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Homeless Young People: Points of Intervention

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As Australia has come to terms with the existence of a large population of homeless young people and systems have evolved to respond to their needs, attention has increasingly turned to the specific issues affecting very young people who are not living at home. Questions have been raised regarding the appropriateness of our service models for this group, and debates have occurred as to who is responsible for their maintenance and support. Governments and community-based service providers have responded to these challenges by developing protocols and practice guidelines for child protection agencies and homelessness services, and reviewing current service models. Yet despite these efforts, the problems confronting very young homeless people clearly remain unresolved.

While life is difficult for all homeless young people, those under 16 years of age have the additional problem of having to negotiate a complex and fragmented service system. Many are affected by the child protection, education, income support and homelessness service systems, which are individually strained, and collectively poorly coordinated. And they are required to confront these systems at a time in their lives when they are arguably poorly equipped to do so.

Over the last five years, policy makers have focussed not only on the adequacy of the resources within each of the service systems, but increasingly on the ways in which they coordinate their efforts to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place. Homelessness has come to be understood as a 'career' process, with young people making a transition through a number of stages before they begin to identify as a homeless person and assimilate with the homeless 'community'. Researchers such as Chamberlain and MacKenzie have identified a number of key transition points, including the *permanent break* from home and family, where young people identify as separate from their family and no longer contemplate a permanent return home, and the *transition to chronicity*, denoting a phase in which they no longer seek a return to conventional accommodation.¹ They note that these transition points are not fixed in time and are influenced by a range of individual and social factors. This understanding of homelessness as a career implies the existence of a range of potential intervention points, from early intervention with young people and their families, to supported accommodation and long-term support work with chronically homeless young people on the streets.

This paper will examine data recently collected through a variety of service systems to identify key points for intervention with young people under 16 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It will aim to identify points within the service continuum at which improved responses are required to prevent young people's progression down the homelessness career path. Finally, it will highlight some positive signs from the field in Queensland that agencies are thinking about creative ways to

¹ MacKenzie D. and Chamberlain C., "The National Census of Homeless School Students", Paper presented to the International Year of the Family National Conference, November 1994, pp.1-3.

respond to these challenges to improve services to young people and divert them from chronic homelessness.²

What do we know about the scale of homelessness among under 16 year olds

We will never really know the precise number of young people who are experiencing family or other problems and who are subsequently at risk of homelessness in Queensland. Family problems are, by their vary nature, often hidden from the public gaze, and young people in crisis often do not come to the attention of their schools, communities or local support services.

However, our information on the numbers of young people experiencing difficulties likely to result in homelessness has improved in recent years. A key turning point was the census of homeless school students conducted by Chamberlain and MacKenzie in 1994, which revealed that in the census week, 1,760 young people who were homeless had come to the attention of school personnel in Queensland. They also suggested that between 4000 and 4,500 young people in Queensland schools experience periods of homelessness each year. Around 34% of the homeless young people identified by schools were under 16 years of age.³ Their findings led them to conclude that schools could serve as a critical point for intervention to prevent young people progressing through the homelessness career path. We look forward to receiving updated information on the number of homeless young people following Chamberlain and MacKenzie's analysis of the current National Census data.

The SAAP program remains the primary response to youth homelessness in Australia, and the SAAP data system is a valuable source of information about homelessness. Queensland data indicates that 874 young people under 16 years of age obtained assistance from SAAP services on 1,030 occasions in 1999-2000. This represents around 4% of all SAAP support periods and 5.4% of SAAP clients in Queensland in this period. It also represents around 16% of support periods provided to young people.⁴ 798 of these support periods (77%) involved the provision of supported accommodation.

In addition to those young people who received a support period, a two week census of unmet demand in SAAP showed that 437 young people under 16 were unable to receive support, usually because of a lack of accommodation vacancies.⁵ There is a degree of double-counting in this figure so it should be treated with caution.

Unfortunately, changes in age clusters over the life of the SAAP data collection system prevent detailed comparisons in the number of Under 16s in SAAP over time. However, information is available in respect of the 'Under 15 years' age group. Data from the 1999-2000 NDCA Annual Report suggests an upward trend in the numbers

² The data cited in this report was obtained through ad hoc requests from the National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) in respect of SAAP clients under 16 years of age in the 1999/2000 financial year, being the latest period for which a complete data set is available. It also draws on data from the Youth Support Coordinator program in the 2000 school year. An incomplete data set was available for that year, but we were able to examine data in respect of 650 clients. Furthermore, we draw on the results of a survey of clients of six youth outreach services, conducted as part of a program evaluation this year.

³ This suggests between 1,350 and 1,500 homeless students under 16 each year.

⁴ SAAP data report for Queensland, Table 3.7, P.14.: Table 3.1, p.10.

⁵ 70% of young people who did not obtain a service were turned away because of a lack of vacancies.

of young people in this age group seeking assistance since 1996/97, and a slower increase in the proportion of SAAP clients in this age group. While gradual increases in the number of clients in this group are evident, claims of a rapid ballooning in their numbers should be treated with some caution.

Table 1: SAAP clients Under 15 years seeking assistance

Year	Total SAAP clients	Number under 15 years	% under 15 years
1996-97	14,850	356	2.4
1997-98	16,500	396	2.4
1998-99	15,300	428	2.8
1999-2000	15,950	415	2.6

The majority of young people under 16 accessing SAAP were 15 years old. However, over 40% were under 15; this is significant because 15 is the age at which young people become eligible for the Common Youth Allowance. As a result over 73% of young people under 16 approaching SAAP had no income, and only 12% were receiving income support at the 'away from home' rate.

Table 2: SAAP support periods, age of client at start of support period

	Number	Percent
Under 10 years	16	1.6
10-14 years	433	42.0
15-17 years	581	56.4
NA/No consent	0	0.0
Not answered	0	.
Error	0	.
TOTAL	1,030	100.0

SAAP figures suggest a negligible difference in the proportion of male and female clients in this age group. Slightly more females (51.9%) than males (48.1%) under 16 years obtained support from SAAP services in 1999-2000. This gender balance tends to be maintained as SAAP youth service clients age.

Indigenous young people were heavily over-represented among under 16 year olds presenting to SAAP services for assistance. While Indigenous young people form 4.8% of the total age group 10-14 in Queensland and 4% of the age group 15-19, they represented 20.2% of the young people under 16 seeking assistance.⁶ This figure is also considerably higher than the proportion of the SAAP service clients aged 16-25 who are Indigenous, at 14%. The high levels of Indigenous access to homelessness services mirror data regarding child protection notifications and involvement.

The link between homelessness and a lack of protective factors at home is examined in the 1998 report *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Context and its Implications for Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (FACS)*. According to this report, young people experiencing problems at home often spend increasing amounts of time away from home, with friends, family members or on the streets. This high level of mobility means that they have a roof over their heads, but no one is taking responsibility for them. The reasons that these problems result in homelessness at a younger age than their non-Indigenous counterparts requires further investigation.

⁶ ABS, 1996 Census of Population and Housing (unpublished data).

Table 3: SAAP support periods, indigenous status of client

	Number	Percent
Not Indigenous	805	79.9
Aboriginal person	186	18.5
Torres Strait Islander person	6	0.6
Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	11	1.1
NA/No consent	0	.
Not answered	19	.
Error	3	.
Total	1,030	100.00

Young people seeking assistance from supported accommodation services were at risk of homelessness for a variety of reasons, including abuse or neglect, family conflict, substance abuse issues and psychiatric illness. Family relationship breakdown was far and away the most common problem identified by clients under 16 years on contact with SAAP services. Around 90% cited family/relationship breakdown or 'time out from family' as a reason for seeking assistance, with over 47% citing it as the primary reason. 19% identified physical, emotional or sexual abuse as a reason for seeking assistance, with just over 3% identifying it as the primary reason.

Table 4- SAAP support periods, main reason for seeking assistance

	All Reasons		Main Reason	
	N	%	N	%
Usual accommodation unavailable	227	25.0	98	11.1
Time out from family other/situation	367	40.5	192	21.7
Relationship/family breakdown	450	49.6	225	25.5
Interpersonal conflicts	300	33.1	40	4.5
Physical/emotional abuse	141	15.5	25	2.8
Domestic violence	73	8.0	14	1.6
Sexual abuse	32	3.5	4	0.5
Financial difficulty	94	10.4	7	0.8
Eviction	195	21.5	109	12.3
Drug/alcohol/substance abuse	71	7.8	8	0.9
Emergency accommodation ended	43	4.7	14	1.6
Recently left institution	28	3.1	17	1.9
Psychiatric illness	12	1.3	4	0.5
Recent arrival - no means of support	56	6.2	22	2.5
Itinerant	59	6.5	20	2.3
Other	118	13.0	84	9.5
NA/High volume form	59	.	59	.
NA/No consent	0	.	0	.
Not answered	64	.	84	.
Error	0	.	4	.
Total	1,030	--	1,030	100.0

Note: Clients were able to indicate more than one reason so percentages for 'All reasons' do not total to 100 and numbers may not add to the total number of support periods.

Points of contact with young people

At the point of crisis...

Chamberlain and MacKenzie and others have highlighted the importance of providing a rapid response to young people who are leaving home to delay the permanent break from home. They suggest that if a young person's connections with family, school or community are severed, they may make the permanent break within as little as two or three weeks.⁷ However, there is clear evidence to suggest that the provision of a family intervention response just prior to, or very soon after a young person leaves home can significantly decrease the likelihood of their becoming chronically homeless.⁸ Therefore the time between young people leaving home and making contact with youth services has a significant influence on the likely outcome of intervention.

SAAP data indicates that the majority of young people under 16 years of age who came into contact with services did so very early in the homelessness episode. As shown in the table below, around 80% of young people seeking assistance from SAAP were identified as being at imminent risk of homelessness (and presumably were either still at home or in some other relatively stable housing option) or as having been homeless for less than 2 weeks. Indeed, around 41% of young people under 16 were still living with either one or both of their parents when they established contact with the service, compared to 19% of older young people. This suggests that SAAP services are well placed to act at this point to reduce the proportion of very young people making the permanent break from home.

Table 5: SAAP support periods, duration of current period of homelessness

	Number	Per cent
At imminent risk	241	39.3
0-2 weeks	244	39.8
>2-4 weeks	26	4.2
>4-26 weeks	52	8.5
>26-52 weeks	20	3.3
>52-104 weeks	15	2.4
>104 weeks	15	2.4
Not answered	417	.
Total	1,030	100.0

Note: percentage figure relates to number of clients known to be in each category, and excludes those clients for whom the question was not answered.

Of the 39% who had already left their parental home, around half were living with friends or relatives in temporary arrangements. It seems reasonable to assume that a large proportion of these young people had only recently left home, and they clearly maintained some linkages with social support networks. For these young people as well, the potential for intervention to prevent the transition to chronic homelessness may be considerable.

⁷ MacKenzie and Chamberlain, "The National Census of Homeless School Students", 1994, p.3.

⁸ Evidence to this effect is offered by the evaluation of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program, 1998.

Table 6: Support periods, living situation of client before and after support

	Before support		After support	
	N	%	N	%
With both parents	97	11.3	64	10.5
With one parent & parent's spouse/partner	117	13.7	72	11.9
With one parent	139	16.2	96	15.8
With a foster family	70	8.2	44	7.2
With relative(s)-temporary	46	5.4	40	6.6
With relative(s)-long term	15	1.8	21	3.5
With spouse/partner	5	0.6	8	1.3
With spouse/partner and child(ren)	2	0.2	0	0.0
Alone with child(ren)	4	0.5	0	0.0
Alone	44	5.1	30	4.9
With friend(s)-temporary	114	13.3	62	10.2
With friend(s)-long term	3	0.4	14	2.3
Living with other unrelated persons	178	20.8	139	22.9
Other	23	2.7	17	2.8
NA/High volume form	59	.	59	.
NA/No consent	0	.	0	.
Not answered	111	.	255	.
Support period ongoing/incomplete	0	.	109	.
Total	1,030	100.0	1,030	100.0

Aside from family, young people's primary social linkages are generally with friends or teachers at school. The available evidence suggests that the maintenance of these connections has the potential to delay progress down the homelessness career path. On presenting to SAAP services, just over half of the young people under 16 were attending primary or secondary school. This figure decreased significantly by the time they left the service, dropping from 503 to 399. The number of very young people leaving education reflects the difficulty which young people experience in continuing at school after leaving home. A number of Australian studies have suggested that between two-thirds and three-quarters of young people who experience episodes of homelessness do not complete the school year.⁹ Moreover, the underlying causes of homelessness and early school-leaving are similar, so that if the factors contributing to homelessness are not addressed, they are also likely to result in young people leaving school. Given the important roles that schools play in the lives of young people, both as a source of peer support networks and a point of contact with significant caring adults, the severing of these connections often compounds the significant trauma associated with family breakdown. Nevertheless, the continuing participation of at least half of the young people in education suggests that timely intervention could assist in maintaining social networks which minimise the chances of chronic homelessness.

⁹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, *Our Homeless Children*, pp.56-58; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness*, p.249; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Truancy and Exclusion from School, A report of the inquiry into truancy and exclusion of children and young people from school*, p.45.

Table 7: SAAP support periods, student status of client before and after support

	Before Support		After Support	
	N	%	N	%
Not a student	373	42.0	321	43.7
Primary/secondary school student	503	56.6	399	54.3
Post-secondary/employment training	13	1.5	15	2.0
NA/High volume form	59	.	59	.
NA/No consent	0	.	0	.
Not answered	82	.	127	.
Error	0	.	0	.
Support period ongoing/incomplete	0	.	109	.
Total	1,030	100.0	1,030	100.0

Note: Variations in the percentage figures are misleading due to the high number of unanswered or incomplete forms at case closure.

It has been shown that the majority of young people under 16 presenting at SAAP services had not yet completely severed their connections with their family home, the school or their social networks and 90% cited family issues as a factor contributing to their homelessness. It could be expected that given adequate resources, an early intervention response aimed at improving family relations could in many instances prevent young people under 16 from leaving home permanently.

So to what extent is SAAP able to offer an early intervention response to these young people? According to SAAP workers, only 26% of young people under 16 required family/relationship counselling, and this service was provided to 21.5% of clients, with the remaining 4.5% referred on to another service. The relatively low proportion of clients identified as needing family intervention is no doubt related to the instructions for completing the SAAP data forms, which indicate that an item should be ticked only if the client expresses or acknowledges a need for a service. If a young person does not state a need for family counselling, or is reluctant to pursue this option, then the box is left vacant. In some instances, a limited focus on family work may be reflective of SAAP agencies' traditional function of preparing young people for independent living. It is also understood that many agencies desire the capacity to deliver a family work response, but feel that their current staff skills or financial resources are inadequate to do so.

It is noted that around 45% of clients under 16 returned to live with parents after a SAAP support period. This could be seen as evidence of effective early intervention in SAAP, and to some extent this may be true. However, it should be remembered that almost 40% of clients were described as being 'at risk of homelessness' at the start of the support period and a large number of these would have continued to live with one or more parents. As noted previously, 23% of SAAP support periods for this age group did not involve accommodation. These figures suggest that a significant number of young people approach SAAP services to receive support, information or other assistance, then return to their previous living situation. Information is not available regarding the long-term outcomes for these clients.

It is likely that some of those who returned to live with parents were from among those young people who indicated that they required 'time out' from family or other living arrangements (40.5% of young people, 21.7% citing it as the main reason). Questions have been raised regarding the appropriateness of the existing SAAP service models in providing this type of respite from difficult family relationships. Of particular concern is the likelihood that young people staying in SAAP crisis services will be exposed to a 'street culture', which may accelerate the process of making the

permanent break from home. The communal living arrangements at most youth shelters mean that contact between recent home leavers and more experienced, chronically homeless young people is unavoidable.

A number of Queensland agencies are exploring alternative models to provide short-term respite with a view to promoting family reconciliation. Of particular interest is the '*Homebase*' service, which operates in a number of Catholic Secondary Schools on the Gold Coast. The service, which has only recently received Government funding, recruits care-providers from the school community, who agree to provide periods of respite accommodation while school support staff or other community service providers undertake intensive family support work to encourage family reconciliation. Over the life of the program, 80% of young people who have received periods of accommodation have been reunited with their families, and all have completed their secondary education. *Homebase* is similar to a range of community placement programs funded under SAAP under the last 15 years. Many of these programs have fallen by the wayside due to difficulties in recruiting and retaining care providers. *Homebase*, however, has maintained 8 to 10 care providers over the last five years. This success is apparently due to the recruitment from within the school community, where there is some sense of shared responsibility for the school's young people. The model offers some valuable insights regarding both the potential of early intervention strategies linked to schools, and the importance of social capital in developing viable responses.

A number of SAAP services are also beginning to look at specific strategies they can use to support young people to improve their family relationships. Some examples of which we have become aware include:

- ❖ *Youthcare* at Hervey Bay has recently been funded to employ a family worker, whose role is to work with young people and their families to improve relationships with a view to the young person returning home, or if not appropriate, maintaining family connections. The worker particularly focuses on very young people who seek assistance from the service.
- ❖ *Youth Emergency Services* at Windsor has piloted a similar model for the last 12 months. The agency had extended its normal crisis accommodation periods for young people where there is a likelihood that with the support of the worker, a return to the family home might be possible.
- ❖ The *Lodge Youth Support Service* at Northgate has developed a policy regarding involvement of family members in the young person's life while they are living at the service. The policy maintains a strong emphasis on the young person's consent to parental involvement. Under the policy, family members can participate in pre-placement meetings to obtain information about the service and identify case goals. Parents may be contacted periodically to inform them how the placement is going and staff actively strive to maintain contact and communication channels. If intensive family counselling or mediation is required, the family is referred to specialist services. The policy aims to recognise and sustain the importance of family links for very young people in particular.

Despite these very positive initiatives, it generally remains the case that SAAP has a limited capacity to offer early intervention because of the many demands on its resources and the limited duration of most support periods. However, SAAP is clearly well placed to identify young people in the early stages of homelessness and to refer on to appropriate family intervention services. With additional resources, it is likely that SAAP services could also serve as effective sites for the delivery of a family relations response. Research indicates that without intervention to improve relationships at home, young people returning home are unlikely to stay. Further research regarding the potential of SAAP in this role is warranted.

Resources for early intervention are limited in Queensland, but have been growing over recent years. Two key responses aim to divert young people from becoming homeless in this State. The first is the Commonwealth's 'Reconnect' program, which funds services in 15 locations in Queensland, providing family focussed early intervention strategies to reconnect young people with family, education, training, employment and the community.

The other is the Youth Support Coordinator (YSC) program, an early intervention initiative that places youth workers within schools with a view to ensuring that young people at risk of homelessness or early school leaving receive support. YSCs provide case coordination services and undertake developmental activities to strengthen linkages between schools and community organisations.

An examination of the YSC data set for 2000 highlights the potential of school based services as a means of identifying young people at risk and offering appropriate responses. Data is available in respect of 650 clients in 2000, with 420 aged under 16 (65%). Of this group around a third were assessed as being homeless or at risk of homelessness. The largest number of YSC clients in this age group were 14 years. Significantly, YSC clients appear to be younger than those presenting at SAAP services: given the focus of the services on early intervention, it is likely that they are contacting clients at an earlier stage of family disruption.

Table 8: YSC clients, by age

Student age	Nos seeking assistance	%
10 years	7	1.7
11	6	1.4
12	17	4.0
13	104	24.8
14	153	36.5
15	133	31.6
TOTAL	420	100.0

As in SAAP, family conflict is the largest single reason for referrals to YSCs, affecting 46.2% of clients. With the majority of referrals made by teachers, guidance officers or school administration, it is likely that a portion of these family problems come to light because of behaviour management issues or declining academic performance. It is also possible that some of the referrals for behaviour issues are related to family problems of which the school is unaware.

Table 9: YSC clients, reason for referral

Reasons for Referral	Frequency	Percent of clients
Client is experiencing trauma	43	10.2
Client is experiencing family conflict	195	46.2
Client is abusing a substance	60	14.2
Client is at risk of self-harm/suicide	22	5.2
Client is exhibiting challenging behaviour at school	179	42.6
Client is at risk of being formally excluded or suspended from school	174	41.9
Client is at risk of leaving school before completion of secondary school education	190	45.2
Client is homeless	35	3.3
Client is at risk of homelessness	83	19.7
Other	44	10.4
Total	1,025*	

* More than one response allowed

At the time of contact with YSCs, almost 80% of the young people under 16 seeking assistance are living with one or more parents, again indicative of their early point of contact with families experiencing difficulties. However, even with YSCs, 8% of clients in this age group are already living outside the parental home, with 1.9% having no fixed address.

Table 10: Living arrangements of YSC clients

Place of residence	Frequency	Percent
With both parents or guardians	161	38.3
With one parent or guardian	170	40.3
With other family members	23	5.5
With foster parents	6	1.4
With friends or friends family or other unrelated individuals	28	6.6
No fixed address	8	1.9
Other, unknown or not stated	24	5.7

While information regarding the outcomes for YSC clients is not available for the 2000 school year, it is clear that YSCs are well placed to identify and respond to young people at risk of homelessness. They make contact with the majority of clients while they are still living at home, and at an earlier stage of the family problem than their SAAP counterparts. They also have an explicit focus on assisting young people to retain links with the school community, even if they do leave home. The evaluation of the program in 1999 found the initiative to be an effective means of diverting young people from homelessness and early school leaving. However, with YSCs only operating in 13 locations and Reconnect services in 15 locations, there remain significant gaps in the network of early intervention services across the State. Further resources are required to ensure a spread and diversity of services across Queensland, and to build the capacity of 'first to know' agencies to respond to young people at risk.

Once young people leave home ...

Even with the best early intervention services, some young people under 16 will leave home early. Once they do, they have few accommodation options other than SAAP. Poor access to income support limits their capacity to obtain private rental housing, and public housing is not accessible by young people under the age of 18. Unfortunately, many of them are not sufficiently mature to maintain themselves in those SAAP service models that offer longer periods of accommodation, which usually do not provide on-site supervision. As a result, young people under 16 are condemned to periods in which they 'do the rounds' of emergency shelters, marking time until they are old enough and mature enough to qualify for unsupervised accommodation, or are able to access adequate levels of income to maintain themselves in these models. Over 93% of clients under 16 years of age who are accommodated in SAAP, do so in a crisis/short-term service, so the vast majority of support periods are between 1 day and 13 weeks, and over half are for a week or less.¹⁰

¹⁰ 88% of support period for older homeless young people are less than 13 weeks, and 37% of support periods longer than one day are for up to a week in duration.

Table 11: Support periods, length of support period

	Number	Percent
Less than 1 day	61	6.6
1-3 days	282	30.7
4-7 days	122	13.3
>1-2 weeks	128	13.9
>2-4 weeks	103	11.2
>4-13 weeks	160	17.4
>13-26 weeks	41	4.5
>26-52 weeks	17	1.8
>52 weeks	6	0.7
Not answered	1	.
Error	0	.
Support period ongoing/ incomplete	109	.
Total	1,030	100.0

Around one quarter of young people approaching services had been living in another SAAP accommodation service prior to the support period, with the vast majority of these being crisis accommodation. Around 19% moved into another SAAP service upon the completion of the support period. Ironically, the young people who require the longest periods of supported accommodation are only able to use those services offering the most limited accommodation periods. There are several supervised medium term accommodation services funded under SAAP, but the number of beds available is clearly inadequate to deal with demand. The continuing usage of SAAP by under 16s suggests that additional accommodation options offering substantial levels of support for longer periods are required.

Table 12: Support periods, type of housing/accommodation before and after support

	Before support		After support	
	N	%	N	%
SAAP crisis/short term accommodation	177	20.1	78	14.0
SAAP medium/long term accommodation	22	2.5	24	4.3
SAAP funded/arranged hostel	1	0.1	2	0.4
SAAP funded/arranged motel/hotel	2	0.2	1	0.2
SAAP funded/arranged community placement	15	1.7	11	2.0
Other SAAP funded/arranged accommodation	5	0.6	8	1.4
Non-SAAP emergency accommodation	7	0.8	2	0.4
Living rent free in house or flat	419	47.6	295	52.8
Private rental market	24	2.7	19	3.4
Public housing	9	1.0	2	0.4
Community housing	3	0.3	1	0.2
Renting a caravan	8	0.9	7	1.3
Rooming house/hostel/hotel	9	1.0	7	1.3
Boarding in a private home	68	7.7	51	9.1
Purchasing or living in own home	2	0.2	2	0.4
Living in a car/tent/park/street/squat	46	5.2	9	1.6
Other non-SAAP accommodation	10	1.1	8	1.4
Hospital/psychiatric institution	12	1.4	2	0.4
Prison/youth training centre	21	2.4	7	1.3
Other government residential arrangement	9	1.0	12	2.1
Detoxification unit/rehabilitation centre	1	0.1	4	0.7
Other institutional setting	11	1.2	7	1.3
NA/High volume form	0	.	59	.
NA/No consent	0	.	0	.
Not answered	144	.	300	.
Error	5	.	3	.
Support period ongoing/incomplete	0	.	109	.
Total	1,030	100.0	1,030	100.0

Note: Income source after support was not recorded on high volume forms so percentages before and after support may not be comparable.

It should be noted there are a number of environmental barriers which restrict the chances of young people under 16 developing self-sustaining living arrangements for some years, irrespective of their maturity or living skills. These include the lack of affordable housing options, discrimination in the private rental market and high levels of youth unemployment. These factors affect all young people, but those who are very young have to deal with them for a longer period of time, and subsequently face greater risk of falling through the gaps between the often poorly integrated support systems.

Of particular concern in respect of very young people is the relatively poor levels of integration between SAAP and the child protection system. This is an issue which has been taxing the minds of bureaucrats around the country in recent months after the Department placed it on the agenda of the Community Services Ministers Council. Queensland subsequently hosted a national forum involving child protection, youth justice and homelessness decision-makers to focus on this issue. We were prompted to do this by ongoing service provider concerns regarding the use of SAAP as a placement option for young people in care and perceptions that the Department offers an inadequate protective response to very young homeless people.

According to service providers, the incidence of departmental placements in SAAP has increased markedly in recent years. While claims of a rapid increase are not supported by the evidence shown below, it is clear that Queensland has consistently had the highest proportion of young people in SAAP who are under protective orders. While Australian data is not currently available for 1999-2000, Queensland figures have been offered for this period.

Table 13: Closed support periods for young clients, existence of a guardianship or protection order.

	1996-97		1997-98		1998-99		1999-00
	Qld	Aust	Qld	Aust	Qld	Aust	Qld
% of young people under order	5.4	4.0	6.5	4.0	5.1	3.8	4.8

These figures relate to the age group up to 25 years. Naturally, young people under orders are clustered in the ages below 18, at which point they generally leave care. The proportion of clients under orders is therefore higher among young people under 16 years. As Table 14 shows, in 1999-2000 almost 12% of young people in this age group accessing SAAP are under a child protection order.

Table 14: SAAP support periods, client involvement in legal processes before and after support

	Before support		After Support	
	N	%	N	%
None	490	63.1	383	61.2
Protection/guardianship order	92	11.8	65	10.4
Intervention/restraining order	9	0.8	4	0.6
Other legal processes	216	27.8	192	30.7
NA/High volume form	59	.	59	.
NA/No consent	0	.	0	.
Not answered	193	.	236	.
Error	1	.	0	.
Support period ongoing/incomplete	0	.	109	.
Total support periods	1,030	--	1,030	--

Note: Clients may have been involved in more than one type of legal process so percentages do not total to 100 and numbers may not add to the total number of support periods.

These figures reflect a paucity of placements for young people in the alternative care system, aside from the traditional family based placements, which are not necessarily suitable for, or attractive to young people. On 30 June 2000, when 19 young people under protective orders were in SAAP accommodation, only 75 children or young people were in licensed residential facilities specifically focussed on those in care. Clearly, the Department and the child protection sector face significant challenges in developing and supporting a range of placement options that can respond to the diverse needs of young people, including those with complex needs.

Currently some innovative approaches to the delivery of non-family based accommodation and support for young people in care are being trialed by the Department and community agencies. Increasing use is being made of individualised support packages, particularly for young people with high support needs. St Vincent's Community Services has developed a range of alternative care models which provide varying levels of support for older young people in care, and which link accommodation with intensive living skills and pre-vocational skills development programs. However, the availability of non-family based options appropriate for young people remains severely constrained across the State.

The other major issue raised by youth services is the lack of clarity regarding the respective roles of community services and the Department in respect of very young people with protective needs. They have noted that it is often difficult to obtain a departmental response to young people in crisis, and that an inadequate level of personal or financial support is provided to young people in care once they have been accommodated in SAAP. The Department has recently published practice guidelines to resolve some of these issues, and is in the process of developing protocols between SAAP services and Area Offices. It is hoped that this might resolve some of the current causes of tension. In some areas these arrangements are being extended by the development of much closer levels of collaboration between service providers and the Department.

For example, youth services on the Sunshine Coast and the local area office have developed a range of strategies to share resources, provide improved responses to individual clients and undertake joint planning. In this region, the Department and agencies conduct joint recruitment strategies, creating a flexible pool of workers who can work in either sector. Where young people require additional support to maintain their accommodation in the service, the Department provides some additional youth work support hours. Conversely, the youth service provides support to care providers and young people in the local shared family care service to prevent placement breakdown. The agencies meet with the Department regularly to undertake joint case planning for clients in common, and they have collaborated to establish a community placement program similar to the *Homebase* model described above. Workers in both the services and the Department describe these initiatives as reflective of a change in a culture, with a spirit of hopeful collaboration replacing the frustrations and tensions which commonly mark such relationships.

Chronically homeless young people

We would like to close by reflecting briefly on responses to young people who are chronically homeless. It is noted that 5% of under 16 year olds obtaining support from SAAP services reported living without stable accommodation of any sort, in a

car, park, tent, squat or on the street. Among young people turned away from services, around 16% had not had any accommodation the previous night. 8.1% of young people indicated that they had been homeless for more than six months at the time of approaching the service, with 2.4% stating that they had been homeless for longer than two years. Even in this very young target group, SAAP is clearly coming into contact with a significant number of young people who are chronically homeless or at risk of becoming so.

Some insight into the lives of young people who have made the transition to chronic homelessness has been provided by recent surveys of young people in major centres in Queensland.

A client survey was conducted as part of a recent evaluation of outreach services targeting chronically homeless young people. These services, in six key locations across the State, support young people within a broad age range, with some as young as 12 and others in their mid 20s. 163 young people completed the survey, with the largest group aged 17 to 20. Around 22% of the survey respondents were aged 16 or under. Of greater significance, however, was the fact that 41% of the young people who completed the survey left home before 16 years of age, with 30.4% leaving before 14 years. Around 19% of the young people completing the client survey identified themselves as Aboriginal (16%) or Torres Strait Islander (3.1%). Of these, 90% indicated they had left home before the age of 16 years.

The life circumstances of these young people are challenging at best. Approximately 23% of the young people who completed the survey stated that they had swapped sex for accommodation, drugs or other reasons, with 81% of these young people indicating that they had traded sex more than once. Around 40% of young people said they had lived in more than four places in the last 12 months, with 18% stating that they had moved more than 10 times in that period. 43% reported that they had been offered money for sex on at least one occasion. Around a third had been hospitalised or treated for self-harming or a mental health problem. 63% admitted to using drugs other than tobacco and alcohol, with a third reporting intravenous drug use and 19% stating that they shared needles. A third said they used heroin or speed on either a daily or weekly basis. More than half indicated they had committed a crime to obtain drugs.

A second survey of chronically homeless young people in Brisbane was recently completed by the local interagency group. The findings reinforce the grim picture of young people's experiences of life without shelter. 25% had slept in a squat the night prior to the survey, 16% had slept on the street and 18.5% with friends. One quarter did not have a regular source of income, with around 70% indicating they had been breached by Centrelink and 15% had been breached three times, resulting in the cessation of payments. Young people supplemented their income by stealing (38%), 'scabbing' (33%), hocking possessions (26%), dealing drugs (26%), 'rolling people' (16.3%), doing the telephones (14%), and trading sex for money or favours (12%).

Young people who have been living without standard accommodation for some time often find it difficult to re-enter the service system, let alone mainstream society. They generally lack structure or routines in their lives, and many develop coping mechanisms that manifest in disruptive, confrontative or even violent behaviour. A highly structured service that aims to set firm limits on certain types of behaviour, as is often necessary for accommodation services, will not necessarily be appropriate for this client group. In Queensland, the primary responses to these young people take the form of outreach services, which can work alongside young people for prolonged periods and gradually assist them to address previous trauma and

negotiate the service system. Further information is required regarding the effectiveness of these service models in assisting young people to survive and reintegrate with the community.

Reflection on the lives of chronically homeless young people reinforces the importance of intervention with young people and families to prevent homelessness. We need to expand the availability of services at the earliest points in the homelessness career path and to locate services at sites that are "first to know" of problems affecting young people. The data suggests that we should focus on a range of support and mediation mechanisms to support families and young people through periods of crisis. We also need to further evaluate the impact of family relations strategies on the transition to homelessness by young people.

In those instances where young people cannot live at home, a timely response is required to sustain family and community relationships, stabilise accommodation and prevent further progression down the homelessness career path. And we must ensure that when linkages across service systems are required, young people do not have to make these connections on their own. Rather, we need to develop support systems that can deliver an integrated, long-term response to the diverse and changing needs of young people. It is particularly important that the homelessness and child protection systems work together in relation to this age group.

Finally, we need to maintain and expand our efforts to assist those young people who are chronically homeless. They require flexible service models which can help them deal with past trauma, overcome addictions, obtain accommodation and rebuild their connections with the community and the labour market.

Most of this is not news to many of you. The interconnected factors that place a young person at risk of homelessness are well recognised among workers in the sector, as are the varying dimensions and experiences of homelessness for young people. We hope that an analysis of the available data has yielded some insights into useful points of intervention. It is encouraging to see that additional work in this area is planned, such as a thematic report on Young People in SAAP, which may assist us to better track how young people move through the service system and into homelessness. It will add to our knowledge about the types of interventions that can reduce the likelihood of this progression for too many of these highly vulnerable young people.

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