

Can Housing First Put Youth First?

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Each night in Australia 116,000 people are homeless, and a quarter are aged 12 to 24 years.¹ Despite being one of the most prosperous countries in the world, Australia does not have a sufficient support system for our most vulnerable, and often homeless people seek shelter in refuges, makeshift dwellings, or on the streets. While crisis intervention will always play a role in the homelessness support system, it should not be the main focus. To end homelessness Australia needs to invest in long-term housing solutions.

The Housing First (HF) model has emerged as best-practice for chronic homelessness, particularly rough sleeping. This does not mean HF can be generalised as best-practice for all homeless cohorts. To determine whether HF is appropriate for young people we need to consider their developmental needs, the impact of homelessness, and the effectiveness of HF for youth.

Overview of Traditional Housing First Model

The traditional HF model was designed to address chronic homelessness among adults with mental health and addiction issues.² The model is based on an understanding that people with a long history of homelessness can achieve stability if given immediate access to permanent housing. Under the model, housing is not dependent on conditions such as ongoing treatment or being 'housing ready'.³ The traditional HF model provides long-term and permanent social housing in scattered locations across the community, rather than in one location.⁴

HF has a lot to offer, and while there is evidence to support its effectiveness in reducing homelessness among adults, it may not do the same for young people as their needs are vastly different.

Adolescent Development

Any program to end youth homelessness must take into account that adolescence is a time of neurological development and social transition. Significant brain development continues well into the 20s, with the prefrontal cortex, responsible for planning, assessing consequences and impulse control, being one of the last areas to mature.⁵ As a result people under 25 are more likely to misread social cues, act on impulse, and engage in risk-taking behaviours.⁶

The skills and responsibilities young people need to learn, combined with their stage of cognitive development, make it essential that they are supported and able to make mistakes as they transition into adulthood.⁷

Continued support is particularly relevant in today's society as young people are staying at home longer, continuing education longer, and therefore delaying entry into the workforce. Most (54 per cent) of today's young Australians continue to live in the family home until 21 years of age,⁸ with the majority (53 per cent) continuing their education until 21. Those who do try and enter the labour force face higher unemployment rates than the general population (11.2 per cent compared to 5.1 per cent in October 2018).⁹

Complexity of adolescent development, with the additional challenges of homelessness

Family breakdown is a commonly cited cause of youth homelessness.¹⁰ Any response to youth homelessness must provide specialised support, not only to replace support lost from family, but to overcome the developmental impacts of childhood neglect, abuse, and trauma, that many young people who face homelessness have experienced.¹¹ Without adequate support young people who experience homelessness are at risk of becoming chronically homeless adults.¹²

Yfoundations has identified five foundations — Safety and Stability, Home and Place, Health and Wellness, Connection and Participation, and Education and Employment — as vital to the growth and development of all young people. Each foundation represents an important component of a young person's developmental process, it also highlights the importance of tackling youth homelessness holistically, as the foundations work across systems and are interrelated.

Yfoundations believes that with access to support across each of the five foundations, a young person is more likely to enter adulthood with the skills and competencies necessary to reach their full potential.

Housing is a critical foundation for any young person, but housing must be developmentally appropriate, and must support growth, resilience, and positive connections. It is important for the housing to nurture learning and developmental needs of the young person and support their future aspirations. For young people, homelessness is not just

'rooflessness', and this needs to be central to any homelessness response.

Evaluation of Traditional Housing First Model, and why doesn't it work for young people?

Evaluation of Australian HF pilots, such as the Michael's Intensive Supported Housing Accord (MISHA) Project, have shown cost savings to the service system through fewer interactions with the justice system and health services.¹³ HF has also been shown to increase housing stability and reduce inpatient admissions among some youth, aged 18 to 24 with severe mental health issues.¹⁴ However, there is little research on the effectiveness of HF for youth homelessness more generally.¹⁵

Considering the lack of evidence, and the theoretical concerns of the HF model, it is important to consider other housing initiatives, specifically tailored to meet the needs of young people.

Alternative Housing Models for At-Risk and Homeless Young People

There are youth housing models that combine elements of HF with a positive youth development approach: Transitional Living Programs (TLPs); Youth Foyers; and Housing First for Youth (HF4Y).

TLPs provide safe accommodation and services to young people while they develop the skills required for independence. Unlike HF, TLPs provide congregate not scattered-site housing. When asked about their experiences of residing in TLP, young people reported many positive aspects: the sense of family; the connections that provided support and companionship; and the community that looked out for them. Young people also reflected on how 'freedom' of independent living seemed appealing, but most were not prepared or equipped to sustain it.¹⁶

Youth Foyers are similar to TLPs, in that they provide congregate accommodation integrated with support and services. Youth Foyers, however, have a stronger focus on education and employment. They also take a 'something for something' approach in the form of a deal that establishes rights, responsibilities and expectations.¹⁷

HF4Y is more than a housing model. It could be described as a guiding philosophy for building systems to better support young people at-risk and experiencing homelessness. Recognising the limitations of traditional HF for youth, the Canadian Observatory of Homelessness (COH) adapted the model. HF4Y is grounded on the principle that housing is a basic human right and that providing immediate housing improves outcomes for at-risk youth. HF4Y provides non-conditional housing with client-centred support. A HF4Y approach means providing broader options of services to meet needs such as trauma-informed care, education, living skills, and opportunities to develop support networks. HF4Y can also be taken a step further and adapted into a prevention model, or a way to support young people leaving care, or mental health facilities.¹⁸

As a model designed with a focus on positive youth development and the impacts of youth homelessness, HF4Y holds a lot of potential. As a relatively new model, further evaluation is required to demonstrate its effectiveness.

Conclusion

HF is not a cure-all for homelessness. It is a model designed to respond to chronic homelessness. While there is evidence to illustrate the benefits of the HF for homeless adults, its appropriateness and effectiveness as an approach to youth homelessness is less evident. As displayed in Canada, HF requires adaptation in order to respond to the developmental needs of young people. These needs are further exacerbated by the impacts of trauma on developing brains. For these reasons we need to consider holistic models to support young people to successfully transition into productive independent adults. What HF can offer is an example of the positive impact initiatives have when they are developed around the needs and circumstances of the individual, and when human rights are the centre of design and delivery.

Endnotes

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