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Learning to belong: A study of the lived experience of homeless students in Western Australia

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**LEARNING TO BELONG:
A STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESS
STUDENTS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

By

Simone Glasson-Walls

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A Thesis Submitted to fulfill the requirements for the award of
Master of Social Science (Human Services)
At the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences.

September 2004

In memory of my mother Marlene Joan Walls (1944-2001). Mum your love, belief in me, and spirit has guided me to the completion of this thesis. Thank you for teaching me the true meaning of belonging.

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This is a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of homeless young people in Western Australia. Its focus is the reasons why homeless young people leave education, although many of them make a serious effort to complete post-compulsory schooling.

The study was qualitative, and was designed as an in-depth analysis of the experiences of five young people aged between 15 and 17, all attending the same school. Data collection consisted of two in-depth interviews with each participant, and a focus group discussion with all five.

Although the study's focus was the issue of homelessness and schooling, it quickly expanded when it became quite clear that the issues confronting these students went far beyond the school grounds. Homelessness to these young people was not about shelter or accommodation: it was about searching for a place to belong, and a place to be at 'home'. This study challenges the idea that schooling and housing are merely practical issues. Instead, it illustrates how the social and psychological implications of homelessness have a strong negative impact on schooling, and how the young homeless person's physical ability to attend classes is not as important as being able to pay attention, contribute, and learn, in the face of overwhelming social pressures.

The study's results are similar to others in that it found that homelessness poses many obstacles to young people wishing to succeed in education, and that current initiatives to retain such students fall short of requirements.

This study provides insight into the unique experiences of the young homeless people themselves. It demonstrates that young people need a holistic approach to support, an

approach that goes beyond the instrumental needs of education to include all aspects of everyday life.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- Contain any defamatory material.

Signed: _____


Simone Glasson-Walls

Date: _____

12 Dec 04

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To Dianne Bortoletto, Karen King and Melanie Zan who have been invaluable contributors to my professional and personal development over the years.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is recognition of the number of homeless students within the Australian population. While the stereotypical picture of homelessness among young people is that of the 'street kid' the reality is often far removed from this depiction (Northcott & Walls, 1997). An Australian study (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1995) first brought the issue of homeless students to recent public attention, reporting that 25,000 to 30,000 homeless young people were secondary school students in 1994. Although the extent of homelessness among the school aged population is not fully known, research by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1995) highlighted the capacity schools have in addressing homeless young people's social, emotional and physical needs.

Others have also noted the potential of schools, particularly in keeping young homeless people connected to community and other protective networks (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001; Sykes, 1993) in alleviating the trauma and other consequences associated with homelessness. When homeless students drop out of school, and leave behind their supportive networks, they are likely to make the transition to chronic homelessness (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002, 1998).

The literature suggests that schools form, for many young homeless people, the only significant constant in their lives (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995). Schools become agents of stability and support. Schools occupy a central place in the community and constitute the frontline in assisting the homeless (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003). "Schools are a

critical factor if we are serious, as we must be, about meeting the needs of homeless young people" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission: Transcript of Evidence, 1989, p.2269).

However, the evidence suggests that homeless young people face numerous obstacles in attempting to attend school, which results in the delay of many life and educational opportunities. For young people without the support of a family, the combination of trying to address basic survival needs and attend school at the same time becomes impossible. Young homeless people often lack the financial, material and social resources required for a successful education. The complex and challenging issues impacting on homeless young people's education requires a multifaceted approach (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003) not commonly found in schools (Goldman & La Castra, 2000). Consequently, many young people respond by leaving school into the unskilled labour market, where they may have little prospect of immediate employment in the workforce (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002).

Awareness of the increasing number of homeless students has served to focus attention on the lives of these young people. Even though the provision of welfare and community services to this student population is a problem which policy makers are aware of, there still remains a shortage of research examining homeless young people's experiences within education.

Background

This study draws upon 12 years of working with young homeless people in Australia. My first introduction to homeless young people was through my position as a Youth Outreach Worker in Kings Cross, Sydney. This position used street work to make contact

with young people who tended to avoid institutions of all kinds. The underlying role was one of flexibility, with the capacity to develop positive, nonjudgmental relationships with high risk groups, such as young people with major social and emotional problems. The position focussed primarily on young people drawn to the King's Cross area, facing the likelihood of long term homelessness, and dependent on drugs and involvement in crime and prostitution.

Many of these young people were at extreme risk of further abuse and sexual exploitation. The street work focus enabled me to meet young people in areas they regarded as their own, such as the street, hotels, cafes and in parks. Engagement, counselling and ongoing support took place on the street, or in the surrounding areas of King's Cross. The objectives of the street contact service to young people was to help them identify their needs and problems, to assist linkages to community networks and to become involved in caring and supportive relationships with adults. This work was based on the belief that in the first instance emphasis should be placed on the building of positive and supportive relationships in a non-threatening context and to offer help where homeless young people are, rather than wait for them to present and request a service.

These young people had little or no trust in adults, particularly those working within welfare and child protection professions. They had found themselves at the end of the line, with past attempts to provide assistance or intervention failing. For these young people, the failure was not on their part, but the system. Their stories showed how the 'system' which has been set up to help young people who needed the necessary protection and care during times of trauma and crisis, all too often failed them. Consequently, these young people turned their backs on any assistance and took matters into their own hands.

Naturally, these young people had lost confidence in adults, particularly welfare professionals. However, if they received appropriate support, these challenges could be

met. My youth outreach role was the first step toward re-engaging these young people. Street/outreach work was a very important first stage of contact with young homeless people. It was one of the few avenues where homeless young people felt comfortable and secure accessing a supporting network. It allowed them to remain anonymous and unthreatened by the stigma and coercion of welfare agencies, they could feel in control of their own decisions, and it provided an ideal opportunity for them to experiment with trust.

Over this three-year period as a youth outreach worker I began to develop a deeper understanding and involvement with young people whose personal and social circumstances were tragic. As I learned more of their stories, I began to question how society and social programmes were failing so badly: where did the failure begin? It became clear that most of the young people living in Kings Cross had had little formal education. Of the young people: most had left school before or around the time they also left home; and eighty per cent of them had not completed year nine. Yet many expressed the desire for education, seeing it as a way out of their present situations. However, getting these young people back into a formal and comparatively restrictive system was a difficult task. Keeping them there was even more difficult.

When I moved to Perth, Western Australia, I was employed to work with youth at risk, as part of the 'Students at Risk' programme in a school. My role was to create and then develop a supportive environment for students with a history of negative schooling and other life experiences. Frequently, students had often been offenders, were homeless or had backgrounds of abuse. They had limited career goals and often had an extremely poor self-image due to repeated failure.

I was surprised to discover young people with the same problems regarding homelessness as those in King's Cross. Again, the issue of homelessness had enormous ramifications on the problems of daily living: survival was an issue that took precedence over

schooling. Here, too, homeless young people had a desire to complete their schooling, but could not cope with this pressure on top of their more immediate problems.

In my first year within the position, I assisted a 16-year-old female student who was a victim of neglect, abuse and family poverty. Her family circumstances forced her to leave home in an attempt to find a safe and secure environment. The psychological and emotional implications of being homeless were a heavy burden on her education. As a start, I attempted to assist in addressing some of her emotional, educational and physical needs. I helped her access safe accommodation, clothing, food, medical treatment, stationery, books and counselling. Consequently I found other homeless young people coming forward for assistance to stay at school. The number of students seeking assistance increased along with my involvement and understanding of the issues affecting them.

It was at this point I realised the extent of homelessness. Homeless young people attending the school increased from six in 1995 to more than 100 in 1999. What started as a response to one homeless student's need developed into a range of school and community support programs addressing the complex needs of homeless students. These programs began to make schooling accessible and meaningful for homeless young people while fostering supportive and accepting relationships with others.

As the enrolment of homeless students increased, the school began to be overwhelmed by their numbers and at times struggled to provide an adequate level of assistance. Support at an individual level became less possible, with only one youth support worker to cater to the needs of so many homeless. With no increased funding or staffing available, students began to drop out. By the end of 2000 the school carried only 30 homeless students on its rolls, and the youth support worker position was defunded.

Presently, there is still no Federal or State government policy on the roles of schools in the response to youth homelessness even though research identifies schools as early sites for intervention (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001). Like the school I worked with, many schools are inadequately resourced and cannot provide the support staff or programmes that are needed if a serious attempt to keep homeless young people in the education system is to be mounted.

My experience as a youth work practitioner raised three significant questions; what can we say about the consequences of homelessness for students, how can schools meet this growing challenge, and how can schools provide for the homeless young people comprehensive services which promotes success?

Purpose of this study

This research aims to heighten awareness of the issues facing homeless young people attempting to obtain an education, by exploring their experiences from their own perspectives. While existing research demonstrates the extent of homelessness among young people, experts' perspectives on the nature of these experiences predominate. Awareness and insight must be achieved if we are serious about alleviating the difficulties young homeless people experience with their schooling. Understanding these young people's experiences can be an important step in improving the educational opportunities for part of this student population. This research will attempt address such issues.

Significance of the study

Much of the existing literature on homeless young people focuses on the extent of the problem, and from the perspectives of the experts. There are few phenomenological studies of homeless young people attempting to get an education. Adopting a phenomenological approach, this study attempts to describe what it is like to be homeless for young people. By understanding how young people perceive their experiences of homelessness, educators and youth work practitioners will be better informed when designing programs, policy and services for this vulnerable population.

The objectives of this study were to:

- explore the experiences of five homeless young people between the ages of 15-18 who have attempted to get an education;
- examine the similarities and differences in their experiences;
- extrapolate common themes by conducting an analysis of the data;
- identify, describe, and critically analyse common meanings that the experience holds for the group ; and
- provide a basis for further research in the area of homeless students.

Research question

The primary research question was- why do homeless students drop out of school?

Organisation of thesis

Chapter one describes the aims, objectives and background to the study. Chapter two provides a context to the study by discussing themes and issues from the homelessness literature. In chapter three the methodological framework is outlined, including discussion of the data collection and analysis, and its relationship to the use of phenomenology in the study. Chapters four to eleven examine the emergent themes of the research, as described by the young people. Chapter twelve draws together the key findings of the study and their relevance to the research literature. The final chapter has some concluding comments, including the voices of each participant. Appendices contain the consent form and interview schedule.

CHAPTER TWO

HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE AND SCHOOLING

This chapter reviews the literature on those young people characterised as being without safe and stable living situations. The review demonstrates that there is no consensus on a definition of homelessness among young people and that the term encompasses young people who are recently homeless, sporadically homeless, and chronically homeless through a variety of paths. The focus of this review is on issues relating to homeless young people and schooling. First, however, there is a brief overview to describe homelessness and its extent and nature among young people in Australia.

The National Inquiry into Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness has become one of the most serious social issues facing Australia since the 1980s. The most influential publication to examine the nature and extent of homelessness amongst Australia's young people was *Our homeless children: The Report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children*, (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989). This inquiry was the result of growing community concern about homelessness among children and young people in Australia. The inquiry had been based on the principles set out in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.37).

The release of this comprehensive report in 1989 led to heightened community and government awareness about homelessness among children and young people within Australia. The inquiry found homelessness was a significant social problem, and estimated that there were between 20,000 to 25,000 children and young people under 18 who were homeless at that time, including at least 8,500 aged 12 to 15 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.65).

The inquiry drew largely on the experiences of 100 homeless young people themselves, focusing on the causes of homelessness. The report emphasized the importance of considering homelessness among young people in a broad social context, rather than focussing only on the individual circumstances of young people and their families. Family breakdown, mental illness, abuse, neglect and poverty were reported as reasons for young people leaving home prematurely. However, leaving home does not necessarily lead to homelessness. The report highlighted a number of contributing factors to certain young people leaving home or becoming vulnerable to homelessness. Broader structural features such as family poverty, high levels of youth unemployment, low levels of income, insufficient welfare services, housing discrimination, and the provision of inadequate housing were among the reasons for young people remaining homeless. Certain disadvantaged groups such as Indigenous young people (pp.129-135), refugees (pp.139-142) and young people (pp.109-117) leaving state care are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, according to the report.

The report provided a critique of resources available to support homeless young people and made 77 recommendations on ways to prevent and reduce homelessness among Australia's young people. It also reported on the provision of services for homeless young people. The report recommended that federal and state governments, and the community generally, work collaboratively to develop a comprehensive approach to address the problems of homelessness. It noted the importance of prevention and early intervention strategies in the area of youth homelessness with a specific emphasis on the role schools can play in that response (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.278).

Defining homelessness

Homelessness is a broad term and one that lacks an agreed definition in the literature (Bessant, 2001; Chamberlain & Johnson, 2001; Fopp, 1998). Popular perceptions are often influenced by the media and personal observations of those sleeping it rough on the streets (Fopp, 1998) whilst the reality is that the most significant proportion of homeless people in Australia are those moving from one form of temporary accommodation to another. This includes young people moving between forms of shelters, friends' places, and the street. In 1989, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) used an appropriately broad definition:

Homelessness describes a lifestyle which includes insecurity and transience of shelter. It is not confined to a lack of shelter. For many young people and children, it signifies a state of detachment from family and vulnerability to dangers, including exploitation and abuse broadly defined, from which the family normally protects the child (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995, p.22).

Towards the end of the 1990s there was an agreement in Australia about the use of the 'cultural definition of homelessness' (Chamberlain, 1999, p.4; Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2001, p.11; House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995, p.26). Responding to the request made at the Housing Minister's Conference in 2000 for the development of a common understanding of homelessness, the definition agreed on at the forum was based on the work of Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992). They argue (1992) that homelessness is a socially constructed cultural concept which acquires meaning in relation to the housing conventions of a particular culture. This cultural definition identifies three levels of homelessness.

The first level of primary homelessness refers to people without conventional accommodation who live on the streets, in deserted buildings, in cars, under bridges, or in

improvised dwellings. Secondary homelessness includes people moving between various forms of temporary shelter, including friends, relatives and emergency accommodation and boarding houses. The third level of tertiary homelessness refers to people living in single rooms in private boarding houses on a long term basis (three months or more) without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1992, p.291).

'Home' in homelessness

These definitions of homelessness do not capture the diversity of experiences, however research by Strategic Partners Pty. Ltd. (2001) raised issues related to producing a coherent definition, by commenting on a "shift in understanding homelessness from a simple approach of 'houseless' or 'roofless' to one which includes the lack of a 'home'" (p.11). This suggests the need for a change in focus from housing requirements to include other issues. Similarly, Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992) note that homelessness is more than houselessness. Homeless people generally lack the vital supports provided by 'home' in its wider sense. Research by Keys Young (1998, p.26) put forward notions of home and homelessness from within an Indigenous context:

Homelessness is about a sense of belonging...four walls and a roof don't make a home (Indigenous SAAP worker).

Likewise, the *National Homeless Strategy Discussion Paper* (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2000, p.17), includes a small but interesting comment from Matt Gleeson, a homeless person who stated:

Unfortunately, my homelessness does not just go away because a counsellor can only see me for six weeks, it does not disappear because a service can only offer a partial solution, and it's not solved by simply housing me.

Kearns and Smith (1994, p.420) reflect on the complexities of homelessness:

perhaps within the tragedy of people living without shelter and in fact pervading contemporary urban society – there is a more profound problem: the lack of belonging and connectedness with particular places.

A number of other Australian studies consider critical factors in describing young people's experience of homelessness. In recent work in the inner-city of Sydney (Robinson, 2001) the construction of homeplaces, places in which young people felt most at home physically and psychologically, were considered key factors shaping experiences for young homeless people. Neil and Fopp (1992, p.3) discussing the dimension of homelessness suggest that:

there are two important issues to be considered in defining homelessness- the notion of a home, and the value of objective or subjective criteria in providing a more appropriate definition.

Other literature notes the importance of acknowledging the concept of the home in an attempt to bring a wider understanding in the definition of homelessness (Beed, 1991; Chamberlain & Johnson, 2001; Fitzpatrick, 2000, Sykes, 1993).

How many homeless young people ?

The methodological problems in estimating the number of homeless have been widely debated (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002, 1998, 1995; Crane & Brannock, 1996; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Fopp, 1998). These studies all note that it is difficult to estimate the number of homeless young people. These young people are very difficult to count, except for the proportion that is reached in accommodation hostels, leaving many young people "untouched and grossly undercounted" (Vissing & Diamant, 1997, p.32). Research estimates of the size of homeless youth vary widely.

Notwithstanding the debates, the Australian literature suggests that the number of homeless young people is substantial and widespread (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003; Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003; Crane & Brannock, 1996). In 1989 the HREOC Inquiry into Homeless Children estimated that the number of homeless young people was between 20,000 and 25,000. In his response to HREOC, however, Fopp (1989) estimated that there were between 50,000 to 70,000 homeless young people in Australia. He did this by using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics to estimate the number of young people aged between 15 and 24 who are unemployed and are not living with their parents and, hence, 'at risk' of becoming homeless.

In 1994 a national study estimated there were 21,000 homeless young people aged 12 to 18 in Australia (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1995). In 2001 there were 26,060 homeless young people (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002). This figure represents a rise of 8.4 per cent between 1994 and 2001. Other studies have estimated that over the course of a year in Australia, approximately 40,000 young people aged between 12 and 24 experience homelessness (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2001).

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) provided assistance with accommodation for 32,800 young people in the year ending 2002. Given the likelihood that large numbers of homeless young people do not access welfare services for accommodation, these figures should be treated with caution (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003).

The context of young homeless people

Young peoples' pathways into homelessness are diverse. Research suggests that there is no typical homeless young person, and there is no single cause for youth homelessness (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003). Research about youth homelessness in general has shown that many young people have left home because of serious family problems, and are not in a safe and stable living environment. Much of the literature discussing homeless young people commonly cites family poverty, family breakdown, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, parental substance abuse and domestic violence as central to young people leaving home (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2003; Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003, 2001; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Smith, 1995; Sykes, 1993; Whitebeck & Hoyt, 1999).

In Australia and elsewhere, an increasing number of studies show a high incidence of neglect among the homeless youth population (Smith, 1995; Sykes, 1993). In a study of midwest American homeless youth (Whitebeck, Hoyt & Ackley, 1997) found that the young people themselves reported parent-child relationships with little parental warmth and supportiveness, low levels of parental monitoring and high levels of parental rejection. The picture to emerge was one of family dysfunction with or without sexual exploitation and physical abuse.

Other studies report sexual abuse and physical abuse as the reason for young people to leave home. For example, Howard's (1991) study of homeless youth in the inner city of Sydney, found high levels of physical and sexual abuse, with females reporting much higher rates compared to young men. Of the females interviewed, 73 per cent reported a history of physical abuse and 82 per cent had been sexually abused as a child. The sexual abuse mostly began under the age of 11 (67%). For males, 77 per cent revealed a childhood of physical abuse and 29 per cent sexual abuse, with 59 per cent reporting the

first sexual abuse at the age of 11. Howard (1991) notes that it is common that young men are less likely to disclose sexual abuse. Within Australian households there is increasing awareness of the levels of violence towards women and children, including increased reporting of sexual and physical abuse, as well as neglect (Stanley, 2002).

Broader structural and economic factors are also identified as contributing to young people becoming homeless. The Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee (1995, p.14) states in its report on *Aspects of youth homelessness* that youth homelessness does not occur in a vacuum, but is a response to the broader social and economic trends impacting on young people, their families and communities. The report concluded that these trends include changes in the family, changes in the labour market and an increase in poverty among Australian households. Changes in the Australian family include the increasing numbers of divorces and separated families. More than one-third of Australian marriages will end in divorce (ABS, 2002). The proportion of remarriages that will end in divorce is higher, resulting in young people experiencing more than one family breakdown.

Evidence suggests that the size of the family has declined so there are greater financial and emotional investments in each child, and a tendency to expect more of that child (McKillop, 1992). The nuclear family type consisting of husband, wife and dependant children have decreased, accounting for little over one quarter of Australian families (ABS, 2002). The fastest growing family type is the single parent family, with more than one in five families with children under the age of 15 now headed by a single parent, that is more than 450 000 families (ABS, 2002).

The structure of the economy and labour market have dramatically changed in the past decade (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003; 2001). Firstly, there has been significant increases in casual and part-time employment. Part-time employment is often low paid and insecure, resulting for some in lower and potentially

unstable wages. Secondly, reports indicate a decline in full-time job opportunities, particularly for low skilled workers. Unskilled employment opportunities which were once available without educational qualifications have now been replaced by technology, therefore increasing the demand for highly skilled workers. These structural changes have increased the importance of training and education in order to obtain employment resulting in young people needing to remain in education longer. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in the number of people accessing welfare entitlements as their regular income. The number of people receiving unemployment benefits increased from 389 000 in 1989 to 745 900 in 1999 (Mission Australia, 2001a). In 2000, 860 000 children were living in households where no one was in paid work (Reference Group on Welfare Reform, 2000).

Over 1.8 million Australians, or over 11 per cent of the population, live below the poverty line. Of this number over 600,000 are children (Mission Australia, 2001b). The link between unemployment and poverty is significant, with almost one in three people in poverty living in a family where the head is unemployed. Australia has a relatively high child poverty rate, with an estimated 14.9 per cent of all Australian children living in poverty (Harding, Lloyd & Greenwell, 2001).

Australia's young people have been adversely affected by these economic and family changes. These changes have obstructed their paths to adult independence, status and identity. The transition from the family unit to independent adulthood has never been more insecure. The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2001, p.1) states that:

at a structural level, the high youth unemployment rate, limited alternatives to mainstream education, low income, a lack of affordable housing and discrimination in the private rental market are key factors placing young people at risk of homelessness.

The process of youth homelessness

Some studies have considered the processes involved in youth homelessness, often challenging traditional thinking which views homelessness as a sudden crisis (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2000; Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002; 1998; Crane & Brannock, 1996). Chamberlain & MacKenzie's (2002, 1998) research on homeless young people has been an important contribution to the discourse on homelessness among young people in Australia. Their model of the homeless career reveals that homelessness among young people "can best be understood as a process, rather than an event" (p.71). "Young people go through various stages before they develop a self-identity as a homeless person" (p.70). If homelessness is considered a process, it is difficult to pin down a beginning and end. They suggest that the process of becoming homeless can usefully be thought of as a career, a sequence of transitions through three stages: "tentative break", "permanent break" and "transition to chronicity".

The first phase within the model (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1998, p.71) is when young people become "at risk of homelessness". They note the importance of support and early intervention during this stage. The first indicator of a young person becoming homeless is when they make the "tentative break" from home and family. "This is usually called 'runaway' behaviour, and most young people who run away stay temporarily with friends or relatives" (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1998, p.71). Some young people leave home for a short time but return once the conflict has been resolved. Others begin to move in and out of home. This first stage (tentative break) in the homeless career is also referred to the "in and out stage".

Those who do not return home make the second stage: the "permanent break" along the homeless career path. The model notes that young people no longer "consider themselves as belonging to the family unit, and that he or she is unlikely to return home on a continuing basis"(Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1998, p.71).

The final stage is the "transition to chronicity" This denotes the acceptance of homelessness by young people as a way of life. "They often come to accept petty crime, substance abuse, drug dealing and prostitution as a normal part of life" (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1998, p.72) There are many factors which influence the homeless process and the "the transition to chronicity is often a drawn out process, and it can occur over widely varying periods time" (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1998, p.72).

Homeless students

The issue of homeless school students came to public attention in Australia when Chamberlain & MacKenzie (1995) reported findings from a national census of homeless school students, carried out in May 1994. They contacted all government and Catholic secondary schools across Australia to ask them if they had any homeless students in their school during census week. Ninety-nine per cent of secondary schools completed a census return and schools identified 11,000 homeless secondary students in that week (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1995). The research further estimated that 25,000 to 30,000 school students experience a period of homelessness each year. This research not only provided an estimate of the number of homeless students, but also challenged the popular view that homeless young people were 'street kids' as they concluded that a large proportion of homeless youth were secondary students.

In August 2001, Chamberlain and MacKenzie conducted the second national census of homeless school students, which was carried out at the same time of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Census. Schools reported 12,230 homeless young people remained within the education system. Twenty three per cent were 14 or younger, 44 per cent were 15 or 16, and one-third (31 per cent) were 17 or 18. Western Australian schools reported 830 homeless young people attending school. This State recorded the lowest numbers of homeless young people attending school (p.14), with only 27 per cent

of its homeless youth remaining in the education system and 71 per cent registered as unemployed (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002, p.38).

Perth City Mission explored the number of homeless students in Western Australia during 1997 by surveying 39 high schools (Northcott & Walls, 1997). This study uncovered an estimated 600 homeless students who stated they had nowhere to live. One school alone had a staggering 60 homeless young people enrolled within their campus (Northcott & Walls, 1997).

Education as a solution

Most young people have their first experience of homelessness while they are still at school (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002, 1998; Crane & Brannock, 1996; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Smith, 1995). Findings from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989, p.14) noted that 75 per cent of teenagers sampled were 15 or younger when they first experienced homelessness. For this reason it is argued that schools can play a key role in helping those students who are homeless or 'at risk' of becoming homeless. In his evidence to the Human Rights Inquiry, Commissioner Brian Burdekin stressed the importance of schools in preventing the cycle of youth homelessness. He commented:

educational institutions...are a critical factor if we are serious, and we must be, about meeting the needs of young people who are at risk of becoming homeless. In my experience, if a family is disintegrating, has disintegrated or has become severely dysfunctional...if that young person's plight is not picked up by the school, it will not be picked up elsewhere (Burdekin,; Transcript of evidence, 1989, p.2269).

The effectiveness of the education system in assisting homeless young people can be gauged by examining the evidence from a study by Morris & Blaskett (1992). This examined the education experiences of 32 homeless secondary students in Melbourne. It highlighted ways in which schools could support homeless students to continue their studies. This study concluded that in the absence of family support, schools not only offer a stable and supportive environment, but also provide homeless young people a sense of attachment and belonging. Access to support service addressing young people's physical and emotional needs were also found to be important factors in keeping homeless youth at school (Morris & Blaskett, 1992).

Another Australian study (Sykes, 1993) reflected on the 1989-1992 Ardoch-Windsor Secondary College experience with educating homeless students. Sykes argues from the data presented, that a school is the best, and often the only, place to identify homelessness and establish successful ways of dealing with it. She notes that schools are primary sites for helping homeless students to find the basic necessities for survival. Schools can assist students in accessing income support, appropriate housing, food, clothes and counseling for emotional support. Sykes further notes that the school is often the last resort for many homeless young people before they become entrenched in the judicial and welfare system. If homeless young people can be "engaged with and kept at school and attached to the local community, their opportunities for participation in employment and further training is increased"(Sykes, 1993, p.120).

Chamberlain & MacKenzie (2002), in a second study from the national census of homeless students, also highlight the value of schools as "significant sites for assisting and supporting young people at the earliest stages of the "homeless career"(p, 5). Schools can assist in the early stages of family conflict or breakdown. For those who have left home or have been homeless for some time, schools can play a critical role in assisting young people with a range of personal and social issues which may lead them to drop out

in the future. It is when homeless young people drop out of the education system their chances of spiraling into a life of unemployment and chronic homelessness is increased. Those who become detached from school are likely to be further marginalised from the community altogether.

In spite of this evidence of the importance of education as a solution to homelessness for young people, many homeless students struggle to remain in school. One of the key findings from Chamberlain & MacKenzie's (2002) study was the high drop out rate of homeless young people from school. They concluded that a large proportion of young people who become homeless while enrolled at school run a high risk of dropping out of the education system. They estimated that more than two thirds of homeless students do not complete the school year in which they become homeless (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002).

In an earlier Western Australian study of 53 homeless young people presented to the Human Rights Inquiry, three quarters (75.4 per cent) gave up on their studies between Year 8 and Year 11 at high school, 9.4 per cent left school between Grade 6 and Grade 7 Primary School, and only 15.1 per cent either continued or intended to resume school (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.57).

In a Melbourne study by Smith (1995) of 104 young homeless people, 43 per cent left school around the same time they left home. Most of these young people were either 15 or 16 years of age when this occurred. A further 28 per cent left school one to two years before they left home. The majority surveyed had left school before grade 10. Many of these were expelled from school for behavioural problems or for drug and alcohol abuse. Twenty one per cent were homeless before they left school (Smith, 1995, p.31). Among those interviewed, some had re-entered education at a different school soon after leaving home but eventually "terminated their education because of financial pressures, lack of facilities to study, sickness or drug and alcohol management issues" (Smith, 1995, p.32).

The school retention rates of homeless young people is quite a concern considering the earlier young people leave school, the longer they are likely to remain homeless (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002; Smith, 1995). Others note that homeless young people leaving education have poor literacy skills and possess the minimum of qualifications to be successful in the labour market (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness 2003,2001; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Smith, 1995).

Educational disenchantment

The problems experienced by homeless young people in the school system have been documented by a range of studies (Gidley & Wildman, 1995; Goldman & La Castra, 2000,1998; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, Smith, 1995; Sykes, 1993). These studies suggest that barriers to school participation for homeless students are often created through the education system itself. Evidence suggests that the school, and the way it operates, further compounds the personal difficulties and social problems of the homeless (Symons & Smith, 1995, p.34). Rather than offering opportunities for achievement, schools become places of alienation and failure (Beresford, 1993).

Many studies contend that the high rates of school exclusion and low retention rates among homeless young people are a reflection of the education system's failure to address the needs of homeless students. O'Connor (cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.85) identified the negative effects of schools with homeless young people as many described unhappy experiences at school. "The process of marginalisation, rejection and exclusion experienced in their families was also reflected in their school experiences". The problem of school was often a result of

alienation, when students felt powerless or estranged from school. O'Connor concluded that:

It is an indictment on the school system that young people do not identify the school system as a potential source of support and assistance (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.90).

Other literature notes that barriers to school participation for homeless young people can also be created through educational bureaucracy. Anderson, Janger and Panton (1995, p.2) noted the barriers that homeless young people face in merely accessing school:

"Efforts to curb crime or ensure school safety may impede enrolment for homeless teens, for example, curfew laws make them guilty of a crime just because they have no place to go. Schools in some states refuse to admit homeless teens due to liability concerns".

Even when homeless young people do attend school, the chances of achievement are compromised by other difficulties. Problems with educational relevance is a continual theme in the research on homeless young people at school (Beresford, 1993). All too often homeless students do not relate the classroom to their world outside the school. The academic side of schooling becomes irrelevant to homeless young peoples' daily lives because of the struggle in meeting their basic needs. Finding suitable accommodation, food, clothing and money becomes the priority, often overriding any potential for academic pursuits. Responding to the needs of homeless students requires a flexible and alternative approach, not commonly found in schools (Goldman & La Castra, 2000).

Other literature suggests that the nature and structure of schools are unable to cater to the demands placed on them by homeless young people. These demands include the range of behaviours which challenge schooling regulations, such as "taking and dealing drugs, persistent wagging, theft and fighting with teachers and students, all leading to expulsion" (Smith, 1995, p.32). Difficulties often arise for homeless students when

schools place expectations on all students that are based on middle class culture and mainstream values (Symons & Smith, 1995; Beresford, 1993). A young person who is homeless, for example, often has values and a lifestyle at odds with those of the school. This contrast results in problems that are often labeled as behavioural difficulties. For example, O'Connor (1989) found that many homeless students are often suspended or expelled for being 'difficult'. All too often "homeless youth are noticed at school for being different and not conforming to the dominant modes of the school" (Symons & Smith, 1995, p.34).

Often schools lack information and knowledge regarding the complexity of issues affecting homeless young people. Studies have recorded a persistent pattern of insensitivity towards homeless young people, a problem that stems from a lack of awareness. Symons and Smith (1995), in their study of homelessness on the Gold Coast, found that a number of students perceived the school structure and teachers' attributes as uncaring of their homeless circumstances. As they note, "misunderstanding, or perhaps a lack of understanding, translates into matters of care. Indeed, the lack of caring displayed by teachers is a strong theme in the field work" (Symons & Smith, 1995, p.33). This was seen as contributing towards the development of students' negative attitudes towards teachers and school attendance. Much of the literature notes that students identify with the school through their teachers. Students do much better at school if they like their teachers and feel valued and supported within their school environment (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2002; Corbitt, 1993; Morris & Blaskett, 1992; Sykes, 1993).

The issue of staff and peer attitudes and stereotypes also receives considerable attention in the literature (Sykes, 1993; Stronge, 1992). The literature emphasises the need for school staff to be aware of stigmatising in school and avoiding judgements about homeless students. The lack of schooling supplies, cleanliness, appropriate uniform or clothing, and physical attractiveness as a result of being homeless can be embarrassing

for these young people. Many feel different, are taunted by their peers, and may feel alienated for being homeless. Stronge (1992, p.124) notes that:

rather than face this kind of humiliation and stigmatisation, many young people choose not to go to school or remain as anonymous and detached as possible.

Barriers to schooling

Research on the impact of homelessness on young people's schooling indicates that these young people confront many obstacles in their attempt to receive an education. Of particular concern are poverty and survival issues, health problems, emotional difficulties, living conditions, life on the street, and victimization and behavioural problems such as substance abuse.

Finances and poverty

Homeless young people find themselves in a position of poverty and financial hardship (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003, 2001; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; National Welfare Rights Centre, 2001). Opportunities to participate in education decrease as their lives become dominated with the struggle to find money for everyday survival needs such as accommodation, clothing and food (Morris & Blaskett, 1992; Northcott & Walls, 1997; Sykes, 1993; Tasker, 1995). A Gold Coast study on the educational experiences of six homeless young women, found those surveyed suffered extreme financial hardship and struggled to make ends meet on a low level income (Goldman & La Castra, 1998). Moreover, the study pointed out that financial hardship contributed to accommodation problems, social isolation and

health problems, severely limiting the young women's ability to continue with their education.

Health problems

Previous studies have consistently found that health problems are more widespread among the homeless population than the general population (Clark & Leys, 1999; Hillier, Matthews & Dempsey, 1997). Untreated medical problems among homeless youth have been well documented (Goldman & La Castra, 1998; Rossiter, Mallett, Myers & Rosenthal, 2003; Sykes, 1993). Existing health problems often go untreated, and the stresses and survival strategies of homelessness can produce new health problems. Many homeless young people suffer poor nutrition, general sickness, upper respiratory infection, dental problems, minor skin ailments and ear disorders. The high levels of intravenous drug use and involvement in unprotected sex also places homeless young people at high risk of exposure to, and transmission of, diseases and infections (Spooner, Mattick & Howard, 1996).

Emotional and psychological problems

Consistently, studies suggest that many homeless young people have disproportionately high rates of emotional and mental health problems. These include anxiety (Cauce, 2000; Howard, 1992; Whitebeck & Hoyt, 1999), depression (Smart, Reginald, Walsh & Gordon, 1993), posttraumatic reactions (Stewart, Steiman, Cauce, Cochran, Whitebeck & Hoyt, 2004; Hoyt, Tyler, & Yoder, 2000; Yates, MacKenzie, Pennebridge & Cohen, 1998), substance abuse (Greene & Ringwalt, 1997; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Sibthorpe, Drinkwater & Gardner, 1995), self-harming behaviours (Pears & Noller, 1995; Smith, 1995) and suicide attempts (Ryan, Kilmer, Cauce,

Watanabe & Hoyt, 2000; Cauce, 2000; Molnar, Kral, Booth & Watter, 1998; Sibthorpe *et al*, 1995; Howard, 1991)

A study by Sydney City Mission (1998) found that 75 per cent of the homeless population had at least one mental disorder. A study of psychiatric disorders amongst homeless youth across Australia showed that compared to the general adolescent population, homeless young people were twice as likely to have a psychiatric disorder during their lifetime (Kamieniecki, 2001, p.355).

A recent Melbourne study assessed the mental health of young homeless people (Rossiter, Mallett, Myers & Rosenthal, 2003). Of those surveyed, twenty six per cent of the young people reported a level of psychological distress indicating a psychiatric disorder. Fourteen per cent of young people reported clinical levels of depression and 12 per cent had clinical levels of anxiety. A surprisingly high number of young people surveyed (12 per cent) had clinical levels of psychosis while 37.4 per cent reported they had previously attempted suicide (Rossiter *et al*, 2003, p.17).

There is evidence that experiencing a moderately to severely stressful event can trigger major emotional problems in young people, and that experiencing multiple events increases the risk (Wilson & Keane, 1997). Considering the childhood history of many homeless young people, it is not surprising that their traumatic backgrounds put them at risk for such problems. There is also evidence that indicates homelessness itself is traumatic, and a risk factor for the development of emotional disorders (Goodman, Saxe & Harvey, 1991; Stewart, Steiman, Cauce, Cochran, Whitebeck & Hoyt, 2004; Whitebeck & Hoyt, 1999).

Being homeless / life on the streets

Homelessness has a devastating impact on the lives of young people. These young people often alternate between living on the street and a variety of temporary locations, including friends' houses, hostels and squats. The life they lead exposes them to a subculture of violence, drug abuse, prostitution and crime (Howard, 1991; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Smith, 1995; Whitebeck, Hoyt, Yoder, Cauce & Paradise, 2001; Wilson, 1989) Often the immediate task of survival overrides any importance of schooling for them. Chamberlain and Mackenzie (2002) note it is harder to reach homeless young people, let alone educate them, once they have become entrenched in the homeless subculture. These young people often lose the capacity to envision life beyond homelessness as they become embedded in a world that revolves around surviving.

Substance misuse

One of the consequences of the homeless subculture that has major implications for young people is substance misuse (Baron, 1999). Use of alcohol and drugs is extremely prevalent among homeless young people and they are often used to "dull the pain of existence" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.53). Previous research has identified that homeless young people have higher rates of alcohol and other drug use than those who live at home (Howard, 1991). A study conducted in the inner city areas of Sydney with young homeless people found 75.5 per cent had used cannabis, 50 per cent amphetamines, 40 per cent hallucinogens, and 42 per cent heroin (Howard, 1991). Another study of homeless young people in America found that 48.7 per cent of males and 40.1 per cent of females met the criteria for having a substance abuse disorder (Hoyt, Ackley, Fields & Whitebeck, 1997). A youth homelessness study in London found the onset of 70 per cent of substance abuse preceded the first episode of homelessness

(Craig & Hodson, 1998). "Increased duration of homelessness also appears to be a risk factor for substance abuse" (Kamieniecki, 2001, p.356). Drug abuse has serious consequences for young people learning at school. Once young people are abusing substances, they are likely to do poorly at school or drop out early (Spooner, Mattick & Howard, 1996). Data from a residential drug treatment facility in Sydney revealed that 72 per cent of young people (aged 12 to 20) did not complete Year 10 (Connie & Miller, 1994).

Crime

Another consequence of the homeless subculture is engagement in criminal activity. Young people who are homeless report high levels of criminal activity and are "very likely to be involved in the criminal justice system" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.19). The literature suggests that homeless young people engage in crime as a means of survival (National Crime Prevention, 1999; Whitebeck *et al*, 2001) while other young people are even committing offences in order to be arrested as a means of obtaining some form of accommodation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989). Often strategies for survival include stealing, prostitution, drug dealing and other illegal activities. "Even the search for a secure place to sleep can involve offences such as trespass" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989, p.19). Davis and colleagues (1995, p.105 cited in National Crime Prevention, 1999, p.22) note that homeless young people typically commit a range of offences, including shoplifting, robbery with weapons, assault, grievous bodily harm, stealing and selling stolen goods, and house burglaries. "They learn to carry weapons, broken glass, razor blades, knives, and for some, guns, all of which become part of the survival kit".

Podesta and Jones (1992) comment on two Victorian studies, the *Forced Exit* (Hirst, 1989) report, and *The Great Leap Forward* (Newman, 1991) report, which found that a high percentage (72 per cent) of homeless young people were completing a corrective order, or had been in a penal facility or institution at some time (44 per cent). They concluded that "as a community we sometimes confused homelessness with young people's need for a secure accommodation environment with the needs to lock them up or detain them"(Podesta and Jones, 1992, p.330).

Victimisation

Young homeless people have a high rate of victimisation. Hoyt and colleagues (1997) studied homeless young people from four midwestern states in America and found a wide range of victimisation occurred among the young people while they were homeless. Hoyt, Tyler and Yoder (2000) investigated street and sheltered homeless young people in the Seattle area and found that those who had spent at least one night on the street had traumatic exposure rates 5.9 times greater than young people who had not spent the night on the streets.

Homelessness has been found to significantly increase the likelihood for physical and sexual victimisation. Interviews conducted with homeless young women on the Gold Coast found that they were at high risk for exposure to a variety of forms of exploitation and victimization (Goldman & La Castra, 1998). Studies of national samples of homeless young people and other reports have similar findings about physical and sexual victimisation (National Crime Prevention, 1999). Alder's (1991) research on the young homeless in Melbourne reported that 92 per cent of those interviewed claimed they were frightened or scared for their personal safety and feared violent acts. A further 65 per cent stated they had been physically assaulted and 52 per cent sexually victimised in the last 12 months.

Conclusion

This literature review identified material which examined the multiple risk factors contributing to educational failure faced by homeless young people. Of the research examined, only a few studies sought to provide an understanding of the phenomenon of homelessness from young people's perspectives. Assuming that young people are the experts of their own experiences, this phenomenological study thus promises to add to the current body of knowledge regarding homelessness among young people in Australia by including perspectives of young people to the existing discourses.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

An interest in a deeper understanding of homeless students' *lived experiences* led me to choose a phenomenological approach. Central to any phenomenological study is "what is the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for these people?" (Patton, 2002, p.104).

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and is both a philosophical theory and a research method (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1998; ●iler, 1982). Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the meaning people give to their everyday experiences. This is achieved by "systematically collecting and analyzing narrative descriptions using methods that ensure credibility of both the data and the results"(Byrne 2001, p.1).

Phenomenology assumes that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday existence and that truth and understanding of life can emerge from people's life experiences (Crotty, 1996). In this study, a phenomenological approach was chosen in an attempt to explore the subjective experiences of young homeless people. Phenomenology is a research method that not only focuses attention on the perceptions and experiences of these young people but also goes beyond their daily state of affairs, such as the "how, where, what, or why something happened, phenomenology is concerned with the essence or nature of the lived experience" for the young person (Van Manen, 1990, p.393). Phenomenology is "concerned with interpreting *the meaning of their lived experience, their lifeworld*" (Van Manen, 1990, p.393). Utilising a phenomenological methodology allowed this study an effective means to better understand homelessness and schooling for young people.

The sample

Qualitative research methods are usually associated with a small number of participants (Patton, 2002). The sampling in this study was purposive. The power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 1998). Adequacy of the sample number was achieved when saturation of the description of the young peoples' experiences was achieved. Patton (2002) suggests saturation is achieved when no new information related to the phenomenon is revealed.

Only a person who has lived through certain experiences can take part in a phenomenological study (Crotty, 1996). This explorative study focussed specifically on five homeless young people aged between 15-18 years, all of whom volunteered to be involved. All participants experienced homelessness while attempting to get an education at school in Perth, Western Australia during 2002. Additional criteria for inclusion in the study were that the participants were recipients of the Independent Youth Homeless Allowance. This particular sample of young people was chosen for their specific life experiences which were considered relevant to the research (Patton, 2002; Crotty, 1996). Two young people (Ryan and Becky) were living in unsupported independent housing, while the remaining three (Sam, Jasmine and Adie) were sleeping it rough in hostels, the street, squats and friends' places.

The young people were known to me previously through my employment as a Youth Support Worker within local government. Having identified young people who fitted the criteria of my study, I then made contact with them by telephone to introduce myself and explain the concept of the study. All the young people contacted were eager to participate in the study. The location and time of the interviews were arranged to suit the participants. The beginning of the interview consisted of me introducing myself, explaining in depth the purpose of the study and the processes which were to follow. Following ethical requirements from Edith Cowan University, all young people were provided with an easy-to-read letter detailing the process of the research and a consent

form (Appendix A). The consent form outlined their rights to withdraw at any stage from the interview and stated that the information they provided could also be withdrawn at their request. Issues around confidentiality and the participants' continued involvement in the analysis/ validation of the data for the focus group were also discussed. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to complete and sign the consent form.

Data collection

In depth interviews

Phenomenology demands a mode of data collection that "will present the participant's experience precisely from their particular perspective, i.e. in terms of the significance it has for them personally. What is sought is a first person's description that stay in the first person" (Crotty, 1996, p.19). For this purpose, in-depth interviews with a narrative approach were used with each young person in order to achieve a better understanding of the lived experience of homelessness and schooling from their unique perspective. A pilot study with one young person was conducted prior to the commencement of the study in order to trial the interview technique and intended questions. The interview scheaule is included as Appendix B. Information from this pilot study was subsequently incorporated into the main study's results. Young people were interviewed twice. The follow-up interview was conducted two weeks after the first interview.

Consistent with phenomenological methods, open-ended questions were used to begin the interview. Similar techniques were used by Smith (1995). That study used a semi-structured interview format comprising open-ended questions to encourage the participants to talk freely about their experiences and life situations. This informal style of interviews suited the young people, and allowed them to talk about their life stories in a non-threatening way.

The interviews were initiated by only one question. The opening question: "Tell me how you came to be enrolled at school" was open and designed to explore the participants' experiences that led them to enrol. Thereafter the conversation was allowed to progress according to the participants' responses. Non-directive questioning, which was broad and open-ended, encouraged a story telling approach, helping the young person to describe their life events, telling their experiences, and describing their thoughts and feelings in as rich detail as possible. This approach allowed them to tell their stories in an unconstrained way. Prompts such as "Can you tell me more about that?" and "Is there anything else you would like to say about that?" were used throughout the interviews to encourage the young people to share their experiences. The use of paraphrasing was useful in maintaining good dialogue during the interviews (Creswell, 1998).

Awareness of my biases, knowledge and professional experiences were acknowledged prior to each interview and put aside during the data collection and data analysis (Patton, 2002). No attempt was made to influence the young persons' descriptions, so that each description was clearly their perspective of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). This 'bracketing, or suspending judgement' was done in order to allow them to construct and give meaning to their own reality (Dahlberg, Drew & Nystrom, 2001).

As is appropriate to a phenomenological study, I served as the primary instrument in this study, focussing on reduction and bracketing (Crotty, 1996; Patton, 2002). Strict attention was paid to the phenomenon under investigation as it was being described, allowing the young people's descriptions to emerge freely without restriction (Creswell, 1998). As the researcher I constantly monitored my own reactions, attempting to avoid all personal opinions.

As previously mentioned, I conducted all interviews in a place where the young people felt comfortable. Two interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. One young woman was interviewed in a inner city café. The remaining two participants were interviewed both times in a seaside restaurant of their choice. Reimbursement of \$20 was provided to participants for each interview. As Booth (1999, p.78) has identified, "researchers should value the contribution, knowledge and skills of informants and provide payment, especially when they may have little or no money".

All interviews were conducted and collated by myself. Interviews lasted up to one and a half hours' duration. All interviews were audio-taped on micro-cassettes and then transcribed verbatim. All tapes were anonymously coded. Patton (2002) states that the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which participants can express their own understandings in their own terms. Field notes were taken by myself during the interview. These field notes were incorporated within the analysis.

Persistence was the key in ensuring that the interviews were completed with each young person. Given the highly transient nature of these young people, it became clear that this was going to be a lengthy process in completing two interviews and a focus group with each participant. On numerous occasions some young people did not attend the arranged time and location for their interview. One young person alone took six attempts to locate for his first interview. He had moved eleven times in a two week period prior to his first interview. At times this proved a lengthy and time consuming process.

Focus group

A focus group was chosen as an additional method of data collection. Morse (1994, p.224) suggests that "data collected by using a focus group can be more informative than the data collected by other methods" as this process is "enriched through group interaction because individual participation can be enhanced in a group setting". This was held on the foreshore of the Swan River. The morning included recreation activities for the young people. Ski-tubing and water skiing was provided free of charge for the participants with an opportunity for them to get to know each other before the focus group. The water activities proved to be a highly successful strategy in providing an ice breaker for the young people. During the focus group lunch was provided. The focus group was audio-taped with permission from the young people. This exercise brought the young people and myself together for discussion of the findings and emerging themes. This process not only allowed for triangulation which strengthened the validity of the study, but also allowed them to elaborate on their experiences as homeless students.

The data to emerge from the young people during the interviews and focus group were rich. Many disclosed personal and painful details about their lives during the process, an indication that they felt safe and comfortable. They all reported positive feelings about being involved in the study and being given the opportunity to tell their life stories. Many expressed a sense of worth and empowerment in being asked to contribute their knowledge and life experiences. It seemed important to all of them that they had something constructive and positive to offer the community. One young woman spoke about the focus group as also being a positive experience as it allowed her to see that she is not in isolation in her struggles of being a homeless young person. They all hope that their life stories may contribute to something positive in the future.

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken concurrently with the data collection from the time of the first interview. The interview data was analysed through a rigorous, holistic approach employing the methodology of Colaizzi (1978, cited in Crotty 1996, p.22).

Following completion of each interview, all tapes were transcribed. This transcription process enabled me to think about what the young people were saying. Each transcript was read several times while listening to the audio tape to ensure accuracy of the interviews and to get close as possible to the young peoples' lived experiences. This analysis process also raised additional questions for the second interview and discussion during the focus group.

By reflecting on the interview transcripts, significant statements and phrases were highlighted. The meanings from the significant statements were formulated and organised into clusters of themes. The emergence of themes common to all the participants' descriptions were subsequently organised and compared across interviews identifying commonalities and differences (Crotty, 1996). Themes that emerged, after analysing each new transcript, were added to the categories already identified from the previous interviews. Saturation of data, which signified completion of data collection, was achieved when no new themes could be identified.

The results of the data analysis were integrated into an exhaustive description in order to capture as accurately as possible the way young people experienced homelessness and schooling. The exhaustive descriptions were returned to the young people for validation. This determined whether the findings accurately represented the young person's accounts of their lives. Any new data was then included in the final results.

Validity

Over the last decade, issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research has been discussed by several authors (Morse, 1994; Patton; 2002; Van Manen, 1990). Leininger (1994) argued that because the purposes of qualitative and quantitative research differ, different criteria is required to address issues of validity and reliability. Rigour, in qualitative research, is not defined in terms of reliability and validity but rather in terms of credibility, auditability, and fittingness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1986). In this study, specific procedures were taken to address criteria of credibility, auditability, and fittingness.

For phenomenological research to have credibility it must describe the experience of the participant in such a way that they recognise as it being theirs. Sandelowski (1986, p.30) discusses this issue by stating the credibility is the degree to which the study presents descriptions of a experience such that researchers, participants or other people would "recognise the experience when confronted with it after having only read about it in a study". As stated previously, the young people in this study were provided transcripts of their interviews for feedback to determine if the themes and experiences I perceived, adequately described their experiences as a homeless student. Reliability and validity was enhanced by this process.

In this study, credibility was enhanced through my use of 'bracketing'. As there is a potential for research bias both in the data collection and analysis stages of the study, bracketing ensures that the researchers make all attempts to acknowledge their awareness of pre-conceived ideas about the phenomena being studied (Dahlberg *et al*, 2001, Miles *et al*, 1994). Crotty (1996, p.20) suggests that bracketing is "a sincere endeavor not to allow one's beliefs and assumptions to shape the data collection process and a persistent effort not to impose one's own understandings and constructions of the data".

Auditability is achieved when other researchers can follow the decision trail of the researcher who carried out the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The issue of auditability is addressed in this study by strictly adhering to the procedural steps outlined by Colaizzi (1978). The auditability of this study was enhanced by field notes, the triangulation of data and use of a focus group.

Finally, fittingness is determined by how well the study can be applied (or comfortably 'fit') to other situations or contexts outside the original study setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moyle, 1996). As the researcher, my responsibility was to ensure that the findings of this study have meaning to others in similar situations. The assessment of fittingness of this study has been addressed by comparing information from relevant literature to the findings of this study. I was interested in how similar the meanings attributed by the young people in this study were to those of other young people in similar circumstances.

Ethical Considerations

Homeless young people present several challenges as participants in research. They are an extremely marginalised and transient population. As Booth (1999, p.76) noted, when conducting research with such a population a number of issues arise which warrant careful consideration. Firstly it is important that the impact of experiences of powerlessness and stigmatisation be recognised, and that the process of research seeks to be powerful and respectful. Booth (1999) raises the issue of power imbalance that exists between researcher and the young person. According to Booth (1999, p.78) it is important to shift the power to the young person by placing the researcher in the role of the learner. In doing this the young person has the information and power, and in effect becomes the teacher. Phenomenology recognises that young people are the experts of their own experiences and can give meaning to these experiences. Adopting this methodological design respects young people's knowledge and insights. This can be an empowering process for the participants involved.

In referring to other literature Booth (1999, p.77) points out that "it is crucial to avoid what Wadsworth (1984) refers to as a 'data raid' where researchers do a smash and grab. They get in, get the data, and get out". When conducting research with vulnerable people one needs to take time to build trust and get to know people allowing a better understanding of the issues. The richness of the data in a phenomenological study depends whether the participants trust the researchers; therefore, the background of the researcher becomes an important part of the study. I had been involved with this particular group of young people for over five years. This experience has enabled me to develop a deep understanding of the challenges facing them while responding to their individual and complex needs. The trust that has been established over this time has placed me in a privileged position to conduct this study. The richness and extent of the data to emerge from the young peoples' interviews clearly demonstrate that they felt comfortable and safe when discussing their homeless experiences and childhood backgrounds. As Rew, Taylor-Seehafer and Thomas (2000, p.13) note in their research, involving trusted adults (social workers and youth workers) in young homeless people's immediate community made them feel comfortable about being involved in the research, and for the researcher, meant a high response rate.

Confidentiality of the participants and their information remains an essential ethical consideration. It was decided to minimize the likelihood of identification through the use of pseudonyms.

A paramount concern of this study was the consent of the participants. The notion of informed consent is important. A consent form was signed by each participant (Appendix A) at the beginning of the interview, but the issue is more complex. As Meade and Slesnick (2002, p.2) have identified, one of the most difficult issues that arises with the young homeless population involves the ethical guidelines that specify that parents and guardians must provide consent or permission for the young person to participate. In many cases, abuse at the hands of these adults has resulted in the homelessness of young people. In the case of the participants in this study, obtaining parental consent was not

appropriate. Many of these young people were disconnected from their parents either voluntarily or by force. It was well documented that these young people have family histories of physical and sexual abuse. Given these histories, it was inappropriate to seek parental consent, as this could run the risk of the young people experiencing further harm and abuse. In these situations, it is in the best interest that young people consent alone to research. As Stuart (2001, p.34) points out, "it is not helpful to reinforce young people's powerlessness in regard to decisions about their own lives by ruling them incapable of deciding whether or not to take part in an interview".

Ethical considerations for working with homeless youth in research are also discussed by Alderson (1999). She points out that there needs to be a questioning of the role of ethics committees in potentially silencing vulnerable young people's voices through the implementation of alienating formalities, rather than protecting them as they are meant to. While this study was not required to obtain parental consent for young people under 18 as was Alderson, I believe the formal structure often required by ethic committees can be limiting. As Alderson (1999, p.61) states, "ethic committees could raise the standards of research with young people by involving them in reviewing protocols and by asking, 'Who is the research for? How might it help young people? Whose interest will it serve?'".

On a final note, with any research of this nature there is always a possibility that talking about personal and traumatic experiences can provoke strong emotional reactions from the participants. It would be unethical for the researcher not to deal with these in some form. For example, if a young person became overwhelmed or distressed from talking about painful issues, the researcher has a responsibility to deal with this appropriately. Although no problems arose, I was experienced in assisting homeless young people with a variety of issues and capable of initiating the most appropriate response to ensure that the young person received all options available to them including access to appropriate counselling.

Limitations of the research

in interpreting the findings of this study limited scope should be kept in mind. It does, however, provide some rich insight into the lived experiences of homeless young people in Western Australia. This was a very small, self-selected non-probability sample and cannot be generalised to the wider homeless population. It was not intended that this study comprise of a representative sample of homeless young people in education across Australia.

Conclusion

This chapter presented an overview of the selection of participants, methods of data collection and analysis. Reasons for choosing a phenomenological approach were outlined, and the importance of focusing attention on the perceptions and experiences of the participants themselves discussed. Issues of ethics and foreseeable limitations of the study were highlighted.

CHAPTER FOUR

HARSH BEGINNINGS

One of my doctors one day asked me to write out ...um...all the good things that happened to me as a child ...and all the bad things that happened to me...and I started crying because I could not think of one good thing. (Jasmine)

Troubled and abusive family experiences were a consistent theme identified by each of the homeless young people in this study, and were cited as their reason for leaving home. They all reported growing up in highly disruptive households. Parental death, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, emotional neglect, physical and sexual abuse, are featured in and part of their descriptions of their childhoods. During the interviews, they all presented as visibly sad as they reflected on their upbringing. Their stories were, in many ways, typical of the many young people who are forced to flee their family home.

In this chapter descriptions of the participant's upbringings illustrate how they were all deprived of childhoods and this provides insight into their beginning life stories. Harsh beginnings they were, marked by staggering forms of maltreatment and trauma.

Sam

Physical abuse, parental mental illness and emotional neglect were evident in the relationship between Sam and his parents. Sam's alcoholic father was regularly in and out of jail. Sam felt that he had been absent for most of his life. His mother's ability to care for and protect him was dramatically affected by her psychiatric condition, schizophrenia. She had repeated hospital admissions for acts of self mutilation and other challenging

behaviours. All too often she was incapacitated to the extent that she developed poor health and personal hygiene problems. She suffered from alcohol abuse which at times led to overdoses with her medication.

Sam witnessed these overdoses many times, leaving him feeling responsible for the well-being of his mother. He spoke of a force that kept him at home to attend to his mother's welfare, out of his fear of her suicide threats. It appeared that his mother had an extreme emotional dependence on Sam's presence and often threatened to kill herself when he was not around. Such threats were frequent and at times acted upon. At an age where Sam needed care himself, he was taking responsibility for his mother's emotional and physical well-being.

From an early age, Sam remembers feeling overwhelmed by his need to respond to and care for his mother's mental illness. He often sought accommodation with friends and relatives or slept on the street when her illness was deteriorating. His mother had a history of avoiding medical and welfare intervention for fear of losing Sam to the welfare authorities, and as a result, Sam learnt to shy away from any formal support by mental health and youth services. Consequently, when his mother was admitted to hospital, Sam felt abandoned and isolated from any adult support.

During these periods Sam found himself cut off from other people and supportive relationships. His mother's hospital admissions were, at times, up to six months in duration. Sam remembers fending for himself at the age of six, trying to meet basic needs such as hunger. He recalls a childhood based on a very transient lifestyle comprised of hopping from one relative's place to another. Throughout his childhood he always felt vulnerable to abuse and victimisation.

For Sam to live safely at home on a permanent long-term basis many things would have to change. He was able to articulate these factors in his interview:

my dad wouldn't of always beaten the shit out of me and my mum wouldn't of been sick. I don't care about livin' really with my dad cause I don't really know him cause he's been in and out of jail all my life...he was in jail when I was born but my mum, she would not have this sickness and he would be out of our lives...and...and my sister would be home with us...yeah.

At times Sam made attempts to stay at 'home' to be with his mother when she was out of hospital. He felt that these attempts were at times successful when it was just himself and his mum. However, this environment was always disrupted when his father was released from jail. On these occasions Sam and his mum would be subjected to beatings, gambling and heavy drinking. Sam talked about how his father's acquaintances, who often stayed over, further contributed to the house being unsafe.

The stress of his father's violent and destructive behaviour exacerbated his mother's schizophrenic symptoms, leading to a relapse. On numerous occasions this cycle led his mother to become so distressed that she would make attempts on her own life. Sam gave accounts of her doing this in front of him and his father. Yet this had little effect on his father's behaviour. It was only when he returned to jail that Sam could find some relief. Sam recognised the destructive influence that his father's presence had on his environment when he spoke about how he looked forward to his 'old man' being back inside:

like things were o.k. when he's in jail and that...and mum's out of hospital and is doing o.k. but when he gets out and that all hell breaks loose...his friends are over drinkin' and that and he stresses mum out that she gets sick again ...I actually look forward to him going back inside when he's out.

Substance abuse, psychiatric illness and related violence were present also in Sam's immediate family, crossing into the extended family, reducing any options for support in preventing his homelessness. When asked about other supportive and family networks Sam replied:

I can go to other family but they got more shit going on than me...always drinkin' and fighting during the days and when I have money they all hassle for it and cause they are family I feel bad if I don't give it to them and then they go down to the 'bottle-lo' and get more grog and drink more and fights...heaps of fights there, cops always there breakin' it up ...uncle taken away then back the next day and they carry on again like nothin' has happened you know.

These problems affected Sam's relationship with his older sister. Patterns of violence and substance abuse shaped her life choices as well, limiting Sam's opportunities for sibling guidance and support. According to Sam:

she's off the planet, she uses heaps, livin' with some guy who beats her up, she's got a couple of kids but they live down in Armadale so I hardly see her...never really see her.

For many, the notion of the family is very much connected with the concept of the 'home' which provides stability, security and a family that provides protection. If this is true, then Sam has been homeless almost all his life.

all these things that happen when you're as a kid and you see all this shit...but when I really think hard and long I reckon that I've been homeless ever since I've been born you know...or feeling that I may become homeless with mum's sickness and all, so I don't know at times if what I go through is just life or being homeless cause I have always felt this way... you know?

Becky

In her attempt to make meaning out of her experience of becoming homeless, Becky was able to articulate many losses and struggles that resulted in her predicament. Like others in this study, she cited multiple, interrelated reasons for her feelings of loneliness and abandonment at the age of sixteen.

A major part of her story reflected not only what had happened when she was a child, but, more importantly, why it happened. Becky's descriptions of the events moving her into homelessness highlighted loss, grief and feelings of isolation. During the interview she spoke about the suffering she experienced as a result of being removed from her mother's care at the age of four and placed under wardship. Not surprisingly, given the age of her removal, Becky had difficulty recounting the details during that time. However, upon reflection, she was able to describe what she perceives as being the beginning of "when it all began...you see this struggle".

She attributes the beginning of her 'life struggle' to the day she entered the state's care and protection system as a consequence of her mother's heroin addiction and neglect. Over a period of months Becky's mother was unable to demonstrate to the welfare authorities any motivation for drug treatment and was constantly in and out of jail for drug-related offences. Her flat was a chaotic environment marked by drug dealing, violence and prostitution. Finally, her mother requested that Becky be permanently placed in the child welfare system as she felt she was unable to address her child's needs. As Becky's father had no role in her life, she was made a ward of the state.

From that day onwards, Becky never saw her mother again. She described feelings of abandonment, rejection, being unloved and intense grief. Becky believed that this period had a significant influence on her progression towards homelessness:

I came a ward when I was four when I was taken off my mum...she couldn't care for me and welfare stepped in and removed me...I don't really remember her and haven't seen her since or even know where she is... I don't even know who my dad is...there is nothing on my birth certificate stating who my father is so I can't really track him down.

Upon removal, Becky was placed in temporary foster care with a female caregiver. This placement was very successful for both Becky and her carer, and continued for over a decade. Becky described in significant detail the positive aspects of

this placement. She reported that the relationship developed into something that provided her with a sense of security, safety and belonging. There was a very strong bond and connection developed within this relationship, making a great difference to her life. After some time, this caregiver who was once a stranger became the mother Becky never had. Becky could very easily communicate her strong feelings about her mum:

when I was taken I was placed with this lady...who became my mum...Ms Chamberlain welfare call her but I call her mum to this day...it was meant to be temporary placement till they found longer term placement.... but things changed...she liked me and we connected immediately...and yeah she took on a longer term placement and came my foster mum... but I never see her as a foster mum...to me she was my mum....and yeah she brought me up and it was just us two. She would get a carer's payment from welfare to look after me and she put me through school, cooked and was there for me 24/7 you know.

Although Becky felt their relationship was different to those of her peers at school, it provided her with the foundations to move on and overlook the difficulties and rejections of her past:

It was a bit strange to the other kids at school though...you know...they couldn't work out why my mum was so much older than theirs and why I only had a mum and not a dad but I wouldn't try and think of that too much.

For Becky, Mrs. Chamberlain for over ten years was

always there when I came home from school...she never had any other kids herself and her husband had died years before me so I think she had lots to give...I was lucky...I always thought I was the luckiest kid in the world.

This stability was not to last. Becky's loss and emotional pain was spoken of very movingly and directly when she began to describe the horror she experienced from the sudden death of her mum, Mrs. Chamberlain:

things were cool for years and then when I was twelve my whole world was ripped from me you know..I get sad just thinking about it...yeah...mum got really sick...cancer...and ...and... died... just before my thirteenth birthday.

The sudden and unexpected death was extremely difficult for her to deal with. What was critical to Becky was the loss of a relationship with someone she loved very deeply. As she recounted:

When I look back through everything I have been through that has to be the worst of all.

Becky was moved into another foster placement, this time with a married couple. Becky had to move suburbs and schools, losing established relationships with neighbours and school friends. Not only were there problems with moving geographically, Becky was also quick to identify other problems with neglect, both emotionally and physically:

they didn't look after me right...you see I never had good clothes and that you know...I think they did it just for the money...none of them worked hey... and yeah I...some days right I would go to school without lunch and that...you know...and I never fitted in...don't know if that was from being new but I had a hard time with the other kids...they all seemed happier you know...than me...and they looked better..I had always the same clothes and that.

This foster situation deteriorated when Becky's foster father began to sexually abuse her over a two year period. To compound this trauma and betrayal Becky did not receive the appropriate follow-up and care from the Department for Community Development which

was legally responsible for ensuring that she was safe, leaving her to feel intensely isolated and confused.

Overwhelmed by her situation and fearful of returning home, one day Becky suffered a breakdown at school. This incident enabled her to disclose the abuse to a teacher who then contacted the relevant authorities. After a thorough medical assessment at a hospital and an intense interview with the police and welfare department Becky was immediately taken and placed in a youth shelter facility. Charges against her foster father were laid by police for prosecution in the near future. Becky realises that her removal from this abusive environment

was only when I confided in my teacher you know...um...yeah...I just had enough cause my foster father was really controlling and he was sexually abusing me and one day I was at school really scared and I was in a panic...you know...a funny state...and I begged the teacher to take me home with her...as I didn't wanna go home you see...I was scared like I said...and I didn't know who or where to go ...and I think the teacher had must of picked up some things over the time and yeah...welfare came to see me in the principal's office and then I told them everything you see...I was taken to hospital...then the police...this lady cop spoke to me and then yeah I was moved into another foster placement for crisis period and then on to a home with other kids my age.

Ryan

The beginning of a troubled childhood began for Ryan when he lost his father in a car accident. Ryan said he never got on with his 'stepfather', who joined his family when he was eleven years of age. Ryan believes the relationship with this man contributed to numerous changes at home, inevitably contributing to his homelessness:

up till last year I was living with me mum...my dad died when I was around three...I never really remember him...only what he looks like through photos...anyway it has always really been me and me mum till a couple of years ago and she met this...this...um...dickhead...if I'm allowed say that...and um...yeah ...everything just changed after that.

Ryan noticed that this man was often hostile, short-tempered, and quick to take offense. He also appeared to be controlling of his mother and often spoke to her in a derogatory manner. Over time Ryan's mother began to perceive her relationship with her partner as hopeless. Ryan often found it distressing witnessing the emotional pain to which his mother was subjected. Reflecting on his upbringing Ryan recalls never feeling comfortable living with this man and thinking he could never feel settled in his home environment. Consequently, he spent little time at home often hopping from one friend's place to another. When he did return home, Ryan numbed himself with pills, alcohol and finally heroin in an attempt to repress the anger and rage that he felt towards his stepfather:

Um...well I started spending less time at home you know...hardly saw mum...and when I did I was usually off my face cause I couldn't stand being there and seeing her in the space that she was in...she always looked so unhappy...you know...he use to control her...wear her down...she had nothing left...some days I could see it in her eyes you know...yeah...I...I just get so wild just thinking about it you know.

Through time emotional abuse was replaced by physical abuse, and Ryan's stepfather physically and emotionally abused him for many years. Ryan also witnessed the beating and humiliation of his mother. One night, in a state of rage and helplessness from just being beaten, Ryan described how he reacted in an explosive and harmful way towards his stepfather. Fortunately, neighbours called the police, leading to the attendance of the emergency services.

ahhhh...well...he would drink right...and he would come home and beat her when he was pissed...he use to do the same to me till last year one night I stood up to him...and ...yeah...things got nasty...cops

called...ambulance the whole 'shoobang'...I almost killed the prick...dunno'...just snapped one night right ...and everything just came out...all those nights over the years...yeah he just copped it...if the cops didn't end up coming...yeah...he would not still be there beating her to this day.

Ryan was charged with assault while his stepfather was admitted to hospital for emergency surgery. Upon his discharge from hospital the stepfather obtained a violence restraining order which restricted Ryan from being fifty meters in proximity to his stepfather. Because his stepfather continued living with Ryan's mother, any access to his childhood home and the premises where his mother was living were prohibited

The impact of this restraining order and his mother's inability to end the relationship with his stepfather destroyed the relationship Ryan had with his mother. To be refused access to his childhood home and for her to support an abuser left Ryan feeling unloved, worthless and extremely helpless. The effect of the restraining order and his mother's betrayal was truly confusing and painful for Ryan to reflect on:

It's me mum's place and I can't go there...but yeah...he's the one who bashes her...dunno...doesn't make sense...it doesn't...does it?...to you does it...?

Ryan felt that this was the catalyst for of a life that was bound to be dominated by transience and uncertainty.

Jasmine

Jasmine grew up with her mother, sister and mother's partner. She doesn't remember her real father, who left the family when she was just three years of age. Jasmine's mother was remarried by the time Jasmine was four.

Early childhood abuse was the dominant theme to emerge from Jasmine's story, and this caused her to run away from home at the age of thirteen to a life dominated by drug abuse and prostitution. During the interview she gave accounts of extreme physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, stemming from the earliest days that she can remember. Jasmine said she could recall abusive incidents from as early as the age of four.

Jasmine was also repeatedly exposed to harsh and severe criticism from her stepfather on a daily basis. She felt that her stepfather attempted to brainwash her and her sister by isolating them from other relationships. He cut them off from their school friends and extended family. This began to erode her belief in herself, reducing her strength and confidence. Jasmine grew up feeling incompetent and unable to live beyond her home environment. Feelings of isolation and shame were added to fear, confusion, helplessness and hopelessness. The only memories she has of her home life and childhood are described this way:

It was so shocking ...I grew up in an environment where there was mainly manipulation ... and...and... I lived in a prison where my stepfather was mentally manipulating and sexually abusing me...before that beatings, you know ?

Symbolic maternal abandonment also arose when the sexual abuse was reported to her mother but ignored. Growing up, Jasmine longed for an environment where she could feel a sense of safety and control. At thirteen, she reached a point when she felt strong enough to confront what was happening. She felt she had suffered too long in silence and she had concerns for the welfare of her younger sister. She felt she needed to regain some control over her life and stop the abuse from continuing. She felt that this had to begin by speaking out and exposing the abuse. She also felt a great need to receive support and understanding from her mother. Her mother's ability to protect and provide safety for Jasmine was critical.

One day, after school Jasmine reported the sexual abuse to her mother. Unfortunately, she was not believed, and this resulted in continued victimisation and feelings of helplessness and betrayal. Her mother discounted what Jasmine was saying and trivialised any feelings Jasmine had towards her stepfather. Even to this day her mother still lives in denial. Jasmine said her:

mother did nothing to stop it at all, she didn't believe it ...my mum was very much like ...um...well.. 100% .. like she does not believe why I ran away from home and that cut me deeply. You know...that she chose to believe my step- father over me and my sister ...she always loved him more than us.

By this point Jasmine believed she had no alternative except to leave home. One night she packed her belongings and ran away to a school friend's house. She stayed there for three nights and then went to live on the streets. It was only when Jasmine fled to the streets and was befriended by other homeless young people that she realised her childhood story was not an isolated case:

knowing my own life story...and all of my friends...you know what I mean? they all had in their own way really bad home experiences you know that...you know...one of my friends...one of my friends use to get whipped and massaged by his dad...one was raped by his dad.

Reflecting upon her childhood Jasmine concluded that it was an extremely painful time. She talked about the long-term affects her upbringing will have on her life choices, always being part of her. She stated that the abuse and trauma she experienced is not something someone grows out of, no matter what age they are.

It was impossible to leave her interview without a heightened sense of awareness regarding the consequences that she may experience in the future. Her future will no doubt be disrupted by the past. From her point of view,

it's hard to imagine a happy life because even as a child I don't remember having one.

Adie

Adie's story gives a perspective on the life of the lonely child who also feels that she can not find a place to belong at home. What differentiates her childhood from the others in this study is the higher socio-economic background within which she grew up. During her childhood, Adie was introduced to elite social networks and was enrolled in the most prestigious schools. Her story crosses the barriers of wealth and class and illustrates that youth homelessness can begin in any family, anywhere.

Adie is the youngest of three daughters. Until leaving home at the age of sixteen, she lived alone with her mother who was being treated for bipolar disorder. Her father left the family home when she was thirteen to live with and eventually marry another woman and father two other children. Prior to her father's departure from the family, to all outside appearances Adie's father was a successful doctor who was held in high regard by those in his personal and professional life. Her mother was known to be a caring and dedicated school teacher and parent who strived to better the community.

Adie's painful childhood was not discussed in great detail during the interviews. It was obvious that she had grown up accustomed to not sharing her childhood and life experiences and had learnt to keep her feelings to herself. It was only after the interviews that she alluded to the 'family secrets' that she attempted to leave behind.

Adie's father was a violent alcoholic who, despite regularly abusing his wife and children for over twenty years, managed to maintain a public façade as the caring father. She describes her childhood as a period of "always feeling like you're walking on eggshells". She elaborated on this by implying that everything that happened within the family

household was determined by the mood of her father. If Adie and her sisters were having a good day, this could immediately change upon the arrival of her father. Her home life was marked by continuous abusive behaviour and general confusion regarding her relationship with her parents.

Life with an alcoholic was anything but predictable, safe or secure. Despite Adie doing exceptionally well at school and at home as a child, she only remembers feeling anxious, easily startled and unsure of the present, let alone the future. However, she would never acknowledge or reveal these negative feelings for fear of causing "problems at home". She felt that her childhood was dominated by attempts to avoid her father's attention.

In an attempt to gain some control over her feelings of powerlessness and hurt as a child, Adie clearly remembers always feeling the need to "make things right at home". Her need to protect the 'family secrets' from the outside world and present 'the happy family image' led Adie on a pathway of compulsive achievements.

When she was thirteen her father left the family, but the difficulties at home did not diminish. After the departure of her father, Adie's sisters were quick to flee the home resulting in her feeling isolated and alone. Adie not only missed her sisters' companionship, but also felt the loss of their support as she attempted to deal with her mother's erratic and at times hostile and emotionally abusive behaviour. By the age of fourteen, Adie found herself overwhelmed by her circumstances and began to neglect her academic pursuits as she struggled to address her mother's emotional difficulties.

There were periods where her mother suffered several emotional breakdowns leading to the use of large doses of prescribed medication, including tranquilizers. Adie can remember always feeling preoccupied with the 'care taking' as she devoted her energy to looking after her mother and the household chores; shopping, cooking, cleaning, and

physically. By the age of fourteen, it became impossible for her to fulfill these tasks and do well at school. When Adie began to fail in all her school subjects, she found herself losing the one thing that had provided some relief and diversion from her painful circumstances.

During one period, her mother suffered severe depression culminating in tranquilliser abuse which lasted for eight months. During this time, Adie was repeatedly subjected to emotional abuse from her mother. Constant criticism and belittling undermined her feelings of self worth. Although the abuse from her mother was not physical, the psychological consequences were immense. Her relationship with her mother began to erode any self esteem that remained and confirmed for Adie that she was not worthy of being valued or cared for.

Adie became depressed herself, because nothing she did seemed to make any difference to her mother. The isolation and loneliness experienced by Adie and her inability to help make things better led to feelings of complete failure and helplessness. At fourteen, her life came to a halt: school, friends, relatives and her own wellbeing meant little to her. She felt that nothing mattered and that her future was bleak. When not sleeping, she spent long periods crying for hours to a point of complete exhaustion. Even the simplest task seemed insurmountable.

Looking back, Adie recognises that she was clinically depressed. However, at the time she was not only living a life of denial, but one of survival. She believes that 'denying' the reality of her childhood enabled her to survive. When her suppressed feelings surfaced and the reality of her upbringing became apparent, she attempted to take her own life.

At fifteen, Adie spent three months in a psychiatric hospital after attempting suicide. Adie never revealed the true nature of her home life to the professionals whilst hospitalised. She experienced feelings of betrayal and disloyalty when she spoke negatively about her family. Consequently, she was discharged from hospital still carrying the burden of her 'family secrets' and left alone to deal with the difficulties of returning home.

When Adie did return to live with her mother she immediately fell back into the role of caretaker. This time she realised that she was putting her mother's needs before her own. She saw the need to distance herself from her mother's problems and find somewhere else to live. Adie felt that if she did not escape this destructive environment she was at risk of having another breakdown. Adie turned to her sisters for help, who at the time were living separately and in relationships. They each refused her accommodation because they "did not want to rock the boat" by having a "disturbed adolescent" live with them. It became apparent to Adie that she would have to deal with her problems on her own. She believes her sisters disowned her because they could not cope with the reality and shame of having a sister who had made an attempt on her own life. Adie was too much of a reminder for them of the 'family secrets' which they had left behind.

The pain experienced from their rejection was pivotal. Her feelings of loneliness and abandonment were never more acute. The sense of betrayal by her sisters hurt most of all.

I mean you develop such a low self esteem being pushed away from your own family...that...I don't know it's a rejection thing with my family... you know?...when you are pushed out from your family and you're going through all this hardship your family should be there for you...um...they should comfort you...but they don't.

It was just after her sixteenth birthday that Adie made the agonising decision to leave her mother's home and go it alone in an attempt to find a more appropriate place to live. This was the beginning chapter to her homelessness.

"It's better than home"

For all these young people, it is not difficult to see how leaving home was a rational decision. As Jasmine reports, being on the streets and out of home was always a better option, and a safer one:

I love it and...living under the most amazing manipulator you break free from that for me it was heaven...I was thirteen you know...

She further recounts:

as hard as living on the streets was for me it was easier than being at home and putting up with the abuse that I was putting up with. Homelessness is um, it's actually a really hard thing to go through even though at the time I don't think I have thought about it that hard in a lot of ways because I had escaped from a hell hole, you know.

Others reported that there was no other option than to leave home. Although it was extremely difficult to accept, Ryan believed there was no other alternative than to withdraw from the reality of his mother's choices:

but what can I do you know?...I wanna be with her but it kills me seeing all this shit happen to her...it's hard...yeah it's really hard.

Leaving home stemmed from a general feeling of powerlessness, when these young people felt they had no control over what was happening to them. Making the decision to leave was, for many, their first step in attempting to empower themselves and save themselves from their abusive upbringings. For one young person, leaving home was a way he could gain some mastery and control over the abuse that he was being subjected to. Sam described the importance of taking matters into his own hands by choosing where he would live:

I've been safer livin' on the streets than when I was livin' with my dad before he went to jail. At least I had control you know...over what was happening to me most of the time when I was staying on the streets and at friend's places.

Even though living on the streets is very difficult for any young person, their decisions not to return home does indicate strongly that there is more going on with 'life at home' than is publicly acknowledged. As Jasmine said;

it is them ...the parents that cause these kids to runaway from home because no matter how hard the streets are...it is saying something when they choose not to put up with the abuse.

"My childhood...my fault"

Child abuse generated a great deal of confusion for everyone in this study. It was distressing to hear of their reactions to these circumstances. Feelings of guilt, self-blame and shame were all strongly embedded in their narratives. They all believed that the maltreatment they suffered was the result of some failing in themselves, rather than of circumstances beyond their control. Instead of directing their anger and hostility towards the person who abused and exploited them, many indirectly punished themselves. To compound their distress, many stated that they were unable to see any positive outcomes in the future as they attempted to search for independence. Ryan "sometimes wonders that maybe I've done something wrong in a another life, you know?" Jasmine felt guilty for disclosing the abuse in the first place. Having made the disclosure she felt responsible for the disruption to her relationship with her mother and younger sister. Her feelings of betrayal and guilt have intensified since she became homeless.

Similarly, Adie indicated feelings of guilt: "It doesn't feel good when you can't live with your parents...it's like it is your fault". She said that she felt "that everyone has brushed me off". When I asked what she meant by these feelings she said:

I feel that my parents have gotten rid of me because I am not good enough, my friends have pushed me away because I'm not good enough...um...I just feel...I just feel that I'm not good enough for anybody else out there.

Conclusion

The narratives of these young people counter the popular misconception that young people choose to become homeless. These young people were forced to leave home for reasons of family conflict and abuse. Returning home was never an option for any of them. For them, leaving home meant gaining some form of control over the powerlessness they had experienced as children. However, the psychological implications of becoming homeless became a heavy burden for them. Of particular concern were the intense feelings of guilt following leaving home and the young people's detachment and isolation from meaningful relationships. The awareness that their futures would be affected by the experiences of the past also weighed heavily on these young people. Their attempts to remain in formal education became an essential element of their determination to regain control and meaning in their life, as will be demonstrated later.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEED TO BELONG

Well way long before um...I don't fit into the straight world...and...I don't really fit into the junkie world...I don't really feel that I belong anywhere.

In these words Jasmine describes one of the strongest themes to emerge from the narratives of the interviews with the young people: their need to belong. Making meaning out of their experience of becoming homeless, most of the five described feelings of 'not belonging' since becoming separated from their family home. They found difficulties in developing meaningful relationships with others and belonging to a network of people to whom they could turn for understanding, nurturing and support. The need to have caring people with whom they felt a sense of connection with was consistently mentioned. Yet as a consequence of being homeless, many factors were seen to contribute to their feelings of social isolation and loneliness. The young people talked about a life dominated by instability from frequent moving, feelings of uncertainty, the loss of meaningful relationships, and emotional difficulties associated with feeling different and displaced from society.

Lack of stability

The young people were quick to identify one of the most difficult aspects of leaving home as the loss of stability. Homelessness caused them to move frequently from one place to another as they attempted to escape uncomfortable circumstances and find safe tenure. This constant change negatively affected their ability to develop supportive networks and relationships with others.

The consequences of leaving home exacerbated many of the daily stresses within their lives. The loss that they felt about their plight repeatedly emerged within their stories. Without a secure place to live, it was very easy for these young people to be cast adrift. As Adie put it:

I just don't know...I guess I'm simply drifting...yeah...drifting...don't know where to though.

Similarly, Jasmine felt,

when you're homeless, you don't know...I mean ...you don't know where you're going to be staying next...you know what I mean?

Sam, who left his mother's home to stay on the streets and with friends, described his experience as a life of uncertainty: "it feels like you're just drifting in and out of things but you don't know where to".

The consequences of homelessness were explored with Adie who reported that in her first year after leaving home she "moved nine times in one year...friends to friends to friends". To these young people homelessness represented an extreme form of alienation. They all were in agreement that one of the most difficult aspects of being homeless was trying to control their own environment: that is, they felt that they had no options in terms of where they would be living. Adie explained her homelessness as:

not knowing what is going to happen from one day to the next, not knowing where you are going to be staying from one day to the next and not knowing where you are going to get your money from to buy food to live.

They all associated their life circumstances and lack of accommodation to factors beyond their control. This provoked strong feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Having

left home, they quickly became aware that their immediate accommodation options were only offered on a temporary or crisis basis. These were usually provided by local youth accommodation facilities. The aim of these services were to address the immediate critical needs of the young people.

Although their shelter, safety and food needs were immediately addressed by these hostels, some young people felt that they did nothing to alleviate their longer term homelessness. They all experienced great difficulty in accessing long-term, permanent accommodation. Even when they were accommodated in crisis facilities, they were all too aware that this was short-term, and that their struggle for shelter was not over. They knew that they would be asked to move on within months, usually into another hostel if there were vacancies. While residing in these shelters, many felt overwhelmed and stressed by worries about meeting future accommodation options.

Many of these young people were unable to comfortably settle in these environments. Living in a crisis hostel for the first time left Sam feeling "that everything is gonna go wrong... I worry and stress heaps...nothin' is certain you know?" The vulnerability Ryan felt when he was refused entry back into the family home and was placed in a youth hostel for the first time was startling:

it...sort of scares me you know...what else is around the corner...you know...everyday I wake up and I don't know half the time where I am, what I think and what is gonna happen...not only to me but mum as well...days yeah there are days when I just feel sick in the stomach...stress it's gotta' be stress...don't know where things are leading and where to...you know?

Jasmine gave accounts of when she felt her life was like being "on a refuge merry-go-round", where she was hopping from one refuge to another. She felt that these services offered her nothing but crisis accommodation for up to twelve weeks, at the end of which she would be asked to move on. By only providing the basic necessity of

accommodation, Jasmine reported that the 'system' did little to address her long-term needs. In effect, Jasmine felt that her lifestyle has reinforced her need to move constantly. Prior to leaving home two years ago, Jasmine reported that she has stayed in most hostels "nine...something like that...one hostel I stayed in up to eight times". Other young people gave descriptions of a transient life. Adie, in her second year since leaving home, reported she had moved "Heaps...heaps...did...6 times in one year".

Feelings of loss.

Experiences of social isolation and loneliness consistently emerged as a dominant theme among these young people. The need to belong was never more clear than when the young people talked about their losses and disappointments after leaving home. A state of detachment from family and other social networks was described.

Although each young person's experience was unique, they all agreed that leaving home meant, at minimum, the loss of relationships with family, friends and a familiar environment. Additionally, many lost valuable personal possessions, contact with family pets and the stability of attending school. In Sam's attempt to make meaning out of becoming homeless he associates his circumstances with having

to always leave behind things, friends and that, things constantly changing and that... life is of leaving things behind all the time...friends and that and familiar places and family.

The loss for others was immense. Becoming homeless for Ryan resulted in a complete upheaval in the conditions of his daily life. In his attempt to begin to explain his experiences of homelessness Ryan felt overwhelmed, but replied:

I've only had everything change...I feel like the whole world is on me at times...I've...got no-one...nowhere to stay...no things to keep and hang on to and yeah...nowhere to call home.

Becky had to leave behind all her close relationships with friends and neighbours after the death of her mother. She was placed in a new foster situation on the other side of the city:

That's where I went...all the way to Midland...all the way away from my friends and school...I had to change suburbs and schools...then they moved me again.

Distance, transportation and the shame of living with the abuse from her foster father deterred Becky from maintaining old friendships.

Jasmine lost all contact with her younger sister after running away, increasing her feelings of aloneness. After living on and off the street for two years she phoned her mother. This was an attempt to rebuild some relationship with her family in the hope she could resume contact with her mother and sister. Jasmine still experienced rejection and belittlement from her mother. Jasmine nevertheless longs to rebuild a relationship with her mother and continues to try and make amends. The sadness and disappointment that she experienced each time she contacted her mother are obvious within her interview:

even though I chose just to ignore that and try and be friends it just was really painful. At the time I was emotional...I was...you know...when I was sixteen... the only reason we would talk was because I would call her and every single time after I hanged up the phone I would be left crying... you know...and my boyfriend at the time said why do you put yourself through this?

Adie also talked about how her attachments to family, friends and support networks were broken since leaving home, and about her increasing feelings of loneliness. She described

the instability as so great that she lost contact with all her previous school and childhood friends:

and once I...had to leave home and move areas... all my friends that I grew up with...I ...I...didn't have any more.

These losses contributed to an overwhelming sense of isolation:

there is no one to talk to...no-one who feels the way you feel...and...and understands the way you feel...yeah...it's pretty lonely being homeless.

Her emotional difficulties were exacerbated by her loneliness. Adie reported longing to live with her family and often experienced severe bouts of depression because she had no connections, no-one around to talk to or understand her. As she explains:

I needed a friend who would just be there all the time..I didn't have that...I was depressed ...I couldn't do it all you know...I just needed someone that was always around...someone I could share my feelings with...you just don't have anybody...you've just got no-one.

Adie's relationship with her family was further explored during the follow up interview. When asked about the possibility of returning to live with her mother as an alternative to her homelessness she was quick to reply:

no...no way...that's why I got the allowance in the first place...I couldn't live there...it was killing me...believe me...I would not have been going through all of this if I could still be at home...no...um...I...mean I just can't live there you know...it was so stressful...couldn't do it.

Similarly, Becky experienced a great sense of isolation and loneliness. She recognised that her need for the attention and affection that was missing at home contributed to feeling vulnerable to further exploitation. As she explained:

it's hard...you're really on your own like...how lonely times are and how you have little contact with other people you know...you don't have much support, particularly when it comes to adults, except ones from town...but all they want to do is sleep with you.

Even experiences that usually lead to achievement and jubilation are instead overshadowed by feelings of loss and loneliness for some homeless young people. As Becky reported:

and...and at graduation...this kid gets a certificate in front of all these people but there is no-one from their family on their behalf you know...and afterwards for morning tea all the other students have someone to go up to congratulate them and this homeless student is standing there on their own cause they have no-one...yeah...that's what happened to me for year 10 graduation.

Feeling different

Problems of feeling different were repeatedly highlighted by the young people, particularly in relation to being at school. Each of the young people reported having felt different from everybody else around them including their peers. It appeared that a number of young people also experienced the stigma of being homeless and this challenged their feelings of self worth. The prejudice of others meant being denied the opportunities to establish positive relationships. Ryan explains that since becoming homeless he

never seemed to fit anywhere...it was like...I dunno...um...I didn't belong...like a different world.

Sam described that homelessness led him to feel different from his classroom peers. He felt that

In every way...you're...you're always never got a place to call home with your family like most kids.

Jasmine felt that her life circumstances had made her grow up fast, way beyond her years. The constant relocation in seeking shelter and her street life experiences made her feel like a stranger among her peers. Consequently, she often felt lonely in her attempts to relate to other students at school:

it's hard because at school you're are so different from everybody else...o.k...even at the age of sixteen... I felt like I'm almost over twenty years old...do you know what I mean?...it was hard to relate...although when I felt happy... I was happy but my heart was still aching...mmmm...a lot of the time I felt like I really didn't fit in.

Becky's struggle to live independently was a constant reminder of how different her life was from those of her school peers. Even the smallest school requirement, such as obtaining parental permission to attend school excursions and other school functions, posed some difficulties. Each time painful reminders about her personal situation were re-experienced. As she explains in her descriptions of school:

different...yeah I have always felt different...it's hard at school when letters ask for parents/guardian to sign...I have to get my case officer to sign...it makes me realize time and time again my real situation and that...yeah I still get upset on days and cry heaps and feel bad.

Similarly, other painful reminders of 'difference' were explained by Becky. Class introductions took place at the beginning of term where

in the beginning of the term we had to go around the class and tell our story, who we were, brothers, sisters and our family, what we want to do and that in the future...and yeah I get sad inside listening to other students and their lives and seeing what they have and that...I just feel weird.

Feeling stigmatised by society

While these young people often made attempts to develop friendships at school, the embarrassment and stigma of being homeless often restricted these new relationships. Becky did tell some friends at school in the hope positive friendships would develop. When she invited three young women from school to stay overnight one weekend, her fears were confirmed about what might happen when her homeless circumstances were exposed. Becky's fears of being labeled, rejected and humiliated became a reality when her friends from school declined her invitation to sleep over. Later on, it was revealed that the parents would not allow these young women to socialise with Becky due to her homeless circumstances. Becky commented that the parents feared that she would be a negative influence on them and place them at some risk if they were to continue a friendship with her. As Becky explains:

and at school with your friends because I live on my own and want to have friends stay and their parents want to speak to my parents...well I don't have anyone so they are really 'suss' of me...cause I'm a State Ward and homeless these parents think that I have done something wrong and won't let their daughter stay over.

This experience elicited further discussion about the stereotypes that are often placed on homeless young people and how this often leads to them feeling further marginalised. Becky continued:

I think cause when people hear that you're homeless and that they think that I take drugs and do prostitution and that...some of us are just normal kids living adult lives you know...and...I reckon they think if they let you into their house you're gonna come back and steal...and that...and they don't want you hanging out with their kids like I'm gonna get them in trouble and that.

Consequently, Becky's ability to maintain her school friendships were adversely affected by her homeless status. In effect, she described how she began to distance herself from other students, fearing further rejection or stigma and keeping her homelessness a secret. Becky prevented other students finding out that she was homeless by limiting the friendships she made in and out of school. When asked about spending time out of school with her classmates she replied:

no...not really...it's kind of hard because my life is so different then my school friends...I guess I sort of don't like others seeing how I live and that.

A constant theme appeared in the interviews concerning the difficulties the young people experienced in their attempts to re-integrate into a society and community that labels, judges and often rejects them. These issues exacerbated their feelings of worthlessness. For those in this study, there was no easy way to belong or fit into society. The narratives illustrated the difficulties they experienced in trying to belong to a community that misunderstands them. All young people interviewed talked about their assumptions regarding society's perceptions of homeless young people as being 'trouble makers, free loaders, offenders and druggies'. During our conversation, Adie quickly challenged the often public notion regarding homeless young people:

I think people need to be more aware of what is definitely going on I mean not just because these kids are druggies and that's why the only reason that they're out there...things happen and for some reason they get left out, they don't know where to turn they don't know where to go.

She went on to explain:

I mean I know that drugs does get to a lot of people...but in a lot of cases it doesn't as well and there are other reasons why other people become homeless and it is not always to do with drugs.

Similarly, Jasmine felt that society misunderstood the reasons that young people frequent the street as a place to sleep. She emphasised that most young people are street present because it is safer than their home environment. For others, it was explained, they have no other place to go. Their needs are based on survival, not on "having a good time":

no-one chooses to be homeless and that's one thing I would like to say...you know.. people say that you choose to run away from home...no-one wants to sleep on the streets at night, not having a shower in the morning like that.

Jasmine felt personally that the:

opinions of middle class society is that we run away from home because we wanted to...I did not...you know and...as hard as living on the streets were for me it was easier than being at home and putting up with the abuse that I was putting up with. Homelessness is um, its actually a really hard thing to go through...even though at the time I don't think I have thought about it that hard in a lot of ways because I had escaped from a hell hole.

Jasmine revealed the nature of life many homeless young people endure on a daily basis. In doing so, she emphasised the fact that these young people are just that, young people. Just like other teenagers, they also long for a place to belong and a future in which where they can find their identity and achieve their future aspirations. If given the opportunity she said she would show society:

the truth.. I would show them the squats that me and my friends lived in and migrated from. I would show them that all of us are really good people, we are good people and ...you know...every single kid has dreams of being a lawyer or teacher or whatever and everyone single one of my friends had too...you would be surprised...but a lot of people would be surprised how smart these street kids are...given the chance and given the support they can achieve their dreams...but...I would like...for middle class people to see that 90% at the time at least...it is them...the parents that cause these kids to run away from home because no matter how hard the streets are...it is saying something when they choose not to put up with the abuse.

Nowhere to belong and homelessness also went hand in hand for Becky. She felt strongly for the need for society to:

realise that a homeless kid like me does really try and do good and all....you know?...that's all...I think people don't understand...and...and ...that...we're all not bad people...we just have hard times that make me stickout....and...not...um...belong...and...all...yeah...but....um...yeah.

Housed but still homeless

All the young people at the time of this study had eventually secured their own permanent accommodation, yet they still expressed overwhelming feelings of aloneness and isolation. In making meaning out of their homeless experiences many felt that their need to belong was not eradicated once shelter had been secured. They emphasised the fact that homelessness constitutes more than just a housing problem.

During the interview, they all differentiated between 'a house' and 'a home'. Although they obtained accommodation, they all expressed the fact that their 'house' was simply a place to stay and they were unable to identify it as a place to call 'home'. Housing alone was not enough to provide a psychological sense of belonging. They all described missing the attachments and connections with others which, they felt, was important in providing a sense of purpose to their lives:

I had my own place just not long ago...mum went guarantor and got me a flat...but yeah...that...it...just never felt like a home. (Ryan)

yeah homelessness is about more than havin a place to sleep every night...I can get that any where, hostels, street, friends and

that...Yeah...just cause you got a roof over your head doesn't mean that it is a home. (Sam)

I mean even when you even have a roof over your head and you have a place to stay...you still don't have any support. (Adie)

Although housing addressed the physical needs of the young people, it did not provide the emotional and psychological support that each felt was important in order for a place to feel like 'home'. The idea of a 'home' related than more than just having shelter. As noted by Adie:

when your at home you've got your parents and that...you've got...support...um...somebody to talk to and when you need it...you've got stability, love affection and attention and everything that you need but when your living on your own you've got none of that...I had no stability, no love, no affection and I had no-one to talk to...I had no-one.

After eighteen months of hopping from place to place, Adie finally secured permanent housing within the private rental market. Although her duplex provided her with accommodation it did little to address her sense of alienation. Her story demonstrated how lonely it can be living without the company of others who care about you.

I mean the place in Maylands was fantastic but I couldn't afford it on my own...and I hate living on my own...I feel really lonely...I was really depressed...because I had...all the problems I was having...I mean but...I wanted...um...really just wanted a family...and you just don't have that...you don't have anyone to talk to.

In her attempt to deal with her pain and loneliness Adie sought companionship from a previous boyfriend and left her accommodation in an attempt to rebuild their relationship. The search for belonging saw Adie recommence a violent relationship. When this relationship broke down she was left feeling more alone than ever. She had left her own accommodation to be in the relationship. But within two months of moving out she found herself homeless again.

Ryan secured long term accommodation and was living independently. Like Adie, he experienced intense feelings of loneliness. To Ryan, loneliness was not associated with being alone but rather with an awareness of being isolated from caring people and attachments. This was illustrated in his descriptions of when his friends from the street socialised at his flat and engaged in drug use:

having friends come around and 'use'...yeah it all reminded me how lonely I really was...yeah how much I am on me own...and how much I miss living in Balga where I grew up...and being with my friends.

When asked what would help to alleviate his loneliness he replied:

That's simple...I would be home with mum...she would be happy and it was just us two...you know...no-one hassling her...making her stressed and upset...and yeah...I would be home.

Although Sam has access to long term shelter he does not consider this place a 'home'. Homelessness is not about 'shelterlessness'. For some, it constitutes a lack of belonging to an environment which should normally protect and nurture them.

to me it's about not havin' any-one to take care of me, to be waitin' for me to come home and that, and yeah just havin' a mum and dad to live with, to eat with and to talk to.

Sam yearned to have a place to call 'home'. He wished to be given the opportunity to have a place which could not only anchor his family but normalise his life:

I guess I just would like life to be normal you know...for us to be like some sort of family that just lives together and gets along at home so we all wouldn't be sort of drifting and that and being separated from one another.

Many of the young people interviewed felt that a 'home' was a place that provided nurturing and support protecting them from any outside influences that made them vulnerable. As Sam explained:

It's a place you can go...away from the bad shit, a place where you know, you're safe and that, a place where you can forget about hassles and be protected and that...yeah...where people will stick by you and protect you, not beat the shit out of you.

Regardless of having long term accommodation these young people also need to feel connected to significant people. Having a house doesn't alleviate their strong need to belong:

and the support...you do need that support, you do need to have somebody to show you, sit down and talk to you...at home if you have a problem I don't have that...if I was living at home in a normal family I would've had that for someone to sit down and talk to about that sort of thing but yeah no...I didn't have that...yeah.

Searching for that connection

With the loss of attachments to family and friends, and the inability to be accepted as a homeless young person, the need to connect to supportive and meaningful relationships that provide a purpose and reason to life is strong. However, the young people interviewed highlighted that there exists a range of issues limiting the ability to feel a sense of belonging in the community. They recounted experiences of being ignored, ridiculed, labeled, misunderstood and rejected from the very community that they had turned to for belonging and acceptance.

For Becky the street provided a place for her to meet others with a similar lifestyle:

after school...yeah most just went home...I use to go into town mostly and catch up and see who was in town...I didn't like going home straight away...yeah ...it's ...pretty boring...at times.

Becky's rejection by her peers at school influenced her decision to create other networks and friendships from previous hostels and the street. Her story illustrates the need to find social alliances with others in similar circumstances. She said she

started hanging around the kids from town who didn't go to school either...yeah...I never feel different around them and that...they always accept you for who you are and that...yeah.

Becky described experiencing a strong connection with other young homeless people.

This related to her sense of feeling different:

That's like why I like hanging out in town with others you know...they are like me...I don't feel like an X-file.

Other young people, in their descriptions of friendships, often spoke of being part of a 'street family'. The nature of this attachment was illustrated by Jasmine:

I had a tight little group of people that we always hung around together and that became my family...something I never had before...we are all...we are all in the same boat.

A perception of true belonging was evident in Jasmine's connections with peers on the street and highlighted the importance of their shared life experiences.

our situation...our environment...and our stories a lot of the time...um...how we are feeling and what we are doing with our lives.

Others alleviated loneliness and boredom by developing connections and relationships which centered around the inner city. These young people needed a familiar place to go there they could seek out and meet others who gave them a sense of belonging. Sam explained:

you know...that's what I like about town...it's always there you know and you always know the people who hang out in there...um...yeah...it's sort of homely in its own way and that, good atmosphere, people you know say hi and that...like...like when shit happens I go into town and things are there and I know the place...I like it.

For Sam, acceptance and understanding emerged as important within his social networks. The connection that he developed with other homeless and at risk young people was described as supportive and accepting. As he explains:

I feel comfortable hanging out with other friends from the street and town...yeah...you can talk to the people in town and stuff, they don't judge you and that, it's like they sometimes support me.

For Ryan, friendships existed even across suburbs and he continued to maintain close alliances with others from his childhood and previous neighbourhood. This was because he felt no sense of belonging or acceptance in the immediate community when he was occupying the flat on his own. Ryan felt that he was fortunate to be able to maintain these childhood friendships which continued to provide support, acceptance and understanding throughout his homelessness.

I'm lucky I have my mates who have become my family...some boys I grew up with in Balga...we understand each other and would always be there...you know...more than I can say for others...yeah...we hang out...get wasted...talk heaps...it's good...block out the rest of the bullshit world...hassles you know.

Ryan enjoyed the companionship and stability that these relationships offered. Protection by these friends was also important to some of the young people, particularly considering the violence they had experienced. As Ryan put it:

me mates are my family you know...they are my stability...no matter what happens I know I can rely on them and they will protect me yeah...yeah...I'm privileged...they help me get by...they also stick up for me...well they bashed one guy cause of shit...they...they watch my back...yeah we stick together.

Jasmine's experience demonstrated that having a sense of belonging and deep connection to another proved to be a life-line during a time of crisis. Jasmine hit crisis point during her attempt to withdraw from heroin. At the time she was experiencing little success in abstaining, leaving her feeling overwhelmed, helpless and exhausted. The events of her past began to resurface. Any effort to shut out these vivid images was impossible. Jasmine reached a point of complete exhaustion. At this time, she became suicidal.

things were just a thousand times worse and you know...yeah. I mean I didn't even want to live at the time cause do you know what I mean...I was that crook. I did...yeah... I did....but I never really whole-heartedly did it... I tried a couple times.

During this time of complete despair, Jasmine believed the bond between herself and her sister provided the grounding to 'go on'. She talked about how her relationship with her sister challenged her distorted beliefs that "no one cares about me anyway". Upon reflection, Jasmine was able to describe the protective factors that saw her through:

That made me wanna live...first of all...it's pretty pathetic but I don't think I had the guts to kill myself because the first things that I think about is I think about my little sister...I'm going to leave my sister...you know...and I'd use to say to myself...my god you pathetic girl. You don't want to live but you don't want to kill yourself because you don't want to

hurt anyone else...and the same thing with...my mum you know...I always think you know...she'd feel so bad because she'd have to admit the truth then...like I've always wanted her to do...yeah those thoughts kept me in there.

For some young people these friendship networks had negative consequences. Most young people reported having considerable alliances with formal or informal drug networks. This is where the young people identified a sense of belonging through like minds and like activities, although things were not always ideal. As Ryan described his friends:

me friends have been good giving me a place to crash, giving me clothes, smokes and money, food and drugs...I mean they are great...but they also...um...at times get me into the shit...into fights when we are wasted...into stealing...there's two extremes you know.

For Ryan, it felt like being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

you either be on your own and lonely...bored...and thinking heaps...or you hang with others...and yeah...drugs, crime, trouble, police and everything.

Drug taking was a regular experience with Sam's friendships:

we all smoke and that before and after school and go there and hang out together, some days I go to school but not to class...we just hang down on the oval and hang out and smoke and that.

Jasmine gave accounts of how hard it was for her to give up using heroin while living with her boyfriend. She recognised that the relationship with him was preventing her recovery, yet she found it difficult to live without him.

my boyfriend was using all the time...and when I was ready to quit he was still using which made it hard...you know...then there was another relapse you know?

Conclusion

In this chapter the young people interviewed described experiences of stigmatisation, rejection and alienation once leaving home. These issues became detrimental to their ability to establish a sense of belonging and acceptance. They all made attempts to replace broken connections with home, friends, and family by establishing new networks with other young people who had similar experiences and could empathise and offer emotional support. The distinction that all five young people made between accommodation and a home indicated the depth of loss they experienced when they left behind their families for the relative security of street life. Leaving home, and the abuse they had encountered, was seen as necessary self preservation.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CYCLE OF BEING HURT

History repeats itself time and time again. (Jasmine)

The previous chapter showed how these homeless young people needed to belong but found themselves vulnerable to repeated victimisation. They were victimised by parents, peers who were a poor influence, and a variety of abusive and rejecting relationships. The abuse could be physical, sexual or psychological or a combination of all three. The young people left home to escape being hurt, but the cycle continued as they found themselves in situations that lacked stability and safety. It was evident that without a place to belong and significant adults in their lives, these young people were easy targets for exploitation by anti-social adults such as drug dealers and pimps who offered promises of friendship and shelter. Some of the young people interviewed were enticed into prostitution or exposed to friends' prostitution as a result of their living arrangements. At times they were expected to perform opportunistic sexual favours for others. Many spoke about becoming victims of street violence, and others of abuse while in the care of welfare authorities.

The young people identified three broad categories in this cycle of hurt: the experience of being in a vulnerable position, of being victimised, and of feeling betrayed. What is of particular interest, is how frequently the homeless young people spoke about their awareness of their vulnerability. Although they often could see trouble coming towards them, most felt powerless to do anything about it.

Being in a vulnerable position

I mean for what ever reason you get stuck out of your house and you're stuffed ...I mean I didn't have a fuckin' clue...you're stuffed and it leaves kids like me with no option and in a very vulnerable and at times a dangerous situation. (Adie)

Adie's comment encapsulates the degree of vulnerability that the young people had experienced since becoming homeless. They all commented on how there were few provisions of support or access to accommodation after they left home, which in turn led them to adopt a variety of survival strategies with differing success. At a time when they were coming to terms with their homelessness and the trauma that they had left behind, they all felt extremely vulnerable to potential abuse and exploitation.

Ryan emphasised the fact that living on his own without adequate support and protection was one of the reasons for feeling vulnerable. He gave accounts about being approached, befriended and at times harassed by adult men, who would try and entice him into sexually exploitive activities. Ryan described feeling as if he was in a marketplace with these men, and he was the desirable commodity:

sometimes I wonder if I have a sign on my head you know...homeless kid ..you know...all these dodgy bastards seem to come out of the woodwork...they just want things from you and say...well I know someone if you agree...I...will help out...dodgy.

Ryan described how some of these 'dodgy' men would provide him with large doses of free heroin, increasing his tolerance and thus his level of physical dependence. He suggested that this was an attempt to use his dependence on heroin to make him sexually vulnerable. Looking back on his experience, he can now see it for what it was:

yeah...they say they can help out...offer ..ya free smack ..that's what happened last time till I ended up with a habit you know then you go around 'cause you need it and they sayna'...you gonna have to pay for it you know...then you say haven't got any money....then...yeah they've got you...yeah...right in the palm of their hands...these drug dealers yeah...they say they'll help...get you off the street....but they turn you into an addict....so you have more problems...most people don't care if you live or die...they just want things from you then...if you got nothing they tum on you.

Other young people echoed Ryan's experience, highlighting the startling difficulties they experienced being homeless as they struggled to find a safe place to stay free of abuse and exploitation. Becky reported often experiencing sexual harassment while on the street: "The people from town...all they want to do is sleep with you".

The stories of abuse and exploitation while homeless, being filled with feelings of anger and pain, consistently formed a part of the narratives of the five's experiences with adults. This was particularly noted in Jasmine's descriptions:

there are a lot of guys...that...you know... that will take advantage of you...and a lot of hurt and pain that is caused by that...that just adds to everything that you have been going through...yeah...yeah.

Accommodation options were extremely problematic for Jasmine once she ran away from home. With nowhere to go, and no-one to turn to, she sought shelter in an old abandoned building in the inner city. This squat was well known by other homeless young people who occupied the premises on a regular basis. She described the squat as violent and dangerous, but said she preferred living there to becoming visible to authorities. Not only did other homeless young people share this squat with Jasmine for shelter, they also used it as a place to bring their 'clientele'. Consequently, Jasmine was exposed to prostitution and became a target for sexual harassment and violence.

Three months after living in the squat Jasmine was befriended by an older man: he flattered her with compliments and promises that he would take care of her needs. These promises were centered around money, shelter, drugs and clothing in return for her companionship at his home. Jasmine was impressed by this man's sincerity who presented as having a general concern for her well being. It was easy for her to take him on face value. With her desperate need to belong and be taken care of, Jasmine accepted the offer and moved in with him. At the time she believed all her dreams had come true.

She was provided with free food, drugs and rent. Within weeks, the situation deteriorated and Jasmine was coerced into giving sexual favors to other men. If she did not comply with his requests, he would beat her until she did. If she spoke of leaving, he threatened to come and find her and kill her. He told her that no one would miss her anyway. For months Jasmine was sexually abused by different men on a daily basis. She realised that she had become this man's prostitute and he was her 'pimp'. One night when he had 'passed out' from drugs she fled his home onto the streets. Looking back on this experience, she recognised how vulnerable she had become to such forms of abuse since leaving home.

they'd offer um...you know...a free cone...a free shot...you know...I'll give you a place to stay they would say...you can come and stay with me'...now...I know...if anything sounds too good, it's too good.

She now recognises how her abusive childhood has damaged her, and how it often influenced the choices she made about her life:

I was very young...you know...a lot of girls in my position are...because when you are abused the abusers kinda do shelter you from life...you are so susceptible already because your mind has been fucked with so much.

Knowing only what she had been taught, Jasmine regarded her self worth in terms of her 'sex-use' value. As a result, she began to sell herself on the inner city fringe. For Jasmine, prostitution became survival sex: to live, eat and clothe herself. At fifteen, it became the only avenue for her to obtain money. At the time, requirements to obtain welfare entitlements, such as possessing multiple documents to prove her identity, were so stringent that Jasmine did not even bother completing an application form.

Jasmine talked about feeling trapped in a cycle of survival and drug abuse. She engaged in prostitution to survive, to obtain money. She used this money to fund her heroin supply. Yet she took the heroin to 'get through' the pain of the prostitution. Heroin was the only way she could escape from the reality of her work. The ability to break out of this cycle was no easy feat. She described her work situation as very bleak and dangerous as she attempted to bring in regular income. What was striking about her story was how the trauma of being sexually abused not only dominated her childhood, but how it also affected her current circumstances.

Jasmine's story illustrates that homelessness is often associated with risky, dangerous behaviours, as young people struggle to meet their needs for survival. For many, homelessness generated a lifestyle that necessitated involvement in theft, drug use, drug dealing and prostitution. These young people were frequently taken advantage of by adults. In particular, their substance abuse made them more vulnerable to being victimised. For many, it was better to be 'out of it' and 'under the influence' of substances, than having to face up to the harsh realities of their lives. Drug abuse served a purpose and was a survival strategy while living on the street. What became problematic was the lifestyle and people associated with their drug use.

Being victimised

Like Jasmine and Ryan, others left home to escape their unhappy and dangerous domestic lives. They intended to empower themselves by starting again. However, escape was elusive and their stories highlight the way in which they were confronted by traumas similar to those from which they were fleeing.

The findings suggest that these young peoples' lifestyles were not conducive to feeling safe as they had no physical refuge, nor people who would protect them. Displaced from the family home, Sam ended up occupying most of his time frequenting the streets in the inner city. He spent these times socialising with other homeless young people at night and until the early morning. As noted earlier, most of the time these relationships and networks were centered around criminal activity and drug use.

Although these networks provided Sam with a diversion from his home life and relieved his boredom and loneliness, there were negative consequences as well. Sam described several occasions where he was physically assaulted by adults who were usually drunk or under the influence of drugs. Many of these people were regular patrons of night clubs and local bars in the inner city. In one instance Sam described being 'mobbed' by a group of men in their early twenties who repeatedly kicked and punched him over the course of ten minutes, leaving him unconscious on the pathway. Sam felt that this was not only an attack on him for being homeless and 'street present' but also felt that it was racially motivated.

there were a few...but I ended up in hospital and that...got made piss (attacked) in town one night...I was hanging out with friends and that and we were all wasted and yeah don't really remember much but that was a pretty bad time...um...cops came and visited me in hospital.

It was difficult for Sam to reflect upon that night as he was aware that he may not have survived if the police had not found him when they did. The effect of this assault led to him being immediately admitted into intensive care where he was hospitalised for head injuries for a two week period. Sam provided a statement to the police about the assault but no arrests were made.

Sam talked about how he has become accustomed to violence and conflict since spending time on the streets. He felt that his upbringing had prepared him for the 'lessons of survival' on the street. It is evident that homelessness creates a sub-culture of its own, where violence is not only tolerated but expected as part of survival. Sam now carries a knife with him for 'protection'. Sam's story challenges the frequent media portrayal of young people, especially those who are street present, as dangerous and the perpetrators of violence. The reality for Sam and other homeless young people is they are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

Adie moved into a destructive environment when she first left home. Too young to access independent accommodation, she moved into shared accommodation with an older man. Within two weeks of moving in, she was subjected to unwanted sexual advances on a nightly basis. Adie no longer wanted to live with this man, but saw him as the only viable option for accommodation. She persevered and accepted this harassment as the cost of having somewhere to stay. Her motivation to attend to her academic pursuits was astounding. While all this was going on Adie still remained focussed on her education.

um...this guy that I lived with he got the lease in his name...but he was awful...the guy I was living with...I had no where else to go...I was too young to sign my own lease so I decided to look into sharing accommodation through the paper and I ended up boarding with him...because it was...well I thought it was good because it was close to the school and all...and I couldn't afford anywhere by myself anyway...and...and he was abusive and he use to come in and try and

sleep in my bed...and...ahhhh...it was disgusting...I just didn't want to be there...I didn't want to keep living in those circumstances...I mean that's why I couldn't live at home in the first place and left...I would rather go and sleep in the back of somebody's car then there...so...yeah...it was horrible...and at the same time I'm trying to go to school...do my assignments at home and yeah...it was just horrible

It was only after she eventually moved into a friend's panel van (car) that she terminated her lease agreement with this man. Adie's description again highlights the trauma and exploitation these young people experienced time and time again in their search for somewhere to belong.

Being at risk of sexual victimisation was not only confined to the young women. Sometimes these experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse were referred to only in a fleeting way, indicating the young person's discomfort. This was the case for Ryan:

I had some people do some pretty dodgy shit to me since being out of home...and me mates...well they bashed one guy cause of shit...you end up doing things you know...um...things you don't like...it seems everyone wants money, drugs or sex from you.

Feeling betrayed

Feeling betrayed by 'friends' was a common experience reported by the young people in this study. Many felt that their friendships were often distrustful. Central themes of a lack of trust and betrayal appeared in the descriptions of their 'friends'. Virtually all these young people had negative experiences with 'friends'. Their experiences while homeless taught them to be careful about who they relied upon for support. Being too trusting could have drastic consequences.

one thing you know that I have learnt is that before you live with someone you really have to trust that person...you really have to know them well...because you never know what they are going to do...guys are always bigger than women and at the end of the day they can do whatever they want..you've just got to be really... really careful because any thing can happen and I mean anything...it's just a really horrible situation to be in.
(Adie)

Ryan's strategy for surviving among his social networks from the street was to trust no-one.

you're surrounded by fuckwits...all these people you know...all want something from you...then they get nothing they don't want to know you...but people...trust no-one I reckon...they rip you off.

For others the friendships were filled with ambivalence. On the one hand these relationships alleviated loneliness and boredom, but they were also seen as untrustworthy and known to easily violate the rights of others. Sam's description about his alliances indicated that:

they're good to hang with and that but I would never trust them you know...when it comes down to it...I know that they would choose drugs or money over me any day...yeah...even my ex-girlfriend that I thought I could trust ripped me off cause she was using and that.

Jasmine found that many of her friends had no respect for her belongings.

even if...when you're staying at a friend's place...your stuff always gets stolen...everything gets trashed.

Adie faced similar problems with not being able to trust her friends. She reported how her flatmate stole all her money on the week rent was due. This 'friend' was somebody that Adie thought she could trust and rely on. As she explains:

all my money in my house...um...nicked my bankcard, took all my money from my account and that sort of thing and...when I go to the bank and they say 'have you written your pin number down somewhere'? and I say 'no' and they ask well how come the money has gone they must know it...and there is nothing we can do about it and you can't have your money back...I mean it is so hard to be able to know who you can trust...who's not going to come into you and rip you off.

Conclusion

This chapter contrasts young peoples' ideal situations with the negative realities of relationships. Although there was a strong need for the young people to quickly form connections with others once homeless, the harsh reality was these 'friendships' comprised abuse, rejection, neglect and betrayal. The discovery that adults and peers alike were potential exploiters enhanced the feelings of isolation and vulnerability experienced by the young people, and came at a time when they were particularly susceptible to kindness disguising self-interest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SCHOOLING

This chapter examines the young people's experiences at school. It describes their motivation for education, and the factors that foster positive learning environments for homeless young people. Some of the barriers homeless students face returning to school are also discussed.

The school

The school attended by the young people in this study is situated about 10 kilometres from the Perth metropolitan area. The local community consists mostly of low socio-economic and financially assisted households. The local government assesses the community as a 'high needs' area with high rates of youth and adult unemployment, single-parent families, and poorer health in comparison with other districts (Town of Bassendean, 1998). The school caters for a wide range of post-compulsory school-aged students. The main target group is those 16 to 19 years old. The school also provides for mature-aged students and some younger students who are given special permission to attend because of their unique circumstances. A full range of courses is offered, with graduating students being able to access tertiary studies, vocational training or employment. The school aims to be student focussed by offering cooperative learning programs, individual tutoring, part-time courses, flexible hours and some subjects available by correspondence.

There are 700 individuals for whom the school caters. The curriculum is comprehensive, providing for a variety of interests and abilities. The organisation of the school is designed to accommodate as many student lifestyle requirements as possible. For example, it operates a breakfast program for those students who are living under the

poverty line. This school has an explicit social justice focus. The needs of the students are paramount in the school. An integrated support system led by a head of student services consists of a psychologist, a nurse, academic co-ordinators, a liason officer and a youth worker. It is the goal of this team to assist students with a wide range of personal and social issues that may affect their education.

"I want an education"

I am going to make something of my life one day, and I know that the only way I am going to do it is by going to school. (Jasmine)

There were many reasons motivating the young people interviewed to enrol at school. One common thread to emerge was that many of these young people recognised that education provided an escape route from their daily struggle of being homeless. Some spoke of schooling being their last resort in breaking out of a lifestyle of crime and substance abuse. This was highlighted in Ryan's interview:

I was keen to get a new start...I thought...right...I'm gonna do this myself...no more stealing cars...gonna get off smack (heroin)...and yeah I thought if I'd go to school this is gonna help me break away...new friends...new life...yeah...gonna make mum proud of me...and also keep getting my payments.

Although Sam indicated that "class and that is just a place to fill in the days" he had similar motivations to Ryan for attending school. He also was realistic about the difficulties he must overcome in order to graduate at the end of the year:

I mean there are days I think right I'm going to stick at it...no drugs and that...and just go to class, but everything seems so much harder, I will one day, cause I want to make something of myself and get a right education and that.

Others attended school in the hope that an education would build a strong foundation that, one day, could lead to a job or future career.

Um...I came to be at school because I wanted to get an education...I wanted to become a police officer and needed to complete my year twelve to be able to apply for the academy...yeah school was the option that I knew would lead me to wanting to become a mounted police officer...yeah I've always wanted to do this ever since I was a kid. (Adie)

Um, well I left home when I was 13 and I finished year 9 and I had a few years off school and at the age of 15 I always wanted to go back to school, you know, and do something with my life...yeah...and I love learning as well. (Jasmine)

These homeless young people recognised the necessity of schooling to gain employment and a sense of independence. As Jasmine stated "school is also the solution if one is to be free from being dependent on welfare and being homeless in the long term". Becky could also see that school provided a way out:

school that was the place to be...it's that or hang out in town...and I know where that leads...I see it with the others...drugs, and that...yeah...and I just got out of that when I did.

Enrolment

All the young people had been out of school for some time prior to their re-enrolment. Apart from the desire for an education in order to have a better life, all made the conscious decision to return to education in order to meet the requirements of their contractual obligations with Centrelink. Those in receipt of the Youth Homeless Allowance would have lost their entitlements if not engaged in full-time study or looking for work. For two young people, the 'system' appeared to be a motivating factor in assisting with the enrolment process. As Ryan and Becky explain:

I had to report every week...yeah report to my JJO (Juvenile Justice Officer) and she had to do a Court Report on me for the Magistrate cause I had priors...you know...and she was doing a case plan for me...they do this so they reckon you'd stay out of trouble you know...and also keep getting my payments...So yeah...that's the gist of it all, me JJO took me down to school, I was interviewed and placed in year 10...and yeah thought I'd give it a go...had nothing to lose...yeah. (Ryan)

and at that hostel was when I was 15 and that's when the Education Officer from welfare took me to the school to be enrolled and that...yeah they did me up a case plan and I enrolled there...yeah that's how I came to be there. (Becky)

Ryan, Sam, Adie and Jasmine all enrolled with no previous schooling reports indicating their academic performance. As a result, no-one was able to learn much about their academic history. This lack of information meant that it took teachers some time to assess their academic abilities. Because of this, the extent of academic support needed for these young people had to be examined over a period of time.

Attendance

All the young people recognised that establishing an attendance standard was important to ensure they received their regular fortnightly payments from Centrelink. They mentioned how their income entitlement from Centrelink was a motivating factor in attending school. Without medical explanations for non-attendance the young people are at risk of having their payments reduced. Absence from school without explanation over five days could result in the young people being cut off from all financial entitlements.

Despite this, non-attendance was an issue commonly cited by four young people, but this varied from those who skipped class to others who occasionally missed the whole day.

Ryan was typical of the latter group. Truancy for Ryan was often a group activity which involved spending time catching up with friends from his old neighborhood. His decision to skip school was often a spontaneous one, often a result of running into 'old friends' in the inner city train station prior to coming to school. Ryan reported spending his days roaming the malls and streets of the inner city with friends looking for cigarettes and ways to get money. On other occasions Ryan would structure his days off school around criminal activities. For Ryan, crime appeared to provide structure, access to money and material goods and the social component of associating with others from his childhood.

Adie reported that there were a number of days when she failed to attend school. However, this was not intentional and was often due to circumstances beyond her control. Adie attributed her absent days to the conditions in which she was living at the time. She indicated that the nature of being homeless and her daily struggle for survival impinged on her ability to access the resources that could enable her to be on time for school. This was particularly evident during the time she sought refuge by living in her friend's panel van. As Adie explains:

I didn't sleep very well but I least knew that I was safe...yeah...but like school I missed classes and that because I would just sleep in and that...I didn't have any alarm because I was staying in the van...and I wouldn't get to sleep till the middle of the night and sometimes I would just wake up after lunch...and yeah...by that stage I missed most of my classes for the day... and yeah wasn't a point going for that day... yeah.

Becky saw the social aspects of schooling as a great motivator for attendance. Social activities and friendships were generally seen as positive by all the young people. However, peer pressure was seen as having the capability of being positive or negative. Involvement in drug use often discouraged attendance for some of the young people. Even though there was a time Jasmine was living across the road from school, she gave descriptions of periods which made it difficult to attend class. Jasmine attributes her absenteeism to days when she lacked motivation. Her determination to go to school was

often influenced by the lifestyle of others with whom she lived. She indicated that living with others made "life pretty hard at home because the people I was staying with when they want to have late night parties...it made it hard for me". Even surviving the parties and getting some sleep at night, there were still obstacles that Jasmine had to overcome in the mornings:

it's just really hard to be the only one who gets up to school every morning when everyone around you is...you know, planning their day and having 'a choof' (drug taking) and it's just so hard you know...mmm...people saying...aahh come on...don't bother going to school, just come with us.

When deciding not to attend school, Jasmine passed these days sitting at home watching television and using drugs.

Sam's attendance was occasionally influenced by his classmates' pursuits. His school attendance was particularly low when his classmates did not attend. When socialising and drug use was high among his peers, going to class was less important. Sam's non-attendance was often spent on the grounds of the school:

school's ok but if my friends don't go I don't...we all smoke and that before and after school and go there and hang out together, some days I go to school but not to class...we just hang down on the oval and hang out and smoke and that.

The school environment

All young people in this study agreed that the school provided an environment of safety and acceptance where there were no uniforms, discipline was not obvious, and they were not threatened by teachers whom they could call by their first names. Many described their experience at this school as different from mainstream schooling in that barriers between the young people and adults appeared to be broken down, generating many positive outcomes. These included improvements in student- teacher relationships. As Ryan explains:

Yeah...heaps you know...they don't treat you like you're an idiot...like they speak to you like you're...an equal sort of...you call the teachers by their first name, you get to smoke during your break and yeah...what other school runs a breakfast program?...you sort of know they at least want to give kids like me a go at some stage...and yeah you didn't have to wear a uniform...and you got the feeling that it's up to you...you're there cause you want to be...yeah had a good environment.

All the young people described the classroom as a safe haven. Time and time again they spoke of the school being a safe and stable place, offering a climate of comfort that they otherwise lacked. In the context of the complex problems and daily crises faced by Ryan, Adie, Sam, Jasmine and Becky, attending school offered them a place that was structured, predictable and supportive. Many of them reported that school gave them a sense of normality in an otherwise chaotic life. As Adie explains:

it gave you a sense of stability...it gives me the opportunity to have you to talk to ...and others there I could talk to and that sort of thing I mean if I didn't go to school I don't have that...it gave me something to do...I felt like I was normal going to school like everyday when I could...um...having people there that I knew and someone that I trusted...it made me feel better about myself knowing that I have people even though I don't have anyone when I'm on my own there is someone I could go to the next day if I wanted to talk to if I needed to.

Other narratives reflected the particular sense of comfort and safety that the school provided for these homeless young people. At times Sam used the school environment as a place to recover from the hectic and occasionally dangerous places where he sought shelter. School provided a place where he could rest his body and mind from the many chaotic situations that he faced. As he says:

when I sleep at these places I never sleep properly and that cause I'm always half awake keeping a watch out for my things and myself...that's why I sleep a lot at school I think...cause I feel comfortable to be able to sleep.

The young people highlighted the importance of having a consistent routine. Routines helped ease their fears and allowed them to feel in control by knowing what would happen and when, at least during school hours. With this consistency, the young people learnt that school was a predictable place. Some described the school as the only place in their current lives that offered safety and predictability.

it was good cause you knew no matter what happened the night before that you knew she was going to be there at this place at the same time you know...it...it sort of gave you a sense of stability...to know that they're there...but knowing I know it sounds stupid and petty...but knowing that if you wanted to have breakfast there in the morning and if you were hungry and hadn't eaten for ages you could know that you could come into school and have breakfast in the morning...yeah it was fantastic.

Without this routine some of the young people became aimless and lost sight of their future goals and aspirations. This was highlighted in Jasmine's case when she referred to the holidays as being a 'dangerous period' due the closure of school and its extra-curricular activities. She spoke of the need for a caring and structured environment to alleviate both her temptation to use drugs and the need to affiliate with other homeless young people from the inner city. She recognised that her drug use was often an attempt to combat the boredom and isolation she experienced over the school holidays. The

holiday period had detrimental effects on her health and led to an escalation of her use of heroin. Jasmine gave accounts about the benefits of structure when attending school.

things seemed so stable...and I had achieved something...then...um...in the holidays. I...had a lot of time on my hands...you know...all my classmates were in the suburbs from me...I had no money to do anything...or go anywhere...and yeah... I started hanging out with the old friends from town where I would go and fill in my days.

Positive student- school relationships

The quality of relationships with teachers seemed to be a key factor in determining how the young people viewed their schooling experiences. Developing a positive relationship with a teacher or other staff member was reported to be of great benefit to these young people who otherwise lacked positive adult role models. The need for support, encouragement and having a staff member who advocated on their behalf within the schooling system was highlighted by a number of those interviewed. Some reported the importance of someone to turn to on the school grounds whom they could go to in time of need. As Sam explains:

that would be good...cause you know they know...you don't feel so alone and that...so like...if...I was missing from school they might think I am having hassles and may help.

When the homeless young people developed a caring relationship with one staff member, this was seen as facilitating a positive sense within the young person, further allowing him or her to engage and establish relationships with other staff. This one positive relationship could then colour the young person's whole schooling experience. Acceptance and encouragement by teachers was a dominant theme in determining whether the young people could establish a strong relationship with staff members. This

became evident in this study through Adie's description of developing a close bond with her outdoor education teacher.

my outdoor ed teacher was absolutely fantastic and I don't think she knew my situation but I still felt a real closeness to her...but that was the only one...but I felt that if I didn't take that I wouldn't have had that with any of them...so...yeah...she was fantastic.

The benefits of this relationship stemmed beyond the classroom and assisted Adie with other issues that were affecting her ability to take full advantage of her schooling opportunities. The relationship with this teacher served many purposes, both academically and personally. The encouragement received from this teacher had a positive impact on Adie's academic progress and challenged her feelings of low self worth, leading to an increase in confidence and trust, she said, "when I got good grades and got praised it made me feel really good about myself".

Once her teacher developed a relationship with Adie and better understood her situation, she was able to extend relevant assistance for a range of her needs. This became paramount for Adie when she faced barriers within the school system. She reported one incident where she was unable to attend her outdoor education camp due to financial problems. A week before the camp was to commence, the school administration informed her that she was unable to attend this excursion until full payment of her school fees had been received. Afraid of being left out and rejected by her peers Adie approached her teacher, who advocated on her behalf and negotiated alternative payment options with the school administration. As a result Adie attended the outdoor education excursion:

I couldn't afford to pay for the end of the year camp with 'outdoor ed'...when I was told that I wouldn't be able to go because I still hadn't paid my school fees...I mean they ended up letting me go...my teacher actually spoke to them and sorted something out so I just couldn't afford it you know...I mean that's what I actually lived for...to go to school cause

I enjoy that so much and then they turn around and say I couldn't go cause I hadn't paid my school fees.

Negative student- school relationships

In discussing young peoples' experiences with school staff, a common problem area that often prevented them seeking assistance from staff at their school emerged. All the young people commented that there was a lack of awareness and understanding of their individual circumstances by some teachers, which often inhibited the development of a trusting and supportive relationship between the student and teacher. Comments made about the school staff included:

I don't think that people understand...cause they don't know my background and that...and what and how hard just the days can get...you can tell that they wouldn't understand the things you see on the street and what goes on outside school. (Sam)

I feel that they don't know your situation. (Adie)

The teachers didn't really know me and the things I was going through. (Ryan)

Becky felt that she could not tell teachers "what was going on and that...some of them would probably freak out anyway...they wouldn't have a clue about this sort of stuff".

In addition to this lack of awareness by school staff of these young peoples' circumstances, those interviewed recognised that their out of school environments were hardly conducive to schooling. Many reported that the very nature of their homelessness contributed to problems with the school and staff. Ryan indicated that schooling and homelessness were two different worlds. After each school day not only did the environments He entered into prevent him from continuing his education in terms of

study or homework, there was no opportunity for him to safely store his school belongings which he needed in order to be prepared for the next day. It was a common occurrence for him to leave his valuables and school belongings on his desk once class was completed. As Ryan said:

sometimes just turning up to class with a pen...that's a good day...having a pen...the dodgy places you stay...um....you can't take your bag with

you...I'd leave my books and valuables in the class every arvo...least I know they are safe and won't get nicked.

Some school staff viewed this behaviour as a lack of motivation on Ryan's behalf and commented that he did not take his schooling seriously. On the contrary, Ryan viewed his schooling of prime importance, and valued the work that he had completed, and wanted it protected. This strongly indicates the very different perspectives of the staff to those of these homeless young people despite the intense desire of both groups to connect.

During the course of the interviews it became clearer that from the young peoples' perspectives there was a lack of understanding by teachers of their lives as homeless. At times, it was all too easy to allow school staff to assume that they lived within a 'normal' family network. This became evident in Sam's case when he described his reluctance to seek assistance from school staff due to the repercussions he felt he would face. During this period, Sam's mother had been involuntarily committed for inpatient psychiatric treatment, which left him without guardian support. He found safe shelter moving from one friend's place to another, and he attended school regularly over the four months his mother had been hospitalised. He did not want to attract the attention of the welfare authorities to his lack of adult care and supervision. Sam spoke of fears that he would be placed back in the 'system' and his life would once again be 'dictated by strangers'. Sam's suspicious attitude towards welfare was based on previous experience.

For the first month Sam had no income and survived by the generosity of other homeless young people. His home environment was not suitable to live in as the utilities had been cut off due to arrears in payment. Within the second month Sam began to receive money after visiting his mother in hospital, and he gained access to her keycard allowing him to receive her fortnightly pension. Sam recalled the day he was in class and was visited by the school registrar for his unpaid school fees. It was at this point that Sam realised that he may no longer be able to keep his plight a secret. Although attending school was sheltering Sam from further attention and problems, his enrolment was at serious risk of being suspended due to the unpaid fees. Sam had great difficulty explaining the whereabouts of his mother and excusing the unpaid fees, considering his mother's last conversation with the registrar indicated that she promised to "come down next week and fix them up", a promise made three days before she was committed to hospital. It was only after several attempts to contact Sam's mother by mail with no success that the registrar visited Sam in class. As Sam explains:

others (other staff) think I live with both parents and that I had the payment lady chasing me and pulling me out of class telling me that my mum hasn't gotten back to her letter about my unpaid fees and that a payment had to be organised right away, I had no money and didn't want to tell them that mum was in hospital in case I got put in a hostel or welfare was notified you know...so I just didn't do anything about it.

This experience demonstrated to Sam the importance of having someone that he could go to who could advocate for him and alleviate some of the pressures he was experiencing at the time. He was able to talk about this:

I reckon having someone like a teacher I knew really well who understood what was going on for me away from school and that...so yeah...on bad days they would just know without me havin to say anything...things like fees, they would talk to the payment lady for me and that...and if I hadn't always completed my work and that...they may think it's not cause I don't give a sbit...that it may be something else and that.

Academic performance

The young people interviewed spoke about feeling angry about how their homeless circumstances affected their ability to succeed at school. Four of them had excelled at school prior to becoming homeless.

I...when I was younger and living at home I was always good at school.
(Jasmine)

I had a life...I was a good student getting good grades and settled...but yeah...everything just blew up I guess. (Ryan)

Ryan spoke about being angry about the abuse he suffered at the hands of his step-father, and how this impacted on his academic potential and attendance at his previous school:

I don't think that people understand...I was getting good grades...right through till me mum's boyfriend moved in and started beating us...that's when I started having problems...you know...the school started complaining about my lack of motivation and attendance...yeah and my behaviour when I was at school. (Ryan)

For Becky, the loss and grief from her mother's death meant major life changes and limited opportunities:

I think about her everyday and what I would be doing if I was still with her, probably getting great grades, well fed, wouldn't have a criminal record for stealing and wouldn't be living on my own. Yeah I would still have my friends who I grew up with and on my way to study at Uni.

Adie voiced similar views:

I think today if I could have stayed with my family I would've finished school and applied for the academy...I would be on the way to doing that...um...now I haven't even achieved half of that I wished I had dreamt when I was little...I mean I don't even have my own place yet.

For Sam, homelessness has affected his schooling:

in every way...you're...you're never got a place to call home with your family like most kids.

Peer comparison

These young people experienced their positions more acutely when they compared themselves to other students. They spoke about feeling at a disadvantage. Some spoke of the advantages other students possessed in having a stable family and a place to call 'home'.

at school all the good kids they got good chances you know for a future...they got parents who buy them things, be there and help with homework, school, fees, work experience whatever...they all got contacts...it's just that others seem to have had it easier...with school and all...yeah...um...you know when I was there (at school) my mum would always be in the back of my mind...is she O.K...these others (classmates) they go home to good things...me...it's mostly a nightmare...you know...nothing is predictable anymore...that's all. (Ryan)

you're competing with others your same age who have their own transport, and a better education than you...um...and the little things...because I am always in crisis with my accommodation I never have a stable place so employers can't get hold of me...what address do I put on my resume...little things like that...they can't contact me and I can't afford a mobile phone...that sort of thing...everything is just so hard...you can't even break out of. (Adie)

Conclusion

All five young people made a decision to return to formal education, although the choice was sometimes dictated by the provisions of the youth allowance entitlement. They appreciated the efforts of the school system and the individual teachers to respond to their particular circumstances and treat them more as adults than was possible in many high schools. However, even so the young people were reluctant to reveal the extent of their circumstances, even when failure to do so might cause repercussions. Their reluctance often stemmed from fear of rejection or fear of interference from welfare department authorities.

The difficulties of attending school stemmed from small things as the lack of basic equipment as well as the need to retain friendships and alliances that conflicted with the school's demands for routine and dedication. Despite this, all five young people saw education as the escape route from lives of stress and degradation, and appreciated the respect, safety and reliability offered by the school environment.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SURVIVING & SCHOOLING

You know...is schooling important? Or is it your life that is important?...and...and ...is...surviving important ?

This question by Adie encapsulates one of the strongest themes to emerge about the experiences of being a homeless student: the daily struggle to survive. There were clear indicators that in order to get an education these young people had to overcome enormous barriers and daily struggles. All of them had particular physical, emotional and educational needs which were not being met, and which made coping with school difficult for them. This chapter highlights a number of barriers inhibiting young homeless people from achieving at school. This chapter also demonstrates how attending school in these circumstances is a considerable achievement for homeless young people.

Youth allowance

The young people attributed their difficulties in attending school to a wide range of structural conditions. To start with, there was a strong feeling from all them that the youth allowance was inadequate to meet their basic needs, even at the maximum level of payment.

I mean it was \$150 a week...how are you suppose to pay your rent, buy food and go to school and all that sort of thing on \$150 bucks a week?
(Adie)

I turned 16...I got the Youth Homeless Allowance and that wasn't enough when I was at school. A big concern to me has been financial problems...money is such a big issue. (Jasmine)

I don't get much money it's...it's hard you know...hard to be able to buy things. (Becky)

It's hard to live on nothing...like when I was on me own...you know you have no money...things are a bit shit. (Ryan)

Money...I never had enough money. (Sam)

The Youth Homeless Allowance is a Government payment administered by Centrelink to assist young people who are regarded as independent from their parents/guardians. A fact sheet from the National Welfare Rights Network (2001) outlines Centrelink protocols for young people to be eligible for the Youth Homeless Allowance. In order for a young person to qualify for the independent youth allowance, it is necessary for them to demonstrate that they are unable to live at home (National Welfare Rights Network 2001, p.2). Reasons may include the following:

- extreme family breakdown or other exceptional circumstances; or
- it would be unreasonable to expect the young person to stay at home because of serious risk to physical or mental health due to violence, sexual abuse or other unreasonable circumstances; or the
- inability of parents to provide a suitable home because they lack stable accommodation.

In addition young people need to show that: they are not receiving continuous support from a parent or guardian; and they are not receiving any other income from either State or Federal. The maximum rate for the Independent Youth Allowance at the time of this study was \$281.10 per fortnight, not including rental assistance.

Rental assistance

Young people who are homeless are eligible for rental assistance by Centrelink. This subsidises their payment of private rental or boarding. The rate of rental assistance depends on the amount of rent paid and if the young person share with others. Centrelink (2004) notes that the maximum rate of rental assistance payment for a single with no dependent children is \$96.80 if the fortnightly rent more than \$215.07. However, it is important to note that the system requires a permanent fixed address to be provided if payment is to be granted to the applicant.

Surviving on youth allowance

Living on the youth allowance was described as simply meeting the needs of survival. There were clear indicators from the interviews that many young people felt they were not in a position to be educated until their basic needs had been addressed. According to Jasmine:

you need to know that you have food on the table, that you can afford your books...you ...know...it's like a little triangle...you need your primary needs met first before we start thinking about the second ones...you know?

What stood out from the young peoples' interviews was the continual effort they had to put into just surviving, unlike the situation of many young people living at home with stable families. Dealing with the struggle of meeting basic needs was an overwhelming task for those interviewed. This left them with little time or energy for anything else. Throughout their periods of school attendance the young people reported they spent most of their time attempting to find safe and affordable accommodation (often moving from one place to another), buying food and clothing, and juggling the payments of school necessities and bills.

Problems accessing safe accommodation

Some young people spoke about how a lack of income severely restricted them in accessing appropriate housing, leaving them vulnerable to living conditions that were, at times, dangerous and risky. This was particularly evident in Adie's story. Without a place to stay and with an income below the poverty line, Adie's opportunities and choices for suitable accommodation were limited.

Adie reported that when she was 16 and first sought accommodation after leaving home she was very distressed. She found the private rental market was too expensive, so she had to find another young person with whom to share the rent and bills. She had also experienced discrimination and a judgmental approach from one property manager regarding people living away from home at a young age. Adie was thus made aware of the possibilities of future barriers that she may face from other real estate agencies if she were to lodge a tenancy application. On numerous occasions Adie and her younger friend had their tenancy applications declined, and this severely limited their ability to obtain private rental housing. She eventually gave up on the option of living with another young person.

As a last resort, Adie began to search for accommodation in the newspaper. The 'shared accommodation' section was the most appealing for her because she could immediately occupy a vacancy that was available. This would also avoid any responsibilities in terms of a lease and would alleviate the pressure to save money for a bond prior to moving in. Adie was looking for a room that was close to the school grounds. Adie reported how pleased she was with herself in securing accommodation close to the school that same week. She moved into a shared household arrangement with an older man. He was responsible for the lease and provided such things as bedding and furniture.

Adie was paying \$95 per week for board which included the rental of her room and the use of power and water utilities. She spent \$30 for food and \$5 for the use of the phone, totaling \$130 a week in living costs. Adie spent the remaining \$20 on toiletries, transport and entertainment.

Despite the benefits of obtaining shelter close to her school, this shared living arrangement quickly presented itself with difficulties as Adie was subjected to unwanted sexual advances from this man. With nowhere else to go and no money until her next fortnightly payment Adie persevered in this situation for many weeks.

Adie's experience demonstrated some of the consequences homeless young people experience on a restricted income. When homeless young people become dependant on others for housing and basic living requirements, they become extremely vulnerable and open to exploitation. Adie summed up the situation as:

a really horrible situation to be in...yeah...like...like ...when I lived with that guy I was stuck there...I felt like I couldn't go anywhere else and didn't really know anywhere else and I was stuck because I didn't have the money to go anywhere...like I said...to live on my own I needed another person for the rent...I couldn't be on my own because you just can't afford it.

On fleeing from this shared living arrangement Adie had few accommodation options available to her. She was unaware of the youth support services and accommodation facilities available to homeless young people

I had nothing...I had no-one to talk to...I didn't know what to do and I honestly can say I had no options...I didn't know what resources were around.

Adie recalled that this was the most difficult period of being a homeless student:

Every day was a nightmare for me...every day just thinking what I am going to do from one day to the next.

With a shortage of options, Adie's only avenues for accommodation were with friends. Yet she had lost contact with her childhood friends due to the transient lifestyle she had been living. This led her to directly approach her only remaining friend, seeking to be accommodated in his panel van.

he was the only friend that I had...and that would at least offer me some sort of help...I mean I knew other people...but he was the only one who would help me out...and at that stage that was huge...it was for about two weeks I was just sleeping in the back of a friend's panel van because I didn't have anywhere else to go...that was horrible...he lived with his parents...I just couldn't stay in their house so I used to sleep in the back of his panel van...so that would have been the worst time...two weeks doing that felt like a year.

I would sneak into it at night ...they (the parents) had no idea...they worked so I never saw them during the day...but on weekends I would have to find somewhere else to stay...um...like hopping from peoples' places and that sort of thing.

This period highlights the ongoing struggle that Adie faced and the pressure she endured in having to stay in inappropriate places just to seek shelter. Her descriptions not only demonstrate some of the undesirable places homeless young people resort to when seeking shelter, but also illustrate some of the risks involved in this lifestyle:

it's just a crappy situation to be in...even my friend with the panel van...I would sit there at Wanerloo shops for hours sometimes waiting for him to pick me up so I had a place to stay for the night...I mean hours just having nothing to do...some nights when it started to get dark I started packing shit thinking he wasn't turning up and all the buses had finished and I was going to have to sleep in a shrub or something..I mean it was just horrible...and all these thoughts would run through my head and I'd get really scared...it was horrible.

This sleeping arrangement had adverse consequences on Adie's ability to look after her physical health and hygiene. There were times when she could not shower or wash her clothes. When the opportunity arose she would take advantage of the change rooms at the local caravan park in order to do these things. Unfortunately there were long periods where she was unable to access these facilities affecting her personal hygiene and presentation at school.

Similarly, Jasmine described her classroom experiences as a time of worry and stress. Often she was unable to concentrate, or complete the demands of her class work as she too was concerned about whether she had a place to stay for the night. Jasmine indicated that:

for me was it was...you're leading two lives...that's the bottom line...o.k....um...I mean going to school is um...it's like having a job...it's hard...you know what I mean...you wake up...you want to do well and in a way that's all consuming...now when you're homeless, you don't know...I mean ...you don't know where you're going to be staying next... a lot of dramas and traumas that go on when...you know...when you're not in a stable accommodation...I am so worried about having a place to sleep. (Jasmine)

Derelict and abandoned houses (known as squats) were some of the places where Jasmine was forced to seek shelter during her schooling. For months, survival for her was a dry floor to sleep on and a roof over her head. Jasmine used these squats on numerous occasions while attending school over a two year period, mostly as a substitute for youth hostels. Jasmine reported that these places were well known to other homeless young people and were easy to find just by:

looking for an empty house that no-one lived in and...that's pretty much what they are like you know...you're lucky if um...for some reason the electricity is on and the gas is still on...that's a good squat.

Not all squats were a good environment for Jasmine to occupy as a place to sleep. Her recollections of most were overwhelmingly negative: that they were cold, dark and dangerous places. One squat that Jasmine regularly occupied was described as an

old business building where there were lots of holes all over the place and it was really um...falling apart...looking back it was pretty hazardous...and um...yeah...there was no electricity in the place and there was just shit everywhere you know...others had stayed there before...heaps of old candles...used condoms and fits (needles).

She reported that she often felt scared and frightened for her personal safety while sleeping it rough in the squats. Harassment was a common experience and homeless young people like herself were often at risk of violence from clients of prostitutes and drug dealers. One of Jasmine's squats

was in town...heaps of girls use to bring their clients up there as there was a couple of old mattresses in one of them...um...you.. know when you think about it these blokes...you know...married...and all...Their wife at home with the kids and they're paying for sex to go and have in a squat with no lights...and yeah...the mattresses...yeah...some things are just too hard to believe...yep...yep...unbelievable.

The lack of adequate shelter was also a reality in Sam's case, although his mother's house was an option. However it was located in a suburb that experienced a high crime rate, and it was in poor condition physically. This raised concerns about Sam's security and safety while he occupied the premises unsupervised. The windows were all smashed, and the front security door was torn off and left on the front lawn. The house was not insulated, making it extremely cold in winter. Sam said that he had stayed in the house even when all utilities had been cut off because of arrears in payment. The house was not suitable for accommodation, let alone a place to complete his school work.

Making ends meet

The effects of living on a low income was also felt by those young people living independently in private accommodation. Both Becky and Ryan highlighted the negative impact the Youth Allowance had on their capacity to not only maintain their accommodation, but also cover basic living costs.

It's hard to be able to buy things...by the time I pay my rent, bills and buy some food...yeah it doesn't leave me much. (Becky)

Both Ryan and Becky prided themselves on their ability to maintain their own accommodation, but commented on the major expense of rental costs. In both cases, their rent absorbed such a large proportion of their income that there was little money left to cover other living expenses. Ryan reported receiving \$170 a week from Centrelink (Rental Assistance included) and out of this he paid \$95 for a one-bedroom fully furnished unit. Becky paid \$80 for her one-bed room flat out of a weekly payment of \$140 (including Rental Assistance). Payments for other necessities like food, clothing, toiletries, bills, and transport had to be bought with what remained.

Comments from Ryan suggests that finding and securing accommodation for homeless young people is just the tip of the iceberg, revealing that there are other issues that need addressing:

Accommodation is not the issue you know...people think just cause you get a roof over your head then everything is sweet...that's just the beginning...it's all about survival...getting by day by day...just to keep that roof over your head you know?

Becky reported that her inability to cover all essential expenses at times made her home environment extremely difficult to live in, let alone study in. The maintenance of her basic bills after rent payments appeared to be a constant frustration for her, and at times she found herself without

money, no power, no clothes and no family to fall back on...at times I would live without power and use candles 'cause my power is cut off and I can't afford to get it put on till the next payment.

Becky would often spend late nights in the inner city to fill in her evenings, and use candles for light to see herself through these difficult periods while awaiting her next payment. In an attempt to stay warm she adopted the use of heated water bottles to warm her bedding. However, once Becky received her allowance, little was left over after all the required bills and rent had been paid. When asked to describe what it is like being a homeless young person, Becky spoke of periods of anger and sadness about living with no money. She indicated that she felt that she was always "struggling to survive to make ends meet but still trying to go to school".

Although Becky's budgeting skills were good, there were times when she could not make ends meet, just for basic things such as toiletries. She spoke about times when she would feel demoralised by some of the situations she was placed in by being poor. She gave one description about herself being the

kid who steals toilet paper from the school toilets cause they have no money to buy their own...yeah that happened.

Inadequate income meant Becky was often unable to afford other personal items, which in turn affected her self-esteem.

you know I wish I had money to buy nice sheets and doonas and that...I mean my bed is second hand...and...and...I...I was lucky to get a fridge and even my knives and fork...yeah I just wish I had nice things like at mum's...new things and that...like when you look at the stuff it doesn't do much for your self-esteem you know...all this stuff no-body wants is what I have...yeah...I dunno how to explain it ...but yeah....I just reckon if I had nice things it made me feel good and that...yeah...I feel not normal I guess.

Going hungry

Descriptions of expenditure on food varied within the young peoples' narratives. However they all commented about the difficulties of not being able to afford sufficient food. For many it meant going to school hungry. All the young people had at least once experienced not having had adequate food over a two day period. Adie reported there were times

I didn't have any money to buy food and I didn't eat for about four days...that was horrible there is nothing you can do in that sort of situation.

Attending school hungry adversely affected the ability of the young people to engage in classroom learning. Many gave reports of extreme tiredness, and of problems with motivation and concentration. These problems compounded other pressures that they experienced with day-to-day living, decreasing their ability to remain focussed on their education. As one young person described it:

you just can't concentrate...not only the fact that you haven't eaten well but also because you are thinking, what's going on in the rest of your life?...I mean school is not important. (Adie)

Becky reported about how she would buy her groceries on payday with what money remained after paying her rent and bills. Each fortnight she would grocery shop then cook up large quantities of meals that she would freeze for the upcoming days. On occasions this method left her without any money to pay for her transport home from the supermarket.

I would carry my groceries for ages home to the flat on my own sometimes in the pouring rain and I would walk for ages cause I have no money for a bus. (Becky)

Lack of appropriate food and inadequate nutrition was a common concern for the young people interviewed. Many did not have access to a refrigerator or power, to store and cook food. Jasmine, Sam, Adie and Ryan all relied on take-away food that was cheap and easy. The school's breakfast program was often accessed by the young people as a way of getting through the difficult periods. The morning breakfast at school was often the only proper meal that they had when their money ran out. This program operated every school morning, providing cereal, toast, tea, coffee and juice. Wednesday mornings offered a hot breakfast with bacon, eggs and sausages. Ryan describes how he went to "the breakfast program...caught up with the nurse there...only in the mornings usually for ...toast...coffee...never had any money for lunch".

Some spoke about overcoming their feelings of stigma and embarrassment as they accessed welfare services. These agencies were a way of coping with hunger by providing cheap meals and food vouchers. "I remember going to the soup van...I...yeah...a lot of places like that...where they gave out free lunches" (Jasmine).

Inability to cover school costs

Lack of income created many barriers to enrolment, attendance, and success in school. All these young people talked about their difficulties in making payments for educational expenses such as books and other materials. These costs were often more of a problem at the beginning of the school year, when each young person was required to spend over 50 per cent of their fortnightly income on school materials. A common complaint was that there were no extra payments or allowances for them to cover educational costs such as school fees and the purchase of books and stationary. Many young people found that the cost of schooling supplies placed such a dent in their day to day living expenses that they were unable to purchase all of their required materials.

Yeah stationary...and that...never had a lot of stuff to buy with...books and that. (Ryan)

Most young people appeared to struggle in covering their school fees as well:

I mean I haven't even paid my school fees because I couldn't afford them. (Adie)

Problems accessing transport

Transport was cited as an additional problem in attending school, as the young people found it difficult to find the money. Most of them indicated that they spent around \$20 a week on travel costs. These costs were essential because they had no other means to get to school. In the focus group discussion a number of the young people talked about the extra burden transport costs placed on their day-to-day living and how this impacted on their ability to attend school. Sometimes they had to choose between eating or paying the travel costs for school. As Jasmine said during the focus group:

you know there comes a time when you have to make a decision...do I use this money to buy myself something to eat...or do I buy a multi rider (ticket used for public transport)?

Other young people indicated during the interview that there were days they could not afford to attend school as they were unable to pay the fares.

You're got no money to even get to school on good days.(Ryan)

Some of the young people indicated that the only way they could get to school was by taking their chances getting on the train without a valid ticket. At times they were caught and fined for evading fares by transit police, further adding to their financial and, at times, legal, problems. Ryan spoke about occasional fines for the train" ...always ran out of money you know and would just hop on to get to school".

At the time this study was conducted the penalty for not having a current ticket on Western Australia's transit system was \$50. A number of young people interviewed had been caught avoiding fare payments at least once in the past year. Many reported they did not have the financial resources to pay these fines. Ryan indicated that he had fourteen outstanding train fines (a total of \$700), which in the past had led to debt recovery action being taken against him.

transit has gotten me heaps of fines which I probably have warrants now you know...haven't paid any of...would've gone to court and that by know. (Ryan)

During the focus group discussion, two young people indicated they had not been able to pay all transit debts, and as a result were refused a driver's licence. This licensing ban cannot be lifted until all outstanding fines are paid in full.

Surviving beats schooling

Many young people reported that being homeless and living unsupported has had a drastic impact on their ability to meet the day to day demands of their schooling, reducing their capacity to do well. The narratives below highlight other daily stresses that homeless young people endure when attempting to get an education. It is quite clear that it is a period of extreme turmoil and confusion. As for many homeless young people, those interviewed were faced with what appeared to be an overwhelming number of problems. The difficulties of being homeless and the uncertainty of everyday living were recurring themes throughout Adie's and Jasmine's interviews. It was not possible to come away from these interviews without a heightened sense of their struggle to find stable accommodation. For Adie, it appeared that her difficulties were not just about finding stable housing. There was also the extreme stress she experienced by living a life that was unpredictable. The uncertainty of not having a stable place to stay had drastically affected her ability to remain focussed on her education. She explained:

it's just realising where are you going to go tomorrow...what's going to happen to me...and what's going on...I found that I reached a point that I didn't really care about school 'cause' I was worrying about trying to actually live my life um...and um to live from one day to...um...to the next...so school became not a big issue to me...you don't think about the future and that...you don't think about what school is going to get you in years time...you're thinking about tomorrow...like what am I going to do tomorrow?...how I'm going to get food tomorrow?... how am I going to pay the bills as well as eat?...you know...am I going to have to be kicked out tomorrow because I don't have all the rent money...you know...um....so you don't think about school...I mean you know school in the future is going to get you a job but you don't think about that because you're trying to survive now...yeah...just finding a place to stay and that...yeah all the moving...yeah it's hard. (Adie)

For Jasmine, too, there were times where she was distracted from attending school and completing assignments by other priorities:

how can you go to school in the morning when you haven't had a sleep all night?...right...o.k...but your priority is where am I going to sleep tonight and where am I going to get food for today?...o.k...I mean as much as you want to go to school that is not the priority at the time being, once you've had your food and your accommodation ...you know...yep.. it's survival.

Survival was also a dominant theme that emerged from the narratives of Sam's story. Difficulties in his day to day struggle were highlighted by the comment that his life is "one big fight to get by". Sam talked about the times he lived at his mother's house, often living unsupported, with no income. He was eligible for the Youth Homeless Allowance as his parents were unable to exercise their parental responsibilities. His father was currently serving time in jail with a two year sentence. His mother, as discussed in the previous chapter, had been involuntarily committed to hospital for inpatient psychiatric treatment. Yet Sam had not applied for the Youth Allowance fearing to alert welfare authorities to his situation. Although his mother's place provided a roof over his head, he did not consider this a place 'home'. When asked about completing and coping with his school work while living at the house Sam replied,

homework...how can I do homework ?...no power at home.

Similar to Adie and Jasmine, Sam often moved between friends' places in order to find a place to stay. Although these places provided him with heating, light and the company of others, they, too, were not favourable environments to live in, let alone study. He said:

at friends or relatives there is no room, it's noisy, and everyone is off their head....you're always looking out for things, always on edge...waiting for things to go wrong...you know?

Sam had real need to be concerned about his welfare, considering some of the environments where he sought shelter. These places were often occupied by older people

who engaged in heavy drug use and were associated with other criminal networks. Sam gave accounts of staying at one particular house where drug dealing was common, particularly heroin. Sam sought this place out when he wanted respite from his lonely situation. The occupants often allowed drug users to 'test' the quality of their heroin before being bought and allowed the 'user' to complete any drug taking prior to leaving the premises. Sam described his decision to stay over at this place the night before his school exams. The house provided a place where he could drop back for the night for a rest, and where he could wash his clothes and shower himself. Unfortunately that night, one man had used heroin at the house and overdosed. Sam witnessed this event in the middle of the night, and this deeply affected his ability to do well in his exams the following day:

like...like one night I stayed at a friend's...had exams the next day and that...and everyone is using and people are coming and going and this guy ends up not breathing you know...the ambulance was called and he lived and that but try going to school the next day...wow...I couldn't get it out of my head for weeks...it really took me back to when mum would always O.D'd on her pills and stuff...that's what I mean...different people, different place but similar experiences and that.

Considering these circumstances, it was not surprising that Sam did not perform well.

I failed, I didn't even complete them...but I was really knackered as well, I just wanted to sleep on the desk.

Such experiences emphasise the importance of stable, safe and secure accommodation if young people are to take full advantage of the opportunities that schooling provides them. The evidence provided by Sam further highlights the vulnerable positions that homeless young people all too often find themselves in. Sam saw there was little hope in the future and found it hard to believe that there would be any change from the abusive and chaotic life that he had tried to escape:

just everything is a hassle, always problems, always on guard, even though I'm not livin' in an abuse home I still deal with abuse, lack of money, no food and drunk and druggy people everywhere...it's the same at home...and I try to go to school but these things still keep getting in the way.

Stealing to survive

During this study four young people revealed they had current involvement with the juvenile justice system. Many reported having multiple charges against them relating to petty theft and shop lifting.

Stealing...I'd been caught before heaps of times and I'd been to JJT (Juvenile Justice team). (Sam)

Ryan, Jasmine and Sam all reported spending time in a Juvenile Detention Centre during the year they attempted their schooling. Sam stated that he "got caught stealing a jacket from a sports store and yeah I did 3 months inside". Ryan claims, "I have been in and out of detention since I was fifteen".

The majority of involvement with the juvenile justice system was due to the theft of food, toiletries and clothing. These young people claimed that the stealing of these items were strategies for survival. Sam argued that he:

couldn't afford to live and that and...didn't get much money...I always use to steal for food and that...otherwise it's asking people for money and you can only do that for so long.

The way in which the lack of income and the need for food can lead homeless young people to steal is further illustrated in a comment from Jasmine:

In a way...it forced me to steal you know...you can only get so hungry before it feels not that wrong to take advantage of things and steal.

Others interviewed gave reports of skipping school and structuring their days around stealing when they could not make ends meet. When asked how they got by for clothing and money, Jasmine and Ryan replied as follows:

I guess whenever I got my clothing...um...it would be me and my friend going out and stealing during the day. (Jasmine)

The majority of my days were around stealing and getting money that allowed me to do the things I needed to do. (Ryan)

Stealing was also explained as a way of securing other basic necessities, such as medication. Jasmine revealed that cost was the primary barrier to treatment for the life threatening condition, (asthma) that she suffered. Not having access to this medication meant that she was unable to control her asthma attacks, often resulting in many admissions to hospital:

at times you know...I had to go without my medication...I get really bad asthma ...and at times I couldn't even afford to buy a puffer on the days I was wheezy...and yeah...I couldn't 'nick' one either as they were behind the counter...um...yeah...if it got that bad I had to go into...um...A&E (Accident and Emergency).

Conclusion

A common concern for all the young people was managing to live on a very small income. The Independent Youth Allowance, even when supplemented with rental assistance, was inadequate to cover fundamental living costs such as accommodation, utilities, food, clothing and toiletries. Large occasional debts such as school fees exacerbated an already difficult situation. Most of the five admitted that stealing, including failing to pay transport fares, were necessary strategies for making ends meet. The difficulties of finding and maintaining adequate housing left some young people with little time to devote to schoolwork. When housing was not available difficulties at school increased considerably. There was general agreement that welfare payments, while appreciated, were inadequate to cover essentials, and schooling suffered through the stress of doing without or stealing to survive.

CHAPTER NINE

THERE'S JUST THAT FEELING OF HOPELESSNESS

This chapter examines the emotional and psychological impact homelessness and childhood trauma have had on these young people's education. The experience of being mistreated as a child and being homeless caused many of the young people interviewed to feel insecure, depressed, anxious, and unable to control their lives. Under these stressful environmental and emotional conditions, learning at school was extremely difficult for all of them.

"It's all become too much"

The picture emerging from the analysis indicates that there was a breaking point for each young person which significantly affected their ability to maintain their studies. Each of them experienced some form of crisis while attending school, leading to long periods of absenteeism. This was a time of extreme stress when they were not able to cope in usual ways. Becky gave a moving description of her toughest time being a homeless student. She described her schooling in the final semester of year 11 when she felt she was coming to terms with her issues and gaining some order in her life. Becky continued to maintain her accommodation and reported an increase in her self esteem and academic achievement. For once she felt optimistic about the future and looked forward to completing the year. She felt that she had:

settled down right, cause I had no hassles you know, I could focus on school and that, and I ...I...um....school just took my mind off things when I was there.

At this time her foster father went to trial for sexual abuse against Becky. Becky was subpoenaed to be a witness for the prosecution. There was very little physical evidence, so her testimony became the most significant part of the evidence in this case. She said:

everything came up with court...yeah it was the days of the trial when I had to give evidence in front of a jury about the sex abuse with my foster father.

Becky described this period as an extremely stressful and traumatic time. She spoke about her fears and frustrations about testifying as she was forced to think about and re-live the intimate details of the sexual abuse. In her mind this compounded the trauma of the original abuse:

It was a nightmare I had to recall in detail all the stuff he did...it brought back all these old feeling and that and um...just bringing it all back and that.

Becky commented on how confused and frightened she became when she was subjected to harsh cross-examination by the defense lawyer. Her feelings were a response to issues like long delays while giving evidence, repeated questioning, not understanding the questions which she was asked, not remembering specific details, and being poorly treated by the defense lawyer.

well...his lawyer...well he confused me all the time...all the time... and made me look like...like I didn't know what I was saying and um... I had a really hard time going through all the past and remembering everything...yeah I just couldn't remember all the explicit details-days, times you know...I only know what happened.

The most difficult factor for Becky was the presence of the accused and his wife in court while she gave evidence. Facing her foster father had a threatening and traumatising effect on Becky, increasing her feelings of vulnerability. Becky explained:

yeah his wife was just sitting there giving me the evils...and yeah...all these strangers just looking at me hearing all this personal stuff...

Not suprisingly, this experience made Becky:

really miss my mum...’cause it reminded me that she had died...you know...’cause if she hadn’t I wouldn’t of been abused...and then I would’ve been protected and not have to go through all of this.

The isolation and vulnerability was amplified for Becky by the lack of support from her case worker as she was required to find her own way home after giving evidence in court:

yeah and after the day of me giving evidence I went home to a flat on my own...you know...’cause when I’m on my own I think heaps...and yeah the trial continued for days.

It was not possible to come away from the interview with Becky without feeling some sense of injustice about what she endured. Her account highlighted her powerlessness within the welfare and criminal justice systems and her feelings of betrayal and abandonment. This was certainly illustrated in her description of the day the jury reached a verdict.

Then...um... I had a visit from this welfare worker saying that he was found not-guilty...yeah that did it for me...I still wonder if I wasn’t a welfare kid would he of got off with good parents you know.

Becky’s reaction was stark:

yeah that was the breaking point for me...I ...I just felt so dirty and ...um....violated you know...I just felt like a piece of shit.

Ryan also had a difficult time in the final semester of year 11. He had been attending school regularly, in part, as an attempt to stay out of trouble for his up-coming court appearances for repeated offences of car theft. His mother was overseas visiting relatives when he became severely ill, which impacted upon his motivation and ability to attend school. At the time Ryan was living independently in a one bedroom flat on the outskirts of the inner city with no support or access to resources during this period and unable to contact the school to inform them of his circumstances as his phone had been disconnected because he had been unable to pay his bills. He was unable to look after himself adequately. Ryan explained:

I hadn't eaten for ages, my mum was in New Zealand at the time, I was in pain, and I had all this court shit with cars to deal with...I started feeling really crook...yeah...I was sick for ages...didn't really go to school and when I did I was really sick....didn't know why at first and yeah...I had all over three weeks off...on...and...off...that's when I didn't send any documents to the school to let them know why I was sick...but...but I couldn't ring I...me phone was not on...connected you know...I was sick.

Ryan's illness escalated to the point where he called an ambulance and was immediately admitted to hospital for severe abdominal pain, vomiting, mental confusion and profound fatigue. After a thorough medical examination Ryan said he was diagnosed with Hepatitis C. He spent three days in hospital under observation where he was treated for dehydration and liver problems. Overall, Ryan had not had any contact with the school for the previous four weeks and no-one including his mother was aware of his circumstances. Upon his discharge from hospital, Ryan returned to his flat with a referral to a liver specialist. For Ryan this period was reported as "my worst time...I was stressing ...stressing to the max".

When he returned to his flat other factors made his diagnosis more difficult to deal with he spoke about reading a letter from the school:

and yeah there...I got mail...and there was a letter of dis-enrolment...I had been taken off the roll cause they thought I didn't give a shit...o.k...and all the shit I went through to get back in...and they say...'we have a waiting list...you obviously don't want to be here, so we gave your spot to someone that does'...fuck...man I was so wild...I did want to be there...I just couldn't.

That same day, Ryan also received a letter from Centrelink stating that his youth allowance payments had been suspended due to his school absenteeism, further compounding his problems.

and after all of that I get a letter from Centrelink billing me for my payments cause I hadn't gone to school...but I didn't know I had to do all of that...I was so crook...all that was on the last on me mind.

For Jasmine, crisis point emerged after the school Christmas break when she returned to complete year 11. During the holiday period, Jasmine reported that her "heroin addiction escalated...I was using every day", mostly to deal with boredom and worries. On her return to school, her heroin use continued and at first, she did not consider herself addicted. As long as she could stop using when returning to school, she thought she would remain in control of her drug taking. As her addiction progressed throughout the holidays, her ability to stop became harder. Before she was aware of it, the heroin had begun to control her thoughts and behaviour. Jasmine only began to realise she had a problem when the drugs wore off and withdrawal symptoms set in on her first day of year 11. The symptoms were so severe she, was unable to walk from the train station to school (500 metres):

then I came for the first day this year...I was so sick that I could barely walk from heroin...yeah...hanging out and trying to get to school...that

was hard...you know once you come up to that level of a habit you can't get up in the morning unless you had some...o.k...when you don't feel so good. (Jasmine)

Jasmine's heroin dependency was so great that even when she did stop using for a period, the psychological battle to stay off the heroin remained. She recognised that her psychological addiction was just as powerful as the physical one.

my addiction was heroin and um, its um...its very overpowering. It's a strong physical addiction, but even more so it's um...a mental addiction...(pause)...you are using it to...I don't know how to put it...but I know...it blocks everything.

Jasmine found herself caught in a cycle. She knew she could not go on and graduate from school without heroin, but also knew the heroin was killing her. She identified this period as the most difficult time of being a homeless student. She explained:

during the periods of schooling I would be drying off drugs and dealing with those withdrawals and trying to keep it together for school but it was really hard...you know?

Life and school changed for Sam the day he decided to skip class in an attempt to visit his mother in hospital. Passing through the inner city prior to the hospital visit, Sam was arrested for stealing items of clothing from a store. He was held by departmental security, taken into custody by the police and interviewed for the theft of the garments. Sam admitted stealing the clothing and as there was no responsible adult to supervise bail release, he was detained over the weekend until court resumed two days later on Monday morning. As Sam had a record of theft and was on a good behaviour bond, the magistrate sentenced him to three months' detention in a juvenile facility. During his custodial sentence, Sam had no contact with his school regarding his academic position, let alone visits from relatives. Detention was described as a highly stressful time as this was his first experience in a juvenile detention center. He spoke of his isolation and

loneliness at this time. Sam clearly struggled to cope in the prison system, particularly being confined in a locked environment.

Emotional problems

Depression was one of the most common psychological problems facing these homeless young people. Some of them described feeling as if they had been depressed for most of their lives.

I think that I have always been depressed ...even when I was young...and then especially during my teenage years...even at seven...there are things that still happen...you know...um happen that make me feel really low.
(Jasmine)

Others indicated that their depression was often compounded by their sense of isolation, loneliness and feelings of helplessness due to being homeless.

I was really depressed because I had all the problems I was having...you just don't have anyone to talk to...I needed a friend who would just be there all the time...I didn't have that when I was depressed...someone I could share my feelings with, you just don't have anybody...you've just got no-one. (Adie)

Depression often resulted in poor academic performance which caused these young people to be distracted and lack motivation with their schooling, Becky reported falling into a deep depression after testifying in court against her foster father. Two weeks after receiving the court verdict she talked about how she had:

started to fall behind in school... 'cause there were days I couldn't even get out of bed...I was so exhausted, emotionally mainly, lost my appetite, had

problems sleeping and totally lost interest in everything...you know...including school...yeah that was a really bad time...yeah.

It was not uncommon for these young people to experience other psychological and emotional difficulties while attending school. Several of them noted the consequences of being homeless and how this had major implications for their schooling. Many gave reports about when they attended school and how their ability to engage, focus, comprehend and learn in class was drastically affected by their personal circumstances. The combination of homelessness, trauma and stress contributed to extreme concentration and attention problems, preventing them from succeeding academically.

The majority claimed they had difficulties learning at school while they attempted to make sense of their disordered lives. They confronted memories of their past and difficult feelings associated with their homelessness on a daily basis and this undermined any effort to remain attentive in class. Daytime thoughts and memories of prior abuse and family conflict persistently interrupted any attempt to concentrate in class. Ryan, for instance, described how he was unable to shut out memories of the violence that he had witnessed at home. In school he was:

there listening to these people about crap you know and...yeah...all I could think of was other things you know...I guess I'd show me sitting there you know...in class...trying to concentrate but can't....too many thing running through my head...I'd sit there but nothing would go in...even if I tried real hard...it's...like...it's...I can't shut out mum in me head...I'd...be sitting there and all these thoughts...they....they just don't go away...then...I'd struggle with me anger...yeah...it's hard. (Ryan)

Others became so preoccupied by their thoughts and feelings, that they too had little energy to devote to classroom learning.

Well...um...concentration was shocking...I mean ...um...certain classes I'd be fine in because you don't have to a lot of things to do ...but the

important ones like Maths and English and all that sort of stuff...nope...you just can't concentrate...I mean I was always thinking about my family...I think it just sort of school was hard to be important...what was important? Yeah...I was constantly thinking about problems...aahh...I don't sleep well I still don't sleep well and I don't know if that's an issue but um...it's just realising where are you going to go tomorrow...what's going to happen to me. (Adie)

The intrusion of such memories and thoughts often produced a state of distress for some of the young people. Sam stated:

I get annoyed by people easily, can't sit still for two minutes and I guess I get all these thoughts in my head and that...you know my mind races all the time and I can't shut anything out...and yeah...I just start to stress. (Sam)

Jasmine's fears and anxieties had become an everyday occurrence and they also made school a difficult experience. She described this experience as:

you know...racing thoughts, sweaty palms, otherwise a lot of it is my feelings...yeah...like that though is the least form of anxiety for me...and everything above that compared to the physical symptoms, mentally they are a thousand times worse...yeah...I had a lot of things...I couldn't sleep, I had nightmares and like...more like a constant anxiety that would fluctuate and um...that's actually really hard to cope with...and um...yeah...that is a pain in the arse to live with.

Substance abuse

This research revealed significant levels of alcohol and other drug abuse among the young people at this time of their lives. The types of substances used covered a large range of illicit and licit drugs such as cannabis, heroin, tobacco, alcohol, prescription drugs and amphetamines. Becky's substance abuse was escalated after the court case when:

things started going down hill again cause I started hanging around my friends in town drinking...and sleeping at other places.(Becky)

For some, substance use was functional even though detrimental, and had immediate benefits. The most frequent reason for using drugs given by the young people interviewed, was "to forget" because it "blocks everything". During interviews and focus group discussions the young people described substance use as a coping mechanism for many of their presenting problems:

it was good at the time when I had something cause it blocked everything.
(Jasmine)

it helps me forget about things...stops the stress you know...calms me down and helps me to relax...takes everything away and when things are happening to you that you don't like...it...makes you not care....things don't worry you like being straight...yeah...takes things away...and makes old feelings go away...yeah. (Ryan)

It's um...like you want to block things out...you know...I feel that everything is gonna go wrong..I worry and stress heaps...nothin' is certain you know...I like to get myself wrecked all the time, like I have been using drugs since I was 13 and I like just using, there is um...no worries and that when I'm off my face.(Sam)

Others felt that their drug use enabled them to function and perform better within the school environment. This was the case for Sam:

sometimes when I'm on something I'm better at school you know...I just sit there and don't say anything and do my work and it's good you know...I can concentrate better when I've had something...It calms me down and that and I don't seem to stress as much and things seem better...um...yeah...I'm better when I've had something than when I haven't...yeah. (Sam)

Drug use served other functions for the young people in this study. In a life that offers no predictability or security, drug use may be one's only 'friend'. Using drugs for Sam has

"been the only certain thing in my life and always has been". For others, when everything seems out of control, resorting to drugs is a way of getting back a degree of control over things. As Jasmine explains:

it just it...it...the thing about heroin like most drugs that I really love is that it gives you a sense of control...I know...I know how ironic that sounds...that's because...um...you know what you are going to feel like for that amount of time after you have had it...And...that made me feel secure...you know what I mean...You see opium...like it was a killer for all of that...you know...it was so beautiful to me...I could pretty much function and do what I wanted without all the crap there...yeah I could depend on it...for me I loved it.

Self harming behaviours

Feelings of hopelessness tended to increase the likelihood of other self-harming behaviours in addition to substance use. The combination of homelessness and overwhelming daily stress caused some of the young people interviewed to feel extremely helpless. It was common for some to internalise their feelings of helplessness and engage in other self destructive behaviours, including self harming and suicide attempts.

For Becky there came a point in her life when everything became too much. When asked in the interview about a period when she felt like leaving school she replied, "It was the time I felt like leaving life, remember?" Becky was referring to the night when she made an attempt on her own life. It was a month after the court case verdict when she went on a binge drinking night with some of her friends from the street. Becky quickly became intoxicated and reported experiencing "all these thoughts in my head about everything". Thoughts of the abuse, the court verdict and other events involving the death and loss of her mother began to surface, becoming too overwhelming for her to deal with. She

indicated that she could not alleviate the intense feelings of guilt which made her feel responsible for what had happened to her.

Finding this unbearable and needing some comfort and relief from her distress, she took a cocktail of pills and alcohol, resulting in an emergency admission to hospital. During the course of her treatment, Becky repeatedly refused assistance from the medical staff and asked them to leave her alone to die. This experience, resulted in five weeks of involuntary inpatient psychiatric care. Becky describes when the ambulance arrived at the hospital:

I just went off...I just wanted to be left alone to die...I just couldn't take any more you know...I just wanted out...and I told the doctor and nurse that and yeah...they got me locked up in this psych ward...I was there for about a month...they gave me heaps of medication to sedate me through that time...the doctor reckons I'm depressed...wow...depressed I think that's an understatement.

Descriptions by other young people illustrated the extent of helplessness some felt regarding their current life situations and their lack of hope for the future. Jasmine gave accounts of periods when she "didn't even want to live at times" which led to numerous suicide attempts during her time at school. She related her thoughts of suicide to the difficulties she was experiencing in coming off heroin, which at the time seemed impossible to overcome. The pain of her withdrawal symptoms and the stress of remaining 'clean' at one point seemed unbearable. "I mean I didn't even want to live at the time cause ...I was that crook". Jasmine was able to talk about her toughest day being a homeless student. She remembers waking up for school one morning while coming off heroin and:

not wanting to live anymore...things were just too hard...you know...when you don't have no energy...you are emotionally, physically, mentally drained in every way that you just...you know...you're dead.

Feelings of helplessness/ hopelessness

Although the young people left abusive homes in order to gain some control over their lives, their descriptions of life since indicate that this has proved elusive. The difficulties of being homeless and the consequent feelings of helplessness were a recurring theme throughout the interviews. It was not possible to come away from the interviews without a heightened sense of awareness that this period in these young people's lives was dominated with feelings of powerlessness. Many of them viewed their lives as beyond their control.

Sometimes being out of control led to feelings of betrayal and disillusionment. Without a secure 'base' to reside for stability and security, Becky endured feelings of helplessness as she found herself ill-equipped with the knowledge and skills to deal with life's difficulties. The loss of power associated with being homeless evoked an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Becky was able to talk about this during her description of what it felt like being a homeless student. She said:

I will never forget this...I think I read it in one of your books...hey?...it went something along the lines of like you're on a plane and um...everyone has a parachute on and everyone's been through all the parachuting lessons but you never had...and...um...the plane is crashing and everyone's jumping out of the plane and pulling on their parachutes...and yeah you have to jump out yourself on your own and yeah...pull it on the way down, but you don't know when to do it, and you don't know how to stop yourself from spinning...you just keep spiraling out of control..yeah that's homelessness to me...out of control...you are sort of navigating your own way through things...but you don't even know if you're going in the right direction.

Similarly, Sam described his experience being homeless as a time "where you don't know what you're meant to be doing or where you're meant to be going". What appears to lie at the heart of these experiences, is a sense of alienation. These young people reported time and again their sense of estrangement.

yeah I tell you there are days I just ...just don't know...I guess I'm simply drifting...yeah...drifting...don't know where to though...yeah...that about describes that (Ryan).

Yeah it feels like you're drifting in and out of things but you don't know where to (Sam).

Others claimed that they felt alien to other people around them, a belief which led to a sense of aloneness and indifference:

it's like the world is going by and moving on...it's everybody else has a future and a place to be and a place to go in the world except you.(Sam)

Any effort to make their environment and personal circumstances better were reported to fail, reinforcing those experiences of helplessness. Adie explained:

things just keep getting harder...you can't even break out of being poor and get a job...it's like a merry-go round...and I feel at times I just keep going around and around with nothing changing or getting better...it's really hard... sometimes can't think of what's at the end for me.

Sam commented:

you're just there you know the same person with the same problems with nothing moving or getting better.

Concentrating on school and planning for the future became an insurmountable task for those in this study. Most lost the capacity to see beyond their day to day struggle for survival as their experiences taught them to live only for today. Consequently, schooling at times became irrelevant and insignificant in their lives. Ryan said:

how can I concentrate on even thinking about school?...school you know is about building a future...a career..I really think I don't fall into that

category...don't even know if I have a future...it's day to day...at the moment...don't know where things are leading and where to...you know...I've only had everything change...I feel like the whole world is on me at times and don't know...how long I can deal with things at times.
(Ryan)

The decision to leave school

All the young people felt that their personal circumstances eventually affected their motivation towards school. They became discouraged and preoccupied with personal problems and other social issues that impacted on their ability to remain focussed on their studies. Some reported that they felt discouraged when they attempted to resume their studies after long periods of absenteeism. The consensus from all indicated that schooling seemed irrelevant to their current life situations.

Sam missed three months of schooling while being detained in a juvenile institution for theft. Although he did receive an education while incarcerated, returning to school became overwhelmingly difficult, which inevitably led him to leave education altogether:

um...it was when I never went back...after being locked up...I sort of got too far behind and that that it just didn't seem any point and that...you know...it's hard you know...school's just a small part of everything else that is happening.

Similarly, Becky talked about falling too far behind in her schooling while she was hospitalised for depression:

you know...and when I got out I couldn't really go back to school. I'd missed too much class before hospital and when I was there...yeah I was too far behind to catch up so I've left for the year...hopefully focus on getting better and try again maybe next year if I feel better...just wait and see hey?

Jasmine spoke about how she was unable to complete her education until her substance abuse issues were dealt with. She believed that there was nothing the school could do to deter her from leaving. She decided her best option was to withdraw from her classes and seek medical treatment for her heroin addiction. Reflecting on whether she had made the right decision she said:

my own personal well-being was needed to be taken care of before I can finish school and do well...yep...um...at that time...um...nothing could have at the time being kept me there because what was what needed to be done was for me to get off drugs and this year I have done that on my own. You know...and...if...I don't know, it is a vicious circle.

Ryan's personal circumstances, too, outweighed any energy and motivation for school. In the end, he felt that any control over his schooling was taken out of his hands by the school's dis-enrolment process. He says: "I didn't end up having to make the decision...they made it for me in a way". He spoke about feeling disillusioned as he attempted to resume his studies after being dis-enrolled. Ryan felt that his education had little relevance to his present circumstances.

I ended up being re-enrolled and went back but yeah...things are just too much to stay you know...there's too much going on and coming up for me...yeah school just...it's just not there at the moment...everything just seemed so different...maybe it was me...so much has changed...and school...my education...my future...I didn't feel like I had one...you know...um...um...the Hep C it just threw me when I heard this is gonna kill me...but yeah that around the time I thought I'd drop out...it all got too much...plus I was still dealing with court stuff...and yeah...I sort of feel different about things since being dis-enrolled...yeah that whole thing has knocked me you know...I want a second chance but yeah...maybe it's not for me you know...who knows maybe some other time.

Conclusion

The emotional stresses of homelessness, coping with authority, dealing with substance use and coming to terms with their past made all five young people find it difficult to cope with the extra, avoidable demands of schooling. Often simply attending school was a major achievement; paying attention while there was sometimes impossible. At some stage, they all found schooling to be less important than dealing with the pressures of daily survival. Their desire to break out of their circumstances by completing their education was blunted and diverted by the many forces that seemed to work against them- perhaps more so when those forces: the legal system, the health system, the school system itself- seemed to be working against the young people they were trying to help.

CHAPTER TEN

EXPERIENCES WITH THE 'SYSTEM'

In this chapter, a brief overview of prevention and intervention programs addressing youth homelessness will be discussed. In addition, this chapter will present descriptions of the young people's experiences while accessing a range of youth service provisions. Their reports highlight a lack of confidence and trust with the 'system'. At a time when they sought assistance, all of them experienced a sense of further alienation from the services which were designed to help them.

The Western Australian Department for Community Development

At the broadest level, this department is responsible for child welfare. This is particularly for young people who are under the guardianship of the state, where legal responsibility for their welfare is transferred from the parents to the state. Previously known as the Department for Family and Children Services, the Department for Community Development has a statutory responsibility for meeting the needs of young people up to the age of seventeen who are at significant risk through abuse or neglect, and young people under fifteen years of age who are homeless or unsupported.

Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) was established in 1985 to consolidate a number of Australian, state and territory government programs designed to assist people who are homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless. The current program is governed by the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994. This act specifies SAAP's overall aim to provide transitional supported accommodation

and related support services in helping homeless young people achieve their transition to independence (Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, 1999).

Centrelink

Centrelink is a Australian government initiative and has prime responsibility for the provision of income support to families and young people. Income support for homeless young people include Youth Allowance, Special Benefit and rental assistance. Centrelink employs social workers who play a major role in assessing a young person's eligibility for Youth Allowance. Health care cards are available from Centrelink for young people receiving payments. The card entitles them to Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme prescription medicines at a small cost, and other concessions.

Job Placement Employment and Training (JPET)

The JPET program is a Australian Department of Education, Science and Training funded program which is delivered by local community based services. This program works with 'at risk' young people who fall into the following groups: the homeless; those at risk of homelessness; young people in care; and young offenders. The program provides a holistic range of services in reducing barriers that are preventing young people from participating in education, pre-vocational or vocational training, or from gaining and maintaining employment.

Reconnect program

Reconnect was established in 1999 as a result of the Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce (1998) which reported on the importance of early intervention and prevention

within the family and school in addressing youth homelessness. This Australian government-funded initiative facilitates mediation between families and young people in the event of early home leaving and aims at connecting young people to more protective factors such as employment, education and the community. This response is "based on the government's belief that often the best means of supporting young people is through supporting their families" (Family and Community Services, 1999, p.3).

Mental health professionals

Mental health is a significant issue for homeless young people. The Western Australian Health Department provides a range of services aimed at promoting better services for homeless young people with mental illness. Young people can access psychologists, hospital based psychiatrists and counsellors to assist with their mental health issues.

Non-government youth support programs.

These services are Australian state/ territory funded organisations providing a pathway of services to homeless young people. These non-government services respond to the needs of the homeless and those 'at risk' in local areas. Services include drop-in centres, accommodation, counselling, employment and training programs, family medication/support, street/outreach programs, youth groups and alternative learning programs. These organisations foster opportunities for young people to become involved in the community by connecting them to a range of services.

Becky and The Department for Community Development

Becky entered 'the system' involuntarily at the age of four. Her mother was unable to care for her due to an ongoing substance abuse problem, and Becky was taken under the care of the department for reasons of neglect. With no long-term solutions available for Becky in terms of another appropriate placement within the family, she was made a State Ward. Wardship involved the care and rights with respect to Becky being transferred to the State, by means of a court order. The responsibility of the State (Department for Community Development) for Becky was deemed to be the same as those required of her parents. Under wardship, Becky's accommodation options involved either living in a group home or a foster placement. The Department placed Becky in the care and responsibility of a female carer, whom to this day Becky refers to as her mother. As discussed in a previous chapter, this foster placement was extremely successful for eight years, offering Becky security, stability and love. When Becky was twelve, her foster mother passed away from a lingering illness, leaving Becky nowhere else to live except within another foster placement. Within two days after her mother's passing, Becky was relocated to another suburb and placed with a middle aged married couple.

For the two years of this foster placement Becky endured repeated sexual abuse by the foster father. During this period Becky claims she did not receive any assessment or follow-up from the Department to determine whether the placement was appropriate. This led her to experience intense feelings of abandonment and isolation. During the interview Becky expressed confusion about the reasons for the inadequate care and follow-up:

No...nope...never...looking back yeah there was nothing...no follow-up...they just presume you're o.k. I didn't see them at all...and it would have been good if they were there when I needed them.

This experience with the Department led to extreme difficulties in disclosing the abuse. Becky's fears were exacerbated and led to a breaking point one day at school. This episode alerted the attention of her teacher who investigated the matter. Becky disclosed the abuse, the police child abuse unit became involved and the Department was notified. It was only after the disclosure that Becky was allocated a case worker from the Department for support.

Becky's anger towards the Department was evident. She strongly believed that assistance from the Department was inadequate for her needs over the two-year period. She emphasised that the system which was designed to protect and care for her had failed. In her eyes, the Department not only failed to protect her from the initial abuse, but further failed to intervene and prevent ongoing victimization. It is perhaps not surprising that Becky believes that she "would have been better off" if she had remained with her natural mother, because of the hardship she endured as a State Ward. Her view of the Department for Community Development was critical:

I mean welfare took me off my mum cause she couldn't care for me right?...well I sometimes think that someone should take me off welfare you know...cause they have done me really wrong...and...and it's not just me...there's heaps of kids this is happening to.

Other comments from Becky highlighted how difficulties of the Department's involvement continued into her adolescence. This included not being given the opportunity to be involved in the decisions that were made about her welfare. From the age of twelve onwards Becky claims she was never included in any of the planning and decision processes regarding her accommodation and schooling. For four years (until she was sixteen) Becky was moved from youth shelter to youth shelter, resulting in the continual loss of friends and familiar surroundings. Most of the time she was removed from accommodation for reasons unknown to her. Over a four year period Becky moved

seven times and attended three different schools. She was able to talk about her frustrations regarding these experiences, which she believes inevitably led to feelings of powerlessness regarding her own life.

Accommodation and schooling were not the only issues highlighted in Becky's interviews. She was concerned, too, about the difficulties of maintaining stable relationships, which were exacerbated by the high turnover of case workers. Becky expressed frustration about her feelings of impermanence and disconnectedness: "Over my time I have had about 20 different case-workers...they just keep changing". Not only did these changes have a drastic effect on Becky's ability to establish some form of relationship with another adult, but they led her to the point of feeling "sick and tired of telling my story".

At one stage Becky did form a strong attachment to a worker who assisted her throughout the difficult period of the sexual abuse trial. Shortly after the trial her case worker too moved on within the Department, without informing her or introducing her to the next worker. Becky only became aware of the staff changes when she contacted the Department to make an appointment. She realised that the strong relationship she felt with her worker was not reciprocal. Becky commented on the painful loss and feeling of rejection.

you get attached to one of them and like them and then they go...without even saying goodbye...I don't realize till I ring up and they tell me...no she left ages ago...so no I don't bother with them any more.

Currently, Becky is still experiencing problems accessing support from the Department. Her experiences have taught her not to rely on welfare authorities for support and care. She believes the only person she can truly rely on is herself. At present she refuses to have any contact with the Department . As she explains:

no...don't have much contact with them...in the past if there were problems they would just shove me into a refuge or home...that's their solution to problems...then they forget you exist...yeah they haven't been much support at all...so no I don't bother with them anymore...yeah...yeah...I just rely on myself and that...the system's not much help for kids like me and yeah...I've just learnt to do things myself.

Becky is waiting until she turns eighteen when her case file will be closed. This will give her sole responsibility for her own care and well- being. At the present age of seventeen, Becky has lost all contact with her natural relatives and believes she has a future dependent on welfare benefits and a life of loneliness and isolation. In terms of her present circumstances, Becky feels that the neglect and lack of co-ordination and assistance by the Department has contributed to her current situation of poverty and homelessness.

O.k...well I'm a State Ward right and ...it's funny...State Ward who is under the care of the government...and I'm homeless...that's funny....shows how much the government cares considering they're my guardian and I'm homeless.

Ryan and mental health services

Another theme running through the interviews was the negative experiences that some young people had with the mental health system. Ryan's experience illustrated the lack of understanding and awareness by mental health professionals about his circumstances and the difficulties associated with homelessness. At times, the very assistance designed

to help homeless young people like Ryan, further alienated them from the few support networks they had.

Ryan talked about being subjected to extreme misfortune while accessing the system. It was evident from his interview that his home environment presented numerous difficulties and challenges that had direct implications for his ability to achieve at school. The violence that he witnessed and endured from his step-father clearly had a negative effect on his behaviour during his earlier schooling period (Years 8 & 9). Ryan believed that living in a violent environment contributed to many of his behavioural problems at school. Such conditions caused him to feel extremely angry about his circumstances, leading to violent and aggressive outbursts towards teachers and other students, and disciplinary action by those in authority.

Well I started getting into fights...not just at school but afterwards and yeah I became really pissed off easily...even not being able to sit still in class you know...I...would just get really angry and if the teacher pissed me off yeah..I would tell them...tell them to fuck off...and end up at the principal's office.

Ryan's behaviours inevitably led him to being referred to the school psychologist in an attempt to address his negative, acting-out behaviour. He had already received numerous suspensions for his behaviour and as a last resort to prevent expulsion, he was referred to a psychologist to address strategies to deal with his anger. Ryan indicated that he had low expectations of the psychologist's ability to assist him, let alone understand his personal circumstances:

then you know at the psych's office doing some dicky anger program...it's like ...get fucked...you's don't even know nothin'.

Assessment of Ryan's behavioural difficulties was undertaken by the school psychologist in association with other school personnel. The assessment was conducted over three separate hourly appointments. Ryan was reluctant to discuss the abuse at home because of the fear of being reported to the authorities and being removed from his mother's care. Consequently, he was misdiagnosed with ADHD by the psychologist who was unfamiliar with his home circumstances. This resulted in the use of pharmacological intervention:

then...they...they sent me to this psych for some...um...an a...assessment...and he'd told me mum that I was ADD....so they put me on this medication...dexies (dexamphetamine)...to settle me.

Ryan believed that his symptoms of hypervigilance and aggression were normal reactions to the trauma that he experienced nightly. He was able to talk about how he felt being misdiagnosed, as a result of the clinician's failure to make any connection between the abuse at home with his present symptoms. Even though his psychologist did not know about the abuse, in Ryan's eyes, "they didn't know what they were talking about". The medical intervention was counterproductive in Ryan's case, as his home circumstances did not improve and there was a further deterioration of his emotional health. Considering nothing changed with Ryan's behaviour, the clinician, in conjunction with his medical practitioner, increased the dosage of the medication. Frustration inevitably set in for Ryan, when there was no improvement with his symptoms. Ryan did not understand his condition, nor the decisions regarding his treatment plan. He felt that the intervention focussed on his present behaviors as part of a 'defect' in his character, instead of factors beyond his control. Ryan described the whole encounter as very disempowering.

so they upped me medication and um yeah...didn't do much for me self you know....being told I was um...having a disorder...um...this...mental problem...I ...it's them with the mental problems I reckon...like it's all my fault?

This experience was one of many Ryan endured. Despite the three clinical appointments, never was the possibility of abuse explored within the therapy sessions. Ryan felt that the assessment regarding his behaviour was premature, resulting in an inaccurate identification of the real issues and failing to address the appropriate intervention required. He was convinced that the clinician was no more helpful or understanding than previous welfare workers. His feelings about the whole process were revealed when he recommended that the school psychologist who assessed him with ADHD

should spend a night with my step father...you know...see if he can sort that fuck wit out so me mum would be safe...yeah...see how he'd handle gotten' smashed every night...you'd reckon he'd sit in school o.k then? Then have a teacher say...well...why didn't you do your homework?...Ooooo...they just don't know nothin'.

Two months after his first consultation with the psychologist, Ryan discontinued his medication because of negative side effects. In a short space of time, he became aware that there was a demand for his medication by other young people at school. Ryan began to sell his prescription and use the money to buy illegal drugs. At this point the marijuana didn't seem to be relaxing him anymore, so he replaced it with a stronger substance, heroin, which alleviated his feelings of stress and anger. Experimentation with heroin quickly led to abuse and then addiction. As Ryan approached school under the influence of heroin, improvements in his behaviour and attitude were noted by the principal. Ryan himself experienced such relief that he sought to recapture this feeling for many months by using heroin on a daily basis. His heroin habit then progressed to the point that what started out as a once a day ritual became a ritual twice daily. If Ryan abstained from heroin for more than twelve hours he became irrational to the point that he could not even carry on a conversation. He hallucinated and became extremely aggressive and irritable. Ryan believed he had reached a point that no matter how much heroin he took daily, he could never seem to relax. At this point when he developed a physical dependency on heroin, everything quickly spiraled out of control:

that's when things started going down hill..I stopped taking the medication 'cause I started selling them to others so I could buy pot and that...and yeah that...I was out of control as one teacher put it and said I should be locked up...yeah well he was right...that's what started to happen...that's when I ended up in Rangeview (Juvenile Detention Centre) and things just kept...um...going down hill from there.

When asked if he would consider counseling in the future, Ryan angrily expressed a complete lack of faith about accessing another therapist:

me to go to counseling... 'a...what for ??!...they probably wrongly diagnose me with something else...whatta these people know about me and what I think and go through...they don't see what goes on outside their little comfy office...I could teach them a thing or two I reckon...what's counselling for ?...fuck...are they gonna take away my Hep C...kick out my step-father...na I don't think so.

From his perspective, therapists had no commitment to him as an individual, nor could they see any positive values in him.

you can see it...with these counsellors...they just think kids like us are all...you know druggies, prostitutes and criminals...yeah you feel that they sort of look down on you...judge you...if you know what I mean...yeah...you feel um...pissed off at them cause you see they don't understand then they wanna tell you what you should do with your life...especially with drugs...they think you should just stop, you know?

Sam and youth accommodation services

Other young people were generally negative about their experiences within youth accommodation settings. The accommodation services accessed by young people are designed to offer temporary protection from further exploitation and victimisation, crisis intervention and individual counselling and support for homelessness. This study

indicated that the process of rejection and marginalisation the young people experienced in their families seemed to be reflected in hostels. Sam encountered the hostel 'scene' after becoming a victim to street violence one night in the inner city. He was admitted to hospital for observation after experiencing concussion. The hospital social worker could not contact any next of kin to whom Sam could be discharged. As a result, the social worker contacted the Department for Community Development for an assessment of Sam's circumstances. The Department for Community Development decided that Sam should be placed in a crisis hostel until a suitable carer could be found to care for Sam. Sam's extended family was well known to the Department and had a long history of having their children removed and placed in state care. These relatives were deemed unfit by the Department to care for Sam while his mother was in hospital. Although Sam was confident about living independently at the age of fourteen, he could not return to his mother's place:

I couldn't live there on my own that night 'cause I couldn't look after myself so they got welfare onto me and I was sent to a hostel so they could make sure I was with an adult...yeah...that was pretty tough cause I hated going back to the hostel and having these adults tell me I couldn't go back to my mum's and that you know.

While the Department considered Sam safer in a hostel than residing at his mother's house without supervision, he was not sheltered from other problems. During his stay many of his difficulties regarding the hostel accommodation revolved around living in a restrictive environment. Most accommodation service have rules and regulations concerning meals, wake up times, lock-out times, chores, curfews, visitors, times to access food and the use of television and radio. All services prohibited the use of alcohol and other drugs, violence and aggression. Sam had difficulties in adapting to this restrictive environment after living a lifestyle of few rules, and the difficulties of adjusting to the hostel environment were amplified by the constant threat of eviction by the hostel staff.

A particular problem related to Sam's need for time out and respite from the violence that he had endured. Instead of being able to remain in the hostel, there was a 'lock-out' system requiring all young people to vacate the premises daily. Returning to the hostel was not allowed until the afternoon. This practice is implemented to encourage the young people to look for work or attend school. Sam felt that this practice did not address the many needs of homeless young people living in crisis accommodation. He felt that meeting basic needs first such as rest and safety was critical before tackling any of the other difficulties he was experiencing. According to Sam,

they don't understand and that...they don't know that you're in crisis and you just want some time out, you can't even sleep in...up at eight...don't worry if you haven't slept for weeks or if you feel sick...you gotta be up and out for the day.

At times Sam felt that the crisis accommodation did not address anything further than shelter issues, such as alleviating his isolation from living alone while his mother was in hospital and his father was in jail. It was always in the back of Sam's mind that if his father or mother were unable to return home he would be moved on to another hostel after his two month period had been reached. During his time at the hostel he always felt that he would have been better off residing at his mother's place:

hostels don't help with long term stuff...they just care about day to day stuff...then if you're not kicked out you out stayed your time in two months and have to move on...but nothin' has changed...all you've been given is a roof...I can get that at mum's and friends' places.

Without safe housing, homeless young people like Sam cannot focus on longer term goals when they are so occupied addressing their safety needs. Sam highlighted the importance of addressing housing priorities before other issues of employment and education. He reported experiencing considerable pressure from the hostel staff to occupy his daily time addressing employment and education issues.

all they care about is if you're going to school and if you're not you have to find a job...it's like their mission is to make you work.

At times, not fulfilling the hostels' rules and regulations challenged Sam's ability to maintain his accommodation. As a consequence of truanting from school and his drug use, Sam was at risk of being evicted from the hostel. In part, this was due to the influence of other young people in the hostel. Many of the young people living with Sam were also living in crisis and some had been homeless for years. Some had just been released from juvenile detention, bringing their difficulties and lifestyle choices with them. At times these influences were a distraction from the goals that Sam had set to achieve. In the interview Sam talked about the day he attended a full day of school only to return to the hostel afterwards to be told by a staff member that the 'lock out' time did not finish for another two hours. Consequently, Sam had no where to go and nothing to do. He decided to catch a train back into the inner city to locate other young people that he knew. It was here that he came into contact with two other female residents from the hostel. With almost two hours to spare and boredom quickly setting in, one of the female residents produced some cannabis and a implement for its use. Sam decided to smoke with the young women before they all returned together to commence their chores. One of the young women asked Sam to hide the smoking implement in his school bag because she was already under suspicion for drug use. Upon returning to the hostel the situation deteriorated, and according to Sam:

the staff member on could smell it (the drug)...then I got my room searched and they found a bong and kicked me out.

Sam felt that there was some injustice to this decision. He reported that he was not given the opportunity to explain himself, and felt discriminated against. He said:

but I reckon they didn't like me anyway...it was all girls before I arrived and I reckon that they thought I was the bad influence...they were all stoned too...but it was only me who got kicked out.

When asked where the hostel sent Sam after his eviction he replied:

No-where...they just gave me a multi-rider and dropped me off at the train station...I had no where to go...they just told me that they would be notifying my worker (DCD) that I had been kicked out for drugs.

Based on this experience, Sam stated that he was now reluctant to access crisis accommodation. His perception of the hostel was that they tended to cater for the easy young people and did not address the issues and problems associated with being homeless. Anyone with difficulties was excluded, similar to his experience of schools he had previously attended.

they don't help you with the other stuff...like drugs and that...if you have a problem like when I was stoned they just get rid of you...and if you have a fight cause you're pissed of with someone...they kick you out for fighting 'cause they say it's not allowed...well what are they there for then?...it's like it's my fault...kids like me just don't last there...it's like school and that...cause you seem to have hassles and that...they are meant to help...but these adults make things worse so I don't rely on anyone like that anymore.

Jasmine and Centrelink

Jasmine was highly critical of her experiences with Centrelink when she applied for the Youth Homeless Allowance. She argued that broader system failures within Centrelink further disadvantaged her personal circumstances. Ultimately, this resulted in her becoming vulnerable to risky situations in order to survive without an income. She identified difficulties accessing financial assistance, long delays within the system assessing her personal and family circumstances, frustrations about a lack of knowledge

of the application process, and having to fight for what she was entitled to as a homeless young person. She claimed staff were inadequate with their follow up regarding Centrelink's policy and procedures. Jasmine stated that:

Dept of Social Security (Centrelink) and Family & Children Services
(Department of Community Development) they did me such a disservice.

This was Jasmine's response to her experiences with Centrelink when she first found herself homeless at the age of fourteen. It was the period when she had her first introduction to the bureaucratic maze that she would have to navigate in order to access her basic needs for survival.

Income was the first thing that Jasmine attempted to address immediately after leaving home. She initially encountered difficulties with Centrelink because of the many forms that she was required to complete before any formal assessment of her circumstances would take place. Many of the questions on these forms were not clear to her, requiring her to seek assistance from the social work section of Centrelink. Then the forms could not be processed until she provided appropriate documentation to verify her identification. Unfortunately, when Jasmine ran away from home she did not take any of the required documentation with her, once again delaying the application process for any income support. In her third week since leaving home, Jasmine went into the inner city and made an application at the registry of births, deaths and marriages for a birth extract. She was told that she needed written parental permission to receive any documentation. Even if this approval was granted, Jasmine discovered there was a cost to receiving any of her identification. It took her a further three weeks to receive her birth certificate from her grandmother.

At this time Jasmine was staying with other homeless young people in a flat near the inner city. She was allowed to 'crash' at this place until her application had been approved, allowing her access to other accommodation. During this period Jasmine "didn't have any food...you know...if it wasn't for my friends I would not have gotten by".

Because Jasmine was under the age of sixteen, the social worker from Centrelink referred her to a Duty Officer at the then Department for Family and Children Services for an assessment regarding her family and personal circumstances. In order to receive a Special Benefit payment from Centrelink, Jasmine needed verification from the Department that it was unreasonable for her to live at home. Although the Special Benefit is a similar amount of to the Youth Homeless Allowance, the assessment is more stringent because of the age of those potentially eligible.

Jasmine reported that the Department of Family and Children Services concluded that it was unreasonable for her to live with either parents and also that she met the criteria for the Special Benefit Allowance. The assessment and conclusion was documented in a formal letter to Centrelink giving approval for her to receive the Special Benefit income entitlements. Jasmine lodged this letter with Centrelink staff along with other required documentation. The staff at Family and Children Services informed Jasmine that this was the final requirement of the process to be eligible with Centrelink and she could expect her payments to commence within the next fortnight.

Three weeks later when Jasmine turned fifteen, she still had not received any allowance, leaving her confused about the process regarding her payment. Access to the Special Benefit became a major frustration for Jasmine. Jasmine said that she made weekly contact with Centrelink staff regarding updates about her payment but was given the same response: "it is being processed and will take some time". Jasmine believed that securing her entitlements should have been resolved a month after the letter of approval

from Family and Children Services was lodged. Instead, she claims her payments were delayed for 12 months.

During this twelve month period Jasmine was forced to move from place to place in order to secure some form of accommodation. Lacking reliable income, her accommodation options were not always places she desired. Jasmine implied that she had to resort to other measures, such as stealing and prostitution, in order to secure accommodation and obtain money for food and clothing. Her experience highlights the vulnerability that homeless young people face during the period between the lodgment of their income application and when they receive payments. Jasmine is highly critical of the payment structure and processes. She felt that she was literally being punished for being homeless.

they...if you are not allowed to live at home under sixteen you get Special Benefits...FACS wrote a letter to DSS (Centrelink) saying that I couldn't live at home...today I still have that letter...to this day...yeah I got paid just before I was 16. DSS (Centrelink) had this letter for a year...a...year...but they were...or they said it took that long to process it...I find that really wrong, for those people who are meant to be in charge they just failed me miserably.

Adie and "the system"

Adie's case highlights the point that not all homeless young people easily access the support services and resources available to them. Although Adie was in great need of support, she experienced overwhelming difficulties in obtaining any appropriate services. Critical factors which contributed to her homelessness included a lack of access to information about community resources and support services. Her case demonstrates that information about service provisions do not always reach those who are in need of them. Additionally, homeless young people do not always have the skills to access essential services that may assist them during periods of crisis.

During a fourteen month period she moved accommodation more than ten times, seeking refuge where ever she could find it. She was unaware of existing youth accommodation services and the extent of welfare support available, leaving her with minimal options except sleeping it rough where ever she could. She said:

there needs to be an advertised service that kids can go to get help straight away...before they are in trouble, on drugs, people need to realise that they can get help if they are in homes where they need to get out...and what are you suppose to do when you've got no options?

The only options for her were to 'camp out' at other people's places, often on their couch or on a mattress on the lounge room floor. When Adie felt that she had overstayed her welcome or was becoming a financial burden she would move onto other accommodation options. At some of these places where Adie sought refuge, she felt overwhelmed by conditions of poverty and overcrowding. She reported that living in these environments often produced conflict between the other people with whom she was staying, resulting in further relationship problems. Nearly all the accommodation that she used was on a temporary basis. Adie did attempt to find other accommodation support on numerous occasions, with little success. She recalled the process as being "really hard...I mean you do look for help but you only look so hard". At one point, Adie found herself sleeping it rough in a friend's panel van simply because she was unaware of other available options elsewhere:

I had nothing...I just started at school, I had no-one to talk to...I didn't know what to do and I honestly can say I had no options at all...I didn't know what services and resources were around...that was the only thing that I could do...he was the only friend that I had...and that would at least offer me some sort of help

Adie's experience highlights the fact that not all homeless youth easily find the resources that they need in a time of crisis. For many homeless young people like Adie, "there should be easier access to support and people to help you and that sort of thing".

Conclusion

Difficulties of accessing the assistance available to young people through various government agencies were detailed by all five interviewees. They all had stories concerning lack of personal service, bureaucratic delays, unsympathetic treatment or no service at all. These experiences left them feeling abandoned and helpless, angry at the system whose help was perceived at best as grudging and at worst counterproductive.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONNECTING TO THE SYSTEM: THE COURAGE TO TRUST

This chapter highlights important issues professionals need to consider when working with homeless young people. Daily, homeless young people confront problems of safety, trust and betrayal. These factors often undermine their efforts to seek help for their educational, physical and psychological needs. Homeless young people need to be able to establish respecting and positive relationships with professionals. Some young people have had positive experiences within the system. Their stories emphasise the significant role youth workers can play in supporting, monitoring and coordinating resources for young homeless people.

"I find it hard to trust people"

Because the young people in this study have been abused by adults and authority figures, it is not surprising they approach services within the system with distrust and fear. These young people's sense of security has been constantly undermined leading to intense feelings of distrust. They have learnt not to rely on any one to protect them, and they protect themselves. As a result, professionals working with these young people must strive to overcome many barriers in order to establish any form of relationship with this clientele. These young people are on the defensive from the beginning of any contact with the system.

I mean if you can't rely and trust your own parents...well who can you turn to?...your whole view of the world is shattered...even to this day I am learning to trust people. (Adie)

A lack of trust regarding adults presented itself numerous times throughout the interviews. Becky talked about trust being "a huge issue" when it comes to dealing with other people. Unfortunately, the tendency not to trust adults impedes their ability to develop relationships with professionals. All the young people shared some of this feeling.

I find it hard to trust adults and that...you know? I feel that I always get hurt in the long run. (Becky)

It's hard to trust and that...to be able to talk to people and that. (Sam)

It's so hard to be able to know who to trust. (Adie)

Yeah that's a big thing ...trust.(Ryan)

One young person, when commenting on whom he would turn to, to talk about his problems, said;

No-one...I don't know those people enough to be able to talk to them...cause of all the things that made me homeless and that have made me see people not in a good way...never can rely on anyone cause they let you down at some stage. (Sam)

Many of the young people's narratives described negative experiences with youth agencies and mental health professionals. There was a consistent theme of an inability to establish a positive relationship with workers. Services identified as favorable as positive by the young people were described as 'trusting', often as a result of particular relationships being established. Becky and Jasmine were quick to relate to one of the positive aspects of dealing with the system:

what has helped has been youth workers you know...and that...who have always been there for the crucial times at and away from school...and that's what I want to do you know...go to uni and study you know...and

become a youth worker to and help other kids like me...yeah you guys have been big to me.(Becky)

If I hadn't met good youth workers to guide me I might not be where I am today...still be running amok, doing crime, and still doing drugs.
(Jasmine)

Becky and Jasmine were referring to the contact they had established with me during my role as a youth support worker while they were attending school. Their feedback and that of the other participants in this study has provided a useful insight into the frameworks and practices that homeless young people found positive and negative regarding their experiences with the system. For all of them, my role as youth support worker had been a positive experience.

Youth work in schools

There is no single answer to the problems confronting schools which are attempting to deal with barriers faced by young homeless people. It is a complex situation that requires a multi-faceted strategy. However, my previous youth support worker position provides one example of a service which delivered a positive response to young homeless people attending education.

The youth support worker was facilitated by a local youth service which targeted young people aged 15-20 who were considered 'at risk' of dropping out of the school system. The service saw the delivery of holistic support services to these 'at risk' young people as its core business and the facilitation of the Youth Support Programme was an important feature of its service. The youth support worker position had the ability to case manage 15 young people at one time, the duration of time with the programme dependent on the issues presented.

The target group of the youth support worker project consisted of young people accessing the local school's Fastrack program. This course focused on young people who were attempting to complete their year 10 studies after previously dropping out of the school system, or not completing all requirements when studying as a compulsory student. The Fastrack course allowed these individuals the opportunity to continue their studies in a post-compulsory senior campus environment. The Ministry of Justice promoted the initiative, which provided the Fastrack program with an outreach worker (youth support worker) who was facilitated and managed by the local youth service. The youth support officer was to provide a range of support and referral services to Fastrack students to assist them in overcoming personal barriers to education. The aim of the Youth Support Programme was to retain 'at risk' young people within the course by providing a client focus support programme based at the campus and providing a mobile/outreach service when required.

The youth support worker model

The Youth Support Programme provided young people access to counselling, mediation and support, and provided assistance with problems arising from substance abuse, legal issues, mental health problems, accommodation, Centrelink benefits, suicide prevention, sexual abuse and domestic violence. Some of these support services were offered by the youth support worker, whilst others were dealt with by referral agencies or in partnership with these referral agencies. The youth support officer also played an important role in supporting homeless students, focusing on barriers to maintaining educational involvement, the provision of a stable living environment and dealing with personal and emotional needs. These young people accessed the service through staff or self referral. The youth support worker maintained a mobile operation to assist in practical ways, to follow up young people or to facilitate the referral process beyond the school grounds. The youth support programme followed a case management model, which involved

intensive 'one-on-one' service provision. The programme maintained a client focus and addressed the most significant barriers preventing maintenance in the school system.

The youth support worker experience

Feelings of abandonment and rejection often surrounded the lives of the young people in this study. Their stories illustrate that youth workers can become a connection for young homeless people, for some, the only sense of stability during an otherwise alienating period. The youth work practice adopted working with those in this study was guided by the four key principles of engagement, providing holistic support, advocacy, referral/linkages and follow-up. It was through these five principles that I was able to assist homeless young people to overcome issues of trust and foster opportunities to establish positive and supportive relationship with other welfare professionals.

Engagement

Engaging young homeless people in positive, non-judgmental relationships is crucial for successful youth work. Engagement increases young people's sense of belonging and attachment to the community as well as reducing previous fears and mistrust of welfare professionals. All the young people in this study had failed to engage with previous welfare services. However, engagement takes time; it is a long-term process which is on-going.

As noted earlier, young homeless people are distrustful of adults and adult situations. Of those in this study, all liked the accessibility and informality of the youth work approach which they could engage with while attending school. As I began to 'hang out' and 'be around' within the school setting, young homeless people became familiar and

comfortable with my presence. A sustained presence seemed to be the key to overcoming the young people's initial distrust of youth work professionals. Over a period of time these young people increased their confidence in engaging with me in conversation and interaction. As a result, positive relationships were established, allowing me to assess their circumstances and help to identify and respond to their needs. Trust and relationship building was maintained through assisting the young people in accessing shelter and other needs. Assisting them outside the school grounds with practical support, such as helping with personal matters and access to enjoyable recreational activities was also an integral part of the engagement process.

The process of engagement was a significant strength of this youth work practice. As all the young people in this study came from abusive backgrounds, and had previous relationships based on rejection, and abuse, the youth support role allowed the homeless young people to establish meaningful and respectful relationships with adults. Once the barriers of distrust had been broken down and a positive relationship had been established, these young people became open to accessing other services and assistance which in the past they would not have considered.

On an interpersonal level, the young people all responded well to an approach that was non-judgmental, non-authoritarian, open and honest, which did not exclude them from support because of their challenging and, at times, self-defeating behaviours. For these homeless young people, my role as a youth worker provided many positive outcomes. When asked what they found most helpful with their experiences with me as their youth worker, responses included, "someone who listens", "someone who cares". As Sam commented:

for kids like me they need someone like yous' who listen and be there no matter where or what's going on...yous' don't push things on others...that's what built trust and that....there's no pressure you know...and yous' are there...where ever I end up...detention, street, or

hostels you come and visit and take me to visit mum...school don't do that and either do the hostels...but yeah you listen to me...that has been big.

Developing trust was an important part of the relationship that I established with Ryan. This enabled him to feel confident and comfortable in disclosing his problems. Ryan implied that this was the first time he had been able to open up to somebody about his concerns. In relation to other service providers Ryan said that he could not:

talk to them about my real problems...you know...like the things we've talked about...I keep that most to myself when I don't see you...you...you and mum are about the only adults I trust you know...yeah that's a big thing...trust...yeah.

Others also engaged strongly and developed positive attachments. Jasmine, who had a history of abusive, exploitive and violent relationships, appreciated the relationship that was developed. It provided her with an opportunity to be heard and understood. It gave her an ally to share the ups and downs of her life, particularly those parts which she could not confide to others. She described some of these positives of her involvement with me as her youth worker:

because you understood me...ok...you understood my problems. You were not judging me at all. And...yeah.. by just being there for me you know...A kind of bond has formed...you would talk to me as like kind almost like a friend...like...do you know what I mean?...not talk down to me or whatever.(Jasmine)

Becky's previous experiences in the system had led her to perceive most professionals as incapable of understanding her circumstances. As she explained,

in and out of hospital and they don't understand...they don't see what life you're living...I find it hard and all to explain things to these people who have never been there...how can you explain something to someone that doesn't understand...doesn't see the things you go through...and what happens away from the school and that.

Engaging with Becky away from the school grounds was a significant part of establishing a trusting relationship with her. This understanding resulted from regular home visits and support for her independent living.

Providing holistic support

This research indicates that the young homeless people responded to youth work practice which utilised a holistic approach when exploring issues and concerns with them. There is no point working with the young person's individual and personal issues without considering the social and economic factors which are affecting the wider context in which that person lives. For example, while a lack of secure and stable accommodation is the common theme to emerge in this study for each homeless student, their ability to remain in education depends on a number of other contributing factors.

Even when there was a roof over their heads while they attended school, these young people were still marginalised from formal and informal supportive networks, both structurally and individually. They were still socially isolated from their families and wider community, lacked adequate income which limited their access to material resources, experienced stigma and prejudices and suffered from emotional and physical health problems. To compound this, these young people often lacked the individual skills to access and negotiate their way through the wider welfare system.

Not surprisingly, these wider issues have a profound impact at all levels. For example, helping a depressed, suicidal, isolated homeless young woman in receipt of a low income to overcome her depression is not simply a matter of telling her to get out more as Becky was advised by her psychiatrist, or by just referring her to a job seeking service. Becky's case highlights the complex issues surrounding homeless young people's circumstances and the practical and social complexities youth workers not only need to acknowledge

and understand. Unfortunately for Becky, complications with her psychiatrist arose out of his lack of understanding about her wider circumstances as a homeless young person. Consequently, this affected her ability to establish a therapeutic relationship with her doctor. As she explains:

I guess it all comes down to money really...I just don't have much ...little things to others are huge for me...I mean at the moment...and little things like that just add up and up and just keep going till...yeah it gets too much...and then you get comments from psychiatrist in hospital telling me I need to get out more and not isolate myself...you know its not that easy...I got no money to go anywhere or do anything...and when if I do hang with normal kids from school...they have money and trendy clothes and all...I don't have any of that.

They don't care if you have a court case or if your depressed and that...all they care about is if you're studying or looking for work...and then you get people saying well get a job you know...I can't work at the moment...I don't have any energy and that..I get tired all the time and have headaches and that...yeah...yeah it's not as easy as people think.

The essence of this youth work practice offered a holistic approach to service delivery which was tailored to meet the young person's complex needs. This practice focused on the fact that although young people may present with similar needs, such as the need for accommodation they are all unique and should be given the opportunity to be supported as individuals (in wholeness). All the young people felt that they benefited from my role which addressed their personal, emotional and basic needs, as well as the structural issues of housing, education and employment. In my response to the young people's homelessness I attempted to address the core issues affecting each young person as well as each one's presenting problems. Thus, the young people's homelessness was addressed holistically, rather than each issue of housing, social isolation, trauma, substance abuse, school exclusion being addressed in isolation.

It is evident that homeless young people require practical and concrete assistance that continues throughout a period of time. Becky indicated the range of holistic support she received from my role as her youth worker.

yeah...you visit, take me for lunch and that...talk to me about everything give me advice...take me out on activities and camps and that...and um...pick me up after school for follow-up and just listen, yeah and...sorted my fees, got me a tutor for awhile in year 10...came to court, sorted out power problems...and...and dropped off food when I was sick and all...and...do little things that mean big you know?...like...take me out for my birthday...and...send X-mas cards and that...yeah it's huge.

Analysis of the narratives demonstrated that this youth work practice has been successful for other reasons. Reports indicate that this way of working with homeless young people requires a 'wrapping around' of the young person's needs. Young people who are homeless have a diverse range of service needs. The vast majority of non-government and government services tend to focus on one particular area of needs, for example, substance misuse, offending, and mental illness. Their single focus makes it almost impossible for the young person to access these programs if they need to address a range of issues simultaneously. Consequently, these young people are put on a 'merry go round' of referrals to lots of different services, each addressing the issues in isolation. At times, young people felt fragmented as they are seen not as individual, but rather a person with a presenting problem. Youth support work, on the other hand, retains a focus of 'wrapping around' the young person, and responding to a range of needs and issues simultaneously. To Becky, having a youth worker has been:

the best...every kid should have one of those...I have support for my housing...helping me get to the doctors for follow-up with my depression, helping me learn to cook, budget and gotten me furniture and let me know what's out there.

These young people need to have confidence and trust in the service and need time to build up trust before they are willing to take part in other programs, counseling or services. When working with young homeless people it is important to resist pushing them too quickly into other referrals, programs and counselling. Young people need to be given sufficient time to deal with their problems in their own way. At times, the young people were further alienated from youth services by the culture of the workers and the agency itself. Many related services have a clinical style or are structured around performance outcomes. Some of the young people commented that they were required to fit into the agency's beliefs and rules which often were extremely restrictive and limiting to those with complex needs. For example, young people were excluded from accommodation services due to their complex needs and inability to put themselves under the governance of stricter rules and regulations than they had ever been under in their lives. Others were unable to seek crisis shelter because these services do not accept young people with drug problems and other self harming behaviours. Those who had a history of aggression and violence were also excluded from accommodation.

As Sam stated:

but they don't help you with the other stuff...like drugs and that...if you have a problem like when I was stoned they just get rid of you...and if you have a fight cause your pissed of with someone...they kick you out for fighting cause they say its not allowed ...well what are they there for then...it's like its my fault...kids like me just don't last there...it's like school and that...cause you seem to have hassles and that.

Others reported feeling pressured to disclose personal issues too soon, being pressured to enroll in a training course or attend counselling for psychological problems. Consequently, some young people ceased all contact with these services altogether leading to further feelings of isolation and failure.

they are meant to help...but these adults make things worse so I don't rely on anyone like that anymore. (Sam)

For others like Jasmine, the ultimate protection comes from not disclosing her deepest secrets. Similarly, Ryan felt that he couldn't "talk to them about my real problems...you know...I keep that most to myself". My youth support role played an important part in working with the young person's needs and changing circumstances, rather than expecting the person to meet the agencies' expectations. Continuing support and acceptance for the young people regardless of their needs, lack of disclosure or challenging behaviours was paramount in establishing and maintaining a relationship with homeless young people.

Ongoing support has been an essential component in working with these young people. In order to address their needs regarding mental illness, trauma, relationship problems, housing and chronic physical illnesses, these young people require long term support and assistance. Many of them often found themselves on a referral mill because they cannot access or engage in the long-term service provision that they need. Like accommodation services, many young people have a long history of failing to establish relationships with services. They often 'outstay their time' with counsellors, employment officers, social workers and teachers. The critical ingredients working with this group of young people appears to be the ongoing relationship which perseveres and does not give up on them, regardless of their circumstances. This requiring a youth work approach where there are no exclusions or banning policies regarding changes in the young person's life. The young people respond well to a practice that is there for the 'long haul' which continues to provide support irrespective of their life choices. As a result, the relationship between the youth worker and the young person is not compromised in any way:

there are not many people like yous' in authority who are trustworthy you know...and...and open and honest and genuinely care about kids with major problems...yeah...and you guys hang in there with me...no matter what, drinking, suicide...whatever of how hard...yeah...it's like...um...yous' walk this dark tunnel with me. (Bocky)

Follow-up

All the young people in this study experienced a recurrence of problems. Therefore it is imperative have appropriate follow up of homeless young people One of the distinctive features of the young people's narratives was how the outreach youth work role was able to follow each person, maintaining an ongoing helping relationship between myself and the young person. Wherever the young person was staying, I continued to provide support no matter what was happening in their lives. This flexibility was a great strength in working with homeless young people. For example, normal contact and support would not have been able to continue for Becky while she received treatment for her depression in hospital. Adopting an outreach approach allowed me to track her down and visit her. I could then provide Becky access to advocacy and support regarding her discharge plan from hospital.

yeah...like when I ended up in hospital...you tracked me down and visited...have been like a connection you know...yeah...where ever I end up you just are there. (Becky)

Ryan was in desperate need for follow-up and ongoing support once he found out that he had been cut off from his income entitlements after failing to attend school. As reported in a previous chapter, he was suffering from a debilitating physical illness (Hepatitis C) which prevented him from attending school. At the time he had no way of contacting the appropriate authorities to ensure that his enrolment at school was maintained, or his absences excused. His lack of income meant Ryan was at risk of being evicted from his flat for arrears in payment. In addition, he had no money to pay for his urgent medical treatment. His vulnerability during this crisis period was startling. The stress regarding his illness could have life threatening complications and the emotional stress regarding his income was considerable. Unable to focus on health matters, Ryan spent any energy he had worrying about regaining his income entitlements so he could maintain stable accommodation. Having no energy, no money to buy food or access public transport, he

accommodation. Having no energy, no money to buy food or access public transport, he was at risk of having his utilities cut off due to arrears in payment. The bills were mounting up and the phone had been disconnected. This situation became overwhelming for Ryan, affecting his ability to recover.

It was my follow-up with a home visit that was a critical point in providing some support and assistance. I drove Ryan to Centrelink to enquire about his entitlements. It was there that he was informed that his payments had ceased due to non attendance at school. Regardless of his health circumstances and the need for money for medication and housing, Ryan was informed that he also had to repay the allowance received while he did not attend school. During this period I assisted Ryan to an appointment with his general practitioner and explained his circumstances to the doctor treating him. It was agreed that Ryan was medically unfit for school attendance over the previous months. This was documented by the doctor in a formal assessment letter for Centrelink. A meeting with a Centrelink service officer was arranged for that same afternoon. I drove Ryan back to Centrelink to provide the documentation verifying his personal and medical circumstances and I was able to advocate on his behalf and assist Centrelink to resolve the matter. Two days from the initial home visit, Ryan was transferred from a full-time student youth allowance to a special benefit as he was assessed as medically unfit, and this exempted him from pressure to attend school. Ryan's debt was erased and he was placed back on his full income entitlements.

Ryan's case highlights the fact that although homeless young people may have housing, their lifestyle factors can at times place them at risk of multiple problems that can perpetuate further homelessness. The complexities of the social welfare system can rarely be negotiated by a young person unaware of the requirements of the system, and support by a youth worker can make the difference between getting or not getting entitlements. It is evident that homeless young people need varying levels of follow-up and support during their independent living ensuring that their accommodation is maintained. Jasmine

spoke of the importance of ongoing support for homeless young people in their transition to independence.

a homeless person is going through the transition of getting a house of going to school...and getting her life together...ongoing support is so important it's so important...cause if that is not given...people slip back...you know...you need help at all levels.

Advocacy

You guys are like a friend with all these contacts...and you guys have the power...you know...people listen to you if not me...it's been fab' being able to ring you and you sort things out with me. (Becky)

The youth support worker role, as a whole, became a safety net for young people at risk of falling between the gaps of other services. I had the flexibility to act as a broker, advocate or lynchpin for young people moving between agencies. The youth support role focussed on addressing the barriers that homeless students faced in maintaining education, accessing safe and secure accommodation and receiving financial benefits. The youth support role included a significant amount of time advocating for the young person's basic entitlements, such as food, accommodation, or medical treatment on a day to day basis. The service maintained an ethos of teaching young people how to deal with life's challenging events by going through the process with them and gradually letting them do it for themselves with support. This approach ensured that young people gained a sense of empowerment and did not expect me to sort out their problems for them.

A client (young person) focus was a strong component of the service. This enabled me to advocate for homeless youth on their behalf. This advocacy demonstrated to the young people that their needs were of prime importance and that their well being was the focus

of my work, irrespective of my working relationship with teaching staff and other service providers. It was always made clear to all parties that my youth support worker position operated in the best interest of the young person (client) regardless of other people's agendas and obligations.

Referral/linkage

One way of offering homeless young people long-term support is to help refer and link them with other networks that can support them. The young people reported one of the advantages of accessing a youth worker was my ability to link them with activities and other people in the community. This included recreational/sporting clubs, counselling, and other youth services. Setting up these networks helps reduce the young person's isolation, and gives them a sense of connection within the community.

In order to offer a holistic approach to the young people, I developed partnerships and worked in collaboration with other local and youth focussed services. Working closely with other services and maintaining a strong network allowed me to be able to refer young people to the appropriate services which could then provide the relevant assistance. The young people were given as much information about these appropriate services as possible so they could make informed decisions regarding their options. Access to other support also enhanced their ability to deal effectively with future problems, thus, preventing crises in the future.

Part of the referral process was to ensure whether the referral has been successful. At times the young people experienced difficulties in maintaining contact with their referrals. These young people required support in re-establishing links with past services. Prior to school holidays I referred and linked Jasmine to a drug counsellor. This referral was to provide her with specialist drug support, to help her to develop coping strategies regarding her heroin misuse. At the time of the referral Jasmine had been abstinent from

heroin for two months. Jasmine felt she had "struck up a good thing" with this worker months prior to the break and felt confident about reaching her during this period. She felt this contact was important for her continued recovery after school finished for the year.

Support from Jasmine's drug counsellor was left behind when Jasmine found herself evicted from her accommodation over the holiday period. After the eviction, distance, lack of money for transport and embarrassment about relapsing became deterrents to maintenance of the relationship with her counsellor. Although Jasmine felt that she needed to see her counsellor, staying in touch became almost impossible. For months, Jasmine missed the support of and contact with this worker. It was obvious this loss was felt larger the day school resumed. She was depressed, suicidal and withdrawing from heroin. She walked into my office trying to hold back tears as she began to explain her situation. She talked about how her heroin use had escalated over the holidays when the eviction led her to have to board with 'old friends'. These old friends were all heroin users, quickly leading to a relapse in her recovery. Jasmine reported that her two month holiday was spent dealing with housing application rejections from real estates agents and the pressure to 'say no' to heroin. Efforts to stop using or even cut back prior to school resuming had become too much to bear, leaving her extremely physically ill.

After lengthy discussions about what had taken place and options that Jasmine felt that she needed, it was decided that Jasmine required intensive medical and emotional support as well as other appropriate accommodation. This day I played an important role in re-establishing contact for Jasmine with her counsellor. I made an appointment that afternoon for Jasmine to discuss the treatment options available to her. Providing transport and accompanying her was critical at this point. She was extremely ill and it was impossible for her to go on her own. I provided Jasmine transport by driving her to this appointment.

Efforts to reconnect Jasmine to her counsellor provided her with the positive outcomes that she needed. The same day Jasmine's counselor linked her to a medical specialist who provides assessment and treatment for heroin addiction. I transported Jasmine to the doctor, who assessed her level of risk. During this appointment the doctor in conjunction with Jasmine, identified her as having a severe substance abuse problem needing residential treatment. As a result the doctor referred her to a residential program. Late that afternoon I transported Jasmine to her admission into the residential program. This service allowed her the respite that she needed while providing the drug free environment essential for her recovery.

Jasmine's case perhaps best highlights the importance in helping homeless young people have access to effective interventions and support networks. In addition to receiving support regarding their lack of secure accommodation, there are specific areas of assistance to which they need referral and linkage. This has been an essential part of the youth work process if one is serious in helping homeless young people connect and stay connected to community networks.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights the importance for homeless young people to develop open, accepting and non-judgmental relationships with professionals. These young people are already displaced from their families, community, peers and other support services. The flexibility of youth work allows for the provision of support for the many social and personal issues that not only led to young people becoming homeless but may be still placing them at further risk.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HOMELESSNESS, SCHOOL AND 'HOME'

This study illustrates that young homeless people face a number of major barriers to succeeding at school. This chapter addresses these complex and challenging issues impacting on homeless young people's education. A discussion of emerging issues is covered under six broad headings: the context of young homeless people; the process of homelessness; education as a solution; educational disenchantment; barriers to schooling; and the importance of 'home' in homelessness.

The context of young homeless people

Consistent with the work of others, the findings revealed that the young people in this study had backgrounds of extremely traumatic events involving abuse and/or separation from family members. They all left home or were forced to leave home because of serious family problems, and were not safe living within these environments. For all of these young people, returning to their families was not an option. The factors contributing to their homelessness were similar to those identified in other studies (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003; Crane & Brannock, 1995; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Smith, 1995), and including family poverty, abuse (physical, sexual and or emotional), the death of a parent, parental substance abuse, emotional neglect and family violence. As others have found, this study also identified young people leaving state care (Maunder, Liddell & Green, 1999) and Indigenous young people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989) as those who are homeless.

Several structural factors were also identified in this study as adversely affecting young people's access to safe and secure housing. These structural issues were related to inadequate income and housing inequalities. The young people in this study felt that their low income contributed to their exclusion from the housing market. They found themselves dependent on welfare services and friends for their housing needs. Some could only afford to live in shared accommodation situations but this proved difficult for those who had issues with trusting other people. This study has shown that homeless young people require access to affordable, safe and secure accommodation, preferably close to the school, if they are to take full advantage of the opportunity to remain at school. These findings have been supported by other studies (Morris & Blaskett, 1992, Sykes, 1993; Tasker, 1995).

Age was also a barrier affecting the accommodation options for homeless young people. Many experienced some form of discrimination in the private rental market. The Western Australian State Homeless Taskforce (2001, p.13), established in 2001 to develop a homelessness strategy, found that homeless young people faced more significant barriers than most in accessing private rental accommodation. The Taskforce revealed that young people under 18 years of age were reported as being denied opportunities to access housing. This severely limits their ability to obtain private rental housing (p.28).

The process of youth homelessness

Chamberlain and Mackenzie have challenged traditional thinking of homelessness as a sudden crisis. They argue that "homelessness can be best understood as a process, rather than a event" (Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998, p.74). Their model of the "homeless career" reveals that young people can go through various stages before they develop a self-identity as a homeless person and find themselves chronically homeless. The youth "homeless career" model captures the process of homelessness through a sequence of

transitions from one stage to another. They identify three main stages which young people pass through: "tentative break", "permanent break" and "transition to chronicity".

This model, though valuable, does not capture the often chaotic circumstances experienced by young people in this study. For them homelessness was an ongoing search for safe, secure and adequate long-term accommodation. During this process all the young people went through various stages of homelessness after leaving their families. Their 'homeless situations' varied from living in private rental accommodation, moving from one friend's place to another friend's place; and staying in hostels, to residing in shared accommodation arrangements and sleeping it rough in public places such as cars, abandoned buildings, public toilet facilities; or the street.

For these young homeless people it was possible to merge rapidly from one category into another, for example, leaving the family unit ("tentative break") to becoming chronically homeless ("transition to chronicity") and accepting the homeless subculture as a way of life. Sam, Adie and Jasmine's cases illustrate that the process of homelessness was not (as Chamberlain & MacKenzie's 1998 homeless career model suggests) a clear cut process of moving slowly through progressively worse accommodation until they were living on the street. Rather, their stories revealed that their movement through homelessness was a mixed process as they experienced multiple pathways and stages during a single period.

Jasmine's case illustrates that not all young people go through a "tentative break" of accessing temporary accommodation, such as staying with friends and relatives before becoming entrenched in the homeless subculture. Instead, Jasmine found herself entrenched in a lifestyle of sleeping it rough in abandoned buildings and on the street - "primary homelessness" (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1992)- within two weeks of leaving home. During this time she found herself quickly drawn to other homeless young

people and became accustomed to engaging in high- risk behaviours to support her physical needs. This included being involved in petty theft, substance abuse and prostitution as part of her daily life. Within a month of leaving home she had identified herself with other homeless young people and had accepted the homeless subculture as a way of life. Jasmine's story illustrates how easy it is for some young people to adapt and become entrenched in the homeless subculture.

Adie's story encapsulates the struggle among the hidden homeless as they move through various stages of homelessness. Within a year she had lived in shared accommodation, supported housing, and a friend's panel van, and had moved from one friend's place to another. Her homelessness predominately included what Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1992) refer to as "secondary homelessness", describing those who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another. However, her story also included multi-layers of homelessness "primary, secondary and tertiary" (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1992), between places, having little access to long-term secure housing. Adie found it impossible to move out of homelessness. Her case illustrates that some young people experience repeated homelessness, not necessarily a single downward spiral. Adie's case highlights that young homeless people can move through different stages of homelessness at any given time.

Sam's story highlights that some young people can be entrenched in the homeless subculture yet still remain 'housed' and attached to the family unit. Sam preferred spending all of his time on the street, sleeping rough and socialising with other young homeless people. Although he occasionally returned to the family house he was heavily involved in stealing, drug taking and drug dealing as a means of survival. However, Sam did not consider himself chronically homeless since he had not made a "permanent break" from his family home. In Sam's case, his mother was in and out of psychiatric care and his father was in prison, leaving Sam to fend for himself. Although Sam considers himself 'housed', according to the Chamberlain and MacKenzie's model (1998) he would

be considered entrenched in the homeless subculture and, chronically homeless. Sam's story again highlights the wide variation in circumstances and time it takes young people to adapt to the subculture and lifestyle of homelessness.

Becky and Ryan both managed to 'exit' the homeless pathway and secured long-term independent accommodation within weeks of becoming homeless. However, their accommodation remained tenuous as they struggled to meet other needs. Ryan and Becky's stories highlight the fact that even when homeless young people secure accommodation, "housing alone is not the solution" (Sykes, 1993, p.134) in meeting other needs that place them at risk of further homelessness.

Becky and Ryan's vulnerability was startling. They both reported lacking independent living skills such as budgeting, shopping, cleaning, cooking and the personal support networks that are necessary in order to maintain housing. Becky's unresolved trauma and Ryan's poor health proved overwhelming and isolating experiences for each of them, contributing to a range of personal difficulties. It was evident that their housing did little to protect them during times of crisis and emotional turmoil, and these factors adversely affected their ability to maintain their tenancy. Becky and Ryan's stories reveal how difficult life experiences can trigger further episodes of homelessness. These findings demonstrate that homeless young people can enter anywhere within the 'homeless career' process at any time. This suggests that for many young homeless people pathways out of homelessness require more than accessing the practical needs of accommodation, but must also address the emotional needs for caring relationships and support.

Education as a solution

Consistent with other literature (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003; Crane & Brannock, 1995; Morris & Blaskett, 1992) this study reveals that school not only provides for homeless young people's educational needs but also for their social and personal needs. The most important factor connecting homeless young people to school was the meaningful relationships that were established with the teaching staff and other students. They saw the social aspects of attending school as of greater importance than academic aspects. A large part of this was related to their need for a sense of community attachment. This attachment provided a range of support, and a sense that they could belong somewhere. Other studies (Sykes, 1993, p.120) highlight that in the absence of family support and other caring adults, "school-based programs for young homeless people can contribute to a sense of attachment and connection for those who have become 'detached' from their families or from other safe and supportive networks".

This study also reveals that homeless young people identify with the school through the experiences with their teachers. If they like their teachers they like the school. For those in this study, the relationship with teachers and support staff was imperative to any school success and proved to be the first positive relationships that they had ever established with adults. Barriers were broken down between the young people and adults, generating many positive outcomes such as establishing accepting student and teacher relationships. Young people highlighted the personal characteristics of a good teacher, which included understanding and empathy towards their circumstances, friendly supportiveness and personal warmth. Some teaching staff were able to form consistent and stable relationships with the students and when appropriate connected them to resources and services which addressed their social, emotional and physical needs. The crucial importance of the teacher and student relationship is mentioned frequently in other studies, with emphasis on the need for positive and caring relationships (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2002; Corbitt, 1993; Sykes, 1993).

There were other important elements, in addition to the crucial issue of the teacher/student relationship. As the young people's lives were dominated by many unsettling and traumatic situations experienced outside the school, the school atmosphere was also an issue. The importance of a safe physical environment to which they could go was a recurring theme. For many, the school became the only place where they could feel safe and secure. This sense of safety was achieved by the familiarity with the classroom and school surroundings.

While the young people reported confusion and unpredictability permeating their lives, all of them identified school as a safer environment. For once, school had become the only form of stability and consistency for them, buffering them against the negative consequences of homelessness. School provided homeless young people a structured and predictable environment which counteracted the chaos and instability in their lives. The routine of school attendance helped ease many of their fears. With consistency, they could develop some control over their lives, learning that school is a predictable place, day after day. It is this consistent routine that other studies have identified as a positive element in the lives of homeless students (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Stronge & Reed-Victor, 1997; Sykes, 1993).

This study strongly reinforces the findings of Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2002, 1998) that if a young person is out of home, there is a greater likelihood that they will also drop out of school. The young people's experiences in this study also suggest that schools can play an important role in providing homeless young people with support during times of personal crisis. As one former school principal noted, "the solution (for homeless young people) does not lie in the curriculum but in providing access to practical support" (Corbitt, 1993, p.39).

Holistic approaches were essential in addressing the housing and other physical needs of homeless young people. Increasing young people's access to trained youth workers and other support staff helped reduced their risk of alienation, truancy and homelessness. A strong focus on the young person's social and personal needs proved to be a key component, allowing support staff to respond to problems when appropriate. The development of trust, care for basic needs and providing linkages to resources helped young people to become connected with the community. Other studies have shown that linkages to accommodation, income support, counselling and assistance with life skills are critical in supporting homeless students to remain in school (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002; Corbitt, 1993; Morris & Blaskett, 1992; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001; Sykes, 1993; Tasker, 1995).

Educational disenchantment

This study challenges the assumptions that young people experiencing homelessness do not want an education. Discussions with the young people suggest that homeless young people are interested in education but find the school structure a fundamental barrier to full participation. Schooling structures continue to generate negative schooling experiences for homeless young people, a finding supported by other studies of participation (Beresford, 1993; Goldman & La Castra, 2000; Gidley & Wildman, 1995; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001).

Homeless young people in this study found themselves at odds with the schooling system because of their homelessness and the ways in which they were forced to survive; including disruptive shelter, transience, poverty, and inadequate hygiene. These problems inhibited the young people's progress in school. Although they attended school their lifestyle was often in conflict with the routines and regulations of the school. Lateness to

class, long absenteeism due to sickness, smoking, inappropriate clothing, and a lack of schooling supplies often disrupted their education.

Some teachers had little information and understanding regarding the difficult life circumstances of homeless students, typically viewing their behaviour as unruly or deviant and not understanding why this might be so. Stronge (1993, p.448) notes that the nature and organisation characteristic of schools "pose formidable barriers to education" and places homeless young people "especially at risk of school failure if not outright school exclusion". In this study, feelings of alienation from school invariably exacerbated the young people's sense of 'not belonging', reducing their possibilities for learning. Other studies have reported the structure of schools as a barrier to homeless young people participating in education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Symons & Smith, 1995). According to Beresford (1993, p.16), school culture is "similar to middle class culture" and school often confers disproportionate advantages to young people from high socio-economic backgrounds.

Lack of awareness and understanding among peers and teachers led to inappropriate judgements and assumptions about the young people's personal circumstances. Poverty often resulted in embarrassment, humiliation and discrimination while attending school. Some felt ridiculed by teachers because they could not afford the appropriate school supplies. Others felt embarrassed because they did not have acceptable clothing or additional money to participate in extra-curricular activities. Some felt inadequate because they could not shower regularly, and were uncomfortable taking part in social activities. At times these young people responded to these situations by withdrawing and isolating themselves from teachers and students. Stronge (1992, p.124) asserts that, over time, "rather than face this kind of stigmatisation and humiliation, many homeless young people choose not to go to school or to remain as anonymous and detached as possible".

This study shows that schooling can be an alienating experience for homeless young people. When attending school the young people were often perceived as different to their peers and they saw themselves as different as well. Many felt that teachers and students viewed their homelessness as a form of personal inadequacy, rather than a series of circumstances beyond their control. Other research (Bogard, McConnell, Gerstel & Schwartz, 1999) suggest that homeless people are often blamed for their homelessness. The young people in this study perceived themselves as being stigmatised once their homeless circumstances were revealed. Some became reluctant to disclose their personal affairs to teaching staff and other students for fear of rejection, humiliation and ridicule. This impinged on their ability to develop positive friendships and supportive networks with other students, as they withdrew themselves from social relationships. This added to their feelings of isolation and displacement within school and the community in general. Other studies have identified similar findings (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Stronge, 1992). Seita and Brendtro (2002, p.14) commented on research (Hyman, 2001) which found that

a surprising number of students experience traumatic stress in school. Most commonly, this stress was from peer intimidation, but also involved humiliation from staff.

In their discussions about what they did not like about school some young people said that education was not relevant to their world outside school and their immediate practical needs. For many, the academic side of school was not as important as their day to day survival. These young people struggled with concentration and learning at school, as they were hungry, sick, or improperly clothed. Accessing food, safe shelter, clothing and money became their prime concern and they saw education as doing little to accommodate these immediate needs. Consequently, they all lost motivation with their education. As other studies have found (Harwood & Phelan, 1995) these homeless young people often blamed themselves for failing at school and had not considered the effects of their life circumstances as influential in their inability to succeed at school. Research

(Goldman & La Castra, 2000) note that homeless young people require a flexible and alternative approach to education, an approach not commonly found in schools.

Barriers to schooling

This study strongly suggests that homeless young people are not ready to be educated until their basic needs are met. All five young people faced difficult daily schedules and situations at the time of this study. For most of them the combination of trying to address their basic needs and attend school at the same time meant that their lives were extremely stressful.

Financial problems

Consistent with other studies (Goldman & La Castra, 1998; Northcott & Walls, 1997; Sykes, 1993) inadequate levels of income proved to be a major barrier in accessing education for these homeless young people. All five young people were affected by overwhelming poverty at the time of the study, and for most, this was a long-standing problem. They all described how difficult it was for them to cope due to financial constraints. For example, having no power at home, no hot water, going to school hungry, unable to afford school supplies, basic clothing and transportation, and the lack of affordable facilities to wash clothes, were all barriers to their schooling. Many of these young people's schoolwork suffered when they could not address these needs. In addition, trying to cope with these problems on a daily basis drastically reduced the time and energy that they could otherwise devote to their schooling.

A study of homeless students (Morris and Blaskett, 1992, pp.69-70) reported similar findings, indicating that schools are able to better to educate homeless young people if their basic needs are met. They noted that homeless students reported many difficulties in

gaining access to housing, food, health services and school requisites, due to inadequate levels of income. Even when homeless young people are able to make ends meet in terms of their day to day survival, there are no allowances for extra essential costs for schooling, such as transport, payment of school fees and supplies, and the purchase of books and materials (Morris & Blaskett, 1992, p.70). These demands on homeless young people force many to withdraw from school.

Health problems

All five young people in this study had long histories of health problems, but their access to health services was generally poor. The conditions of being homeless with inadequate shelter and food exposed them to a variety of health problems. Some reported great difficulties in looking after their physical health, as they suffered from untreated skin infections, repetitive illnesses such as the flu, sleeping problems, and respiratory conditions. Malnutrition was also reported as a common health problem, stemming from living in impoverished conditions and a lack of money. Other studies report a high incidence of health problems among young homeless people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Hillier *et al*, 1997; Rossiter *et al*, 2003; Sherman, 1992).

The young people were a highly transient group which made it difficult to access medical treatment. They were also reluctant to attend health services for many reasons, except in emergency situations. As others have found (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Owen, 1996; Sykes, 1993) these homeless young people have had past experiences of significant betrayals of trust by adults and professionals whom they might have expected to help them. It is not without good reason that they were reluctant to seek medical care as they feared further intimidation or victimisation within health services. It was evident that these young people needed access to specialist youth health services that were not intimidating or judgmental. For some, medical problems resulted in

long term absenteeism, a lack of energy for class work and attention difficulties. Constant absenteeism placed them further and further behind academically. These findings were similar to research conducted by Goldman and La Castra (1998).

Crime

Crime was a strategy for survival as homeless young people attempted to obtain food, clothing, shelter or money. Many felt that their welfare benefits were inadequate to live on and supplemented them by resorting to illegal activities. Several studies suggest that the need to survive forces many homeless young people into criminal activities (Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness, 2003; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; National Crime Prevention, 1999; Smith, 1995; Whitebeck *et al*, 2001)

All five young people had at some time been detained by police overnight at least once since becoming homeless. Police 'lock up' was a strategy used by some as a means for obtaining safety and shelter. During their schooling, three young people had spent some time in a juvenile detention facility. Similar to the findings of a study of homeless young people in Melbourne (Smith, 1995), these young people also noted an improvement in their education while being incarcerated. Among those who had been incarcerated, some had been detained many times. The most common reason for detention was for 'minor offences' such as shop lifting and trespassing. As Sykes (1993, p.115) notes:

being homeless, and all that may imply (being unsupported, living in poverty, being on the streets, involved in drug use, living in dangerous situations, stealing, squatting) increased the likelihood that young people will come to the notice of either legal or protective authorities.

Victimisation

As previous research has noted (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Whitebeck *et al*, 2001), all the young people found themselves detached from environments and networks that offered protection and safety and this exposed them to victimisation. Once leaving home, they had few options in meeting their basic needs. The process of learning to survive on their own placed many in danger. Survival strategies such as living on the streets, living unsupported, taking and dealing drugs, shop lifting and prostitution made them especially vulnerable. During their schooling they reported being exposed to a variety of violent situations. These included sexual exploitation, victimisation, physical assault and robbery. As has been noted in Owen (1996), some young people were abused and exploited within the very system set up to protect them. Whitebeck and colleagues (2001, 1999, 1990) note that although young people may view leaving home as a means of avoiding victimisation, the process exacerbates potential victimisation rather than alleviates it. Being homeless poses many significant dangers to young people outside school. As Alder (1991) has shown, fear of further trauma is an ongoing process for homeless young people. Under these stressful conditions, learning at school is extremely difficult, if not impossible (Stronge, 1992).

Emotional and psychological problems

Homeless young people experience a variety of mental health problems, which may precede, co-occur with, or result from homelessness. The young people reported low self esteem, depression, a sense of hopelessness, anxiety, guilt, aggression, post-traumatic stress, and thoughts of suicide. Other research has shown that young homeless people suffer from high rates of psychological distress, including depression (Smart *et al.*, 1993; Wincup, Buckland & Bayliss, 2003), anxiety (Cauce, 2000; Whitebeck & Hoyt, 1999) and self harming behaviour (Howard, 1991; Ryan *et al*, 2000). All five young people have experienced and are still recovering from considerable traumatic events. Exposure

to trauma can produce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Stewart, Steiman, Cauce, Cochran, Whitebeck & Hoyt, 2004; Whitebeck *et al*, 1999) which, in turn, further impinges on their difficulties in coping with education. In two separate American studies, one on homeless young people in Hollywood (Yates, MacKenzie, Pennebridge & Cohen, 1998) and another on homeless young people in Seattle (Hoyt, Tyler & Yoder, 2000) an identical rate of 38 per cent of respondents evidenced PTSD.

Both major life events and prolonged stress contributed to the young people's psychological problems. Depression resulting from the painful losses they had sustained in their lives was very common. Some remained in a state of unresolved grief, while others had been depressed for so long that they had come to accept their unhappiness as normal. For three of them, the psychological pain had reached breaking point and they attempted suicide as a way of ending their pain. High rates of attempted suicide and suicide ideation have been reported among other populations of homeless young people (Kamieniecki, 2001; Sibthorpe *et al*, 1995).

This study indicates that homelessness itself is an extremely traumatic event. The young people were victims of extraordinary stress exacerbating the risk of developing emotional problems. The loss of family, friends, support, safety, shelter and predictability undermined any sense of personal control. As homelessness continued, they became increasingly powerless over their circumstances, increasing their vulnerability to mental health problems. As others have suggested, homelessness itself is a risk factor for psychological trauma (Goodman *et al*, 1991) and contributes to the development of psychological problems among homeless young people (Whitebeck & Hoyt, 1999).

Similar to other findings (Kamieniecki, 2001; Sibthorpe *et al*, 1995; Wmcup *et al*, 2003) levels of alcohol and other drug use among these homeless young people was high. For some, alcohol and other drugs offered an avenue to relieve painful memories from the past. For others, engaging in drug taking was a coping mechanism for dealing with the

everyday trauma and survival of being homeless. Drug use became part of the young people's lifestyle fulfilling their need for belonging. As others have found (Baron, 1999; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Smith, 1995), drug use increased peer group acceptance, formed connections and social networks among other homeless peers, and eradicated feelings of loneliness and alienation.

Mental health problems proved to be an obstacle for homeless young people in accessing effective services. The young people were excluded from services because of psychological problems (aggression, self-harming behaviours and substance abuse), further displacing them from society and the resources set up to help them. Other findings consistently note that homeless young people are denied access to education, accommodation and treatment on the basis of mental health and other behavioural problems (Bisset, Campell & Goodall, 1999; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989). As the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, (1989) notes; "services are failing to help those young people who are clearly the most vulnerable and arguably the most needy" (p. 171) and, consequently "early death or suicide is the price that many homeless young people have to pay for their marginalisation" (p. 74).

Homeless subculture

The young homeless people commonly experienced alienation, social isolation, rejection and loneliness within their school and community. They felt they had no one to whom they could turn for support. As a result many sought a sense of belonging elsewhere. They reported needing to develop networks that would provide understanding, guidance and support. These networks were found in relationships with other homeless young people who were living on the streets. These new acquaintances were out of school, and

entrenched in the homeless sub culture, a lifestyle that rejected the values and norms of mainstream society. Their lives were dominated by survival strategies such as drug abuse, criminal activity and prostitution. For the young people in this study as with those elsewhere (Kipke, Unger, O'Connor, Palmer & LaFrance, 1997; Smith, 1995), other homeless peers became their primary source for information and socialisation regarding street life.

These young homeless people shared a common need for acceptance and support and found this with their peers. What adults viewed as a negative influence was extremely important for them. For young people with no family support or no connections within school and the community, these peer relationships became a primary source of protection, companionship and support when things got rough. They represented a type of connection and gave a sense of belonging. Previous studies (Hoyt, Whitebeck, Cauce & Tyler, 2001; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989; Whitebeck *et al*, 2001) suggest that those who become homeless quickly join other homeless young people as a means of guidance and support. As Hoyt and colleagues (2001, p.7) note, "for an isolated, lonely girl, coming from a home marked by violence and abuse, the attraction of the deviant group, which provides her with a sense of belonging, is enormous".

'Home' in homelessness

This study highlighted the fact that securing housing alone is not enough to solve a young person's homelessness. For all of them homelessness was not the absence of a 'house', but rather the absence of a 'home'. Homelessness became a search for belonging and a place to be at 'home'. Although accommodation was secured, housing did little to address the young people's separation from other people and relationships. Feelings of displacement and alienation outweighed any attributes that shelter and physical comfort

provided. The young people's accommodation tended to be isolated and unsupported and many did not see themselves as feeling 'at home'.

Other literature on homelessness has acknowledged 'home' as central to its definition. Of particular interest to this study, the construction of homelessness which is central to the work of Neil and Fopp (1992) considers the broad meaning of homelessness. They note that homelessness is not necessarily defined as a lack of accommodation focussing on 'home'lessness rather than 'house'lessness. They moved beyond the physical structure of a house and took into account the psychological and social notions of a home. Neil and Fopp (1992 pp. 4-5) identified a number of attributes of home. These are having security of tenure linked to a sense of belonging, security for each member of the household against internal and external threats, decent standards, affordability, social relations, accessibility, compatibility and appropriateness. Other attributes of a home also allow for expression of identity and opportunities for privacy and autonomy and control over one's environment.

For the young people in this study, housing alone did little in addressing their need to belong. Some left their permanent accommodation and moved back into transient accommodation in order to maintain connections and relationships with others. Places such as the street became places of significance to some young people, and came to be equated with a place to call 'home'. For these young people, 'home' was a place that provided a sense of belonging, not just a place to stay.

Other studies of homeless young people (Beed, 1991, cited by Sykes, 1993 p.103) note the importance of social relationships in creating a home. In Beed's (1991) study, homeless young people defined the home as places where they are understood and respected, have freedom to make their own decisions about social relationships, where there are attachments to caring people, where there is openness and honesty and basic physical needs are met. According to Beed (1991) home is not a physical structure, but an

attachment to understanding and caring relationships. If this is the case, it is not surprising that some young people feel more 'at home' living on the streets or in other places that lack permanent shelter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CONCLUSION: LEARNING TO BELONG

The initial concern for this thesis was to explore the reasons young homeless people are unable to complete their education once they become involved in the cycle of homelessness. This investigation established that the primary issue of concern for homeless young people is not schooling: learning the skills of survival is most important. This thesis narrates the stories of five homeless young people and their struggles to remain in school. Contrary to popular belief, young homeless people consider education an important ingredient for a successful future. However, as this study has shown, the harsh realities of physical survival, combined with psychological and emotional turmoil, significantly complicate the pursuit of a successful education.

Using a phenomenological approach which explored homelessness through the eyes of these young people, I ascertained that schooling was not the priority for this group. Their experiences as victims of neglect and abuse and the subsequent realities of having to provide shelter, food, clothing, money and protection for themselves have significantly altered their priorities. The struggle to provide these basic needs compromised any time and energy available for schooling and other long-term pursuits. It is evident that the immediate welfare needs of homeless young people need to be addressed before concerns such as education become a priority.

Whilst the struggle for physical survival is an obvious inhibitor to education, there are other issues that challenge the young homeless person. Grappling with the sense of what being 'homeless' means is an emotional and psychological issue these young people constantly have to address. Although secure accommodation may be available to them at times, there is always a sense of homelessness. To these young people having shelter does not automatically constitute having a home. Ideas of 'home' include protection and attachments to caring and supportive relationships. The psychological implications of

being homeless are a heavy burden on these young people. Not only must they come to terms with the circumstances that led them to become homeless but also the consequences of what being homeless means so far as a sense of belonging is concerned. For the young people in this study homelessness is about striving to belong somewhere.

The need to develop and maintain relationships that are caring and trusting is an important element in their search for stability and security. These homeless young people want a sense of belonging and acceptance as much as they want the physical elements of survival. They have been rejected from their families and excluded from the community in one way or another. The stigma of being homeless seriously affects their relationships with school peers, and consequently they seek refuge with other marginalised young people to compensate for failure in relationships everywhere else. These peers are already at odds with the norms and values of mainstream society and as such a tentative sense of belonging already exists within this group.

Having experienced past abuse and the failure of family relationships, young homeless people experience feelings of alienation and displacement. As a result of their traumatic circumstances some of them are extremely hurt, angry, distrusting and vulnerable. Past experiences often prove that they cannot rely on anyone, particularly adults. Consequently, many of them have difficulties developing positive relationships with school staff, other adults and their peers, which in turn compounds their feelings of isolation. It is essential that these young people develop positive relationships with professionals in order for them to receive appropriate guidance and assistance.

Many young homeless people's experiences have led them to perceive adults as authoritarian figures, incapable of understanding their needs and problems. Excellent resources and programs are ineffective unless young people are able to establish respecting, positive relationships with professionals and teaching staff. Young people need to work at their own pace and not be subjected to the pace and agenda of

bureaucrats and other professionals. It is essential to view the young person as the client, whose requirements need to be addressed with a flexible, non-judgmental and non-authoritarian approach. This study attests that positive relationships are the essential ingredient in assisting these young people.

Once the initial physical and emotional requirements of homeless young people are met and an atmosphere of acceptance and support has been established for them, it is possible to assist them with their education. It is important that homeless young people are retained in school. By improving their skills and increasing the level of their education, they will subsequently gain the knowledge and skills which will enable them access to more opportunities in the future. Schools are able to assist homeless students by providing the complex, specialised support they need to stay in school.

Crucially, schools offer homeless students a sense of attachment to the community. This sense of belonging facilitates young people to resume some control over their lives by giving them the confidence to begin to address their unique range of difficulties. Schools can help to strengthen homeless young people's attachments and support networks within their local community. By providing physical and emotional support, homeless students also acquire confidence. Schools cannot provide all of the support required by homeless students, however community and support services, combined with school services, need to collaborate to provide these homeless young people with the resources and skills they need to survive physically, emotionally and educationally.

Whilst this study has demonstrated that the first priority of homeless young people is to address their physical needs for survival such as shelter and food, education is important to these young people. Neither the actual education itself, nor the sense of belonging that constitutes belonging to a school community, are the primary associations that homeless students make with education. Education represents something else entirely for them. It represents the future. Dreams for the future. The loss of schooling is devastating to these

young people, as it is the loss of hope. This loss of hope is greater and more profound than the loss of shelter. Fostering hope and increasing self esteem are paramount issues for support services for these young people. The cost of implementing programs to assist homeless young people in their struggle for survival as well as the maintenance of education is always a consideration. However, the cost to society and to these young people as individuals is even greater, if they do not receive the physical, emotional, psychological and educational support they need in order to survive and succeed at life, not just at school.

The issues facing homeless young people are threefold. The scars of the past need to be healed, the requirements of the present addressed, and hope for the future encouraged. The past, present and future situations of homeless young people are all important factors when considering the best ways of addressing their needs. Positive schooling experiences stabilises young people, gives them a sense of belonging, and hope for the future.

FINAL WORDS

Yeah...don't know where I'll be...maybe will go back (to school) next year...I just wanna' see how mum goes first when she gets out of hospital...yeah. (Sam)

you know...it's so...so important you know...it cannot be stressed enough...you need to start and address the issue from the bottom, from every step of the way...you know...and it's not being done you know...it doesn't seem to be a priority to the community as a whole really because we are so much happier spending money on luxuries...on...things...on...(pause)...what is really you know...worthwhile...than saving human lives...you know...yep...yep...it's so silly...if I was in government you know...all these beautiful kids that have gone...that are still struggling with addictions...if they'd been...I know of so many friends that have tried to go into rehab and have been turned away...why don't we put money into instead of locking them up but back into the community where they can be helped....it's no credit to the government at all...you know what I mean?...yeah...I think that they (the Government) should be ashamed of themselves. (Jasmine)

What now? ...um...who knows...I certainly don't...(pause)...dunno. (Adie)

I just wanna' hang out with me mum and stay out of trouble till court...I'm on probation and all and got to go for others (charges)...and yeah...with 18 coming up I don't wanna' go to Canningvale (adult maximum prison)...you know...na'...I'd rather be dead...so yeah need to get on disability or sickness and stay clean...that's me life focus for now...and yeah sort out some other accommodation of me own so I don't get dragged into other shit and end up inside again...yeah...it's a circle isn't it?...I just know...or...hope...that...this is gonna be worth it...you know...things one day will change...hey? (Ryan)

I just hope that at some stage people will understand you know...um...what it is really like...that's why I think this is wicked...you know...maybe those people who make those big decisions will read something like this and realise that a homeless kid like me does really try and do good and all you know...that's all...I think people don't understand...and...and that...we're all not bad people...We just have hard times that make me stick out...and yeah...um...not belong and all...yeah...but...um...yeah...and...they might realise you know...these people that...that...pretend and all...they don't care...they make things worse and all...you know...but to others they wouldn't know that...they just leave kids like me...um...yeah...on our own and all. (Becky)

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APPENDIX A

Consent Form

Researcher: Simone Walls

Phone: [REDACTED]

Supervisor : Associate Professor Sherry Sagers

Phone: 9400 5074

To be read to each participant.

Before we begin the interview I need to give you some information about my research, and get your agreement to go ahead.

- I am conducting this research as part of my university study program.
- You are not required to give any name or identifying details in order to take part in this study.
- I will be asking you questions regarding your past experiences of being a homeless student.
- You may refuse to answer any questions.
- The interview will be audio-taped. If you wish, the tape can be stopped at any time, or certain comments can be edited from the tape at your request. The interviews will then be transcribed. The tapes and transcriptions will be anonymously coded to ensure that no individual is identified. All tapes and transcriptions will be kept in a safe place, and only I will have access to them.
- Interviews may take place on two separate occasions over a three month period.
- While I will do everything I can to maintain confidentiality. The information may be published, but no individual will be identified.
- You will receive a sum of \$20 for each interview.
- You may withdraw consent at any time and stop the interview, without penalty.
- Do you have any questions?

1. I have read this to the participant

Researchers signature: _____

2. I have been read the above information and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to proceed with the interview.

Participants signature: _____

APPENDIX B-INTERVIEW ONE

PROMPT QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me about how you came to be enrolled at school?
2. How would you describe homelessness to someone who knows very little about it?
3. Can you tell me how you feel about being a homeless student?
4. If you were making a movie to show people what it is really like being a homeless student, what would you show in your movie?
What would people need to see to understand what it was really like for you?
5. How does being homeless affect your day-to-day living?
6. Can you describe one of your toughest times being a homeless student?
7. Tell me about a time or situation in which you experienced a feeling of leaving school?
8. If you could wave a magic wand to change things so things would have been better, can you describe what would be different?