5

Youth homelessness does not involve a particular type of young person but a process of events that happen in a young person's life. The 'youth homeless career' is a typology of that process for young people, tracing the main changes that can occur following family breakdown. Young adults can become homeless when their relationship with a partner fails and they lose their accommodation because they are forced to leave the family home. Or, some young people can become homeless due to accumulating debt and a financial crisis resulting in loss of housing. Melbourne University's Project i examined the experiences of homeless young people in close detail in a longitudinal study of pathways through homelessness. The focus on 'careers' and pathways sensitises policy decision-makers about when to intervene and distinguishes different interventions along a time dimension. The emergence of 'early intervention' was bound up with the understanding of homelessness as a process.

Chapter 5 | Homelessness as a Process

5.1   One of the most important shifts in thinking about homelessness is the now widely accepted view that homelessness should be thought of as a process – of becoming homeless, being homeless, but also re-establishing a livelihood and a place in the community after being homeless for a period of time.

5.2   Prior to the HREOC report in 1989, (the Burdekin Report) youth homelessness was described in terms of what caused homelessness, the reasons why young people became homeless and the state of being homeless. During the 1980s, youth homelessness was generally depicted in the media in terms of stereotypes of 'street kids'. Whereas, in the Burdekin Report there was a great deal of detail on the circumstances experienced by 100 young people interviewed by Dr Ian O'Connor for the Inquiry, the stereotypical representations of homeless youth was not challenged in any major way. However, the report distinguished between young people 'temporarily detached' from family, who leave home after a domestic altercation but return after cooling off[1]. Their period of homelessness is for 'quite short periods'. Then there are young people who leave home but require assistance only temporarily and they resolve their issues relatively quickly – within weeks or over a few months. However a third group experience homelessness over an extended period of time and might be described as 'chronically homeless'

5.3   MacKenzie and Chamberlain developed a sociological account of homelessness proposing the concept of a 'homeless career'. They first developed this characterisation in the early 1990s[2] when they examined the temporal issue of how long young people experienced homelessness. They had noticed that not all young people who presented to the inner city Melbourne information and referral service The Info Deli seemed to fit the 'street kids' typology. Some were recently homeless but travelled to the inner city and
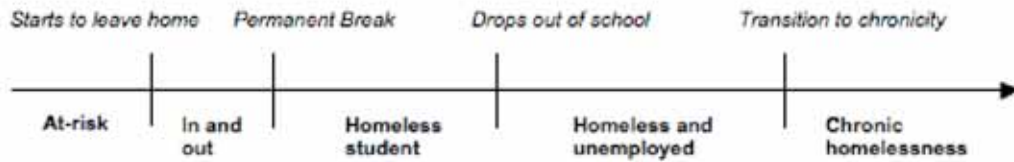
others had been homeless for much less than one year.

5.4   Mackenzie and Chamberlain's 'homeless career' is a sociological representation. As a sociological term, the 'career' refers to an ideal-typical process of transitional stages involved in the development of forms of biographical identity[3]. The concept of a 'homeless career' describes the process of change as young people become homeless and pass through various phases before they develop a self-identity as a chronically homeless person. The homeless career 'calls attention to the factors that influence movement from one stage (of the process) to another'[4]. The earliest representations of homeless careers were linear trajectories pointing towards 'chronic homelessness' where homelessness had become a way of life or a very long-term predicament in someone's life. However, homeless typologies are as much about points of exit from homelessness as they are about becoming and remaining homeless. Most young people who become homeless will recover more stable accommodation and their pathway out of homelessness and the duration of their homeless experience depends very much on how much support and assistance they receive and how timely that is at critical junctures. Only a minority will traverse the entire career and become chronically homeless.

5.5   Later work delineated three career types – a youth career, a family breakdown career and a housing crisis career. The youth career is strictly what happens when young people exit the family home due to a breakdown in familial relations and become homeless. The family breakdown career can involve young people in their own family households where relations between the young adult partners breaks down often involving domestic violence and a parent, usually with children, becomes homeless as a result. Lastly, the housing crisis is where individuals or family become homeless as a result of accumulating debt leading to eviction, loss of accommodation and homelessness.

5.6   Young people who become homeless during their teenage years experience conflict within the family leading to a breakdown in family relationships between parents and children. The conflict can take many forms and range from conflict over restrictions and rules to physical violence and sexual abuse. Sometimes, someone in the family suffers mental health issues and this can bring relationships under stress to the point of breakdown. Similarly, if a family member has drug or alcohol problems this can eventually reach a crisis point. At first running away from home or staying with friends (ie in and out) may continue to the point where the young person finally makes a 'permanent break' from their family. Many young people do not immediately drop out of school. They stay with friend's families and try to attend school. Help at this point can sometimes achieve reconciliation with family, or if that is not possible, the student can be supported to live independently while continuing at school.
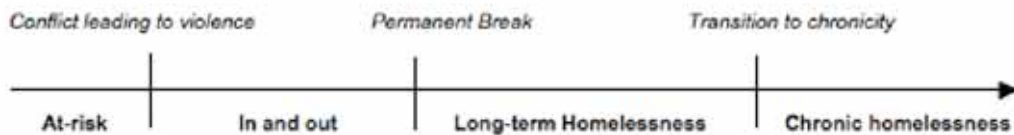
Fig 1: Homeless Youth Career

Starts to leave home	*Permanent Break*	*Drops out of school*	*Transition to chronicity*
At-risk	In and out	Homeless student	Homeless and unemployed	Chronic homelessness

5.7   The family breakdown career is where adults in families usually with children experience a breakdown in their relationship. Conflict mounts and intensifies often accompanied by family violence and eventually one party – usually a woman with children – leaves the broken conflicted relationship and becomes homeless. A component of SAAP provides shelter and protection for such women escaping domestic violence. Women escaping domestic violence may leave and return many times before abandoning their partner.

5.8   In many ways, MacKenzie and Chamberlain's 'family breakdown career' is analogous to the youth career in that the breakdown in human relationships is the main driver for becoming homeless.

Fig 2: Family Breakdown Career

Conflict leading to violence	*Permanent Break*	*Transition to chronicity*
At-risk	In and out	Long-term Homelessness	Chronic homelessness

The permanent break is a choice made under duress usually after a long history of conflict and violence. About one third of SAAP clients are women/ families escaping domestic violence.

5.9   The third homeless career identified by Mackenzie and Chamberlain was called the Housing Crisis Career where accumulating debt eventually reaches a point where eviction occurs or the leasee 'does a runner' and the individual or family loses their accommodation and becomes homeless. This typology emphasizes that in a situation of poverty people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of a sudden loss of income due to illness, loss of job or bad financial behaviour. The main driver of homelessness here is the accumulation of debt even though in most cases there are also other issues as well.

Fig 3: Housing Crisis Career

Beginning of debt accumulation		*Loss of accommodation*		*Transition to chronicity*	
Poverty	At-risk	Long-term Homelessness		Chronic homelessness	

5.10   Families at risk of homelessness were the target group of a small FaCSIA program of eight services, one in each state and territory jurisdiction, called the Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice program. This initiative was theoretically underpinned by the Housing Crisis Career typology. An evaluation of the HOME Advice program estimated that the number of families at risk of homelessness ranged from a conservative 7800 to a more realistic 15,800 at a point in time, however over a year, the number of highly at-risk families could be at least 15,000 to 30,0005.

5.11   The delineation of 'homeless careers' identifies theoretically the key trajectories by which people become homeless. In reality, homelessness is a complex process involving many factors and issues.

5.12   Another important study that has deepened the understanding of youth homelessness as a process has been Project i. This was a five-year study of homeless young people in Melbourne and Los Angeles from 2000-2005. The study undertook a longitudinal follow-up of newly homeless young people using surveys and interviews. The sample comprised 165 newly homeless (77 males and 88 females) and 266 experienced homeless young people (266 males and 261 females) who were recruited from 95 services across metropolitan Melbourne between December 2000 and August 2002. Follow-up surveys were undertaken with the 165 newly homeless young people at 3,6,12, 18 and 24-month intervals. Much of the analysis has been produced on the basis of the interviews with 40 young people from the newly homeless sample 18 months after they were first contacted.

5.13   Mallett and Rosenthal found that young people became homeless either because of problematic experiences (running away) or a desire for a life change (running to). They found one third of young people left because of family violence, which in most cases had occurred over a long period of time. Another third reported parental alcohol or drug use as the main reason they had left, while another third left home from 'a desire for independence and to loosen the strictures of parental control'[6].

5.14   The researcher decided that 'family conflict' as a reason for leaving home was too broad and focused on the four most common reasons for leaving: domestic violence, personal or parental drug and alcohol use, personal anxiety and depression and finally a desire for adventure and independence. In the sample about one third became homeless because of violence in the family and in most cases this had been happening for a long-time. One third cited drug and /or alcohol use by themselves or parents as

the main reason, while another one third left home seeking independence. In some case this was driven by stressful conditions at home. A small number of young people said that anxiety and depression were the main reason they left home. Despite the small size of the sample the longitudinal combination of survey and interview with follow-up over time, illuminates in closer detail the processes whereby young people experience homelessness7.

5.15   The Key Centre for Women's Health in Society presented evidence indicating that young homeless people and the families from which they originate are not homogenous, but can be usefully grouped.8 In Moving Out, Moving On, a report of selected results from Project i, the Centre's collaborative study with the Centre of Community Health at the University of California, the Centre suggests that young homeless people in identifiable living situations appear to have distinct clusters of family background and personal issues.9 The Centre uncovered four broad family background pictures that corresponded with the particular living situations the young people in the study found themselves in 18 months after they were newly homeless.

5.16   Street Based Group - the first and smallest group, described as unstable homeless, had been living on the streets or in a service for six months or less. Most of the group shared a family background of poverty, neglect and violence with protective services' involvement.

5.17   Service-based group - the second group, described as stable homeless, had been living in a service for six months or more. More than half were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, more than half were born overseas and a minority were raised by grand-parents before joining their mothers in Australia. Poverty and emotional deprivation weren't issues in these young people's family backgrounds. None of the parents abused illicit drugs and parental alcohol problems and parental mental illness was an exception. A minority of families had experienced a protective services intervention and there was a level of episodic violence from mothers. There was also a lot of cross-cultural and intergenerational conflict. A number of these young people had been thrown out of home.

5.18   Part-time family home group - the third group, described as unstable home, had been living back in their family home, in shared accommodation or in their partner's family home for less than six months. These young people came from diverse backgrounds. In most cases there was little violence, parental mental illness or substance abuse, but there were exceptions.

5.19   Family home/private rental group - the fourth and largest group, described as stable home, had been living back in a family home (including extended family or partner's family), in private rental or in public housing for six months or longer. Parents tended not to have mental health or substance abuse problems and where family violence had occurred it appeared to be episodic during times of crisis. A very small minority came from chaotic families that had experienced protective services' interventions. A desire for independence and adventure and conflict at home were common reasons for leaving.

5.20   Homelessness is not necessarily an experience that only happens once. For some people there are successive crises with the result that secure accommodation is lost at different points in time. Catherine Robinson10 described this phenomenon as 'iterative homelessness'. This concept highlighted that some people may move in and out of various forms of shelter and accommodation on different occasions so much so that transience is not just through different forms of temporary accommodation but also through situations that would be described as independent living such as a share house.

5.21   Transience is the predominate mode of many people's housing/ sheltered/ homeless lifestyle. Robinson specially described cases where an on-going mental health condition was the underlying cause of the 'iterative homelessness' experience.

> *Iterative homelessness is a somewhat imperfect term offered in this research to encourage a conceptualisation of homelessness as repeated uprooting, as a process of repeated attempts to establish a home physically and emotionally. Broadly, the term can be used to refer to the experience of homelessness, which is ongoing and may involve moving from one form of accommodation to the next. Some people may experience this iterative or repeated cycle of losing, searching and maintaining accommodation for a significant part of their lives.*[11]

5.22   The similar concept was mentioned by Mackenzie and Chamberlain who referred to 'episodic homelessness' where homelessness is 'interrupted by relative short periods of stability'[12]. However, the suggestion here was that some people do spend quite long periods living independently although financially precarious and perhaps with continuing issues until such time as another crisis causes them to lose their accommodation. Analysis of the SAAP data identifies some individuals and families with mental health and drug and alcohol issues, who leave SAAP for insecure housing, as potentially being vulnerable to becoming homeless again. The HOME advice evaluation discussed a sub group of at-risk families who had been homeless but who were experiencing another crisis threatening their housing[13].

Summary

5.23   The conceptualisation of youth homelessness as a process of changes in a young person's life course renders homelessness as a dynamic. Young people become homeless at some point and experience homelessness for varying periods of time. Young people move out of a situation of homelessness generally with assistance. The homeless youth career and the various pathway typologies lay out a sequence, however, the process might be best thought of as a cycle – marginalisation from the community through homelessness but then reconnection and re-integration back into the community. This way of thinking sensitises policy to the opportunities for intervention along the temporal continuum of the homeless experience – prevention and early intervention before homelessness or at the earliest stage, crisis intervention and transition support while homeless, and finally post-vention support after homelessness. The complaints from SAAP services about exit points[14] draws attention to the difficulty of securing affordable accommodation for a homeless young person who needs independent living arrangements. Support is available while a young person is in the homelessness service system, but after leaving

transitional or medium- and long-term SAAP services the capacity for post-vention support is virtually non-existent. Recycling back through the system is not uncommon (see Chapter 15). Early intervention became a visible position in the policy debate after 10 years and has become widely accepted, yet the Reconnect program has not been expanded to be able to deliver the full-potential of early intervention and prevention (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 13).

ENDNOTES

1   Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) Our Homeless Children, AGPS, Canberra, p.43

2   Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie, D. (1994) 'Temporal Dimensions of Youth Homelessness', Australian Journal of Social Issues, 29(1), 1-25.

3   See Goffman, E. (1961) Asylums, Harmondsworth: Penguin; Becker, H. (1963) Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance, New York: Oxford University Press; Snow, D. & Anderson, L. (1993) Down on their luck: A study of Homeless Street People, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; and Hutson, S. and Liddiard, M. (1994) Youth Homelessness: The construction of a social issue, London: MacMillan.

4   Snow, D. & Anderson, L. (1993) Down on their luck: A study of Homeless Street People, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p.273.

5   MacKenzie et. al. (2007) Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program evaluation report 2007, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

6   Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., Keys, D. & Myers, P. (2004) Moving Out, Moving On: Key findings.

7   Ibid.

8   S. Mallett, Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne, Melbourne Day 14, 24-04-2007.

9   Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., Keys, D. & Myers, P. (2006) Moving out, moving on: young people's pathways in and through homelessness in Melbourne, Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne and Center for Community Health, University of California Los Angeles, Unpublished Manuscript; S. Mallett, D. Rosenthal, D. Keys, P. Myers, A. Tattam, September (2006) Moving out, moving on: key findings, Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne in partnership with the Office of Housing, Victorian Department of Human Services, available at <http://www.projecti.org.au/ research/momo_keyfindings.pdf>.

10 Robinson, C. (2003) Understanding iterative homelessness: the case of people with mental disorders, AHURI final report no. 45, Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

11 Ibid. p.3.

12 MacKenzie, D. & Chamberlain, C. (2003) Homeless Careers: Pathways in and out of homelessness, Melbourne: Swinburne and RMIT Universities, p.27.

13 Mackenzie, D. Desmond, K. and A. Steen (2007) Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program Evaluation Report 2007, Canberra: FaCSIA, p.46.

14 Fopp, R. et. al. (2004) Getting Out and Staying Out: Pathways to Independent Living: Best Practice, Critical Interventions and Strategies for Addressing Homelessness in South Australia, AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin, Adelaide: AHURI Southern Research Centre.