



Support for homeless young people under 16 years old: towards a new paradigm

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Received: 5 March 2020 / Revised: 8 May 2020 / Accepted: 10 May 2020 /

Published online: 31 May 2020

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Abstract

Young people who become homeless before the age of 16 years face particular problems finding appropriate services that address their needs. This has been acknowledged in Australia and internationally, but successful system-wide resolution has not been achieved. The purpose of this study was to find out what would be required to improve policy in this area. The study set out to establish both the nature of the problem, and the nature of the changes needed to improve outcomes for young people. The research documented young people's experiences of early homelessness and service provider's perspectives on the adequacy of existing services. These were compared with the theoretical models and assumptions that informed the design of policy and service delivery. The study found that existing policy left some homeless 12–15-year-olds with fewer options and in much riskier circumstances than homeless young people aged 16–17 years. This perverse outcome occurred because the theoretical assumptions that informed policy did not align with either the reality of service delivery or with young people's capabilities and aspirations. The study concluded that a new paradigm was required to improve outcomes. In addition, more varied types of accommodation are required for homeless young people under 16 years, and, where developmentally appropriate, young people aged 12–15 years should be treated as mature minors, and assistance should be provided through supported youth accommodation services.

Keywords Youth · Policy · Australia · Child protection · Looked after · Run away

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Introduction

Young people who become homeless before they are 16 years old, face particular problems finding appropriate services. This has been acknowledged in Australia by the Auditor General of Western Australia (1998), and internationally, for example, by Hall (2003); Margaretten (2015); Vítopoulos et al. (2018). In 2016, a group of Western Australian youth accommodation service providers expressed concern to the Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP) about the number of young people aged 12–15 who had sought emergency youth accommodation because they had nowhere else to go. The CCYP commissioned this study in conjunction with Edith Cowan University, (Cooper et al. 2018); (Cooper 2018b). The purposes were firstly, to find out more about the circumstances and needs of young people who became independently homeless before the age of 16 years, and secondly, to make recommendations about how services could be improved for this cohort. Young people under 16 years who become homeless independently of their parent(s) or a legal guardian, are referred to as ‘independently homeless’ young people throughout this article.

A purpose of this research was to establish what would be required to improve policy in this area. The study set out to answer two questions: one was epistemic and paradigmatic; the other was strategic and practical. The epistemic question was concerned with the nature of the problem. This question sought to determine whether policy failure was the result of lack of knowledge or whether the problem was paradigmatic, arising because mistaken assumptions had led to misinterpretation of available information. The strategic and practical question was concerned with relationships between policy and service delivery. This question sought to determine whether policy failings had occurred because of strategic errors in the organisation of service delivery to achieve policy outcomes (referred to as end-means linkages between policy and service delivery). The questions asked were as follows:

- 1) Paradigm: Are the assumptions that inform independent youth homelessness policy for under 16s well-founded (if not, what needs to change)?
- 2) Strategy: Is the strategy that links policy and service delivery coherent and practical (if not how could strategy be improved)?

Background

Previous national and international research into independent youth homelessness either excludes young people who are under 16 years, for example, see Jenkins and Amaral (2017), or combines them with older young people up to the age of 18 years, 21 years, 24 years or 25 years, for examples, see Gaetz et al. (2013); Kamieniecki (2001); Moore (2005); Mayock et al. (2011); and Barker (2016). No studies were found that focused exclusively on the 12–15 age group. The closest studies in terms of scope and applicability are three surveys of school students aged 12–18 years conducted in 1995, 2001 and 2006, by MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2008) but these surveys only included young people in Victoria, and only those contactable through schools.

Extensive previous research has examined various facets of youth homelessness (12–25 years) and the implications for youth homelessness policy, in Australia and

internationally. Some research has focused upon improving understanding of the correlations and social dynamics between youth homelessness and young people's psychosocial context, for example: drug use, family conflict, family breakdown, peer groups, mental health, early life experiences of neglect, abuse and out of home care, experience of the justice system, or marginalised social status; see, for example, (Corno 2017; Couch 2011; Donoghue 2015; Fitzpatrick et al. 2013; Gatenby 2010; Jordan 2012; Kamieniecki 2001; Liddell 2005; Mallett et al. 2005; Martijn and Sharpe 2006; Piat et al. 2014; Rawlinson 2012; Rosenthal et al. 2006; Tikiger 2019).

Other research has focused upon the interplay between discourses on homelessness and structural and institutional processes, and how these affect the organisation of services, policy development, and the subjective meaning young people make of their experiences homelessness. Several authors (for example, Barker 2016; Farrugia 2011; O'Sullivan 2017; Watson and Cuervo 2017) have been critical of neoliberal policy responses that constructed youth homelessness as an individualised problem caused by personal deficiencies or deficiencies within families, which can be addressed through a focus on 'self-capitalisation' of young people. Farrugia (2011) has argued that the experience of homelessness reflexively shapes young people's social identities through an interplay between structural, institutional and subjective processes which leads young people to perceive their experience in individualised terms of shame and failure, which mask the social processes. Similarly, Watson and Cuervo (2017) contend that contemporary conceptions of homelessness increase stigma, and they suggest that homelessness services should operate within a social justice framework that gives attention to both the material and non-material support needs of young people who are homeless. In particular, they suggest services should attend to young people's needs for autonomy, self-respect and empowerment. Barker (2016) examined how young people's experiences of instability and insecurity that preceded homelessness, were exacerbated by institutional responses to youth homelessness and became internalised in their expectations about how life will be, which meant that they adjusted their responses to recreate instability in their living arrangements. The need to respond constructively to young people's expectations of autonomy was also discussed by Kuskoff (2018) and by Barker (2014).

In Australia, official counts of homeless young people underestimate numbers. A review of the 2006 Australian Census returns found that hostels for homeless people had not always been correctly identified and this led to an undercount of homeless people in all age groups (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008). This review also found that estimating and counting numbers of young people aged 12–18 years who are independently homeless is difficult for several other reasons. Firstly, they may not be counted at all, especially if they are sleeping rough, in sheds, or in improvised shelter. Secondly, they may be counted, but not necessarily identified as homeless, for example, if they are couch surfing with friends, or if they have been living in a hostel or a boarding house that was not correctly identified in the census (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008). To address this problem and to develop a more accurate estimate of the numbers of young people who are homeless, the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] compared the 2006 Census with the homeless school student survey in Victoria (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008). Mackenzie and Chamberlain concluded that the 2006 census undercount of homeless young people was 20.5%. They developed a correction metric, but this has not been applied to subsequent census counts of youth homelessness.

The Australian Census does not collect separate data about young people who are independently homeless between the ages of 12 and 15 years. Statistics are aggregated for young people aged between 12 and 18 years or 12 and 24 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). ABS statistics for 2016 indicated that 9995 young people aged between 12 and 18 years were homeless in Australia on census night, making up 9% of all homeless persons (a rate of 51 per 10,000 of the population). By comparison, 27,683 young people aged 12–24 were homeless on census night, making up 24% of the homeless population (a rate of 72.6 per 10,000 of the population). However, the ABS acknowledges that these figures are likely to be an underestimate, ‘due to a usual address being reported for some homeless youth’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018).

Another way of gauging the number of homeless young people is through requests for assistance made to youth accommodation services. In Western Australia, youth accommodation services are primarily funded under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement and the Department for Child Protection (WA). Similar arrangements exist in other states in Australia. These programs fund services for young people aged either 15 or 16 years and over, and under these agreements, services have no capacity to respond to requests for emergency accommodation for young people under 15 years. In 2017, 42,131 young people aged 15–24 years approached a specialist homelessness agency for assistance. Just over 40% had previously lived alone and another 18% previously lived with family other than their parents. There were more young women (62%) than young men, and around 18% were aged 15–18 years (about 7583 young people). Twenty-six percent of young people aged 15–24 years identified as Indigenous (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2017), which is five times higher than the proportion of Indigenous young people in Western Australian population. Various authors have suggested that official data underestimates the extent of homelessness amongst Indigenous young people. Memmott (2003) suggested that this occurred because some families see it as shameful to seek help from services. However, significant barriers to accessing formal services may also include a lack of culturally sensitive services, negative prior experiences and a lack of services in the local area. Henry and Daly (2000) contended that mobility between the households of extended family members may mask homelessness amongst Indigenous young people if young people’s living arrangements are unstable or where the family is not able to provide support. Various authors have concluded that more research is needed to understand differences in cultural definitions and meanings of homelessness to more accurately capture the extent of the Indigenous youth homelessness and to develop policies, services and supports that meet these needs appropriately (Barker et al. 2012; Memmott 2003).

Youth Homelessness Policy in Australia

The assumptions that inform Australian youth homeless policy have changed over time (MacKenzie and Coffey 2012). MacKenzie and Coffey argued that youth refuges established in the 1980s initially operated on a ‘shelter first’ premise, and later a human rights perspective, as exemplified by the Burdekin Report (Burdekin et al. 1989). Critiques of these approaches considered they responded to immediate needs, but they did not adequately address broader issues of exit pathways, affordable permanent housing and adequate financial support (MacKenzie and Coffey 2012). In the late 1990s, funding to refuges was reduced and the focus of strategy changed to

prevention of homelessness through the Reconnect programs (MacKenzie and Coffey 2012). This scheme focused upon family reconciliation, so young people could continue to reside in the family home (MacKenzie and Coffey 2012). Ideologically, this approach constructed youth homelessness as a form of deviant behaviour, as evidenced by the analytical framework applied in the discussion paper by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006) on youth homeless ‘careers’, where youth homelessness was presented as an inexorable ‘slide’ towards deviancy that could only be prevented by early intervention. This analysis was illustrated by selected case studies from Victoria. Recent larger studies support the positive effects of early intervention, but found that early intervention only led to small decreases in the number of young people needing homelessness services (MacKenzie et al. 2016).

Since 2008 and *The Road Home* white paper (Commonwealth of Australia 2008), systems thinking has been applied to youth homelessness policy (Lazzari and Mudford 2009). This approach moved away from an individualised deviancy approach and examined how policies contributed to people becoming homeless, and how policy could either facilitate or block young people’s exit from homeless. Under the *Road Home* policy, the strategy for youth homelessness was conceptualised as having four components (Lazzari 2008). These were (1) strategies to prevent youth homelessness, (2) strategies to provide crisis services and better support to young people who are homeless, (3) strategies that create exit points to secure housing and (4) strategies that stop homelessness from re-occurring (sometimes called ‘post-vention’) (Lazzari 2008). Most recently, the Housing First plus wrap around services approach has proposed integrated exit points and post-vention (Wood et al. 2017). Typically, services for young people under 16 have emphasised reconciliation with family as the primary prevention strategy (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). However, family violence is one of the main reasons why young people arrive alone at specialist homelessness services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2017), and this circumstance makes reconciliation inappropriate.

In Western Australia, as in other parts of Australia, young people who become homeless aged 16–24 years are supported through emergency or transitional youth accommodation services staffed by youth workers. The focus of youth workers in these services is to support young people to live independently and to enable them to manage a tenancy in either the private sector or in social housing. Supported youth accommodation services help young people to find accommodation, to stay in education, and to address drug, alcohol and mental health issues. These services support family reconciliation, if this is the young person’s wish and where this is safe. To enter supported accommodation, young people have to be eligible for independent government financial support (Centrelink) or have other financial support. Young people aged 16 years and over are normally treated as ‘mature minors’ and, although not legally adult, are not normally taken into out of home care by the State (State Government of Western Australia 2004). Some young people aged 16–17 years, who were taken into the state care system before the age of 16 years, reside in supported youth accommodation managed by youth services, and their position is more complicated.

Youth Homelessness Services for Under 16s

In Western Australia, homeless young people aged 12–15 years are the legal responsibility of child protection services, where they are referred to as ‘children’.

By 2003, the requirements of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 1989), and other reports that drew attention to child protection failures, led to revision of child protection legislation (Cooper & Love 2017). This resulted in the Children and Community Services Act 2004 (WA) (CCSA) 2004), which re-affirmed that young people who become homeless before the age of 16 years old without parental support are the responsibility of the state government through Child Protection and Family Services (CPFS). The CCSA (2004) made some conceptual and procedural changes, and enshrined a requirement to consider the young person's culture when care placement orders are made. This led to greater reliance on kinship care, especially for Indigenous young people. Other research has shown kinship carers are under-supported and experience high levels of stress (Spence 2004). Child protection strategy focused on supervised placements for young people, primarily in foster care, in kinship care, in hostels or placements managed directly by CPFS. An 'At Risk Youth Accommodation' (ARYA) service provides very short-term emergency accommodation to young people aged 14–17 years who have no other accommodation (State Government of Western Australia 2017). Several research studies over many decades have documented poor outcomes social, economic and health for young people leaving the care system in Australia (Auditor General of Western Australia 1998; Humphries 2016; McNamara et al. 2019; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006).

Few other formal accommodation options exist for young people aged under 16 years who are independently homeless, as they cannot obtain rental properties in the marketplace because of their age, and prejudice about their ability to be reliable tenants (Harrison 2007), and because private rental properties (if available) would be unaffordable for them (Eldridge et al. 2008; Fildes 2016). This means that young people who are under 16 years old rely on informal accommodation options, like 'couch surfing', living with a sexual partner, staying in makeshift accommodation (tents, cars, sheds) or living on the street. Couch surfing covers many arrangements including staying with relatives (sometimes in overcrowded conditions), staying with friends or entering transactional sexual relationships in order to have a bed (Robinson 2017; Vichta and Hail-Jares 2017). A report by Brisbane Youth Services found that couch surfing was riskier than living on the streets (Vichta and Hail-Jares 2017).

Research Design

This research was approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. The researchers surveyed and interviewed relevant service providers, and interviewed 15 young people who had experienced independent homelessness before the age of 16 years. The interviews with young people explored their experiences of homelessness prevention services, and of homeless support services, and, where applicable, their experiences of services to support their pathways out of homelessness. Youth workers were asked about their perceptions of how policies were implemented, about systemic barriers and about their suggestions for policy and practice improvements. The young people who were interviewed had been independently homeless before the age of 16 (respondents were aged 8–15 years at the time of their first

independent homelessness experience and aged 14 to under 26 at the time of interview). Young people were contacted through multiple channels, including youth homelessness services, snowball sampling and word of mouth.

Four participants were aged 12–15 years and 11 were aged 16 years and over at the time of interview. Eleven participants were female and four were male, and one-third of the sample identified as Aboriginal. Although young women and young people of Aboriginal descent were over-represented in this sample, they are also over-represented in the independent youth homeless population Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] (2017).

Online surveys, supplemented by six semi-structured telephone interviews, were used to ascertain service providers' perceptions of policy and services. The service provider sample was purposive and criterion-based, with an emphasis on maximising variation amongst participating youth homelessness services (Cooper et al. 2018). Eighteen service providers offered direct services for homeless young people and 14 service providers offered indirect services (32 surveys were completed in total). The survey respondents represented 28 youth services from across Western Australia (both rural and metropolitan). This article uses the findings from the research to address the questions posed about paradigms, and the strategies contained within the program logic model for youth homelessness services for young people under 16 years. The program logic model provides a visual representation of the relationships between the intended goals of a program, the organisational strategies, techniques, and methods, and the intended outputs and outcomes of the program (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2020; McDavid and Hawthorn 2006).

Paradigms and Youth Homelessness Policy for Under 16s

Appropriate 'mental models' (or paradigms) are vital to support effective social policy development (Serman 1994; Serman and Ford 1997). There are two sources of mental models that inform homelessness policy for under 16s. Firstly, the *Road Home* (2008), which provides the overarching paradigm for all homelessness policy. The mental model this document uses is the 'stocks and flows' metaphor. A very different mental model is enshrined in CCSA2004 that governs child protection. The mental model used in the CCSA2004 is of the 'young person as child'. Each of these mental models will now be examined in more detail and compared with the research findings.

Stocks and Flows

The 'stocks and flows' mental model suggests that policy should aim to reduce the total 'stock' of homeless (young) people in the system, through a combination of approaches that seek to prevent (young) people from becoming homeless, and to prevent their re-entry into homelessness after they have gained accommodation. Policy should also increase the rate at which (young) people 'flow' through the system, by providing timely and comprehensive support to (young) people whilst they are homeless, that mitigates personal and structural factors that might slow down or prevent an early exit from homelessness. The reasoning behind this model is that homelessness makes it very difficult for young people to maintain normal social and economic activities and

relationships, like work and education, or to maintain social connections with peers who are not homeless.

Our findings support this reasoning. Only two participants managed to stay in education after they became homeless, whilst several other young people said that they had wanted to stay in education, but for various practical reasons it became impossible. Only two young women managed to work after they became homeless. One young person found work after she moved in with her boyfriend, following a brief period of time when she lived in his car.

When we moved into the apartments we were working at Hungry Jacks, he was working at Hungry Jacks, so he got me a job at Hungry Jacks, I worked there for a few years until I got too sick.

Many others were forced into various forms of illegal activity to survive.

From eight years old it was easy to begin with to ask for money from people, but as I hit 12 or 13, people started looking at me as a responsible teenager and I started getting pushed away and did not get the support from there so that's where the stealing came into my life.

Several young people mentioned the loss of social connection as a very difficult aspect of homelessness.

Well it was sad, depressing. Awful to live on the streets. I've tried it once and it's lonely. Miss family and friends.

Money, schooling, finding a job, trying to balance everything whilst stressing about life. Not having anyone to talk things through with.

Young Person as Child

The mental model that informs the CCSA 2004 is based upon a very different set of assumptions from the *Road Home*. Within the CCSA 2004, all young people under the age of 18 are referred to as 'children'. There is very little differentiation between the capabilities of young children, those in middle childhood, and young people aged 12–15 years. The only section of the act that explicitly acknowledges young people's different developmental capacities states that young people should be asked about their preferences. However, this gives young people no right to autonomy, and a young person's autonomy takes second place to the rights of others to determine the 'child's' best interests. Under the CCSA 2004 the best interests of the child, include taking into account:

(1)(a) the need to protect the child from harm; (1)(f) any wishes or views expressed by the child, having regard to the child's age and the child's level of

understanding in determining the weight to be given to those wishes or views; (1)(k) the child's physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and developmental needs; and, (1)(l) any other relevant characteristics of the child.

The act provides little guidance about how maturity will be assessed, and, in a risk-adverse environment, assessments of possible risks mean that young people's views and aspirations may be disregarded.

Throughout the CCSA 2004, young people are cast primarily as the object of intervention rather than the subject of support. Section 9 of the Act outlines the principles to be observed, and these emphasise others' judgements about the young person's safety and well-being. The principles state that

'...the parents, family and community of a child have the primary role in safeguarding and promoting the child's wellbeing', and '...every child should be cared for and protected from harm...every child should live in an environment free from violence...every child should have stable, secure and safe relationships and living arrangements' (State Government of Western Australia 2004, p. 11).

If a young person is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent, Section 81 of the Act also requires the CEO to consult with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander officer, and a person (or agency) with knowledge of the 'child', their family or community. These requirements are intended to ensure that the cultural background of young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island descent is considered when arrangements are made for their care, but also treat the young person as an object of protection rather than a subject with rights.

This way of framing young people is not unique to Western Australia, and similar points have been made by Winter (2006) in her discussion of the child protection system in the UK, and also by Kuskoff (2018). The system emphasises safety, and places low priority upon support for the young person to make their own decisions. Throughout the legislation, the young person is described in essentially passive ways as the object of care, rather than as a subject who will very soon have full autonomy, will soon have no support, and has only a very short period of time to develop their independent living skills. According to Saunders et al. (2018), young people in poverty were also treated as passive, without agency, and as if their views are the same as their parents/carers.

Young People and Self-Determination

The interviews with participants showed that many young people did not fit the mental model that underpinned the CCSA 2004. The mental model of 'young person as child' was discordant with the experiences of autonomy of the young people we interviewed. Often, young people managed their lives on a day-to-day basis from an early age and felt able to survive physically and emotionally without their parents. Our interviews provided many examples of how young people valued their autonomy and self-determination, as well as evidence of physical and emotional survival skills. Young people had taken responsibility for

themselves in their daily lives, because they had had no reliable and responsible adult in their lives, or because the adults in their lives could no longer cope or had moved away. One participant said she had perceived herself as adult since she was 13 years old.

Most of us kids don't have strict parents, we don't have parents telling us what to do, we just have ourselves, you know to just watch over ourselves, feed ourselves, clean ourselves you know ...I still have no one, I am the adult, I've been the adult since I was 13, I'm 17.

Another young woman who was 15 years old had no problem with the practicalities of taking care of herself, but identified that the biggest problems she faced arose because she needed paperwork signed by her parents who lived in a different state and were not responsive to her requests.

Age was the barrier when I came to Perth. I was OK on my own, could manage cooking, cleaning etc. Could not return home. Getting help was harder cos parents were in [another state].... Am going to get kicked out of TAFE cos parents can't send the forms.

Another young woman who had been abandoned by both parents by the age of 12 years, and had been living independently since that time, simply said

I do not want to be around parents any more.

Young people discussed their living arrangements prior to leaving. Many described experiences of family violence, parental drug use, parental ill health, neglect, physical, emotional or sexual abuse. By the time they were 12–15 years old, some young people exercised their autonomy to escape living arrangements that had become unbearable. Some chose to stay 'under the radar' in informal living arrangements to avoid engagement with child protection until they were old enough to access supported accommodation (aged 15 or 16 years) or other formal living arrangements. Barker (2014) also found that self-reliance and autonomy were important values for young people who were homeless.

Several young people actively avoided contact with child protection services, even though this meant considerable material hardship, because they feared the lack of autonomy within the child protection system. When asked about whether the child protection services had supported him, one young man who lived on the street intermittently from the age of 8–17 years old said:

They [child protection] tried to find me but [were] not exactly helping in a lot of ways. The help I was receiving wasn't the right form of help, I wasn't receiving assistance with counselling, really stuff I needed like counselling was the main thing I needed living on the streets for so long. I needed someone to talk to, because I never had someone who was there 24/7 for me. I always had a different person I seen when I came to DCP, it became frustrating and scary for me. So I never had no one to trust.

Another young woman who couch-surfed to avoid child protection services because of her previous experiences in foster care as a child, and her fear she would again be placed somewhere against her wishes

I tried but like I couldn't [get help from service providers] it was a really long process because I'd have to go to one place and they'd always used to call DCP [child protection services] straight away and put me in DCP care and I can't be in DCP care cos I was in DCP when I was little with my brother and I was there for about two years... and we used to get sexually assaulted.

The reluctance of young people to engage with child protection services was affirmed by one service provider who elaborated on the consequences of the lack of support options:

[There is] virtually nowhere to refer except DCP [child protection] and young people will typically refuse this assistance and may leave. [We] May advise them to stay with a friend's family if this is safe. Kids aged 13-15 will usually continue to stay in unsafe places such as with older men or other street present young people and may trade sexual favours for protection but prefer this to departmental intervention. We don't have any way of getting them to contact the department if they are unwilling.

Several service providers said they believed that, from a harm reduction perspective, more suitable housing and support arrangements needed to be developed for young people aged 12–15 years. Young people reject the systems that are designed to protect them, because they feel unsafe, unsupported or inappropriately constrained, and this increases their risk of harm.

Aboriginal Young People

We found no obvious differences between the experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, although the sample size was too small to undertake any separate formal analysis. Participants' individual experiences differed and not all participants mentioned all themes (Cooper 2018b). However, when major themes emerged, they were mentioned by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, for example, antecedents of parental homelessness; parental drug use; severe parental mental health problems; and participants' childhood experiences of the out of home care system, participants' pregnancy and parenthood and participants' involvement with the justice system. Aboriginal participants were a similar age when they first became homeless. It is possible that differences between sub-groups of participants (gender, Aboriginality) would have become evident had the total sample been significantly larger. The lack of differences may reflect the location of the study in Perth. Historic massacres, forced assimilation and Stolen Generations policies, have caused widespread multigenerational disruption of local Noongar culture, and of Yamaji culture (the coastal country north of Perth to Carnarvon) where some participants had family. This history has contributed to intergenerational cultural trauma, and weakened protective cultural networks. Some Aboriginal participants had both Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal family. The social networks of young people we interviewed mostly included both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, who had shared experiences of poverty, rejection, violence, marginalisation, exclusion and homelessness. There is scope for further research into Aboriginal young people's experiences of independent homelessness, and of how re-emerging Aboriginal culture can be engaged to contribute more fully to youth homelessness prevention and support.

Program Logic and Youth Homelessness Strategy

An analysis of youth homelessness strategy across the three youth age cohorts, (12–15 years, 16–17 years, and 18–25 years), showed that the operation of youth worker managed homelessness services for young people followed the program logic set out in the *Road Home*. A major focus is to support the young person's independent living skills and their capacity to manage their own life. Table 1 provides an overview of the 'ends-means linkage' which identifies how the strategies and methods are expected to implement policy for each age cohort, based upon the four policy elements outlined in the *Road Home*.

The operation of homeless services for under 16s provided by child protection services follows the program logic of the young person as child/object of protection. Strategies presume that young people must be in a living arrangement closely supervised by adults. The strategy for prevention services aimed to resolve family conflict so young people could live with their carer(s). Whilst these services have been found to be successful in some instances (MacKenzie 2016; Maycock, et al. 2011), only one young person (out of the 15 in our sample) had a family with whom it would be possible for them to live safely, and this young person did not want reconciliation at that time. For all other participants, family reconciliation would have been either impossible because the family had disintegrated, or would be unsafe because of family violence over an

Table 1 Means-ends linkages in youth accommodation

	Under 16s years	16–17 years	18–24 years
Prevention of homelessness	Reconnect; kinship care	Reconnect; possible rent subsidy	Rent subsidy
Support whilst homeless	Kinship care; foster care; group homes; child protection operated hostels; supported youth accommodation (if 15+)	Supported youth accommodation services	Supported youth accommodation services
Exit pathways from homelessness	Return to parents; informal options found by young person	Transitional supported housing; Foyer-style youth housing; externally supported housing	Transitional supported housing; Foyer-style (under 21 years); public housing; external support; private rental
Post-vention to prevent re-entry	Case work; LIFT program (care leavers aged 15+)	LIFT program (care leavers 15–24)	LIFT program (care leavers 15–24)

extended period, or because the environment was otherwise unsuitable. Adverse family circumstances included long-term family instability; severe parental alcohol or drug misuse; severe parental mental illness; family violence perpetrated by parental figures or older siblings and their partners (towards their mothers); parents and siblings being incarcerated; parental death; and parental or sibling maltreatment of the young person, including physical violence, sexual abuse and neglect.

The formal support strategies for homeless young people under 16 years were through placement in alternative care (foster care, kinship care, hostels). Only one young person indicated they had entered a foster care placement when they were 12–15 years old. This placement failed within a few months, after which the young person moved into informal (non-sanctioned) accommodation with her partner. The Review of Child and Family Protection Services (CPFS) in Western Australia (Auditor General of Western Australia 1998) documented the stories of young people who had experienced multiple placement failures, and argued placement breakdown reinforced abandonment, and that young people who needed additional support services could not always gain access to the services they required. Two young men said they would have liked foster placements when they became homeless (both aged 13 years) but were not offered them. One other young woman had requested a foster care placement (unclear at what age) but was also refused. She said:

Mum goes into [city] for drugs & you know (prostitution). Child safety wouldn't help; said we were too old for their help cos they struggle to get accom (foster) for younger people.

The shortage of foster care placements has been reported in many research studies. The National Youth Commission *Inquiry into Youth Homelessness* (2008) stated that young people are not prioritised for out-of-home care in the same way as infants and young children, which meant young people who are 12–15 years were too young to gain access to the youth accommodation hostels, but too old to be fostered (Eldridge et al. 2008). More recent research on the lack of foster care places found: a lack of foster placements for young people who are over 12 years, pre-existing carer strain, social workers not disclosing the extent of the young person's difficulties, initial (negative) carer reactions to the young person, initial dissatisfaction with the placement by the young person or the carer, and concern about possible impacts on other children in the foster family (Child and Family Practice 2015). The Review of Child and Family Protection Services in Western Australia (Auditor General of Western Australia 1998) concluded that reliance on foster care to accommodate young people aged 12 and over was not effective, because of the difficulty in finding and maintaining suitable foster placements for young people aged 12–17 years.

Formal kinship care arrangements had been experienced by two young people. Both placements failed when the young person reached their early teens. In one case, the arrangement broke down because the kinship carer was unable to comply with the requirements of the care order that limited the young person's contact with her mother. In the other instance, the young man said he did not know why his grandparents no longer wanted to care for him. Two other young women had been informally living with grandparents. One young woman was living with her grandfather in an informal arrangement whilst another young woman had lived with her grandparents for a short

period but was unable to stay long term because the grandparents had care of other children and the house was overcrowded.

Hostels operated by child protection services were mentioned, neutrally or negatively, by two young men and one young woman. One young man discussed bullying and theft of his clothing:

There's only 'X' amount of youth hostels out there that DCP [Child Protection] run and I was homeless for a number of years due to the fact that I kept getting, I've been mobbed a couple of times by the hostel boys.... DCP paid for me to get a few clothes but they all went walkabout overtime, through washing, other kids claim the clothes, so the majority of what I had was in a backpack with my two pairs of jeans, two t-shirts, and it was like try to get them washed when I could.

In 1998, the Review of Child and Family Protection Services (CPFS) (Auditor General of Western Australia 1998) found that placement of young people in hostels or group homes operated by child protection services could lead to further risk and traumatisation. Hostels often house young people who cannot be placed in foster care because their conduct is disturbed as a result of childhood trauma.

Supported youth accommodation was primarily designed for young people who were at least 16 years old; however, five young people had been placed in this type of service when they were 15 years old. Mostly, they spoke positively of their experiences. Unusually, one young woman was placed in medium-term supported youth accommodation when she was 15 years old and was able to stay in the same accommodation for a year. This enabled her to continue her schooling and also to continue part-time paid employment. This young woman was the only participant who subsequently entered (and completed) higher education. Another young man was placed in a supported youth accommodation service in the same neighbourhood, which enabled him to stay at his usual school.

Service providers expressed concern about the lack of emergency housing services for 12–15-year-olds (Cooper, Jarvis, & Brooker, 2018). They affirmed that youth accommodation services sometimes provided beds to young people aged 15–16 years. Over half of the service providers said they had turned away young people under 16 years. Their reasons were not having any available beds, the young person did not fit the funding criteria of the agency, they needed the oversight of CPFS or a legal guardian before accommodation could be provided or they were unable to provide the kind of supervision that such a young person needed (especially when older young people up to 25 years old were being accommodated in the same place).

Many service providers also believed that younger homeless young people would need more intensive support, but that this could not be provided under existing funding models. Service providers were concerned about the duty-of-care responsibilities for under 16s:

When a 15-year-old is asked to leave the property, there is a level of duty of care which may not exist with a 16+ young person. Often, we might need authorisation from family or the department [child protection] to house a 15-year-old with the understanding they would take them back if their accommodation broke

down. This is not always possible when a 15-year-old is fleeing an abusive family. (Service provider)

Some service providers thought that it might be necessary to have waking night staff; however, funding did not allow this. Most service providers thought that they could support young people under 16 years effectively, if adequately resourced, but not under current funding regimes.

All young people except one reported spending some time in informal (non-sanctioned) accommodation they had arranged for themselves. This included couch surfing with friends, seeking makeshift shelter (sheds, tents, vehicles, semi-derelict houses), staying with sexual partners, staying with other family members (siblings, grandparents, aunts, partner's family) or living on the street without shelter.

There was no strategy for exit pathways from homelessness for young people under 16 years old, unless the young person returned to the parental home or found their own informal options. None of the participants in this study returned to live with parents. As one service provider noted:

Taking on a young person at 15-years old when they do not turn 16 for many months can be problematic. There are almost no medium/long term options for 15-year-olds, and we would have to exit them after 3 months. This is babysitting at best, this does not help to fix the issues of homelessness. (Service provider)

There was no formal post-vention strategy for under 16-year-olds, because there was no exit pathway. Case management could be viewed as a form of post-vention intended to maintain living arrangements for young people under 16 years old in state care. One young woman reported that one of her CPFS case workers had been very supportive and caring when she was homeless before she was 16 years old and this had been very important to her at the time. Several other young people commented negatively on their case workers, perceiving them to be uncaring, or only interested in controlling them.

Causes of Policy Failure for Under 16s Who are Homeless

The two questions posed at the beginning of the article: (1) whether policy failure stemmed from information deficiency or whether the problem was paradigmic and (2) whether policy failure occurred because of strategic mistakes arising from end-means linkages between policy and service delivery.

We contend that the primary cause of policy failure in youth homeless for under 16s is the use of an inappropriate paradigm (or mental model) to inform policy development. The secondary cause is reliance on strategies that are not congruent with the realities in the external world. We conclude that policy failure does not require more information. Information about policy failure and its causes has been widely available for over 20 years, as references in this article illustrate. The existing paradigm for homelessness policy for young people aged 12–15 years is based upon an unsuitable mental model of the 'young person as a child'. This mental model is unsuitable for five reasons.

Firstly, the mental model of young person as child has mandated service provision that positions the young person as an object about whom others make decisions, rather than a subject who can make decisions about their life. In this study, several young people chose informal accommodation, even though this exposed them to further risks and hardship, rather than accept placements within a system which treated them as objects without autonomy.

Secondly, the mental model of ‘young person as child’, did not match the lived reality of the population the policy is meant to serve. The young people perceived a mismatch between the services offered and their perceived needs. Many had practical independent living capabilities before they became homeless (and did not want or need family style accommodation) but wanted support to develop independence and self-respect (as found by Watson and Cuervo (2017) and Farrugia (2011)). This mismatch led to low compliance with formally sanctioned living arrangements by several young people.

Thirdly, the values that underpin the ‘young person as child’ mental model, prioritise protection, safety and avoidance of risk. A protection approach to risk is not a workable response to risk if young people’s compliance is low, as was seen from interviews with participants. Protection also does not prepare young people for adulthood. Within the model of ‘young person as child’, if a young person rejects protection, this leads to attempts to control them ‘for their own good’. As was seen in participants’ interviews, some young people avoided the services that were designed (by others) to support them. As some participants’ stories illustrated, when this occurred, young people aged 12–15 years were placed in far riskier circumstances with less support than if they had been aged 16–17 years. From this perspective, policy, as implemented, whilst intending to protect young people aged 12–15 years, exposed young people to greater risk.

Fourthly, several implementation strategies based on the mental model of ‘young person as child’ are not practical because they ignore the reality. For example, the shortage of foster placements for teenagers meant that those who wanted this type of provision did not get it. The reconnect strategy depended upon there being an intact and safe family, but this was not the situation for most participants. Reliance on kinship care as a strategy breaks down if kinship carers become overburdened, or if the terms of the care orders create conflict.

Finally, the present model has led to a system that provided no exit points. At the time of the study, the youngest participants were housed in emergency accommodation with no foreseeable prospect of exit into stable accommodation. Slightly older participants who were 16–22 years were in supported transitional accommodation, with possible pathways to permanent accommodation after up to 10 years of homelessness. Some of the oldest participants were in their mid-twenties, and had found stable accommodation but typically had been homeless for several years before gaining stable housing. This result has been acknowledged to be undesirable because it compounds and embeds existing trauma, instability and disadvantage.

Towards a New Paradigm

From the perspective of service providers, a key issue was being able to provide young people with the support that they needed without taking away their independence. A

youth worker explained the dilemma of needing to take time to build trust with a young person and yet not having sufficient options to respond appropriately:

‘It can take a long time to build the trust necessary for intervention, during which time the young person becomes used to street life or enters an unsafe relationship and feels in control of their life to some degree, [and] they do not want to go into a child position in care’ (Youth worker).

Another service provider spoke about the need for better staff training and safer hostels to manage the difficult balance between the apparent youth of this cohort, their complex needs, and sometimes the relative safety (compared with their previous circumstances) and independence that they had found in becoming homeless.

The new paradigm for proposed policy replaces the mental model of ‘young person as child’ with a mental model of ‘young person as peri-adult’. A ‘young person as peri-adult’ mental model would be consistent with a harm reduction approach, which would support the young person to learn how to keep themselves safe. With this focus, services would actively support young people to develop their practical and decision-making capabilities and autonomy. A harm reduction approach to risk would prepare young people better for adulthood than the current ‘protection’ approach.

Service providers who were interviewed supported the systemic approach developed in the *Road Home* approach because it facilitated flexible support for young people and because this approach recognised the importance of providing exit points, and support to prevent re-entry. Other research also affirms the importance of ‘flexible, tailored, post-vention outreach support’ (Eldridge et al. 2008, p. 5; Lazzari 2008), which enables young people to successfully maintain independent living. The lack of exit points and lack of post-vention in current strategy for 12–15-year-olds is a weakness. This weakness can be overcome if the mental model of ‘young person as peri-adult’ is applied. Young people aged 12 and over who became homeless would be assessed for their practical capabilities and their maturity, and offered individualised support packages to facilitate their transition to independent adulthood. Where developmentally appropriate, young people aged 12–15 years would be treated as mature minors and would have access to independent financial support and supported youth accommodation services. The key needs young people perceived were for better individual support, for greater autonomy, and someone who would listen and care about them whom they could trust. If these needs were met, it would reduce service avoidance by young people and increase safety because the approach taken by youth accommodation services would align better with how young people perceived their situation.

The new paradigm aligns with the ethos of youth work, which supports young people to develop their decision-making capacity, respects their autonomy and develops their self-advocacy (Cooper 2018a) but is in tension with the ethos in CPFS, who are responsible for policy in this area. A change of paradigm would require a change in the power hierarchy between child protection services and youth accommodation, and this would have implications for collaboration to develop a new service delivery model. The ‘young person as peri-adult’ paradigm would require child protection services to relinquish their control over how other services work with young people. This arrangement would also require a transfer of funding from child protection services to youth accommodation services. Research would be required to determine

whether this could be achieved within current budgets. Suitable arrangements for guardianship would be needed, especially if a young person was not considered sufficiently mature to make decisions on their own behalf.

Adoption of such a paradigm for policy has implications for the organisation of other services, and potentially for legislation. Service providers identified that current guardianship arrangements were a barrier to young people being accepted into supported accommodation before the age of 16 years, as was restriction upon access to financial support through Centrelink. A review of guardianship laws is needed to permit young people to be treated as mature minors at a younger age, if they have sufficient maturity. Where young people are not yet sufficiently mature, attention needs to be given to finding practical arrangements that will work, and prioritising how the young person can be best supported towards adult independent living. This might be achieved by extending existing Public Guardianship arrangements to young people.

A wider variety of accommodation and support options are required for young people who have been used to making decisions for themselves, who value their independence, and who will soon be adult. Suggestions from service providers included an expansion of existing services and alternative forms of supported accommodation for some young people under 16 years. Accommodation for young people under 16 years, who are not yet sufficiently mature to live independently, might include intensively supported accommodation, boarding arrangements (as suggested by MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008), and better supported kinship care or foster placement options that actively support young people to attain independence.

Conclusions

A new paradigm for youth homelessness services for 12–15-year-olds is long overdue. Services need to be redesigned to reflect a mental model of the ‘young person as peri-adult’, who needs both material and non-material support. The young people’s stories illustrated how limitations within the existing youth homelessness systems had played out in their lives and led to unintended consequences that increased their risk of harm. Their stories also illustrated what support they valued, and demonstrated the resourcefulness of the participants. The response needs to be systemic. A strong social safety net is required, as outlined by O’Sullivan (2017) and a foundation in social justice as outlined by Watson and Cuervo (2017).

The intention of the research was to find out how young people had experienced and navigated the homelessness system when they were under 16 years old, and to compare this with information gathered from service providers. There are several limitations of this study: it was a small-scale exploratory study based upon a convenience sample of young people in Western Australia; stories were collected retrospectively, sometimes several years later. Mayock et al. (2011) suggested that some single point studies may over-represent the chronically homeless for whom family reunion is not possible, and our sampling strategy means this may be case. In addition, our sampling strategy did not recruit anyone who is currently incarcerated, so may have under-represented some groups who were chronically homeless, including potentially Indigenous young people who are homeless and who are over-represented in the youth justice system.

Despite these limitations, information from service providers was congruent with findings from young people. The researchers are reasonably confident we have achieved sufficient saturation to capture the major themes relevant to the system in Perth, Western Australia. However, the researchers acknowledge that minor themes may have been missed and that findings may not apply in other jurisdictions or other locations, without local contextualisation.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Jayne Jarvis who conducted the interviews, and of Trish Heath and Marketa Reeves from the Commissioner for Children and Young People for constructive feedback on the study.

Funding Information This project was funded by the Commissioner for Children and Youth and Edith Cowan University (not listed in drop down list of funding bodies).

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Research Involving Human Participants All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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