

Ch-ch-changes? . . .

Youth Homelessness in Australia

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In Australia, 'youth homelessness' has had a higher policy priority than in other Western countries. By contrast, in the United States of America, the dominant policy paradigm has been chronic street homelessness followed by sheltering homeless families, but 'youth homelessness' does not have a social problem profile as such.

Youth homelessness emerged as a distinct public policy priority in Australia in the late 1970s and 1980s. Why this was so raises important questions of context and history. One stand out factor is the activist and advocacy role of community organisations; another is the bipartisan approach of successive State and Federal Governments prepared to take action. It is a history of considerable achievement compared to most other countries but also of lost opportunities and unfilled aspiration.

The Early Days

In terms of legislation, the 1974 Homelessness Persons Act was the basis for funding homelessness services in the capital cities. This enabled both large and small community based organisations to take a greater role in service delivery.

Inspired by the women's refuge movement, youth refuges were the first iteration of this community response to youth homelessness, taking a 'housing/home first' approach of trying to provide a more natural 'home' setting with wrap around support for young people experiencing homelessness, rather than an institutional setting. These early youth refuges provided unconditional stay. They provided a 'home'. Minutes and documents from these times remind us that for the early youth refuges, there was a focus on a response that was local, small-scale and community-based, and local community members were typically involved in these services. The predominant themes were young peoples' rights and social justice.

Initially, funding for services was relatively unstable and short-term. The viability of services was heavily dependent on volunteers and live-in 'house parent' approaches were common. However, over the next decade, as the smaller youth refuges began to acquire more stable funding and the staffing became professionalised and unionised, the volunteer component began to drop off. However, most community agencies still have boards comprised of local

business people and community members serving in a voluntary capacity.

In the early 1980s, as the community sector ramped up its advocacy, 'youth homelessness' gained further prominence. The Senate Standing Committee on Youth Homelessness in 1982 resulted in a new round of Government action. In 1985, funding was consolidated at the national level (into three streams Youth, Women's Refuges and General) and these services became funded under a national Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). Legislation in the form of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (SAA Act)—an important piece of Human Rights legislation—ensured a consistent national program and an ongoing evaluation and research process.

At this time, it was widely thought that youth homelessness was a temporary effect of high youth unemployment and that when youth unemployment decreased, so too would youth homelessness. However, this 'turn around' never eventuated. In fact, youth homelessness increased. This misleading presumption had some effect on the initial design and distribution of youth homelessness services.

The first youth refuges were critiqued by many in the community sector as a necessary but short-term 'band-aid' solution. The focus of advocacy was on pathways out of homelessness for young people who were unable to return to home. Unfortunately, the agenda of building a community infrastructure 'beyond the refuge' involving easier access to income, youth housing and affordable youth rentals for young people attempting to live independently, was not fulfilled. The development of a significant youth housing sector never happened.

Instead, Government purchasing tactics increasingly delimited the unconditional 'home first' approach of early youth refuges and shaped them into limited stay crisis services feeding medium to longer term accommodation services. Over time, the unconditional youth housing became increasingly conditional and the cost benefit advantage of the youth crisis services was compromised. Arguments about length of stay criteria, unit costs and the cost and benefits of youth crisis services continue to the present day unrelieved by any serious effort to inform the debate with evidence or critical thinking.

The Burdekin Years

The vigorous advocacy of the 1980's was followed by the capstone Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) inquiry into youth homelessness led by Commissioner Brian Burdekin.

Compared to the Senate Inquiry in 1982, the HREOC report *Our Homeless Children* (1989) was a hard-hitting, wide-ranging compilation of evidence and policy ideas and it had a major public impact through the media. There is no doubt that Brian Burdekin, now an internationally acclaimed leader in the human rights area, deserves a great deal of credit for his contribution to further elevating 'youth homelessness' into a major public policy issue in Australia. The Hawke-Keating Government of the day took up some of the report's recommendations but the Burdekin agenda was largely not completed as this Government was overtaken by political issues of survival.

The Burdekin Inquiry raised expectations in the community and the sector and energised efforts to move to a broader 'beyond the refuge' reform agenda incorporating case management practices, living skills programs, links to employment (the Community Youth Support Scheme) and education, peer education and health and well-being support and more 'holistic' support for young people beyond a bed for the night. The high expectations were largely not met. Apart from a small stream of Crisis Accommodation Program (CAP) funding for SAAP crisis services, the development of a youth housing sector remained under-developed, income support for young people attempting to live independently was inadequate and the exit pathways out of homelessness were a continuing problem.

By the early 1990s, there were four basic models of youth homelessness services: 'crisis' services (derived from the youth refuge model) providing 24/7 support for up to three months; 'medium term' services (again based on the youth refuge model) providing 24/7 support for up to six months; 'long-term/multi-house' (an independent living model) less intensive support or up to two years, dependent on availability of community housing; and 'brokerage' support limited to wrap around accommodation and non-accommodation support as required.

The homelessness services were augmented by other related programs such as the CYSS program in the 1980s, the Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth ISHHY in 1991, the Job Placement, Employment and Training program (JPET) in 1992, the Students at Risk (STAR) program in the 1990s. At various times, these other programs enabled some agencies to provide what amounted to an integrated 'foyer-like' model for tackling youth homelessness.

Most of these programs have disappeared and significant opportunities for integrated and enhanced approaches were lost. Several times, Government policy has effectively

dismantled resources that allowed for enhanced co-ordination and integration, and then cyclically tried to reinvent integration.

Although 'youth homelessness' received a great deal of media attention following the HREOC Inquiry report, young people still became homeless and youth homelessness is worse in 2012 than it was 20 years ago. The Counting the Homeless (CTH) statistics research showed that youth homelessness had doubled since Burdekin.

Following the 1996 election, the new Howard Government continued to support SAAP, but over the next decade, the real value of homelessness funding slowly and incrementally declined. Youth homelessness services were expected to do more with less and were held accountable for outcomes beyond their control or influence.

However, on the positive side, Prime Minister Howard initiated a Prime Ministerial Taskforce on Youth Homelessness that produced the early intervention Reconnect Program. By 2003, at 100 sites, Reconnect was deployed to work with young people and their families and address incipient homelessness. This was an important initiative. Also, the SAAP program data collection was a notable achievement and the envy of other countries that were beginning to act on similar issues. Tinkering within the system was accompanied by the caveat that anything new could only be considered on a no net funding increase basis. A common view of the time was that SAAP provided a safety net for people failed by other systems. For young people leaving state care or juvenile justice this was certainly the case.

The Road Home

In 2007, homelessness became a significant election issue, at least in the sense that Kevin Rudd promised his government would address homelessness.

Australia has been a notable engine of innovation with some of the most creative and advanced models of homeless services to be found anywhere, and yet for a long time, there has not been the political will to make the necessary social investment that would eventually yield the dividend of reducing and ultimately eliminating youth homelessness.

Extensive community consultations informed a White Paper, *The Road Home* that was finally released in December 2008. The core strategic goal was halving homelessness by 2020. The framework covered prevention and early intervention (Turning off the tap), new investment in the homelessness service system (Improving and expanding services) and housing and support for people trapped in homelessness (Breaking the cycle). The Federal Government announced significant new money for homelessness, the first serious investment since the early 1990s, and described this as 'a down payment on the 12-year reform agenda outlined in the White Paper'. *The Road Home* is probably the best homelessness policy document produced by any Western country. It was an auspicious beginning.

A balance sheet of the past three years, must acknowledge the Federal leadership on homelessness and the positive achievements of *The Road Home* agenda. But after the initial hype and genuflection around the release of *The Road Home* had abated and as the states and territories grappled with implementation without the reference point of a national action or implementation plan, youth homelessness slipped somewhat down the national policy agenda, as the policy conversation started to focus more around adult chronic homelessness models, rough sleepers and US-style Street to Home approaches.

A lot of new money was pushed out to fund housing and homelessness models from overseas and a relatively small number of high profile short-term pilot projects. There has been a tendency to worship at the altar of the 'cult of the new' and minimal attention on how to build on foundational successes and apply leverage to scale up. Whichever party forms government after the next Federal election will face some major problems about funding the next phase of the homelessness agenda in the post-June 2013 period.

Funding for a significant expansion of 'early intervention' via Reconnect and Home Advice disappeared into the Council of Australian Governments and National Affordable Housing agreement funding bucket. As a result, little has been done to expand early intervention thus 'turning off the tap', despite evidence that early intervention measurably reduced youth homelessness between 2001 and 2006.

Then, there are the revisions of the homelessness definition and counting rules being pushed through, at the behest of COAG according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The ABS launched into a new initiative to take over the homelessness enumeration in Australia. Despite advice from experts and protests from the homelessness sector, the ABS seems set on a controversial and some say 'political' track to slash the number of homeless youth from about 20,000 to 5000. It is difficult to envisage major new initiatives for homeless youth getting up through Treasury if the statistics are mired in controversy and the problem has been statistically downsized.

During the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), more than \$6 billion was poured into social housing but it is not clear how much of this housing was accessible for young people. The reason is that the current approach to social housing through housing associations is a business model that works well enough for reliable low-income tenants but not nearly as well for high-need 'unreliable' tenants who have experienced homelessness or young people who cannot easily meet the rental payments required.

Assets, Foundations and Knowledge

Over the past thirty years, the youth homelessness sector has shifted from its well-intentioned 'youth refuge' origins into a broad spectrum of youth housing and

support models and approaches and beginnings of 'whole of community' and systems reform models. Early intervention was developed as a policy perspective within the youth homelessness sector. However, inconsistency in Government funding policy and periods during which real funding decreased, as well as the lack of a cost benefit analysis to underpin a long-term commitment has delimited the full potential of services to take an integrated 'spectrum' approach and build a sustainable community infrastructure.

Australia has been a notable engine of 'innovation' with some of the most creative and advanced models of homeless services to be found anywhere, and yet, there has not been sufficient political will to make the necessary social investment needed to yield the social dividend of reducing and ultimately eliminating youth homelessness. The Rudd Government seemed to represent a bold effort to work strategically over the long-term but there has to be doubt whether this agenda will be sustained after the next election regardless of which party is elected. There is a question mark over this.

In 2012, there are not many stand-alone youth refuges left, and the 'system' comprised a spectrum of youth homelessness models and services:

1. intensive supported accommodation, ranging from 24/7 to 24/7 on call
2. supportive accommodation, intermittent intensity of support and longer-term youth housing
3. independent longer-term youth housing
4. outreach, off-site and 'brokerage' approaches offering limited wrap around accommodation and non-accommodation support as required, working in partnership with schools and other community organisations
5. integrated on site approaches, mixes of youth and youth homelessness services such as single site foyers, drop-in centres, youth health centres and youth centres
6. distributed integrated approaches such as scattered site foyers and youth hubs
7. youth homelessness approaches which integrate family counselling, early intervention, parenting, adolescent counselling, links to learning, links to income and employment etc
8. the early intervention Reconnect program
9. Youth Health Centres, Headspace
10. projects on couch surfers, community development, school education, community awareness.

In many ways, the renewed interest in foyer-like approaches represents yet another attempt to bring all of these elements together again and to ramp up increased investment in 'youth housing'. But this is not really a totally new idea. For example,

Yfoundations/YAA (as a partner in the Live N Learn foundation with NSW Housing and union and corporates) and others such as Southern Youth and Family Services blazed the 'foyer' trail in Australia as the early champions foyer approaches in the late 1990's and early 2000. The first Foyers were set up in the early 2000s by Live N Learn in Miller and SYFS in Wollongong and by Melbourne City Mission with funding from the Myer Foundation. While there are a small number of 'foyers' popping up around the country, the underpinning funding and income subsidies available to young people do not yet make for a sustainable model from a financial perspective.

There has been a significant evidence and knowledge base created over the past thirty years so while we should be always 'open minded' to innovation and new ideas, we are not or should not be 'empty minded'. Most of what needs to be done and how this might be accomplished is well-understood. A large body of evidence is in the extensive evaluations of SAAP, many Australian research studies, inquiries such

as the Standing Committee in 1982, Burdekin in 1989 and NYC in 2008, 25 years of SAAP data, and cognate Inquiries into Child Protection, Juvenile Justice etc ... as well as practice-based evidence from the youth homeless sector. All of this data and research needs to be pulled together to inform a long-term National Youth Homelessness Strategy supported by both sides of politics.

For problems that clearly can only be addressed over the long-term, that is, over several changes of government at both state and Federal levels, a critical factor is 'bipartisanship'. Fortunately in Australia, homelessness has remained a bipartisan issue and both sides of politics have contributed constructively to policy and programs although not necessarily agreeing about priorities and the appropriate level of resources. SAAP was established by a Labor Government but continued and supported by the Liberal Government during the 1990s. Important new initiatives such as Reconnect and HOME Advice early intervention programs were launched by

the Liberals. Governments are loath to refer to the documents and policies of their predecessor. Thus, policy documents are often rewritten, rebadged and re-launched. But, if there is strategic and funding continuity then this is not really a problem, just an annoyance.

Despite the fact that bipartisanship has never appeared so fragile as at the present time, building a consensus around redress for Australia's most vulnerable young people is a national imperative. Early intervention is not only about reaching young people as early as possible in their problems; it can also be thought of in terms of 'early in life' from a life course perspective.

Reducing youth homelessness will cost money but it should be kept in mind that there is emerging evidence that it will save the Australian community a much larger amount over the long-term. No Australians really believe that young people experiencing homelessness is OK. An avoidable future we don't need to have is already evident on the streets of the United States. Let's not go there! ■

Victorian Social Housing Framework Consultation

The Victorian Government is inviting all key stakeholders to participate in a public consultation process regarding a future Victorian social housing framework. To guide the consultation process, the Hon Wendy Lovell, Minister for Housing has released two discussion papers:

Pathways to a Fairer and Sustainable Social Housing System

Social Housing—Options to improve the supply of quality housing

The Council to Homelessness Persons (CHP) will continue to partner with peak organisations, the homelessness and broader sectors and with people who have experienced homelessness, to inform its submission to the public consultation, open to 31 July.

How can you participate?

Review and provide feedback on CHP's draft submission to the two consultation papers.

CHP's draft submission can be found on its website:

http://www.chp.org.au/public_news/items/2012/06/00398-upload-00002.pdf

CHP's draft submission has been informed by CHP's Peer Education Support Program and Policy Advisory Group. Now we're keen to hear from you! Are we on the right track?

Have we missed anything? Do you have any general feedback?

Please submit your comments and questions to CHP at ian@chp.org.au by 23 July 2012.

Draft your own submission.

CHP is happy to support organisations in drafting submissions. Please also feel free to use in your own submission, any of the information set out in CHP's draft submission.

Participate in a Public Housing Tenants Consultation.

Public consultation meetings will be held in different parts of Victoria for tenants and interested members of the community to provide feedback on the discussion papers.

For additional information on local meetings, visit the DHS website: www.dhs.vic.gov.au

CHP will continue to provide up-to-date information on the Victorian social housing framework through our regular e-newsletter.

**For additional information on the consultation process, please contact
CHP's Manager, Policy and Communications Unit, Sarah Kahn (sarah@chp.org.au)**