

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Dr Jess Heerde

Organisation Name: Melbourne Social Equity Institute, The University of Melbourne

Your position or role: Senior Research Fellow

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Rough sleeping, Mental health, Services, Family violence, Employment, Public housing, Housing affordability, Indigenous people

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Academic & research

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

Homelessness prevention across the life-course. We remain concerned that current strategies to reduce homelessness are crisis driven. Reducing adolescent and young adult homelessness across the life-course requires proactive strategies, which focus on prevention and early intervention.

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

We are happy to be contacted regarding our submission and building the evidence for effective homelessness prevention approaches.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5ded7b73267f1-VIC Homelessness Inquiry submission_MSEI.pdf](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Dr Jessica Heerde

5 December 2019

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria
Legal and Social Issues Committee (Legislative Council)
Parliament of Victoria

Melbourne Social Equity Institute Submission: The state of homelessness in Victoria

1. Background

The Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne supports interdisciplinary research aimed at addressing disadvantage across the full spectrum of social life. It brings together researchers across the University of Melbourne in partnership with external organisations to identify unjust or unfair practices that lead to social inequity and work towards finding ways to ameliorate disadvantage.

Researchers supported by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute are currently undertaking a competitively funded project which addresses the current lack of evidence for effective adolescent and young adult homelessness prevention approaches and scalable investment. Existing efforts to reduce homelessness are reactive (seeking to decrease the amount of time adolescents and young adults are homeless) as opposed to preventative (addressing life-course predictors of homelessness). We stress the importance of preventing adolescents and young adults reaching crisis. This is a genuine gap in both research and practice. Three recommendations are submitted based on our research.

2. Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: To fill the evidence gap, support research that analyses existing data to identify modifiable life-course predictors of homelessness.

- Support the analysis of data from the *International Youth Development Study*. This is data from a representative population-based cohort, followed longitudinally across the critical development period of adolescence and into mid-adulthood. Analysis of this data will establish an evidence base that identifies *when* and *how* to intervene to measurably reduce adolescent and young adult homelessness.

Recommendation 2: Implement the *Communities That Care* program to reduce life-course predictors of homelessness.

- *Communities That Care* (CTC) is a tested-effective, coordinated and appropriately resourced state-wide community coalition process. It has demonstrated success in reducing life-course predictors of a range of adolescent and young adult health and social problems. The implementation of CTC will provide clear evidence critical to informing policy relevant feasible targets for homelessness prevention and scalable investment.

Recommendation 3: Support rigorous academic research in the form of a) analysis of data from the *International Youth Development Study*, and b) an evaluation of the impact of *Communities That Care* on reducing homelessness, to build an integrated evidence-base for homelessness prevention across the life-course.

3. *Rationale for Recommendations*

Homelessness among adolescents and young adults (12-24 years) continues to be a state-wide and nationally significant social and public health issue. There have been few recent gains in homelessness prevention and service provision for these young people, compared to other age groups. Rates of adolescent and young adult homelessness in Australia have risen by 10% in the last five years.¹ Victorian adolescents and young adults make up a quarter of all homeless young people nationally².

The Council to Homeless Persons, has noted that “young people who are homeless often experience poor mental health, poverty, trauma, substance abuse, social isolation and are victims of violence.”³ This statement is mirrored in the findings of our recent research.^{4,5,6}

Adolescence presents a unique opportunity for responding to Australia’s adolescent and young adult homelessness crisis and for life-course homelessness prevention; positive adolescent health and development are critical to health and well-being across the life-course.⁷

One reason for the rising rates of adolescent and young adult homelessness is that *we do not have the evidence for effective prevention approaches*. Troublingly, current approaches to reducing homelessness among these young people are reactive, driven by crisis management and focus on intervening after homelessness is experienced. Reducing adolescent and young adult homelessness across the life-course *requires proactive strategies, which focus on prevention and early intervention* and allow targeted spending in the most efficient way possible.

Identify modifiable life-course predictors of homelessness

Victoria needs innovative approaches that identify new strategies for measurably reducing homelessness across the life-course. These approaches must be informed by a sophisticated understanding of life-course predictors of homelessness, to effectively inform the development, testing, adaptation, and implementation of applied homelessness prevention. We remain concerned that current strategies to reduce homelessness are crisis driven. Advancing homelessness prevention requires putting prevention approaches on firmer ground. The way to do this is to understand the trajectories of homelessness across the life-course to a) identify and target high-risk periods for entry into homelessness and b) understand how homelessness trajectories change or stay the same across adolescence and young adulthood. The research we have conducted indicates that life-course predictors are identifiable, are modifiable, and can be improved through existing tested-effective programs.⁸

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). "2049.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016." <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@nsf/DetailsPage/2049.02016?OpenDocument>.

² Ibid.

³ Council to Homeless Persons (2016). Homelessness and Young People. Melbourne, Council to Homeless Persons.

⁴ Heerde, J. A., et al. (2019). "Longitudinal associations between early-mid adolescent risk and protective factors and young adult homelessness in Australia and the United States." Prevention Science **accepted October 2019**.

⁵ Heerde, J. A. and M. Pallotta-Chiarolli (2019, in press). "'I'd rather injure somebody else than get injured": An introduction to the study of exposure to physical violence among young people experiencing homelessness." Journal of Youth Studies.

⁶ Heerde, J. A., et al. (2019, in press). "I dropped out early": School Disengagement and Exclusion Among Young People Experiencing Homelessness. Supporting Positive Education Outcomes for Students in Conflict and Crisis: A Plaited Rope. P. Towl and S. Hemphill, Routledge.

⁷ Patton, G. C., et al. (2016). "Our future: a Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing." The Lancet **387**(10036): 2423-2478.

⁸ Blueprints for Health Youth Development (2019). "Registry of Experimentally Proven Programs." from <https://www.blueprintsprograms.org>.

Providing an integrated base from which modifiable predictors are recognised as feasible targets for prevention and scalable investment, needs to be supported by detailed guidance on cost-effectiveness. It is highly cost-effective to use tested-effective prevention programming in addressing adolescent health and social concerns, with this approach often saving more dollars in future costs than are spent in program delivery⁹. The use of economic modelling to determine the cost-effectiveness for implementing tested-effective prevention programs known to effect life-course predictors in the context of reducing risk for homelessness is needed to inform the development of scalable prevention approaches in Victoria.

Recommendation 1: To fill the evidence gap, support research that analyses existing data to identify modifiable life-course predictors of homelessness.

- Support the analysis of data from the *International Youth Development Study*. This is data from a representative population-based cohort, followed longitudinally across the critical development period of adolescence and into mid-adulthood. Analysis of this data will establish an evidence base that identifies *when* and *how* to intervene to measurably reduce adolescent and young adult homelessness.

Implement tested-effective prevention programs

Implementing existing tested-effective programs that are known to reduce the identified life-course predictors of homelessness, are required to inform policy relevant feasible targets for prevention and investment. These programs must be coordinated and appropriately resourced.

Communities That Care (CTC) is an existing state-wide tested-effective program. It is a five-phase community coalition process using evidence-based strategies proven to reduce adolescent and young adult engagement in problem behaviours (and associated health and social problems). CTC currently operates in over 20 Australian municipalities and has demonstrated success *in reducing the life-course predictors of homelessness* identified in our current research.^{10,11}

Changes in rates of homelessness shown to result from the implementation of CTC, will inform and guide policy by *shifting the focus from a reactive crisis management approach, to investment in feasible municipal prevention efforts*. Supporting rigorous academic research that analyses life-course predictors of homelessness and the effectiveness of CTC in reducing homelessness, will build an integrated evidence-base for homelessness prevention across the life-course.

Recommendation 2: Implement the *Communities That Care* program to reduce life-course predictors of homelessness.

- *Communities That Care* (CTC) is a tested-effective, coordinated and appropriately resourced state-wide community coalition process, for reducing life-course predictors of a range of adolescent and young adult health and social problems. The implementation of CTC will provide clear evidence that guides policy relevant feasible targets for homelessness prevention and scalable investment.

⁹ Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2004). Benefits and costs of prevention and early intervention programs for youth. Olympia, Washington, Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

¹⁰ Heerde, J. A., et al. (2019). "Longitudinal associations between early-mid adolescent risk and protective factors and young adult homelessness in Australia and the United States." *Prevention Science* **accepted October 2019**.

¹¹ Toumbourou, J. W., et al. (2019). "Community intervention to prevent adolescent health behavior problems: Evaluation of communities that care in Australia." *Health Psychology* **38**(6): 536.

Recommendation 3: Support rigorous academic research in the form of a) analysis of data from the *International Youth Development Study*, and b) an evaluation of the impact of *Communities That Care* on reducing homelessness, to build an integrated evidence-base for homelessness prevention across the life-course.

For further information, please contact Dr Jessica Heerde

Professor Bernadette McSherry and Dr Jessica Heerde

**Melbourne Social Equity Institute and Melbourne Medical School
The University of Melbourne**