

## Homeless young people in NSW: Innovative Health Services for Homeless Young People (IHSY)

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### Youth homelessness

Homeless young people include those living on the streets (primary homelessness), those frequently moving from one refuge to another (secondary homelessness) and people living in boarding houses or couch surfing (tertiary homelessness) (MacKenzie and Chamberlain, 2008). In short, they do not have safe, secure, and stable housing.

Young people's health is determined by a complex interaction of social, economic, environmental, physical and personal factors. Homeless young people experience a multitude of problems, including becoming disengaged from school and family, experiencing abuse and engaging in risk taking behaviours, requiring a range of supports including health and education as key services (Lawson and Bawman, 2001).

There is an increasing understanding that because young people engage in risky behaviours, adolescence a time of opportunity to prevent the effects of these health risks later in life (Burt, 2002). Although one in four young people experiences a mental health problem including substance use problems, depression and anxiety (AIHW, 2007), the major health problems of young people are largely preventable (Tylee et al, 2007). Mental health problems strike early and deteriorate across the life span: three quarters of adults who have mental health problems, first experience these before the age of 24 (Kessler, 2005). We also know that early intervention increases the chance of recovery (Marshall and Lockwood, 2006; McGorry, and Yung, 2003).

### Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth

Almost twenty years ago the 1989 report, 'Our Homeless Children', known as 'the Burdekin Report', (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989) raised awareness of young homeless people, many of whom face mental health issues. Publicity was aided by a significant documentary, 'Nobody's Children' (ABC, 1989) resulting in much public shock and outrage.

The Burdekin Report', (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989) resulted in Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSY), a joint Commonwealth and State program funding agreement. The IHSY Program is managed at the federal level by the Population Health Programs Branch, Population Health Division, Department of Health and Ageing. "The aim of the program is to improve the health outcomes of homeless and otherwise at-risk youth aged 12-24 years and their dependents through the provision of specialised health services and improved access to mainstream health services." (Department of Health and Ageing, 2008)

## Youth Health Services in NSW

Within NSW, IHSY-funded services are administered via the Area Health Service, in contrast to other States and Territories where they are largely administered through non-government organisations.

In NSW most Youth Health Services source their major funding from NSW Health and are administratively managed within the local Area Health Service. IHSY funding makes up a significant portion of this funding. However the 2007 Youth Homelessness inquiry found that this funding has eroded across time (National Youth Commission, 2008a, p266):

*The NSW Association for Adolescent Health, the peak body for the youth health sector in that state, told the Inquiry that the current funding received by NSW is insufficient, that some locations have no IHSY services and that existing services have experienced an erosion in funding, with an impact on staffing levels.*

A review of IHSY funded services found there is a need for specialist services for marginalised young people (Community Link Aust, 2003). In particular the review found that youth health services were able to reach their target group and that users consistently reported benefits from those services. It was anticipated that a further review, conducted in 2007, would argue favourably for increased investment in IHSY funding.

Youth Health Services aim to improve marginalised young people's access to health services, by providing multidisciplinary primary health care to young people aged from 12 to 25 years. Youth Health Services share a common operating philosophy which values social justice, equity, and an integrated/holistic view of young people's health and well-being. Youth Health Services play a key role in accessing and engaging hard-to-reach, marginalised young people.

Research into overcoming young people's barriers to service access (Kang et al, 2005) found that on the whole Youth Health Services:

- Specifically target young people,
- Promote relaxed, comfortable environments which could be described as 'youth friendly' in appearance and layout (for example providing a pool table, informal furniture settings and youth-targeted reading material and posters in the waiting areas)
- Employ multidisciplinary teams and, where appropriate, specialised professionals (such as bilingual staff and Aboriginal workers),
- Attract young people through a variety of entry points and less-threatening services (e.g. arts, drop-in, basic needs facilities such as showers and laundry), thus offering a comfortable and trusting environment where young clients are more likely to approach a counsellor, nurse or doctor to discuss other health problems,
- Facilitate informal links between the YHS and other support services/sectors (e.g. education, Centrelink, accommodation, Juvenile Justice, legal services), thereby assisting marginalised and homeless young people in navigating complex systems and bureaucracies associated with wider health and well being issues, and
- Encourage and incorporate young people's participation and consultation (NSW CAAH, 2005).

Currently nine of the total fifteen Youth Health Services in NSW are IHSY funded. These include:

- Canterbury Multicultural Youth Health Service (Belmore)
- Youth Health Outreach Team YHOT, Central Coast YHS (Wyong)
- Youthblock Health and Resource Service (Camperdown)

- Murrallappi - The Settlement Neighbourhood Centre (Chippendale)
- Community Health for Adolescents in Need (CHAIN) YHS (Wollongong)
- Crossroads Youth Health Service (Nowra)
- Coffs Harbour Outreach Youth Health Service
- High Street Youth Health Service (Harris Park)
- Coffs Harbour Youth Health Service Child and Adolescent Mental Health

## Inquiry into youth homelessness

The recent inquiry into youth homelessness found that in the past twenty years the situation for young homeless has not changed, although the numbers of homeless young people have doubled (National Youth Commission, 2008a). As a result youth homelessness has recently received much media attention.

The documentary 'The Oasis' (National Youth Commission, 2008b), focussing on one of their services in inner city Sydney increased public awareness of the important role this service, like IHSY funded services, play for young people on the street. Both 'Nobody's Children' and 'The Oasis' were made through investigation of the issues including the views of professionals and young people themselves. These documentaries help to bring visibility to a group that would otherwise remain invisible (Resnick and Bowes, 2007).

The third national census of homeless school students found in 2006 the number of homeless school students had decreased since 2001 (MacKenzie and Chamberlain, 2008). The authors ascribed the decrease to an increase in early intervention services, but noted that three groups in particular were overrepresented including indigenous students, young people from a single parent family and those who had been in state care and protection.

## The green paper: Which way home

The timing of the Australia's Youth Homelessness report favourably coincides with the new Federal Government which has identified homelessness as a key policy issue (ABC, Nov 5, 2007). The Minister for Housing, Tanya Plibersek, has spoken eloquently about youth homelessness on multiple occasions in the media.

The Minister's challenge will be to look outside of the Housing portfolio, beyond the SAAP services outlined in the green paper, to consider the broader social and health needs of homeless young people including IHSY funded youth health services.

The Green paper proposes increasing educational supports for young people with a view to maintaining their connection with education. This is a welcomed focus, at the same time we need to enhance funding for youth health services so that young people can receive the support they require for a range of health issues.

The Government needs to consider recommendation 17.2 of the *Australia's Homeless Youth report* (National Youth Commission 2008a, p.23) which included increasing investment in IHSY funding:

*The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSY) program be continued and further developed as an important component of a national homelessness service system in order to provide more and better health services for at-risk, disadvantaged and homeless young Australians.*

In the case of youth health services for homeless and at risk young people the key policy drivers have included public support for investment in young people at risk, evidence of the need for and benefits deriving from this investment and, most importantly, the fact

that the *youth health service model* provides an effective framework for addressing the problem. These factors all combine to increase recognition of the reality that investing in our young people's health makes good financial sense.

## Recommendations

NSW CAAH strongly supports increased funding for a range of early intervention and prevention services, including IHSY-funded youth health services, as recommended by the Australia's Youth Homelessness report (National Youth Commission, 2008a).

Research indicates that youth health service provision would be greatly enhanced by continuing to develop and appropriately resource youth-targeted programs and services; developing program consistency and shared strategic vision, and improving coordination, linkages and information sharing (NSW CAAH, 2005).

Opportunities for action identified by the NSW CAAH document (NSW CAAH, 2005) *Young People's Access to Health Care: Exploring Youth Health Programs and Approaches in NSW*, were commended by Robyn Kruk, Director-General, NSW Health who "encourage(d) their widespread use to improve health care and health outcomes for young people in NSW." *Young People's Access to Health Care: Exploring Youth Health Programs and Approaches in NSW* (NSW CAAH, 2005) recommends:

1. The health sector continues to resource and develop youth-specific health services, many of which have been particularly effective in accessing marginalised and at-risk young people.
2. All sectors support youth programming in mainstream services, while ensuring that these agencies have sufficient awareness, knowledge and skills in addressing young people's health and well being needs.
3. All services ensure consistency in youth health approaches and programming by developing standard policies (such as those shared by all local Divisions of General Practice), linked to relevant State/Commonwealth policies and strategies.
4. All services adopt NSW CAAH's *Access Study: Youth Health Better Practice Framework Factsheets* (NSW CAAH, 2006) for reviewing, planning and evaluating youth health-related services and programs. This practical, action-based resource was based on relevant local case studies and valuable lessons learned from services across NSW.
5. All sectors holistically address young people's health and well-being needs through 'multiple entry points', co-locating services and developing complementary partnerships.
6. All services invest in improved communication (e.g. supporting involvement in interagencies and other networking meetings, providing appropriate information technology) to increase awareness of, and coordination with, other services.
7. Organisations and services maximise intersectoral co-operation in youth health activities by establishing or linking up with existing interagencies, cross-sectoral youth health working groups, Youth Health Coordinator positions or equivalent.

## About NSW CAAH

The New South Wales Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health (NSW CAAH) is funded by NSW Health. In partnership with NSW Health and other sectoral stakeholders the Centre seeks to improve the health and well-being of young people aged 12-24 in NSW.

Our mission is to protect and promote the health and well-being of young people in NSW by partnering with health care, non-government, education, academic, community and advocacy bodies to ensure better adolescent health outcomes.

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