

**Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission**  
**Young Parents and their Children Project**  
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**‘Where to from here? A review of the existing approaches to addressing the needs of  
young homeless parents and their children’**

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**1. Introduction**

In a prosperous nation such as Australia, it is hard to believe that there are currently an estimated 26,000 youth aged between 12 and 24 experiencing homelessness (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Young parents are making up an increasingly large proportion of this group, with around 10,000 parents aged between 15 and 24 requiring support from specialist homelessness services each year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). Despite the continued severity of this problem, however, there has been limited research to date on vulnerable young parents, particularly in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the services available to them.

In this submission, I provide a review of the current national and international literature examining the effectiveness of different service approaches. While I focus primarily on services catering to young homeless parents specifically, such services are scarce throughout Australia, as is the literature surrounding them. As such, I add to the discussion by examining literature on homeless youths’ use of services in general. In taking this approach, I aim to provide a clear view as to how service approaches can be improved to more effectively address the needs of vulnerable and homeless young parents.

Overall, the literature suggests that while many homelessness services provide accommodation for vulnerable youth, a large number of these services are not equipped to serve their broader educational, vocational, psychosocial, and health needs, particularly when there are children involved (Anderson, Stuttaford, & Vostanis, 2006; Barber, Fonagy,

Fultz, Simulinas, & Yates, 2005; Rashid, 2004). Furthermore, services which attempt to address a wider variety of vulnerable young people's needs often find it difficult to engage their clients (Garrett et al., 2008; Giullari & Shaw, 2005; Peled, Spiro, & Dekel, 2005; Scappaticci & Blay, 2009). Importantly, the literature suggests that access to ongoing support and education, employment, and training pathways are crucial elements in helping youth and their children make sustainable transitions out of homelessness (Boese & Boyle, 2006; Broadbent, 2008; Hampshire, 2010; McNeill, 2011; Robinson & Baron, 2007).

## **2. The effectiveness of current service models**

### *2.1 Barriers to seeking support*

Despite being specifically designed to address the needs of youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, many service providers struggle to engage this group in the use of their services (Garrett et al. 2008). Investigating the reasons behind youths' lack of engagement with services may help improve understandings of how the homeless support sector approaches and interacts with homeless youth. These understandings could ultimately help the sector connect more effectively with this group and improve youths' access to a range of important support services.

Several recent studies have been conducted into how homeless youth make the decision to access the services available to them, particularly in terms of the factors that act as barriers and facilitators (Garrett et al. 2008; Malvaso & Delfabbro 2016; Pedersen et al. 2016). These studies find that factors such as a distrust of staff, unattainable expectations, unsafe environment, and a lack of services which align with their wants and needs all act as barriers which prevent vulnerable youth from accessing services. They also suggest that the decision not to access homeless shelters is often linked to self-pride and a desire for autonomy and independence. As such, homeless youth often feel that the structure and rules imposed by homeless shelters are overly restrictive, which prevents them from viewing shelters as viable means of support (Garrett et al. 2008; Giullari & Shaw 2005).

Concerning homeless mothers, research suggests that they are often hesitant to seek support from shelters due to difficulties with following rules and trusting others, which often arise as a result of difficult past experiences (Scappaticci & Blay 2009). A lack of control over their own

parenting is also an issue many parents face when staying in a shelter, as rules and decisions regarding everyday events such as bed or meal times are often imposed by the shelter (Swick 2009). Furthermore, living in a shelter turns parenting from a private experience into a public one, and can thus leave young parents vulnerable to criticisms and unwanted intervention from outsiders (Scappaticci & Blay 2009). Overall, these barriers indicate some of the weaknesses of current approaches to service provision which must be addressed in order for them to better engage their target population.

## *2.2 Effective forms of support*

While available support programs are often underutilised by youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, there are particular aspects of such programs which have been found to be helpful in keeping youth engaged and assisting them in moving out of homelessness (Garrett et al. 2008; Hennessy, Grant, Cook, & Meadows 2005; Robinson & Baron 2007). For example, a study by Taylor and colleagues (2012) investigated effective strategies to engage young parents in support services. Through a workshop which included service staff and young mothers, the study found that strategies such as having supportive and approachable staff, having numerous services available at the same place, providing childcare and education for parents, and being more inclusive of fathers helped encourage young parents to initiate and maintain engagement with support services (Taylor et al. 2012). Such 'wraparound' services which focus on a number of needs at once have been shown to be effective in supporting vulnerable people to move out of homelessness (Marrone 2005; Neale et al. 2012).

Homeless mothers have further been found to value parenting programs which involve discussion with other vulnerable parents, as these enable them to discover better approaches to meeting their family's needs (Swick 2009). Many parents also find one-on-one parenting support helpful, particularly when the frequency and intensity of the support provided is tailored to their specific needs (Anderson, Stuttaford, & Vostanis 2006; Taylor et al. 2012). However, it must be noted that the voluntary nature of service programs is highly important for many vulnerable young parents, as it helps them maintain both their sense of autonomy and their ability to make their own decisions about their future (Taylor et al. 2012).

Once services have successfully engaged their clients, however, it is important for them to provide the support necessary for youth to make positive and sustainable transitions out of homelessness. Research suggests that ongoing support plays a key role in helping youth achieve this. For example, studies by Pollio and colleagues (2006) and McLaren (2013) of the short-term outcomes for individuals who accessed homelessness services found that clients who received post-discharge support achieved and maintained more positive outcomes compared to those who did not. Overall, the literature suggests that wraparound services may help to effectively address the complex and interconnected issues faced by vulnerable young parents, and highlights the need for increased levels of post-discharge support to facilitate the maintenance of positive outcomes.

### *2.3 Issues with current models*

The existing literature refers to a number of issues preventing current support models from successfully addressing the needs of vulnerable youth and young parents (Anderson et al. 2006; McLaren 2013). For example, a study by Anderson and colleagues (2006) investigated a family support team which was created to respond to a range of social and health needs of homeless parents and children living in a hostel for homeless families. The study found that while most families found the hostel secure, the layout of the apartments proved to be an issue for some parents due to the inconvenience of living in a single room along with a young child (Anderson et al. 2006). The location of the hostel was also seen by some to be an issue, as it was located in an area that was perceived to be disadvantaged and dangerous, and was too far away from schools and relatives of the clients (Anderson et al. 2006).

Similarly, a study by Martin and colleagues (2005) found that young parents were generally against models that involved sharing accommodation with other young parents. Hostels in particular were seen as having a stigma attached to them and were considered impractical as they were unable to meet all of the parents' needs (Martin, Sweeney, & Cooke 2005). Additionally, some youth criticise services for the length of time it takes to complete certain programs, as well as the types of people who are allowed to participate. For example, Robinson and Baron (2007) found that some of the youth who were participating in an education program resented other participants who were not fully committed to the program as they would arrive late and be disruptive, thus hindering everyone else's ability to learn

(Robinson & Baron 2007). As such, it is clear that there are particular factors which must be considered when designing services for vulnerable youth, to provide them with more effective support and enable better outcomes.

### **3. Gaps in the literature**

While the existing literature has covered the services available to homeless youth fairly comprehensively, there are a number of gaps in knowledge. For example, there is a considerable lack of follow-up studies which investigate the long-term accommodation, employment, and independence outcomes achieved by vulnerable youth after they exit homelessness services (Collins & Curtis 2011; Holtschneider 2016). This means it is difficult to know which services are successful at helping you make a sustainable transition out of homelessness. Furthermore, many of the existing studies are limited in that they only involve participants who have accessed homelessness support services at some point in their lives, and their views and experiences are likely to be very different to those of vulnerable youth who have never been engaged in support services (Kirk & Day 2011; Martin et al. 2005; Tischler 2008).

Furthermore, while the literature investigates young vulnerable people and the services available to them in considerable detail, there is much less research about the availability and effectiveness of services aimed specifically at vulnerable young parents. Young fathers in particular are largely excluded from the literature, which may be a result of the lack of services available to them. For example, many emergency accommodation services for mothers have rules which prevent their partners from visiting or staying overnight, which limits their ability to be involved as parents (Giullari & Shaw 2005). Furthermore, fathers who access Specialist Homelessness Services without their children present often have their parental status ignored (Barker, Kolar, Mallett, McArthur, & Saunders 2011). More research is needed into the experiences and outcomes of young vulnerable mothers and fathers who access or require support services in order to better understand how to more effectively address their needs and improve their long-term outcomes.

#### **4. Conclusion: Where to from here?**

Overall, the literature suggests that vulnerable young people and vulnerable young parents experience a number of interrelated issues for which they require support. Such issues may include a lack of independent living skills, financial instability, poor physical and mental health, low educational attainment, and a lack of training or employment opportunities. As such, it is important for support services to have the ability to address multiple issues at once in order to better help vulnerable youth make a sustainable transition out of homelessness (Marrone 2005). Furthermore, support services tend to engage more youth and help them to achieve better outcomes when they are more flexible, easier to access, and are better tailored to individuals' needs.

These findings may have important implications for Australian policies for youth homelessness, particularly in light of the recent shift in policy focus from managing homelessness to preventing homelessness (Parsell, Jones, & Head 2013). The fact that many homeless youths require assistance in multiple areas suggests that there is a need for service providers to increase their focus on the specific and individual needs of vulnerable young parents and provide them with increased 'wraparound' services to aid them in accessing the support they need. More effective communication and collaboration between service providers, governments, and community organisations may prove beneficial in helping to better organise such 'wraparound' support programs and facilitate young people's transitions to sustainable housing and employment. Finally, greater emphasis on service flexibility and ongoing support may help ensure that youth remain engaged in services and achieve better long-term outcomes.

These changes to support services may help provide more vulnerable young parents with the opportunity to develop their independence in a safe environment. In doing so, they can gain the skills needed to successfully move out of homelessness and improve their own outcomes, as well as those of their children.

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