the items that were important to them from the list of options in Table 2. The top three responses for all groups were *family relationships, being independent* and *friendships*, although the rankings and proportions varied. *Family relationships* were identified as important by a much lower proportion of the juvenile justice group (57.7%) than the 'other housing' group (76.1%). About two thirds (67%) of the homeless and out-of-home care groups highly valued *family relationships*.

Being independent was highly valued by a much larger proportion (55.9%) of the homeless group than those in 'other housing' (32.3%). Slightly less than half (about 45%) of those in care or detention highly valued this item.

Friendships were highly valued by around 42% of those who were homeless or in detention and about half (49.8%) of those in out-of-home care. These are lower proportions than those in 'other housing' (61.4%).

Young people who were homeless (39.1%) or in detention (36.0%) were more likely than those in care (30.2%) or 'other housing' (25.8%) to highly value *feeling needed and valued*. *Financial security* was very important to around one in four of those in detention compared to around one in ten of those in 'other housing'.

WHAT CONCERNS YOUNG PEOPLE?

Body image was the top concern for homeless young people, those in out-of-home care and those in juvenile justice.

Table 3: Issues of concern

	Homeless %	Out of home care %	Juvenile Justice %	Other housing %
Body image	37.5	33.2	38.9	25.0
Alcohol	37.3	31.4	37.9	22.4
Bullying/emotional abuse	32.0	31.1	26.1	23.0
Suicide	26.0	14.1	24.5	26.3
The environment	20.1	14.8	18.1	16.6
Physical/sexual abuse	19.0	19.6	15.9	22.9
Family conflict	18.4	22.9	14.7	24.4
Drugs	17.4	25.2	22.8	26.9
Coping with stress	15.8	13.4	19.4	18.8
Depression	15.7	19.6	18.7	18.8
Sexuality (relationships, health, identity)	15.6	14.4	17.1	11.3
Self harm	12.7	13.5	12.5	13.4
Discrimination	12.3	12.1	14.2	11.6
Personal safety	10.4	18.4	12.4	22.6
School or study problems	9.6	18.7	10.8	17.6

Note: Data is aggregated and includes items ranked 1, 2 or 3 by respondents.

WHAT CONCERNS YOUNG PEOPLE? (CONTINUED)

Young people were asked to rank their concerns from the list in Table 3. The top three concerns for those who were homeless or in care or detention were *body image, alcohol*, and *bullying/emotional abuse*. *Body image* was the top issue for each of these groups, with a third or more of these respondents identifying it as a major concern, compared with a quarter of those in the 'other housing' group.

Alcohol was the second-ranked issue for each of the more vulnerable groups, with around 37% of the homeless group and those in detention, as well as 31% of those in care, identifying it as a major concern. This compares with just over a fifth (22.4%) of those in 'other housing'.

A young person's concern about *alcohol* may or may not be related to their personal use of it. Their concern could relate to alcohol use in the family, by their peers or in the broader community.

Research has shown however that there is an increased likelihood of young homeless people and those in juvenile detention having high levels of alcohol consumption and/or dependence. A study of homeless young people in Melbourne found that 67% were alcohol or other drugs dependent (Mallett et al, 2003). South Australian research with juvenile detainees aged 11 to 17 years also found that close to 90% had used alcohol in the past six months and almost half had been alcohol intoxicated at the time of offending (Payne, 2006).

Bullying/emotional abuse was a major concern for close to a third of the homeless and out-of-home care groups, compared to around a quarter of those in juvenile justice or 'other housing'. Those in care or 'other housing' were much more likely than those who were homeless or in detention to identify *personal safety* as a major concern (around one in five compared to one in ten).

WHERE DO THEY GO FOR ADVICE AND SUPPORT?

Two fifths of young people in juvenile justice used the internet as a major source of advice.

Table 4: Where young people turn for advice and support

	Homeless %	Out of home care %	Juvenile Justice %	Other housing %
Friend/s	74.8	72.8	66.5	85.1
Community agencies e.g. youth worker	47.8	32.1	44.7	11.2
Internet	47.6	32.2	42.9	21.6
Parent/s	36.5	54.4	38.9	74.8
Relative/family friend	28.1	42.6	34.5	62.0
Someone else in your community e.g. doctor, church minister	19.9	9.1	15.4	8.7
Magazines	14.0	14.8	20.0	10.7
Teacher	13.6	15.8	10.8	10.8
Telephone helpline	11.9	8.9	16.1	5.6
School counsellor	10.8	17.7	13.0	10.7

Note: Data is aggregated and includes items ranked 1, 2 or 3 by respondents.

Respondents were asked where they go for advice and support when they have a personal problem. As shown in Table 4, the top response for all groups was *friends*, although the proportions varied from around 85% for the 'other housing' group, to around three quarters of the homeless and out-of-home care groups, and declining to about two thirds (66.5%) of those in juvenile justice.

Community agencies and the *internet* were the second and third-ranked sources of advice respectively for both the homeless and juvenile justice groups, and were important for close to a half of these groups.

For those in out-of-home care or 'other housing' the second and third ranked sources of support were *parents* and *relative/family friend*.

Nearly 20% of those who were homeless indicated that *someone else in the community* was a major source of advice, double the rate for those in 'other housing'. Similarly, one in five young people in juvenile justice identified *magazines* as one of their top three sources of advice, compared to around one in ten of those in 'other housing'.

HAVING ENOUGH INFORMATION

31% of homeless young people didn't have access to enough information.

Table 5: Access to enough information

	Homeless %	Out of home care %	Juvenile Justice %	Other housing %
Enough information	69.1	82.7	69.3	87.3
Not enough information	30.9	17.3	30.7	12.7

Respondents were asked whether they had enough information on issues that concern them. Those in 'other housing' (87.3%) and out-of-home care (82.7%) were much more likely than those who were homeless or in juvenile justice (about 69%) to indicate they had enough information.

WHO DO YOUNG PEOPLE ADMIRE?

Table 6: People and organisations young people admire

	Homeless %	Out of home care %	Juvenile Justice %	Other housing %
Friends	21.7	22.4	19.6	15.8
Entertainers	15.0	7.4	14.0	6.7
Family	14.1	24.4	18.8	29.6
Sports teams, players and coaches	9.0	6.9	11.2	8.4
Businesses and business people	4.9	1.6	5.6	1.8
Community agencies helping disadvantaged people	4.2	4.8	1.8	4.6
Political organisations and figures	3.1	2.5	3.6	1.8
Myself	2.5	1.8	1.4	0.5
Schools and their staff	2.4	3.9	2.0	2.4
Religious figures	2.2	1.6	2.4	1.6
Youth organisations and leaders	1.8	2.3	2.6	1.4
International aid organisations	1.2	3.5	1.7	6.1
Environmental groups	1.0	0.9	1.3	1.8

Young people were also asked to name the three people or organisations they admired most. Table 6 shows that *friends* and *family* were in the top three responses for all groups but the proportions who admired them varied between the groups. Around 14% of the homeless group compared to around 30% of those in 'other housing' identified *family*. Those who were homeless or in juvenile justice were more than twice as likely as those in 'other housing' or out-of-home care to admire *entertainers*.

CASE STUDY: NIGHTSPOT

Nightspot is a new early intervention program that Mission Australia is piloting in the Logan region of Brisbane. It provides newly homeless young people with short term, emergency accommodation with a volunteer family in the community. It is designed to help young people resolve family or other issues while still in the early stages of homelessness, with the primary aim of re-uniting them with their family where it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Displacing young people from their local communities can often do more harm than good, severing their existing social networks with a geographical relocation (Uhr, 2003). The involvement of local families provides young people with the opportunity of staying in their community and connected to their social networks and decreases the likelihood of them needing to use emergency accommodation, thereby delaying, or avoiding altogether, entry into the homeless subculture.

Nightspot is open to young people aged 16 to 21 years who are experiencing difficulties at home, but because they are placed with families only those deemed 'low risk' are eligible to participate. Young people are offered a secure place for between one and seven nights from which to assess their home situation, be made aware of the other local services available to them and plan a course of action. Referrals are made through informal networks such as youth support coordinators, pastoral care staff or chaplains, and other welfare services in the area. As many of these are school-based services, *Nightspot* clients tend to be 'homeless students'.

The *Nightspot* program is still in the early stages of implementation. However, results from the pilot have been encouraging and with further development it may become a useful model for early intervention with homeless young people.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Relationships

Developing and sustaining connections with family and friends is a key foundation for a young person's wellbeing. The *National survey* suggests that while *family* and *friends* are highly valued by all groups of young people, the proportions who value them are lower for the three more vulnerable groups compared to those in 'other housing', with the greatest difference being for those in juvenile justice. This is despite the fact that these three groups value *feeling needed and valued* more highly than other young people.

As research with vulnerable young people has shown, they, like other young people, are 'capable of forging positive, independent lives; but… to do this they require ongoing and consistent care, support and recognition from adults who they can trust and rely upon… and relationships with people who value them' (Mallett, 2010). Services which work with more vulnerable young people need to have a strong focus on building or rebuilding healthy and stable relationships, with family members where appropriate, or with other significant adults.

The Commonwealth Government's *Reconnect* program has been an important early intervention initiative to support young people to rebuild relationships with their families. A new pilot program, *Nightspot* (see case study), may also provide young people and their families with the opportunity to resolve issues before they escalate and enable young people to remain in their local communities while that happens.

For other young people whose history of relationships has been deeply scarred, including through violence and abuse, intensive, long-term and specialised support will need to be provided by services in order to support them to rebuild trust and develop a base for healthy relationships. An important part of such work is continuity of care, so that positive relationships developed with significant adults are not prematurely severed just at the point when trust has been built.

Advice and support

Whilst for most young people parents or other family members are major sources of advice and support, homeless young people and those in juvenile justice are more likely to rely on *community agencies* and the *internet* than on their family members. They are also much more likely than other young people to have insufficient information when they have a problem. This highlights the need for nuanced information strategies that meet the particular needs of more vulnerable young people and ensuring community agencies have the capacity to meet the diverse range of information and support needs of these young people. It also reinforces the need for high quality and accessible information available online for more vulnerable young people.

Wellbeing and integrated responses

The issues of concern for the three more vulnerable groups vary considerably from those in 'other housing', with concerns about *body image* perhaps linked to poorer self esteem and overall sense of wellbeing. Services that work with these groups need to be funded to take an integrated and holistic approach to enhancing young people's wellbeing, including a focus on life skills, relationships, education and/or employment, accommodation and physical and mental health. The high level of concern regarding *alcohol* reinforces the need for 'accessible, timely and targeted health services' (Mallett, 2010), whilst the relatively lower level of concern regarding *drugs* may point to the need for more targeted education and health campaigns with these groups given their generally higher level of usage.

No exits into homelessness

The Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments under the National Partnership on Homelessness are implementing a policy of 'no exits into homelessness' from institutions such as statutory and custodial care (FaHCSIA, 2008). This is particularly important for young people given the links between homelessness, out-of-home care and the juvenile justice system. Young people under out-of-home care orders are 'at risk' of homelessness with 40% of those leaving care not knowing where they will live (McDowall, 2009). Homelessness is also a risk factor for becoming involved in the juvenile justice system with 'a growing body of research suggesting that an increasing number of young people are ending up in remand because they don't have anywhere to live' (AIHW, 2007). The *National survey of young Australians* confirms both the vulnerability of these groups and some of the similarities they share. Ensuring more widespread availability of initiatives such as *Navig8* in Western Australia, which supports young people leaving care to move to independent living, and the new Tasmanian Specialist Intervention Tenancy Support Services with its multi-disciplinary teams for young people leaving the care and protection system or youth justice facilities, will be critical to making the 'no exit' policy a reality for young people.

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Inspired by Jesus Christ, Mission Australia exists to meet human need and to spread the knowledge of the love of God. Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life.

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The Macquarie Group is a diversified international provider of banking, financial, advisory and investment services. Through the Macquarie Group Foundation, Macquarie supports a wide range of community organisations. The Foundation has formed a major partnership with Mission Australia, to enhance its research into key social issues. This research guides Mission Australia's policy development and advocacy, ensuring its employment programs and community services continue to deliver to those most in need.

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