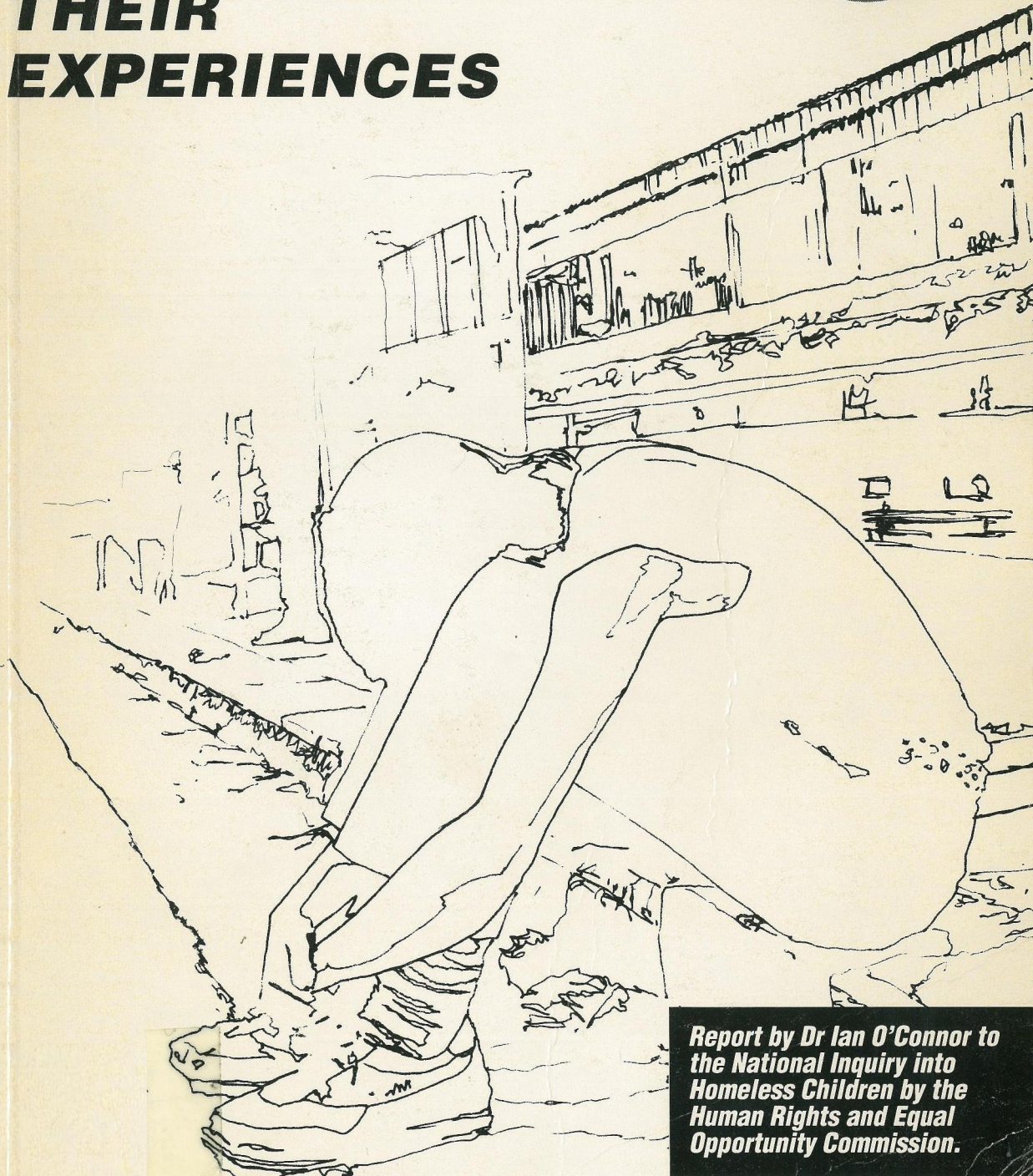


# OUR HOMELESS CHILDREN: THEIR EXPERIENCES



*Report by Dr Ian O'Connor to  
the National Inquiry into  
Homeless Children by the  
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# Preface

The following report is an edited version of a more detailed report commissioned by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission as part of its Inquiry into homeless children (*'Most of us have got a lot to say and we know what we are talking about': Children's and Young People's Experiences of Homelessness*). The Commission sought evidence through public hearings and written submissions. Recognising that neither were alone adequate avenues for homeless young people to put their perspectives before the Inquiry, research was commissioned into children's and young people's experiences and perspectives of homelessness.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

The project aimed to facilitate the Commission's Inquiry by placing details of young people's experiences and perceptions and an examination of the human rights implications of their accounts before the Commission. In conceptualising, undertaking and analysing the research, reference was directed to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child and, in particular, to:

- (i) Principle Two, which provides that the child shall enjoy 'special protection';
- (ii) Principle Four, which provides that the child has the right to 'adequate nutrition, housing, recreation and medical services'; and
- (iii) Principle Nine, which provides that the child 'shall be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation'.

## AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

1. To describe the experiences of homelessness as perceived by homeless children and young people;
2. To document homeless children's and young people's perceptions of the causes and triggers of homelessness. In this context the research considered the role played by families and peers and the education, employment, income security, housing, criminal justice and child welfare systems;
3. To take into account factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, race, place of origin and class on experiences of homelessness, giving particular attention to the impact of institutionalisation (for offenders and non-offenders); and
4. To ascertain what, if any, human rights homeless children and young people understand they have and to ascertain which, if any, of these human rights homeless children and young people perceive as being abused.

The methodology of the research is discussed in the body of the report. It suffices to state here that the research process was underpinned by the stance that the Inquiry would benefit from taking into account the perspectives and experiences of young people. I believe that this report supports that proposition.

I wish to acknowledge the support and assistance provided by Father Wally Dethlefs, Amanda Bowden, Commissioner Brian Burdekin, Lurline Comerford, Warren Simmons, Roger Gaven, Gerard Dowling and Clare Arthurs. Interviews for this research were conducted in Brisbane

and the Gold Coast by Lurline Comerford, in Sydney by Warren Simmons and in Canberra by Peter See, Paul Adcock and Sarah McQueen. I wish to thank Joan Daniel for the typing of this report. Assistance with typing the report and transcripts of interviews was also provided by Judy Morris and St. Lucia Secretarial Services. This report was edited for publication by Pamela Sweetapple. Assistance was also provided by a myriad of youth services in our efforts to locate homeless young people. Sincere thanks is expressed to the one hundred young people who participated in the interviews.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction and Research Method

There is nothing extraordinary in young people leaving home. It is one of the expected transitions to adult life. This transition is not always a smooth one, however. It is not unusual for the process of leaving home to include a number of departures and returns to the family home (Young, 1987). For some young people, however, the option of returning to the 'family home' while becoming accustomed to their new-found independence is often not a feasible one. For them, the process of leaving home is particularly fraught with difficulties and trauma. It is not associated with the eventual acquisition of stable, secure accommodation and a lifestyle wherein their basic needs of food, shelter and nurture are met. These are our society's homeless children.

What prevents young people from returning to their families? What stops them from fulfilling their expectations and need for a stable, secure home? Issues such as these are the focus of this report. We have sought the answers to such questions through focusing on the experiences of homeless young people. In this introductory chapter, the perspective taken in relation to homelessness is detailed. The methodology is also discussed.

### HOMELESSNESS

Definitions of homelessness vary from the exceedingly narrow, literalistic 'absence of shelter' to definitions which stress the absence of secure, adequate and satisfactory accommodation. For example, the National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH) defines youth homelessness as:

the absence of secure, adequate and satisfactory shelter as perceived by the young person, and for homelessness to exist, at least one of the following conditions, or any combinations of conditions should be operative:

- (a) an absence of shelter;
- (b) the threat of loss of shelter;
- (c) very high mobility between places of abode;
- (d) existing accommodation considered inadequate by the resident; for such reasons as overcrowding, the physical state of the residence, lack of security of occupancy, or lack of emotional support and stability in the place of residence; and
- (e) unreasonable restrictions in terms of access to alternative forms of accommodation (NYCH, 1985).

Such broad definitions are preferable because they attend to the breadth of the experience and the lifestyle associated with homelessness.

The Commission has recognised this in seeking a report on 'the conceptual issues involved in the definition of the total number of homeless children and young people' (Fopp, 1988).

Since this research aimed to access young people's descriptions of homelessness, it was important that a working definition of homelessness be adopted. The requirements of the definition were that it:

- (i) recognised that homelessness was a process and an experience, rather than a single event that happened to a person or a description of their housing status;
- (ii) was inclusive of young people in a wide variety of accommodation as well as none at all; and
- (iii) recognised the different dimensions of the experience of homelessness.

For our purposes a young person was therefore considered homeless if their housing history and current situation featured a lack of security, lack of quality, lack of stability or lack of permanence in accommodation (Low, Crawshaw & Mathews, 1984). This definition enabled us to interview young people in many different contexts, at different stages of homelessness: the recently homeless, the long term homeless and those on the verge, perhaps, of moving to a situation of stability.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY**

This research aimed to access young people's understanding of the experiences of homelessness. This required:

- (i) an appropriate sample;
- (ii) a methodology to access young people's perspectives; and
- (iii) a method of analysis.

It is to these issues that we now turn.

## **METHOD**

### **(a) Sample**

As it is not possible to draw a random sample of homeless youth, the sampling was selective; designed to reach a cross-section of the homeless youth population and thereby document the dimensions of the experience of homelessness.

One hundred young people in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory were interviewed. Their names have been changed herein to protect their anonymity. Twenty-five young people were interviewed in four locations: Sydney, Canberra/Queanbeyan, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. These locations were purposely chosen to tap the differing contexts in which homelessness emerged, developed and was experienced. In Sydney young people were interviewed in Kings Cross. In contrast, Brisbane children living in or about an outer suburban location were interviewed. The Gold Coast provided access to homeless young people living in resort areas, whilst Canberra/Queanbeyan provided a smaller city/provincial city sample. Three variables were used as the basis for selection in all locations. They were current accommodation status, age and sex. Three broad accommodation types were delineated. They were:

1. untenable housing situation: a young person in some form of housing (other than a refuge or emergency accommodation) who was in immediate need of alternative accommodation and was at risk of being without shelter in the near future;

2. highly mobile or on the street: young persons without stable accommodation who were either sleeping out or in squats or were moving from place to place every couple of days; and
3. in a refuge or emergency accommodation.

For the purpose of selection, age was split into categories: young (12-15 years) and older (16-17 years). The parameters for the selection of sample in each location was as follows:

Location	Untenable	Highly Mobile On Street	Refuge/Emergency Accommodation	(n)
	(32)	(36)	(32)	
Sydney	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 3 OM	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	12 F 13 M
Brisbane	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	2 YF 3 OF 2 YM 2 OM	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	13 F 12 M
Canberra/ Queanbeyan	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 3 OM	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	12 F 13 M
Gold Coast	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	2 YF 3 OF 2 YM 2 OM	2 YF 2 OF 2 YM 2 OM	13 F 12 M
	8 YF 8 OF 8 YM 8 OM	8 YF 100F 8 YM 10 OM	8 YF 8 OF 8 YM 8 OM	50 F 50 M
Note: YF --Young Female OF = Older Female YM = Young Male OM = Older Male				

In each location lists of refuges, emergency accommodation and youth services were drawn up. Permission was sought to approach young clients of these services to seek their participation in the research. The interviewers also sought to make direct contact with homeless youth through contact with young people and by going to places where homeless young people went. This was important for it facilitated contact with young people not in current contact with youth services etc., who were living in disparate forms of 'housing'. It was considered essential that the sample include young people who were not living in refuges or shelters. (Most research on homelessness has drawn samples exclusively or primarily from those in emergency accommodation or refuges.)

The sampling frame also ensured that age and sex were balanced.

## (b) Interview Schedule

Young people's perceptions and experiences of homelessness were accessed through a semi-structured interview. An interview schedule was constructed which addressed the issues raised in the research questions. The interview schedule served as a guide to the issues to be discussed with each young person. The actual wording of some of the questions was modified in the context of the discussion and interviewers' perceptions of the young person's verbal skill. The schedule provided the **basis for a discussion — not a survey**. A copy of the interview schedule is available from the Commission or the author.

The interview schedule reflects the assumption that the causes and consequences of homelessness are multi-faceted. It recognises that young people require, inter alia, stable accommodation and social and emotional support to grow and develop. The responsibility for this support and nurture rests with families, communities and the state. The schedule therefore allowed an examination of the young person's interactions with the key social institutions of the family, the education, child welfare, youth welfare, income security, police and the criminal justice systems.

Through an analysis of a child's initial and subsequent experiences of homelessness, the causes and triggers of homelessness, the child's survival techniques and the strength and failings of these primary and secondary support networks could be identified. This approach also allowed consideration of the manner in which structural factors (e.g. high rates of unemployment, limited availability of housing, low benefits etc.) were experienced by individual young people and the manner in which these limited the young person's choices and options on a day-to-day basis.

In addition, the method facilitated an analysis of the human rights implications of this research. Through an analysis of young people's accounts of their lived experiences, it was possible both to delineate their implicit concepts of rights and their expectations of respect for their human rights. Further, the children's accounts of their experiences were measured against the human rights guidelines set down both by the United Nations (see Preface) and the various Australian states. In that way the question of whether the human rights of homeless young people are recognised and protected was addressed.

## **(c) Procedure**

Interviews were undertaken in June, July and August 1988. The researcher explained the purpose and style of the interview, including the fact that interviews were taped. Each participant was paid \$10 for their time and as a recognition that their perspectives were important. The interviews occurred in a variety of places, including refuges, coffee shops, cars, parks etc. In addition to the taped interview a brief demographic sheet was completed. The length of interviews varied between one and three hours.

## **(d) Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed to computer files. A coding schedule was developed along the lines suggested by Turner, 1981. The interviews generated over 3,000 pages of transcripts. To facilitate the task of indexing and retrieving this volume of coded text, the program TEXTCODE was used in the analysis (Reeders, 1987).

The analysis of the interviews focused not only on isolating common themes and responses, but on making explicit the underlying theoretical assumptions implicit in the interviews. In that sense the analysis focused on reading the interviews as texts, as sources of meaning. Sue Lees aptly described this process in her analysis of interviews with young women about sexuality:

In focusing on the meanings/explanations as presented, in order to make sense of what the girls said we looked at what the accounts had in common in terms of explanations, contradictions, oppositions, gaps and taken for granted assumptions. The aim was always to make explicit the hidden or unexpressed assumptions behind the explanations given (Lees, 1986).

In essence, we have examined the manner in which the young people have described and explained their experiences of homelessness. We have taken their descriptions and raised questions about their meaning. In the sections that follow different aspects of the accounts are explored, the meaning of homelessness, the process of becoming homeless, surviving homelessness, the barriers to obtaining accommodation and so on. Particular attention is paid to the structural position of youth. We note the manner in which the pressures on young people are experienced and are productive of homelessness.

## **SUMMARY**

The purpose of this report is to document and discuss young people's perceptions of the experience of homelessness. The focus is young people's stories of how and why they become homeless, why they remain homeless and the consequences of homelessness.

The research is reported in the following way. Firstly, the characteristics of the samples are described in Chapter 2. We then consider young people's own definitions of homelessness.

In Chapter 4 the focus is the reported causes of homelessness, while in Chapter 5 we consider the various paths to homelessness. We then consider a series of issues related to why young people are homeless and remain homeless. The barriers that young people believe prevent them from obtaining stable, secure, adequate accommodation are delineated.

Young people's experiences with the social institutions designed to protect their rights and meet their needs when their families are unable, or unwilling, to do so — the child welfare system, the police, the education and income support systems — are discussed. We also explore some of the consequences of homelessness through a discussion of the children's involvement in prostitution, their mental and physical health and generally, their exploitation.

Our concern in this report is to delineate patterns and issues and to discuss the manner in which these patterns reflect underlying structural issues. We searched the patterns for strength and potentialities which could facilitate the resolution of difficulties associated with homelessness. In this context we conclude this report with a discussion of young people's recommendations.





## Chapter 2

# Characteristics of the Sample

Of the 100 interviews undertaken, four were only partially completed. This occurred in Kings Cross, due to a range of factors including tiredness of the young person and the intensity of the interview. Attempts to retrace these young people and complete the interviews failed. As demographic information was obtained at the end of the interview, much of the information about these four participants is missing. A summary of the characteristics of each young person is included in the Appendix.

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

#### (a) Age

Slightly over half of the sample (56) were aged 16 or 17 years. The remainder were aged 15 years and under. The Gold Coast sample was weighted towards the older age group due to the interviewer's inability to locate the necessary younger participants in the time available. However, it is considered that the 'young homeless' were adequately represented.

TABLE 1					
AGE					
	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Years					
13	1	0	0	1	2
14	3	1	1	3	8
15	8	6	9	7	30
16	3	7	4	8	22
17	10	11	8	5	34
Missing data	0	0	3	1	4
AGE OF GROUP					
Years					
13 - 15	12	7	10	11	40
16 - 17	13	18	12	13	56
Missing data	0	0	3	1	4

## (b) Sex

The sample was constituted equally by males and females.

	Brisbane Gold Coast		Sydney	Canberra
Male	13	12	13	12
Female	12	13	12	13

## (c) Family

## Background

### (i) Family structure

The young people's family backgrounds were diverse. Forty per cent of the sample were members of reconstituted or step-families (Table 3). Twenty-six per cent were from nuclear families and another 26% were from single parent families. It is important to note that homeless children come from all family types. They are not always products of single parent or reconstituted families.

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Nuclear	7	8	4	7	26
Reconstituted	10	13	6	11	40
Single Mother	7	3	8	3	21
Single Father	1	1	1	2	5
Relatives		-	2	-	2
Missing data			4	2	6

## (ii) Parents' occupation

The occupation of respondents' parents was coded to the six point ANU scale which provides an indication of socio-economic status (Broom, Duncan-Jones, Jones & McDonnell, 1977). Four additional categories were added to this scale to encompass those not participating in the labour market.

<b>TABLE 4</b>				
<b>MOTHER'S OCCUPATION</b>				
	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra
Professional	0	2	1	1
Managerial	0	0	0	1
White-collar	4	6	4	3
Skilled	0	1	2	1
Semiskilled	2	3	1	3
Unskilled	1	2	2	7
Unemployed	0	1	0	0
Pensioner	6	3	5	0
Home Duty	11	6	4	2
Dead	0	0	0	2
Unknown	0	1	2	2
Missing data	1	0	4	3
<b>FATHER'S OCCUPATION</b>				
	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra
Professional	1	0	1	1
Managerial	0	2	0	0
White collar	1	4	1	6
Skilled	7	8	6	4
Semiskilled	4	5	'?	4
Unskilled	2	1	0	3
Unemployed	2	0	1	0
Pensioner	3	3	0	0
Home Duty	0	0	0	0
Dead	3	1	4	2
Unknown	1	1	6	2
Missing data	1	0	4	3

Although these figures show that homeless children come from all socio-economic backgrounds, a significant proportion of the children interviewed did come from families which were financially disadvantaged. Interestingly, ten of the young people's fathers were dead. In a few cases, the death of the father was the direct cause of the homelessness.

## (d) Ethnic and Racial Background

TABLE 5 ETHNIC AND RACIAL BACKGROUND					
	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Aborigine or Islander	1	0	3	0	4
Australian born — ES (a)	20	20	15	18	73
Australian born — NES parents (b)	2	1	0	1	4
Overseas born — ES (c)	1	4	2	3	10
Overseas born — NES (d)	1	0	1	2	4
Missing data	0	0	4	1	5

Note: (a) Australian born and parents born in Australia or other English speaking country.  
 (b) Australian born — and one or both parents born in non-English speaking country.  
 (c) Born in English speaking overseas country.  
 (d) Born in non-English speaking country. Most of the respondents came from an  
 Anglo background. Most of the children born overseas were New Zealanders.

## DIMENSIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

### (a) Current Accommodation

TABLE 6 CURRENT ACCOMMODATION					
	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Parents	4	1	1	1	7
Relatives	2		1	-	3
Friends	9	2	1	3	15
Refuge/Hostel	5	9	11	11	36
GSAP		7			7
Sleeping out	1	1	4		6
Squat	1	1	3		5
Boarding House		1			1
Caravan		2		2	4
Tent		1			1
Rental (Private & Public)	2			5	7
Other emergency accommodation			-	2	2
Other	1	-	-	1	2
Missing data			4		4

The current place of residence of the young people is summarised in Table 6. Numerically the largest group — but not the majority — were residing in youth refuges or hostels. The different accommodation patterns in each location reflects:

- (i) the differences in the experiences of homelessness in different locations, and
- (ii) the fact that young people at different stages of homelessness tend to live in different places.

For example, seven of the 21 Kings Cross youth were either sleeping out or living in squats. On the Gold Coast seven of the young people were living in GSAP accommodation. This reflected the lack of beds in youth refuges and some of the young people's disenchantment with youth refuges on the coast. Young people were also living in caravans and tents at the Gold Coast. In Canberra five of the young people were accommodated in emergency public rental accommodation for young homeless people. In the outer suburban sample, nine young people were staying with friends or the parents of friends. As shall be evident later in the report, young people often initially sought accommodation with friends when first leaving home. It is also notable that seven youths were living with one or both parents at the time of the interview. It may be suggested that it is inappropriate to classify children residing with parents as homeless, however these young people illustrate one of the hidden aspects of homelessness. All were facing the imminent loss of shelter. For example, one young woman, 13 years of age and the victim of incest, was leaving home to enable the father to move back. She had no idea of her housing future. Another young woman had returned from a shelter in Rockhampton to the mother's home. The mother had said she could stay no longer than a week. At the time of interview she had two days to go. She was then 'planning' to live on the streets. And so on. The interviewing for the research was undertaken in June-August 1988 — that is, winter. It is likely that this reduced the number of young people interviewed who were currently sleeping out or in squats.

## **(b) Income**

As well as a home, these young people lacked sufficient sums of legitimately obtained money. Given the level of social security benefits and Austudy, the education benefit, only employment provides legitimate access to an income upon which it is possible to live independently. Only eleven of the 100 young people derived their income from employment (ten full-time, one part-time) (Table 7). Twenty-nine relied for income on the Job Search allowance — a maximum of \$76 per week if they were receiving the Young Homeless Allowance. A small number were receiving some other form of benefit. (Special, Sickness, Supporting Parents Benefits or Austudy). Twenty-seven had no income source at all, while seventeen received small incomes from family, friends or boy friends etc. Only nineteen young people were receiving Young Homeless Allowance — one third of those who applied for it. Many (35) had not even bothered applying. The amount of weekly income varied from nothing to \$260. Eighty people received \$76 per week or less, including forty-six who received less than \$46 per week.

TABLE 7A  
INCOME SOURCE

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Job	3	4	2	/	11
Jobsearch	11	8	4	6	29
Sickness	0	0	2	0	2
Special	2	0	1	1	4
Supporting Parents	0	1	0	0	1
Austudy	0	1	0	3	4
Other	4	5	3	5	17
Missing data	0	0	4	1	5

TABLE 7B  
WEEKLY INCOME

Income \$	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
0	6	9	11	6	32
1 - 4 5	2	2	2	8	14
56 - 76	14	7	6	7	34
77 - 150	2	4	1		7
150 and above	0	3	1	2	6
Missing data	1	0	4	/	7

### (c) Education and Employment Status

The majority of the sample were unemployed. As mentioned above, a small number had jobs. A similar number were involved in some form of education — schooling or college. This was notably the case in Canberra where a considerable number were students.

TABLE 8A  
EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Unemployed	18	17	19	13	67
Full-time work	2	4	9	2	10
Part-time work	1	0	0	0	1
Student	3	1	0	10	14
Other	1	1	0	0	2
Truant	0	1	0	0	1
Supporting Parents	0	1	0	0	1
Missing data	0	0	4	0	4

Only one of the young people had completed secondary education. The majority had left school before completing Year 9 (Table 8B).

TABLE 8B  
HIGHEST SCHOOL GRADE COMPLETED

Grade	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
7	0	0	2	2	4
8	3	5	4	3	15
9	9	8	8	9	34
10	11	6	6	5	28
11	1	4	0	5	10
12	0	1	0	0	1
Other	1	0	0	0	1
Missing data	-	1	5	1	7

The extent of educational disadvantage suffered by these young people is evident from the fact that 61 had left school at or before the the minimum school-leaving age. Thirty-one left school before legal school-leaving age (Table 8C). We return, in the body of the report to the difficulties these young people had with the school system.

TABLE 8C  
SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
In education	3	1	0	10	14
12	0	0	1	0	1
13	1	1	7	0	4
14	4	9	10	3	26
15	11	7	5	7	30
16	4	6	2	3	15
17	1	1	0	1	3
Missing data	1	-	5	1	7



## (d) Period Since First Homelessness

Respondents were asked to discuss their first experience of homelessness. As will be clear from the report, many young people were homeless on a number of occasions. Table 9A provides an indicator of period of homelessness experienced.

Years	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Less than 1	7	8	1	6	22
1 - 2	8	5	2	4	19
2 - 3	3	3	8	7	21
3 or more	5	7	10	6	28
Missing or uncertain data	2	2	4	2	10

This does not necessarily mean they have been homeless for the whole period since their first experience of homelessness. It is, however, indicative of housing instability. It is notable that young people living in or around Kings Cross have experienced homelessness over longer periods than the rest of the sample. It is clear from these figures that rather than homelessness being a rare and short-lived event, many young people have experienced years of housing instability. It is also of concern that the young people report their first experience of homelessness at an early age. More than half report such an occurrence at 14 years of age or less

Age	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
0 - 12	3	2	5	4	14
13 - 14	9	8	12	11	40
15	6	7	1	4	18
16	4	4	2	3	13
17	0	2	0	1	3
Uncertain	3	2	1	2	8
Missing data	0	0	4	0	4

## (e) Previous Court History

Given the instability in these young people's lives and their lack of income, it is not surprising that about half had appeared in court charged with criminal offences. More surprising was the fact that one-third had never appeared in court on any matter — criminal or status offence or a welfare matter such as abuse or neglect. Twenty-nine had been the subject of a child welfare application.

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
No appearance	13	9	2	9	33
Street offence only	1	1	0	0	2
Welfare matter	2	0	2	4	8
Criminal offence	4	11	8	3	26
Welfare, status or criminal	5	4	9	7	25
Missing	0	0	4	2	6

## (f) Wards

Fourteen of the children were currently state wards or in some form of care and protection. Another eight had at some time previously been under such an order. More of the young people from Sydney were currently or had been wards. This is consistent with a higher rate of wardship in New South Wales.

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Never a ward	16	15	12	18	61
Temporary custody	2	1	0	0	3
Previously a ward	2	3	2	1	8
Ward	3	1	6	4	14
Unclear	2	5	0	1	8
Missing data			5	1	6

## (g) History of Institutionalisation

Slightly over half the sample had lived in a child welfare home or a detention centre, or both. Children in the Kings Cross and Canberra samples were more likely to have been in such institutions. This is congruent with Queensland's lower rates of institutionalisation.

TABLE 12  
INSTITUTION

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Nil	17	13	8	8	46
Criminal	2	4	2	3	11
Welfare	1	0	8	6	15
Both	3	3	2	5	13
Remand	1	2	0	0	3
Jail	0	1	0	0	1
Watchhouse only	1	2	0	0	3
Missing data			4	3	7

## (h) Sexual Abuse

The question of whether the child had been sexually abused by family members or close family friends was raised in the interviews. This is an issue of great sensitivity and under-reporting must be expected. Twenty-eight young people, 18 women, reported they had been sexually abused. In light of details in the report this will be seen as a significant under-pointing. We note in the body of the report that the extent of physical abuse was much higher.

TABLE 13  
DIRECT EVIDENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Nil	11	17	14	20	62
Family	2	0	9	1	5
Family and other	3	3	1	1	8
Other	9	5	4	1	19
Missing data	0	0	4	2	6

## (i) Mobility

The young people interviewed were highly mobile. Thirty-nine had lived in from two to five residences in the past year. Thirty-one had moved from six to ten times, whilst the remainder had more than eleven moves in the past year.

Moves	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
2 - 5	14	6	8	12	40
6 - 10	8	9	7	7	31
11 - 15	3	5	3	2	13
16 - 20	1	1	1	1	4
21 - 25	0	2	1	1	4
26 - 30	0	0	1	1	2
Missing data	0	2	4	1	7

## (j) Parents' Location

The mobility is again evident when the current location of the child is compared to the location of parents. Only half of the children were resident in the same city as their mother, and a third as their father. A not insignificant number of the young people's parents lived interstate. This was especially the case for the Gold Coast sample, suggesting that the resort served as a drawcard for young people. Sixteen young people did not know where their father was.

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Same city	17	6	11	16	50
Same state	5	3	7	0	15
Interstate	3	12	3	4	22
Unknown	0	3	0	3	6
Deceased	0	0	0	2	2
Overseas	0	1	0	0	1
Missing data	0	0	4	0	4

	Brisbane	Gold Coast	Sydney	Canberra	Total
Same city	8	5	7	13	33
Same state	7	5	2	0	14
Interstate	4	8	1	5	18
Unknown	2	5	6	3	16
Deceased	3	1	4	2	10
Overseas	1	1	1	1	4
Missing data	0	0	4	1	5

## **SUMMARY**

It is clear that the sampling technique successfully ensured that a cross-section of homeless youth was interviewed. The sample was constituted by young people from a diverse range of social, economic and cultural backgrounds, of varying ages, living in many different types of accommodation. The sample included the recently homeless and the long term homeless.

## Chapter 3

# The Meaning of Homelessness

I felt isolated among the house full of people  
I was acquainted with one or two of the older ones  
But the rest were all new to me  
Introductions names and questions were thrown my way  
But were meaningless and quickly forgotten  
I sat still trying my hardest to be inconspicuous  
But they knew my presence well  
The feel of being uncomfortable surrounded me from all angles  
I silently wished I could fall into a thousand molecules of dust  
And get blown away  
The hours passed slowly and my whole body ached as my muscles grew stiff  
Voices were continuously ongoing but not really heard  
I turned my head slightly to take notice of the style of clothing they wore  
And felt low in comparison  
But what seemed out of the ordinary was the way these complete strangers  
could feel so at home together  
I could not relate to that. (Steph)

It is appropriate that a consideration of young people's experiences of homelessness commences with an examination of their definitions of homelessness, the meanings they attach to the experience. Their accounts of the meaning of homelessness underscore, just as Steph's poem does, that homelessness is far more than a description of their current housing status. It is an experience that impinges on every aspect of their lives. Their definitions embody the isolation, the rejection, the enforced self-dependence, the lack of alternatives and the lifestyle of the homeless. The specific meaning young people attach to homelessness reflects the differences in their individual experiences. For example, young people living in King's Cross — those who have been homeless longest — talk more of life on the streets and present us with images traditionally associated with homelessness. From the answers of the young people, we have delineated five response patterns concerned with permanency, isolation, family conflict, structure and life on the streets. Their responses illustrate the often interrelated dimensions of the concerns of the homeless.

### (a) Permanency

The lack of stable, permanent and adequate accommodation was central to one group of young people's definition of homelessness.

**It**            What does homelessness mean to you?

- Helen:** Kids or people that haven't got proper homes ... I have no home at the moment, as I said before I haven't got any privacy or anything like that, and I really want to go somewhere else if I can.
- Shelley:** To me it's got two different meanings. Like, some people think of homelessness as, they haven't got anywhere to live, sort of thing, but with people in a house but it's not like a home, sort of thing. That's the way I look at it, two different ways.
- Int:** A house is not a home?
- Shelley:** The refuge one, that was all right, but I never really felt comfortable there because I knew one day I'd have to leave it 'cos it's only a temporary refuge.
- Petra:** When you haven't got anywhere to live or you have got somewhere to live but it's not a place of your own. You get chucked around every week from one place to another and you're totally relying on other people. You've got no money of your own. You probably haven't got your own room and you're just travelling round all the time looking for somewhere more permanent.
- Robyn:** Not living with your parents and not having anywhere to stay. Not having shelter or anything. Not having any support at all. [Refuge and friends' places are] not permanent. It's just temporary until you can find somewhere permanent. Homelessness is more than a label applied to their current housing situation. Its ramifications are real and keenly felt. The lack of permanent shelter both generates, and results from, instability in the life of these children. Instability is the one constant in their life and it requires ongoing adaptation.

## **(b) Isolation**

Associated with this is the sense of apartness or separateness that pervades the interviews. The accounts embody the contradiction of homelessness for young people — the need to rely on others for basic material support but not having anyone to rely on in the long-term. Acceptance in relationships is provisional and transitory, and is not based on reciprocal obligations. A group of responses explicitly embody and convey this sense of isolation and separateness:

- Mandy:** It [homelessness] means that you've got nowhere to live and you've got no-one to turn to and you've just got to look after yourself as good as you can because there's nobody else to look after you, you've just got to do it yourself.
- Gavin:** Nowhere to live, no money, no-one to talk to, just lost, I think.
- Tim:** Not having any fixed residence, not really living with your parents, just out having to support yourself.
- Debbie:** [You] don't live at home ... you haven't got a place to go to.

The feelings of isolation and separateness which permeate these responses have an import beyond the personal pain and anguish they reflect. The vulnerability expressed and experienced provides the precondition for exploitation. This vulnerability is in part structurally induced, for the young person is denied access to shelter and emotional and physical support.

## **(c) Family Conflict**

Many young people explicitly defined homelessness in terms of fractured family relationships. Homelessness meant being forced out of the family home:

- Trish: Homelessness means when somebody's kicked out of their home or they don't have anywhere to go or not enough money for accommodation or food, they've got no food, that comes under homelessness.
- Rod: It means people, you know, you're kicked out of home, your parents don't give a damn what happens to the kids and stuff like that.
- Int: Being kicked out of home. What does it mean to you?
- Rod: Parents aren't caring or just couldn't care less and then some other parents they kick the kids out and then they ring Youth and Community up or the police up and say that the kid's run away from home, which they haven't, they've been kicked out of home.
- Maria: Well, [it's] like without a home and having to go somewhere like anywhere you can find to dump and to sleep, you haven't got anywhere.
- Jut: And does it mean more than having nowhere to sleep?
- Maria: Yeah, it means like in some cases you have been kicked out of home, your parents don't want you and in other cases your whole family is homeless.
- John: Nowhere to stay, not allowed, you've been kicked out of your parent's and you've got to live off people and or stay on the streets.
- Peter: Homelessness? It can mean many things really but to me it means, urn, not having anywhere to live, not having your parents accept you, whether or not you are living at home, or away from home, urn, and I think that's basically about it. Not having anywhere to live.

For these young people the process of exclusion from the family home and the consequences of this exclusion is central to homelessness. At one level, such accounts are a matter of fact account of a straightforward event. Homelessness is, and results from, being kicked out or not being able to live at home. On a second level, they are indicative of young people's assumptions about their own place in their families and in society. The children assume their position in the home is based not on their **right** to caring and nurturing, but is **contingent** on their acceptance by parents. The lack of such acceptance immediately rules out emotional, economic and material support by parents. It is clear from these young people's accounts that, denied such acceptance, their options or alternatives are few. The accounts do not suggest a belief in society's responsibility for the provision for youth. It is an individualised view of the world.

## (d) Structure

Some young people take their analysis a little further and link homelessness to exclusion from the home and to the structural issues that prevent them from obtaining suitable accommodation.

- Kiley:** Well, it [homelessness] means to me mostly, people that their parents don't want 'em and they got nowhere to go and they've got to find somewhere to go, if not they're out on the streets. And I don't even think that's right. They've got places here, yeah that's right, but most of them are full and packed up. **I** reckon people should have more of these around so other kids wouldn't be on the streets and getting in trouble.

Laura and Clare were both seventeen years old. Their priority was independent living rather than reconciliation with parents. They clearly identified the structural issues of lack of accommodation and lack of money to obtain suitable accommodation.

- Int:** What does it [homelessness] actually mean to you?



**Laura:** Having nowhere to live, or not being able to, maybe not having the skills to get somewhere to live, or the money, or something like that.

**Clare:** It means that someone doesn't have somewhere to live. You don't have somewhere to live.

**Int:** Does it mean anything else? Money? People?

**Clare:** Yeah, not enough money, they can't afford flats, caravans and that's about it.

## **(e) Streets**

The public view of homelessness is a literal one — people without shelter, living on the streets. Although young people's experiences and perceptions of homelessness are broader, for some it does mean literally living on the streets. To these people, homelessness is:

**Tom:** Where **I** am at the moment. Nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep, nowhere to have any meals or nothing.

**Wendy:** That you've been kicked out of your home and you sort have got nowhere to go.

**Jack:** Living away from your parents, living on the streets. Hardly no food at all. Nowhere to go. No shelter. And you're just living in squats off the street.

**Nick:** It means kids, adults, got nowhere to go, no place to stay, no roof over their head.

For these young people living on the streets involves an ongoing struggle to meet basic material needs. This lifestyle — this struggle to survive — is reflected in the accounts of the 'long-term' homeless. Their description of their efforts just to survive reveal the darker side of homelessness. With few exceptions the accounts reported below were provided by young people living in or around the Cross, or the long-term homeless in other locations.

**Int:** What does homelessness mean to you?

**Marion:** Just wander around all day. Looking for places like refuges and that.

**Int:** Did you find any?

**Marion:** Yeah. Caretakers down the road.

**Int:** And did you sleep out much or did you ...?

**Marion:** No. I always had somewhere to go. I was on the streets for about a week.

**Int:** Where'd you sleep those times?

**Marion:** Just in the gutter or anywhere. Or in the snooker rooms in the Cross. Anywhere really.

**Linda:** When you're out on the streets and got nowhere to go.

**Int:** What has that meant for you in practical terms? What have you done for food and somewhere to sleep and stuff like that?

**Linda:** You normally go out and steal it.

**Int:** Steal ...?

**Linda:** Food.

**Int:** Food and what money too, to get somewhere to live?

**Linda:** I do rolls, just do a lot of silly things.

**Dennis:** Just people out of homes, nowhere to go, people trying to scab money and get accommodation, uhm, just trying to get a place anywhere they can.

Jason: Well I'm homeless myself and I live on the streets.

**Int:** For how long, Jason?

Jason: Um, nearly six months now. I've had to steal and that to survive.

**Int:** So for you it means stealing. What else does it mean?

Jason: You've got to steal and steal things worth lots of money and things like that, so you can get money to survive. Violence is an accepted part of life — a way of surviving.

**Int:** What does homelessness mean to you?

Tracey: Pretty bad.

**Int:** Tell me a bit about what pretty bad means.

Tracey: Because you're living on the street you've got to bludge money to eat. You've got to ask people some old people you don't feel like doing.

**Int:** You go up to old people?

Tracey: Yeah.

**Int:** You don't like doing that?

Tracey: You're bashin' people and ya steal their bag, steal their purses.

**Int:** Old people?

Tracey: Yeah, young.

**Int:** Doesn't matter? Do you like doing that?

Tracey: No 'cos I think it's really slack but it's the only way to live. But there's another special coffee shop we can go to now and then, not all the time.

Violence is not, as we shall see, only directed outwards. The homeless young people are themselves vulnerable.

**Jill:** It means somebody that's on the streets all the time. I don't like being on the streets at all.

**Int:** Why is that?

**Jill:** 'Cos it's cold out there. There's violence.

**Int:** So you're pretty frightened at times?

**Jill:** Yeah. **I** get frightened out there on the streets sometimes. Especially when I'm by myself.

There is a constant struggle to find accommodation, to secure a safe place and to dodge the police:

**Steph:** Well it just means someone that hasn't got, they can't live with their parents and for some reason haven't got anywhere to go.

**Int:** So what does that mean to you in terms of having nowhere to go?

**Steph:** Well **I** just used to travel around on trains during the night until we got busted for not having tickets 'cos they're really straightened up now.

**Int:** They've got tougher, have they?

**Steph:** Yeah.

**Int:** They chuck you off the trains?

Steph: Yeah. Then we just sleep in the parks or walk round up there in the Cross.

Tony: Well, to me homelessness means you're sleeping out, trying to get food, where you're going to get food from, there's some places they don't give you food, they don't treat you right.

**Malcolm:** Homelessness, I suppose, is being taken out of home and looking at the world in a different way, I guess, from getting up in the morning and saying 'Mum, what's for breakfast?' It's getting up in the morning and finding breakfast.

Homelessness is hard work — it has its own hours, its own rules and own training processes. Life on the streets is living on your wits, being constantly on guard, constantly on the move, avoiding the police and acquiring food and money. It generates a lifestyle for some young people that necessitates participation in crime and prostitution. It provides alternatives that lead only to a more transient, riskier lifestyle. Fewer and fewer avenues are available out of homelessness and the associated consequences. On the whole, young people's accounts of the meaning of homelessness do not portray it as a pleasant or easy life. Their lives may be difficult 'at home' but life away from home, from the perspective of an outsider, does not appear to improve dramatically. Yet despite the difficulties, many young people remain homeless rather than return to their family. Others return to the streets after an attempt at reconciliation. Some of the reasons why young people may prefer the option of homelessness are found in the reasons why they left home in the first place.

## Chapter 4

# The Causes of Leaving Home

The transition to independent accommodation for homeless young people cannot be characterised as unproblematic; for most, it is fraught with difficulty and unhappiness. Yet for varying reasons, homeless young people feel unable to return to their family or relatives. In this chapter the reasons young people left home initially, or were initially separated or removed from stable accommodation, are considered. Usually these reasons also make a return to the family home difficult or impossible. It is clear from the young people's accounts that leaving home is not the result of a whim; rather, their stories reflect ongoing and deep-seated difficulties. Whilst the reasons for leaving are categorised and considered separately, it is important to note that, in reality, they interact. For the young people, the trauma, the pain, the desperation and the confusion which is at the heart of their experience arises from the very complexity of their situation. While the outsider may see a clear-cut cause and effect of homelessness, the young people's accounts paint pictures of confused, chaotic times.

### REASONS FOR LEAVING

For the participants in this research, leaving home was almost universally precipitated by changes or situations which developed over time. The accounts are of domestic tensions which build up to result in a specific, explosive incident which makes them decide to leave. But far from being climactic, often the causative incident was not dramatically different from those which preceded it; rather, it was more often 'the final straw' coming at a time when either the parent, child, or both, were prepared to make a break. For example, a number of young people left home as soon as they believed it was legally possible for them to do so.

#### (a) Sexual Abuse

At a minimum, 12 of the young people had been sexually assaulted by a member of their family. Typically the assaults continued over a period of years rather than being a one-off event. (For example, Maria reports being assaulted from the age of nine to 14 years, Wendy from eleven to 14 and Petra from eight to 14 years.) It was only when the young person reported the abuse to another person, such as parent, police or welfare officer, that the direct assaults sometimes stopped. Maria left home at 16 to get away from her father.

Maria: Dad was on holidays and I wanted to get out before he came back, 'cos I didn't like living at home whilst he was there, so I just went ... Dad used to pick on me all the time, like he used to bash me, and he used to bash mum up too ... he kept bashing me, so I decided to go.

Int: Has he ever sexually assaulted you?

Maria: Yeah.

**Int:** Have you ever thought you could get any help for that?

**Maria:** No. Like Mum knows about it and that, she was really upset, she told Dad to get out but he said he'd be leaving, shoot himself and shoot me as well, so he stayed, but then she couldn't hack any more so she made him leave. And that happened when I was nine, right up 'til **I** was, how old would I have been, fourteen. And, um, he said if I told anyone, they'd blame me it'd be all my fault so **I** was too scared to say anything to Mum and that.

**Int:** Do you believe what he said and that?

**Maria:** **I** did back then, now **I** don't.

**Int:** You feel much stronger.

**Maria:** Yeah. He tried it again just before he went on holidays and he came into the bathroom when I was in there and I just told him to get out, and he knew I meant it, so he walked out.

**Int:** **But** when you're nine, you don't know.

Maria: Yeah, before I left home I didn't like staying there 'cos I didn't like being alone with Dad, I was really scared.

**Int:** Of course.

Maria: **And I** was afraid of sex and that, and then Mum knew that and that's why **I had** to get out, so that's probably why I'm so nervous and that. I nearly went for a nervous breakdown and that, so I had to get out and straighten myself.

Sexual assault highlights the powerlessness of young women in families. Maria was prepared to accept that rape would be considered her fault, and she did not believe she could take her difficulties outside the family. Like Maria, Wendy sought help from her mother. She was 14 when she told her mother about the last three years of sexual abuse.

**Wendy:** As soon as I told Mum the problem she believed me straight away because my dad's dad did it too. So mum knew something ... Mum didn't know it was going on because she was too close to Dad. As soon as I told her she believed me.

Although Wendy's mother believed her, she wanted the 'problem' kept in the family. When that did not provide a solution, Wendy decided to run away.

**Int:** What sort of solutions had you tried before to try and solve the problem?

**Wendy:** **I** tried one solution, running away from the problem. **I** ran away once.

**Int:** Tell me about that.

**Wendy:** **I** just got sick of it because Mum told me not to tell any of the police or anyone because it's a family matter, should be dealt. I mean ...

**Int:** And did you run away that time?

**Wendy:** Yeah. So, I got all the other problems on top of me. I just had to get rid of them so I just ran.

That was three to four months before the interview. She stayed away a couple of days. She returned home and after her father physically assaulted her, she telephoned the police. Her father was charged and committed for sentence in the District Court. A condition of bail was that the father keep away from Wendy.

Superficially the response to the sexual abuse was appropriate: her mother and the police believed her and her father was pleading guilty to the offence. Yet Wendy was at the time of the interview about to be forced out of home.

**Int:** I understand that you've been talking about leaving home shortly? Do you want to tell me a bit about that?

**Wendy:** It's just that sort of a board or something home and you go away for a short or long period of time and I've met the woman this morning. I just talked about the contract and that I've got between her. I move in Monday and that's for three months.

**Int:** What's brought you to this decision to go and live there for three months?

**Wendy:** Well, I haven't really brought to this decision. I don't really want to go but Mum reckons it's best for me to go for a little while to have a break from her.

**Int:** Do you feel that you want to have a break?

**Wendy:** Well, in my opinion I want to stay here. 'Cos it's my house here and when I go there it's not my house ...

**Int:** Where do you see this situation going, the whole family thing? How do you see things turning out in the long run?

**Wendy:** Well, at the moment it sounds like the family is drifting more apart.

No doubt Wendy's mother was under immense pressure — not the least being the financial consequences for her and her children if her husband was imprisoned. The immediate consequence, however, was that the victim was further victimised. The young person's right to special protection, to shelter, to emotional and material support was violated. Given the lack of the supports and the structural barriers to **young people obtaining** secure and adequate accommodation (discussed later in this report), it is likely that Wendy was entering a period of homelessness. Petra, too, described years of sexual abuse by her stepfather. The ongoing rape virtually in front of an unresponsive mother made a mockery of Petra's rights to special protection, to care and nurturing. Despite this, her options as a young female were few. At eleven years of age she sought to 'leave home' through suicide.

**Petra:** Well, I tried to commit suicide when I was very young because that was the only way out at that stage.

**Int:** That's when you ...

**Petra:** I was in hospital, yes ...

**Int:** What did you think could, you know, how did you think that would help you?

**Petra:** Well, that was the only way out. Ah, I was too young to leave home and I couldn't talk to any of my teachers because I wasn't very much liked at school anyway.

After a short stay in hospital she was returned home. No one discussed whether she was being abused at home with her. At 14 years she tried to leave home after reporting the assault to the police.

**Petra:** That was when I first, urn, when I left home they put me into a hostel place because I was going to press charges, then my mother told me, 'Oh no, you can't press charges. Your stepfather will go to jail and what would I live on then'. So I withdrew my statement and the police said, 'Well, if you are not going to go to court you have to go back home and if you keep running away we'll have to put you in a home where you'll be locked up so you can't escape' and so I ran away from home and I went to Sydney so the police wouldn't get me.

We will return to Petra's story throughout this report. It suffices to say that at this stage her homelessness was a direct result of the manner in which her rape was dealt with. Her initial efforts to seek assistance indicated that the state would replicate the oppression of her family. She was forced to make her own way.

## **(b) Physical Abuse**

Like sexual abuse, physical abuse drives many young people from their family homes. For the young people interviewed, violence was a part of their everyday life. From a young age most had been subject to physical punishments and often unprovoked assaults. This violence was accepted as part of normal life. It was only when the abuse was particularly excessive, or when the young person reached an age where they were no longer prepared to accept the ongoing assaults that the young people left. It must be stressed that where abuse precipitated the decision to leave, it was because of repeated abuse rather than one unfortunate incident where tempers were frayed.

The abuse of alcohol seems to be a significant part of the story of physical abuse. It recurs in John's report of his relationship with his father.

**Int:** You said he drank a bit?

**John:** Yeah, he did. He used to drink real heavily and used to just come home blind as a bat.

**Int:** Violent.

**John:** Yeah. Hits me with a brick.

**Int:** The others?

**John:** Nup. He wouldn't even touch the girls.

**Int:** His wife?

**John:** Nup. Probably just mouth to her, that's it. He wouldn't hit her. One day **I** can remember my pushbike was stolen. It was at a second-hand shop and I didn't have the money to get it out. I said I'd get it out when **I** got the money. Anyway he came home drunk one night and said where's your bike? And I said, '**I** haven't got the money yet'. Bang, he just hit me. He went berserk. That was two days before **I** left home.

No matter what its cause, young people seek to adapt to the violence in their home. For example, Mike's strategy of self-preservation was to make himself scarce, to remove himself from the situation.

**Mike:** **Oh** yeah, it was just me fighting Troy and **I** smashed a window.

**Int:** So you smashed a window and what happened then?

**Mike:** Then Mum came home and she started throwing punches at us.

**Int:** She was out, was she?

**Mike:** Yes, she was out, [and she] just come home and she told me to get out and so I did.

**Int:** **Mm. How did** you feel about that?

**Mike:** Ah, pretty upset.

**Int:** Mm.

**Mike:** She told me to go. **I** said to her, **I** said, 'I'm going for a couple of weeks, till you've settled down'.

**Int:** And what, did she think that's a good idea or how did you put that to her?

**Mike:** She just said, 'I don't care what you do'.

The problem for Mike and other young people who repeatedly leave home as a strategy of problem resolution is that it consistently denies them the stability and care they need. Mike, for instance, was trying to continue his schooling while staying with friends. The constant comings and goings make it difficult to obtain any form of income support, creating potential problems.

Even when the state intervened at an early age and removed children subject to abuse, life did not necessarily improve. Some children were in and out of children's homes. For example, Rod had been in and out of children's institutions since he was eight. His mother, also a survivor of the father's assaults, returned to New Zealand. This left Rod, in whom child welfare no longer had much interest, the options of an abusive father or refuges.

**Rod:** I didn't get along at all with my father. That's one of the reasons why I was in a home. He hit me with cricket stumps and got a lot of bruising on my legs.

**Int:** So he was coming home during that time and leaving again all the time?

**Rod:** No, he wasn't living with Mum.

**Int:** Did he visit?

**Rod:** Yeah.

**Int:** This is when the abuse occurred?

**Rod:** Yeah. He done the same thing to Mum, domestic violence and Mum went to New Zealand and then I went over, I went up for a holiday to see my nan and my dad lives with my nan, so I went to go back down to where Mum lives, they were living and she went back to New Zealand so I had to stay up with Dad.

**Int:** How long were you there?

**Rod:** It would have been about three years ago and ever since I have been in and out of refuges. Dad hit me with the cricket stump.

**Int:** All the old stuff still occurred?

**Rod:** Yeah, he still, and then I'd go back there on and off all the time just for a weekend but he still does it. 'Cos he drinks a lot. That's why I'm really scared, so I don't want to go back to the central coast.

The pervading sense in the interviews is of a lack options, of young people trapped and subjected to a variety of ill treatment from an early age and from a range of adult figures. One homeless youth, Austin, suffered abuse both from his father's mother, whom he said rubbed raw onions in his eyes when he wouldn't sleep as a five year old, and from his father, a Vietnam war veteran, whom he said used to throw him through closed doors. Like many young people Austin was willing to live with the abuse, even excuse it, for some years.

**Int:** Did you ever think that there might be some solution to that problem?

**Austin:** I already knew what was wrong. 'Cos, well, he's been through the war, see, blew half his head off.

**Int:** Mm. Right.

**Austin:** Since then it's just changed him as well. He still has the dreams through the nights and that.

**Int:** Which war was it?

**Austin:** Vietnam.



## **(c) Severe Family Conflict**

Many of the young people left home to escape negative and damaging relationships with parents and caregivers. The relationships were characterised by a high level of conflict. Indeed, family conflict is a unifying theme in all of the accounts. Even where other reasons were presented as the primary causative factor, severe family conflict was a secondary or compounding factor. Conflict was expressed in many forms: some was one-sided with the young person as explicit victim — sexual, physical or emotional abuse and explicit emotional or material rejection. In other situations the conflict was more two-way — particularly as the young person got older — and was expressed through arguments and physical fighting.

### **(i) Conflict with mothers**

Many of the accounts of conflict with mothers were from 13 - 16 year olds who found antagonism rather than support in their transition from childhood to adulthood. Often these conflicts were over lifestyle choices. They occurred within families where communication was poor and/or who used conflict as the normal way to resolve stressful situations. In this environment a young person's growth into independence is not accommodated by the family and tension and conflict mount. The stories of Ralph, Peter and Fran illustrate this.

**Int:** Well, why did you leave? Were you having a lot of conflict? A lot of tension? Or did you just decide to run away, did you get forced out or did your mother say, put you with your auntie?

**Ralph:** No, she said 'Just go, do whatever you want to do', so I said I'd go.

**Int:** So what led up to that?

**Ralph:** Just arguing all the time. The only time we'd ever talk is when we'd argue.

**Int:** And what sorts of things were you doing yourself at that time?

**Ralph:** Stealing.

**Int:** Did you feel yourself that you had a problem?

**Ralph:** Only stole to get money.

**Int:** Mm. And tell me about the day that you left, you know, this time four months ago.

**Ralph:** I just left. I just went to Karen's, me aunty's. I stayed there, I been staying there.

**Int:** Did you have a fight, were there words?

**Ralph:** Nup.

**Int:** So what actually finally made you leave this time?

**Ralph:** I don't know. I just left 'cos I was gettin' pissed off with everything and I know I'm old enough to leave so I just left.

**Peter:** Oh, I left for good permanently was I'd say about 14, might be 15.

**Int:** And how did that come about? Did you plan that or did you get kicked out again, or did you get forced out, run away?

**Peter:** Oh, I got kicked out again.

**Int:** Yeah. And, urn, who did it?

**Peter:** Oh, Mum. My Dad couldn't give a stuff really.

**Int:** Can you remember what used to bug you most in those days, a couple' of years ago now, about four years?

**Peter:** School. Having been told what to do, no control over my own life.

**Int:** What sorts of things did you want to have control over that you weren't allowed to?

**Peter:** Decision-making on my own behalf. And like whether or not **I** could go out. And there's quite a few things really.

**Int:** And, urn, what actually happened that first time that you were, I think you said you were kicked out, were you?

**Peter:** Oh, just the usual muck. 'I'll pack your bags for you so that you'll get out. I'll pack your bags for you.' You know. I went and grabbed my own stuff and went out, just left, walked.

Fran was told to leave home by her mother when she was **13**:

**Fran:** I stole \$100 off the people we were living with and either I went, or we both went, so Mum kicked me out ... Urn, my mum goes, 'You're low. Get out of this house. I don't want you', and **I** said, 'Yes, sure, I'm going' and **I** packed me bag and just left. It just all blew up and **I** just left.

Conflict between parents and teenagers is normal. What distinguished these young people's experiences was that the conflict was not able to be dealt with appropriately. Difficulties over behaviour and family rules were responded to in rigid, inconsistent and unproductive ways. In the final analysis they were resolved through the young person being ejected from the family home.

Whilst children's relationships with each parent differs, severe conflict with one parent significantly reduces their ability to relate to the other and to reside with their parents.

**Int:** So how does she treat you, your mother, now?

**Anna:** I ring her up and she sounds alright, you know. Ask if I could go home and she goes, I disown you. And I thought fine, sweet, and I just hang up on her. I ring my Dad, he hasn't done nothing wrong to me, you know. I really love my **Dad**, but **I** just wish my Dad would leave her, but you know they're happy. What can you do?

## **(ii) Conflict with fathers**

Conflict with mothers tended to involve lifestyle issues. Conflict with fathers was more frequently generated by their actual treatment/abuse of the child. The physical and sexual abuse of young people has already been noted. Such abuse necessarily generated conflict, particularly as the young person aged and challenged the appropriateness of their father's behaviour. For example, the conflict, violence and exploitation which Austin had experienced over a number of years came to a head when he was **15**.

**Int:** And before you left, what was it like at home?

**Austin:** Pretty shitty. It wasn't, you know, it wasn't all that good.

**Int:** Did you used to have fights?

**Austin:** Yeah, we used to have fights you know, fist to fist.

**Int:** What actually happened on the day that you left?

**Austin:** I just said to him straight, I'm moving out and I'm never coming back, and that's it.

**Int:** You have, yeah. Yeah.

Austin: Then I just moved out from me old man's 'cos, what, see when I was fostered out again, they were claiming for me thing, as well as me allowance, and when I moved back with me old man, they didn't, they found out then and um, they gave them a letter, \$4000 fine and Dad said it was mine, and that's when everything started happening, you know, we started brawling and that. I was pissed off.

Int: Was that social security?

Austin: Yeah, we were upstairs arguing about it, he goes 'Shut up' and I said, 'No, I'm sick of you telling me to shut up' and stood up to him.

Int: So what, what you're saying is that what finally made you leave is that you decided to stand up to him?

Austin: Yeah. Stand up and tell him the truth, tell him everything, you know.

Int: What did you tell him that time?

Austin: Just told him, 'sick of you, you know, don't want to see you ever again', then I just took off.

Robyn was kicked out of home by her father at 16.

Int: And how long ago is it since you left home?

Robyn: About four months.

Int: What was happening at that time? Like, what actually made you leave?

Robyn: I just got really sick of it. Dad was just drinking. I just kept on getting hit and everything. And I'd go to school, around the place and everything. And I wanted to leave school and my parents wouldn't let me leave school. So I just, in the end I said, 'Look, if you don't let me leave school, that's it. I'm just going'. I was just so sick of it, so I just got up and left.

Int: And what was your mother's opinion?

Robyn: She was really upset that I wanted to leave home and I didn't want to study and all that. She was crying and all that but dad just said, 'I don't give a stuff. Get out.' I said, 'that's it'.

The exercise of power in families by fathers was frequently a crude exercise of force. Conflict resulted because in the resolution of issues, fathers were far more likely to lay down the line' and expect obedience, often enforcing it with excessive reliance on physical force. As the child ages the balance of physical and psychological strength becomes more even and the child is less likely to accept the domination.

### **(iii) Conflict with step parents**

Forty of the 100 young people left reconstituted families. Conflict with step parents was a consistent theme in the interviews. The accounts of conflict were permeated by themes of dispossession, of a sense of no longer belonging or being wanted by the family and of living on the margins of the family.

Int: So, what was happening then, at that time?

Jim: Aw, just fighting all the time.

Int: With?

Jim: Everyone.

**Int:** Your mother?

**Jim:** Not really my mother, but see, **I**, mainly me stepdad, but he was being a real cunt. He just slaps you about a bit. Just hit him back, he stops. Just that sort of thing, eh?

**Int:** Yeah, and so, what actually happened then, that six months ago? Were you forced out, did you run away, were you kicked out?

**I** got kicked out. They said, leave, and **I** said, fair enough, it was their house, **I** got nothing to do with it, so if they want me to leave, they pay for it, they pay the rent, so

Jim characterises himself as a person dispossessed, without the right to be cared for, or belong to the family. Others shared his feelings of not belonging.

Roger simply could not communicate with his stepfather in the face of obvious rejection.

**Int:** Now these problems that you've been having, you know, like for four years, they'd been a problem, had you ever sort of thought, oh, there must be some solutions to all this, and tried some ways of solving them.

**Roger:** I've tried to talk to him, even Mum, like I tried to talk to him, sit down and talk to him and it just goes in one ear and out the other. And like she says, it's a bit hard on me, he takes the girls out everywhere, but in sixteen years he's taken me camping twice and he's brought along his mates, where they've had a big piss up and all this, and I'm not even allowed to bring any of my mates, so not a good time for me, **I** sit around by meself and find something to do.

Some young people described the arrival of a step-parent as the beginning of the end of an otherwise happy family life. Indeed Dennis had a very simple analysis of his homelessness.

**Dennis:** Well, me mum and dad are split up, so I got kicked out of home. **I** live in a refuge.

Dennis lived in a conflictual relationship with his step-father for five years until he 'got sick of it and left'.

**Int:** How did you get along with your mum when you were living at home?

**Dennis:** Alright, until the step-father came along.

**Int:** So what, the marriage split up when you were four?

**Dennis:** Yeah.

**Int:** So you and mum were together for four years.

**Dennis:** And then me step-father came along.

**Int:** You got on with mum pretty well up until then?

**Dennis:** Yeah, and then when this bloke came along the hassles started.

**Int:** What sort of hassles were they?

**Dennis:** Oh just, he said 'You can't leave school', and all this, and **I** said 'You got no right over me, you're not me father, **I** do what I like' and that, and he just didn't like it and so he just kicked me out. I said, 'You can't kick me out' cos it's not his house and that and those sort of things, problems, hassles.

**Int:** During that time when you were pretty young did you ever think there might be ways of solving the problems you were having?

**Dennis:** No.

**Int:** Why did you think?

**Dennis:** Every day there'd be about six or seven fights, so [I] just got sick of it and fed up and left.

**Int:** There was nothing you could think of to stop all the fights?

**Dennis:** Just leave altogether and it would be happier for them.

#### **(iv) Family breakdown**

Most children survive the deleterious effects and thrive in reconstituted families. It is clear, however, that some of the young people interviewed did suffer in the process of separation and reconstitution. They were 'lost' in the process of family breakdown. Some felt their parents lacked the desire, interest or resources to bear the burden of raising the young person. They speak of being passed between parental homes until that relationship breaks down.

**Int:** Right. Urn, your father, do you see much of him?

**Kerry:** No, never.

**Int:** Never?

**Kerry:** I was living with him for about four months and then one day he just said, 'Look, you can either go to your mum's or go to boarding school'. And I wasn't going to get locked away so I thought I'd go back to my mum's. I was back there for about two weeks and she kicked me out.

Gavin's experience also illustrates this drift to homelessness. After his parents separated he lived with his father on the Gold Coast until ongoing tension came to a head one night. Gavin left. His father provided the fare to Melbourne and arrangements were made for Gavin to stay with his mother. In her reconstituted family, however, Gavin's presence caused some difficulties and he decided to leave.

**Int:** And how long were you actually able to stay there?

**Gavin:** Well, **three months before I started to**, I don't know, just knock around. I kept arguing with Mum.

**Int:** What did you argue with your mum about?

**Gavin:** **Mainly just me complaining about** work. I had two jobs so I was working at a fish and **chip shop at night. I don't know, there** was a bit of a hassle at home. It mainly wasn't **to do with me that time for leaving**, it was more family matters with Mum, the kid and her husband. It was more to do with that. I don't think Mum could handle it, so I was the one who suggested I leave.

The breakdown of families and the rejection or discarding of children by their parents may leave the young person psychologically and physically vulnerable. The implicit and explicit parental rejection and the accompanying lack of security and support were important variables in the equation that resulted in homelessness.

Gavin and Fran provided poignant commentaries on the consequences of children being discarded in family breakdowns.

**Gavin:** I reckon parents need some sort of counselling to even prevent it starting, 'cos it only starts at home, that's where it starts.

**Fran:** Heaps of people [are in the same situation as me]. Too many. I reckon nearly, more, than half the population is out of home and in the same situation as me. That's what I

think. Parents nowadays they split up and leave their kids, it's exactly the same, they're treating kids like animals. I know we should say that we should treat animals and people equally, but they are, they dump them.

## **(d) Conflict with or Removal by State Authorities**

### **(i) Police**

Young people are involved with police for a number of reasons: as victims, as offenders and through police efforts to reinforce parental authority. In many cases, police intervention facilitated parental abandonment of responsibility for care of the child.

Int: So if I asked you how long ago it was since you left your parents' home, I mean, when would you say?

Brian: Left?

Int: When you yourself left?

Brian: Oh, I didn't leave on meself, see I got locked up and then when I come back me father didn't want me living there 'cos he knew the police.

Int: So that would have been last year sometime, was it?

Brian: No, it was this year, it's only been about four months I've been away from 'em.

Int: Oh, right, so you got locked up about four months ago and let out two months ago, is that right?

Brian: Yeah, I got let out, and then I got locked up again. See I only got out about three weeks ago. And ever since I been livin' here.

Int: And how long would you think that things have been a bit difficult at home?

Robert: Couple of years.

Int: Since you were 14, 12?

Robert: ... I was getting into trouble with the police. That's when it started.

Int: What sort of trouble were you in with the police?

Robert: I, like ... busted the ceiling once, no break and enters. Just riding motor bikes and me own bike on the road, lots of fines.

Int: Fines?

Robert: Fines, not showing up for court, things like that.

Int: How did your parents handle that?

Robert: They weren't really impressed but they said, if we get caught they're not going to help me. Which is fair enough 'cos it's me own fault.

Int: I mean did you get caught by the police a lot? How many times would you have ...

Robert: Four or five times ... Me parents just got the shits and they didn't want me around and I didn't want to be around till I just left.

Police were often central to young people's reasons for leaving home. Some, like Petra (discussed above), sought police protection against abuse and incest and found themselves being forcibly returned to the violence at home. In these cases the actions of police contributed not so

much to the young persons' decision to leave home as to their decision about the finality of the move.

**Int:** That time when you were nine, had there been a particular thing that happened, a particular fight or blow-up or something when you left?

**Linda:** Yeah I think there was.

**Int:** Can you remember?

**Linda:** I didn't go to school because I wanted to go and see some friends.

**Int:** Had you been jiggling school a fair bit?

**Linda:** And I'd been jiggling school a fair bit, yes. And my sister found out and she told my mother and my mother told my father and my father just went off his rocker.

**Int:** Did he hit you again?

**Linda:** Yeah. And then I went back to my friend's place and I stayed there for the weekend. And then we went and saw the coppers and they took me back home and then I got another flogging. So I just thought, that's it. I'm just leaving, packing stuff and I just left. I just ran.

Parents also involved police in their conflicts with young people. In these situations the child (normally female) was frequently removed from home and charged with a status offence. Sarah was 12 when she was charged with being 'uncontrollable'.

**Sarah:** I came home and Mum said 'Get changed we're going out' and I got changed and she took me to the cops.

**Int:** Tell me what was happening at home before you left?

**Sarah:** Just fighting.

**Int:** What type of fighting?

**Sarah:** Punching out.

**Int:** With your mother?

**Sarah:** Yeah ... My mum, she used to bash me every night of my life nearly ... I went to the doctor heaps of times.

Fran's experience of leaving home was similar. After a week of abuse by her mother and her mother's boyfriend, she was handed over to the police. Fran was sick of being treated 'like dirt'. Her mother had a new boyfriend who 'used to hit me a bit, yell and scream at me; he even tried to flush my head down the toilet once'. One night she left but her mother found her and 'dragged me home by the ear. By the time we got home I was yelling and screaming "I want to get out of here". So ... I tried to get out and Tom came in and slapped me in the head'. A couple of nights later she left again and was picked up by the police and returned home. She remained home for two days until:

**Fran:** Wednesday night, Mum goes 'You're going to go and see a social worker'. [I said: I 'I'm not going, mum.' I ended up going Friday morning. We got in a taxi and she said 'Woodridge Police Station'. We ended up going to Woodridge Juvenile Aid Bureau. Mum's put me up into custody of the cops and then what happened is, urn, she filled out a statement and I was sitting in the cop station for about an hour or an hour and a half and then I went to the watchhouse in Beenleigh, ended up sitting in the cell for about an hour, had my food handed through the bars, it was scary.

Fran's story illustrates the powerlessness experienced by the young people when police became involved in the process of their leaving home. Fran decided to leave home and the police took her back. Her mother decided to kick Fran out and the police obliged by taking Fran into custody.

On the other hand Matthew, being male, was virtually run out of town by the police and courts. He was living with his mother and stepfather in the Blue Mountains until he was fifteen.

**Int:** Yeah, right. Can I ask why you left your mum's?

**Matthew:** Oh, 'cos I was having trouble with the law.

**Int:** **Right.** And it was better to move town?

Matthew: Yeah. And the whole thing I done a couple of homes in Sydney and one of the conditions of me getting off not going to jail for ever, you know throw away the key, urn, was that I moved up to my father [in Canberra].

Matthew describes his father as 'an alcoholic and a (heroin) user' who came home drunk almost every night. After a year, 'I was forced out 'cos, urn, my dad's a very violent man and he beat me and my sister up pretty badly so I grabbed my sister and left'. He then began a nomadic lifestyle typical of many young homeless people, staying for short terms with friends and in refuges.

The police have the dual responsibilities of dealing with juvenile offenders and child welfare matters. In enforcing the rights of children in child welfare matters they have certain responsibilities **but**, as has been noted, they are not always exercised in a way beneficial to children. Often these children describe treatment by police more suited to hardened criminals. In a later chapter we consider specifically young people's efforts to seek assistance from police. It suffices here to note that for some young people, police action was a precipitating factor in their homelessness.

## **(ii) Child welfare**

**The child welfare departments** in each state are charged with the protection of children. Young people's treatment by welfare authorities was often identified as a reason for their leaving home and, at later stages, for lack of secure accommodation.

**Liza:** [When I was eleven] the welfare took me off me parents and put me in a foster home ... to give my parents a break.

**Int:** On the basis of you being too difficult to manage is that what it was all about?

Liza: Yeah ... but ... I'd been getting a few beltings and ... schools were really hard for me 'cos at one I got picked on a lot ... And the foster family they put me in with for a few months they were great. I would have loved to have stayed there, they wanted me and everything and then the government sent me home ... And, uni, when they sent me back I started running away, back to these people ...

**Int:** You seemed pretty unhappy at home.

**Liza:** I was. I'd had it.

In Liza's view of her removal, she remains always the victim, always powerless. She was the one who had been physically abused and the welfare response was to remove her from the house that was as much her home as it was anyone else's. The reason for her removal was to give not her but her parents a break. To compound Liza's feelings of being unimportant, welfare



authorities then destroyed Liza's chance of stable, secure accommodation by removing her from the foster placement. She resorted to running away in an effort to return to a place of security. Running away, of course, generated conflict with the police and the Child Welfare Department.

Liza's treatment by child welfare authorities, being removed from and replaced back at home, was not uncommon. It happened to many of the young people interviewed on a number of occasions. This type of treatment had the effect of generating mobility. Importantly, it also signified to the young person that things weren't so bad at home and that they should be able to put up with it. Removal from and replacement in a troubled home situation by welfare authorities also facilitated a situation wherein blame and responsibility for a young person's troubled home life could be transferred directly to the young person by concentrating on their running away and the other behavioural consequences of this treatment.

Julie, for example, had been severely beaten by her stepfather from the age of thirteen:

- Int: How long had, um, there been problems with your stepdad? Couple of years like when you were 13, 14, you said?
- Julie: Yeah, half through 13 until I was about 15 'cos I got moved out.
- lot: Did you, before you ran away, did you try and do anything about it?
- Julie: Oh, I ran away a few times, it wasn't just once. And I talked to people about it and that and I had a Child Care Officer and I got moved out once before that, then I got put back, you know for me to try and sort things out with them but [it] never worked out.
- Int: Did, urn, were they helpful, Children's Services?
- Julie: Oh a little bit, you know, they always wanted me to go back there all the time, you know, go home all the time, you shouldn't run away, you shouldn't do this, but [I] don't think that they really understood what it was like.
- Int: Was there anyone else you could talk to?
- Julie: No just a Child Care Officer.
- Int: Right. So each time that happened it wasn't successful anyway, the same thing just happened.
- Julie: Yeah.

## **(e) Desire for Independence**

Some of the young people interviewed did leave home because of a desire for freedom and independence. However, the young people's expressed desire for independence rarely or never stood alone as a reason for leaving home or of not returning. It was invariably in the context of a situation of conflict and was seen as the positive side of escape from that conflict. Often conflict was over parental restrictions: going out, smoking, drinking, choice of friends, desire to leave school etc.

- It:** What was happening at home at that time to make you leave?
- Harry:** Lots of arguments.
- It:** What would you argue over?
- Harry:** Anything, any little things, what channel you were watching on **TV**, just things like that.

**Int:** Did you used to get into trouble when you ran away?

**Harry:** No. Not really.

**Int:** What did you used to get into trouble for?

**Harry:** Not cleaning up my room and things like that. Just the basic house things. And I started drinking about 16 or 17, so that would be a bit of a problem.

**Int:** What finally made you leave?

**Harry:** Well I just didn't want to stay with my parents any longer, with Adrian. I just wanted to get out and do a few things for myself.

**Liza:** Oh, I just didn't get on with her, she always wanted me, she told me who my friends were and, urn.

**Int:** You felt she had too many rules. You said she was a bit like a house parent.

**Liza:** And then she decided that I wasn't allowed to go out at all at night and not on weekends and I wasn't allowed to use the 'phone and she just wanted me to do everything for her and didn't want to let me do anything.

**Int:** So what's wrong with mum's rules.

**Liza:** They were just too, too much.

Often underlying these presenting difficulties were deeper issues within the family: poor communication, lack of understanding or recognition of the young person. Sybil, for example, as a 15 year old was frustrated by inability to communicate with her family about the poignant issues she faced as a young person, and the lack of recognition of her as a maturing person.

**Sybil:** You couldn't talk. I'd left at school at, um, 15 I left school and 'um, they were still treating me like a two year old and I couldn't talk. I could go out anywhere. I was working, at the age of 15 I had a 22 year old boyfriend.

**Int:** What did you need to talk about that you couldn't?

**Sybil:** About me, about what I was feeling inside, about my feelings, about life itself. I mean, I even thought about finishing my life because I didn't want to live any more. They were building up inside of me. I mean, I'd close my eyes and all I could see was problems and hassles flashing through my mind, you know. Where am I going to end up, what am I going to do, I'm going to be a bum on the streets for the rest of my life.

**Int:** When did you think that? Before you left home or after you left home?

**Sybil:** Before I left home. Because I couldn't see any, I mean now I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, but before all I could see was the door that was slammed in my face.

**Int:** How would you describe the actual first time that you left. Were you forced out, did you run away, were you thrown out, kicked out? Did you actually sit down with your parents and say, look I'm leaving home, this is what I'm going to do, this is how I'm going to live?

**Sybil:** No, I just said I was going 'cos I had enough and they didn't want me to go, they thought we could sort things out, and I left and I felt it very scary because I had to do things for myself and I didn't have Mum and Dad to say, hey, look, this is, can you take me here, can you take me there, I was having to depend on myself all the time.

**Int:** And what made you finally move, what actually happened?

**Sybil:** Um. Mum and I had an argument about something, I can't remember now, and ah, it'd been going on for the last three weeks and I had a boyfriend at that stage and I'd been urn, going out at night and not coming home. Like the first time I ever did that was in April, 28th to be exact, my father's birthday, which I didn't know it was his birthday, I forgot completely about it, and I didn't come home that night and it just happened all from there. I mean, I felt the freedom and I wanted it so badly.

## **(f) Need to Leave Home for Work**

Two of the young people reported that the need to leave home to find employment was a major reason for their break from their family. In both cases, other factors were also significant. John reported abuse by his mother and stepfather and conflict with his step-siblings.

**John:** Before I left I'd done all the work meself. Set meself up for a job, while I was living at home I was on the dole and I was getting money. Every time I got money I'd save it and go down to Sydney, look for a job. And I found one. I didn't tell me parents, that's why I left that morning. Three o'clock in the morning so I could get down in Sydney by a certain time so I could start.

**Int:** So you had a job lined up?

**John:** I had a job lined up that morning I left home.

**It:** What sort of job was it?

**John:** Rolling roof racks. Making roof racks for cars. Had a caravan set up.

For Phoebe as well, the scarcity of jobs for a young school leaver in a country town combined with other factors to cause her to leave home.

**Phoebe:** Yes, she did, not to get rid of me, but there was tension, also, at home, with my own little stepbrother ... we would just fight and fight and fight all the time ... He was younger than me, so Mum said to me it was best for me if I came down here and looked for a job, 'cos I couldn't find anything up in Quilpie and Quilpie being a small town, you couldn't do anything.

## **(9) Leaving Out of Consideration for Others**

Some young people reported leaving home for the sake of others in the family. The more specific reasons are as varied as the number of individuals.

Trish came from New Zealand to the Gold Coast to stay with her sister. Her sister asked her to leave after a couple of months.

**Trish:** She said to me that she couldn't afford me any more, she didn't, well it was my decision to move, not hers, she didn't throw me out. I decided to do that grown up thing and just find another place because I knew that it was upsetting her because I think they raised the rent and she couldn't really afford it.

Kiley was 15 and she believed her parents' fought often because of her. She finally decided to leave in an attempt to save her parent's marriage:

**It:** Was it hard for you to make that choice?

**Kiley:** I had two weeks of thinking of it straight. 'Cos Dad told me once before. And I ended up saying what's the point — I've got to leave later on in life anyway 'cos I want to

travel Australia and do all those sort of things. **I** said, I don't want to split their marriage up because, you know, they're fairly close. And it'd destroy Mum if they split their marriage up. Mum would be in hospital straight away.

Kiley's shouldering of responsibility is remarkable as an illustration of the internalisation of blame for problems which many young people display. Compare the preceding paragraph to the actual moment of leaving.

**It:** What finally made you leave? What was the thing?

**Kiley:** The thing that made me leave — one day they'd ... Dad, after Dad chucked the speaker at me and was having a go at me and fighting and fighting, **I** said, look if you don't like me living here, why don't you say so. Why can't you find me other accommodation? Like, ring up ... and ask for me to go up the coast. And they said, Dad come in, he just started a mass argument. He hit me a few times so I just said, I'm going. Dad goes, get out of my house now, ... I said, 'I'm going'. I said, 'I will go'. He said, 'Get out of my house. Quickly pack your stuff'. Like he give ten seconds to do it. Packed all my stuff, still got a whole pile of my stuff at home mostly. And **I** left. And Dad's been happy ever since.

## **(h) Time Out: Parent not Coping**

Some young people left home as a result of a decision by a parent that they could no longer cope with living with the young person. This was prefaced by the desire to maintain the relationship in some form.

The situation is similar to those described in the last section except that in this case the parent's position as powerbroker is explicit: it is the parent's decision and the young person is forced to comply. It is always the young person who must move on.

For Roger, an ongoing conflict with his parents resulted in what superficially was an amicable agreement that he would move into a refuge.

**It:** And you left again last Friday?

**Roger:** Yeah, I left. Oh Mum's, that when me and mum agreed we both need a bit of time to sort our differences out because she was under a lot of pressure and so was I so she said three or four months will do just fine, and if you want to come back, you can come back, if you don't well, just let her know and just keep in contact. But me stepdad, he's not worried at all, he said to Mum. She said, 'Do you want him to leave', and he goes, '**It's** up to you', and Mum, and I agreed with **Mum**, **I** said, 'Yeah, I'll go [we] both need time to sort our differences out', he said, 'Get lost', didn't even have time to pack me clothes, he just kicked me straight out.

The reader will also recall Wendy's predicament discussed in the section on sexual abuse. She was moving out because her mother wanted a 'break from her' and to allow the father to move home.

## **(i) Death of Parent/Caregiver**

Of the one hundred young people interviewed, twelve reported having a parent deceased. This clearly reduced their accommodation options and in some cases was a direct cause of homelessness. In other situations the unresolved and often unacknowledged grief of the young person caused major problems in day-to-day living. It made relationships with the surviving parents and step-parents difficult and hampered attempts to maintain stable accommodation.

Marcus had been bereft of secure accommodation for the preceding year. He had lived with his father and brother from an early age. He attributed his homelessness to the unexpected death of his father.

**Int:** [When] did you regard yourself as having moved away from home?

**Marcus:** As soon as Dad died.

**Int:** As soon as Dad died, yeah. So you were 14, April last year. Yeah. How did you know you had to leave there?

**Marcus:** Because we couldn't stay there.

**Int:** And why was that?

**Marcus:** There was no one to support us there.

**Int:** Who told you that you had to leave?

**Marcus:** Me grandmother.

## SUMMARY

The home lives and relationships of these young people were difficult and frequently abusive and oppressive. While different reasons for leaving home have been categorised, in most situations a number of factors were operating which resulted in the young person leaving home or being removed from home.

Leaving home, or being removed from home, does not inevitably lead to homelessness. However, for these young people the consequence of leaving home or being removed from home was that at that time, or shortly afterwards, they were homeless. Why and how they became homeless is discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

# Becoming Homeless

In this chapter, differing paths to homelessness are considered.

The aim is to highlight the manner in which factors combine to limit a young person's options and produce homelessness. Once homeless, choices are further narrowed, rendering young people vulnerable to additional abuse and exploitation.

Initially, the paths to homelessness are considered in terms of the young people's first experience of being without a home. This can result from a decision of the parents to evict the child, the removal of the child by the state, the decision of the child to leave and the loss of accommodation due to other factors, such as loss of employment.

### (a) Kicked Out

Leaving home was frequently not a decision taken by the young person; rather it was a parent's decision. After a period of conflict the parent simply told the child to leave or, literally, packed their bags and threw them on the street. Most often such young people sought help from friends and parents of friends. This provides a partial solution in that shelter is provided, but this type of shelter is considered by young people to be temporary. They are not there as of right nor are they paying their way

Ian, for instance, was thrown out of home at 13. He stayed with a school friend's parents. Whilst these people were good to him, he was uncomfortable living off them. His biggest problem was:

**Ian:** ... trying to go to the cupboard, get your own food and that was a hassle 'cos its not my house like ... I'd feel badly.

When his friend's parents told him they were having difficulty supporting him, he went to another friend's place, and so on. Ian continued to attend school through several more moves, but eventually was forced to leave so he could get a job to support himself.

It is of concern that many young people who are thrown out of home receive no assistance to resolve their family difficulties or to assist them to obtain stable accommodation. The main publically identified sources of assistance to young people are the police and the child welfare services. Children tend to approach both statutory agencies as a last resort and consequently, assistance is rarely provided until the situation is desperate

For example, Tom was evicted from the family home in Canberra when he was nine. No assistance was provided, or apparently sought, at this initial break.

**Tom:** I was nine. My mum kicked me out. I just started walking to Peak Hill to live with my nan

**Int:** And what happened exactly at that time ... what did she say?

**Tom:** Oh, she told me to fuck off and not come back again ... that she should've gone ahead with an abortion, she wanted an abortion, she didn't want me.

**Int:** Did you at that time, you were pretty young, did you ever try and get any help from anybody?

**Tom:** No, I stole a purse with a full pension cheque in it.

**Int:** Did anyone ever give you any help then?

**Tom:** No.

**Int:** Did you think that there would be anyone around that would help you?

**Tom:** Didn't know nothing then.

**Int:** ... you just said life was pretty shitful, do you reckon anybody actually knew that?

**Tom:** I'm not sure.

**Int:** Did any adult understand or believe what was happening to you at that time?

**Tom:** nobody'd ever believe me, that she's not like that, she wouldn't do that, and all this crap.

Tom lived with his grandparents for about a year but was returned to his mother after they sold their house. However, nothing had changed. No-one, outside the family, had paid any attention to Tom's (or his mother's) distress, no-one had sought to ensure his right to special protection provided for in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Tom was to go through similar experiences of rejection by his mother, his family, his relatives and friends and eventually by welfare services, for the next eight years. Even a suicide attempt did not change anything. Tom has been homeless for almost half of his seventeen years.

Even where those departments with statutory responsibility for young people are involved in the plight of a homeless youth, their responses are often not conducive to preventing the development of a highly mobile lifestyle after a child is ejected from home.

Sue, after disclosing to the police and welfare services that she had been sexually abused by her father, was left in a somewhat untenable situation.

**Sue:** I was still at home, but they [the Department of Children's Services] just kept an eye out on me ... and said if it got worse report it straight away and I'd have to [move] into a foster home for a while ... Children's Services sort of spoke to him about the problems and I don't really know what happened with Dad.

Sue continued to live in this rather strained situation for about a year until, eventually, her father acted.

**Sue:** [He] just told me he didn't want me there ... he just said, you go, so I left ... It was lucky one of me friends took me in.

From this point on Sue had no further contact with the Department. It would appear that after Sue's father had ended the Department's concern that she might be sexually abused (by throwing her out of home), the Department was no longer interested in Sue. In the subsequent one and a half years, Sue has moved innumerable times from friends to boarding houses to shelters, up and down the eastern coast of Queensland, and never once come into contact with the government department whose statutory responsibility it was to assist her.

For these young people, being thrown out of home meant they had to rely on their own resources without the opportunity to plan their departure or the financial support necessary to

acquire secure accommodation. Their vulnerability was made worse by the lack of appropriate official responses to homelessness. That so few felt that they could seek assistance from anywhere (except from friends) is an indictment of the existing child welfare services. That their schools either did not know of their circumstances or did not offer any help is an indictment of the educational services. Almost none of them felt that the police would be of any assistance. Thus, rejected by their families and either not knowing of or being abandoned by those services whose job it is to protect and assist them, we should not be surprised if these young people make decisions which have negative consequences.

## **(b) Being Removed by Police or Child Welfare Department**

When the decision that a child should leave home is made by the police or welfare authorities, the state assumes (or attempts to assume) legal guardianship; that is, the young person is admitted to care or wardship. Such intervention does not necessarily ensure that the rights of the young person to shelter etc. are guaranteed. Indeed, coming into care, or attempting to have a child committed to care, often provides a clear path to homelessness.

Liza was 11 years old when she was removed from her family by the state, 'to give my parents a break'. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, she was fostered for several months and then was returned to her family.

**Liza:** When they sent me back I started running away back to these people. Liza was quite severely abused by her step-father.

**Liza:** I had bruises all over me bottom and all across me legs ... The government seen the bruises on me but they still sent me back ... So I stole a lot of money and they just said they didn't want me any more and they locked me up. Couldn't cop it. Three months being locked up treated like a criminal.

During her incarceration Liza was admitted to wardship. She was then placed in a children's home, but after running away eight times in two weeks, was again locked up and charged with being 'uncontrollable'. This pattern repeated itself over the subsequent years until eventually, at the age of 15, Liza struck out on her own and moved to Sydney and a refuge. After a few turns on the refuge circuit, Liza found herself on the streets trying to keep a job.

**Int:** Right, so what did you do for food and money?

**Liza:** Well, I did an embezzlement, that's what they charged me with ... I stole \$200 out of the till at work ... I'd only been there two days ... Like I had no money to my name, I hadn't been sleeping before I went to work, I was staying awake, just so I could make sure I didn't go to sleep so I was on time for work.

And so **it went on. At the age of 16 (and still in the legal guardianship of the state)** Liza was forced into live-in work at a Kings Cross brothel.

**Liza:** The government knew I was doing it. Youth and Community Services down at Kings Cross ... knew I was trying it 'cos they were giving me no assistance.

When police or welfare services remove a child from its family, they obviously do so in the belief that the child needs 'special protection'. And yet, repeatedly, it was clear that because of **either inappropriate or insufficient** action, this removal from an abusive situation facilitated the child's entry into homelessness, poverty and exploitation. The abused child is further abused by society's response. Indeed, given the experience of the young people like Liza who were, or had been, in some form of state care, it may be reasonable to speculate that the state is an unfit parent.



## (c) Child Leaves Home on Own Impetus

In many situations the young people themselves decide to leave home. Potentially this allows for greater planning on the part of the young persons about where they will go and how they will live. The extent to which this planning can and does occur is affected by many factors. For example, a child who runs away because of untenable family or domestic situation is clearly circumscribed in the extent to which they can plan. Further structural factors, such as the lack of and/or low level of income support, the lack of jobs, the lack of cheap accommodation and so on, make it difficult to realistically plan for leaving. These same factors hinder the successful implementation of any plan and frequently homelessness results.

Mandy decided to leave home at the age of 13, after having gone through several years of conflict with her parents (who were divorced and who moved her backwards and forwards from one to the other) and physical abuse from her mother's boyfriend. She and her cousin left their homes at the same time and went to a welfare agency which placed them in refuge accommodation. They then moved in with some male friends. Eventually her mother found her ... and the police came around and I was locked up in Minda for uncontrollable'. She was then released and placed in a refuge.

Soon after, she was again locked up in Minda for being 'uncontrollable' but was eventually released and placed again in a refuge. The farce was then repeated a third, and finally, a fourth time:

**Mandy:** ... they tried to do that again actually, and then I already had four charges of uncontrollable on me and because I'd been locked up so many times I was mixing with the wrong people, and um then I just started getting into trouble, like break and enters.

Anna, an adopted child, experienced much rejection and emotional and physical deprivation throughout her childhood. Her mother frequently locked her in her bedroom all weekend. At the age of 15 she decided,

**Anna:** I've got to get out of there. I can't stay in a locked room all me life. I've got to get out and see the world, so I decided I did. It's a hard way, but I'd be locked up in me room until I was 21. I've got to find out the hard way and if that's what I've got to do, I have to do it.

Anna sought her mother's permission to leave, telling her she had a place to go. Her mother agreed to her departure. In fact, Anna had nowhere to go. She headed for Bondi and slept on the beach. Next day a stranger approached her and offered to let her stay. Like many young people she had little choice **but** to take up with acquaintances of very short duration.

**Anna:** ... she took me in. I was living there for about two months. **It** just happened. I was just so lucky, you know. After then everything started to go wrong.

Her 'benefactor's' husband not only raped her on a number of occasions but infected her with a sexually transmitted disease. By chance, Anna came to the attention of the police and was placed in a refuge. By her account, to gain admission to another refuge where a friend was staying, Anna received goods stolen from her friend. After being charged Anna was admitted to the refuge of her choice. Here, she was 'bashed up' and was moved to yet another refuge. There, the fact that she had herpes was revealed and she was abused and tormented.

**Anna:** ... **I** thought if I've got to put up with this shit, I'm getting out. So I come up here [to the Gold Coast].

All of this happened to Anna in the last year. She was still 15 when she was interviewed and had been working as a stripper. At the time of interview she had no income, no permanent housing, no adult support, a criminal record and a sexually transmitted disease. The choices that she had made — to leave home, to move from one refuge to another, to steal, to work as a stripper — were not real choices at all. From the time she felt she was forced to leave home, her options became further restricted. Each choice further trapped her into homelessness.

Maria had been sexually and physically abused by her father for years when she decided to leave home. Maria left home while her father was away and moved around a little before settling in a town where she found work as a strapper at a racing stables. She obtained this employment through a male friend with whom she started living, as she had little money and no accommodation. Unfortunately,

... he just started getting really abusive and that ... he just used to bash me and bash me.

Having almost no money and nowhere to go, she put up with this for several months. Eventually she left and located her mother in GSAP accommodation at the Gold Coast. Maria was part of the hidden homeless, living in an exploitative relationship in order to obtain shelter. This is discussed in subsequent chapters.

The futility of developing policies and responses to homelessness which conceptualise it merely as an absence of shelter is clear from these accounts. It is impossible in most situations to pinpoint the moment of homelessness. Usually, becoming homeless is a process rather than an event.

## **(d) Loss of Employment**

Not all young homeless people become homeless after leaving home or being removed from home. For some the initial transition is successful. They are employed, or obtain employment, and are able to afford to secure accommodation. They become homeless because they lose their job and are unable to afford rent and either leave or are evicted. For one or more of the reasons discussed in Chapter 4, they are unable to return to, or depend on, their family for support and accommodation.

Tim, for example, was 16 when he left home with his mother's consent. He had a reasonably well paying job and a flat of his own. He was coping well financially and maintained contact with his family and friends. However, then he lost his job and, inevitably, his flat. Tim felt unable to return home because of conflict with his mother's de facto. Forced to move in with friends, there were the inevitable problems and Tim began on the highly mobile, poorly financed treadmill of homelessness. After several moves around Brisbane he moved to Townsville in the hope of getting work. Living in a tent in a caravan park with no money, Tim committed burglary. He was placed on probation and told that it would be a breach of the conditions of probation for him to continue to live in a tent. So he returned to Brisbane and had to sleep in a park.

**Tim:** I didn't have any money at the time ... none of the banks were open, they wouldn't let me go into the caravan park or anything, pitch my tent or anything ... without seeing money, first.

Tim eventually found somewhere to board only to be sexually harassed. He moved on. At the time of interview Tim was receiving Jobsearch Allowance of \$50 a week and boarding with a family.

**Int:** In general who sort of problems have you had in finding somewhere to live?

**Tim:** It's just quite hard 'cos you can't really, on your own ... you can't really afford to live in a caravan, 'cos once you've paid the rent you've got nothing to live on.

Loss of jobs precipitated incidents of homelessness for young people in all locations. Without jobs they were propelled into homelessness by poverty. The level of income support for unemployed youth who are homeless and the lack of cheap housing are central factors in the phenomenon of 'youth homelessness'.

## **(e) Loss of Parent**

It was noted in Chapter 4 that the death of the child's primary caregiver may also result in homelessness. After Marcus's father's death he moved to Canberra to live with his grandmother and his mother.

**Marcus:** I couldn't live there because I don't get along with my step-father, he hit me once, my step-father, her husband, hit me once ... she called my dad something and he called my dad something, so I nearly killed him. Then I couldn't stay there, so I just come back here.

He left Canberra and returned to Brisbane to find his aunt. After spending several days wandering the streets and sleeping out, he finally located his aunt and moved in with her. This arrangement failed, so he moved to a friend's house and was then made to return to his aunt by the child welfare department. This again failed and, after sleeping in industrial bins for several nights, Marcus began on the refuge circuit. In the thirteen months between his father's death and when he was interviewed, Marcus had moved nineteen times:

**It:** What do you really need in terms of housing?

Marcus: ... I want to settle down in one place.

**Int:** Is that what you need?

Marcus: Yes. Someone to love me, too.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter we have illustrated different ways in which young people first come to be homeless and then charted their subsequent histories. This has highlighted a series of structural forces which prolong and aggravate homelessness. These include poverty, which is both a cause and consequence of homelessness, and a lack of appropriate assistance from social institutions such as police, schools and welfare agencies.

## Chapter 6

# Barriers to Accommodation

Young people encounter a range of barriers to obtaining secure accommodation. The barriers reported by young people are discussed in this chapter. Again it should be noted that although these barriers are considered separately, they often interact for any one person.

### (a) Lack of Money

For many young people, a lack of money is a major barrier to obtaining and maintaining stable and secure accommodation.

Those young people who leave or are forced out of home at short notice are rarely in receipt of an income. Thomas, for instance, had hitchhiked from Victoria to the Gold Coast. He was a well presented lad but had no income. He was 17 years old and until he left home was completing the final year of his secondary education in a private school. He maintained he liked school but could no longer put up with his parents' treatment of him. During his first week at the Gold Coast he slept out in post offices and bus shelters. He obtained food by eating the food left over by tourists in food halls. He was referred to GSAP accommodation when he sought to obtain employment from the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). At the time of the interview he was in the process of applying for a Social Security benefit. Thomas was clear that the lack of income stood between him and somewhere to live.

**Thomas:** Just money, that's all. Like, you know, you could get the accommodation, just it's money, that's the problem.

Even when a young person had accommodation, a lack of income jeopardises that accommodation. Many young people leave home and initially seek and obtain accommodation with relatives or the parents of friends. Their inability to pay their way further hinders their ability to plan their future. Ralph, for example, was staying with his aunt.

**Int:** Is this where you want to stay, at your aunty's?

**Ralph:** No, I wouldn't, 'cos she's gonna kick me out soon. 'Cos I been staying there for ages.

**Int:** Why is she going to kick you out?

**Ralph:** I dunno, 'cos she's getting sick of me staying there, 'cos I been staying there for ages and she's not getting no money through me for staying there.

**Int:** What about this money problem?

**Ralph:** Oh, that's the only problem, 'cos I don't give no money and she's got to keep feeding me and she gives me money to go out and all that and she's not getting that much to keep me.

His aunt's financial predicament is of concern to Ralph. He lacks the necessary knowledge or resources at this stage to negotiate a living arrangement with his aunt which would ensure that her financial security and his need for shelter and material and emotional support are met. Arrangements such as Ralph's are often recipes for disaster in that the relationship between the young person and the caring adult is subject to additional financial stress which often causes the relationship to disintegrate.

Access to income through social security benefits does not guarantee secure accommodation. The level of benefits creates and feeds a lifestyle of instability. Petra left a situation of sexual abuse and moved from place to place, generally of acquaintances whom she had met in the street or on the road.

**Int:** At what stage did you think that you had something [housing] permanent?

**Petra:** I thought with the people I was living in the flat, that would be permanent, but because I didn't have any income, of course, I wasn't allowed to stay there for nothing for a long time, but the people that I went to Perth with said they could get me some help from social workers or something and I could stay with them until I urn get a job or I could go back to school once they get some money from Social Security... I mean, they were, or seemed like my friends and they sort of taught me how to steal supermarkets and how to sell drugs and things like that.

**Int:** Mm. To get the amount of money that you actually needed, what would have helped you then, in those days?

**Petra:** I don't, well Social Security wouldn't have given me enough money at that stage, it was \$50 a week. I mean if you want to live somewhere you need bond and you have to eat, you can't eat and pay rent and everything else on \$50 a week.

**Int:** OK. Let's talk about some other stuff, about accommodation. What are the main problems you had in finding somewhere to live?

**Petra:** Not having enough bond, and not having enough money to get all your, the things you need, like your gas put on and your electricity, and then finding somebody that would let you live in their place, being at such a young age.

**Int:** Mm.

**Petra:** And if you have to share, finding people who'd share with you and who weren't going to rip you off.

**Int:** So when you've stayed with friends, or acquaintances, people that you just happen to run into in the gym or something, have there been difficulties with that?

**Petra:** Yeah, because if you haven't got the money to pay for your own way totally, they think that they are allowed to control your entire life and, I mean, you don't want someone telling you to iron your clothes, to wash your hair, to wash up this and do that and why don't you have a bath, and things like that.

**Int:** So that's with someone who's sort of an acquaintance, who's a bit older than yourself, bossing you around. What about when you lived with friends your own age?

**Petra:** Because they're not likely to have much money either. You'll get into arguments about paying bills and spending too much money on this and especially with food, I've always had problems when I was living with Sally and Rhonda, they thought we should split the food bill but we didn't agree on the same foods and we had so many problems.

The process of acquiring accommodation — the need to pay bond, rent in advance and for utilities, forces young people into debt. It is a debt that they are frequently unable to repay. Their tenure is commenced without the money for necessities of life.

Tim: It's just quite hard, 'cos you can't really [live] on your own, you can't really get out and, like, move. You can't really afford to live in a caravan, 'cos once you've paid the rent, you've got nothing to live on.

Young people are predominantly excluded from the public housing sector. However, for young people at the Gold Coast, Brisbane and the Cross, the lack of public housing was only infrequently identified as an accommodation barrier. This contrasted with the experience of the Canberra/Queanbeyan sample (discussed below). Instead, the cost of renting and their low income were identified as the main barriers to accommodation.

The precarious nature of young people's housing tenure also results from their tenuous labour market situation. Young people can sometimes scrape by if they are employed, but the level of youth income and/or the loss of the job can prevent young people from acquiring the requisite money to obtain and maintain accommodation.

In summary, lack of money is a major hurdle for young people attempting to obtain stable, secure accommodation. Young people without any source of income are particularly disadvantaged in obtaining accommodation and are forced into temporary arrangements with friends and acquaintances, forms of emergency accommodation or exploitive relationships. Those in receipt of some form of benefit experience difficulty because of the low level of benefits. The 'start up' of costs of housing, including bond, rent in advance and the connection of utilities, also prevents young people from obtaining accommodation. Finally, loss of income resulting from loss of employment results in young people being unable to maintain the accommodation in which they are living.

## **(b) Lack of Affordable Accommodation**

The paradox of homelessness is that people are without secure shelter while houses and flats are vacant all over Australia. This was most marked on the Gold Coast with its ample supply of holiday accommodation.

Maria left home after years of sexual abuse. She moved in with a boyfriend, an alcoholic, and was subject to months of violence at his hands. She escaped (literally) from this situation and sought to contact her mother. Her mother had left the father shortly after she did. They found each other in GSAP accommodation at the Gold Coast.

Maria: [S]ince I've been back with Mum we've been trying to find a house and that, so we can all move out into a house, so we can be a family again, 'cos it gets a bit tense around here with everyone around.

Int: Oh indeed, so what's stopping that? Would it be mainly cost or availability of housing, or the area that you're in?

Maria: Well there's heaps of empty houses around, but there's always the cost too. Like we went for a house, it was \$108 per week. We could manage that as there's going to be me, Mum and Charles, that's my boyfriend, and Mum's boyfriend. We were going to all pitch in together and pay that, but then the house got sold. It's mainly the cost and there's not many houses round either.

For those on low incomes, public housing is one of the few avenues to safe, secure accommodation. Public Housing authorities have little history of providing accommodation for

young people. Some young people in Sydney and Canberra commented adversely as to the availability of public housing and to their treatment by the Public Housing authorities. It is notable that public housing was not an issue for those in Queensland — it wasn't considered to be available.

**Simon:** You're treated like a circus toy there, like they play with you, run you round like, they'll send you to about four places or something 'cos of your age and that they'll just muck around with you and that, the only things I found helpful there was the [free] coffee machines.

**Int:** In general, what problems have you had in finding places to live?

**Marion:** I don't know. I've never had any problems.

**Int:** In terms of finding refuges, if you want to set up by yourself though, in your own accommodation. Have you ever tried that?

**Marion:** Yeah, I went down in Housing Commission, but you have to wait heaps to get one.

For young people the combination of lack of money and lack of appropriate, affordable accommodation acts to create an almost impenetrable barrier.

## (c) Age

In addition to their lack of income and the lack of appropriate, affordable accommodation, young people believed that they were additionally disadvantaged by their age. Some cited legal barriers, that they were under 18 years of age and were unable to sign leases, others that age implied low incomes and a final group argued that they were discriminated against simply because they were young.

### (i) Leases

The issue of their legal capacity to enter into leases was explicitly raised by young people in all four locations.

**Int:** What about trying to get somewhere privately? What are the problems there?

**Mandy:** I'm too young.

**Int:** So you can't rent something yourself?

**Mandy:** No. I can't get a Housing Commission 'cos I'm too young, plus there would be too much of a wait. I can't just rent a flat like from a real estate 'cos I can't sign the lease.

**Phoebe:** Yes, urn, being young and not able to get a flat because you're not 18, 'cos when you move into a flat you've got to be at least 18, you've got to have a guarantor, or someone older than you moving in there with you, which is pretty hard.

The difficulties with leases is tacit knowledge for many young people. Many have not actually had contact with real estate agents or experienced difficulties with real estate agents themselves.

**Robyn:** Not much money, that's the main one. And when you're 16, even if you have got the money, you can't get a flat because you're too young.

**Int:** Have you looked for a flat yourself?

**Robyn:** There's no point. Like, I would look but there's no point in looking. Because even if I did have the money I wouldn't be able to get it because I'm too young. You've got to be 18.

The impact of such ideas is twofold. At one level it acts as a direct barrier. The inability to sign a lease prevents the securing of legitimate tenure. The second level is also important. Most young people have not had the direct experience of being refused accommodation because they were not 18 years. The widely held belief that they cannot sign leases provides an insurmountable structural barrier to legitimate and secure accommodation. They are marginalised and excluded even before they seek accommodation.

## **(ii) Age and income**

It was noted above that the lack of income was a major barrier to obtaining accommodation. In many cases this was linked to the lower income, wages or benefits available to young people.

**Int:** In terms of your housing, what's stopping you from having what you want?

**Gwen:** Money, age, money and age.

**Int:** Do you think that young people have more problems finding accommodation than adults?

**Robyn:** Yep.

**Int:** Why's that?

**Robyn:** More income and age. They don't trust you if you're too young. They think you're too young to move into a flat, you know

## **(iii) Discrimination**

Most keenly felt was the belief that they were discriminated against because of their age.

**Ann:** Yeah.

**Int:** Why's that?

**Ann:** 'Cos nobody gives any youth a go. Some do, some ... Not very many people do.

**Int:** And why do you think that some young people have more problems than other young people finding accommodation?

**Ann:** The way they live. The way they speak. I dunno, just the way they look and speak, if they look different to what one person does, that person would get it.

**Int:** What stopping you from doing that?

**Gavin:** Money, money. But there's places now where you can get bond money, so we are going to do that next week and try and get a bond. But mainly if I went to a real estate [agent] or something, they'd just take one look at me and say no you're too young and even if they didn't think I was too young, they probably would think the walls would get wrecked and think all the worst things that can happen.

**Sarah:** They want someone older and more quiet, not like — we're younger and have parties a lot.

**Int:** Why do you think that some young people have more problems than other young people in finding accommodation.

**Marion:** 'Cos some of the real estate agents don't like the people that have problems 'cos they've got too many problems.

**Int:** How do real estate agents tell the difference?



Marion: I don't know. From their background and that.

**Int:** How do they find that out?

**Marion:** I wouldn't have a clue, but they do. They just don't like the look of ya, they know.

**Int:** They measure it accurately?

**Marion:** I don't know. I've never been to one.

It is not just the fact that they are 15 or 16 years of age that bars young people from accommodation, but their perception that they are considered undesirable in some way. This reflects their perception of their inferior position in society. It is expressed, for example, through their comments about real estate agents. Most do not have direct contact with real estate agents yet it is part of their belief systems that young people are not welcome as tenants and not welcomed by real estate agents.

## (d) Gender

Young people varied in the extent to which they indicated that gender affected their access to accommodation. Many stated they believed it made no difference. This was especially the case for young males. Some young males believed that women's ability to trade sex for accommodation left them better placed than males. Young women were concerned about the potential for exploitation and did not see it as advancing their efforts to obtain safe, secure accommodation. Indeed, fear of exploitation was a significant concern for young women seeking accommodation.

Some young women reported direct experience of being refused accommodation because they were young women. Fiona and her friends tried to rent a caravan, without success.

**Int:** So you reckon cost is the main problem?

Fiona: Yeah, we tried caravans, we can afford a caravan, no worries, but they reckon three girls in a caravan by themselves causes too much trouble in a park.

**Int:** Who Said that?

Fiona: Blue Gum Caravan Park. And some of the other parks won't take us 'cos we're too young, but that's beside the point, we reckon we're mature enough to get our own place.

**Fiona:** Well, like I said, at the caravan park [they said] three females alone in a caravan would cause too much trouble amongst the males.

**Int:** And so how does that make it harder for you?

Fiona: It's sexist.

Time and time again young people reported potentially legitimate and viable options being closed off because of extraneous factors.

Young women also indicated that there was less emergency accommodation available to them.

**Steph:** I think they should have another room for the girls. Instead they got two rooms for the guys and they only got one for the girls.

Debbie, who finally found accommodation at a GSAP refuge, reports:

**Int:** Do you think being a female makes it harder to find somewhere suitable?

Debbie: Yeah.

**Int:** Why do you think that's the case?

**Debbie:** I went to Redhead in Newcastle, no vacancies for females, everywhere I went, no vacancies for females.

**Int:** And why do you think that is, that there are no vacancies?

**Debbie:** I don't know, but most of them are male that stay there.

**Int:** What about the needs of young women?

**Debbie:** Don't know.

Brian, also felt that there was less accommodation for young women.

His comments also highlight the manner in which refuges/shelters often compound difficulties and generate a transient and mobile lifestyle.

**Brian:** I didn't want Shelley out on the streets, like she got kicked out of home, or left home or whatever happened and she come here, and I seen her and asked her where she's living and she said nowhere, and I tried to get her into the hostel here, and they wouldn't let her in here because she knew me, so I decided to move out as well so I was out on the streets with her because I didn't want her out on the streets by herself. So we ended up going out and then a few days later, see one of the other guys from the hostel which is in Sydney now, he got his money, then we went to Sydney with him. He supplied us with accommodation, you know, money the whole lot, and then a few days later he just took off and we never seen him again. He just, he was going down the road to the bank, he'll be back in half an hour. And we didn't see him for the rest of the week, then the rent ran out so we had to move out, so I stayed at a shelter and Shelley at some place ... It's just a normal house for people ...

**Int:** OK. How do you think young women get treated, better, worse, or the same as young men?

**Brian:** Oh, I reckon they get treated less. That's what I reckon, because Shelley stayed in a hostel exactly the same as what I'm staying in, she gets hassled every morning, because they're trying to accuse her of being out at ten thirty at night, after ten thirty, you know, with me, when I'm in bed asleep, she gets ripped out at six o'clock in the morning and hassled, they don't get fed over there, they gotta buy their own food, you know, they've gotta do more independence than we do. We get all our meals made and they get nothin'. Oh well, you'd think they'd have a lot more accommodation for young women than they would men, 'cos you know, it's different to us, sleeping on the streets, than it is ...

Some young men felt that, rather than fewer beds for women, there were more. Because young women were seen as more vulnerable, refuges were prepared to take them in — this, of course, contrasted to the experiences of young women seeking accommodation. Some young men did, however, feel that they suffered from the stereotyping of masculinity.

**Int:** So do you think young men have got it harder than young women?

**Harry:** Not much harder, but yeah.

**Int:** A little bit?

**Harry:** Yeah.

**Int:** What would make that difference, do you think?

Harry: Urn. Because males are supposed to look after themselves and females, well, they aren't.

Milan: I think it's harder for men, young blokes and that. 'Cos men are supposed to be tougher.

Societal expectations of men may indeed cause some difficulties — especially for young men who have been forced into a premature self-reliance and who have not experienced satisfactory relationships of dependency. For young women, however, it was not just the lack of beds in emergency accommodation, but that they felt at clear risk of violence and exploitation in mainstream accommodation.

**Int:** Do you reckon being a young woman makes it harder to find somewhere, or easier?

**Petra:** Makes it harder ... Because women can't live with men really, unless you've known them for a long time, while men can just move into any share house. I mean they're not likely to get harassed or raped, while women can't move in with most men. I mean, if, if a man advertises in the paper, say, looking for someone to move in with him, if a man moved in they wouldn't have to worry about being harassed.

**Int:** Do you think being a female makes it harder to find suitable accommodation?

Wendy: Yeah. Because you've got to know the people. If it's a guy you might not trust him.

**Int:** Why does a female need to know the people and not a male?

Wendy: Well, if a female moves in with a total male stranger, you never know what he's like and he could try something.

**Int:** What about a female and other females who are strangers?

Wendy: Well, that seems OK.

Gender is experienced as an additional vulnerability and additional barrier to obtaining adequate secure accommodation. Some young women, like Sybil, report being implicitly and explicitly forced to trade their bodies for shelter.

**Int:** What about being a young woman? Do you think it makes it harder to obtain suitable accommodation?

**Sybil:** No. It's easier for a woman than it is for a man.

**Int:** Why is that?

**Sybil:** Oh, a woman can go up and dress herself up like a slut, if you want to put it, and pick up a guy just like that.

**Int:** Do you think that's hard for a woman to do, or do you think it's easy.

**Sybil:** Yes, very, very hard. I mean, I felt sick. Sick inside for what I was doing.

Laura, a sexual assault victim, was forced from a refuge because of sexual harassment.

Laura: Well, somebody, the boy that I'd been involved in was giving me a really hard time and he was just harassing me, 'cos he was living there too, and so I just left in the end, went to another refuge.

The failure to provide adequate out of home accommodation for young people implicitly condones the exploitation and sexual abuse of young women and men. Indeed young women in such relationships are the hidden homeless.

Gwenn, a young Canberra woman, expressed it most clearly. She was a victim of physical and sexual abuse and lived with her 'boyfriend'.

- Int:** Do you think that being male or female makes any difference?
- Gwenn:** Well the female has got it harder than the male.
- Int:** Oh, why? What things have led you to believe that?
- Gwenn:** ... this world is sexist, in a lot of places, usually males are bosses and women can't get any higher or can't earn much money 'cos it's all men no women. I hate that topic ... No, no, I don't feel at home [here], 'cos most times it's not my place, it is his flat, and they [my friends] always say to me but it's yours as well, but I don't feel comfortable with that.
- Int:** How long have you been staying there?
- Gwenn:** A month.
- Int:** A month? How long can you stay there? Is there any time limit on it, or ...?
- Gwenn:** No.
- Int:** And you've also told me that that's not ...
- Gwenn:** Permanent.
- Int:** And that's not the sort of accommodation you want?
- Gwenn:** No.
- Int:** Is it cheap?
- Gwenn:** Yeah, it's cheap.
- Int:** Is the food OK?
- Gwenn:** I guess so. He cooked tea so I've had no complaints there.
- Int:** Right, and if you had whatever you need, would you be somewhere else if you had another option.
- Gwenn:** Yes, I would.
- Int:** And would you still be in a relationship with your boyfriend, do you think?
- Gwenn:** No.
- Int:** So in a lot of ways, yeah, that's right? How could, um, how could your current accommodation be improved?
- Gwenn:** Moving, definitely moving.

In summary, young women reported difficulties in obtaining accommodation caused by direct discrimination, lack of provision of emergency accommodation for young women and threats to personal safety. Their lack of, or low, income forced some into relationships for shelter and material support.

## (e) Refuges

Refuges have been a primary response to the problem of youth homelessness, yet the refuge system is directly experienced by some young people as a barrier to adequate, secure accommodation. For these people, the rules, the framework and structure of refuges have contributed to their homelessness rather than ameliorated it.

They have entered refuges either in a state of crisis or after living a transient lifestyle for some period. Not surprisingly, they experienced difficulties in living in a structured setting. Refuge

rules provided the potential for conflict, especially for youth who have left their family home after ongoing conflict.

Marcus, for example, has reservations about the degree of control exercised over him and the expectations of his behaviour.

**Marcus:** [T]he thing **I** hate about this place, when you pay for a 'phone call, even a relative, you're only allowed on about five or ten minutes. Last night I was trying to ring me brother. [The worker] wouldn't believe **I** was going to ring me brother up till she spoke to him. Can't even ring your own girlfriend up, she rang me up the other day, 7.30 in the morning, I was only speaking five minutes and they reckon **I** was on for an hour.

**Int:** You reckon they don't understand young people like to be on the phone a fair bit?

**Marcus:** No. They should know, if they don't like us speaking up here, they should let us go down the 'phone box for a while instead of getting people to come down and get us all the time ... Everyone's got to adjust to not to swear here and that, you know, about two days after I'd been here, I wasn't swearing at the dinner table and two persons swore and [the worker] she came straight up to me and said 'You can go sleep outside, 'cos you swore', and then Joe stuck up for me and said, 'It was me', because it wasn't me. Then she kept blaming me, every time she went to go off at us boys she'd always look at me, you know, I hate that.

A standard of behaviour is expected. Those that fail to live up to the standard are out. Often the standard relates to needs of the structure/institution rather than the young people. In that sense the refuges/hostels can recreate 'rules of- living' that are more rigid than the families they came from.

Some refuges and hostels require the young people to be out of the refuges at certain times of the day and in at others. For young people without income and enduring much instability in their life, being forced onto the streets each day is often a recipe for disaster. Laura's situation is an example of the sort of difficulties that rules of the refuges can create. The refuge she stayed at required young people to go out and look for work each day.

**Laura:** Oh yeah, well it's cheap, cheaper than anything that you'd normally get on the public market.

**Int:** What about freedom?

**Laura:** There's not much freedom, makes it a bit difficult at times .... [T]hey have a week night curfew of 10.30 and I had to work till twenty past, um half past eleven and, um, so **I** got in trouble about that, but the thing is, um, if I hadn't taken the work then it would have been seen as not doing anything to get myself money to get other accommodation and so **I** would have been, they probably wouldn't have let me stay there any longer anyway.

Refuges also bar access to stable accommodation in that they facilitate the development of a transient lifestyle. They often have rules as to the period of residence and the rules related to entry.

**Int:** How many refuges did you go to?

**Jason:** This is the last refuge where I'm staying at now where **I** can go to in Sydney.

**Int:** So how many, at a guess, do you think you've lived in the last six months? This is the last six months we're talking about now.

Jason: About six.

Int: What's good and bad about refuges?

Jason: ... most refuges, three months is about the most you can stay.

Int: Is that why you had to leave?

Jason: Yeah. I ran out of places and not enough refuges and I've run out of places to go. When my time's up here I'll have nowhere else to go, I'll be back on the streets again.

Int: So for two years since you've been out of home, including the last six months, you've never really had anything that you could call permanent?

Jason: Nah. Never.

Int: Why do you think some young people have more problems than other young people in finding somewhere to live?

Jason: Well some younger people might have just left home, they've got more opportunity to go to places where they haven't been, than people who have been on the streets longer with less places to go and less places to sleep.

**Int:** But why is that? What happens when you've been on the streets for a long time that makes it harder for you?

**Jason:** Because you run out of refuges to go to.

It is ironic that the resolution of the problem of lack of shelter is to move a person on to another shelter or to refuse them access at all. Rather than seeking to retard the development of a transient and highly mobile lifestyle, a refuge cycle is created. The termination of the cycle is the streets and GSAP accommodation.

Louise clearly articulated the dual nature of the support and barriers offered by refuges.

Int: What do you like about your current housing?

Louise: Um, that's a hard one. Oh, I like the fact that it's cheap and ... and all that sort of stuff ...

Int: So do you feel supported there?

Louise: Well actually, as I described to you earlier I get the impression that, you know, when **I** first came here everybody, they couldn't do enough to help you, you know. [**It is**] sort of like a little boy who gets a puppy dog and plays with it for the first few months and can't do enough to help it and then all of a sudden they say, oh go away.

**Int:** Urn, so how do you think this place could be improved?

**Louise:** Um, I think, I don't know, I think that if they could try and make it into more, a more homely environment sort of thing, like urn, it's very close to being like a business, I mean you know like the bars on the windows ... and, um, you know, they've got rules and regulations ... if they could just loosen up a bit and urn say if you want to bring a friend over that's fine. It's really hard [to bring a friend over] because you've got to sit in here and you're not allowed in the bedroom. Trying to have a conversation with your boyfriend with all these other people around you, you know, you're going yeah well. Do you feel comfortable Harry, oh yes lovely thank you, you know I thought so. So yeah.

## (f) Lifestyle

The lifestyle developed by these young people also acts as a barrier to obtaining stable accommodation. Donna, who had been fairly mobile for the past year, suggested that it was her own attitude that stopped her getting a flat.

**Donna:** What I'd like is to get a flat by myself.

**Int:** But you said you didn't like living on your own.

**Donna:** But **I** don't mind, around Tilly I know a few people. Oh, there's a few people **I** don't know, but, I don't know, I just think I'm at the stage **I** can look after myself.

**Int:** So what's stopping you from getting what you need?

**Donna:** Do I have to tell the truth?

**Int:** Sure.

**Donna:** **I** can't, like if I want to get a place like that I have to commit meself to go and look for work, but, oh, at the moment I couldn't be bothered.

**Int:** So you haven't got the motivation?

**Donna:** No. **I** feel lazy. Feel like doin' nothin'. Oh, I feel like that a few times and then I just get up and go.

The forms of support developed by homeless young people and the relationships developed may also act as a barrier to obtaining accommodation:

**Int:** Looking back over the last four years, what's been the main problem that's made it difficult for you to find somewhere to live?

**Richard:** Probably my attitude, 'cos I won't go nowhere .. . If I get somewhere to live my mates are comin' in wiv me, 'cos I look after my own and I expect them to do the same for me and they do.

**Int:** So this group's pretty loyal to each other ... ?

**Richard:** That's right. Death before dishonour ... rClos I like to be wiv my family and my family's on the street. I class them as my family.

One of the great strengths of these young people is the extent to which they rely on and support each other. Any sensible response to homelessness will recognise that these bonds are positive rather than negative and disruptive.

## (g) Fear of Help

Young people are also prevented from seeking accommodation by fear of the consequences of seeking help. For example:

**Tracey:** **I** thought of just going to a refuge, staying at a refuge, but **I** thought to myself if **I** go on and do that they're going to call the police and lock me up. So **I** just slept on the street.

Austin, who was in the care of the Department of Children's Services, when asked whether he kept contact with the Department while on the streets, responded:

**Austin:** Yeah, **I** kept in contact with them all the time, when I was out on the streets as well.

**Int:** Mm. Now, did they know you were on the streets?

Austin: No, they thought I was living with some people.

Int: Why did they think that?

Austin: 'Cos that's what I told them. I said I'm living with other people, I'll be right.

Int: What would have happened if you'd told them the truth?

Austin: Put away again, put in Wilson or somewhere like that, that's why I told them that, because I didn't want to go back to Wilson [a detention centre] ...

hit: Did you ever try and sort of go to a refuge or anything like that when you were on the streets?

Austin: No.

Int: No. Did you know that they existed?

Austin: Yeah, I knew that. It's just that I didn't want to.

Int: No? Why not?

Austin: 'Cos I just didn't want to.

Int- Mm.

Austin: 'Cos I didn't know what, I won't, I would not trust any man in my life, for sure, again. Me and Des, we get on pretty good, to a certain extent.

Int: **Mm.** So it's men you don't trust?

Austin: Yeah, it's just men. I trust sheilas, I usually don't like men, I don't really get on with men. 'cos of what I've been through with my old man.

## **(h) Friends**

Whilst young people may not trust formal sources of help, they do rely extensively on their friends. Many initially stay with friends or parents of friends after leaving home. Just as their lack of income generates difficulties when living with friends' parents, it also causes difficulties when they rely on other young people for survival.

**Liza:** Yeah, what I did is, I went to a CES office and I got a job, I got rental relief, I've, Youth and Community Services they paid my bond and everything for a flat, I had two of my girlfriends move in with me and I had the job at Hanimex and I was getting paid \$119 a week and I was paying \$155 a week rent. That's how much my flat was, and the girls were hardly ever giving me money, and the money I'd saved from my previous jobs ... Just really disappeared and I ended up having to forfeit my bond and everything.

Int: You got behind in the rent?

Liza: No, I was never behind in rent, I just had to move out of the flat.

Int: Couldn't keep it going?

Liza: No.

Int: So then you had to leave your job too?

Liza: Well I'd lost my job. They, ah, told me that they put a few of us off, they said we were too young for the position. Gave me a very good reference, that's when I ended up working in a parlour.



**Int:** Have you ever lived or stayed with friends or acquaintances?

**Liza:** Yeah.

**Int:** What's that been like for you?

**Liza:** Hard.

**Int:** Hassles?

**Liza:** Yeah, well I was staying with my friend before I went to Toowoomba, and it was like I was their built-in cleaner and a built-in babysitter. Plus every money I got in she was always borrowing it off me, so she owes me a lot of money, I just left, I couldn't handle it.

**Int:** Is that typical when you've stayed with friends?

**Liza:** Yeah, it is. They really treat you like a bit of shit. That's when you find out who your real friends are.

**Int:** When you've had somewhere to live have you ever had friends move in with you?

**Liza:** Yeah, well when I had that flat I had friends living with me.

**Int:** Was that any hassle?

**Liza:** Oh they gave me a lot of hassles.

**Int:** Oh, yeah?

**Liza:** Like they really used me, like parties all the time, not cleaning up, not giving me rent money and even when I had a hotel room I had friends staying with me, because like she had nowhere else to stay.

**Int:** Nowhere to go.

**Liza:** She never offered to help or anything.

Despite its many difficulties, living in shared houses is one of the few forms of accommodation which young people can potentially afford. The chances of the success of such arrangements are reduced when persons lack experience, legitimate income and basic life skills. While shared housing arrangements are to be supported, resources should be made available to ensure that the young person has some chance of success in such accommodation.

## **(i) Lack of Information**

**Int:** Why do you think you weren't able to find this place earlier?

**Troy:** I didn't even know about it.

**Int:** So maybe there's not enough publicity so that young people who need it don't know where to go. Would that have been a problem do you think?

**Troy:** Yeah.

Young people forced out of home experience a myriad of barriers to obtaining accommodation and assistance. It is appropriate to conclude this chapter by noting that lack of knowledge of the available sources of accommodation hinders access to the limited services available. While this report has concerned itself with young people's experiences, it is clear from their comments that those adults from whom they informally seek assistance may also be unaware of available

resources. In their recommendations to prevent and ameliorate homelessness, young people stressed the need for publicity and information. This is discussed in detail in the final chapter.

In this chapter the barriers that young people said prevented them from obtaining secure, adequate accommodation were discussed. Theoretically young people are not without support and assistance in our society. There is a range of social institutions that are entrusted with the responsibility to support, protect, assist and help young people. In the next four chapters the extent to which those social institutions both cause and ameliorate their homelessness will be considered.



## Chapter 7

# Child Welfare Services

In every Australian state, child welfare legislation has been enacted to ensure families are assisted to care for their children. Where parents are unable to offer appropriate care, the state is empowered to intervene, protect and provide for children. Often, however, the state's intervention does not result in the protection of a child or the provision of a stable, secure home. In some cases, though certainly not all, the responses of the child welfare agencies facilitated the development of homelessness.

### (a) Failure to Intervene

A surprising number of those interviewed had never had contact with statutory child welfare departments. In some cases, these children had been homeless for several years. Ian, for instance, had been homeless for four years. During this time he travelled from Victoria to Queensland without coming to the attention of the appropriate government departments. Imbued with the ideology of individualism, Ian had always sought to provide for himself so as to avoid becoming a bludger

In other situations, the welfare authorities knew that a young person was experiencing difficulties but failed to intervene.

Fran: She was told about me and she was, she had my case. She was the one who had to, you know, sort of had to help me and all that kind of stuff.

Int: Between the beginning of the year and up until last week, what sort of assistance has she provided you with?

Fran: None. I just got, I just went back home and sort of didn't really see her.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Fran's family situation deteriorated and she was charged with being 'uncontrollable'. The possibilities of achieving positive outcomes for young people like Fran are diminished by failing to intervene earlier, and by 'criminalising' and individualising family difficulties through the court process.

### (b) Avoidance of Contact

The failure to intervene and offer appropriate services is not just the result of direct acts of omissions by welfare services. Many young people actively avoid 'the welfare' because they were fearful of the consequences of contact. For many young people the dominant image of the welfare is 'they put you in a Home'. This is a powerful disincentive to seek assistance.

Int: So did you ever tell Children's Services, or anything like that [you were being physically abused]?

**Tim:** No, not really, no **I** didn't. Problem is my sister, she was raped when she was eleven, and when Mum rang the police and everything straight away, they rang Children's Services and Charlene was taken away. And I didn't want to particularly get taken away from home, so I didn't tell anyone.

## **(c) Unwillingness to Listen or Believe**

Some young people do seek help from, or are in contact with, child welfare departments. Given the size of these departments and the extent of staff turnover it is to be expected that there would be great disparities in the experiences with individual workers that young people report. Young people are positive about child welfare services to the extent to which they provide material assistance and are prepared to listen to and believe the young person. For young people, being listened to and believed is a validating, if rare experience:

**Jim:** Children's Services are about the only people ... they were pretty nice, they'd sit down and talk about it.

**Roger:** ... but Children's Services have known what people've been through.

However, many young people have had the opposite experience. Julie had run away from home, where she had been physically and sexually abused.

**Int:** Were they helpful?

**Julie:** ... they always wanted me to go back there, all the time, you know, go home all the time, you shouldn't run away ... but **I** don't think they really understood what it was like.

**Int:** Do you feel that they believe and understand the problems that young people have?

**Austin:** Not all that much. They don't really know what goes on in life with us kids.

This perceived inability or unwillingness to listen to and believe young people's stories creates a barrier to any effective helping. Such experiences reduce the likelihood of the young homeless again approaching welfare departments. It mitigates against trust and responsiveness to the potential interventions and assistance of welfare workers.

## **(d) Authoritarian Intervention**

Related to this unwillingness to listen to young people's stories is the complaint that welfare workers often seek to impose solutions on young people. As most of these young people have left authoritarian family situations in which they have been subject to someone else's abuse of power, intervention of a similar kind by welfare workers and police is counter-productive.

**Wendy:** They [the child welfare service] were the people that were pushing me, saying charge him, charge him. They were pushing me, not asking.

**Int:** **Do you think that** was of any assistance to you?

Wendy: No, not really ... my mind was so confused, saying shall **I**? They're saying 'yes, it's good!' One side of me saying 'is it really good?' I was just so confused.

**Int:** Would you ever recommend to any friends having similar problems to go to Children's Services?

**Wendy:** No, I'd tell them not to.

This is in contrast to Anna's experience. Anna, who had also been sexually abused, had been in trouble with the police and left the state without the welfare department's permission. Yet she still felt she could contact her District Officer.

**Anna:** ... I've still got her. I rang her up the other day ... She goes 'Yes, come back to Parramatta. Yes'.

**Int:** ... and has she been helpful to you? The D.O.?

**Anna:** Yes. She's sorted out a lot of things. Confusing things. She's sorted out heaps.

The worst aspect of authoritarian responses to homeless young people is that it often replicates the inflexibility and the conditional acceptance that they have already experienced in their families. Help is conditional on the young person accepting the department's decisions. Liza's DO had arranged for her to go to a live-in job with board provided, but no wages, in the country. When Liza decided to return to Sydney she went to see her District Officer.

**Liza:** ... they turned around to me and they said 'cos you're still under contract, you can stay out there, we're not giving you any income, any place to stay, in other words, you live on the streets ...

**Int:** Until the contract's over?

**Liza:** Ah. yeah. They've told me I can go there on the 10th of July which is a Sunday evening, and then they'll help me out and not before that.

Young people often enter into 'contracts' with their 'helpers'. Contracts frequently disguise the gross power discrepancies between the homeless child and the worker who controls social resources. They are not agreements freely entered into by both parties. Whilst they generally include penalty clauses for non-performance on the part of the young person, they never include penalty clauses for the non-performance of the helper.

## (e) Structural Rejection

The rejection that young people experience at the hands of individual workers is compounded by structural rejection. The relationships developed by young people who have been institutionalised for long periods of time 'may be totally severed upon discharge. Similarly, when a young person is discharged from wardship, the state no longer believes it has any particular responsibilities to them, despite having assumed legal guardianship at some stage.

**Int:** So once Philip House ended, you were on your own at that time?

**Jill:** Yeah.

**Int:** Did the YACS people try to help you after you were discharged?

**Jill:** Oh no. YACS wouldn't help me. I had to find that myself. They won't help me today either.

**Int:** What happened when they said you're not a State Ward anymore? What did they do?

**Jill:** They can't give you financial assistance, they can't do nothing for you at all.

**Int:** Did they call you to the office to say goodbye, or did they just send you a letter?

**Jill:** They gave a letter to my Mum saying she's got custody of me.

**Int:** That's it?

**Jill:** Yeah.

## (f) Victimising the Victim

In contrast to the preceding situation where institutionalisation leads to homelessness, the converse also occurs: homelessness may lead to institutionalisation. Steph left home because of severe family conflict. After arriving in Sydney, government welfare workers sought to arrange for her admission to an institution.

**Int:** Tell me a bit more about YACS. How is that ripping you off, trying to put you in [an institution]?

**Steph:** 'Cos its for young offenders.

**Int:** And you felt that was wrong as far as you were concerned.

**Steph:** Yeah, I'm not going to a place like that.

**Int:** Had you offended or were they just trying to get you off the streets?

**Steph:** No. They were just trying to get me off the streets.

Not surprisingly, young people's sense of justice is offended by efforts to consign them to institutions when they have not been convicted of any offence. This response, of blaming and punishing the victim for his or her situation, is common.

## (g) Willingness to Help

Young people were often very ambivalent about child welfare services. They were aware that the welfare departments would give some material assistance when they need it, but were also aware that this willingness to help was very limited. Simon had been a ward for ten years and homeless for one.

**Simon:** I didn't realise that until six months ago, when I was told that I can go to them for help. I went there and actually started getting money off them.

**Int:** So have they been helping you since?

**Simon:** To an extent, yeah. They've given me the run around, a bit, but in some ways they do help out.

**Int:** Accommodation, things like that?

**Simon:** Not accommodation. Went to them once and they said you should just go around, look at some places, ring up places ...

**Int:** What sort of assistance do you think they should give you?

**Simon:** I reckon the first thing they should do is try and find somewhere for you to stay, which is what they don't really get into.

Generally, young people were very perceptive of welfare workers motivations in dealing with them and were very sensitive to the often unstated limitations of this. Liza realised that she could get some assistance, but felt that the department would rather not know if she was in serious difficulty.

**Liza:** ... they put [you] in refuges that's their escape from the subject. But if you've really got a problem they're not [of] very (much) assistance.

No doubt there are young people who did receive the assistance they needed from welfare services and did not become homeless. However a significant number of young people are 'failed' by statutory welfare departments. For those who have been 'failed' by the 'welfare', there are very few other places to go for assistance.

## Chapter 8

# Police

Many young people interviewed during this research complained of harassment and abuse by police. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the manner in which the relationship between young people and police contributes to the problem of youth homelessness.

Homeless young people's rate of contact with police is considerably higher than that of other groups. The police are a port of call for many experiencing severe family conflict. The way police respond to these difficulties is important for the successful resolution of the problems of homelessness. In this chapter, young people's experiences of police involvement in the difficulties which gave rise to their homelessness are first considered. We then discuss their involvement with police resulting from their homelessness.

### (a) Young Person Seeking Help

Many of the young people had suffered physical, emotional or sexual abuse from their family, near family or friends. Some young people directly sought police assistance. Wendy, 13, contacted police after she had been assaulted by her father and complained of sexual abuse.

Wendy: Yeah. I phoned them up one night to tell them about the problem 'cos my dad hit me and I just turned around and phoned them about Dad's problem. That's the only way I've had contact with them.

Int: How did you know to contact them in that situation?

Wendy: I didn't know. I was just confused so I just rang the police.

Int: And what did the police do that time?

Wendy: Just spoke to me that night and got all the papers for charges written out and that. Because we had to do that for the record.

Int: How have you found the police? Have they been helpful?

Wendy: Yeah. They have really helped.

Int: How are they helpful?

Wendy: Well, they've got a service that deals with the kind of thing that I went through and so they know how to treat the people.

Int: How did they treat you?

Wendy: Well, they weren't pushing Me, they were just explaining to me what did happen if I took him through court, how many years he would go in and just things like that.

Int: What happened with court? Can you tell me a bit about that?



**Wendy:** Well I haven't been. My dad just went and this way he's not allowed anywhere near me because the court told him too. He's got to stay away. And if he's seen anywhere near me or touches me he's straight away in jail.

**Int:** If a friend of yours had similar problems as yourself would you recommend they go to the police for assistance.

**Wendy:** Yeah. These people I would. They really helped.

While Patrick did not have direct contact with the police, his experience as a child led him to believe that police could intervene in a positive manner where he was the subject of abuse.

**Patrick:** One time when we were little, she hit me and Brad, and at that time we went to Nan's house ... And she called the police in. I don't know what the police said, whatever they said she changed a lot now.

**Int:** Your aunty changed after the police spoke to her?

**Patrick:** Yeah.

Other young people found that police assistance in response to their victimisation was far more conditional. Petra, for instance, was removed from home after she complained of sexual abuse. Her mother persuaded her to withdraw the complaint.

**Petra:** And um, the police officer was very nice at first, but then when I withdrew the statement she just started saying 'Oh, you made us do all this work for nothing. You have to go back home and you have to stay there or else'.

The policewoman Petra was dealing with then threatened to lock her up if she left the violent situation at home.

In relation to allegations of sexual abuse, the police were at least prepared to hear and partly accept the complaints of young people. Young people like James who complained to police about physical or emotional abuse were rarely heard.

**Int:** Just before you left home did you go to the police for help, then?

**James:** I just wanted to tell them about my dad. About um, him bashing me and that.

**Int:** Yeah. And do you think that they listened to you?

**James:** No.

**Int:** No? What happened then with the police?

**James:** Well, the police the ones down at Beenleigh, they won't even listen to me. Troy and Sarah had similar experiences:

**Int:** Have you ever thought that you could get assistance from anybody for that sort of violence?

**Troy:** Urn, I tried once and I went to pull him up on an assault charge and I ended up dropping it, 'cos I had a cut on my eye and bruises on my back, went to get photos at the police station in Southport, and one of the police officers said to come back at 8 o'clock at night to get photos taken of all the cuts and that. I went back about eight I think it was, and there was no one there. So I ended up giving up in the end.

**Int:** How old were you?

**Troy:** Sixteen.

**Int:** Was it before you left home or after?

Troy: Um, that was the night I left home. I tried to pull him up on an assault charge ...

Int: What do you think they thought?

Troy: I think they thought **I** probably just got into a fight and had enough of my father.

Sarah: It's hard because they don't believe you. When you first tell them, I told them what my mother used to do to me, and they said 'If I had a kid like you I'd be giving you beltings everyday too'. And **I** got upset because it wasn't funny, they didn't realise the seriousness of it, how serious it was, and they thought that I was bullshitting, until they saw me, and then one day my mother couldn't say anything.

Int: There was evidence. So it took them a long time to believe you.

Sarah: Yeah, and I had to get the biggest bashing I ever got you know before they realised that I wasn't bullshitting.

It is rare for children and young people to make explicit complaints about their treatment. The implicit messages they deliver — withdrawn, or acting-out behaviour, unexplained bruises, etc — are generally ignored or punished by those in authority. It is doubly damaging when young people who do overcome the barriers and complain, feel that their statements are not heard or believed. Such responses feed young people's belief that they are unlikely to get a fair hearing from the police.

## **(b) Parents Contacting Police**

It is not just young people who approach police for help — parents approach police for assistance in difficulties with their children. Police lack skills in dealing with family conflicts. Too often when approached by parents they simply replicate the parents efforts to scare or order the child back into line.

**Int:** Do you think that any adult understood the problems you were having and believed what you told them?

Kiley: I believe that some do — the child care offices don't believe half the things you're saying which are true. Same with the Broadbeach Police Department, whatever that is in Broadbeach Police Station. **I** don't believe they believe anything. They take it all from your parents. Whatever they say, goes.

**Int:** Was that your experience?

**Kiley:** They don't believe us. They'd rather believe an older person than us kids ...

**Int:** What sorts of things wouldn't they believe?

**Kiley:** Like, when Mum kicked me in the ribs, they didn't believe it. I've got marks on me arms from the scratch marks from her. And they didn't believe that. They said I did it myself. That was at Broadbeach Police. And then they turn around and say, 'We'll put you in John Oxley' and all this stuff. And you don't know what's going on. Why should I get put in John Oxley when my mum's hit me?

Kiley: Before I left home? I've been up to Broadbeach Police Station once before for taking off from home for the weekend.

**Int:** What happened there?

Kiley: What happened there? They just took me up to the police station ...

**Int:** Who's they?

**Kiley:** My parents took me up there and they just threatened to put me in John Oxley and all that. They were showing me all these pictures and that.

**Int:** What pictures did they show you?

**Kiley:** Pictures of rape and murders and... They were showing a picture of a girl that got raped in the rain and in the bush ...

**Int:** How did you feel about that?

**Kiley:** It's alright, I can take it. My Dad's pretty strong for those things but Mum couldn't take it. She had to go out of the room.

**Int:** And why did they show you these photos?

**Kiley:** To say if I run away from home, I might get into big trouble and meet up with somebody who might bash me or rape me.

**Int:** This was before you left home?

**Kiley:** Yeah. That was before.

**Int:** Once at Broadbeach?

**Kiley:** Yeah I've been there twice. They showed me the pictures twice. I forget what the other ... wagging school, I think it was.

**Int:** They showed you the pictures when you wagged school?

**Kiley:** Yeah.

**Int:** Why did they show them to you that time?

**Kiley:** 'Cos they thought if I wagged school, they could get me through the day time. I said, they could get me any old time ... I reckon the police are pathetic. They can't do anything. A social worker would be much better to help a young kid than the police. All the police do is get you a room and pressure ya. They have a go at ya. They walk out, come back, have a go at ya. That's all they ever did with me. And writing it down on paper what I'd say and that.

**Int:** Why did they write it down on paper?

**Kiley:** Put it in your record. But I haven't made any offences or anything like that but they still put it on record.

**Int:** Is there any situation where you would ever recommend to any person to go to the police for assistance?

**Kiley:** The only situation, I reckon, to go to the police for assistance, if you're being chased by somebody and that's the only situation. Or something bad's happened. Someone's done something to you and you've got to tell the police. Or somebody's done something and you know about it and you don't wanna really tell 'ern but ...

**Int:** So you don't think they could actually help with family matters?

**Kiley:** No. You know, they're meant to be really good about it, but they're not. All they are is to talk to you and let go, come back, talk, let you go.

Kiley articulates the central elements of the experiences of young people whose parents, for good reason or ill, sought police assistance with their family difficulties. For young people such encounters are detrimental. They have no sense that the police are interested in their side of the story — rather they believe that parents' stories are accepted without question. k suggests to the

young person that their concerns are illegitimate, even illegal. It replicates the unsuccessful resort to force, threat and intimidation used in an attempt to dominate children in families. It reduces the likelihood that young people will seek assistance from other formal authorities.

## **(c) Children Seeking Shelter**

Whilst the preceding situations concerned children and families seeking assistance with the difficulties that give rise to homelessness, in this section young people's experiences of seeking shelter from police are reported.

For example, Debbie always sought assistance from the police for her housing problems.

Int: And where did you sleep on Sunday night?

Debbie: I slept in the police station on Sunday.

Int: In the police station, where?

Debbie: At the coast.

Int: What in a cell?

Debbie: No, in the interview room.

Int: Did they give you a shower, food or anything?

Debbie: Yeah, they gave me breakfast.

John also found the police helpful.

Int: What sort of assistance could the police give a young person who is having problems?

John: I don't know really. Never gone to the police and asked for ... I have gone ... When I hitched to Queensland, I went to the Broadbeach Police Station and asked where there was a hostel or somewhere to stay and they gave me this place. They just let me stay here till I get me cheque. I just pay them two weeks and then I'll be alright then.

Where police responded to their lack of shelter as a problem rather than as evidence of a criminal character, young people considered the police helpful. Some police were more helpful than others, however.

Sophie: When I wanted somewhere to stay and I went to the police and I asked them, and they wouldn't give me any help so I told them if they didn't give me any help, I was going to go out and cause a big scene, and they just told me that I should try hard then, I walked out and I started swearing at a policeman and they still wouldn't take me away so I ran out in front of a car and they still wouldn't take me away and that was when I was with um Jackie right, and urn we pulled a knife on this girl, then they took me away for obscene language.

Did they lock you up?

Sophie: Yeah for the night.

Int: Um, and have you been before the court on it yet?

Sophie: Yeah. Went the very next day.

Whilst a touch bizarre, at least three other young people directly approached the police to allow them to stay in the watchhouse. Others had seriously thought about it. Such approaches are clearly an indication of the desperation experienced by some homeless young people. It is also suggestive of the cold, danger and discomfort that is sometimes the lot of homeless children.

## (d) Police Encountered Because of Young Person's Lack of Shelter

Rather than making direct approaches to the police, some young people encountered police in the course of their homelessness.

**Thomas:** Just one night in Surfers Paradise, I was sleeping at the Post Office, then all this commotion started, people starting up cars, and I better get out of here, don't wanna cause a scene, so I was just walking along, I was gonna sleep at the Surfers Paradise CES, that's where I'd been sleeping most nights, the police were just cruising down the road real slow, and they stopped, just asked me to come over, and he checked my bag, they thought, you know, I probably knocked off somethin', sumthin like that, and they just found my dirty clothes, that's all. And after that they just sort of wished me luck, that I'd find a place to stay and that.

**Int:** Did they offer to make any 'phone calls for you to find places?

**Thomas:** No.

Tom had a similarly disappointing encounter with police:

**Tom:** Lying in the gutter, that happened to me one night out at Woodridge, but they don't give a shit, you know, like.

**Int:** This might sound like a silly question in the light of what you've just said, but I'll ask it anyway. Would you ever recommend any young person who's having troubles to go the police for assistance?

**Tom:** No, no way. 'Cos they shrug you off and chuck you in a home, shit like that.

Tom had been homeless half his life, while Thomas was only recently homeless. Tom had extensive previous contact with the police, Thomas none. Despite such differences both shared a common perception: that the police were interested in them only as suspects. Their homelessness, in itself, was of little concern.

Like Tom's, Jason's attitude was characteristic of the long term homeless; his open hostility bred out of long periods of avoiding the police, interspersed with open conflict between 'street kids' and the police.

**Int:** Would you recommend another young person who's been in trouble to get help from the police?

**Jason:** No they don't help, they're arseholes.

**Int:** ... what sort of help do you think the police have or should have provided you with?

**Mandy:** I think they should have put me in a refuge and not locked me in a cell as if I was a criminal. I wasn't doing anything wrong, they were the ones that picked me up. I wasn't the one that flagged them down, or broke into a shop or anything.

**Int:** Would you recommend to another young person who had similar difficulties to you, that they seek help from the police?

**Mandy:** No.

**Int:** You wouldn't.

**Mandy:** Because most police just laugh at you

## **CONCLUSION**

Police frequently have contact with homeless youth and those at risk of homelessness. Young people were rarely positive about these encounters, despite the fact that some had actively sought police assistance. Their relationships with police were marred by police reliance on threat and intimidation to resolve behavioural problems, their failure to listen to young people's complaints and a perception that police condoned the use of violence against young people. It is clear however that any successful response to homelessness must address the central role played by police.



## Chapter 9

# Income

The lack of an adequate, legitimate income is both a cause and a consequence of homelessness for young people. The experience of being homeless and the experience of poverty are inextricably linked in the histories of all of those interviewed. One factor reinforces the other, creating a cycle from which it becomes increasingly difficult to escape.

In this chapter the difficulties the young people experienced in obtaining and maintaining an adequate income are discussed. The two legitimate avenues of income support — government benefits and labour market participation — are not adequate for the special needs of homeless young people. In consequence many are forced into marginal, exploitative or illegal activities to survive.

## GOVERNMENT BENEFITS

### (a) Lack of Immediate Income

As has been discussed earlier, most young people leave home in either an unplanned way or with only very short term plans. After leaving, there is no guaranteed system of immediate income support for them. One common way young people cope with this, is to rely on friends. Another is to steal, which causes obvious problems.

Living off friends often results in the young person sooner or later being told to move on. This sets them on the road to high mobility and continuing homelessness.

### (b) Lack of Benefits for Under 16s

Young people below the age of 16 are ineligible for unemployment benefits (or Jobsearch Allowance as it is now called). Theoretically some could be eligible for special benefits.

**Int:** Have you got any income?

**Jim:** No, not yet. Social Security won't give me no money.

**Int:** Why not?

**Jim:** 'Cos I'm only 15 and they don't believe me that I can't move back home, so, I don't know. I'm too young for that Jobsearch thing, so they won't give me no money, so I just got to get a job.

**Int:** And is there any way you can get Social Security to change their mind ... pay you Special Benefits for instance?

**Jim:** I already tried. They said 'No way there's no way we're going to give you any benefits at all'.



## **(c) Proving Eligibility**

Difficulty in proving eligibility is a common experience for young homeless people, regardless of age. The need for identification generates major problems for those applying for benefits, since the manner in which most left home and their subsequent highly mobile lifestyle meant that it was extremely difficult for them to procure and then keep the numbers of personal papers which Social Security regulations require.

## **(d) Maintaining Benefits**

Proving eligibility for benefits is often only the start of continuing problems. The same factors that make it difficult for the young homeless to prove eligibility make it difficult for them to continue receiving payments. Mandy had had her payments terminated repeatedly.

**Int:** Twenty times in the last three years? Do you know what causes it?

**Mandy:** No. Sometimes they think I've got a job. If I change my address on the form. If I change my bank account number on the form ... Sometimes they even lose my form that! hand in, so I don't get it and they blame me for it.

## **(e) Barriers to YHA**

The Federal Government introduced the Young Homeless Allowance in recognition of the fact that young people who were homeless had much greater need than those who lived at home. From the small number of young homeless interviewed who were in receipt of the Allowance, it is clear that it is not being paid to many of those for whom it was intended. Some possible reasons for this can be illustrated.

### **(i) Lack Of information**

Many young people who are homeless have not applied for YHA simply because they are not aware of its existence.

### **(ii) Establishing eligibility**

For those who do know about it there are serious problems in the way in which the Department of Social Security seeks to establish an applicant's eligibility.

**Thomas:** With Young Homeless Allowance, you've got to have a real hardship at home ... they did ring up my parents and they said 'Oh, something could be worked out' but I don't want to go home at all. But I reckon like seeing as I don't want to go home and got no money, I reckon, they should help me out a little bit.

**Int:** What you're saying is that they should take the young person's word for it.

**Thomas:** Yeah, taking the parents' word against mine, yet ... I'm the one who's out on me own.

To establish eligibility, the Department must contact both parents of the young person and gain from them statements that their child is not allowed to return home, or the young person must be able to show that the home situation is such that he or she cannot reasonably be expected to return to it. Leaving aside matters such as some homeless young people not knowing where one or both of their parents are, there would seem to be a serious problem with regulations which require parents to admit to child abuse or forcing their children out of home, before the homeless young person can be deemed eligible for the YHA.

### **(iii) Waiting period**

Another major problem with the YHA is the statutory six weeks waiting period before payment can be made. To make a young homeless person wait six weeks for payment is to add to the great number of material and emotional pressures to which he or she is already subject. Quite often, the wait is longer. One boy interviewed said he had applied for the benefit eight weeks before, and had not received any money.

### **(f) Barriers to Austudy**

Austudy, the allowance paid by the Department of Employment, Education and Training to assist young people in continuing their education, may be paid at the independent rate if the young person can establish his or her homelessness. The criteria of homelessness are the same as for the YHA, which discourages many people like Laura from even applying:

**Laura:** ... I had so much difficulty getting YHA that I think I'd have the same problems if I tried to apply for independent rate and Austudy.

**Int:** Do you think you will apply for the independent rate?

Laura: No.

Indeed, the additional barriers faced by the homeless young when applying for Austudy at the independent rate appear to have forced many to leave school and seek employment.

**Jim:** I tried that Austudy and they said 'No' ... I was thinking about going back to school and getting a better Junior, to get a better job, but they said 'No, can't give you nothing' so (**I'm**) just trying to get a job.

### **(g) Inadequacy of Benefits**

The most often cited complaint about the income security system is that the level of payments are often simply inadequate. Sybil had an income of \$50 per week from Jobsearch Allowance:

**Sybil:** You can't survive on it. Now you work it out. You pay \$25 to \$30 a week board ... Out of the \$20 you've got left for the week, you've got to feed yourself. If you're a girl you've got to look after yourself ... monthly, and if you want to take precautions you have to buy the Pill, smokes, food ... it can't be done.

Robert was one of the few young people to be in receipt of YHA and he had an income of \$76 per week.

**Robert:** It's just not enough money ... It should be \$100 a week ... You get \$150 for a fortnight. It's got to do two weeks. You got to pay \$50 rent and the \$100 has got to do you two weeks which is impossible.

It must be stated, however, that some young people found their level of income adequate for their needs. This, of course, depends on individual circumstances, such as whether the young person is living in supported or subsidised accommodation or in private rental accommodation. It is clear that the level of government benefits is a major barrier to their moving out of their homeless condition while they rely solely on these benefits.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

The only legitimate way in which homeless young people can secure enough money to allow them to obtain adequate, permanent housing, is to gain employment. However, the fact that they are currently homeless means that their chances of getting employment with remuneration sufficient for them to secure housing are very low, especially when it is remembered that unskilled young people have the highest level of unemployment of any group. Only eleven of the 100 young people interviewed had a job.

### **(a) Difficulties in Obtaining Employment**

Those under school-leaving age experience legal barriers in obtaining full-time employment. Most employers won't employ children under 15. A more common problem for the homeless is that they report that employers discriminate against young people who are not living at home.

Helen: I ... put down that I was living in the Youth Shelter, and 'cos they found that out, they wouldn't let me work there. 'Cos I was homeless and I was in the Youth Shelter they thought 'Oh, yuk, no can't have her here'.

Mandy: I went to a job interview yesterday night, and the lady was really nice to me and she asked me ... if I was living at home, and I said no, and from there on she wasn't nice to me because people just think that if you don't live at home, that must have been your fault. You've done something wrong.

The realities of the homeless lifestyle with its high mobility and the associated factors, such as lack of telephones, also works against the homeless obtaining employment.

Richard: You can't get a job if you got nowhere to sleep, you know ... 'cos if I got a job, you know, I could take pride in it. Turn up for work all neat and tidy. Looking like 'foreman material' is not easy when you are sleeping out or in squats with no amenities like running water or electricity.

### **(b) Difficulties in Maintaining Employment**

Similar factors to those illustrated in the preceding section make it difficult for homeless young people to maintain the jobs that they do obtain.

Simon: Well I had a couple of jobs but you couldn't really last with them 'cos you'd wake up in the morning and you'd be nice and scruffy, your hair would be everywhere ... you wouldn't get to sleep until two in the morning, and when you'd get to work you'd be alright for about an hour and then you'd feel down and out.

Those young people who have been institutionalised had even greater difficulties in maintaining employment. And, as Brian's experience exemplifies, being unable to maintain employment makes it much more likely they will to be involved in illegal activities which result in their being detained again. This is yet another cycle out of which it is very hard to break.

Int: And have you had a job since you came out of Westbrook?

Brian: Yeah, a few times, like I had a job before I went into Westbrook, and when I got out, I got sacked from that because I had to go to Westbrook, then when I got out, got another job, worked there for six months, and I got sacked because me Job Start was up, so three months later you know, all the money I'd saved I ended up spending it and I had not money left and it tempted me and I couldn't get another job and it tempted me to do something.

**Int:** Yeah, break and enter or something.

**Brian:** Yeah, so I broke into this nursing home and got \$5,000 and then I got caught for that later on, and they sent me into Westbrook. Well, they put forty charges on me, and I got let off for those forty charges, and then a week later they kept one charge away, and a week later they brought me in for it and charge me with it, and that's why **I** got locked up two months. I just got out, that's this time. And between all the times I've had jobs.

## **(c) Homelessness Caused by Job Loss**

As mentioned in previous chapters, loss of employment was a direct cause of homelessness for some young people. Being no longer in receipt of an adequate income they will not be able to obtain adequate housing. Tim was receiving adult wages, had organised himself a flat and was doing well.

**Tim:** It was good ... me parents were ... not very far away, if I wanted someone to talk to. I had friends, somewhere to live, had my independence.

**Int:** And why did you leave?

**Tim:** I ran into difficulty. **I** lost my job. I couldn't afford to live there anymore.

There can be no clearer illustration of how, for many young people, unemployment inevitably means homelessness.

## **(d) Marginal Nature of Jobs**

If a young homeless person is able to overcome all of the barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment, he or she will often still find themselves little better off. Most are educationally disadvantaged and unskilled and therefore have access only to poorly remunerated jobs.

**Int:** So, what do you reckon is needed to assist you to achieve the amount of money that you need?

**Tim:** A decent job.

**Int:** And what's stopping you from achieving that?

**Tim:** Oh, at the moment, the problem is urn, education. My education hasn't been furthered enough. I haven't even got my Junior Certificate, which is a big problem.

There is the further problem of the low level of junior rates of pay.

**Tim:** Like, **I** went and seen about a job, on the north side of Brisbane, and it would've cost me just as much as what **I** would've earned, nearly what I was earning, to get there and back by train.

These young people do not get junior rates for transport, junior rates for clothes, junior rates for food or junior rates for housing. But they are expected to survive on junior rates of income. The concern that this society shows for homeless young people is accurately revealed by the amount of money on which we expect them to survive.

## **MARGINAL, EXPLOITATIVE OR ILLEGAL SOURCES OF INCOME**

If, as it has been asserted, these homeless young people find it difficult to get, maintain and then survive on government benefits or employment, the question naturally arises as to how the homeless young do, in fact, survive. The answer is that in many cases they survive on the margins of society through begging and like behaviour, through others exploiting their financial predicament (prostitution) and through illegal activities. The interviews showed that homeless youth people engaged in a wide variety of offending, from avoiding fares on public transport to robbery with violence in order to survive or supplement their income.

### **(a) Begging and Petty Offending**

Typical of almost all of the young people interviewed, was Austin's experience of surviving on the streets.

**Austin:** Oh, I'd ask for money, yes.

**Int:** Did people give you money?

**Austin:** Couple of times.

**Int:** Mm. What sort of people would give you money?

**Austin:** Old people. You know, just 20 cents, you know, something like that, say for a phone call. You could get about \$2 out of that and buy a feed

Begging in the street and fare evasion were common ways of supplementing -and conserving a meagre income.

**Steph:** Yeah, jump the trains. I used to go to Youth and Community to sort of get money, say that I was living on the streets and I used to go down St. Vinni's and Smith Family and get money out of them. They give me about ten bucks or whatever.

### **(b) Stealing**

Somewhat more serious, but also extremely common were stealing and break and enter offences.

**It:** What did you do for food and money?

**James:** Well, we'd go down to shops ... and nick the food and that ... Sometimes we'd go out, break into houses and get the money and that, or go and break into shopping centres or bowling clubs and that.

**It:** What about stealing?

**Tim:** At one stage ... I lost my benefits and that's how I came to get the break and enter charge.

**Int:** And so when you first left home, what did you do for food and money?

**Clare:** Pinched, just pinched it. Just break and enters and all that stuff.

### **(c) Robbery with Violence**

'Rolling' people or robbing people with some degree of violence was not a rare way for the homeless young to obtain money, especially in Sydney.

John: We used to bash poofers to get money. We used to roll people and get money.

Dennis: Or sometimes I'd granny snatch.

Int: Tell me about a granny snatch.

Dennis: You just, when ladies are walking past you just run up and grab their bag or something or

Richard: Yeah. Stack someone and get their money off them.

Int: How often would you think you had to do that?

Richard: Every night.

## (d) Dealing Drugs

A number of young people have also become involved in selling drugs. Normally this involved selling marijuana to friends and acquaintances, and was not very financially rewarding. None of those interviewed seemed to have been the 'Mr or Ms Bigs' of the drug trade. However, drug dealing is a serious offence and can have very serious consequences, especially in Queensland.

**Int:** Have you ever tried drug dealing, selling drugs?

**Jason:** Yeah, I have a couple of times, I've sold marijuana for about two months just to get a bit of money, I didn't get much ... You still need money to buy drugs. You ain't got money to buy them, you can't sell them.

## (e) Prostitution

Some young people, both males and females, were forced into prostitution to obtain an income. It is sometimes, if rarely, highly remunerative.

**Int:** Some kids have to get involved in prostitution.

**Richard:** Yeah. I've had to do that too sometimes.

**Int:** How old were you then?

**Richard:** About fifteen

**Laura:** ... my ex de facto's younger sister she had been working as a prostitute um she was only about 15 or 16 and urn she decided that she was going to go out and get more money so she could pay for all of us at a Hotel and so that's how I decided that I was going to do that sort of work too, I couldn't let her go out and earn money in this way and me get accommodation from it, so I reasoned that I should um do it too.

The involvement of these young people in prostitution is considered in greater detail in a later chapter.

The central point which should be remembered in any discussion c. r youth homelessness, prostitution and crime, is that the vast majority of these young people engage in such activities simply to secure the necessities of life. Jason is 15 years old:

**Jason:** Well I've looked for jobs and because I've got nowhere to stay it's very hard to get a job.

**Int:** Have you thought about knocking over a house or something at the moment?

Jason: Well I have recently. I've been wanting to do one 'cos I've got no money, and I need money to get somewhere to stay and get food, and get a shower and sleep.

**Int:** So you haven't done it yet. You're thinking about it?

**Jason:** I've been thinking about it all the time.

**Int:** What other things do you think you might have to do if you don't get the money soon?

Jason: Like prostitution. Sell meself.

## SHORT TERM AFFLUENCE

Sometimes, through illegal activities, these young people have access to substantial amounts of money. When an interviewee has made a relatively large amount of money, a homeless lifestyle meant they didn't keep it for very long. The features of this lifestyle which minimise their chances of keeping hold of any large amounts appear to be the strong ethic of sharing and the shared taste for living in motels when it can be afforded.

**Linda:** Once you start working, it's just money night after night. I mean I hardly ever used to walk out of the club. A person put \$500 in your hand for the night. I mean, it just gets too much.

**Int:** \$3,500 a week if you work 7 nights. It's a lot of money, isn't it.

**Linda:** Yeah. And I blew it all on drugs and places to stay.

## SUMMARY

Lack of income is a cause and consequence of homelessness. The mechanisms of income support for young people by government fail youth without family support. The eligibility rules are a major barrier to homeless young people obtaining and maintaining benefits. The rate of benefits is such that young people are barred access to secure housing in the private sector. In consequence they are forced into and retained in a state of homelessness.

While employment provides a potential exit from poverty and homelessness, they experience significant barriers to obtaining jobs. Their lack of skills and education ensures that they can only obtain marginal and often poorly paid positions. This factor, plus the lifestyle, means that it is difficult to maintain positions. Loss of employment results in their being forced into homelessness and poverty.

The failure of the legitimate avenues of income support results in young people seeking other sources of income. Some are forced into begging, prostitution and criminal behaviour to obtain an adequate income and shelter.

## Chapter 10

# Education

While some of the young people interviewed had no contact with the police, child welfare or youth services, all had attended school. Schools are potentially in a position to identify and respond to difficulties, to monitor the violation of the rights of the child and to ensure that their right to education is meaningfully met. Yet the young people interviewed had, almost without exception, severed their links with their schools before they had completed grade 12. Many left before Grade 10 or Junior level. Thirty-one left school before the legal leaving age. In the main, just as the child welfare services, the police and the income security system failed these young people, so did the school system.

While the role of families, police, income security, housing and child welfare services in causing and responding to homelessness are frequently considered in great detail, rarely are educational experiences given such scrutiny. It is for this reason that young people's educational experiences are considered in some detail in this chapter. The manner in which schooling is implicated in the process of marginalisation and exclusion of young people is discussed. Young people's attempts to remain in the schooling system are then considered.

### **(a) School as a Process of Marginalisation**

For most of the young people interviewed, their schooling experience was not a happy one. The process of marginalisation, rejection and exclusion experienced in their families was also reflected in their school experiences. In their accounts, they characterise themselves as outsiders in terms of their academic performance and/or their acceptance by their peers and/or interaction with authority and compliance with the system.

#### **(I) Academic performance**

Young people reported that schools had little tolerance for those who experienced difficulty in coping with the academic workload. Sybil says she had a 'reading problem' which caused her to leave at Grade 9.

Sybil: Just completed it, not right at the end though. Urn, I left school because I couldn't do the schoolwork and no-one was willing to help me so I thought I'd be better off out in the workforce.

Int: What would have made school a better place for you?

Sybil: To be able to read and spell, I suppose.

Tom left at Grade 8.

Int: Why did you leave school?

Tom: I wasn't getting nowhere. 'Cos I'm illiterate, I can't read or write.



**Jut:** Is that because of school, or what?

**Tom:** Don't know. Never been able to read or write.

The school system emphasises academic achievement, and seemingly for some equates academic achievement with personal worth.

**Mandy:** You never got any credit for what you did. It was always like a competition, like all the good, smart people sit at the front and all the dumb people sit at the back, and like the teacher would say, oh you know how they've got school pets and class pets, and they'd say 'Oh she got 86 per cent', then she'd be saying to me 'Why didn't you get 86 per cent' and 'Why don't you try harder, I know you can try harder'.

The difficult family lives of many of these young people was, of course, not conducive to scholastic performance.

## **(ii) Relationships with peers**

It has been stressed that young people provided care and support for each other. It is also true that relationships with peers was a cause of distress for some young people. For some, their relationships with peers at schools were characterised by rejection and worse.

**Sybil:** Kids at school were ripping me off because **I** had urn, just because **I** was large and had a reading problem, they didn't want to know you they think 'Go to hell, you're stupid, you don't know anything'.

**Donna:** Not many, I got called, because my sister was called harlot, I got called junior.

**bit:** Oh yeah, yeah. What about you know when you were at schools that your sister hadn't been too?

**Donna:** Nope, didn't have many friends, **I** had all what they urn, dropkicks, what they reject, for friends, 'cos no-one liked them, so I thought that was a bit cruel so I was friends with them.

**Int:** So you did have friends at school?

**Donna:** **About** five. They were all in my class, the lowest.

Donna was discussing the system of grading classes where a given grade or year is divided into classes according to scholastic performance. The education system's stigmatisation and alienation of students as 'rejects' and the 'lowest' is reflected in the bigotry and violence of the schoolyard/playground.

Some dated the difficulties with peers to the experience of moving to a new school.

**It:** What were the problems at school for you, what the major difficulties?

**Laura:** At that time, **I** just couldn't get on with people, **I** mean I've gotten over it now, so **I** can't really understand what was wrong with me in those days, probably had something to do with when I moved away from living with my father, and went to a new town and everything.

Many of those interviewed seem to have had a particularly nomadic school life; usually concomitant with the disruptions to family life of parental separation, leaving home, running away. They report difficulties in reintegrating with peers. Marcus, for instance, dropped out of school at Grade 10 when he found changing schools got too much for him.

**Marcus:** Last year, **I** went to seven different schools. I was just sick of moving around. 'Cos we've moved around all our lives.

For those who failed to achieve academically or socially there was little solace to be found in peers or the educational system. Such young people became increasingly isolated and marginalised at school.

**Tim:** Oh, it's just that **I** used to get picked on all the time.

**It:** Who would pick on you?

**Tim:** Ah, just the, other, **I** was one of those blokes just didn't really hang around with anyone, **I** was just, sort of like, on my own, **I** like being on my own a lot. People used to come up and just, different people at different times, just pick on me.

**Int:** And how did that make you feel?

**Tim:** Lousy.

**It:** Was there anyone at school that you felt that you could tell about it?

**Tim:** Not really.

### **(iii) Interactions with authority**

Schools provide a site of struggle for young people in conflict with adult authority. The accounts of school were often details of the high and low points in the struggle with teachers. Some, like Shelley and Jim, displayed a strong individualism which refused to conform to teachers' expectations of normal behaviour:

Shelley: Well, I used to take a lot of my troubles out on the school, I never really fitted in at school. I mean ... I wasn't scared of them, like, a lot of the kids were scared of the teachers, but I wasn't, **I** never used to care about school. **I** done well, I always done well, that's a funny thing about it. Like when I came up here to Queensland, that wasn't bad for a while till one day, I decided 'I don't like this teacher', it was just something stupid, and she turned around to me, and you know how teachers threaten you and say 'Get up to the office' and the kids just sit there and they let it go. She told me to get up to the office, so I got my stuff and went, she didn't like that one bit. And I slammed the door behind me, she didn't like that at all.

In a system that expects and rewards conformity, dissenting behaviour is not well tolerated. Yet these young people's behaviour can be seen as expressing frustrated creative potential, as well as anger, despair and alienation. The system simply could not bend enough to accommodate (let alone harness) the energy. In Kiley's words 'the rules were too strict'.

The structural and sometimes physical violence upon which the authority of the school system rested and was enforced, at times, resulted in violent outbursts from the students.

**Jim:** Got in fights with teachers when they started picking on them, shit like that. See, that's why **I** went on the alpha course, well, 'cos I hit a teacher.

**Int:** Right.

**Jim:** So, 'cos he was picking on one of me friends, he was only a little fella, he was only about this big, eh, he was only little, so they start pushing him round, so I got up and told him to fuck off. Told me to go sit down, I said 'Do you want to step outside, or something, just leave him alone', and he said, 'Come outside', and **I** said, 'Fair enough'. Comes out and he pushes me against the wall, so **I** just took a round house kick at him. He dropped and I had to go up to the office then. Didn't really press any charges, 'cos every cunt was getting bashed, you know, it was really good. It wasn't really good, I shouldn't have done it, but, I just did.

From one perspective, such action is gross misbehaviour. Yet it must also be seen as symptomatic of young people's alienation from autocratic school authority. Such displays of alienation engender further alienation because of the education system's habitual, commonplace responses involve punishments of physical violence, withdrawal, suspension and expulsion.

**Kiley:** One day in class there was ... **I** don't know ... everybody was chucking things around and they pulls a couple of us up in the office and we were up there and they stuck me in isolation for a week doing no school work or nothing. I said, 'I'm meant to be getting an education here, not just sitting here'.

**Harry:** At Cunnamulla **I** was up at the office every second day and was banned from going to school until 9.30 and had to spend my lunch hour up at the office and about every second day **I** got the cane.

**Steph:** No, I just got bored, and they locked me up in the withdrawal room that's where they put, they have up to three kids and they separate 'em, and you get to go out twice a day for about ten minutes and that's not the times the other kids are out. And every time I got sent out **I** just ran off, I went down to Sydney.

**Int:** Um, the withdrawal room.

**Steph:** Yes, that's when they kicked me out.

For some, their schooling difficulties and education were terminated through expulsion. Others became increasingly alienated and 'drifted' out or were forced out of school. Those who lived their school lives on the outer in relation to authority found their educational opportunity severely curtailed.

Shelley's teacher verbalised the messages implicitly conveyed to the young people in their interaction with the school system:

**Shelley:** My teacher turned around to me and she said 'Why don't you go back where you come from?' and **I** looked at her and I was shocked, you know. She goes 'This class was a good class until you turned up to it'.

Shelley left school at 13.

Through the eyes of these young people, schooling is seen as a process of marginalisation. For a variety of reasons they found themselves on the outer at school: poor academic performance; lack of social skills; the disruptions of changing schools; simply not fitting in with their peers; falling foul of the authority structures; not complying with the school system's expectations of normative behaviour.

The schools' responses further entrenched their alienation: emphasis on scholastic competition and achievement; segregation into classes and streams according to academic performance; and autocratic punishment of 'deviant' behaviour by separation from peers and exclusion from class.

These young people clearly acted out the difficulties they were experiencing in and out of school in the school environment. Yet school rarely provided support or assistance to resolve these difficulties.

**Int:** What were the problems at school for you, what were the major difficulties?

**Laura:** At that time, I just couldn't get on with people, probably had something to do with when I moved away from living with my father, and went to a new town and everything, yeah, from the very first year **I** was there I didn't get on with anybody and I wasn't popular at all, and I probably gave out bad vibes so other people sort of reacted to that maybe.

- Int: Did the school assist you in any way to deal with these problems?
- Laura: No, they just ignored them. They ignored them. Adults have a habit of doing that.
- Int: When the school did notice the changes in your mood, did they ever offer to assist you or help you in any way?
- Thomas: Not really, they just sort of pointed out that I've changed, that's all. I wasn't doing anything bad or just you know wasn't happy anymore. I still keep to myself and all that.

Laura's and Thomas's reflections are perceptive: the school system notices only blatant misbehaviour. In these young people's experience it is equipped to do little else other than ignore the personal needs of the bulk of its students. Through simply ignoring the problems experienced, schools were abetting the social marginalisation of some young people. Unfortunately, others report interactions with the school system that actively excluded them.

Phoebe who liked school, apart from sortie of the teachers, was told she could not succeed as a student:

- Phoebe: When I left Grade 10 the guidance officer said to me it was no use me going on to Grade 12, I'd just passed Grade 10, and um, I guess the guidance officer was just saying that you really have to pass Grade 10 to even get anywhere in Grade 11 and 12.

Jack and Peter both expressed frustration of their experience of school as a large and impersonal system.

- Peter: No friends at school that I could really confide in. You know, 'cos I'd think they're going to tell somebody else and there wasn't really a teacher you could speak to, 'cos didn't have a one on one with the teachers there. And there was only one bloke, Tom Jones, he was a Guidance Officer, I went to see him a couple of time and told him about the situation and he, you know, both times he brought Mum up and nothing happened and then you know he'd been writing down there and he'd chuck you into a file sort of thing, you know, so you'd basically be a piece of paper.
- Jack: There's too many people in the class, and one person gets into trouble and disrupts the whole class.

## **(b) School as a Cause of Homelessness/ Reason for Leaving Home**

Given the experiences reported in the previous section it is no surprise that for one group of young people their difficulties at school were part of the reason for leaving home. Alienation at school has a substantial negative impact on young people's entire lives.

The flow of the process of marginalisation in school to the consequent alienation/dispossession of homelessness is explicit in the story of Dennis. His classroom behaviour was considered intolerable and he was expelled:

- Dennis: Oh, just didn't want to do me work, hassling the teachers, giving 'em heaps, you know swearing in class, I'd make a conversation with the kids and they'd start to talk around, you know ... I got kicked out of school, and then I got kicked, two days later I got kicked out of home for getting kicked out of school.

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Peter also saw his being kicked out of home as a direct result of his experience at school:

**Peter:** School, I didn't like it at all. And, I'd say that's where it started from, 'cos I was a shit at school, that sort of affected.

**Int:** What do you mean, you were a shit at school?

**Peter:** If I didn't want to do something at school, I wouldn't do it. If I didn't want to go, I'd wag it and eventually wound up, you know, Mum kicked me out.

Wendy was a victim of incest who found school much more burdensome than supportive. Her school problems compounded the pressure she felt from other sources. At 14 she tried to escape by running away:

**It:** What sort of solutions had you tried before to try and solve the problem?

**Wendy:** I tried one solution, running away from the problem. I ran away once.

**Int:** Tell me about that.

**Wendy:** I just got sick of it because Mum told me not to tell any of the police or anyone because it's a family matter, should be dealt. I mean ...

**Int:** And did you run away that time?

**Wendy:** Yeah. So, I got all the other problems on top of me. I just had to get rid of them so I just ran.

**It:** What other problems?

**Wendy:** Had school problems. At that time I was going with a guy which gave me hell so I just ran.

It is an indictment on the school system that she, like other young people did not identify schools as a potential source of support and assistance. She was alienated both at home and at school: the two institutions from which she should reasonably expect most support. Yet from those sources (and from her boyfriend) she felt only pressure. And running away alone — seeking not care, but **isolation**, as a source of comfort — reveals a depth of pain, anguish and despair. For Wendy school simply turned the knife of her pain.

## **(c) Impact of Family Difficulties on Schooling**

From the perspective of these homeless young people, the school system is established to accommodate 'nice kids' from stable nuclear families. There is a gross mismatch between the disrupted lives they have lived and the normative expectations of the education system:

**Laura:** The education system in High School is geared to them and their situation of being at home with a family, whereas with me I don't have that family support, either financially or emotionally, and um I sort of feel like a square peg in a round hole urn with sort of the way the school is run.

Like square pegs in round holes these young people's passage through the education system was marked by tension and conflict at the points at which they did not fit. The education system did not accommodate their disrupted home lives.

**Helen:** Yeah, I like school.

**It:** What made you leave?

Helen: I was away from school most of the time. I got behind from everybody else, and I just came to school, and what I was learning at my other school was completely different, even though it was the same subject, they were in a different section to what I was learning. And I just got so behind, I didn't know what I was doing so I just left.

Frequent disruptions to their education meant 'getting behind' at school was common in the experience of these homeless young people. Their home environment — often unstable, violent, neglecting — did not provide the security, support and nurture that the school system expected of it. Without encouragement and support to stay on at school, giving up on a system that has given up on them was also common.

## **(d) The Impact of Leaving Home on Schooling**

Surprisingly, despite all the difficulties, some young people do try to continue schooling after leaving home.

Ian's is a remarkable story of tenacity. He was kicked out of home at 13, in his first year at high school:

**Int:** Okay. And urn, what did you do then when you got kicked out?

**Ian:** I went around to a mate's place and tried to sleep in his shed, then his parents found me and they talked to my parents and I was living with them they helped me through school and urn they said we can't support you, find somewhere else to live and then go, don't go before you find somewhere else, so I went to another mates and I've been around mates houses all me life. Their parents helping bring me up. I was lucky. Even to get through school I reckon I was lucky ...

**Int:** So did the school ever realise that you weren't living at home.

**Ian:** I don't think so, urn, not that I know of.

**Int:** Right, so they never mentioned anything to you, offered you any help or assistance? Okay, and how did you get by for things like school books and school uniforms and stuff?

**Ian:** My parents used to pay for all that.

**Int:** Did they? Fine. And did you ever get any income of your own, did you go on Austudy or special benefits or ... ?

**Ian:** I've had, had a part time job during second, most of secondary school.

**Int:** Secondary school, did you have that job when you left home?

**Ian:** No.

**Int:** Got it after. Urn, was that enough money for you to get by on?

**Ian:** It was \$40 a week.

**Int:** So what was it?

**Ian:** Service station, cleaning, wasn't pumping petrol, self serve. So it was really just cleaning, stacking the fridge.

**Int:** When you left home did you continue to attend the same school?

**Ian:** No I was kicked out of that school, and then I went to another school nearby and then I went to another part of Melbourne and ...

Ian's tenacity was anchored on the conviction that 'you need at least Year 10 to get a decent job'. When he had achieved that, he opted for the greater independence of employment.

**Int:** Yeah, and urn what urn why did you decide you'd leave school?

**Ian:** Went to live out by myself. Decided to go and get a job.

**Int:** Would you have preferred to continue attending school?

**Ian:** I reckon I would have done Year 11.

**Int:** And so urn what stopped you from going into Year **11**. What happened in your housing situation to make you go out on your own?

**Ian:** One of me mates wanted to move out and I said Yeah I'd go with him. Have a chance to support meself for a change.

**Int:** Right, right, Urn, did anyone encourage you to go on to Year 11.

**Ian:** No.

**Int:** No one did. Urn, looking back could school have been made a better place for you in anyway?

**Ian:** I don't know really. No. School was okay. I always enjoyed school.

For other young people like Tony and Ralph, who seem to have habitually absented themselves from school, the move away from home had little impact on their schooling.

**Int:** When you first left home, were you still at school, or had you already left school?

**Tony:** Well, I was, I don't know how to say it. I was sort of at school and I sort of wasn't you know what I mean.

**Int:** You were going but you weren't really involved.

**Tony:** Yeah, like, I was.

**Int:** You fronted up, but you weren't.

**Tony:** I wasn't, I didn't care what happened there.

**Int:** So you were, were you truanting a bit, before you left home?

**Tony:** Yeah, quite a bit.

**Int:** So when you first left home, were you still at school?

**Ralph:** I'm enrolled at school but I never go.

**Int:** Right. Do you wish to go to school?

**Ralph:** Nup.

**Int:** What has the school said to you about um your home?

**Ralph:** Nothin', 'cos I don't go. I only just enrolled and went for about a week this year, then I left.

**Int:** What difficulties have you got with staying at school?

**Ralph:** I dunno, just doesn't make me learn nothin', I don't learn nothin', nothing through goin', so why go?

## (e) Schools' Responses to Young People's Difficulties at Home

Did the schools respond to the difficulties the young people were experiencing at home? In the end, some obviously were not given the chance:

**Int:** So you didn't try to continue at school after you left home? You gave it away?

**Richard:** Plus I hated school all me life.

**Int:** All your life. Was the school ever aware you were having problems at home? That you were unhappy at home?

**Richard:** Nup. I don't tell them nothin'.

**Int:** Was there no one there that you thought you could talk about your problems with? A school counsellor or a special teacher?

**Richard:** Nup.

Such reluctance to seek assistance must be considered in context. Richard was sexually assaulted by his first stepfather, and physically abused by his mother and his second stepfather. He had been taken into care at nine, and left school when he ran away from home at thirteen. His experience of school apparently did not incline him to open up to or trust the teachers.

Carol singled teachers out for special mention in a general distrust of adults. An incest survivor, she said 'all I really wanted was someone to really listen'. None did, she felt.

**Carol:** Like a lot of them just thought, she's only a kid, a silly little kid, exaggerating with everything. I never trusted adults very much in my life.

**Int:** For what reason?

**Carol:** I don't know. I just never have. I do now, like I've been around a lot of adults now, but then I just didn't want them. I didn't even like my school teachers, I hated them.

Linda and John suffered repeated physical abuse as children and would attend school badly bruised.

**Int:** Did school know you were having troubles at home? Did they ever see any marks or bruises or anything?

**Linda:** Yeah. I know my friends saw them.

**Int:** Did anyone at school think, maybe we should do something about this?

**Linda:** My friends, just told me to get outa there. I said, I was gonna.

**Int:** So it never got to the official, like the headmaster or teachers or any of the guidance

**Linda:** They knew, they found out.

**Int:** What was their response?

**Linda:** They couldn't do anything.

**John:** I had bruises all round me legs and I had to go to a swimming carnival the next day at school.

**Int:** Did the teachers notice?

**John:** Yeah.



**Int:** Did they help you in anyway?

**John:** Nope.

**Int:** What did they say?

**John:** Nothing at all. They said, 'What happened to you'. I said 'Got a hiding at home'. They said, 'What for?' I said 'It's none of your business'. 'Cos I used to be a real shit. I hate teachers, they're stagnaters all of them.

In the eyes of students, teachers have great power invested in them by the school system. Yet they wield that power only arbitrarily. They select the young people's minor misdemeanors for judgment and wrath, policing the most trivial misbehaviour, while being blind to or unable or unwilling to intervene in the very serious abuse or neglect that the young people are experiencing from their parents.

The young people's stories, of course, are of widely varied and at times contrasting or contradictory experiences. Their perception of teachers as people showed marked contrasts.

Jason illustrates much of the consensus of opinion, which saw the teachers as 'a pretty uncaring lot'.

**Int:** Did the school know that you were having difficulties at home too?

**Jason:** Kind of in a way they did.

**Int:** Did they do anything about that?

**Jason:** No, they don't help. All they're interested in is getting paid for what they do.

**Int:** So you see them as a pretty uncaring lot?

**Jason:** Yeah.

**Int:** And when did you leave school?

**Jason:** I left in Year 7.

Yet Clare, Robyn, and Kiley tell of individual teachers who were caring. Clare left school at fourteen:

**Clare:** The headmistress really liked me and she felt sorry for me and she said 'OK Clare if you need to come back any time just ring up' and everything, she was really good about it.

**Int:** Was there anyone at school, any adult that you could confide in?

**Robyn:** My Home Economics teacher, Miss Oakley. She was really good. I talked to her heaps.

**Int:** What did she do? Was she helpful in any way?

**Robyn:** She didn't help me out like, telling me where to go and talk to people and stuff like that. She just was somebody to talk to.

**Int:** So she never gave you information?

**Robyn:** No. I didn't. I just talked to her.

**Kiley:** The science teacher. She was really good to me and that.

**Int:** Did she ever assist you?

**Kiley:** She would just help me through with a bit of problems, you know, at home and that. She just said, what she thought about it and how I should go about it.

**Int:** Did you find that helpful?

**Kiley:** Yeah.

As with the child welfare officers, police officers and other adults, once again the young people clearly indicate the need to be listened to: believed, but not controlled or dominated.

Perhaps it is not so much the deficiencies of individual teachers as the deficiency of the education system that precludes schools from responding to the personal needs of these young people. Certainly that is the implied message that Fran and Malcolm have heard.

**Int:** Has the school ever, urn, what has the school done in terms of helping you with your home situation?

**Fran:** Nothing, they can't do anything.

**Int:** Mm.

**Fran:** School's school, you know, you've gotta go, you've gotta go and they can't do nothing.

**Malcolm:** School is there for learning, it's not there for other things.

## **(f) Barriers to Successfully Returning to and Remaining at School**

Some young people do try to return to school after leaving home. Living away from home on a low or no income renders such returns difficult, but not necessarily impossible. A common pattern was however to return to school briefly and again drop out. Roger, for example, left school when he was 'kicked out' of his father's Gold Coast home at 14. He went to live with his mum in Melbourne, and worked for a year (at Coles during the day and at a fish and chips shop at night) before trying to go back and do his junior year (Grade 10). He stayed there for about eight weeks and left again.

**Roger:** The work was a bit on the hard side. Like **I** was always in the top classes in Queensland, down here I was in the second last and last classes, 'cos the work was hard.

**Int:** Did the school ever give you a hand with these problems you were having at home?  
Mm. So like what actually made you leave school?

**Roger:** Just that I'm so used to having money in me pocket before, I just wanted the same money in me pocket.

For those who have lived in a transient, unstable but independent manner for a period, the structure and control of school is hard to accept.

**Simon:** Urn, if **I** tried again now, It'd mean I'd have to sit down and start all the way from the beginning again and I just think it would be harder to actually start off again once you've left and that.

**Int:** You're not sure you could hack it?

**Simon:** Not really no. I tried it once for the college.

Others did 'hack it'. They succeeded in their efforts to re-enter and/or remain in the education system. They were held there by their own determination, sense of commitment to the future and active assistance by the school and teachers. Indeed, those young people from Canberra attending school emphasised the importance of understanding and sympathetic teachers in their continued school attendance.

**Matthew:** It's a very understanding school to the point of doing all that can be done for me.

Int: And have you continued to attend school (since leaving home)?  
 Roy: Yeah.  
 Int: At the same school or another school?  
 Roy: Same school.  
 Int: What was the school's response to your home situation? Did they know what was going on at home?  
 Roy: Yeah, they had to.  
 Int: They had to know. And so how did they respond, were they helpful, or ...?  
 Roy: Yeah, they were.  
 Int: So are you attending school now?  
 Roy: Yep.

Laura, who returned to school after a two year absence, was able to cogently reflect on the range of issue and barriers that confront a homeless young person who seeks to continue their schooling. At the time of the interview she was living in a short-term refuge. She cites three barriers to her continuing education:

### **(<sup>11</sup>) Lack of stable accommodation**

Int: You're actually looking for something that you can live in until you finish ...  
 Laura: I need at least um 18 months accommodation because it just interferes with my schoolwork too much if I had to move every couple of months.

### **(ii) Lack of adequate income**

Laura was receiving Austudy but found it inadequate to cover the cost of living independently:

Int: Okay, so how will you manage?  
 Laura: Well if I don't get a permanent job then I don't know how I'm going to manage, um I'm planning to get a permanent job then find accommodation either share accommodation or possibly boarding accommodation, but if I don't get that permanent job! don't know what I'll do.

### **(iii) The school system's assumptions that students:**

- (a) have family support;
- (b) are not able to be responsible for their own lives and need to be controlled.

**Laura:** Yeah well the education system in High School is geared to them and their situation of being at home with a family whereas with me I don't have that family support, either financially or emotionally and um I sort of feel like a square peg in a round hole um .with the sort of way the school is run with um permission notes and all that sort of thing it's really stupid 'cos I have to write my own urn I get questioned a lot about what I'm doing, where I'm going which I'm not really used to urn, because I sort of make my own decisions about what I do whereas the other kids have other people responsible for them and who make their decisions for them.

Other barriers were identified by other young people.

#### **(iv) Schools' lack of understanding and flexibility in accommodating homeless students.**

**Int:** Can you say what school, what could have been done to make school a better place for you then?

**Malcolm:** I don't think they have any understanding. I mean schools ... I don't know. Because half the school wasn't homeless — there was only me that I knew of, so they couldn't really make a special thing for us. I don't know. I think school is there for learning, it's not there for other things, I think.

#### **(v) A clash between the lifestyle of homelessness and lifestyle imposed by schools' expectations**

**Int:** What sort of hassles did you have in trying to keep going to school, when you were away from home?

**Peter:** Oh, basically getting clothing, being tired.

**Int:** Mm. Not having your clothes, and being tired.

**Peter:** Yeah, yeah, 'cos I'd be up late some nights and ah.

#### **(vi) Young people's perception that school was irrelevant to their daily lives because they had a daily struggle for survival**

**Malcolm:** I know myself that I've got enough intelligence to survive. I don't need that. All it is is on paper.

#### **(vii) Lack of resources**

**Int:** And how did you manage that not having anywhere to live?

**Sarah:** You don't need it, just carry school books around and that and a school bag.

**Int:** Who helped you to buy your books and things?

**Sarah:** Well I kind of bludged and stole most of the time.

**Int:** Just before you left home, were you at school or a job?

**Thomas:** Yeah, I was at school, I was at school.

**Int:** Did you wish or do you wish to continue attending school?

**Thomas:** When I get a fair bit of money to pay school, I mean, like I'll be supporting myself, you know, house, food, works, then add school on top of that like I have to have a fair bit of money. You know, if I do that in a couple of years time, I do intend in going back to school, finish off Year 12 and you know, maybe go to Uni or do a TAFE course, something like that. It depends.

#### **(viii) Stigma of homelessness/institutionalisation**

**Int:** Had it been hard trying to go to school with the problems you had, in Philip House and things?

- Jill:** Yeah, it did. There was a lot of us that did go to that school from a House, and you just get hassled at school all the time.
- Int:** Why was that?
- Jill:** So that you're in a home, you got no parents.

## **CONCLUSION**

Young people's experiences in the education system, in the main, were not positive. Difficulties at school were again both a cause and consequence of homelessness. The pattern of relations **in** school contributed to the process of domination and oppression of these young people and their consequent alienation. Rather than providing a domain where young people were respected and supported, where assistance was perceived as a possibility, and where major efforts were directed towards maintaining young people in education, schools provided a context which further marginalised and excluded young people. Once again their legitimate avenues for support and assistance were experienced as not offering real alternatives to the problems at hand. For homeless young people, school is an option only for the strongest and most resourceful. Yet, provided with an educational environment respectful of young people and sensitive to the lifestyle difficulties of homeless youth, many young people will choose to continue with their education.

In the preceding four chapters we have examined young people's interactions with the key social institutions that have responsibilities to them. Each potentially could play a role in preventing young people from becoming homeless, in mitigating the consequences of homelessness and in facilitating young people's efforts to obtain stable, secure accommodation. In relation to these young people the institutions of social support have failed and hence have contributed to the extent of consequences of youth homelessness.

The failure of these institutions has serious consequences for young people and society. In the next five chapters the consequences of homelessness are considered in terms of the young people's physical and mental health and their involvement in violence. Prostitution and other forms of exploitation and abuse are also considered.

## Chapter 11

# Physical Health

In this chapter we discuss the manner in which pre-existing illnesses are aggravated by homelessness, the development of health problems related to their lifestyle and the barriers which were experienced in obtaining adequate health care.

### PRE-EXISTING ILLNESS AGGRAVATED BY HOMELESSNESS

Homeless young people suffer from all of the illnesses common to adolescents generally. Respiratory illnesses, in particular asthma, were common. Having no, or poor, housing and limited access to health services, appeared to lead to an aggravation of these conditions.

Simon has had asthma for as long as he can remember. Living in squats has probably not helped this condition.

**Simon:** You've always got to have your spray because you find it pretty dusty living close to the floor. I woke up a couple of times choking to death in the night.

Liza suffered from recurrent skin infections.

**Int:** Have you ever had medicine or tablets prescribed by a doctor and been unable to get them?

Liza: Plenty of times ... I wouldn't have the money.

**Int:** Can you remember what that was for.

Liza: A lot of it was antibiotics ... I get a lot of infections in my skin ... when I get my infections I get really sick ... [and] I haven't been able to get the antibiotics.

As well as the physical realities of homelessness which aggravated pre-existing illness, the psychological factors may also play a role in aggravating illnesses. These young people experienced considerable mental stress. It would seem likely that this also contributes to the health problems in this group of people.

### LIFESTYLE RELATED PROBLEMS

The health problems of adolescents are frequently caused by aspects of their lifestyle, including their proclivity for engaging in risktaking behaviours. The abuse of drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, was prevalent amongst these young people. Indeed, alcohol and drugs were frequently used to dull the pain of daily existence.

High risk and self-damaging behaviour are discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but are mentioned here only in relation to the physical problems they cause.

John had a number of lifestyle related problems, and was used to 'non-stop smoking pot and drinking'. Although he had ended up in hospital, he didn't seem too concerned.

**John:** Like me lungs and kidneys are stuffed ... but me arms and me legs, me bones still work. So as far as I'm concerned, I'm alright.

This lack of concern for physical health was a common feature of youth interviewed. Drug abuse and poor diet were also often related.

**Mandy:** I've been sick 'cos I haven't been eating. I've been really sick because I didn't get the right vitamins.

Young women had particular problems related to the violence, sexual abuse and exploitation to which they were subject. Maria was bashed and had several ribs broken by the male she was forced to live with because she was homeless. This appears to have caused more serious problems.

**Maria:** I've got to go and have an operation on my rib. I've got this lump on it and they're going to operate on that for me and I haven't been able to hold my food down, so I'm not allowed to eat for a couple of days and use fluids.

Whilst some of these problems may be ameliorated by effective preventive health schemes and by giving these young people health information in ways they can understand, it seems clear that most will continue to suffer from these problems until they are given viable and meaningful lifestyle choices. It may not be possible at the moment to give them loving and supportive families. It should however be possible to attack the poverty in which most of them are forced to live.

## **ACCESS BARRIERS TO HEALTH SERVICES**

Regardless of the aetiology of the health problems experienced by homeless youth, these young people experience great difficulties in obtaining effective treatment from conventional health services. The most significant of the barriers to health care identified was cost.

### **(a) Cost**

Many young homeless people did not seek medical attention when it was needed because they believed they could not afford it.

**Int:** Have you ever been able to get any good medical help for your health?

**Trish:** No. I haven't really tried because I thought most of the places you have to pay.

Many doctors do require payment from patients, rather than direct billing the government. Most young people interviewed didn't have either a Medicare card or a Health Care card, and some did not know about how to obtain them.

**Int:** Have you got a Medicare card?

**Robert:** No, but I want to get one. I don't know how to do it.

**Int:** What about a Health Care card? You haven't got a Health Care card but you're on Social Security.

**Robert:** Yeah. I haven't got a Health Care card yet, but they might send me one.

In addition to this, a significant number were not in receipt of any Social Security benefits and were thus ineligible for a Health Care card.

Despite this, many did consult a doctor for medical assistance. The benefit gained from these consultations was greatly reduced when as frequently happened, the young person was unable to afford to have the prescriptions filled.

**Int:** Have you ever had any medicine or tablets prescribed by the doctor?

**Tracey:** Yeah.

**Int:** And not had the prescription made up?

**Tracey:** A couple of times.

**Int:** Why wouldn't you get the prescription made up?

**Tracey:** Lack of money.

**Int:** You ever had medicine or tablets prescribed and not been able to get them because of no money?

Simon: You bet, quite a few actually, I just haven't had the money to pay for them so I usually just throw away the prescription.

Other health services, such as physiotherapy and dental care were beyond the reach of the young people who required them.

Sybil: I have to go to physio. I am supposed to swim every day for my back muscles and that. Can't afford to go to the pool. Supposed to go to physio **but** it's **\$50** a pop each time you go.

**Int:** What about at the public hospital?

Sybil: No, you're waiting up to six weeks to two months to get in.

The professed rationale for the introduction of the Medicare Scheme was that health care should be available to all Australians, regardless of their means. From what homeless young people report, universal health care has not, as yet, effectively covered them.

## **(b) Poor Treatment**

Another barrier for these young people in accessing health care was their previous unsatisfactory medical experiences. Laura was admitted to hospital after she took an overdose.

**Int:** Now did those people in the unit give you good care?

**Laura:** No, they didn't. They were awful actually when I first got there they were very, very cynical about what I was doing and urn maybe they thought I just wanted cheap accommodation or something, I don't know, but they were pretty cynical. They treated me like a bit of shit.

Liza sought treatment from a public hospital.

**Liza:** Well I went there once 'cos I had a sponge caught inside me and he treated me like, the doctor really treated me like a bit of crap and I didn't appreciate it, and every time, and when I was in there the nurses picked on me because I had tattoos, and one turned around to, urn, there was an ambulance guy putting the thing in my arm, and he



couldn't find my vein and so he took his glove off to feel for a vein and she came along and turned around to me, turned around to him and said — 'Oh put your glove back on you could catch anything off people with tattoos like her'.

## APPROPRIATE SERVICES

The one optimistic feature of the discussion of health problems with homeless youth was that when there was a health service designed to meet their needs, they were prepared to use it. The absence of such services in most locations and the need for them was clear.

One health service set up to this end, which was held in particularly high esteem by young homeless people, was the Kirketon Road Clinic in Sydney.

**Mandy:** The place where I always go for medical health is at Kirketon Road Clinic.

**Int:** Have they always been helpful, Kirketon Road and other people?

**Mandy:** Yeah.

**Int:** Do you think that young people should have the right to adequate medical services?

**Linda:** Yeah.

**Int:** Do they get that right?

**Linda:** At Kirketon Road they do. But if they don't know about Kirketon Road ...

Once more the message is clear. Young people are prepared to ask for assistance if that help is provided in an appropriate non-threatening and non-controlling manner.

## Chapter 12

# Mental Health

Homeless young people have a high risk of depression and suicide. Of those interviewed, more than three quarters report episodes of serious depression and slightly less than one third have made direct attempts at suicide. Many others also report episodes of non-suicidal self-harm.

### SUICIDE AND DEPRESSION

**Int:** Have you ever thought about harming yourself?

**Fran:** Yeah, I tried to take overdoses, tried to get run over, tried to stand in front of a train. I've tried everything.

Fran expressed the overwhelming feeling of hopelessness that others shared.

**Fran:** I don't know. The way I feel ... 'cos you can't survive, so why live, if you can't survive? That's what I keep saying to myself.

John had fled from a very unhappy home and had drifted into an itinerant lifestyle.

**John:** [After leaving home] I went mad. I went psycho. I wanted to jump off Sydney Harbour Bridge at one stage, get run over a few times hitching up here. Life's just all hassle for me at the moment. ... Like the sort of problems I've got at home, I got. Like, most people ... they don't know what its really like on the streets. They've never been on the streets — always had a home. And that's why you sometimes get a bit depressed.

Loneliness and vulnerability were often at the centre of these young people's feelings of depression.

**Jason:** When you're on the street you feel defenseless and upset because you've got nowhere to go ... I've thought of hanging myself because people kept pushing me around.

Young people continued to view suicide as a viable option, even if attempts failed.

**Shelley:** [I've made a] suicide attempt.

**Int:** And what sort of experiences have they been for you?

**Shelley:** Pretty shitty.

**Int:** Yeah. Why?

**Shelley:** I suppose it doesn't really help ya, sort of makes you feel worse. You try and you don't succeed and it makes you feel even worse ... Makes you feel like a failure ... I still want to do it ... I'll keep trying 'til I finally do it, too.

It is difficult to adequately convey the feeling of hopelessness and despair that pervades so many of the interviews. However, the following statement by Austin aptly summarised the lack of hope that characterised the lives of many.

**Int:** In terms of your dreams for the future, your hopes for yourself, what do you most hope for?

**Austin:** What do I most hope for?

**Int:** **Mm.**

**Austin:** **That** I die pretty quick.

## SELF HARM

Young homeless people's inability to have any effective input into decisions which effect their conditions of life in either the macro sense, such as Social Security payments, or the micro sense, such as rules in youth shelters, leads to anger with and alienation from what they perceive as an uncaring adult society. This socially-imposed impotence leads to high levels of violence in this group — violence which can be directed either outward or inward. It is in the area of self-harm that it is easiest to see this inward direction of violence and anger.

**Fiona:** Sometimes I get depressed and then I hurt myself.

**Int:** Do you?

**Fiona:** Like I did my knuckle on the weekend ... must have hit a rock and hurt myself.

**Int:** Why do you think you just hurt yourself?

**Fiona:** I don't know. Because I'm too gutless to hurt anyone else. I can't do it.

Another illustration of the internalised anger associated with self-harm is given by Donna.

**Int:** Have you ever thought of harming yourself?

**Donna:** Yeah, got lots of scars on me arms, everywhere, in there.

**Int:** So you don't just think about it [harming yourself], you just do it?

**Donna:** I do it. I don't want to kill meself, I, I, sometimes I want to kill meself, but I don't want to kill meself. Got too much to live for.

**Int:** **But** you sometimes feel like harming yourself?

**Donna:** Uhm. If people get me really going I'll go for it.

This phenomenon of non-suicidal self-harm is rarely seen in adults, but is characteristic of this group of young people.

**Debbie:** **Nup**, I just **do** it. If I don't want to kill myself, I just cut myself, and I've got all these little scars along there.

**Gavin:** I've got a love heart and I scratched an anarchy sign, it's pretty hard to see. Banging my head against the walls and stuff like that. I had it scrapped on my arm, it wasn't that major, but it hurt.

**Int:** So how did it make you feel after you'd done that?

**Gavin:** Better. It's really weird now. I don't know. Started to get into my blood, but mainly drugs, get out and don't think about it.

Sometimes the desire for self-harm leads to acts of violence.

**Int:** Have you ever felt like hurting yourself?

**Linda:** If I feel like hurting myself, I go out and do it.

**Int:** Go out and hurt yourself?

Linda: Yeah. I get into a fight and ... I try and pick on somebody that'd be able to beat me. But it doesn't work out that way.

Violence is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However the very close connection between depression, self-harm and violence is shown in this extract.

**Sarah:** I get depressed sometimes, I feel hopeless, I feel like a reject sometimes because I haven't got a job ...

**Int:** So has this sort of situation sort of led you to thinking of harming yourself.

**Sarah:** No, I think about harming other people. I won't kill myself, I'll go and kill someone else ... Oh sometimes I punch walls ... I smash glasses, kick holes in walls and punch holes in walls.

**Int:** And do you think this is sort of solving it?

**Sarah:** No way, I reckon I'm mental. It's a natural reaction. Some people cry first, I don't, I hit. I don't cry when I'm angry, I cry when I'm hurt and I punch things when I hurt. But it's always punch first, cry later

## DRUG ABUSE

Young people's inability to change any of the forces which control the quality of their lives, leads to feelings of impotence and thus anger. This anger can manifest itself in a number of ways. Besides depression and self-harm, drug abuse was a very common manifestation, and is closely inter-related to the other manifestations.

**Kerry:** ... I slashed my wrists a couple of times.

**Int:** Trying to just get out of it, so you don't feel it?

**Kerry:** Yeah. That's the main reason I got into drugs.

Stop the hurt.

**Kerry:** Yeah.

**Int:** What do you do when your emotional health is not good?

**Gavin:** Just get drunk, smoke dope, pop pills, stuff like that.

The process of self medication may to some extent be behaviour learnt from the law-abiding' adult world. It does, however, carry with it some very serious consequences. Heroin use is not rare in this group of young people.

**Robyn:** I get depressed sometimes because I just feel that I'm not ... I just sit down and think about that I'm not really going anywhere. But I just don't really care. As long as I'm happy that's all I really care about. Just get some stuff that Joe ... smack.

The main danger in the use of illicit drugs to deal with feelings of depression, besides whatever consequences the drugs themselves may have on the individual's mental health, is the possibility of detection and consequent criminalisation. This criminalisation can lead to further homelessness and consequent misery.

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## **CONCLUSION**

Young people are denied access to the political and legal systems which are utilised by others in society to press for change. This socially imposed impotence generates overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and anger. The consequences of homelessness are life threatening. We should not be surprised when anger and despair results in self destruction. Nor should we be surprised when it leads to violence directed at others.

## Chapter 13

# Violence

The lives of most young homeless people have been, and are, permeated with violence. It is a recurring motif in their view of the world and their roles in it. The majority of young homeless people come from violent environments where they have been treated violently and live under the constant threat of violence after they leave home. It is not surprising then that some of them, in turn, use violence as a major weapon in their limited armories of ways of dealing with a violent world.

### VIOLENCE AT HOME

A significant number of young people left home, as has been discussed, because of abuse in the home. Most endured the abuse over many years.

This constant level of violence and the reliance of parents on harsh physical discipline was characteristic of most of the families of origin of the young homeless people. Indeed violence is sometimes seen as a proper part of the parental role.

Maria: ... he still used to hit me a lot, bash me a lot, that's when he started to care more.

Thus, bashing becomes related to caring.

However, at a certain point, all did begin to object to being abused.

Jack: ... my push bike was stolen. It was at a second-hand shop and I didn't have the money to get it out ... Anyway, he came home drunk one night and said 'Where's your bike'. And I just said 'I haven't got the money yet'. Bang, he just hit me. He went berserk. That was two days before I left home.

Linda was nine years old when she decided she had had enough.

Linda: . .,I'd been jiggling school a fair bit, yes ... my father just went off his rocker.

Int: Did he hit you again?

Linda: Yeah. And then I went back to my friend's place and stayed there for the weekend. Then we went and saw the coppers and they took me back home and then I got another flogging. So I just thought, that's it, I'm just leaving, packing stuff and I just left. I just ran.

The violence that these young people have suffered is not confined to bashings. For example, Shelley was shot, Liza was stabbed and had her jaw broken, Linda sustained fractures, Jill was bashed with cricket stumps and Robyn was bashed with stubbies. It is through such experiences that young people first learn that violence is an acceptable method of getting your own way or of resolving problems.

However, it is little wonder that after years of abuse, they have developed strong feelings of impotence and anger.

**Int:** How often would you like to see your father?

**Kerry:** Just once. Get a gun and go bang.

It is little wonder that some of these young people become violent.

## VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENCE

To be homeless is to be vulnerable to violence. Being on the streets with no shelter or having insecure shelter such as squats, leaves the young person open to violent attacks.

Jim had had trouble from the police when he was sleeping out.

**Jim:** See, if you tell them where you're staying, they come and beat you up while you're asleep.

**Int:** And has that happened to you?

**Jim:** Yeah, while you are asleep they come ... and find you and while you're asleep they kick you and wake you up, then hit you in the mouth or something. It's a real shit.

**Int:** How many times would that have happened to you?

**Jim:** Just about twice.

Young women who are without housing or with only insecure housing are in added danger of sexual violence. However, young women who are homeless and who enter relationships with men who provide shelter, are also vulnerable to physical assaults.

**Mandy:** I got bashed up a couple of times, but after awhile he just used to push me round a lot and overpower me and treat me as if I was a piece of dirt.

**Int:** Did you try and get any help to stop that?

**Mandy:** Yeah, but nobody can do anything about it because I tried to leave, but every time I left they'd follow me or find me somehow ... he used to always get me to come back.

Even young people who have accommodation in a youth shelter are vulnerable to abuse. Gavin was sexually abused by a worker in emergency accommodation.

**Gavin:** The people he associated with found out, were very angry with him.

**Int:** So that makes you feel a bit funny?

**Gavin:** It makes me feel like punching his head against the wall.

Those young people who have lived in state institutions also have been subjected to assault by staff.

**Liza:** ... I was there three months in another cottage where I was belted up by the house father. He grabbed me and threw [me], picked me up and threw me against the wall, and held me up there.

The young women who became involved in prostitution faced particular problems.

**Liza:** ... he used to belt all his girls up and so I took off and then he told everyone around the place that he would get me back and give me the belting of my life. I carry a knife on me, that's how scared I am up here.

To some extent being subject to violence was seen as inevitable, and if it was inevitable it could not be the subject of complaint.

**Ann:** I've only been bashed at a max four times. That's it. So it's not that common. I've seen people bashed but they've always deserved it.

**Int:** And when you were bashed those four times did you have to go to hospital or get treatment?

**Ann:** I went to hospital once.

**Int:** What was wrong with you?

**Ann:** Two broken ribs, a black eye, and dislocated jaw. But I deserved it.

**Int:** It was a very severe bashing though.

**Ann:** That's when I was using the needle. I deserved it.

**Int:** Well what made him bash you then? What was it?

**Ann:** He'd been there and done it all before.

**Int:** Yeah. But what gave him the right to bash you?

**Ann:** 'Cos I was a friend.

**Int:** What, did he think you'd deceived him somehow, taken him for a ride?

**Ann:** I don't know. He done it 'cos he cared.

Such experiences which lead young people to believe that it may be alright for someone to bash them, inevitably lead to the belief that it is alright to attack someone else. Richard was asked what he needed to get an adequate income.

**Richard:** Do you want me to be quite honest?

**Int:** Mm.

**Richard:** 44 and about a kilo of heroin. That'd keep us all alive.

**Int:** What's 44?

**Richard:** Magnum.

**Int:** So you're not thinking in terms of legal ways?

**Richard:** There is no legal way on the street.

Richard believed young people would steal and assault people even if they had access to money by legitimate means:

**Richard:** That's right. Because you know, it's just instinct. You see somethin and you think fuck that, it might not be there tomorrow, you know, and I might need it by then. You take it anyway, just in case.

## A LIFESTYLE OF VIOLENCE

Many of the young homeless people interviewed were angry. They were angry with the families that had abused them, and angry with the society that had subjected them to such violence and which did not allow them any other options. And angry people can become violent people.

One of the more common ways in which these young people used violence was as a means of solving inter-personal problems. Street violence amongst the long-term homeless in Kings Cross seemed common.

**Int:** Ever thought about harming other people?



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Tony: In what way?  
Int: Hitting them, rolling them.  
Tony: Ah, that goes on every day up here.  
Int: Yes, but have you ever felt like doing that to other people. Do you ever get so angry with the world that you feel like doing this?  
Tony: Yeah.  
Int: You want to take it out on somebody?  
Tony: Yeah. Everyone takes it out on everyone up here. The mob I hang around with ...  
**Int:** In the mob, or the people on the street?  
Tony: Ah, it all depends, like if someone says something on the street against the mob, or like, we always back each other up, we're always fighting. That's how I got my black eye, I backed me mates up. People were fighting and I just said 'I'll do it for you, just cop this' and that's the way it goes, you just back your friends up. We fight nearly, sort of, every couple of days up here, always fighting.  
**Int:** Why do you like fighting?  
Linda: That was the way I was brought up. My father used to be a boxer and he taught me how to fight. He used to be a champion.  
Int: Has that helped you survive on the streets?  
Linda: Except for last night, yeah.  
**Int:** You've hurt your eye, haven't you?  
Linda: I got into one fight too many last night. I'd been drinking all day.  
Int: You can't fight if you're not sober. How bad's your eye? Not too bad, bad enough.  
Linda: The other chick came out worse.

Street violence amongst homeless youth rarely comes to public or police attention, except if someone is seriously hurt or killed. However, when violence is directed at persons other than homeless youth, it is a matter of public and police concern.

Serious violence was reported by those associated with robberies. It appeared from several interviews that quite often robbery was accompanied by a level of violence that went beyond that which would have seemed necessary to effect the robbery and this violence was an acting out of an unfocused anger with the world.

**Richard:** [The first time I did a 'roll' I] took all his money off him and cut his throat. Doesn't worry me we have got to live somehow.

**Int:** What happened with him?

Richard: Nothing. Just went to hospital.

Int: Charged with A and B.

Richard: Yeah. Didn't cut 'im up that bad.

Int: So was that always part of the scene in the last four years in terms of getting money?

Richard: Yeah.

**Int:** Was it a regular thing?

Richard: Yeah.

Int: How often would you think you had to do that?

Richard: Every night.

Int: Every night? For four years?

Richard: Mm.

Tracey also had violently assaulted someone in the course of robbery.

Tracey: I'm up for attempted murder now. I got to go to court, I rolled this guy.

Int: You hurt him pretty bad.

Tracey: I broke a bottle over his head ... I was angry.

Int: Did you know him?

Tracey: No.

Int: What do you think that's all about, what do you get so angry about?

Tracey: Everything.

## **SUMMARY**

Homeless young people's lives are permeated by violence. They have been subjected to it as family members and live with the threat of it on the street and in insecure accommodation. Violence can become a strategy to resolve problems and to obtain an income. This is all more or less understandable. However, the more serious, unfocused violence discussed above can also only be understood in the context of these young people's lives. The young who do behave in this manner have usually experienced many years of poverty and homelessness, living in squats or on the streets. Life is a daily struggle for survival. They have been brutalised throughout their lives.

Unless we as a society respond to youth homelessness in an effective manner, the consequences will be felt not just by the young people themselves, but by all of society.



## Chapter 14

# Prostitution

In all major cities there appears to be a highly profitable industry which relies, at least in part, on a constant supply of homeless young people. Both males and females become involved in prostitution. Their motivation for this is clear.

**Tom:** Oh at the Cross I done it a couple of times to get some money.

Gavin was forced into prostitution when he arrived on the Gold Coast from Melbourne.

**Int:** How did you get into that?

Gavin: Nowhere to live, no money.

All of the young people who had engaged in prostitution came to it as a choice between it or continued homelessness. Almost all believed there was a stigma attached to it.

**Len:** Like people they think its stupid selling your body to other people. But when you really need money, you can do with it.

Linda began working in a parlour in Kings Cross when she was 14 years old.

**Linda:** Well, once you get ... Once you start working, it's just money, night after night. I mean, I hardly ever used to walk out of the club. A person put \$500 in your hand for the night. I mean, it just gets too much.

**Int:** \$3,500 a week if you work 7 nights. It's a lot of money, isn't it?

**Linda:** Yeah. And I just blew it all on drugs. And places to stay.

Liza was 16 years old when she began work as a prostitute in a parlour.

**Liza:** That's when I came to the Cross. The government knew I was doing it. Youth and Community Services ... knew I was doing it, 'cos they were giving me no assistance. And I lived at work.

She said that she only became involved in prostitution because she needed somewhere to stay. Eventually Liza decided to give it up. However, this was not an easy process.

**Liza:** I carry a knife on me, that's how scared I am up here ... [My boss], he used to belt all the girls up and so I took off and then he told everyone around the place that he would get me back and give me the belting of my life.

When she was interviewed, Liza had not gone back to prostitution, but was being refused assistance again by the Department of Family and Community Services. She thus had no legitimate income.

**Liza:** I thought about prostitution again but I know myself I wouldn't be able to earn a lot. I actually threatened the government this morning about committing suicide 'cos I can't take much more of it, but no, I couldn't do it: I've thought about it [prostitution], but it's not something I want to do.

Prostitution appears to be an integral part of the lives of most young homeless people in Sydney, who tend to congregate around Kings Cross. Both males and females are vulnerable to its offers of money. Even those who haven't got involved appear to have considered it very seriously.

**Marion:** Never had to crack it. I've thought about it. No. I'd rather go to jail than fuck and get AIDS or something. Or get raped.

Not all prostitution is conducted in parlours. Sometimes young people get involved in a less organised way as a result of a particular set of circumstances.

**Laura:** The accommodation they had wasn't very good, it was just staying at this lady's place and we couldn't really stay there as a group for very long and urn the girl, my ex de facto's younger sister, she had been working as a prostitute urn she was only about 15 or 16, and urn she decided that she was going to go out and get more money so she could pay for all of us at a Hotel and so that's how I decided that I was going to do that sort of work too. I couldn't let her go out and earn money in this way and me get accommodation from it so I reasoned that I should urn should do the same thing rather than use her money.

Harry summarised how this form of 'hidden' exploitation arises out of the limited options which young homeless people find themselves.

**Harry:** Depends on what extent they want to go to get accommodation. Like if they don't want to live at home because they argue with their parents, or something like that, they've either got to pull themselves together and go back home and not argue or find somewhere else, prostitution I suppose would help. Find accommodation as long as you sleep with the person that's giving you the accommodation.

These young people were all aware that rich adults were exploiting them because they were poor and homeless. Most of them decided in the end that it was better for them to be poor or to get money in other illegal ways.

**Petra:** I had more money when I was working on the street. But I don't think I'm worse off now.

It is an indictment of this society's treatment of young homeless people that they must make similar decisions to that of Petra — whether to be engaged in prostitution or whether to be poor. It is often argued that prostitutes become involved in the trade as a result of fully-informed, unpressured free choice. It is clear that this is not the case with these young people. The young homeless become involved in prostitution as a direct consequence of the poverty and the lack of legitimate access to a liveable income and secure housing.

## Chapter 15

# Exploitation and Abuse

Young people who are homeless are particularly vulnerable to all forms of exploitation and abuse, because of their poverty, their lack of adequate housing, their lack of legitimate options and choices and their lack of family support. Prostitution, as already discussed, is a common way in which young people are exploited. In this chapter several other forms of exploitation and abuse to which this group of people are subjected are identified and illustrated.

## EMPLOYMENT

### (a) Wages

Due to lack of experience or advice, and their sometimes urgent need for money when they have no income, young homeless people can be exploited by employers. Usually the positions they obtain are unskilled, temporary and poorly unionised. In such situations, they have very little protection and few means of seeking redress.

**Marcus:** Yeah. Then I went to Sydney, this place, I got a job car detailing.

**Int:** Yes. That was a full time job.

**Marcus:** Yes. Six days a week.

**Int:** Mm. Well, more than full time. How much did you get paid for that?

**Marcus:** \$150. I was stupid, they ripped me off.

**Int:** **Did** they? In what way?

**Marcus:** Taxed me too and they never give me a tax return or nothing.

**Int:** Right, right. You mean they took money out for tax.

**Marcus:** Yeah and never got no tax form or nothing in my pay packet or nothing.

**Int:** Is there any way that you can deal with that?

**Marcus:** I don't really want to. As far as I'm concerned, it's over.

Jim managed to address the problem of his exploitation in employment:

**Jim:** They gave me about \$50 for 40 hours. I told them, I told them, 'That's not right' I said, 'You better give me award wage or I'm going to talk, to the unions about it'. And they said, 'Oh sorry, it's our mistake'. They always back down when you say you're going to go to a union, and I meant it.

Instead of adopting Jim's approach and challenging exploitation, often young people just put up with it because they had no other choice if they wished to keep the job.

**Int:** You've felt that you've sometimes not received the right wages for the work that you've done. Do you think that's common?

**Tracey:** Probably, because you're young and there's so much unemployment around they can reduce the money, so if you don't want to take lower wages there are plenty of other people that will take it, doesn't matter.

Maria had had two jobs in which she was 'ripped off' financially and in one she was subjected to sexual exploitation.

**Maria:** Well when I was working, I never got paid the right wages, that was at Hot Chick when I worked at a job there, and at a Bakery I got \$150 a week. That was alright but they just kept on harassing me. There was a young guy that I went out with, and then I found out that he just used me. Then he put me name around as a tart where I worked, so I had to leave.

**Int:** So with the Hot Chick unpaid wages, were you able to get your wages.

**Maria:** All I got was \$3.55 an hour. And I worked seven days, one day from 7.30 in the morning to 10.30 at night, and all I got that week was \$85.

## (b) Sexual Exploitation

Maria's experience of sexual harassment at work was not uncommon amongst the young women. Whilst a woman does not have to be young or homeless to experience sexual harassment or exploitation, these factors did appear to aggravate their vulnerability. The only option which they felt they had to stop the harassment was to leave the job.

**Mandy:** I've worked in a fashion boutique, but I got harassed by the boss's father, so I didn't

- want to work there 'cos I didn't want him to touch me you know, just because his son was paying my wages.

Gwenn is another homeless young woman who was forced to abandon a job because of sexual harassment, this time from the employer.

**Int:** Was there any particular reason why you lost that job?

**Gwenn:** Because he was a dirty old man.

**Int:** Did he harass you?

**Gwenn:** Oh, a lady I knew worked there before and he was pinching her on the bum and getting you into a corner and things like that, and one time he got me into a corner and turned off the lights, ... pinching my bum and I said 'That's it', and I was asked why I left and said 'cos I felt like it', I didn't tell her why.

Financial and sexual exploitation of young homeless people in the work place is probably inevitable when they are not given any substantive protection by unions or government bodies.

## ACCOMMODATION

### (a) Sexual Exploitation

Homeless young women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

**Sybil:** Yeah, I did sleep with people for a roof over my head. Urn, not for money.

**Int:** Sounds to me as if you have very little choice.

**Sybil:** I didn't have any choice. It was either that or be out in the cold. I'd look at them, size them up and I wouldn't care what they said, I'd just leave them, just for that time, 'cos I wanted somewhere to stay, something, someone to talk to, somewhere to stay, something, someone to talk to, someone to love me in the way I wanted to be loved.

Because of the exigencies of finding shelter when living on the streets or sleeping out, many young people will take up with strangers if they are offered accommodation. This, of course, has many dangers for young women. Young men are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Gerard had been sexually exploited when he was staying with an adult.

**Int:** You were staying there because you didn't have anywhere else to stay?

**Gerard:** Yeah.

**Int:** And you were exploited by staying there?

**Gerard:** Yeah.

**Int:** They were paying you to have sex with [them]. They sexually exploited you.

**Gerard:** Yes.

**Int:** And would you have got into that situation if it wasn't for the fact that you needed money?

**Gerard:** Correct.

Regardless of the specifics of individual cases of sexual exploitation, it, in effect, robs the young person of their last possession.

**Petra:** Well, they took the only thing that I did have, really. I mean if you've got nothing material, if they start taking your personality and things like that, you don't have much left after awhile.

## **(b) Violence**

Homelessness increases a person's vulnerability to physical attacks. Sleeping out or in squats provides few of the safeguards against violence which most of us take for granted.

**Tracey:** I've been raped.

**Int:** Have you?

**Tracey:** In the street.

**Int:** How old were you then?

**Tracey:** Um, fourteen.

**Int:** By another street kid or ...

**Tracey:** Pardon.

**Int:** An adult or what, did you know him?

**Tracey:** No 'cos I was off me, me face.

**Int:** What did you do?

**Tracey:** Had a shower, and then went and drank.



Int: So you don't know who it was?

Tracey: No.

Int: Is that a common experience do you think for girls on the street to be attacked like that?

Tracey: Yeah, it's low.

This rape of young homeless women was, as Tracey said, very common. Carol and a girlfriend were raped when they were trying to live on the streets in Sydney.

Carol: Oh, I was with my girlfriend. I never trusted this guy, I said 'You know, I don't trust this guy, let's get out of here, you know' and she wanted to go with him and I said 'No way! ', you know, not me, she said 'Right then, but I'm going' and I didn't want to be left there by myself you know. And they reckoned they had some smoke, in his place, so we went up there with him and he said 'I can't find any now' so he went off and one of his friends told us to stand under this light, now I thought 'This is a bit sus, I don't like this idea one bit', you know. Then I looked around the place, and I thought 'Stuff this, I'm not going to hide in some little dark corner, you never know who's hanging round', really bad area it was, complete slum. So this guy came back and we went back to his place anyway. It didn't turn out too good.

Int: So what were they after.

Carol: Just the one thing. Like she went, she done everything they told her to, but not me, I kicked up that big of a stink and I was punching them and kicking them until they decided they were going to bash me and I gave up then no way, not going to get black and blue for that.

Being on the road also has great dangers for young people.

Int: Has anyone tried to take advantage of you?

Ann: When I went up for a lift into Sydney, this truck driver ... I wouldn't sleep with him, so he bashed me. I had earrings in my ear. They all went through both sides and he pushed me out of the truck. 'Cos I wouldn't sleep with him.

Homeless young people were also vulnerable to attack from police.

Int: Have you been hassled by the police when you've been sleeping out?

Tom: Yeah.

Int: What did they say to you?

Tom: Ah, I was a little bit stoned at the time, and that and I was just walking around and that, and they just walked up and said 'What are you doing' and I said 'Nothing' and they said 'Where do you live' and I said 'I haven't got nowhere to live' and they go 'Where are you sleeping, in the gutter' and then they started laughing and that and I told them to get fucked and they started laying into me.

## CRIME

Some young people were used by adults for criminal activity. The property stolen in break and enters was frequently sold to adults to dispose of. In these circumstances the young people received only a small fraction of the actual worth of the property. Dennis was used by an adult to steal cars which were later stripped or sold and for which he was paid \$100.

Dennis: I was worth money, 'cos I was the best thief there, 'cos I stole heaps of cars for him, in that, I was only working for him for about, four or five months and I just had to move on, I was getting bored, wanted to steal something else other than cars, out of the five months I got averaged to about, about 6 or 7000, and I had I had just bought clothes, uhm, just clothes and food and accommodation and rent and that, and he ah, I bought, I stole a couple of Ferrari's, Porsche's Mercedes, Rolls, all the good cars, you know, sports cars, Mercedes, Jags, all the really nice cars, 'cos then if you get good cars, he'd give you a bit extra, like say 10 bucks, 20, 30 bucks extra.

## **CONCLUSION**

Young homeless people are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in all aspects of their life. Young women's risk of sexual exploitation is aggravated by their homelessness. The reasons for their vulnerability are structural: poverty, lack of accommodation and lack of options. The maintenance of the present pattern of responses to homelessness serves to condone and facilitate the exploitation of young people. Rather than guaranteeing 'special protection' the responses produce the preconditions for exploitation.



## Chapter 16

# Young People's Perceptions of Rights

Young people's treatment within the family and by the institutions of care and control in our society is conclusive evidence of the violation of young people's rights to special protection, to shelter, to nutrition and to health care.

In this chapter young people's assessments of the respect for their rights are explored. First considered is the extent to which the young people believed they had the right to accommodation, income, food and health care, and the extent to which they believed this right was enforced. These perceptions are explored in the context of young people's understanding of their own position in society.

## RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

### (a) Right to Adequate Housing

Not surprisingly nearly all agreed that young people should have the right to adequate housing.

**Int:** Do you think young people at the moment do have any rights to housing, the way things work?

**Tony:** Ah, they've got no choice, the prices are just too high. I reckon they should just have houses, like, bedroom and a kitchen and that, for a reasonable rent. When you try and go and get Housing Commission, I've heard about it, well, you've just got to wait too long.

**Jim:** Yeah, sure, everyone should have the right to adequate housing. I mean, it's just, it's just a necessity. I mean, you've got to have a roof over your head.

**Int:** Do they?

**Jim:** No. Not everyone does.

**Int:** No? Who doesn't?

**Jim:** Oooh, there's about 20 or 30 kids that I know that don't. They're just wandering around.

A few children believed that if young people had enforceable right to housing, it might lead to more leaving home prematurely. Robert was one:

**Int:** Do you think young people should have the right to adequate housing?

**Robert:** Nup.

**Int:** You don't think they should have the right? You know, you're the first kid in 40 interviews who's said that.

Robert: Well, I don't reckon they should.

Int: That's alright. I'm interested to know why you say that.

Robert: Because they should take the opportunity to stay at home.

## **(b) Right to Nutrition**

In an affluent country the right to adequate nutrition is taken for granted. Yet the reality of life of homeless youth is that many have gone hungry at different times. Perhaps not surprisingly, none think that is fair that they do not have a right to food.

**Int:** Right. Do you think young people should have the right to adequate food?

**Jill:** Yes, I do.

**Int:** **Does** that work?

**Jill:** Not with me it doesn't.

Louise: Yeah. I think that no matter what anybody's done, urn, if they're out of home because of their parents, I mean it's not their fault, because of their parents they shouldn't have to pay for the rest of their life and you know live on, live in poverty because their parents didn't want them sort of thing, but because of the, you may as well say non-existent benefits you get from the government, that's what people have to do.

The search for food potentially marginalises and criminalises young people. For some, part of their daily life was lunch at large centres for homeless adults, for others food was obtained directly or indirectly through crime.

**Int:** What about food, do you think young people should have the right to adequate food?

**Jar:** Yes. Food's too expensive. We're not getting enough money, we can't afford a house, we can't afford anything. So, until we're living on a free basis, we want something, we've got to steal it. But you can't steal a house.

**Tony:** Ah, we've got that anyway, we just go down Talbot and that's good enough for us ... See, you can get a good feed, ah, sometimes it's not too good feed, but, every Sunday night we get a baked dinner, down at Talbot.

The contrast between what is and what should be is stark for many young people. The hypocrisy of a wealthy society in which the young go hungry and are exploited, engenders cynicism, disbelief and anger. Jim was dismayed that anyone would be stupid enough to ask whether young people should have such basic rights:

**Jim:** Yeah, well, course, I mean everyone should be able to live somewhere, everyone should, oh well, probably that medical thing is an all right question, but that one, that takes the cake! That's stupid.

**Int:** Well actually, I forgot to ask one, wait till I ask you another one. But the reason we ask, I suppose, is that it seems obvious, but what's the reality?

**Jim:** No-one's doing anything about it. It's always going to be the same, no one does anything about it.

**Int:** This other one I forgot to ask you is, do you think young people should have the right to adequate food?

**Jim:** Haaah! That's a good one too!

## **(c) Right to Health Care**

Young people were inclined to indicate that not only should they have the right to medical services, but that they personally did have that right (while other young people might not).

The majority of young people interviewed, however, indicated that the exercise of the right was significantly impaired for young people.

**Int:** Do you think that young people should have the right to adequate medical services?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah.

**Int:** And do you think they do?

**Elizabeth:** Sometimes they do.

**Int:** Sometimes?

**Elizabeth:** Yeah. Oh sometimes they might not know much about where to get it.

**Int:** So lack of information.

**Elizabeth:** Yeah and lack of money.

**Int:** Do you think young people should have the right to adequate medical services?

**Julie:** Yeah.

**Int:** Do you think they have?

**Julie:** In a way they have, like, you know, with hospitals, you know, you don't have to pay hospitals and that, but then again like doctors you have to pay it and a lot of people haven't got Medicare cards and things like that.

**Int:** OK. Do you think that young people should have the right to adequate medical services?

**Katrina:** Yeah, definitely.

**Int:** And do they?

**Katrina:** Um, no. Not everybody's fortunate enough to have a Health Care card because you've got to be on some sort of benefit to get one and um a lot of kids aren't eligible for one so they usually have to go without.

As noted in the chapter on health, lack of money, lack of information and lack of targeted services negate aspects of the right to health care.

## **(d) Right to Protection from Exploitation and Cruelty**

Young people believed that they should have the right to be free from abuse and exploitation. Yet the lived experience of these young people, as is evident in this report, is that their lives have been blighted by abuse and exploitation. So, while young people believe in the right to protection from abuse and exploitation, this right was not afforded to them.

**Int:** What about the right not be exploited or abused?

**Ann:** I get abused and exploited.

**Int:** Do you think that young people should have the right not to be exploited or abused?

- Jack: They should only be exploited or abused for what they done wrong. What they do wrong they should get punished for. Like, I got punished for going to court and stuff like that.
- Int: Is there a difference between being punished and abused, though?
- Jack: Being abused can be child abused, sexually abused, being punished and being locked up for six months to life. When you go to jail you're sexually abused anyway.
- Int: Do you think that young people should have the right not to be exploited or abused?
- Louise:** Definitely. I mean, it just comes down to the basic fact that you might be younger but we've still got our lives to live and everything that happens now is going to affect our lives, so yeah, I don't think we should be taken advantage of.
- Int:** Do you think young people should have the right not to be exploited or abused?
- Carol:** Yeah. If we get hit we should be able to take our parents to court for it, so they don't do it twice.
- Int:** So you think going to court is one way of enforcing those rights?
- Carol: Yeah.
- Int: How can you go about otherwise enforcing rights?
- Carol: Put them away for a while instead of it always being us. You know they say we're uncontrollable children. It's not really us, a lot of the time it's our parents. They go around hitting us and expect us to be good little people, you can't do that.

## **POSITION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOCIETY**

Young people believed that they were entitled to basic human rights and that these rights should be respected. In this section we seek their explanations of why their rights are, on the whole, violated. In the interviews their understanding of their position in society was specifically addressed through discussion of their treatment and their life in comparison to other young people and adults, and whether gender impacted on life circumstances.

We rely heavily on interview extracts as they authentically and cogently reflect their lived experience and their analysis of their position in society.

### **(a) Self and Other Young People**

The day-to-day life of the young people interviewed stands in marked contrast to the images of youth portrayed in the media. Not surprisingly, those interviewed did perceive their life to be different from most other young people in the community.

In comparing their lives to those of other young people, the respondents did not focus explicitly on their victimisation. Instead they noted the absence or loss of a family and the lack of support in their lives; the necessity in their life to be totally self-reliant. They also noted the bad experiences of their peers, and expressed sympathy.

**Int:** **How** do you think your life is different from other young people's lives?

**Ralph:** I dunno. Half the young people my age are exactly the same as me. The other families, **they've just cared more about** their kids that's why the kids are like they are now.

Int: How do you think your life is different from other young people's?

Julie: I think it's not so much, pretty much the same, but you know I'm not the only young person who's been through a lot, 'cos a hell of a lot of people out there who go through the same thing. Maybe not the same situation, oh probably, but everyone's just got different problems.

Gerard: Well I think everyone is different. A lot of people have the same problems and that, but most of the time it's only some of their problems. I'm not saying I was really bad off, there's other people worse off than me and hopefully some day I'll be able to get in there and help.

The loss of a family and the sense of aloneness that it engenders was often evident.

Simon: Like, if I could have one thing in life that I could have had, I wish I would have had, it would have been a family to grow up with, but I never got that so life is a lot harder for people without families. Like you hear the odd person living at home, got it hard, have to do the dishes every night, it just makes you laugh really.

Carol: Some people haven't been through as much as I have, makes it a bit different. They've got parents that love 'em, that will take care of them and everything, and send them to school and some to university, and mine, it's different, my mum wouldn't take the time of day.

The lack of family support goes hand in hand with the lack of other support. These young people from an early age have to eke out an existence.

Ian: Other young people have got their parents and everything given to them, I have to work for everything I get.

Petra: Urn, I think some other young people have got it a lot easier because they can live at home and they have their parents to pay for things and they can concentrate on their studies and plan their future according to their parents' wealth without them having to worry about their own.

The reliance on self was not a totally negative experience for some as it offered potential for freedom from parental restrictions.

**Steph:** 'Cos they've [other young people] got someone to depend on and we've got to depend upon ourselves and they sort of get everything for them, like you know they've got someone there for everything and we haven't, that's about all.

Int: No back stops?

Steph: Mm, but then again we can sort of stay out whenever we want basically and they can't.

Int: Yeah, you've got more freedom.

Steph: Yeah.

The implicit message these children have assimilated is that to benefit from society, young people must remain part of a family. The contradiction for most of the young people interviewed was that the family provided the site of violation of the most basic of rights. Outside the family they are fair game, with few active or successful steps taken by the state to ensure that their rights are enforced.



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## (b) Young Women

The issue of gender has been addressed through this report. It has been noted that young women have specific difficulties related to their sexual assault within and outside of the family. It was argued that young women were forced into exploitative relationships and prostitution for shelter and income. Young women reported particular difficulties obtaining accommodation because of sexual discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault. These were experienced directly and indirectly and hindered their access to all forms of accommodation

In considering the position and treatment of young women in comparison to young men, these concerns were again restated. The males seemed to take difficulties faced by females more lightly than women, with most tending to believe they were treated equally or better.

**Int:** What about young women? Do you think they get treated better or worse or the same as young men?

**Fiona:** Worse, because young women, young girls, like me and Helen walk down the street all the time and you get these dirty old perverts driving past, honking, yelling and all that, and you walk down the street, 'Oh hi there sexy', and it really pooks us off, you know. Yuk, look at that dirty old fag [laughs], you know, that sort of feeling. Yuk, I hate being a female. I wish I was a guy. Guys can seem to have more fun.

**Int:** Do you think guys get harassed as much?

Fiona: No, no, I hardly ever see guys walking down the street getting whistles off sheilas.

**Int:** What about young women? Do you think they get treated better or worse or the same as young men?

**Lilla:** Worse, yeah.

**Int:** Why do you think so?

**Lilla:** 'Cos, women get bashed by their men.

**Int:** You've seen a lot of that?

**Lilla:** Yeah.

Katrina: Girls have to be more careful about where they go and where they live 'cos of all the rapes and stuff going on.

As these young women's words clearly express, the experience of sexual violence and harassment is part of their everyday life. It **permeates** every aspect of life: social behaviour, sexual relationships and employment.

**Int:** What about young women, do you think they get treated better or worse or the same as young men?

**Carol:** Worse. Just not fair, like jobs and all that sort of thing, jobs, housing **all** that sort of thing that it's meant to be equal rights but it's not really. They say it is.

**Alan:** Well I reckon girls don't toe the line they get treated worse like there's a girl here that doesn't toe the line and she doesn't get as much, she doesn't get as much privileges, if she needs money she never gets it. 'Cos I toe the line, if I need something I usually get it.

I think they get treated differently, yeah.

**Int:** Worse?

**Julie:** Yeah, than the men like, the men can go to sleep with three or four different girls in one week and get called stud or whatever and a girl can sleep with one or two different blokes and get called a slut. You know, it's not really fair, you know they get put down a lot more than what you know blokes do.

Young women's experiences of homelessness differ significantly from those of young men. It is clear that in constructing responses to homelessness the particular needs and wishes of young women must be attended to. To do otherwise is to define and respond to homelessness in terms of young men's experiences and to perpetuate the gender discrimination suffered by young women.

## **(c) Young People and Adults**

Young people's analysis of the reasons for the violation of their rights are most evident in a consideration of their treatment by, and role in, adult society. The accounts recorded below are indicative of a growing cynicism, desperation with and alienation from adult society. If society does not hear and does not attend to these statements, then we will all increasingly bear the direct and indirect costs.

### **(i) Young people advantaged**

A few young people did believe that adults were treated equally to or worse than youth. This reflected notions that all were equal, that other factors rather than age influenced decision-making and that in specific situations, such as in the criminal justice system, young people were advantaged.

**Int:** Do you think that young people get a better deal or a worse deal than adults in our society?

**Jack:** A better deal.

**Int:** Young people get a better deal. Mm. In what way?

**Jack:** Well, like, if you've got a criminal record when you're under 17, when you turn 17, they bum your record. And so then you can start over again. But once you're an adult it means that you can't.

**Int:** Is there any other reason why you say young people get a better deal?

**Jack:** No. Oh, they've got more places to go to for help and things like that.

**Int:** And how is it that you know that?

**Jack:** Well, just places like Children's Services, and there's not really an Adults Services or things like that ... Yeah, the police sometimes give better deals because the adults, they might just throw 'em in the lockup or something and they can bring, if it's the children, if it's the children they can bring them back 'cos they've got somewhere to stay.

**Donna:** I reckon it's the same, everything's the same, sometimes we don't get treated fairly as everyone, you know the adults, because they're, you know, older and they most of them have their life sorted out, but some haven't, but urn and young kids they just think it's all our fault.

**Tim:** It's about the same. We're all in the same situations, a fair few, a lot of us.

**Int:** Mm. Do you think that young people get a better deal or a worse deal than adults in our society?

**Tim:** I'd say we're about equal because, ah, the adults, look at the unemployment side. Adults they, some of them they have children and that, they have to look after their children. That's why they get more than us. I'd say we were in a roundabout even situation for age differences.

These young people are suggesting life is difficult for a lot of people, not just the young. With the exception of Jack's response, the notion of equality or advantage is not phrased in terms of affirmative or positive rights. Most young people, however, believed that they suffered significant disadvantage because of their youth. Such responses took a number of forms. The majority indicated that they were treated like or were 'scum' to the adult community. Other response patterns related to a lack of trust, lack of decision-making power, a lack of control over resources, a failure to listen and a lack of respect by the adult community.

## (ii) SCUM

**Kiley:** I reckon that people think that kids out on the streets ... They're treating us like scum, like we don't know anything. It's not our fault if we get kicked out on the streets. We can't plead with people to take us in all the time. It's not our fault.

**Int:** Do you think that young people get a better deal or a worse deal than adults in our society?

**Matthew:** They get a worse deal. The young people are treated like gutter scum. **Int:**

And why is that do you think?

**Matthew:** Because most youth have gone to society. They, unfortunately a lot of youth think that the world owes them a living. They learn in the end that they don't, but society can't handle it. They just cannot handle a plague of young homeless youth. It's become like cockroaches and we need the Pied Piper to get out there and lead us somewhere. We need, it's funding basically, and ...

**Int:** Do you think that young people get a better deal or a worse deal than adults in our society?

**Tom:** Worse. 'Cos it's a piece of shit. You got no say in nothing, it's our world, not yours. It's not because it's your generations before that have screwed it up for us and our kids.

**Int:** What about treatment? Do you think that young people get treated the same, or different, from adults?

**Tom:** Different, totally different. There's always two sets, two different sets of rules. Like somebody says something, then they go and do it and then you go and do it yourself and then you get in trouble for it and then you say, 'But you done it' and they go, 'But that's different'.

These young people speak with feeling and with anger. They clearly perceive that they are seen as, and treated like, the lowest of the low. They are rejected by society and barred legitimate access to the necessities of survival. It is not surprising that they feel few obligations to society and experience few of the constraints on behaviour which result from a sense of belonging to society.

### **(iii) Lack of respect**

Others made a similar point in a slightly different way. They argued that the young were treated poorly and the reason for that treatment was a basic lack of respect of young people in our society.

**Brian:** Urn, well, with the abuse bit, I reckon younger people should be treated, you know [with] a bit more respect than older people, adults. You get picked up at the police station, we should get treated a bit kindly, we mighta broken the law, we might've did something wrong by them, but we should be treated at least kindly.

**Int:** Do you think young people get treated the same or differently to adults?

Simon: Quite a lot different.

**Int:** Why is that?

Simon: It usually comes down to respect your elders and that, a thing you hear quite a lot or you do something rowdy and you've always got the old ladies out saying when I was your age they used to do this and that, and that sort of is a big hassle.

**Int:** Do you think young people get respected by elders?

Simon: No, not very much, not at all.

Responses to homelessness must be built upon and demonstrate respect for the integrity of young people. To be respectful of another requires one to listen, to be aware that the other has a perspective that is worth hearing and considering. Throughout this report it has been stressed that the failure to listen and take seriously young people's accounts has contributed to their becoming and remaining homeless. This failure to listen is a cause and consequence of their position in the social structure.

**Int:** Do you think that young adults get a better deal or a worse deal than adults in our society?

Richard: Worse deal.

**Int:** Why's that?

Richard: 'Cos we're just kids, you know. Don't listen to kids. They don't know nothin'. Haven't been there, 'aven't done that. I tell you what, we know more than what any adult knows.

**Int:** Do you think young people get treated **the** same or differently to adults?

Richard: Different. Very different.

**Int:** Why's that?

Richard: We get treated like we're useless.

**Int:** Useless. Worthless?

Richard: Yeah. All we're good for is going down the shop for mum. That's the way I see it.

### **(iv) Lack of power and control over resources**

Young people's disadvantaged position is underlined by their lack of material resources in a society in which material resources determine opportunities. While their basic needs are the same as adults, their legitimate access to these resources is restricted by their age — employment opportunities are fewer, wages lower and benefits less.

**Int:** Do you think young people get a better deal or worse deal than adults in our society?

**Liza:** A worse deal.

**Int:** Why is that?

**Liza:** Adults, they treat 'em like they got more respect than we have, adults seem to get whatever they want, without hesitation they get better pay, they get flats easier than we do, that sort of stuff. They treat us like a bit of shit.

**Anna:** Well, adults think they have to be the first one in. That's what I reckon. You know, children come last. Well, that's what happened to me. You know. You go by their rules, never listen to us. You have to listen to them all the time, never us. You know. And when, you know, it just makes a bad influence. Like, if you had a kid, you'd understand what ... Understand why they get shitty, pissed off, run away. Course they run away, they never listen to their kid. You know. You always have to listen to them, get told what to do, you know. Not that you can tell your mother what to do, just talk, you know.

**Int:** Do you think young people get a better deal or worse deal than adults in our society?

**Steph:** Oh, I reckon worse ... 'Cos it's easier because a lot of things like organisations like you can come in and that will help adults more than they will children.

**Int:** That's funny, that's what they're supposed to be there for.

**Steph:** Yeah, I know, same as St. Vinni's and that.

**Int:** You think they're geared up to help adults.

**Steph:** Yeah, that's what they say, oh we don't usually help children we usually help young mothers, like pregnant young mothers and all that.

The lack of access to resources, especially jobs and income, is seen as indicative of their position in society.

**Sybil:** [Young people] get a worse deal. It's pretty, I mean, I go to work, right, when I was working. I do exactly the same that a senior person would do, yet they'd get \$100 more than I'd get, just because of their age.

**Tony:** Young people get, under 21 young people get nothing, but people over 21, they're the ones who are making the money, under 21 they pay you half or nothing. So I reckon we're getting a worse deal, we should be paid the same as them, we're doing the same as them.

**Gerard:** Why I reckon they get treated rougher is because they go into CBS and they see this job that they really want to go for and CES says, 'No that's not appropriate for you'. Then they can't get a job 'cos no one is really helping them get a job.

Young people's position of power may be contrasted to that of adults. Adults, including parents, police and welfare officers, seemingly control not only their own lives but the lives of others' children. Young people, on the other hand, seemingly lack legitimate control over many aspects of their own life.

**Int:** Do you think that young people get treated the same or differently to adults?

**Linda:** They get treated differently. I mean, they're younger. Adults tell the kids what to do.

**Fiona:** Yeah. They reckon that because they're older they have the right to boss anyone younger around.

**Int:** Even if they don't know what they're doing?

**Fiona:** Yeah, it's not fair, it's almost like prejudice, prejudism against old against young, but it really drives me crazy.

**Gwenn:** I think kids, kids should have some basic rights in what they do. I mean, it's always left to the parents to say to do this to do that, kids should have rights.

**Matthew:** [We get a worse deal] because we're younger and society's um structure is not always, even welfare people don't like young homeless people because they think they should be back with their parents no matter what their parents or situation is.

For structural reasons, including the isolation of young people in families, the ideology of the family and their lack of input into societal decision-making processes, it is difficult for young people to organise around their collective oppression. Their response to their oppression is essentially individualised, even when it takes a collective form. For instance, when the Federal Government decides to cut social security benefits for young people, there is no likelihood that government will feel at the ballot box the collective discontent of 14, 15, 16 and 17 year olds. (**It would** feel the discontent of pensioners, on the other hand,, if pensions were cut.) For young people, the collective response and the avenues for collective response are limited.

Their response to the anger, despair, violence and hunger is individualised and either self-destructive through depression, self-harm and suicide, or directed outward through crime. Even when undertaken in groups and directed to the external environment, crime and violence remains an individualised response to poverty, isolation and personal violence.

Mandy and Laura clearly summarise the position of youth in the social structure and their powerlessness.

**Mandy:** Because people my age don't get a choice, in like government or anything, they don't get a choice to say how they really feel, but it's happening now, they don't get any help from anyone really. They've just got to do it all by themselves. Adults can deal with problems, but people my age, like **I** can deal with problems now, but when I first left home I couldn't 'cos my friends always dealt with my problems.

**Laura:** I suppose the root of the problem is that the public doesn't want to face up to the reality that urn they don't want to admit that urn that all parents aren't urn don't always treat their children the way they should be treated and this is reflected in government policy, because government is representative of the people and their opinions, so we end up with a bad deal.

**Int:** Right, and do you think young people get treated the same or differently to adults, like in hospitals and schools.

**Laura:** In schools, no we do not, I do not. Well sometimes I, I get treated a bit more fairly than the other students here, urn maybe it's because I think, oh I'm good in class. I don't disrupt the class or anything like that. I show some respect to the teachers and I think they urn show some respect for me. Not as much as they urn they show to each other though.



## Chapter 17

# Recommendations

It is clear that the causes of homelessness are many and its consequences affect every area of a young person's life.

All interviewees shared family situations which were experienced as untenable or non-existent. In addition, all shared a lack of an adequate income and a lack of access to affordable housing. It was argued that the formal responses to homelessness and young people's understandings and interpretations of those responses syphoned young people into homelessness and increasingly restricted the paths out of homelessness. Throughout the text the positive and potentially positive responses to homelessness developed by young people have been noted. Many of these related to young people's efforts to help themselves and other young people with shared difficulties.

This report is premised on the assumption that it is important to listen to and hear young people's perspectives. We therefore conclude this report by detailing the recommendations that homeless young people themselves had to respond to the problem of homelessness. The young people's recommendations canvassed many of the issues and the difficulties identified in the body of the report.

## FAMILIES

Many young people's recommendations for dealing with homelessness related to the family. This reflected the belief that their family's situation was responsible for their homelessness. Some were so overwhelmed by the impossibility of their own situation, and the powerlessness of children in families that, whilst identifying families as problematic, they could see few ways in which the structure could change.

**Int:** What sorts of changes do you think you need to prevent people coming homeless?

**Tony:** You can't, it's something, the individual, what happens at their house, or where they live, before they get kicked out or thrown out. You can't get no changes from that.

**Donna:** Oh, God, I don't know. It all goes back to the family, that's the main problem, and you can't, you can't exactly tell people how to live, and the way to live, don't know.

**Linda:** Well if parents looked after their families more ... If their family isn't looking after them [they] should get their kids taken away from them ...

**Int:** If we can't find foster families for them what should we do to keep them off the street?

**Linda:** There's nothing much you can do really ... If you get them a foster home, they're still going to go out a lot and hassle a lot of people ... There's nothing much you can do to prevent it really.



However some young people were able to articulate recommendations relating to family life. There was agreement on the constituent elements of an improved family life identified by young people. The elements were underpinned by a statement of the need for families to care for children and were elaborated by the imperatives of listening to and understanding young people.

**Int:** What sorts of changes do you think need to be made to help prevent homelessness amongst young people, and to help those young people who are experiencing housing difficulties. You've already said Social Security's got to get better. Is there anything you'd like to suggest?

Tony: Parents ought to look after their kids more.

Int: You think parents have got a clear responsibility.

Tony: What's the use of havin a kid if you're not goin to look after it properly.

Carol: Something should be done about parents handling children, parents should take more time looking after kids, and police should take more action about it. People should just think more, you know, about kids.

Steph: Well before they leave I think parents should take more consideration into the way they run their household and their kids and that.

**Int:** Do you think that problem is with parents in terms of they don't know enough or what?

**Steph:** Yeah, they don't listen, that's right, yeah. They're just worried about themselves you know.

**Int:** What do you think's behind that?

**Steph:** I don't know.

**Int:** Think they need more information about how kids tick, or

**Steph:** Yeah, but they don't accept it, they think they know everything about kids, so they use the point of view of when I was young it's not, 'cos things changed. They think it should be the same. But it's not.

**Int:** What sorts of changes do you think need to be made to help stop young people becoming homeless? And to help those young people already having housing difficulties?

**Richard:** Nothin'. Parents should talk to their kids more. Try and understand you know ... If parents really wanted their kids, why shouldn't sit there for hours if they have to and try and understand what their kids on about. Why do you do these things and all these. I mean understand 'em. Understand how they cheat, things like that. Understand why they are hurtin', why they are happy, why they are sad, you know, stuff like that, emotions the works.

**Int:** Really important stuff.

**Richard:** They should be able to trust their parents, you know. 'Cos if you can't trust your parents, you can't talk to em. If you can't talk to em you're gonna fuck up sooner or later.

Despite their own negative family experiences they were not calling for the abandonment of the institution of the family. Indeed they recommended that others stayed at home. Basically, children want their parents and other adults to listen to them, to try to understand their view. Their recommendations concerning families are directed to the prevention rather than the amelioration of homelessness.

## HOUSING

Safe, secure and adequate housing was identified as a major priority in any program to prevent and remediate homelessness. There were clear statements that there was a need for variety and choice in housing, and an injection of resources into the housing sector for youth. At its most basic this was formulated in terms of a demand for beds in refuges as a response to the level of immediate need.

**It:** What, just to finish off now, what sorts of, what sorts of changes do you think need to be made to help prevent homelessness amongst young people?

**Julie:** Accommodation, mainly accommodation.

**Elizabeth:** I reckon there should be more housing, refuges or something for kids, there's not enough.

**Matthew:** I think urn there should be a few more places like Ansley. There's only about a half dozen refuges, there's nowhere else to go. If you've got no income you can't even come to some of those places.

Refuges were however recognised to be at best only a partial solution to the problem — indeed some young people considered they contributed to homelessness. Young people need permanent accommodation and refuges did not provide this.

**Simon:** More long term refuges that's what people look for, 'cos there's nothing worse than going to a short term refuge, and after three weeks finding yourself back out exactly where you started, just after you've tried working yourself out.

**Int:** So you're not making any progress.

**Simon:** No 'cos you slowly start pulling yourself together then after three weeks you're back there again. It's a hassle. Places like this are good, but you usually find they are too full.

A number of alternatives to refuges were suggested. These included supported boarding houses, shared housing and flats. Central to such options were support, low cost and permanency.

**Steph:** I think they should have more, I think they should have more set up houses, share houses, one's that are set up.

## LONG TERM REFUGES?

**Steph:** No, not long term refuges.

**Int:** No. Not where kids can go for a number of years?

**Steph:** Oh, long term share houses where people can go, you know 12-18 not just over 16 year olds, it should be 14-15 year olds, 'cos they have interviews and that but a lot of 14-15 year olds can live independently, they just think you're over 16 year olds and that's it. But urn, and they should have more refuges stuff like that.

**Int:** Once they are on the streets, what do we need to help then?

**Liza:** Accommodation. Not refuges.

**It:** More accommodation. Special accommodation, or.

**Liza:** Cheap accommodation, where they get a certain, like, if they are not working they get a certain amount of money taken out of their income, like, Housing Commission

**Int:** A set amount. Yeah.

**Liza:** Yeah. Not just refuges because most of the refuges you've been there once you might be OK for a while and go home or something and then you need somewhere to stay out, and most of them won't take you a second time. They don't like to take kids for a second time, and you know refuges aren't any good for kids, because they treat you like a bit of shit as well.

**Mandy:** They should have more refuges, more SOS housing.

**Int:** What's that?

**Mandy:** Share accommodation, like four kids might move into a house and one worker will come in and get the rent off them and see if they're all alright, twice a week or something.

**Int:** Who runs that?

**Mandy:** SOS Housing, I don't know. They should do a lot of things.

These young people are advocating for a housing program for young people — not a refuge program for homeless youth which provides shelter but encourages transience. They are calling for programs which facilitate their entry into the mainstream of the housing sector.

Others who were also concerned with the need for permanent accommodation recommended that financial and employment assistance be made available to young people so they could afford housing or that their rents become income linked.

**Int:** What sort of changes do you think have to be actually made?

**John:** More hostels, more refuges for young people. More jobs for young people. Try and make the young people understand what life's going to be like if they're not given a job, let them settle down, and real estate's try and trust young people who really want to settle down.

**Robyn:** I do think they should get a funding program or something like that where people can go into a flat. They can, you know, have a chance to get their act together but independently, on their own. And give them a trial period, say a month, three weeks or something where they get a job, they start paying rent and all that. And be able to survive trying to get them to survive independently without too much other means. You've got to give them a little bit of power without too much interference.

In summary in the housing area they recommended more refuges to meet immediate needs, but most importantly the development of a range of accessible, long term and affordable accommodatiori. They stressed the characteristics of permanency and independence. In housing as in other areas of their life they sought from adults (and from the state and welfare services) limited support and assistance, not control. They wished for support to enter the housing market, and some assistance in ensuring rents were affordable. They sought, on the whole, to live with their peers in share houses and flats.

**Fiona:** I reckon, have special, certain, little communities for young people like, little flats built in little town house areas and all that just especially for young people, especially youth caravan parks, youth this and youth that, youth tents sites.

In terms of housing needs, these young people were looking to the future and planning for independence, rather than seeking solutions to the problems in the past failures of their family life.

## GOVERNMENT POLICY

Some young people argued that the government had abdicated its responsibilities towards the young, especially the young homeless. Homelessness was partly caused by the priorities of government and could at least be partially remedied through a change in priorities.

**Fran:** All I need right now is for the government to open their eyes, right, this is true, this is what I've always felt, the government to open their eyes and help kids, 'cos all the kids can do there is sit and you know, think you know they just can't do anything, they can't help themselves, they can't. The government thinks about themselves and all these lies. If I get into this, I'll do this for you and I'll do this for you, it never happens. All they think about is adults and how much money they're going to get and how much money they can make in these minting machines and that.

**Laura:** I should stress again that I think the government should change its social policy and it should stop pandering to the voters if they actually care about what happens to young people then that's what they should do, if they don't they're not going to, they should say.

**Louise:** I think the government should you know stop wasting money on stupid things like the Bi-centennial not stupid but I mean the amount of money they are spending on it is really pathetic and, urn, allocate more money toward helping them because we're the future of the country and if they don't look after us now then it's not going to be very good in the future

**Jason:** The government don't realise that the people who live on the streets, have nowhere to go. That we're the ones on the streets who're starving, would have to steal, would have to do things to get money, and they don't think like that. They just think oh well they can stay on the streets, there's refuges around, they don't think when they make up their rules, urn, they're only allowed to stay at that place for one night, or a few days or only once. You're only allowed there once you're not allowed back at all.

That some young people can articulate the nexus between government policy and priorities and their problems is of significant importance to young people and to the society. In articulating such a perspective they are expressing a recognition of the fact that decisions are made in, and reflect the broader social context, and that their problems and those of their families are not solely the responsibility of themselves or their parents. The development of successful strategies to resolve homelessness depends on the involvement of young people in taking some control of the process of program development. The potential for the development of collective youth responses will be enhanced by an understanding that they are effected by and can take part in, and influence, social processes.

## ACTIONS OF GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

Whilst the preceding recommendations concerned government priorities, other young people made recommendations about the manner in which departments implemented the existing policy of government. There young people indicated that services were marred by bureaucratic complexity, mismanagement and a lack of respect for young people.

**Gavin:** They shouldn't have so many government offices ... You go to here and take all this information and then you have to go over there and see them ... They should have one committee to give them money and say rights, make one place and keep it like that.

**Int:** So you need places that aren't so complex and simpler to get what you need?

**Gavin:** Yeah. Just to say I need this, and for them to say OK.

The administration of YHA and Austudy were of a particular concern for those who had applied for their benefits. They considered that rules for payment did not respond to their needs.

**Brett:** In Austudy the young homeless there is a six week waiting list, you've got to be out of home for six weeks, before you can get Austudy, I think it's just too long, people can die in that time. That's about all.

**It:** What you're saying is that they should take the young persons word [for establishing eligibility for YHA].

**Thomas:** Yeah. [Instead of] taking the parents' word against mine. Yet I'm the one's who's out on me own.

It was noted in the preceding chapters that the young people experienced significant access barriers to services. There is a mismatch between their lifestyles and routine workings of government departments. In consequence young people abandon their efforts to obtain assistance and are further trapped into homelessness.

## INCREASED AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES

The amount and availability of resources was also a cause for comment by some of the youth. They argued that the level of benefits should be raised and the availability of housing and employment increased.

**Int:** Are you saying everyone should have a minimum income.

**Troy:** Yeah, not like, not income on the dole and job search allowance, people shouldn't get like it's age groups, like, if you're unemployed and you're 15 probably get about 100 bucks a week, if you're unemployed and ya' 19 you'd probably get three or four times that, for the age group it's just stupid, should be all the same.

**Fran:** We need a house each, we need money.

**Int:** So, when a person does become homeless, what is most helpful?

**Fran:** It's all according to what the person's like. They might want sympathy or that sort of thing, they need a home, they need money, they need food, they need a roof, they need care.

The need for additional resources and amenities for youth was also stressed.

**Fiona:** [There should be] more things for younger people to do then the younger people wouldn't get on the older people's nerves so much and wouldn't cause the older people to hate the younger kids so much.

**Matthew:** A few more amenities for young homeless. I think they should be brought up to the level of single mothers and people on the dole which they are not, they are disadvantaged in a lot of areas, government agencies just 'cos they haven't got a baby or they can't find work. We're a lot harder 'cos we can't get money really because we're going to school so we can't get a job or looking for jobs you don't get as much money as people on the dole or single mothers. Single mothers are put on the top of the list for priority housing stuff like that.

**Gavin:** I reckon why people can get into trouble, doing break and enters, there's not enough things to do. Like a drop-in centre, it's not enough, things like pin ball parlour that you can go in, drop in. Or they should have something like ... Even it its a do it together sort of thing, you know. As long as they've got people to talk to and then they won't get into so much trouble.

**It:** When there's people around to talk to?

**Gavin:** Yeah.

## **PUBLICISE AVAILABLE SERVICES**

Lack of knowledge of the available resources and sources of assistance was identified as one of the causes of the homelessness and problems associated with homelessness. They recommended that sources of assistance be widely publicised.

**Brian:** Advertise [hotels and refuges] ... They should be easy to find. I reckon they should have a sign up — like those signs on the sides of bus stops — like in Sydney they advertise the Sydney City Mission everywhere.

**It:** What about when the kids are still at home? What can we do to prevent kids becoming homeless?

**Liza:** There should be a service sort of, it should be published like on TV and that, that if kids are having trouble all they've got to do is contact someone that is actually going to help, not like YACS, they say they're going to help, but they don't.

**Jack:** I think the [youth shelters] should express themselves more, like don't just leave the house and nobody knows about it. It should advertise its kind of thing so that people know its there and that.

The recommendations relating to publicity are consistent with the statements by young people that they need options and the right to control their life. They need to know the resources available and the potential consequences of the decisions that they could make. Appropriate publicity must be youth oriented. The process of facilitating young people taking control over their life would be enhanced by involving them in the publicising of services and options.

## **PUBLICISING NEEDS AND ISSUES**

Many young people believed that the whole issue of youth homelessness should itself be a major focus of publicity. They believed that adults did not believe that they were homeless or understand why they were homeless. They believed that publicity could ensure that a response to their needs was made.

**It:** What would be the best thing to help young people who are experiencing housing difficulties?

**Shelley:** Oh, I don't really know. Publicity and that, that'd help. People would start to realise those kids are out there like, talk and all that sort of stuff. 'Cos I reckon if every kid, young person, had somewhere to stay, that'd cut down, cuts down on the drugs, prostitution, all that sort of stuff. People just don't seem to realise this, adults. They call them druggies and everything, they're hopeless, they're no good, 'cos that's what my old man used to say and I turned round one day and I said 'Look at these old drunks, they're no good'. I knew it'd hit home, he said. 'Yes, but what drove them to

be that way?' and I said the same thing about druggos, you know. Then, he looked at it differently. 'Oh my God, listen to me, I'm listening to my daughter here', that's true, he used to think that I was no good. When you look at it, the whole of it, the reason we're on the streets and that, that's why

Gwenn: It should be on telly so parents realise our problems before kids end up leaving home, what real troubles they are having.

Fran: The only thing I want to say is that you've got to help us. We need help, we need money, we need clothes. We just need things. I know that's a big thing, saying what we need, but we do need. I'm not saying it for me, just for me, 'cos I know I need, I'm saying it for everyone, 'cos everyone who's homeless needs it. There's kids out in the streets, I know that they're living in Brother bins, and just picking food out of bins, 'cos that's all they've got and no one knows about them.

## **YOUNG PEOPLE HAVING A VOICE**

Closely associated with the need for publicity were recommendations that the publicity, and indeed the process of defining and responding to homelessness should be controlled by young people

Malcolm: There's no way to do it except for legally. I don't want to do protests or anything like that. Stupid 'cos that will just make it look worse. I think that the youth should get up there, a world-wide concert of something, with bands, people can pay for it.. Heaps of things to get the youth off the street and fed. We need more housing. I mean I know there's a lot, but there's not, you know what I mean. There should be more.

Sybil: I think that a lot of, I think everyone in the same situation that I am in, should get together, I don't think there's enough room, but should get together and protest, to make an issue to everybody, so everyone knows what's going on and how many people there are out there who want someone to help them.

Jack: [Homeless young people] ought to take it to Parliament and say ... 'Listen to this, listen to what these young people are saying, listen to how they've lived'.

Carol: Instead of everyone listening to like parents and all that sort of thing, like just listen to the kids. I mean fair enough we might be young, we mightn't be at home, but we still need somewhere.

Responses to homelessness have primarily defined young people as problems rather than as having problems. In consequence their strengths and potentials are ignored. Young people who are homeless do have strengths. They know the streets and they have an intuitive grasp of potentially appropriate types of assistance for themselves and their peers. Their statements are clear. They wish to be listened to and respected. They want independence and support. They do not wish to be coerced. They want their voice heard.

## **WORKERS WITH YOUTH**

Throughout the interviews the young people consistently stated that for workers with youth, social workers, police and teachers to be helpful, they must be respectful of young people, be prepared to listen and not take control. It is not surprising that those whose recommendations concerned workers reiterated such sentiments.

Robyn: They need somebody who really ... I mean, like when you move out of home, like this is how I felt. You need somebody who really cares. You need somebody to talk to you and to help you find, you know, give you somewhere to live like a foster home or something like that. But in foster homes and things like that you've still got rules and I don't know, that's one thing I hate. And a lot of other people do hate. There's just too much discipline.

Anna: I hate counsellors. I had 'em too. They're nose people. I hate listening to 'em. They think, 'Oh, so what's wrong with you', you know. And I thought, 'Mind your business, they're not your business', you know. I can't stand talking to 'em. This one I suppose is alright.

Int: So what you need is non-nose counsellors?

Anna: Yeah. They get too powerful. I hate that ... But proper counsellors should be the people who've been there and done that. Been raped or sexually assaulted or bashed or something, you know.

There was support for the notion of young people helping young people. This reflects their lack of trust in adults, the fact they have been dealt with as 'cases' and not people, a perceived lack of respect by workers for their experience and a lack of worker response to the difficulties about which they seek help.

Fran: I'd go on radio, I'd go on TV, and say 'If you need help, you come to me, I'll help you. I can give you this, I can give you that'. If I said that, they'd say I'm lying. I'd go round the streets and tell them 'Fools', I'd say 'I'm in the same situation and I'm young, I'm in that situation right now and I know what you're going through. If you need help you can talk to me and I will try my very hardest to help you'. And things like that. That's all they need, is help.

Int: Do you reckon the people in the Brother's bins would listen to another young person, is that what you'd say?

Fran: Don't think they're going to listen to an adult, 'cos an adult's their enemy, as far as they're concerned.

Liza: There's so many kids on the street, it's not funny, they've got people working in the YACS department that they just don't care, like I always say to them, I should be a district officer because I could get a lot more done than they do now, and I know most of the people who work for the government haven't been through what the children have been through, and they don't understand like those kids do, like, that, all they think is we're trouble and we don't know what we're talking about. Most of us have got a lot to say and we know what we're talking about.

## CONCLUSION●

This report has documented young people's accounts of the experiences of homelessness, accounts which revealed widespread violations of their rights. The young people eloquently and powerfully shared and relived aspects of their life. They spoke at times in anger and, at times, in despair. They reflected on the hypocrisy of a society that mouths platitudes about the importance of children and young people, but condemns them to poverty and exploitation. They criticised the controlling approach of the institutions that had responsibility for children and young people. Their accounts suggested that the cost of the burden of suffering experienced by the young people may, in the



future, be shared by the community as well as by the individual children. The continued failure to respond to the difficulties of homeless young people will inevitably lead to them hitting back.

The accounts also provide a basis for optimism. The young people clearly articulated their demands to be treated with respect, to be listened to and understood. They wished to be part of society — but part of a society in which they have some say and to which they are allowed to contribute. Any response to homelessness must, therefore, seek to empower rather than depower the young. This principle must underly micro responses, such as interactions between youth and workers with youth, and macro responses, such as income support measures and housing programs. To empower a young person is to facilitate the development of meaningful responses to their and other young people's situations and to provide meaningful options that allow them to make choices and decisions. Empowerment requires a commitment to provision of adequate resources to create a context within which young people can regain some control over their life.

The choice is clear. We, as a society, can continue our current responses to youth homelessness, or we can invest time and resources and develop real options with and for young people. The cost of the former will be borne by society and the young people themselves. The benefits will be few. The cost of creating options for young people will also be borne by the community but, in the long term, the community will benefit financially and socially.

The choice is ours.

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## Appendix: Sample

Name	Location	Sex	Age	Accommodation
Petra	Brisbane	Female	17	Rental
Phoebe	Brisbane	Female	17	Relatives
Mike	Brisbane	Male	15	Friends
Sam	Brisbane	Female	15	Emergency Acc
Christine	Brisbane	Female	14	Friends
Robert	Brisbane	Male	17	Friends
Marcus	Brisbane	Male	15	Refuge
Shelley	Brisbane	Female	15	Rental
Tom	Brisbane	Male	17	Refuge
Sean	Brisbane	Male	17	Friends
James	Brisbane	Male	16	Refuge
Fran	Brisbane	Female	13	Refuge
Sharon	Brisbane	Female	15	Hostel
Sybil	Brisbane	Female	17	Parents
Tim	Brisbane	Male	17	Friends
Austin	Brisbane	Male	15	Friends
Fiona	Brisbane	Female	16	Parents
Jim	Brisbane	Male	15	Sleeping Out
Helen	Brisbane	Female	16	Friends
Ralph	Brisbane	Male	15	Relatives
Sue	Brisbane	Female	17	Friends
Peter	Brisbane	Male	17	Other
Harry	Brisbane	Male	17	Friends
Jack	Brisbane	Male	14	Parent
Wendy	Brisbane	Female	14	Parent
Malcolm	Gold Coast	Male	16	Sleeping Out
John	Gold Coast	Male	17	GSAP
Lincoln	Gold Coast	Male	15	GSAP
Thomas	Gold Coast	Male	17	GSAP
Kiley	Gold Coast	Female	15	GS AP
Trish	Gold Coast	Female	17	GS AP
Roger	Gold Coast	Male	16	Refuge
Milan	Gold Coast	Male	16	Refuge
Anna	Gold Coast	Female	15	Refuge
Brian	Gold Coast	Male	16	GSAP
Debbie	Gold Coast	Female	16	GSAP
Maria.	Gold Coast	Female	16	Brdg House
Robert	Gold Coast	Male	15	Refuge
Ann	Gold Coast	Female	17	Van
Clare	Gold Coast	Female	17	Van
Laura	Gold Coast	Female	17	Refuge
Ian	Gold Coast	Male	17	Refuge
Troy	Gold Coast	Male	17	Refuge
Robyn	Gold Coast	Female	16	Friends
Kerry	Gold Coast	Female	14	Friends
Sophie	Gold Coast	Female	17	Tent

Angela	Gold Coast	Female	15	Parents
Arthur	Gold Coast	Male	15	Refuge
Tony	Sydney	Male	17	Sleeping Out
Rod	Sydney	Male	16	Friends
Jill	Sydney	Female	17	Refuge
Marina	Sydney	Female	15	
Mandy	Sydney	Female	15	Refuge
Dennis	Sydney	Male	16	Refuge
Liza	Sydney	Female	17	Sleeping Out
Jason	Sydney	Male	15	Refuge
Tracey	Sydney	Female	15	Sleeping Out
Stacey	Sydney	Female		
Steph	Sydney	Female	14	Refuge
Simon	Sydney	Male	17	Refuge
Lilla	Sydney	Female	15	Relatives
Ben	SSydney	Male	15	Refuge
Len	Sydney	Male	15	Squat
Richard	Sydney	Male	17	Squat
Nick	Sydney	Male	17	Refuge
Neville	Sydney	Male	16	Refuge
Marion	Sydney	Female	17	Parents
Linda	Sydney	Female	15	Squat
Frances	Sydney	Female		
Frank	Sydney	Male	17	Refuge
Arnold	Sydney	Male	15	Sleeping Out
Sarah	Canberra	Female	16	Public Housing
Caitlin	Canberra	Female	17	Public Housing
Louise	Canberra	Female	16	Refuge
Brett	Canberra	Male	16	Refuge
Gwenn	Canberra	Female	15	Friends
Blue	Canberra	Male	17	Refuge
Rozanna	Canberra	Female	16	Public Housing
Patrick	Canberra	Male	13	Parents
Terry	Canberra	Male	16	Other Emer Acc
May	Canberra	Female	17	Refuge
Matthew	Canberra	Male	17	Public Housing
Julie	Canberra	Female	17	Van
Carol	Canberra	Male	16	Van
Graham	Canberra	Male	16	Refuge
Fay	Canberra	Female	15	Refuge
Elanore	Canberra	Female	15	Other
Alan	Canberra	Male	14	Refuge
Reg	Canberra	Male	14	Refuge
Katrina	Canberra	Female	14	Refuge
Mery	Canberra	Male	15	Other Emer Acc
Elisabeth	Canberra	Female	16	Friends
Quentin	Canberra	Male	15	Refuge
Gerard	Canberra	Male		Public Housing
Lucinda	Canberra	Female	15	Friends
Oscar	Canberra	Male	15	Refuge