

# From Youth to Adult Homelessness

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## **Abstract**

Governments have shown an interest in early intervention strategies to reduce youth homelessness, but critics say that early intervention programs lack clear outcomes. This paper investigates what happens when early intervention programs are not in place and young people progress to adult homelessness. The paper assesses the 'social adaptation' hypothesis that the longer young people are homeless the more they adapt to homelessness as a way of life. The paper uses information on 1,677 individuals who first became homeless when they were 18 or younger. Three-quarters of the sample had progressed to adult homelessness (defined as 25 or older) and one-quarter were now young adults aged 19 to 24. The findings confirm that the longer people are homeless, the more difficult it becomes to get out of homelessness. However, the social adaptation account overstates the extent to which people accept homelessness as a 'way of life'. People can return to conventional accommodation if they are given long-term support. The paper concludes with three policy recommendations.

Keywords: homelessness, social adaptation, policy

## Introduction

Youth homelessness started to emerge as a public issue in Australia in the 1980s when homeless young people were noticed on city streets. However, it was the publication of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) report *Our Homeless Children* (The Burdekin Report) which brought youth homelessness to a broad community audience.

The Burdekin Report evoked a great deal of public commentary from politicians, welfare agencies and other community leaders, as well as stirring up significant interest in the general community. One important insight in the Burdekin Report was that young people experience homelessness for varying lengths of times. While the media tended to focus on 'street kids' (Fopp 1989), the Burdekin Report drew attention to the need for different forms of interventions at various critical junctures. The traditional view of homelessness as a sudden crisis started to give way to the recognition that homelessness is best understood as a process of adaptation and exclusion.

Since the mid 1990s, there has been a gradual shift in youth policy towards early intervention. The House of Representatives (1995) *Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness* stated that early intervention is 'probably the one area of public policy which could deliver to the community the greatest returns in terms of increased social cohesion through the reduction in the levels of family breakdown and long term welfare dependency' (House of Representatives 1995:360). In 1996, the Australian Federal Government set up a taskforce to oversee 26 early intervention pilot projects. This led to the establishment of the Reconnect program in 1999. There are now 98 Reconnect services across Australia with about 200 early intervention workers. Since 2000 most state and territory governments have also strengthened the welfare infrastructure in schools to facilitate early intervention (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008:Ch.8).

Early intervention is predicated on the belief that homelessness is a process and that prolonged exposure to homelessness increases the likelihood of people becoming entrenched in the homeless population. In fact, implicit in the term 'early intervention' is that it:

... is possible to observe in the lives of people the early manifestations of the phenomenon in the making, and respond in such a way that progression to experiencing the phenomenon is halted or impeded (Crane & Brannock 1996:5).

The assumption is generally made that it is 'cheaper' and 'more efficient' (Freeman 1999:235) to intervene as early as possible or to focus on prevention. Early intervention holds the promise of 'avoiding or reducing the significant costs associated with homelessness' (Lindblom 1997). There is also a moral argument. Early intervention is a strategy that enables individuals to gain assistance before their situation becomes chronic and denies them access to those resources the community takes for granted (Billis 1981).

There is some evidence to indicate that early intervention can reduce the number of homeless youth (Department of Family and Community Services 2003; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008:Ch.8). However, it has also been claimed that early intervention is an expensive policy that does not have clearly identified outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to investigate what happens when early intervention strategies are not in place – or when early intervention fails – and young people progress from youth to adult homelessness.

### **Theoretical arguments**

The theoretical arguments underpinning our analysis focus on the effects of prolonged exposure to homelessness. We call this the social adaptation account and it suggests that the longer people are homeless the more they adapt to homelessness as a ‘way of life’ (Sosin, Piliavan & Westerfelt 1990; Pears & Noller 1995; Wasson & Hill 1998; May 2000; Auerswald & Eyre 2002; Chamberlain & Johnson 2002; van Doorn 2005). According to Snow and Anderson (1993: 43):

... all else being equal, behavioural patterns and cognitive orientation ought to vary with length of exposure to any particular set of objects or circumstances (Snow & Anderson 1993:43).

The social adaptation account is also known as the ‘cultural identification thesis’ (Westerfelt 1990; Piliavin, Wright, Mare & Westerfelt 1996) or the ‘social acculturation account’ (Wallace 1965) and it is grounded in the sociological view that social action cannot be adequately understood outside the context in which it occurs.

Researchers using the social adaptation approach have focused on different aspects of homeless people’s behaviour. Some consider crime (Snow, Baker & Anderson 1989; Baron 2006), some focus on identity (Ruddick 1996; Arnold 2004), others examine subsistence strategies (Baldwin 1998), and some focus on the routines that homeless people develop (Mallett, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn & Rotheram-Borus 2004). Four interconnected propositions are common to most versions of the social adaptation argument, and these four propositions form the basis of our theoretical framework.

First, the social adaptation account contends that once people become homeless, they start to develop friendships with other homeless people and this provides a sense of ‘belonging’ that is often missing in their lives. For example, Grigsby, Baumann, Gregorich and Roberts-Grey (1990:152) argue that the establishment of new social ties is a critical element in the process of becoming ‘acculturated to homelessness as a functional way of life’.

Second, the social adaptation account draws attention to a range of sites where homeless people become involved in the homeless sub-culture. Various authors have argued that young people become involved in the homeless sub-culture in youth refuges and emergency accommodation (Hirst 1989; Smith 1995;

Fitzpatrick 2000; Mallett, Rosenthal & Myers 2001; Johnson 2006). In this paper, we propose that boarding houses are another important site where homeless people engage in the homeless sub-culture.

Third, the social adaptation argument contends that homeless people learn strategies from other homeless people that help them to survive homelessness. However, these practices can also undermine their attempts to return to permanent accommodation. Substance use is often a form of initiation into the homeless sub-culture and substance use can be a strategy for coping with a stressful environment. In both cases substance use may become substance abuse. Substance abuse can undermine people's ability to exit from homelessness (Johnson & Chamberlain 2009).

Fourth, the social adaptation account argues that the longer people are homeless, the more likely they are to sleep rough. Sleeping rough occurs because people have exhausted their limited accommodation options. When people start to sleep rough their physical appearance starts to decline and this further undermines people's self-esteem. For some people sleeping rough becomes 'normal' or a 'way of life' (Wallace 1965) and when this happens such individuals are said to have become 'chronically homeless' (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 1998; Wolch, Dear & Akita 1998).

This paper investigates each of these propositions. We argue that the social adaptation account helps to explain what happens when young people make the transition from youth to adult homelessness. However, we think the social adaptation thesis overstates the extent to which homeless people normatively accept homelessness as a way of life. What may appear as 'acceptance of a way of life' is often a form of 'pragmatic acceptance' that can change when alternatives are available. Finally, we make three policy suggestions.

#### **Data collection**

The information for this paper is drawn from two high volume services in inner Melbourne. Both agencies work with people who are 'at risk' of homelessness as well as those who are actually homeless. On average each agency works with 6,000 – 7,000 households each year. A case file is created for every household that presents to each service. At one agency the case files were on an electronic data base, but at the other agency paper files were used. We obtained permission to read these case files from both agencies and our university ethics committee.

At one agency the protocol was that clients must give written consent for us to examine their case file. At the other agency the protocol was that clients could opt out of the research by signing a form. The case files could not be de-identified because they were currently in use by staff at both services, but clients' names were not recorded and each record was allocated a number for identification purposes.

The case files contained a great deal of retrospective information about people's housing histories. It was often possible to follow people's experiences of homelessness over many months or years. As part of the research, project

staff at both agencies asked clients additional questions about the age at which they first became homeless, whether they had spent any time in the state-care and protection system, and whether they had had any previous episodes of homelessness.

We used the cultural definition of homelessness to code the data set (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 2003). This definition includes the following people as homeless: people without conventional accommodation (streets, squats etc); people staying temporarily with other households (because they have no usual address); people in emergency accommodation (refuges, shelters etc); and people in boarding houses.

We examined 5,526 cases from January 2005 to June 2006. We identified 334 cases where people had been coded at both agencies and these duplicate cases were removed from the database, along with six cases that contained insufficient information. This reduced the database to 5,186 households. Both agencies work primarily with adults, but we had information on 1,677 people who first became homeless when they were 18 or younger.

As others have noted, it is not easy to use quantitative data to determine how processes unfold. Therefore we supplement our analysis with qualitative information gathered from 65 in-depth interviews with homeless people. The 65 respondents were recruited from the participating agencies. Agency staff recruited people who were homeless (or had been homeless) and were willing to participate. Approval was obtained from our university ethics committee.

The interviews were with a cross-section of homeless people using the agencies and they matched the main sample on basic social characteristics such as age, gender and household type. There were 26 interviews with people who became homeless when they were 18 or younger. On average the interviews lasted for an hour and participants gave written consent. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for qualitative analysis. Where we use qualitative information we have changed the names of those concerned to ensure confidentiality.

We also identified three age cohorts so that we could examine changes over time. Our first age cohort was 'youth'. In the Australian literature the consensus is that 'youth' are 18 or younger (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 2003). Our second group were 'young adults' aged 19 to 24 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1989). These people are in transition, moving from 'subservient childhood to initiative-taking adulthood' (Rietveld 1993:52). Our final category was 'adults', defined as 25 or older.

**Table 1: Current age of sample**

	N	%
18 or under	35	2
19 – 24	394	24
25 or older	1,248	74
TOTAL	1,677	100

Table 1 shows that two per cent of our sample was still 18 or younger, 24 per cent were now young adults aged 19 to 24, and 74 per cent had made the transition from youth to adult homelessness. This sample is not representative of the youth homeless population because many teenagers return home and others move on to independent living (Milburn, Rosenthal, Rotheram-Borus, Mallett, Batterham, Rice & Solorio 2007). However, the sample is appropriate for our purposes, because we are concerned with the consequences for those who make the transition from youth to adult homelessness.

### **Duration**

The social adaptation account argues that the longer people are homeless, the more likely they are to adapt to homelessness as a way of life. First, we investigate whether most of our sample had a long-term problem with homelessness. After that we examine what happened to those who were long-term homeless.

The distinction between 'short-term' and 'long-term' homelessness is often made in the international literature (Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt & Matsueda 1993; Culhane & Hornburg 1997; Leal, Galanter, Dermatis & Westreich 1998; Johnson 2006). However, there is disagreement about how these categories should be operationalised. Some argue that a 'short-term' problem is three months or less (Rossi 1989); others argue that six months or less constitutes a 'short-term' problem (Rossiter, Mallett, Myers & Rosenthal 2003); and some claim that up to 12 months is 'short-term' (Leal et al. 1998).

Similarly, there is debate about what constitutes 'long-term' homelessness with some suggesting 12 months as a starting point (Leal et al. 1998; Phelan & Link 1999; Wong & Piliavin 2001). Others favour two years as 'long-term' (Rossi 1989) and some favour as long as nine years (Coleman 2001).

While any typology is ultimately a matter of judgment, for the purposes of this research short-term homelessness was classified as less than three months. This decision was based on our belief that more than 90 days without secure accommodation is not a short-term experience. With regard to long-term homelessness, there is an emerging convention in Australia that 12 months is an appropriate threshold and we have adopted this protocol (Chamberlain & Johnson 2002; Johnson 2006). This left a middle category – those who were homeless between three and 11 months – and we refer to this as medium-term homelessness. The idea of a transitional zone is important because it addresses the problem of being classified in the short-term population one day and in the long-term population the next.

The main issue when coding duration was incomplete information in some case files. For example a 28 year old male reported that he was 15 when he first became homeless, but we only had information that he had been homeless for four weeks on this occasion. This means that our information on duration underestimates the length of homelessness experienced by some people.

**Table 2: Duration of homelessness by age cohorts (per cent)**

	18 or under (N=35)	19 – 24 (N=394)	25 or older (N=1,248)	All (N=1,677)
Short term (less than 3 months)	52	17	6	9
Medium term (3 -11 months)	17	13	9	10
Long term (12 months or longer)	31	70	85	81
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Despite this underestimation, Table 2 shows that 70 per cent of the young adults reported a long term problem with homelessness and we know that just over one-third (37 per cent) of them had been homeless for two years or longer. Amongst those who had made the transition to adult homelessness, 85 per cent had a long-term problem and just over half (53 per cent) had been homeless for two years or longer.

### **New friends**

Next we focus on the consequences for those who made the transition to adult homelessness. The first contention of the social adaptation argument is that when young people make a permanent break from home and family, they often lose contact with friends and relatives who are housed. Many newly homeless young people are on their own and they are often confused and bewildered. As a result they search for new friendships in the homeless population (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 1998; Fitzpatrick 2000:75). We use qualitative data to illustrate the importance of these new friends.

When Ken was 14 he left home temporarily following a beating from his father and started to move from one friend's place to another. It is through 'couch surfing' and 'hanging around' that young people meet others in similar circumstances. By the time Ken left home permanently, he had:

... made social links with a lot of people who considered themselves homeless so it was easier to make the transition.

In a similar vein, Kylie who had been 'in and out' of her mother's care for most of her life, said that when she made a permanent break from home she soon knew:

... a whole network of people ... so you knew where the squats were ... you had a community around you.

Many people in our sample engaged with other homeless people because it provided them with a sense of belonging that was often missing in their lives. These relationships also served a number of practical functions that assisted inexperienced people to get by in an unpredictable environment. Through these networks individuals secure information that helps them to survive homelessness, and a common theme was that learning what 'not to do' is of crucial importance. Joan was told 'not to sleep alone for starters', while Ken learnt when to 'keep his mouth shut':

If I hadn't listened to them then I'd be stuffed. I probably would have got jumped on in my sleep or something like that.

Ken did as he was told and soon gained the confidence of people around him:

They started treating me like a mate ... so I started hanging out with them.

Interactions with other homeless people are an important source of information on 'where' and 'how' to secure material resources such as food and emergency accommodation. Getting access to these material resources also influences patterns of interaction among homeless people. Because young people cannot rely on family for economic and social support, many start using welfare agencies and much of the information they learn about these services comes from other homeless people. Through interactions with other homeless people Tanya found out:

... where to have lunch, where to have tea or if you want to grab some food vouchers go to here or go to there. That sort of thing.

Mixing with other homeless people also helps to avoid becoming isolated. Tanya said:

... you could mix with some people so you didn't feel as though you were completely on your own.

Our qualitative data support the social adaptation argument that when young people make a 'permanent break' from home they start to have sustained contact with other homeless people (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 1998; Fitzpatrick 2000:75) .

### **Boarding houses and substance use**

The second contention of the social adaptation account is that there are a range of sites where homeless people get together, exchange information and develop new friendships. It is well documented that many young people 'learn the ropes' while they are in refuges and other forms of short term accommodation (Hirst 1989; Smith 1995; Mallett et al. 2001; Johnson 2006). In this paper we argue that boarding houses are another important site where homeless people forge new friendships and engage with other homeless people.

The third contention of the social adaptation argument is that it is in sites such as boarding houses that young people learn practices which undermine their attempts to return to permanent accommodation. One important practice is substance use which is often a form of initiation into the homeless sub-culture as well as a way of coping with homelessness. Homeless people often participate in substance use in boarding houses and this can undermine their ability to exit from homelessness.

In the inner suburbs of Australia’s major cities, boarding houses are an integral part of the system of emergency accommodation and welfare agencies often provide vouchers for boarding houses. Table 3 shows that 94 per cent of those who had made the transition from youth to adult homelessness had stayed in a boarding house, as had 78 per cent of the young adults.

**Table 3: Been in boarding house by age cohort (per cent)**

	18 or under (N=35)	19 – 24 (N=394)	25 or older (N=1,248)	All (N=1,677)
Been in boarding house	46	78	94	89

In boarding houses people learn about the rules and practices that structure interactions within the homeless subculture, and between homeless people and mainstream institutions. Although many of the social networks homeless people form are opportunistic in nature (Snow & Anderson 1993), the crucial point is that boarding houses are an institutional site through which a broad confluence of sub-cultural activity flows.

People have to learn the implicit rules that govern behaviour in boarding houses if they are to survive. For newly homeless people it is often a case of ‘sink or swim’ when they first go into a boarding house:

There were all kinds of people ... criminals, prostitutes, drug addicts, alcoholics, mentally ill people (Teresa).

I was in with these real hard people for the first time and I was going to bed with a half smashed bottle – we were all in one room (Sam).

Violence is common in boarding houses. When a resident broke the number one rule – ‘mind your own fucking business’ – and spoke to the police about an incident, other residents targeted him. Tom saw what happened next:

They were smashing his head into the bricks. And then they got into a circle and starting kicking him.

Although most people dislike boarding houses, getting out of them is difficult. One reason is that the cost of rooming house accommodation is high and people frequently pay more than 50 per cent of their income for a room (Gallagher & Gove 2007). For people on low incomes this makes returning to conventional accommodation difficult and often traps them in boarding houses for long periods.

People develop friendships with other people in boarding houses to counteract loneliness and isolation. In an often violent environment these friendships can be critical. People ‘backed each other up’ and many friendships were forged on the basis of their shared experiences. Joan found that:

I get along better with other homeless people. I don’t know why. I’m more comfortable with people who have had a tough time.

As Rice et al. (2005) found in their longitudinal study of homeless young people, networks composed largely of people who were housed were steadily transformed into networks composed largely of other homeless people.

There was, however, an obvious tension given the social context in which these friendships emerge. Many people recognised that their friendships were based on circumstances rather than anything else. Peter said:

... with these people you can't make ... true friends.

Friendships with other homeless people, opportunistic or not, are important. A number of researchers have identified the role that mentors play in introducing young people to the homeless sub-culture (Hirst 1989; Smith 1995; Auerswald & Eyre 2002). When young homeless people 'hook up' with more experienced people they are introduced to new social practices. In boarding houses there is widespread acceptance of illicit drug use as a normal recreational activity and drugs are 'hard to avoid'. As Palik said, 'If I wanted drugs, all I had to do was walk down the corridor and knock on the door'.

Many young people reported that they had had their first experience with 'hard' drugs (opiates and amphetamines) in a boarding house. Mei said that she only 'started getting into drugs and stuff' when she was living in an inner-city boarding house. Tess said she started to use:

... because everybody I was surrounded by were literally doing it.

Joan was more explicit about the influence of homeless peers:

Just peer pressure, I suppose. People around me were doing it and I wanted to fit in.

We operationalised substance abuse following the work of Mallett, Edwards, Keys, Myers and Rosenthal (2003). Substance abuse is when drug use dominates a person's life at the expense of other activities and has negative mental and/or physical side effects. We classified people as having a substance abuse problem if they met at least one of the following criteria:

- They had approached the agency for referral to a drug treatment service
- They were currently in, or had been in, a detoxification or rehabilitation centre
- The case notes identified substance abuse as an issue

**Table 4: Developed substance abuse problems while homeless by age cohort (per cent)**

	18 or under (N=35)	19 – 24 (N=394)	25 or older (N=1,248)	All (N=1,677)
Developed substance abuse	23	48	65	60

Table 4 shows that a quarter (23 per cent) of those aged 18 or younger had a substance abuse problem, whereas half (48 per cent) of the young adults reported substance abuse. Among those who had made the transition from youth to adult homelessness, two-thirds (65 per cent) had substance use issues.

For many young people drug use is commonly a form of ‘initiation’ or a ‘rite of passage’ into the homeless subculture (Fitzpatrick 2000; Auerswald & Eyre 2002; Hartwell 2003). According to Auerswald and Eyre (2002:1503), drug use is an important way that young people affirm their identity ‘as an insider to street culture’. By engaging in the social practices of the homeless subculture and interacting with others who also have substance use problems, other homeless people can provide a measure of support and a sense of interpersonal validation (Snow & Anderson 1993).

Other people start to use drugs more heavily to deal with the harsh reality that confronts them. Researchers commonly refer to this as a ‘coping response’ (Neil & Fopp 1993; Reid & Klee 2000; Kennedy & Fitzpatrick 2001). Toby said that the only way:

I could deal with that place was to use drugs and I did use them.

For Andrew using drugs helped him to forget about his troubles. Using drugs was:

... a classic way to hide. You just hide away from everything that way ... You take your mind off everything else because the one thing you’ve got to do each day is make sure you get your hit.

For some young people drug use begins primarily as a form of initiation into the homeless sub-culture, but for others drug use is more an adaptive response to an unpredictable and stressful environment. In both cases, substance use may become substance abuse.

The social adaptation argument contends that for many people drug use is a social practice that sustains friendships in the homeless population. At the same time, the social adaptation account contends that drug abuse ‘locks’ people into homelessness because they become pre-occupied with four inter-related issues: raising money, ‘scoring’, ‘using’ and finding ‘somewhere to crash’. According to Snow and Anderson (1993:182) homeless people are often overwhelmed by the ‘consuming character of the immediate present’. When people have a ‘present orientation’ it means that the contingencies of homeless life take precedence. Issues like organising housing – which require planning and resources – typically get put to one side.

Toby described how ‘raising money’ consumed his attention from the moment he woke up:

You get up and then you think, 'How am I going to get out of it today?' How am I going to score? How much money do I have? What possibilities are there to get money? Is there anything I can pawn? Do I know anyone who is getting paid who will lend me money?

The 'business of raising money' has a significant influence on people's day-to-day lives because the cost of illicit drugs is high. People have to devote large amounts of time to securing money:

You go to sleep, wake up and do the same thing again ... just trying to get money so you can score. Everyday it's the same routine (Andrew).

People employ a range of strategies to raise money (Baron 1999; Rowe 2002; Baron 2006). Some shoplift, while others pull scams that are learnt from other homeless people in the course of 'hanging around' (Johnson 2006). These practices provide structure and purpose for the day (Hogan 2001), and people's priorities are firmly located in the 'here and now'.

When homeless people have substance use issues their day-to-day life is structured by the need to raise money and things like food and paying for accommodation commonly fall by the wayside.

### **Sleeping rough and accepting homelessness**

The fourth contention of the social adaptation argument is that the longer people are homeless, the more likely they are to sleep rough. When people start to sleep rough it is commonly assumed they have started to accept homelessness as a 'way of life'.

Table 5 shows that three-quarters (74 per cent) of those who had made the transition from youth to adult homelessness had slept rough. This is probably an underestimate because the information may not have been recorded in all case files. In contrast, half (54 per cent) of the young adults had slept rough as had one-quarter (26 per cent) of those who were 18 or younger.

**Table 5: Has slept rough by age cohort (per cent)**

	18 or under (N=35)	19 – 24 (N=394)	25 plus (N=1,248)	All (N=1,677)
Has slept rough	26	54	74	68

These findings confirm that the longer people are homeless, the more likely they are to sleep rough. Our qualitative data also indicated that many people with substance use issues end up squatting. Ken described a squat in suburban Melbourne:

It was an old nursing home ... walls ripped out, floorboards pulled up ... there were a few old hospital beds ... people were shooting up ... yeah, it was a huge shooting gallery.

Most people also reported that sleeping rough resulted in a drop in their self esteem. According to John:

I looked like a real rough nut ... didn't brush my hair, never had showers. I looked like a street person I suppose ... looked disgusting and everyone could see I'd changed. I ended up staying in this building. It had nothing in it, it had a mattress, it had no electricity.

Others tried to avoid being seen by the public because they did not want to be negatively judged. Sarah told us:

I remember one time ... there was somebody walking their dog ... I was so embarrassed. She must have known we were sleeping in the car, so that's when we started to move around.

When people's physical health, appearance and self-esteem decline, it often works to reinforce their exclusion from mainstream institutions.

This often leads to the argument that young people who make the transition to adult homelessness accept homelessness as a 'way of life' (Grigsby et al. 1990; Wolch et al. 1998). In our view, this proposition is not substantiated empirically.

**Table 6: Two or more episodes of homelessness by age cohort (per cent)**

	18 or under (N=35)	19 – 24 (N=394)	25 or older (N=1,248)	All (N=1,677)
Two or more episodes	46	70	88	83

Table 6 shows that 88 per cent of those who had made the transition from youth to adult homelessness had had two or more episodes of homelessness, as had 70 per cent of the young adults and 46 per cent of those aged 18 or younger. Most teenagers who had made the transition to adult homelessness did not have a linear, continuous experience of homelessness, but rather one that was periodically broken by 'exits' and then a subsequent housing breakdown. Most people try to get out of homelessness if they think the opportunity is available.

Longitudinal studies in the United States also suggest that episodic homelessness is more common 'than continuous homelessness' (Sosin et al. 1990:171). The fact that many people experience episodic homelessness raises a theoretical puzzle. The social adaptation argument contends that the longer people are homeless the more they accept homelessness as a 'way of life'. If this is the case, there should not be widespread evidence of people attempting to get out of homelessness.

In our view, the thrust of the social adaptation account is right: the longer people are homeless, the more difficult it becomes to get out of homelessness. However, the social adaptation account overstates the extent to which the long-term homeless normatively accept homelessness as a 'way of life':

You never get used to it ... You do it because there's no way out ... As soon as you get a chance at accommodation you take it (Alex).

It was just too depressing to get used to ... (Sandy)

Most people who have a long-term problem do not endorse homelessness as a preferred lifestyle. On the contrary, they pragmatically accept their situation and their 'acceptance' is 'continually being constructed and reconstructed over time' (Zufferey & Kerr 2005:346). This 'pragmatic acceptance' can change rapidly once people perceive that alternatives are available and then they want conventional accommodation. People who experience long-term homelessness can both 'get out' and 'stay out' of homelessness if they are given the right material and emotional support.

## Discussion

In this paper we have examined a sample of 1,677 people who became homeless when they were 18 or younger. Three-quarters of the young people were now adults aged 25 or older and one-quarter were young adults aged 19 to 24. Our findings corroborate two key propositions in the social adaptation account.

First, the social adaptation model contends that involvement in the homeless sub-culture is important for young people who often lack a sense of 'belonging' following the breakdown of their family relationships. The sub-culture provides them with friends and a sense of camaraderie, as well as information on how to survive in a hostile environment. Our findings corroborate these claims. We have also shown that boarding houses are an important site for sub-cultural activity.

Second, the social adaptation argument contends that involvement in the homeless sub-culture is a 'double edged sword' (Grigsby et al. 1990). The thesis contends that the longer young people are homeless the more likely they are to engage in social practices that perpetuate homelessness (Wolch et al. 1998:447). We found that two-thirds (65 per cent) of those who were now in the adult population had developed substance use issues. We also found that 74 per cent in the adult population had slept rough.

These findings provide a rationale for three policy recommendations. First, we focus on two policy arguments about early intervention. Then we make a point regarding long-term support.

In recent years, there has been a gradual shift in youth policy towards early intervention. It is known that most young people have their first experience of homelessness when they are still at school (O'Connor 1989; Crane and Brannock 1996; Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1998), and early intervention programs aim to prevent homeless students dropping out of school and joining the homeless sub-culture.

Our first policy point relates to the Commonwealth Government's Reconnect program. Reconnect targets young people aged 12 to 18 at the earliest stages of homelessness and works with teenagers and their parents to facilitate

family reconciliation. The evaluation of Reconnect found that the program was effective at assisting young people and their families to reconcile their differences:

Reconnect intervention has a major effect in achieving family reconciliation by increasing the capacity of families to manage conflict and to improve communication (Department of Family and Community Services 2003:8).

There are currently 98 Reconnect services across the country with 200 early intervention workers. It has been estimated that 50 per cent of communities do not have a Reconnect program (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2004:41-43), but we know from census data that homelessness occurs in most communities (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003). If we want to prevent more young people engaging with the homeless sub-culture, then Reconnect should be expanded to have national coverage

**Table 7: Number in state care and protection, selected groups (per cent)**

	Youth aged 10 to 17*	Homeless secondary students**	Homeless adults and young adults^
State care & protection	0.5	15	42

\* Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006: 34)

^ Information on 72 per cent of cases

\*\* Source: MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2008: 22)

The second policy suggestion is that some early intervention strategies should be targeted at particular groups of young people. In the American literature, it is reported that teenagers who have been in state care and protection are over represented in the homeless population (Blau 1992; Piliavin et al. 1993; Penzerro 2003; Zugazaga 2004). Table 7 shows that 0.5 per cent of young Australians aged 10 to 17 were in ‘out of home care’ under a state care and protection order in 2005. The national census of homeless school students found that 15 per cent of homeless students had been in state care (Mackenzie & Chamberlain 2008:22). In our sample, 42 per cent of the adults had been in state care (Table 7). Young people who have been in state care are at greater risk of becoming homeless than most teenagers, and they are at much greater risk of making the transition from youth to adult homelessness. Our second policy point is that some early intervention strategies should target young people who have higher risk levels.

The third policy point relates to the provision of adequate long-term support for those who have made the transition from youth to adult homelessness. Our research found that most of these young people had experienced long-term homelessness and many had developed substance abuse issues in the population. The social adaptation account implies that they had accepted homelessness as a way of life. However, we found that 88 per cent of this group had previously returned to conventional accommodation. In the past, they had tried to get out of homelessness, but it had always been followed by housing breakdown.

Young people who make the transition to adult homelessness need long-term support when they return to conventional accommodation. They are usually unemployed when they are re-housed and they do not have strong social networks in the housed population. Without a meaningful role to perform and new social networks to engage with, some people find it difficult to disengage from the homeless subculture when it is their primary social network. A failure to disengage can compromise their capacity to stay out of homelessness, particularly if they return to substance use. Long-term support is necessary because it takes time for most people to rebuild their lives. People often have a wide range of problems that have to be resolved including: overcoming the trauma that lead to homelessness; staying 'clean' and sober; rebuilding personal self-confidence; re-establishing domestic routines; and rebuilding relationships with family where this is possible. Recovery is a process that takes time.

The Supported Accommodation Program (SAAP) in general provides short term support to homeless people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2006:xi). A more realistic approach to the provision of support is necessary. Unless governments fund ongoing support to help formerly homeless people to remain housed, it is clear that many people will experience further episodes of homelessness. When this happens the costs to the individual and the community are high.

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