

POSITION PAPER

Education and Employment for at-risk and homeless young people in NSW

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for
Youth Homelessness
Representative Council



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ABOUT

The Youth Homelessness Representative Council (YHRC) is a group of 10 young people (aged 18-25) all with lived experiences of youth homelessness. The YHRC meet to discuss and address issues that affect young people at-risk, or experiencing homelessness. The YHRC is the official youth steering committee for Yfoundations, the NSW youth homelessness peak body.

The purpose of this paper is to set out the position of the YHRC on education and employment. This paper provides a basis for advocacy for systemic changes to the education and employment system in NSW and makes specific recommendations to improve service support, access, inclusion, and outcomes for young people at-risk of, or experiencing homelessness.

HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW

Census data has revealed that the rate of youth homelessness in NSW (young people aged 12-24) increased from 6,631 in 2011 to 9,041 in 2016[1], which includes rough sleeping, couch surfing, sleeping in homeless shelters, or in severe overcrowding[2]. This alarming increase signifies that youth homelessness needs to be given more attention and resources.

Many young people who are homeless are not only without a roof over their head, many struggle with mental health issues, addiction, and social isolation, with flow on effects including severe financial hardship, trauma, loss of education and employment opportunities, and limited pathways out of homelessness.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT FOR HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW

It is vital that all young people are given the opportunity to pursue their educational and employment goals. Education, including formal tuition and practical life skills, is crucial to the growth and development of young people. Education promotes self-confidence and independence and provides young people with the skills necessary to enter into employment.

Young people who disengage from education are more likely to find themselves unemployed, engage in unhealthy relationships, engage in crime, experience poor social and emotional health, and often have low or no income. ABS data shows that one in six Australians 15-24 are living in poverty. Intergenerational unemployment and the high rate of youth unemployment significantly affects homeless young people [3]. Employment and education are integral strategies in preventing homelessness and also enable young people to exit out of homelessness[4].

Transitioning from childhood to adulthood is a challenging time, and it is important that pathways from school to training, to tertiary studies, or to employment are accessible, flexible, and the right fit for the individual.

All young people in NSW should enjoy full access to affordable and quality education that meet their needs and prepares them for the future. Those experiencing homelessness are likely to face barriers to education and employment, including; lack of fixed address, limited experience or qualifications, financial stress, and limited soft skills. Typically these young people may have moved schools any number of times and for a variety of reasons, including as a result of eviction, escaping Domestic Violence, family breakdown, or breakdown in Out Of Home Care (OOHC) or accommodation support. Without the skills or positive connections, living a transient and uncertain lifestyle may provide significant stress and pressure, and often homeless young people disengage from school. The longer a young person remains disengaged from the school system, the more difficult it is to re-engage at a later stage[5].

For some young people, a clear pathway is not initially recognisable. It is therefore important to ensure multiple pathways are available and accessible to young people, which afford the necessary time and support to work through and ultimately overcome the barriers. It is also important to acknowledge that the formal or traditional school system is not always the most appropriate pathway, and appropriate alternative options need to be available and accessible to young people for whom the mainstream school environment is not suitable, e.g. Skillset Senior College in Bathurst, BackTrack in Armidale, or Vocational Education Training (VET).

The economic and social costs associated with leaving school early are significant. Early school leavers are more likely to encounter difficulties finding appropriate employment. From a financial perspective, young people who finish school will earn on average \$1.5 million more over their working life than those who leave before year 12[6].

It is not only financial benefits that young people receive from education. Education teaches positive life skills to enable young people to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

There is increasing recognition within the youth homelessness sector that young people need more than just a place to sleep. The developmental needs of young people require the provision of a range of specialised intensive and appropriate education and employment support services in order to ensure young people don't progress into long-term homelessness.

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, Census reveals a rise in the rate of homelessness in Australia, viewed 24 December 2018, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>

[2] Ibid

[3] Homelessness Australia, 2016 Homelessness and Young People, viewed 24 December 2018, <https://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/sites/homelessnessaus/files/2017-07/Young%20People.pdf>

[4] Gronda and Coventry 2009 (Parity Volume 22 Issue 8, Sept 2009), Education, Employment and Training for Young People Experiencing Homelessness: Outcome Dimensions.

[5] Horowitz, S., Springer, C., & Kose, G. (1988). Stress in hotel children: The effects of homelessness on attitudes toward school. *Children's Environments Quarterly*, 5, 34– 36.

[6] Argued by Professor Sue Kilpatrick, director of the Centre for University Pathways and Partnership at UTAS, http://www.themercury.com.au/article/2013/05/04/378430_tasmania-news.html

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY THE YHRC

- 1** Lack of Government Funding for education, particularly alternative education and therapeutic learning programs.
- 2** Young people experiencing homelessness need additional support to stay engaged in school. Mainstream schools do not offer one-on-one support and as a result there are high dropout rates for homeless young people.
- 3** Teachers do not have enough understanding of youth homelessness issues or experience (e.g. domestic violence, mental health, drug and alcohol dependencies etc), and therefore teachers can come across as unsympathetic and uncaring.
- 4** There is a need more flexible learning environments and pathways into tertiary education or employment.
- 5** Young people experiencing homelessness often don't have a fixed address and therefore will often have to move schools, reintroduce themselves, and retell their story over and over, which can lead to poor mental health and disrupts their education.
- 6** Negative stigma and negative stereotypes. Employers do not want to hire people who are experiencing homelessness (e.g. if their address is a homelessness service).
- 7** Financial barriers. Many courses, apprenticeships, traineeships, or first jobs require young people to pay up front costs (e.g. course fees, uniforms, licenses etc). This is a huge barrier for young people who have low or no incomes. Young people often do not have the financial capacity to pursue these employment or education opportunities.
- 8** Existing government initiatives, programs, and support that are currently available to students and their families are confusing, unclear, and often inaccessible for those who need it. More streamlined supports should be available in schools to cut through the "red tape" and help young people and their families to access the support they need before students begin to disengage.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE YHRC

More needs to be done to support what is a broken system lacking consistent long term planning, policy, and resources. The YHRC recommends that the NSW government commit to an inclusive, accessible, and flexible education and employment system, to ensure young people at-risk of, or experiencing, homelessness are able to attain qualifications, and enter into the workforce.

- 1 Individual and tailored support in schools with the aim to keep young people engaged** - The YHRC have identified a need for individual and tailored support for students across NSW. One way to achieve this is to employ independent Student Support Officers (SSO) to be a stable point of contact for students, teachers, and parents/guardians, to enhance student social and emotional wellbeing, to improve learning outcomes, and provide holistic support. SSO to also work collaboratively with the family, external child and family support agencies and other government agencies to support students at-risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.
- 2 Schools to implement alternative disciplinary practices** - School should be a happy and safe place for students. However, one key driver for student disengagement is school disciplinary practices such as suspension. Young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness often present with challenging behaviours, and while it is increasingly understood that they are a symptom of their experience, suspension is still commonly used to manage such behaviours in a school environment. School suspension disproportionately affects Indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with cognitive/learning impairments, and students with a history of trauma. Suspension policy and practice can improve. In place of suspensions, schools should implement alternative disciplinary practices (e.g. supervision, behaviour support plans, or restitution within the school environment) that prioritise inclusion for students who are at-risk. Suspension should only ever be used as a last resort.
- 3 Diverse and accessible Alternative Education across NSW** - Many young people experiencing homelessness end up in Alternative Education as they are often the most flexible learning environments, and allow young people to connect with other students in similar circumstances. However, Alternative Education can often be limiting (academically) and don't offer the option to complete HSC (or equivalent) and/or receive an ATAR. There is a need for more variety in Alternative Education across NSW that enable young people who want to complete their HSC an opportunity to do so.
- 4 Therapeutic learning environments for the most vulnerable young people in NSW** - Young people who face extreme disadvantage, and have a history of significant trauma and neglect, need more support than mainstream or alternative education can provide. Some young people can't sit at a desk in a classroom for six hours a day. These young people are amongst the most vulnerable and need time to heal in order to thrive. If not, they will fall through the gaps and often into the juvenile justice system. The juvenile justice system is a trap; 82% of young people who have been in sentenced detention (jail) will return within 12 months[1]. One program currently offering a lifeline to these young people is BackTrack in Armidale. BackTrack is often a last resort for vulnerable young people wanting to lead a decent and happy life. It offers a range of hands-on programs, which offer real life skills and builds confidence. BackTrack has an 87% success rate when it comes to education, training, and employment[2]. The YHRC are calling for more programs like BackTrack to give young people a nurturing and therapeutic environment to learn, to rebuild their lives, and to create a brighter future.

- 5 Invest in Youth Foyers** - The NSW Government should invest in a range of evidence-based approaches that provide wrap around support for young people, such as Youth Foyers. A Foyer is an integrated learning, housing, and support service, focusing on education and employment goals. A Youth Foyer provides employment, education, training, and skills development in a stable and secure congregated living environment. Young people exiting a Youth Foyer are much better equipped to be good employees and more likely to sustain employment^[3]. One example of a successful Youth Foyer is the Education First Youth Foyers in Victoria run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in partnership with Launch Housing. The Education First Youth Foyers provide young people aged 16-24 safe, secure and affordable accommodation on TAFE campus for two years while they study towards a career. The YHRC is calling for these evidence-based Foyers should be introduced onto TAFE campuses in NSW to support vulnerable young people into employment.
- 6 Offer short courses which deliver practical skills and qualifications** - For young people who are not academically inclined, or struggle to stay engaged in a mainstream school, short learning courses which offer practical supports, such as; obtaining a Drivers License (including Driving Lessons), White Card, Baristas Skills, Computer Lessons, Resume Writing, Interview Skills, and Work Experience, would be beneficial. These short courses should be free (or heavily subsidised) for those on youth allowance or Newstart and would be for young people who lack basic qualifications and experience.
- 7 Employment services to focus on young peoples interests to help find meaningful employment** - Employment services should focus on the needs and interests of the individual to connect them with employment opportunities that are meaningful. A holistic model, should offer support around literacy and numeracy as well as soft skills such as communication and problem-solving. Employment services should also provide appropriate support for job seekers after they have found a job to help ensure their employment is sustainable long-term.
- 8 Make Vocational Education Training and Apprenticeships/Traineeships appealing for practically minded young people** - Vocational Education Training (VET), including TAFE, plays an important role in preparing young people for work and responding to the skills need of the labour market. VET is flexible and able to help those preparing for their first jobs and those wanting to develop their skills. By providing a mix of general training and job specific skills, VET can assist young people to acquire the knowledge and competencies to find a job. For practically minded young people pursuing an apprenticeship/traineeship may be the best way to build skills and get work experience. More needs to be done not only to make VET and Apprenticeships/Traineeships more appealing, but to make them financially and logistically accessible to young people at-risk of, and experiencing homelessness.

[1] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Young people returning to sentenced youth justice supervision 2016-17. Juvenile justice series no. 22. Cat. no. JUV 127. Canberra: AIHW.

[2] Retrieved from <https://www.backtrack.org.au/>

[3] Foyer Foundation 2018, Introduction to the Foyer Foundation: Transforming lives of Young People, Page 3 - 4