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The second national census *of* HOMELESS

Homelessness is best understood as a "process", rather than an "event". In the past, we have referred to the "homeless career" to draw attention to the fact that young people pass through various stages before they form a self-identity as a homeless person (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1998). The stages are not inevitable, but depend on contingencies in young people's lives. Just as young people can become homeless, they can also return to secure accommodation.

Most teenagers who experience homelessness are still at school at the time of their first episode of homelessness (O'Connor 1989; Crane & Brannock 1996). The first national census of homeless school students (May 1994) identified 11,000 homeless secondary students in census week, and estimated that 25,000 to 30,000 students experience a period of homelessness each year (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 1995).

Schools are important sites for early intervention because it is easier to help homeless teenagers while they are still at school and located in their local community (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 1995; Prime Ministerial Youth Homelessness Taskforce 1996; Crane & Brannock 1996; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1998; Queensland Department of Families, Youth and Community Care 1999). It is only when teenagers drop out of school that they are likely to become deeply involved in the homeless subculture, and, at this stage, some may begin the transition to chronic homelessness.

Because homelessness is a process, it is often difficult to know when homelessness "begins" and "ends". Young people are usually "at risk" prior to becoming homeless. In practical terms, it is important to try to prevent family breakdown by providing these teenagers (and their families) with assistance.

The end of the "career" can also be difficult to specify. It is common for service providers to assist teenagers who are attempting to live independently after a period of homelessness. In many cases, the young person's hold on accommodation is tenuous because she or he is either unemployed or still at school. In one sense they remain "at risk". Service providers usually prefer broad definitions of homelessness that take into account the realities they deal with. We call these "service delivery definitions".

Definition of homelessness

Towards the end of the 1990s there was an emerging consensus in

In August 2001, **David MacKenzie** and **Chris Chamberlain** conducted the second national census of homeless school students in Australia. In this paper they present the main findings of the census and outline their core policy argument that schools are important sites for early intervention because they are able to provide young people with assistance before they become deeply involved in the homeless subculture. The authors conclude their article with a discussion of early intervention policy developments since 1995.

SCHOOL STUDENTS

Australia about the utility of the "cultural definition of homelessness" (Burke 1993; House of Representatives 1995; Charman et al. 1997; Driscoll & Wood 1998; Chamberlain 1999). The Australian Bureau of Statistics adopted this definition for enumerating the homeless population at the 1996 census (Northwood 1997). In this paper, we use a service delivery definition based on the cultural definition.

The cultural definition identifies three types of homelessness – primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary homelessness includes all people without conventional shelter, such as people living on the streets, sleeping in parks or squatting in derelict buildings.

Secondary homelessness includes people who are staying in any form of temporary accommodation (friends, relatives, youth refuges etc.) with no other secure housing options elsewhere. If young people remain homeless for any significant period of time, they usually move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another, some spending occasional nights on the streets.

Tertiary homelessness refers to the occupants of single rooms in private boarding houses who live there on a long-term basis (three months or more). There are few teenagers in the tertiary population.

For the purposes of the national census of homeless school students, young people were defined as homeless using the core categories in the cultural definition (primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness). However, we followed the definitional protocol established at the first census. Schools were also asked to include young people in their return "if they have been homeless within the last three months and are in need of continuing support". This takes into account the fact that school welfare staff often work with these young people as they attempt to return to secure accommodation. It is a "service delivery" definition based on the cultural definition.

Table 1. Response rate for all States and Territories, Australia

NSW	*Vic*	*Qld*	*SA*	*WA*	*Tas*	*ACT*	*NT*	*Australia*
100%	100%	99%	99%	99%	100%	100%	100%	99%

Methodology

The national census included all state and Catholic secondary schools (N=1,937), but excluded the small sector of other private schools. Permission was sought through the various departments of education and then directly from the schools.

On 30 July 2001 we sent a letter to all principals, using Telstra's Faxstream service. It gave them details about the proposed research and asked for their cooperation. Schools were told that they would receive two forms. One asked for the school's best estimate of the number of homeless students in the school and some brief details about these young people. The second provided space for two case studies to inform a deeper understanding of what is happening to homeless students. Each principal was asked to nominate one person to oversee the data collection in his or her school. It was suggested that the school counsellor or student welfare coordinator was probably the most suitable person.

The census used a method based on collating "local knowledge". This is a diverse body of everyday knowledge that emerges naturally in communities such as schools. In most schools, at least a few people will know if a young person is homeless. The young person may tell a friend or approach a welfare coordinator for help. It is also common for other students to convey this information to staff. The census asked one person in each school to bring this disparate knowledge together into a quantified estimate of the number of homeless students.

On 6 August, we faxed the census forms to all schools asking them to return them one week later. We also carried out follow-up interviews by telephone with about 500 schools. Table 1 shows that 99% of schools completed a census return (1,930 schools out of 1,937). Schools also returned 1,220 case histories. In this paper, we use a small amount of qualitative data to illustrate various points. We have changed some personal details to protect people's privacy, and all names are fictitious. Names were not recorded on the case histories.

Main findings

It was common for a staff member to have gone around the school consulting key people (pastoral care teachers, year coordinators, the school counsellor, staff in the school office, and so on). In other schools, the issue was discussed at a staff meeting, and, in some schools, the deputy principal and the welfare coordinator sat down and made a list of all the cases they were aware of.

Nonetheless, some schools were concerned that there were homeless students they did not know about. One-third of secondary schools have an enrolment of less than 400. In these "small schools", the welfare teacher is likely to know if a student becomes homeless. Another one-third have an enrolment of between 400 and 799 ("medium schools"). The final one-third have an enrolment of 800 or more ("large schools"). The risk of undercounting is greater in these schools.

In 1994, we made a uniform adjustment of between 5% and 10% for undercounting. This time we made an adjustment of 10% for large schools, 5% for medium schools and no adjustment for small schools. This takes into account the fact that the risk of undercounting is greater in large schools. The adjustment is not uniform across the country because there are more large schools in some States.

Table 2 presents four sets of figures. First, there is the raw data from the census assuming 100% response rate. It shows that there were 11,461 homeless students in census week.

Second, there is the percentage adjustment for undercounting following the procedures outlined. It varies between the States, but the overall adjustment is 6.7%.

Third, Table 2 shows the final figures from the census corrected for undercounting. There were about 12,230 homeless school students in census week. The numbers are similar in New South Wales (3,060), Victoria (2,890) and Queensland (3,070). There were 1,020 homeless students in South Australia, 830 in Western Australia, 570 in Tasmania, 320 in the ACT and 460 in the Northern Territory.

Finally, the table shows the rate of homelessness per 1,000 of the school population. This allows a comparison between States and Territories with different population sizes:

- The rate is highest in the Northern Territory where there were 37 cases

Table 2. Number of homeless secondary students and rate of homelessness per 1,000 of the school population, by State and Territory

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT	Australia
No. of homeless (raw data)	2,862	2,698	2,870	961	783	537	301	449	11,461
Adjustment for undercount (%)	7.0	7.0	7.1	5.9	5.9	6.9	7.6	2.4	6.7
No. of homeless (final figures)	3,063	2,886	3,073	1,018	829	574	324	460	12,227
Rate per 1,000 of the school population	7	10	15	11	7	14	14	37	10

per 1,000 of the school population.

- The rate is lowest in New South Wales and Western Australia where there were seven cases per 1,000 of the school population.
- The rate is higher in Queensland (15 per 1,000), the ACT (14 per 1,000) and Tasmania (14 per 1,000) – double the rate in New South Wales and Western Australia.
- In Victoria and South Australia, the rate is somewhere in between (10 and 11 cases per 1,000 respectively).

The rate of student homelessness varies by State. When a young person becomes homeless there are four possible contingencies. They may remain homeless and still attend school. Some may return home. Others will be assisted to obtain independent accommodation and continue their education as independent students. Another group drop out of school and become homeless and unemployed. The rate of student homelessness is a point-in-time measure reflecting these underlying processes. The "interpretive dilemma" is that a higher rate of student homelessness may indicate more homeless students remaining at school, and a low rate of student homelessness may indicate greater drop out from school. This is discussed in more detail in Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2002, ch.4).

Northern Territory

The higher rate of homelessness in the Northern Territory may be explained, in part, by a subtle change in how we operationalised the definition of homelessness. In the first census (1994), many schools in remote Indigenous communities contacted us to discuss the definition. Teachers said it was common for young people to stay with members of their extended family, but this was not considered "homelessness". However, a minority reported that all their students were "homeless", recording them as "moving around". In 1994, we made a technical decision to record zero returns for all remote Indigenous communities.

In the 2001 census, we had telephone conversations with teachers in nearly all remote schools. We found that teachers distinguished between "normal" moving around and young people who were not receiving adequate care. Some Indigenous teenagers frequently stay with members of their extended families under widely accepted obligations that operate within Aboriginal communities. Their whereabouts are "known" and they are "supervised". No-one in their communities regards them as "homeless".

However, there were other young people moving around the community who were "fending for themselves" and not receiving adequate care. These students were described as drifting between households, with little supervision and irregular school attendance. Teachers identified them as "homeless".

Table 3 shows that 56% of homeless students in the Northern Territory were in remote communities. If they are removed from the State total, then the rate of homelessness in the Northern Territory is 16 per 1,000, about the same as in Queensland (15 per 1,000), Tasmania and the ACT (14 per 1,000).

Current accommodation

Table 4 shows that about one-third of the young people in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT were classified as "recently homeless" and approximately two-thirds were classified as "currently homeless". In Western Australia and South Australia, about three-quarters of the students were reported as "currently homeless" and one-quarter were "recently homeless". In the Northern Territory nearly all were currently homeless.

Table 5 shows that 69% of those who had been homeless recently were either boarding with other households or attempting to maintain private rental accommodation (shared households). Fourteen per cent had "returned home", but schools were concerned that arrangements would

Table 3. Percentage of homeless students who were in remote, Indigenous communities, by State and Territory

NSW	*Vic*	*Qld*	*SA*	*WA*	*Tas*	*ACT*	*NT*	*Australia*
1%	0%	5%	2%	13%	0%	0%	56%	4%

Table 4. Number of currently homeless and recently homeless students, by State and Territory (percentages)

	NSW	*Vic*	*Qld*	*SA*	*WA*	*Tas*	*ACT*	*NT*	*Australia*
Currently homeless	69	66	66	76	77	67	65	94	69
Recently homeless	31	34	34	24	23	33	35	6	31
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

breakdown. Another 14% were in foster care arrangements.

Overall, 70% of the students were "currently homeless". Gwen, 15, was born in Vietnam. She was brought up by grandparents in the northern suburbs of Adelaide:

> *Grandparents say she can't have an Australian boyfriend and they don't like her going out in mixed groups … student suffers from depression … left home three weeks ago … has been staying at different friends' places.*

Richie, 16, attends a state high school in southern Brisbane. He has been homeless for 10 weeks:

> *… moved to Brisbane to be with his father. The relationship has been volatile … About two and a half months ago, his father hit him with a cricket bat, fracturing his nose … Richie hasn't been back.*

Richie stays at various friends' places. According to the school he "moves all the time".

Table 6 shows that 80% of currently homeless students were staying temporarily with other households or moving around. Another 16% were in Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) accommodation, such as refuges, hostels, transitional housing or community placements. Two per cent were "on the streets".

Table 5. Current accommodation (census week) of students who had been homeless recently, by State and Territory (percentages)

	NSW	*Vic*	*Qld*	*SA*	*WA*	*Tas*	*ACT*	*NT*	*Australia*
Rent flat or house, board with friends	69	67	70	65	76	80	74	65	69
Foster parents	13	13	18	17	11	5	7	12	14
Back with parents	15	18	9	14	11	10	18	23	14
Other	3	2	3	4	2	5	1	0	3
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 6. Current accommodation (census week) of homeless students, by State and Territory (percentages)

	NSW	*Vic*	*Qld*	*SA*	*WA*	*Tas*	*ACT*	*NT*	*Australia*
Secondary									
Friends, relatives, moving around, other temporary	80	75	87	87	90	81	70	91	82
Refuge, hostel, transitional housing	18	24	11	12	8	14	29	9	16
Primary									
Street, squat, car, tent	2	1	2	1	2	5	1	*	2
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Less than 0.5%

Age and gender

The first census of homeless school students found that 56% of the students were young women and 44% were young men. The 2001 census found the gender composition of the population has remained the same. There are minor differences between the States, but overall 45% of students were male and 55% were female.

Most students who experience homelessness are young when they have their first episode of homelessness, and some move in and out of home a number of times before making a "permanent break". Overall, one-quarter (23%) of the homeless students were 14 or younger, 44% were 15 or 16, and one-third (31%) were 17 to 18.

State and Catholic schools

About three-quarters (77%) of all secondary schools across Australia are in the state system and nearly one-quarter (23%) are Catholic. Table 7 shows 93% of homeless teenagers are in the state system. There were 11,370 homeless students in state schools and 860 homeless teenagers in the Catholic system.

Nonetheless, 41% of Catholic schools reported homeless students in census week, and another 14% reported cases in the preceding 12 months. However, the numbers are usually small in Catholic schools. In contrast, 69% of state schools reported homeless students in census week and another 10% knew of cases in the preceding 12 months. The numbers are relatively low in most state schools – 15% reported 10 or more cases – but the problem of homelessness is predominantly in the state system.

Early intervention

The findings from the second national census of homeless school students confirm that schools are sites for early

Table 7. Number of homeless students in state and Catholic schools, by State and Territory (percentages)

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT	Australia
State	92	94	94	92	94	96	93	85	93
Catholic	8	6	6	8	6	4	7	15	7
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

intervention where it is possible to provide young people with assistance at the earliest stages of the "homeless career". If the underlying family problems are not resolved, many teenagers will begin to move in and out of home. This is a critical time for early intervention when it is possible to facilitate family reconciliation.

Schools also have an important role to play because they can support young people who cannot return home and who want to make the transition to independent living. Young people who experience an emotional roller-coaster ride as they come to terms with family breakdown need ongoing counselling. Others need practical assistance with income, accommodation and budgeting. This is "early intervention" in a broader sense of the term.

Policy development since 1995

There has been an explicit move in youth policy since 1995 towards building an early intervention capacity in schools and local communities. The House of Representatives *Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness* (1995) stated, "early intervention is probably the one area of public policy which could deliver the greatest returns in terms of increased social cohesion through the reduction in the levels of family breakdown and long-term welfare dependency". It gave particular attention to early intervention strategies in schools.

One of the first initiatives of the new Liberal-National Party Government in 1996 concerned youth homelessness, with an expressed focus on "early intervention" (Prime Ministerial Youth Homelessness Taskforce 1996). A Prime Ministerial Taskforce was set up to oversee a large pilot program. Twenty-six pilot projects were funded at a cost of $8 million over two years. This led to the establishment of the Reconnect Program.

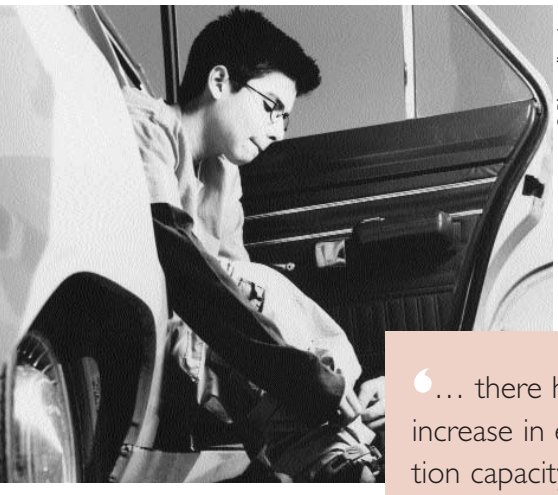
Reconnect provides support for homeless teenagers and young people "at risk". The target was 100 services across Australia, and there was recurrent funding of $22 million for four years. In 2002, there are 93 services around Australia with about 190 early intervention workers. In the first 18 months of Reconnect, just over 6,000 young people were assisted and about three-quarters (77%) of these cases had been finalised (Reconnect Data Report 2001). The program has about a 75% success rate. There seems to be a capacity for this program to increase its client base significantly as the full complement of services become operational.

The Prime Minister's Youth Homeless Taskforce also recommended a further inquiry into the transition from school to work and/or further training. This inquiry is known as the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce and it has tabled its recommendations (Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001). The major recommendations on "transition support" have yet to be implemented.

There are several other important developments that have contributed to the national early intervention capacity. The Full Service Schools program was a one-off initiative of $22m that accompanied the implementation of the Youth Allowance. The funds went to 65 clusters, with most projects involving several schools. This program funded a wide range of support activities, usually supporting young people at risk. The evaluation of this program concluded that early intervention had become widely embedded in many schools and communities (Strategic Partners in association with the RMIT Centre for Youth Affairs Research and Development 2001).

Some States have also made a significant investment in early intervention. In Victoria, a comprehensive student support policy is contained in the *Framework for Student Support in Victorian Government Schools* (Victorian Department of Education 1998). This policy framework is probably the most comprehensive in Australia. Some $34m is allocated to schools for 300 student welfare coordinators, who are trained teachers who take on welfare responsibilities. Every secondary school has a student welfare coordinator, and larger schools have more than one, or several people on different campuses. In addition, $43m is allocated for social workers, guidance officers and psychologists. Following the Victorian Suicide Prevention Taskforce report on suicide prevention (Victorian Suicide Prevention Taskforce 1997), the Victorian Government increased spending for school counsellors by $8m a year and initiated the School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) program. This program deployed 41 community workers to lead the development of improved coordination between schools and community agencies.

In New South Wales, school counsellors are trained psychologists. In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> '... there has been an increase in early intervention capacity but how well the various initiatives cohere on the ground is unknown at this point.'

2002, there are 790 school-based counsellors and guidance officers. Some counsellors work across two or three schools. There are also a number of schools that have part-time counsellors. In district offices, there are 84 home–school liaison officers, including 12 working with Aboriginal students. There are also 300 district support teachers who deal with behavioural issues and attendance. Every district (46) has a student welfare consultant who coordinates support and advises schools.

In Queensland, there are 165 guidance officers located in secondary schools. These people are school based and every medium to large secondary school has at least one guidance officer. In July 1997, a Youth Support Coordinator Initiative was established as a three-year pilot program to address issues of student homelessness and early school leaving. A budget of $1.9m was approved in 1996–97 and allocated to 13 services around the State with a target of 35 participating schools (Queensland Department of Families, Youth and Community Care 1999). The Youth Support Coordinators Initiative has subsequently been funded as an ongoing program.

In Tasmania, there has been a lot of activity in recent years to strengthen the welfare infrastructure in schools, especially in the eight senior secondary colleges. Tasmania has social workers and guidance officers located in schools but they are managed through district offices. There are 70 such positions, and districts will often find ways to achieve a more generous provision than warranted under the official formula. Senior colleges organise their own welfare support, and typically this is a small team of about three counsellors and support workers in each senior college.

South Australia's system for student support is strongly school based. There are 186.5 equivalent full-time student welfare coordinators in schools across the State and 135 generic welfare officers located in regional and district offices. There are two alternative schools for at-risk students, and 32 personnel supporting alternative pathways for students under 15 years of age who are having difficulty in mainstream schools.

Western Australia has 166 welfare officers, but they are located in district offices following a restructure in 1998, which moved these staff from school-based locations. They move between different schools, as needed. All schools are responsible for deciding the profile of student support staff. A senior high school with 500 or more students will typically have a school nurse who spends 0.3 of her time in feeder primary schools; a psychologist; a school-based police officer; and, sometimes, a part-time chaplain. Smaller schools have fewer resources.

The ACT has high schools and senior colleges. High schools typically have at least one full-time counsellor, while senior colleges have a welfare team. In the ACT, secondary schools are well resourced – probably better than in any other State.

Schools in the Northern Territory are well provided with welfare support in Darwin and other regional centres. There is a counselling position in every secondary school, a school nurse, a home–liaison officer, and, in many cases, a community-based police officer. However, the many small schools in remote communities do not have these resources. The Northern Territory also has the biggest problem with homelessness, and school retention rates from Year 7/8 to Year 12 are lower in the Territory, compared with other States.

In summary, there has been an increase in early intervention capacity since 1994 in Australia, but how well the various initiatives cohere on the ground is unknown at this point. In some communities there is a high level of awareness about the need to develop links between schools and local services. In these communities, there is development of incipient coordination structures. In other communities, there is little evidence of this happening.

The Victorian School Focused Youth Service model deserves to be considered for national implementation. The evaluation described it as "ground breaking, innovative and broadly successful" (Successworks 2001). A national program would ensure that a coordination function exists in all local communities. The Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce recommended a program of transition officers in the community to work with young people leaving school early, including homeless students

dropping out of school. This initiative would address a largely unmet need and further strengthen the youth support infrastructure. The Commonwealth and the States need to develop a long-term, national strategy to build Australia's early intervention capacity in schools and local communities.

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- Youth Homelessness 2001 is a research program funded by all State and Territory governments and the Salvation Army (July 2002). Web: www.rmit.edu.au/tce/ssp/yh and www.salvationarmy.org.au
- For an overview of the Reconnect program, which provides support to young people and the families of young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, see the *Youth Homelessness: Case studies of the Reconnect Program – Final Report* prepared by Ceri Evans and Sheila Shaver of the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales for the Department of Family and Community Services. It was published in July 2001, and can can be viewed as a pdf at: www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/youth_homelessness/$file/YouthHomelessness.pdf
- For more information about the Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, including access to the Taskforce's report *Footprints to the Future* see the web site at: http://www.youthpathways.gov.au/
- *The National Evaluation Report Full Service Schools Program 1999 and 2000* is a research report prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs in February 2001 by Strategic Partners in association with the Centre for Youth Affairs and Development. It can be viewed as a pdf at: www.detya.gov.au/schools/publications/2001/fss/evaluation.pdf
- Information about the School Focused Youth Service, including an evaluation document, is available on the Internet at: www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/welfare/youth.htm
- *Parity* is the Council to Homeless Persons' journal and is published 10 times a year. It covers a wide range of issues concerning homelessness and the provision of housing and services to homeless people. Web: www.parity.infoxchange.net.au/
- The National Youth Coalition for Housing is a federation of all State and Territory coalitions with an interest in youth housing. It was established to promote housing opportunities for young homeless people in Australia. Web: www.nychonline.org.au/index.htm