

Chapter 5: Pathways Out of Child and Youth Homelessness

Championing Health at Hope Street

Jamileh Hargreaves, Communications Lead, Hope Street Youth and Family Services and Jessica Heerde, Associate Professor, University of Melbourne, Senior Research Fellow, Royal Children's Hospital

Prevention and early intervention are vital to reducing homelessness among children and young people. For people under 25 experiencing homelessness and their children, access to timely healthcare is vital to wellbeing. These young people need to be supported through wrap-around service delivery models that are child and youth specific and tailored to address their health needs. The largest cohort of homeless people in Australia are children and young people (0 to 24 years), making up 37.4 per cent of the homeless.¹

With such high rates of homelessness in this population, it is crucial to reduce the development of health conditions associated with experiencing homelessness early. This is done by setting young people and children up for access to community health services, including bulk billing GPs, mental health counsellors, drug and alcohol services, pre- and postnatal care, maternal and child health, dentists and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) service providers. Hope Street is a leading provider for child and youth homelessness based in Victoria, with early intervention for young people and their children vital to preventing homelessness across a lifetime.

Hope Street provides young people with stability to access healthcare by supporting them to find a bulk billing GP, as well as life skills and opportunities for psycho-social wellbeing, education, training, and employment. It is also a place for community connection and wellbeing. Through access to primary health care, young people are supported to achieve their healthcare goals and in their journey into secure housing, education, training, and employment opportunities. Hope Street teams deliver a service method

that has long-term positive and sustainable outcomes for young people who are experiencing homelessness. Hope Street views healthcare as foundational to achieving a stable home.

Hope Street as a frontline service provider recognises the intersection of health issues for people experiencing homelessness. Homelessness for young people and children is at crisis levels. According to Sue Scott, Operations Manager, Hope Street: *'Young people and children make up two in five homeless people in Australia and the health impacts of being homeless on young people and children is linked to long-term severe consequences across their lifetime as well as across a range of their life domains. Therefore, it is critical for young people to access healthcare providers early to prevent further long-term disadvantage and continued homelessness from occurring.'*

Associate Professor Jessica Heerde, one of the authors of this article, is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Paediatrics at the Melbourne Medical School. Her program of work centres on understanding and responding to homelessness among young people and its impact on their health. While short-term intervention-focused initiatives respond to the immediate needs of young people, she emphasises the need for a long-term strategy that not only provides sustained support to young people, but that also works to prevent them becoming homeless in the first instance. Hope Street is leading the way in responding to youth homelessness with a priority on mental health, dental care, health care and accessing an affordable GP and nursing services to mitigate the

impact of stressful circumstances on a young person's health outcomes.

In addition to prevention and early intervention, the health impacts of experiencing homelessness for young people must be considered. Recent media coverage in *The Guardian* about early deaths among adults sleeping rough highlighted the potentially severe impact of homelessness on health.

The impact of homelessness on health among young people is still being researched, including in a project that Associate Professor Heerde's team is working on. Funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council, they are assessing the health and mortality of young people following their contact with the homelessness service system in Australia. As Sue Scott says: *'It is important that young people and children are not left behind when understanding how health impacts homelessness over a lifetime, with the largest cohort of homeless being young people and children.'*

Healthcare for young people and their children who are experiencing homelessness is vital to their social and psychological wellbeing. Without access to healthcare, compounding health issues both physical and mental can escalate to become more chronic and acute conditions.

Associate Professor Heerde stated in the lead up to the 2023 National Child and Youth Homelessness Conference:²

'There are many drivers, and these will differ between children and young people. The drivers for children and young people are different from adults. Children and young people are also



Photo courtesy of Hope Street

still developing physically and emotionally, meaning the effects of homelessness on development are profound. Many children and young people who experience homelessness have or will develop health problems because of their homelessness. These are complex and may include physical and mental health issues, substance abuse, injuries from violence or victimisation. Importantly, these health issues can place children and young people at increased risk for early death. The most acute health issues and the role of health care in addressing them remain largely unknown for young people who experience homelessness. Access to health care is important, but we must be aware that experiencing homelessness also reduces children and young people's capacity to access healthcare or health treatments.¹³

Through the service delivery model at Hope Street, we acknowledge the demand for child and youth homelessness services is never-ending, with many more children and young people experiencing homelessness presenting for support to Hope

Street than ever before. Hope Street's specialist youth team see that experiencing homelessness creates and exacerbates significant health issues for young people, which the researchers believe may have life-long consequences across multiple areas.

Wrap-around services at Hope Street Youth and Family Services ensure a seamless delivery of health, mental health and wellbeing support for young people and their children. Currently, Hope Street has the Homeless Youth Dual Diagnosis Initiative program on-site/co-located at the youth refuge in Brunswick West. The 'Homeless Youth Dual Diagnosis Initiative' focuses on developing the knowledge and abilities of youth specialist homelessness services workers in the north of Melbourne, including Hope Street youth practitioners, to identify and respond with early intervention to the complex needs of young people experiencing homelessness. The initiative fosters ongoing partnerships between mental health, drug and alcohol and youth homelessness services.

On-site at Hope Street in Whittlesea and at the Brunswick West refuge, a Bolton Clarke Homeless Youth

Community Nurse visits young people to conduct general health assessments and appropriate referrals to specialist health care, including dental, optical, pathology, sexual health, and pregnancy/parenting support. The value of the Bolton Clarke Youth Homelessness Community Nurse is a health program that needs to be scaled up in these co-located services in youth refuges as an achievable initiative that enables early intervention and prevention of health issues for young people and their families who are experiencing homelessness.

For young people on low incomes, the delivery of localised, affordable and accessible primary healthcare options is vital to manage their wellbeing and health needs. Financial and geographical barriers that young people experience when trying to access healthcare can lead to greater hospital emergency admissions.

There is currently no system to collect and share health data on a young person's medical conditions when they present to homelessness services for the first time. If a young person has been unable to access a stable GP, their conditions can worsen.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'people experiencing health issues while also experiencing homelessness may have difficulties managing their health conditions which can lead to the development and/or exacerbation of a chronic health issue. This in turn can reduce a person's ability to sustain wellbeing, employment, housing, and personal networks, further impacting their ability to sustain stable housing.' Across a lifetime, the health of those who experience homelessness can greatly deteriorate if their conditions are left untreated.

In response Sue Scott states:

'Although additional funding has been allocated by the Federal Government, there is yet to be a national plan or youth specific federal strategy for early intervention and prevention of long-term homelessness and the corresponding health issues that occurs. Youth specific data on health and homelessness will provide insight into how to best address the needs of young people experiencing homelessness as they present to services and how best to engage them for further community support such as living skills, tenancy skills, employment, education, counselling and wellbeing in conjunction with the services of treating primary healthcare professions, NDIS providers, maternal and

child health, counsellors and dentists. With effective services already being delivered in the area, the much-anticipated Melton Hospital needs to be supported by community service providers and accessible to GPs to meet the growing demands of the area. By excluding young people from the National Housing and Homelessness Plan we are unable to respond effectively to homelessness among this group. Healthcare and youth homelessness are inescapably linked.'

This is supported by Jordy McGauran, Youth Case Manager, Melton Youth and Family Refuge Service who says:

'Unfortunately, GPs in Melton are no longer taking on new patients. This is due to doctor shortages. There was one health service that offered GP appointments to new patients and this service was cut several months ago. Now we must transport clients to health services 30 minutes away. Accessing affordable and timely public dental care is a major issue for our clients. In several cases we have had to refer to emergency services due to long wait times for dental work resulting in infections. Accessibility and poor distribution of services has always been a challenge for the western suburbs. Now it seems this issue is spreading further.'

Accessing primary healthcare providers, alcohol and other drug (AOD) services, dentistry, mental health counselling and wellbeing support is an important part of our response to youth homelessness. Hope Street in Brunswick West is unique in its delivery model as the dedicated Youth Homelessness Community Nurse has a presence on site multiple days per week and is able to build a rapport with young people in their environment, privately and confidentially. As a 'translator,' in relation to GP or specialist health practitioners, young people can be supported and informed about their healthcare and a reliable contact point is made for them to receive healthcare services in the community.

It is critical that young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness can have access to accommodation that can deliver vital community health services. Alternatively, it is critical that the service model ensures that primary healthcare is provided to children and young people. Hope Street has built strong partnerships with local GPs to allow access to bulk-billing and support children and young people with accessing medical services in the local community as a part of skills development and wellbeing. This vital support is the foundation for a better life for young people at risk in the community. Beyond this level of engagement from primary healthcare providers is the need for collaboration between community based mental health services and an increase in local GPs, that can serve as trusted places for young people at risk of homelessness and other health crisis to engage with these services. At the foundation of a young person's journey towards stable housing is access to healthcare.

Endnotes

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023, *Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>
2. National Youth Commission Australia 2023, *Life-long Health Impacts for Children and Young People that Experience Homelessness*, LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/life-long-health-impacts-children-young-people-experience%3FtrackingId=kdnkDkDCTHKj9cvjTtXBmQ%253D%253D/?trackingId=kdnkDkDCTHKj9cvjTtXBmQ%3D%3D>
3. Ibid.

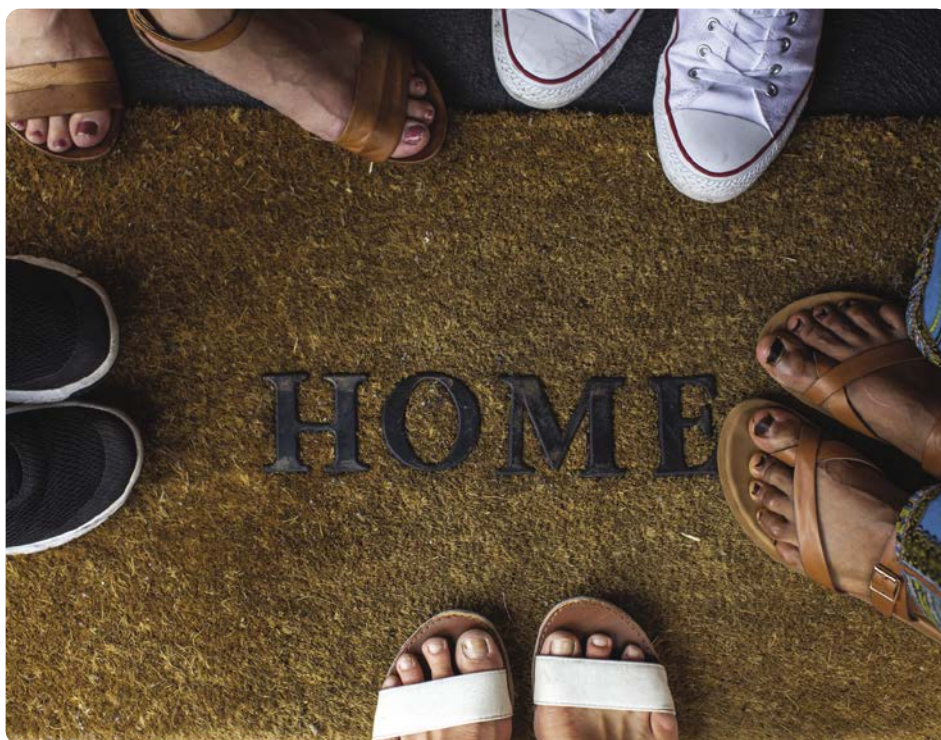


Photo courtesy of Hope Street