

International Commentary: Some Reflections on the Policy History of Youth Homelessness in Australia

David MacKenzie
University of South Australia
Swinburne University

Abstract

Youth homelessness in Australia was recognised early on as a social problem area prior to other Western countries, such as the United States and Canada. This article traces the policy history of youth homelessness since the 1980s and finds that, despite vigorous community-based youth advocacy, three official inquiries on youth homelessness and a royal commission-like independent people’s inquiry in 2008, public policy prominence does not necessarily mean policy priority. There were advances. The Reconnect Program launched in 1997 was the first early intervention program for young people at-risk of homelessness or recently homeless, but until recently further implementation of early intervention and a youth-specific and youth-appropriate housing sector remained under-developed. Some lessons can be drawn as the U.S. research and policy development on youth homelessness gains momentum. Using an Advocacy Coalition Framework perspective for policy formation analysis, what has been missing is a sophisticated government engagement and media communications strategy, as well as the deeper and stronger community-based advocacy coalitions that have begun to assemble around the system reform Community of Services and Schools (COSS) model of early intervention.

The Social Construction of Youth Homelessness

Despite many similarities in the structural changes since the 1960s among the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom that have led to an increase in homelessness as well as a more diverse population including more young people and families (Rossi, 2013), Australia has been notable for the early prominence given to “youth homelessness” as an identifiable social problem focus.

All social problems including “homelessness” are socially constructed, and the definitional debates and decision-making take place in the realm of politics and policy-making processes. Social

researchers play a part in these debates and in the policy processes, but as one amongst many stakeholders, including the major service agencies, advocacy and lobby groups, government bureaucracies, political parties, and politicians (Best, 2017).

Describing policy-making as a process tends to be descriptive rather than a theory of policy change and framing policy-making as social construction does not explain how the dynamics of policy-making processes for particularly complex social problems are played out. A promising and increasingly influential theoretical model of policy formation is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1988, 1999). The salient value of their analytical model is that it captures the elements involved in complex, contested areas of policy change and provides for conflict and political claims-making by various actors/claims-makers/stakeholders organised loosely or tightly in coalitions advancing different strategies, claims, and proposals. The ACF model analysis of policy-related events and activities recognises that the achievement of major reform generally involves playing a long game (at least a decade on average). The Advocacy Coalition Framework has the dual value of being a sophisticated explanatory model but also a theory of practice.

From a program delivery perspective, service delivery definitions are required to identify who is eligible to receive assistance for homeless people; from a research perspective, operational definitions are required to determine who will be counted as homeless when estimating the size of the homeless population; and from a policy and planning perspective, definitions are framed to “target groups” authorised as a focus for planning and program delivery. Apart from debates about the concept of homelessness, for all practical purposes, different definitions are required for a range of purposes. In social problems discourses, the size of the population has often been controversial and contested, with advocates tending to opt for larger estimates while governments tend to favour more conservative figures. As Joel Best (2012) reminds us, social statistics are social constructions as well dependent on the definition used and how counting is undertaken. During the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, estimates of the homeless population were highly contested (Roleff, 1996) and even after the HUD street and shelter counts, the issue of whether homeless young people were adequately counted has remained controversial.

In Australia, from the time youth homelessness was first brought to public attention in the seventies, a number of notable milestones has occurred. But, as Archbishop Peter Hollingsworth (1993), a major leader in the welfare sector during the 1970s, reflected: “... the great difference between the 1960s and the 1990s is that (youth) homelessness was viewed as an individual problem affecting a few. It was never defined as a societal problem of serious proportions.” During the 1980s, grassroots community advocacy around the problems of homeless young people was vigorous, accompanied by a steady output of media coverage of “street kids.” Perhaps in response, the first Australian Government inquiry was the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare’s *Report on Youth Homelessness* in 1982. The report complained that the existing estimates of the number of homeless youth were “unreliable.” The Senate report had very little public impact, but it did serve to draw the issue of youth homelessness to the attention of policymakers.

The main government response was the consolidation of several state and Commonwealth homelessness and housing programs into a joint Commonwealth-State program known as

the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) in 1985. The definition of homelessness that found its way into the SAAP was originally developed by the National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH). For the purpose of support and accommodation under SAAP, “a person is homeless if and only if he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing” (Chamberlain, Johnson, and Robinson, 2014: 74). SAAP stood as the signature national program response for homeless Australians for 25 years. The diversity of service responses was one of its strengths. In Australia, beginning in the early 1990s, the large capital city shelters were redeveloped into more adequate and supportive private environments for homeless residents. Early on it was recognized that homelessness was increasingly being experienced by a diversity of groups—women escaping domestic violence, families, and of course, young people. The SAAP definition was a broad service delivery definition that co-existed alongside a research-based cultural definition, also a broad definition encompassing a range of situations of temporary shelter as well as rough sleeping (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1992; MacKenzie, 2012). Nevertheless, the focus for SAAP-funded services remained largely oriented to crisis accommodation and “chronic homelessness.” Again, advocacy from the youth sector was formative in the formulation of the SAAP definition and a significant proportion of youth services was part of SAAP (about 34 percent of 1300 agencies in 2005–2006). On the other hand, the transition of young people from crisis accommodation to affordable social or private rental housing or supportive housing, which hardly existed, has remained a continuing problem.

By comparison, the U.S. response to homelessness for a long time has largely focused on crisis responses—street outreach, homelessness shelters, and transitional accommodation. A number of competing definitions frame homelessness, which presents a public policy challenge (see Federal Definitions). However, more recently, “prevention” has begun to enter U.S. policy discourse with policy papers from the United States Inter-agency Council on Homelessness (USICH, 2015) discussing prevention and a HUD-funded Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program that includes community-based prevention initiatives.

The Burdekin Report

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s (HREOC) 1989 Inquiry into Youth Homelessness served to bring “youth homelessness” into the national consciousness (Fopp, 2003). The HREOC was established in 1986 as a statutory authority under an act of parliament. Brian Burdekin was the foundation Human Rights Commissioner and his Inquiry into youth homelessness was the first Inquiry of the newly formed Human Rights Body. Over 9 months, 20 hearings were held; with evidence from 300 witnesses and 160 written submissions; visits were made to 20 youth refuges and services, and the Inquiry commissioned 7 special reports, including one that estimated the extent of homelessness in Australia. The HREOC report, *Our Homeless Children*, was wide-ranging and thorough (HREOC, 1989).

As with all social problems, media coverage plays an important role. In the case of the Burdekin report the huge amount of media stimulated community interest (Fopp, 1989). The quoted figure from a special report was 50,000 to 70,000 homeless youth, although the Commissioners opted for a more conservative estimate of 20,000 to 25,000; media reports tended to relay for the higher

figure. The contrary estimates stimulated a spirited debate about numbers and further research (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1992; Fopp, 1993). This led to the *Counting the Homeless* project (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2003) which produced estimates of homelessness, including youth homelessness, that were accepted by all stakeholders including government.

In the United States context, the *Voices of Youth Count* is a particularly notable national initiative that has set out to “more clearly define the size of the (homeless youth) population”, as well as express the diverse experiences of young people experiencing homelessness while taking this knowledge out to a “broad national community dedicated to ending youth homelessness” (Voices of Youth Count, 2018; Youth.gov). The size of a social problem population matters greatly in the social policy process.

Despite raising public awareness, the Burdekin Report reinforced the dominant public typification of homeless youth as “street kids”. The report highlighted that young people leaving care or who had been in care and Indigenous young people were particularly vulnerable groups requiring appropriate support. The symposium papers by Samuels et al. and Shelton et al. both address equity issues and how race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identities intersect to produce a higher risk for homelessness and different experiences while homeless. Broadly similar parallels exist in the Australian context, despite historical differences, for special need sub-groups such as Indigenous Australians, LGBTQI youth, and young people leaving care.

The Federal Labor Government responded with a \$100 million Social Justice Package for Young Australians over 4 years. About one-half of this went on improving social welfare benefits for homeless youth, providing a small number of innovative health services and a few new accommodation services, but a significant amount went on pilot projects that were not recurrently funded or replicated.

In response to conservative criticism of a new government benefit designed specifically for homeless youth (the Youth Homeless Allowance), the House of Representatives conducted another parliamentary review, producing its *Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness* (The Morris Report, 1995). The core insight offered by this Inquiry was that “early intervention is probably the one area of public policy that could deliver the greatest returns in terms of social cohesion through the reduction in family breakdown and long-term welfare dependency.” Morris argued that an early intervention strategy was needed and that “schools become the focal point for early intervention.”

The Federal Government changed soon after in 1996. Most of the Morris Report’s recommendations were not acted on, but what did happen was that the incoming Howard Liberal Government set up its own taskforce, a *Prime Ministerial Taskforce on Youth Homelessness*, chaired by Major David Eldridge from the Salvation Army. The Taskforce report clearly proposed “early intervention” and fielded a pilot program of 26 pilot projects to explore how early intervention might be done using family mediation and reconciliation approaches. This was an important innovation in policy and service provision for the homelessness sector and the first explicit early intervention program in the homelessness sector, possibly a world first. The Reconnect program was launched in 1997. By 2003, at 100 sites, Reconnect was deployed to work with at-risk young people and their families and to address incipient homelessness. The program was rolled

out in stages from 1998 to 2003, to allow time for workers and agencies adapt to the new early intervention practices.

During the 1980s, youth homelessness attracted a lot of community advocacy but relatively little research. Following the Burdekin Report, advocacy continued but at the same time, small cadre of university-based researchers formed an ongoing research effort (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1992, 1995, 1998; Mallett et al., 2009; Neil and Fopp, 1994; Fopp, 2009). A sobering understanding is that achieving public policy prominence for youth homelessness was not the same as a policy priority and even when it appeared that youth homelessness was due for major investment, changes of government at critical points in time limited what actually happened. But also, when it came to decisions about resources, the established large charitable organisations that were the main providers in homelessness services appear to have time and again been more effective in getting resource allocations in their favour. The resilient media typification of homelessness as “rough sleeping” seems to have been a relevant issue. Research on the costs of youth homelessness has consistently shown that when early intervention prevents a young person becoming homeless and/or completes secondary schooling the cost saving is significant for the community over the longer term. The two policy imperatives from this work have been prevention and early intervention and rapid rehousing.

Focused on the U.S. context, Rice et al. in this symposium series provides interesting data from a study of prioritization decisions for entry into the crisis response system given limited resources and the need for triage so that youth with the greatest vulnerability receive a priority housing intervention. This addresses the management of “outflow” from the crisis system. There is no similar approach in Australia. Young people who remain in the crisis system and do not return home at an earlier stage generally require a housing solution. The introduction of intake points in some jurisdictions and communities are attempts to prioritise entry into the crisis system but this approach has not been implemented system-wide nationally. However, ending youth homelessness depends on dramatically reducing the “inflow” into the crisis system. This is the challenge of early intervention in both the United States and Australia.

Reflecting on the fate of youth homelessness policy and program responses from 1987 to 2007, a general observation would be that youth homelessness in Australia has had a public prominence not matched by the government decisions about resources for homelessness youth services and housing options for young people.

The Road Home (2008)

The Federal Government changed at the end of 2007 and the Rudd Labor Government declared that homelessness would be one of its highest priorities. The National Youth Commission (NYC) inquiry into Youth Homelessness in 2007–2008 and its report, *Australia's Homeless Youth*, together with the ethnographic feature documentary, *The Oasis*, was an important milestone in revivifying a focus on youth homelessness. The Inquiry was not funded by any Australian government but constructed as a community process adhering strictly to the practices and standards of an official inquiry. Hearings were held in all jurisdictions, collecting evidence from 319 people and 92 written submissions, producing a 400-page final report with 80 recommendations and a graphic booklet

with a Roadmap of 10 key reform propositions. The new Labor Minister Tanya Plibersek and the former HREOC Commissioner Brian Burdekin spoke at the launch. The subsequent Government's 2008 White Paper, *The Road Home*, drew liberally on the NYC's advice. The White Paper proposed a strong strategic framework linked to the long-term objective of halving homelessness. As one of the three core strategies, the metaphor of "turning off the tap" colourfully expressed the idea of "early intervention." The importance of mainstream institutions and programs in the early intervention policy frame was raised but not given much in the way of detail despite advocacy around "schools as sites for early intervention" since the mid-1990s. The symposium papers by Dworsky et al. and Walker et al. papers discuss how youth homelessness could be more effectively prevented by engaging earlier with broader service systems such as child welfare/foster care (Dworsky) and juvenile justice (Walker). In Australia, slow progress has been made in constructing in leaving care support programs but not as systematically and systemically as would be needed to effect significant measurable improvement in the official statistics.

What assessment can be made about the period from 2008 to 2018? The government invested an initial down-payment in service development and repair and social housing, but amid endemic political turmoil in the Government and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), thereafter, implementation in this high priority area faltered. The implementation of "The Road Home" strategies for Australian homelessness policy remained focused on the most obvious and visible aspects of homelessness like the "Streets to Home" response for rough sleepers and "Housing First" approaches for the chronic homeless. Considerable resources have gone into these approaches, but virtually nothing on early intervention. Also, apart from several special youth foyer projects, very little of the GFC-driven investment in social housing seems to have benefited young people exiting homelessness.

However, during this same decade, determined research and development to trial early intervention as a place-based local service system reform—the "community of services and schools" model or COSS Model, also known as The Geelong Project after the first and most developed trial site, has been conducted. This effort was not driven by government but through an alliance between researchers and practitioner leaders (MacKenzie and Thielking, 2014). Some key innovations are a reliable process for whole of school population screening for risk prior to crises, a flexible dynamic tiered practice framework, longitudinal monitoring and a sophisticated embedded outcomes measurement regime linked to practice. Rather than an add-on program, the COSS Model represents a collective impact reform of local service provision connecting youth services with the universal institution of secondary schools (MacKenzie, 2018). Practitioners and youth agencies have expressed a groundswell of interest; a small number of operational pilots in Australia and Canada; government funding is beginning to flow; and researchers in Australia, Canada and the United States have an active interest in forming an international collaboration around "early intervention."

Some Reflections on Policy Formation and Change

Bipartisanship has generally been underpinned by a degree of stability in the funding for homelessness services in Australia, while never providing anywhere near the level required to seriously redress the problem. Although governments and bureaucracies can be criticised for a lack

of political will or continuing established but not highly effective programs, the homelessness sector has been actively reformist, proposing creative initiatives and systemic solutions. One issue is the dominance of crisis-oriented practice and agencies. Then, agency-focused thinking that seeks “innovation” primarily to enhance the business of the agency rather than a systems approach which begins with the totality of the community is a problem. Departmental leadership, which could be expected to take a systems perspective, too often yields to political expediency, short-term program responses, or a plethora of “pilot” projects that never get scaled up.

In the 1990s, early intervention was not initially embraced even by the youth homelessness sector. Some were anxious that the new program would be funded by cost shifting from expensive crisis 24/7 services to cheaper early intervention models. But, that did not happen when Reconnect was funded. In the sector, the main pushback against early intervention came from agencies that predominately work with chronically homeless individuals. A similar pushback has occurred in the United States against moves to broaden the scope of the homelessness response and shift modestly toward early intervention and prevention (Shinn and Baumohl, 1999).

Over nearly three decades (1980–2008), the Australian experience with youth homelessness as a social problem has been marked by a promising early start, vigorous advocacy by community organisations and youth advocacy coalitions, the launch of the Reconnect program in 1997, three major official inquiries, and one independent people’s inquiry, a plenitude of media coverage and a continuous stream of research on youth homelessness in 1990s. The concept of early intervention found its way into high-level policy documents such as the Australian Government 2008 White Paper, *The Road Home*, under “turning off the tap.” But, as has been argued previously, government resourcing for youth homelessness fell short of what might have been expected from its public policy prominence. Thinking about this period from an Advocacy Coalition Framework perspective, what was missing was a sophisticated bipartisan strategy for engaging long-term with government around implementable social policy solutions.

By contrast, since 2008, the developmental work around early intervention focused on a place-based service system reform model. The coalition between the university research team and the Geelong community stakeholders became a community-wide Geelong advocacy coalition. The research focused on development issues and the measurement of outcomes, and the COSS Model/ Upstream Project Australia leadership does have a sophisticated strategy for engaging with government at all levels as well as media communication to broader constituencies of interest. In Australia (circa 2018), the scaleup of the COSS Model to effect local system change and reduce youth homelessness significantly seems to have begun.

Author

David MacKenzie is an associate professor at the University of South Australia and Swinburne University, Chair of Youth Development Australia Ltd, and Director of the Upstream Project Australia.

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