



# **POLICY BRIEFING # 1 : MAY 2008**

## **Definitions and Assumptions**

Pre Conference policy briefing papers for the NYCH Pre Conference Workshop at the 5<sup>th</sup> National Homelessness Conference 21-23 May 2008



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### **Definition of young people**

The National Youth Coalition Housing (NYCH) defines young people as being between the ages of 12 to 25 years; this is consistent with the ABS definition of this term. However this does not imply that the Coalition is of the opinion that the accommodation and housing responses will be the same for all young people in this age cohort. Consideration should be given to age, support needs and skill levels when developing responses to young people's accommodation and housing needs.

### **Adolescent development**

NYCH also acknowledges the adolescent development issues that impact on young people, families and communities and must be taken into consideration when developing policy and practice responses. Adolescence is a time for great change for young people and their families. In the main these changes occur between the ages of 12-15 years and generally young women mature earlier than young men.

These changes for young people are at a number of levels:

- Biological – physical
- Psychological – thinking and feeling
- Social – how they relate to the world around them

Adolescent development is generally seen to be in three stages:

- Early adolescence: 12-14 years
- Middle adolescence: 15 -16 years
- Late adolescence: 17 – 19 years

In general NYCH further breaks down the age group into three sub groups:

- 12 -15 years
- 16-18 years and
- 19-25 years.

## Legislative frameworks

There are a number of legislative frameworks that guide accommodation and housing responses to young people. The SAAP Act 1994 that guides youth SAAP funded services articulates that services should not exclusively accommodate young people under school leaving age. The SAAP Act 1994 also clearly outlines that there should be no funding of services which duplicate existing programs.

SECT No duplication of services

10.(1) Except with the joint written consent of the Minister and the State Minister of each participating State, a form of agreement specified in an instrument under section 6 must provide that SAAP will not replace or duplicate a service that is already provided by, or is the responsibility of, any other government, program or organisation.

## Why 'youth specific' homeless services and supported accommodation?

The rationale for a 'youth specific' service response is that the young people who are in homeless services / supported accommodation are:

- a. dealing with a range of trauma issues relating to the fact that they are no longer able to live in the family home; and
- b. have no capacity to move "back home" should their private rental or other accommodation break down so there is a greater need to ensure that young people have the independent social and living skills prior to moving out of supported accommodation.

The report *Children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*<sup>1</sup> highlights research that found that "half of the children who had experienced homelessness showed major developmental delays and high levels of either aggressiveness or withdrawal" (page16). In fact they cite a number of research studies that demonstrate the negative impact on children and young people's development due to their experiences of homelessness.

For young people between the ages of 12 – 18 there are a number of understandings that form the basis of the NYCH position;

- Young people aged 12-18 have needs that are observably different to those under 12.
- Young people aged 12-18 who are unable to live with their family and have protective needs are clearly the responsibility of the relevant State or Territory Department, the statutory child protection authority;
- Young people aged 12-18 who are unable to live with their family, whether in care and protection or not access SAAP services.

For young people aged 12-18 the provision of accommodation options outside a statutory framework (ie residential care, foster care) should not preclude linkages with existing intervention services and the funding of new intervention services under Child Protection. For this age group the discussion about service delivery needs to move beyond a question of 'in or not in care' to a discussion about how statutory and non-statutory responses to young people's protective needs can compliment one another.

For young people aged 16 to 25 years there are a range of accommodation and housing models across tenures (located in the 'crisis intervention and ongoing support' and 'post crisis housing' continuum of service delivery framework) that have been developed that meet a range of needs. NYCH supports the need for a variety of tenures that provide young people with a choice of their housing.

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<sup>1</sup> Children in the Supported accommodation assistance program, Final Report, August 2005, Social Policy Research Centre, Commonwealth of Australia

## Risk.

Over the last decade we have come to understand youth homelessness as a process. While each Young person is homeless they also may be 'at risk' of or experiencing:

- physical, sexual and emotional abuse and/or neglect;
- absence of an adult figure who can exercise care and responsibility;
- engagement in risk taking behaviours, coupled with families who are unable and/or unwilling to protect them from the harm this exposes them to;
- family conflict/violence and breakdown;
- an absence of or limited support networks;
- a range of emotional, social, and physical affects as a result of harm or potential harm.

The protective needs of young people may be further exacerbated as a result of cultural and social factors. These young people include:

- young people with an intellectual disability or learning difficulty;
- young people with a physical disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people;
- young people from diverse cultural backgrounds;
- young people with psychiatric illness;
- Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual and Transgender young people;
- young people with substance abuse issues.

It is recognised however that there are grey areas in the continuum due to the individual nature of homelessness and the variation in the level of service delivery in communities. It must also be noted that when young people make the permanent break from home and school they become homeless in a very short time period. Wilson and Day<sup>2</sup> in their examination of the SAAP data on under 16's found that:

...the majority of young people under 16 years of age who came into contact with services did so very early in the homelessness episode. As shown in the table below, around 80% of young people seeking assistance from SAAP were identified as being at imminent risk of homelessness (and presumably were either still at home or in some other relatively stable housing option) or as having been homeless for less than 2 weeks. Indeed, around 41% of young people under 16 were still living with either one or both of their parents when they established contact with the service, compared to 19% of older young people. This suggests that SAAP services are well placed to act at this point to reduce the proportion of very young people making the permanent break from home. (pg5)

## Cultural definition of homelessness

The most accepted definition of homelessness is the one developed by Chris Chamberlain and David Mackenzie where they acknowledge homelessness as a process. In their report *Youth Homelessness 2001* they discuss the definition of homelessness.

*There will always be some individuals who are difficult to classify, but in broad terms the cultural definition leads to the identification of 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' categories of homelessness.*

**Primary homelessness** is the least contentious category because it accords with the common sense assumption that homelessness is the same as 'rooflessness'. It includes all people without conventional shelter, such as people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or improvised dwellings for shelter.

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson, T and Day J, "Homeless Young People: Points of Intervention" Paper presented to the National Housing Conference 2001

**Secondary homelessness** includes people who are staying in any form temporary accommodation with no other secure housing elsewhere. It is common for people who lose their accommodation to stay temporarily with other households (usually friends or relatives); others stay in boarding houses on a short-term basis; some go to government funded emergency accommodation, such as youth refuges, hostels for the homeless, night shelters and so on. People who remain homeless for any significant period of time usually move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another, some spending occasional nights on the streets.

**Tertiary homelessness** is probably the most contentious category. Tertiary homelessness refers to the occupants of single rooms in private boarding houses who live there on a long-term basis (three months or more). They are homeless because their accommodation does not have the characteristics identified in the minimum community standard - they do not have their own bathroom and kitchen, a separate room for eating and sleeping, and security of tenure provided by a lease. Homeless people often live in boarding houses as they get older, because they do not have the financial resources to access the private rental market.<sup>3</sup>

## **Youth homelessness as a 'process' .**

Over the last decade we have come to understand youth homelessness as a process. While each young person's story is unique there are common trends that can lead young people from the family home to chronic homelessness. These understandings have resulted in the reshaping of responses to youth homelessness and an increased focus on early intervention and the maintenance of family and community links. One of the key issues in exploring points of intervention is to acknowledge that the use of terms must be contextualised in a place and time. What the literature over the last 18 years has shown is that as our comprehension of the issues' increases the language that we use to describe our understanding changes in its meaning. When looking at the continuum of service delivery clearly one of the key language changes is how the terms prevention and early intervention are interpreted. Therefore in looking at the continuum of service delivery government and non-government services need to re-think how language is used and whether the language you are using is contemporary.

## **What is the difference between early intervention and prevention ?**

There is a need to have common understanding of what people mean by prevention, early intervention, crisis and post crisis.

NYCH wants to clearly articulate that early intervention is where risk factors have been identified, yet harm has not occurred and that crisis intervention is where harm has occurred.

The level of isolation from community, disadvantage and marginalisation increases from prevention through to crisis intervention. The process of how young people move through this is not in a linear fashion, however as stated earlier a lack of resources in prevention or early intervention mean that a significant point of contact in relation to community services is with those services providing crisis responses.

The framework attempts to construct a comprehensive strategy that builds upon the protective factors in a community – this is sometimes included in the labelling of community capacity building (if using the social justice understanding of this term).

This framework is compatible with the findings of the reports by Chamberlain and MacKenzie that identify there are a number of transition points before young people make the permanent break from home. Their reports also identify that young people may become chronically homeless if they are not supported in dealing with the critical issues that are confronting them. Further they note that the transition points are not fixed in time and are individual to each young person's situation and other social factors. The transition points identify that there are a range of intervention points that can assist young people and their families.

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<sup>3</sup> Chamberlain, C and Mackenzie D, 'Youth Homelessness 2001' RMIT University July 2002