

CHAPTER 22

ROLE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Teachers are teachers. They're there to teach you, not to help you with your problems.

(Marion, aged 17, quoted by I.O'Connor, *Most of us have got a lot to say and we know what we are talking about': Children's and Young People's Experiences of Homelessness* (1988) at 179.)

The most common reason for youth to seek...services were family problems. The second were school problems. In fact, these two often serve to compound each other.

(Ms Deborah Shore, Executive Director, Sasha Bruce Youthwork Inc., a major community-based program for homeless children in Washington DC, United States of America.)

INTRODUCTION

22.1 Some homeless young people continue their schooling, often from very unsuitable and unstable accommodation, while others may have been truanting for years before leaving home. Probably the majority leave home and school almost simultaneously. Where the homeless young person has not already severed ties with schooling, it is extremely difficult to maintain continuous attendance and participation in the education system. Most homeless children, as a result, have poor academic records and few skills which would assist them to obtain even unskilled employment in a competitive labour market.

22.2 The minimum school leaving age in all States and Territories is 15 years (except in Tasmania, where it is 16). An increasingly significant proportion of the young homeless population is younger than 15. Moreover, the Federal Government has a policy of encouraging students to continue their schooling beyond the minimum school leaving age. Again, however, a significant proportion of young homeless people is aged under 18 years. In this chapter we consider the role the education system itself may play in causing the homelessness of some students and consider whether schools could, and should, take a role in preventing homelessness. We then discuss the barriers to continued education for homeless children and young people and again ask whether the education authorities have a role in helping homeless or unsupported students to surmount these barriers.

SCHOOL AS A FACTOR IN HOMELESSNESS

22.3 Both the evidence presented to the Inquiry and recent studies have revealed a number of ways in which schools can contribute to child and youth homelessness. They include irrelevant curricula, poor teacher-student relationships, inflexible and alienating institutional structures, rejection or neglect of under-achievers and, more directly, suspension and expulsion of difficult students. It was recently reported, for example, that 'the structure and organisation of schools may contribute to early school leaving and subsequent departure from home': A number of the 100 homeless children and young people in O'Connor's survey described very unhappy experiences at school.

The process[es] of marginalization, rejection and exclusion experienced in their families were also reflected in their school experiences.'

Some of those surveyed blamed their poor academic performances and their accounts suggest that their schools were able to offer them little support and had little tolerance for their lack of achievement.' Other respondents mentioned their lack of acceptance by their peers, and Shelley told of her rejection by a teacher.

My teacher turned around to me and she said, 'Why don't you go back where you come from?'
And I looked at her and I was shocked, you know. She goes, 'This class was a good class
until you turned up to it' ⁴

Shelley left school at 13.

22.4 Curricula developed for the mainstream are, in some States, imposed on all with little account taken of the difficulties facing those children at risk of becoming homeless and of their learning needs. In the Northern Territory, the Inquiry was told:

...we do not have sufficient specialist services within our schools and this means that the schools largely are catering for the middle bunch, the so-called normal kids. We do not cater very well for the kids that do not fall into that middle bunch.'

A young homeless person told the Inquiry:

Schooling is one thing — learning all your maths and arithmetic and that, but learning how to cope with life is something that has got to come through practice, and there is just no education about life, I find, for young people at all.'

22.5 Many students respond to these difficulties by truanting. The Inquiry was told that truanting can ultimately lead to homelessness due to conflict in the home, early school leaving and resultant unemployment, and frustration and alienation. O'Connor reported that underachievement at school and truancy caused family conflict for some homeless young people which was serious enough to be a significant factor in their leaving home.' The Inquiry was told:

Many of the children who are experiencing difficulties at home and school...will ultimately enter the welfare and judicial process. They increasingly feel alienated from mainstream society, drift into crime and a general sense of hopelessness. Many will eventually refuse to attend school, leave or be evicted from home and end up on the streets.'

In New South Wales it was estimated in 1985 that at least 22,000 children were absent from school each day without any known reason.' Recent evidence suggests this disturbingly high figure has increased.'

22.6 The Inquiry was told that, far from catering for students at risk of becoming homeless, schools often 'cope' with difficult students by suspending and expelling them, propelling them into homelessness. Suspension is even used as a punishment for truancy.

...schools. ...tend to be fairly straight down the line. [They] have often absolved themselves of any responsibility for these children. They are expelled..."

In Perth a witness stated:

...we now have a situation where our principals can get away with kicking young people out of schools and that is happening very commonly now, and without there being, within the education system, very good options for ways of helping young people to complete their schooling, and particularly those young people that really just will not follow the herd, that just will not be there from 9.00am 'til 3.00pm.¹²

A Victorian witness told the Inquiry:

The education system...isolates young people who do not achieve and then it prevents access when they are deemed too difficult. Once they are out it is very, very difficult to get back

22.7 In some cases children younger than the minimum school leaving age are denied access to education. In the Greater Newcastle area, the Inquiry was told:

...there are 200 plus young people under the age of...15...who are suspended from school but not expelled, who are unable to return to school after their period of suspension is over.¹⁴

Some of these children are as young as 12.⁵

EDUCATION PROSPECTS WHILE HOMELESS

22.19 O'Connor reported that some of the young people in his sample of 100 tried to continue their schooling after leaving home (see Chapter 5, The Experience of Homelessness). Most, however, find it impossible to continue at school. The most important barriers to school attendance for homeless young people are lack of suitable accommodation and lack of income.

Accommodation

22.20 One of O'Connor's respondents, trying to complete her schooling, stated:

I need at least 18 months accommodation because it just interferes with my schoolwork too much if I had to move every couple of months."

The impossibility of attending school from a refuge was also recognised in a study of unsupported students conducted for the Commonwealth Department of Education in 1986:

It is inappropriate for homeless students to stay all but the shortest periods in emergency accommodation."

22.21 Yet there are few other accommodation options open to unsupported students. The A.C.T. situation described below holds true throughout Australia:

There is not enough, nor suitable, accommodation available for homeless students in the ACT. Public housing is not available, there is no student-specific accommodation available, and refuges are generally considered to be unsuitable for all but very short-term emergency accommodation."

The national situation has been summarised as follows:

...in general, accommodation for unsupported students is tenuous and unsuitable at best. Many find their way into the already overstretched refuge network. Conditions for long-term stays in such accommodation are extremely difficult for young people attempting to study...the public housing sector will not be capable of meeting the demand for youth housing, even in the medium term. In the private rental market, opportunities for unsupported youth are severely limited."

22.22 Thus it has been suggested that supported and unsupported accommodation should be provided — on or near school campuses — for the use of students detached from their families.

...options could run from fully supervised group homes at one end of the spectrum, through part-time supervised hostel-type schemes to fully independent living for older youth."

The A.C.T. Schools Authority advised the Inquiry that:

The establishment of a foster family scheme for younger homeless students, and of student houses near colleges have been proposed as desirable solutions to students' accommodation difficulties."

22.23 It has also been argued that education authorities have the primary responsibility for providing such accommodation.

We recommend that the Education Department set up a community-based housing program for students...particularly those without family support..."

Again:

Educational institutions must also begin to bear more responsibility for housing of its students and governments should recognise the need to incorporate the cost of support services such as housing in [their] overall education budget[s].⁴⁴

22.24 The Inquiry was told of an on-campus emergency accommodation model for school students established by a Wollongong private school with the assistance of the (then) New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services:

...over the last couple of years we have become aware in our school, which is a private school, of a number of kids in distress, of families in crisis, particularly with the kids being in difficulty, and in view

of that we decided at the college to set up a cottage. Primarily we saw it as a crisis centre where kids in those situations could go, but in looking at it we also sort of started to become aware of the bigger problem in the region, particularly with the downturn in employment and increased family pressures there. So we decided, you know, that we would open it to any young people in the area.

...we looked primarily towards kids who were out of home but wished to continue their education, so that is primarily the service we offer. We were able to get a house through Youth and Community Services — we have that on lease from them — which adjoins the college grounds. It was only a two bedroom cottage which meant, you know, one bedroom for the supervisor and one bedroom for kids, so we have only been able to take two kids at a time and overnights in sort of a makeshift arrangement. We opened at the beginning of this year [1988] and we have had 10 kids through there so far. Six of those have been residents and four of them have been just emergency accommodation."

22.25 Another solution to meeting the education and accommodation needs of homeless children which has been successfully implemented elsewhere is the assignment of qualified teachers to conduct classes in refuge centres for children. The Wollongong model just referred to is, however, more appropriate to current Australian circumstances — along with other responses recommended in this Report.

Income Support

22.26 Homeless students 16 and older can claim Austudy at the independent rate. The difficulties of establishing eligibility, the long (6 weeks) qualifying period and the low rate of the allowance together mean that few students are able to continue their schooling once they become homeless. As one submission recognised:

Students cannot survive [the] waiting period without some support unless they have assistance by way of part-time employment or support from voluntary welfare agencies. Full-time students are not entitled to receive any Social Security payments, so they may opt to leave their studies and become eligible for \$50.00/week on a Social Security benefit. There is no real encouragement given by way of financial support from the government for these students to continue studies, due to the waiting time before payment can be approved."

22.27 Detached students under 16 cannot obtain Austudy and clearly cannot work full-time (at least legally). Their only options, therefore, are:

- Special Benefits, which are extremely difficult to secure; and
- illegal or marginal activities such as stealing, prostitution, begging and the like.

It has therefore been proposed that additional financial assistance should be provided to low income families with children in the years of compulsory education to enable them to keep their children at school."

22.28 It was submitted to the Inquiry that:

Lack of income support is the issue which most affects the living conditions of young single students. Austudy is heavily tied to family income. For students whose parental income exceed[s] the limit set by Austudy and yet [who] do not have parental support in the continuation of studies, the major source of income is obtained through casual work. Such students have few accommodation options, often resorting to 'camping' at friends' houses, securing very cheap accommodation possibly of a substandard and insecure nature, or just moving around, depending on their income at that time."

It was also urged in evidence that:

If the community is going to support government objectives in the area of increasing educational retention, then homeless young people should be assisted to complete their schooling.⁵⁰

Personal Support

22.29 The Inquiry was told that:

Quite often the school counsellors themselves are not even aware of the fact that there are kids within the schools that are trying to cope to continue their education and to keep themselves together without any other support."

22.30 The students among O'Connor's respondents referred to the importance of the understanding and encouragement of their teachers in continuing their schooling while homeless." This element of personal support should not be forgotten when efforts are being made to retain homeless or unsupported students in the education system. Apart from psychological support, which most students receive from their parents, homeless students have a range of other needs:

...education and welfare authorities should be responsible for the provision of appropriate support structures to assist with problems to do with studies, personal and financial management and domestic organization."

It has been recognised that:

All young people need access to personal support, be it for guidance, company, stimulation or plain affirmation. Very often homeless youth are cut off from such support and for students the demands associated with completing education mean extra pressures are faced. Lack of personal support both at school and in the community is a major factor in unsupported students dropping out.'

Other Needs

22.31 Apart from their lack of stable accommodation and their lack of income, O'Connor 's respondents identified other barriers to the successful completion of their schooling while they were homeless:

- the school assumes that students have family support and are not responsible for their own lives;
- the school lacks understanding and flexibility in catering for homeless students;
- a lifestyle clash — the school requires a different lifestyle;
- the curriculum is irrelevant to their daily struggle for survival;
- homeless young people lack resources, such as books and uniforms; and
- stigmatisation."

Thus O'Connor concluded that:

For homeless young people, school is an option only for the strongest and most resourceful."

22.32 The discipline and routine of most schools is likely to deter many young people used to fending for themselves (see Chapter 5, The Experience of Homelessness). Moreover, the rigid schedule of most schools makes it difficult for homeless students to combine education with part-time employment. The unsuitability of 'existing institutional arrangements' within the school system for homeless youth has been widely recognised."

22.33 The Commonwealth-initiated Participation and Equity Program, which operated between 1983 and 1987, provided funds for programs and developmental activities targeting students at risk of early school-leaving. The Program was relatively ineffective in assisting homeless students because most programs were sited within the traditional school system.

Even if school offerings are attractive and relevant to their needs, unsupported students require support structures which relate to their special status. Such young people may need access to counselling services, to special assistance with studies, assistance in dealing with outside agencies and school authorities, and perhaps a less regulated environment that allows combinations of schooling and work."

22.34 It was submitted to the Inquiry that there need to be 'more creative alternative[s] that suit the less conforming personality':"

...places providing literacy and numeracy programs for young people where schools are unsuitable places for them. ...leading to a future establishment of alternate schooling...'

Another suggestion was that:

...there badly needs to be teachers at large...

...educational options of an Outreach type...other than situations where young people simply have to come and sit behind a desk in a particular set of four walls...⁶¹

These ideas find strong support (albeit from a distance) in the success of the alternative and remedial education programs, and the outreach program to prevent homelessness evolving through truancy, which have been implemented successfully by Sasha Bruce Youthwork Inc. in Washington DC in the United States of America (see Chapter 18, Accommodation Services).

A SOBERING COMPARISON

22.35 The following passage from a recent editorial in the *Washington Post* was commenting on a report released in December 1988 by the Princeton-based Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The report's findings were based on a survey of 22,000 teachers across the United States:

In an odd way this report isn't about teaching, but about the extent to which the schools have been made to stand in for providers of everything from child nutrition and family life to socialization and values. That's a familiar plaint but a vague one; here it is put into numbers. Ninety percent of teachers nationwide cite 'lack of parental support' for their efforts; 89 percent say they see abused or neglected children. Sixty eight percent say undernourishment is a problem at their school, 69 percent poor health.. .even a few children in these kinds of distress constitute a considerable burden on the teacher. That doesn't say much for the likelihood of an abused, ill, hungry or even an ordinary child's getting enough help at school to counter a bad home situation. Those reposing their hopes in the schools and the teachers as the best place to attack these problems had better start giving those all important players the resources and support they deserve.'

This may overstate the problems our teachers face in Australia." It is, however, sobering to reflect that the editorial accompanied a major article highlighting the problems faced by the U.S. education system because of the growing number of children who are homeless because the entire family is homeless. This phenomenon is also increasing in Australia. Such children have mainly been outside the scope of this Report — and they raise, in some respects, problems quite different to those we have addressed. Nevertheless, the problems which they present for our teachers will be serious and demanding. The rapidly escalating cost of housing in our major cities has recently led many commentators to predict a substantial increase in the number of homeless families.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

22.36 RECOMMENDATION 22.1

- **The following specific recommendations rest on the premise, and major recommendation, that our schools and teachers represent a critical resource which we must use effectively if we are to address the difficult issue of child and youth homelessness. Our teachers are generally dedicated to the welfare of our children. But in the current social climate of continuing family disintegration, they need, more than ever, programs, training, support and sufficient time to assist children who are homeless or in such domestic difficulty that they are at serious risk of becoming homeless. Absent a functioning family, the school is our first 'line of defence' in protecting our children. The school is often, too, the last point of contact which these children have with mainstream society. Therefore, although numerous onerous demands and expectations are already imposed on our teachers and schools, the issue of homelessness is one which must be addressed.**

22.37 The Inquiry found that family conflict can often be a cause of difficulties at school. Conversely, both underachievement at school and truancy cause, or arise from, family conflict which directly results in some young people becoming homeless. The Inquiry also found that the provision of school counsellors is patchy, that their resources are often extremely limited, that their focus is, consequently,

often too narrow and that students affected by family conflict, who are at risk of homelessness or who have personal adjustment difficulties, have often been ignored.

22.38 The Inquiry believes that schools are in a most strategic position to identify the broad range of problems and difficulties faced by students and that education authorities can respond by offering help and support within a non-threatening school environment. While we recognise that increasingly heavy demands have been imposed on teachers by governments, communities, parents and students themselves, it is also true that the school may be the last social institution to have significant contact with a child at risk of becoming homeless.

RECOMMENDATION 22.2

- **The Inquiry therefore recommends an expanded role for school counsellors as an essential mechanism in the prevention of child homelessness.**

RECOMMENDATION 22.3

- **We also recommend that school counsellors receive intensive training in order to effectively perform this 'welfare' role — as well as a continuing role in the child's education.**

22.39 The Inquiry believes that schools must have adequate resources to ensure that the right of their students to education is meaningfully met. Evidence presented to the Inquiry clearly indicated that students often reject their schools and that schools often actively reject students who are in difficult circumstances, thereby compounding their problems.

22.40 The Inquiry notes that substantial numbers of children, some younger than the minimum school leaving age, are denied access to education through suspensions or expulsions because of their conduct. Moreover, current curricula are not always relevant to the learning or survival needs of children and young people at risk of becoming homeless.

RECOMMENDATION 22.4

- **The Inquiry therefore recommends that the Federal Department of Employment, Education and Training, through the Assistance for Disadvantaged Schools and Students Program, fund:**
 - **training programs aimed at giving teachers a greater sensitivity to and understanding of students demonstrating behavioural difficulties, or those who are unable to cope with existing school programs, in order to better equip them to assist those students;**
 - **preventive and early intervention programs aimed at meeting the personal development, educational and vocational needs of young people who are homeless or clearly 'at risk' of homelessness; and**
 - **the development, with responsible State and Territory authorities, of innovative truancy prevention programs.**

The Inquiry believes that the Disadvantaged Schools and Students Program, which is designed to provide specific government funds for initiatives with respect to socio-economically disadvantaged school populations, is ideally suited to fund the above initiatives.

22.41 Evidence to the Inquiry indicated that young people find it almost impossible to continue their schooling after leaving home because of lack of suitable accommodation and lack of care. The Inquiry also found that it is inappropriate and impractical for homeless students to attend school and stay in emergency accommodation; and that student-specific accommodation is generally not available.

RECOMMENDATION 22.5

- **The Inquiry therefore recommends that a proposed Youth Accommodation and Support Services Program include the provision of specially designed accommodation and support services for students detached from their families. This accommodation should be located as near as possible to schools in the areas of greatest need.**

Notes

1. E Maas and R. Hartley, *On the Outside: The Needs of Unsupported, Homeless Youth* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, Policy Background Paper No. 7, 1988) at 29.
2. I. O'Connor, *Most of us have got a lot to say and we know what we are talking about': Children's and Young People's Experiences of Homelessness* (1988) at 170.
3. *Id.*, at 170-171.
4. *Id.*, at 177.
5. S. Healey, *Transcript* at 1629-1630.
6. Craig, *Transcript* at 1219.
7. O'Connor, *op cit.*, at 180-182.
8. H. Burgess, Committee for the Establishment of a Special Youth Residential Facility (NT), *Transcript* at 1600.
9. *NSW Home School Liaison Program Report* (nd).
10. Meeting between the Chairman of the Inquiry and senior NSW Police.
11. M. McMahon, *Transcript* at 885.
12. C. Holdom, YMCA Perth, *Transcript* at 760.
13. G. McLiront, Homeless Persons' Council (Vic), *Transcript* at 956.
14. A. Mayo, Maitland Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1981.
15. S. Hindle, Salvation Army SOS Crisis Centre Newcastle (NSW), *Transcript* at 1945.
16. F. Wright, Barwon School Welfare Support Group Geelong (Vic), *Transcript* at 1233.
17. F. Maas, Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Transcript* at 913.
18. J. Smith, *Education Participation and Financial Incentives* (Cwth Office of Youth Affairs, 1984) at 57.
19. NSW Women's Co-ordination Unit, *Girls at Risk* (1986) at 99, 111.
20. *Id.*, at 107.
21. O'Connor, *op cit.*, at 169.
22. Australian Law Reform Commission, *Child Welfare* (Report No. 18, 1981) at 216.
23. F. Wright, Barwon School Welfare Support Group Geelong (Vic), *Transcript* at 1233-1237.
24. Report by researchers at the Universities of Sydney and Macquarie based on an Australia-wide study of more than 3,000 students and 1,150 teachers in 35 State and Catholic schools: A. Susskind, 13 Jan 1989 *Sydney Morning Herald*.
25. O'Connor, *op cit.*, at 182.
26. N. Fabrier, NSW Education Department, *Transcript* at 46.
27. Australian Law Reform Commission, *op cit.* at 216, cited in S.5, ACT Schools Authority.
28. Committee of Inquiry into Education in Western Australia (K. Beazley, Chair), *Education in Western Australia* (1984) at 290.
29. *Report on Homeless Youth* (Parliamentary Paper No. 231/1982).
30. E Wright, Barwon School Welfare Support Group Geelong (Vic), *Transcript* at 1233-1234.
31. *NSW Home School Liaison Program Report*.
32. Eg, Child Welfare Practice and Legislation Review (T. Carney, Chair), *Equity and Social Justice for Children, Families and Communities* (1984) at 193.
33. S.125, Stepping Stone Streetwork Hobart, at 3.
34. S.89, St George Accommodation for Youth (NSW), at 4.
35. S.68, YMCA National Council, at 19.
36. G. Roberts, North Queensland Youth Accommodation Coalition, *Transcript* at 460. See also, L. Muller, Cairns Regional Community Council (Qld), *Transcript* at 504.
37. Laura, O'Connor, *op cit.*, at 193.
38. F. Maas (a), *On the Outside - Assessment of the Needs of Unsupported Students* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1986) at 117.
39. S.5, ACT Schools Authority, at 16.

40. E Maas (b), 'Unsupported Students - Still on the Outside' (1987) 6(2) *Bulletin of the National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies* 12, at 13.
41. *Id.*, at 14.
42. S.5, ACT Schools Authority, at 16.
43. S.89, St George Accommodation for Youth (NSW), at 6.
44. S.32, Curtin Student Guild, at 4. See also Maas (b), *op cit.* at 14.
45. B. Hocking, Edmund Rice College Wollongong (NSW), *Transcript* at 1810.
46. By 'Covenant House' in New York. This is a major voluntary organisation serving homeless children in several major US and Canadian cities.
47. S.17, N. Springell, at. 1.
48. V. Sheen, *A Fair Chance in Education* (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 1988) at 7.
49. S.32, Curtin Student Guild, at 2.
50. E Maas, Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Transcript* at 913.
51. H. Eastbum, Shortcuts Youth Information and Referral Service Canberra, *Transcript* at 548.
52. O'Connor, *op cit.*, at 193.
53. Maas (b), *op cit.*, at 14.
54. *Id.*, at 13.
55. O'Connor, *op cit.*, at 194-196.
56. *Id.*, at 196.
57. Eg, by the Commonwealth Schools Commission, *Participation and Equity in Australian Schools: the goal of full secondary education* (1985) at 16; N.P. Low, B.W. Crawshaw & S. Mathews, *No Fixed Address* (Outer East Youth Needs Group, 1984); Maas and Hartley, *op cit.* at 33.
58. Maas and Hartley, *op cit.*, at 33.
59. A. Mayo, Maitland Youth Refuge (NSW), *Transcript* at 1983.
60. V. Dwyer, Bidwell Youth Emergency Accommodation Unit Mt Druitt (NSW), *Transcript* at 130.
61. C. Holdom, YMCA Perth, *Transcript* at 760.
62. Editorial, 19 Dec 1988 *Washington Post*.
63. Although the information in Parts II and III of this Report clearly indicates that the Australian and US experiences are comparable.

