

**The Prospect of Independence:  
A critique and proposal for responding to youth  
homelessness in South Australia**

**By**

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## **Declaration**

I am aware of the University's policy on Academic Dishonesty, and, except where appropriately acknowledged, this assignment is my own work, has been expressed in my own words and has not previously been submitted for assessment.

**Signed:** Sharyn Goudie

**Date:** 29<sup>th</sup> November 2008

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

When a young person becomes homeless, their experiences are very different to those who become homeless at other life stages or via different homeless 'pathways'. By reducing the amount of young people who become homeless and the amount of time a young person remains, it is possible to reduce the number of people who become homeless long term. For this reduction to occur there needs to be an appropriate evidence based response. Despite Australia's economic growth over the past 20 years, homelessness continues to remain a major issue. Despite clear evidence that homelessness is experienced by diverse groups of people, public policy – particularly in South Australia - continues to target the more visible 'rough sleepers'.

The lack of resources a young person brings with them to their experience of being homeless dramatically impacts on their ability to get out of homelessness. Young people who become homeless come with limited experience of successful independent living and at a life stage in which they are still developing physically, intellectually and psychologically. Johnson (2006) found that the younger a person was when they first became homeless the more likely they would remain homeless for a longer period of time. Evidence also shows that the longer someone remains homeless the more likely it is that they will develop substance use and/or mental health issues, further reducing their opportunities to 'get out' of homelessness. Youth homelessness disrupts schooling and limits future opportunities for economic participation, placing these young people well and truly at the bottom of the labour market. This paper asks "Given that young people follow a unique pathway to homelessness, what supports and services are needed to effectively respond to this group?"

Current interventions into youth homelessness focus on child protection, Reconnect and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP). There is a strong link between contact with child protection services and likelihood of future homelessness. Getting this critical response right could dramatically reduce the number of young people entering homelessness. Reconnect also provides a nationwide response to young people at risk of homelessness. While successful, it is still constrained in the extent of services that can be provided. For those young people who become homeless, SAAP is the primary accommodation and support that these young people can access.

This paper is divided into three sections – a critique of the characteristics of young people who become homeless, a review of current theories of intervention and government responses, and finally a proposal for an improved response to young people who are at risk of becoming or who are already homeless.

In the first section this paper argues that people who initially become homeless before the age of 18 have characteristics that make them unlike other homeless groups. This idea of a 'youth pathway' to homelessness will be examined and the implications of this concept discussed, this will include an identification of the how and why young people become homeless and their particular vulnerabilities. Finally, this section will examine the young person's psychological and developmental life stage and how these factors impact on young people's relationship with the 'homeless subculture'.

The second section will explore four different structural issues that impact on a young person becoming homeless. These include contact with the child protection system, contact with the juvenile justice system, leaving school early and a lack of affordable housing. This section will include the practicalities of South Australian

government responses to these structural issues. This will include an analysis and critique of the current Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP) system, the influence of the Social Inclusion Initiative and the State Government's understanding of homelessness in South Australia. It also seeks to understand the relationship between these policies and the actual provision of services primarily delivered by the third (or not-for-profit) sector.

This section includes a critique of the current South Australian Government's response to youth homelessness and the extent to which it has engaged relevant models of interventions. South Australia is well positioned and provides an informative case study of a government's response to homelessness issues. The current State Government has been a vocal promoter and utiliser of Social Inclusion initiatives, developing a State Strategic Plan that includes a goal to reduce the number of 'rough sleepers' in Adelaide, a State Housing Plan that in part addresses the housing affordability crisis and engaging Rosanne Haggerty as a Thinker in Residence to detail the New York Common Ground model and its ability to be emulated in Adelaide.

Finally, this paper will propose a framework for assisting people who are at risk of, or who become homeless before the age of 18. This will be based on the Case Management Model working within a client centred integrated service delivery framework.

Three separate evidence bases have been utilised for this critique: The Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP) data collected by the National Data Collection Agency (NDCA); South Australian and Federal government policy documents that focus on supporting young people who are homeless or at risk of

homelessness; and a literature review of studies relating to youth homelessness and relevant theories of intervention.

The release of the Australian Federal Government's 'Homelessness Green Paper', the development of the National Affordable Housing Agreement, the release of the National Youth Commission's paper "Australia's Homeless Youth" and Ted Mulligan's Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in South Australian State Care have all been timely and important works that have influenced this paper. Other academic research utilised includes Guy Johnson's 2006 paper 'On the Move', Melbourne University's Project i study and the works of Chamberlain and Mackenzie.