1. Introduction

This paper presents finding from a study undertaken by the presenters during 2000/01 into Aboriginal youth homelessness in metropolitan Adelaide. The study primarily explored issues relating to homelessness, rather than offending. Homelessness and offending are not two separate issues, however, and consequently there are insights from the study which relate to crime and offending.

This paper does not discuss all the findings from the study (these will be published separately by the Department of Human Services in 2002, in a publication entitled "*Moving Yarns: Aboriginal Youth homelessness in Adelaide*"), but focuses in on those relevant to offending.

2. Methodology

In depth interviews were conducted with 20 young people who were either currently homeless, or had recent experiences of homelessness and were still in unstable or vulnerable housing arrangements. The focus of these interviews was on pathways into homelessness, experiences when homeless, and use of services. In doing the interviews a "life story" approach was adopted through the use of a booklet, entitled "*Moving Yarns*". Young people could choose to record, or have recorded for them, their story as they moved through the sections of the booklet, or else just talk with the interviewer. The interviews and booklet were structured around the broad areas of

- family background and relationships
- their life history according to their moves
- key issues in their current situation
- their support people
- their experiences and views on support services.

In addition, case studies of ten homeless Aboriginal young people were provided by and discussed with ten different services. This enabled a fuller exploration of issues relating to service provision and case management.

The definition of homeless used in the study was that contained in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (1994), ie:

> "A person is homeless if, and only if, he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing. A person is taken to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which the person has access:
> (a) damages, or is likely to damage, the person's health; or
> (b) threatens the person's safety, or
> (c) marginalises the person through failing to provide access to:
> (i) adequate personal amenities; or
> (ii) the economic and social support that a home normally affords; or
> (d) places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.

Under this, the definition proposed by two Melbourne researchers, Chris Chamberlain & David McKenzie[1], was used, which distinguishes different levels of homelessness:

Primary homeless:	"Sleeping rough" and lacking conventional accommodation.
Secondary homeless:	People who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another and including people in SAAP accommodation.
Tertiary homeless	People who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis.

It is important to note that, by both these definitions, homelessness doesn't just include "living on the streets" or sleeping rough, but moving around a lot when you don't have anywhere safe or stable to stay. Most homeless people (indigenous and non-indigenous) probably stay temporarily with friends and relatives, rather than sleep rough or stay in shelters[2]. It is also important to note that young people can move in and out of homelessness, and homelessness can be of a very short duration (eg several days) or long term and chronic.

<u>3. The young people in the study</u>

Thirteen young women and seven young men participated in the study. Ages ranged from eleven to twenty, with an average age of fifteen.

All were either currently homeless, or had recent experiences of homelessness. Some of those interviewed were in stable accommodation at the time of interview but for a specific purpose and time (eg in youth detention).

When the interviewer asked the young people "When did you start moving around?" just over half identified that they began moving before the age of seven. Most had had at least one change of caregiver before the age of 10, and usually multiple changes. There was another block of young people who said their moving around started in their early teenage years.

Just over half voluntarily disclosed their experiences of child abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual) during the interview. Neglect was probably common to the experiences of all.

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[1] Chamberlain C & MacKenzie D (1992) "Understanding Contemporary Homelessness: Issues of Definition and Meaning"; *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 27 (4) pp 274 - 297

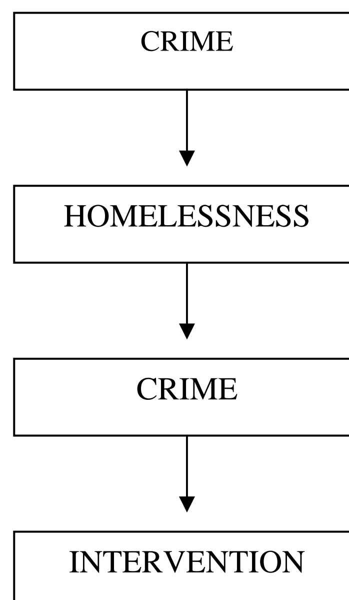
[2] See, for example, findings of Chamberlain C (1999) *Counting the Homeless: Implications for Policy Development*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Occasional Paper, Commonwealth of Australia

Most had lived in many places, with many different people and in many different forms of care. So for example, most (but not all) said they had lived with their parents; they all said they had lived with their extended family; just over half had been in foster care, half said had lived with friends, about a third said they had been in Youth Detention, and a third said they had slept rough.

In noting these patterns of high mobility, it is important to remember that homelessness for young people is not just about "houselessness" or lack of accommodation, but also about the lack of stable, consistent adult care and, which is so essential for all children and young people. Young people who lack stable housing also therefore lack stable adults care, and each move means a change in caregivers and relationship as well as a place to sleep.

4. Patterns in the relationship between crime and offending

Juvenile offending and homelessness are not two separate issues, but are intricately and intrinsically linked. Homeless young people have a complex relationship with crime, offending and the statutory system. All the young people talked about crime, offences, or offending through the course of the interviews. When we analysed the interviews and considered issues related to offending, a basic pattern emerged, namely:



To capture this sequence in a nutshell:

> *Tara ran away from home to get away from her uncle who bashes her and rapes her. She lived on the streets, and while there, stole to get food and some other necessities. She was arrested.*

It is important to emphasise that this is a pattern, which does not mean it is inevitable or holds true in every situation. It is also only part of the picture about Aboriginal youth homelessness, and certainly not every young person who experiences crime, or is involved in offending, becomes homeless. Conversely, not every young person who becomes homeless will have come from a background of offending. But this pattern was there for all the young people in our study.

It is also important to stress that the discussion on homelessness and offending in this paper is not about placing blame on individuals and families. The driving forces behind Aboriginal homelessness and offending are the dispossession, racism, cultural loss and marginalisation which has been the experience of Aboriginal people since white settlement. Family breakdown, alcohol and substance abuse, violence and homelessness are all manifestations of these broader issues.

5. Offending as a backdrop to homelessness

We did not specifically ask the young people we interviewed "*was there crime in your family*?" or "*did people who you were living with break the law*"? However, nearly all of them chose to describe, in the course of their conversations, growing up in and around illegal acts – that is people they were living with, usually family members, were committing crime. The most common kind of offence described was violence and assault, but there was also sexual assault, use of illegal substances, robbery, including with violence, and drug dealing. These things were part of the family picture for the young people. Often in their stories they mentioned a family member who was in gaol, or recently released, and they sometimes expressed relief at such an imprisonment because it gave them a break from intimidation and violence.

This degree of contact with "wrong doing" is not unexpected or surprising, given what we know about the rate of arrests and imprisonments amongst the Aboriginal community, and also the family backgrounds of both young offenders and young homeless. Many of the known antecedents for offending (family breakdown, deprivation, educational failure, a sense of marginalisation from the mainstream community)[3] are also associated with homelessness. Offending, housing instability and homelessness are not unexpected amongst young people from deprived and unstable backgrounds and struggling families.

In our study we observed two specific impacts this exposure to crime appeared to have on the young people:

[3] Beresford Q & Omaji P (1996), *Rites of Passage: Aboriginal youth, crime and justice*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press

Firstly, living with and growing up around crime increased the likelihood that young people themselves would be involved in criminal acts. This was an experience of **socialisation into a particular life-style**, learning certain behaviour. The young people had grown up in a marginalised sub-culture, at the edges of society, where rules and norms are different and where certain types of offences and kinds of behaviour are not exceptional.[4] It is not unexpected that these young people will in time repeat the patterns and behaviours they have grown up with. At the extreme end, they may be actively drafted into crime - in one particularly graphic example a young boy told us of his first offence, when he was very young and a parent took him out with them while they did a break and enter and car theft, and he was nearly killed in the process.

Secondly, **offences often triggered housing instability, running away and homelessness.** The most frequently identified reason these highly mobile young people gave for moving from one place to another was to get away from something (some offence) occurring in the home – abuse, violence, assault, intimidation, rape. Offending behaviour within households precipitates homelessness.

The homelessness which resulted from this leaving was in some cases short-term – moving out for a while, going and staying with friends, or living on the streets, to get a break from home or until things calmed down there. So for example, 12 year old Mark:

> *Mark mainly lives with his grandma. He has lots of problems with his uncle who also lives in the house: he uses drugs and is violent. "Hits me around if he has no drugs or drug money, he'd go off. He's always saying to me, you little bastard, you little cunt". To get away from it for a while, Mark runs away and stays with friends or sleeps rough.*

There are two obvious concerns with such behaviour. Firstly, there are the very real dangers that children and young people are exposed to when they are homeless, particularly on the streets. And secondly, such behaviour can become a pattern: every time a young person runs away it makes it easier for it to happen the next time. From short term running away grows long-term and chronic homelessness.[5] Pivotal to successful intervention to prevent homelessness is taking action when the young person first leaves.

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[4] ibid

[5] Chamberlain C & MacKenzie D (1998), *Youth homelessness: early intervention and prevention,* Australian Centre for Equity through Education

Offending could also trigger the permanent ending of living arrangements:

> *When she was very young, Kate suffered extreme physical abuse by her parent and this started her story of moving around, living with various people in her extended family. Two of these arrangements have ended when she was sexually abused.*

Consequently, by the time they become homeless, many Aboriginal young people are already **victims of crime**. As we have argued, their status and experience as a victim of crime is a contributing factor to becoming homeless, and also to their own subsequent offending.

Many of them bear the physical and emotional scars of being victims. Physical effects we observed included long-term brain damage from a physical assault which has ongoing implications for learning and behaviour. Some young people chose to show the interviewer physical scars remaining from assault, for example, being slashed with a knife. Emotional scars were also quite visible and even more common. For example, there was extreme anger:

> *"I fucking hate my mother and I want to knife her like she knifed me".*

We also observed isolation and exclusion from family; poor self-esteem; self-mutilation; suicidal thoughts and substance abuse (including one young girl who said she used drugs to forget what her father did to her – ie, rape). Also apparent were patterns of violent behaviour, and limited ability to cope with conflict. All these reactions, of course, path the way for offending by the young people.

6. Offending when homeless

It was clear from our study that there was a link between the young person's housing status and their offending. We didn't ask young people *"do you break the law and offend when you are homeless?"* But most chose to tell us that they did. In particular, it was clear that the more unstable and vulnerable the living arrangements – ie when young people were sleeping rough and on the streets – the more they were likely to offend. So why do homeless youth offend? The young people themselves provided a number of reasons.

First, and foremost, they **stole to survive**. Stealing was an economic, survival imperative, and a method commonly used to meet their most basic need for food. Stealing as a major "access strategy" to food when living on the streets does not apply just to Aboriginal youth, as other research on access to food by homeless young people in inner city Adelaide has demonstrated.[6] If we examine our service systems for homeless youth we can see how this happens – there are clear gaps in the adequacy of food services for homeless youth. In particular, young people who are recently or temporarily out of home face enormous difficulties: they have no financial support and no income. So, for example:

> *Andrew is thirteen. When he is on the streets in the inner city he sniffs paint. He gets money for food by stealing or else going to the Food Van in Whitmore Square. He says he does not go "scabbing for money" (begging) like his cousins, because that's a shame job.*

> *Gabrielle is fourteen. Her three older brothers are involved in drug use and serious crime, and are violent and intimidatory towards her. To get away she goes and stays with friends or sleeps in squats. When away from home she steals to get food.*

Several young people told us that there was less stigma and shame attached to stealing than to begging.

Young people also stole to meet other basic needs, for example:

> *During her time on the streets when she was 12, Marie said she was caught three times for stealing soap and shampoo "so I wouldn't look crusty". She would also try and scab money, but she thought scabbing was shameful and preferred stealing.*

It is deeply concerning to us that, in the 21st century in Adelaide, young people have to steal, commit a crime, in order to eat.

Young people also identified other reasons why they were likely to offend when homeless.

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[6] Booth, S (work in progress)

They are **more likely to use drugs and alcohol** when they're homeless, and particularly when on the streets and in the inner city. Some of this use is itself a crime. They also do crime when under the influence; or to get the money to get the drugs. This, of course, crosses over into the policy and health issues of addiction and the criminalisation of certain behaviours. So:

> *When interviewed, Jill was on charges of violence and vandalism which occurred when she was homeless in the inner city and high on paint.*
>
> *Cara, a homeless heroin addict, said she prostituted herself to get money for heroin.*

The influence of others – the gang, the cousins – is particularly strong when on the streets. When young people have so little, the gang/group fulfils an important need for identity, security, protection and family. There are few restraints on behaviour on the streets, there is no supervision, normal limits do not exist. The group itself is a marginalised sub-culture, with different rules and norms and where there is likely to be a sense of alienation from or opposition to the wider community. This alienation facilitates illegal acts.[7] It was also apparent that, for Aboriginal young people in the environment of the streets, younger children can be quickly drawn into certain activities by older ones.

> *Jenny started to sleep rough uptown when she was about 11 years old, including sometimes sleeping in squats with her father. During this time she would smoke dope and pop pills. She also started to "roll white kids for their clothes". She was charged with a number of offences including stealing, break and enter, and illegal use of a motor vehicle. She said that when you're on the streets you sometimes do crime because "you get a big head and you want to be a hero".*

We were also told that boredom was a factor in offending. Many homeless youth are bored – they have long days and little to do. So, for a bit of excitement, they might steal a car.

We would also note that these young people are more likely to get involved in crime because of the ongoing scars of their life experiences. They often carry a lot of anger and resentment, and have poor conflict resolution skills. Subsequently, they are likely to get involved in fights and violent incidents, and cause property damage, including in shelters (which could also precipitate eviction).

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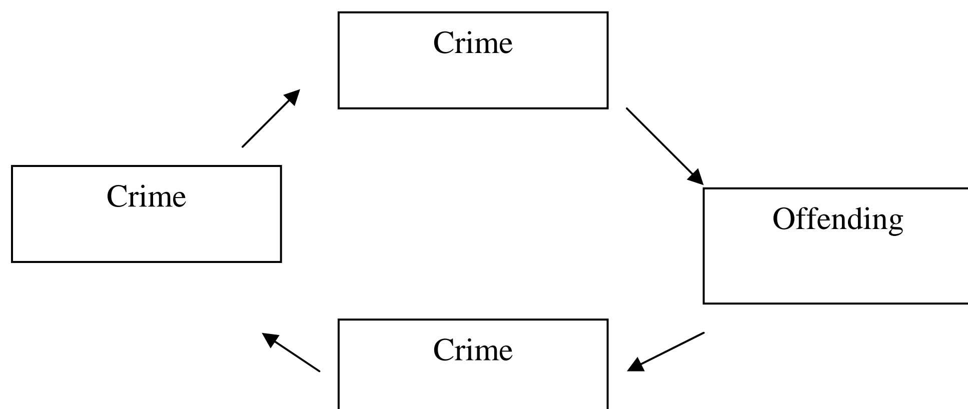
[7] Beresford & Omaji (1996), op cit

The speed with which homeless Aboriginal young people become involved in offending and other risky and risk-taking behaviour (sleeping rough, using drugs) seems to us to be one of the ways in which indigenous youth homelessness is different to non-indigenous homelessness. The kind of behaviour which other research suggests is more present with "chronic" homeless non-indigenous young people[8] seems to emerge very quickly for Aboriginal youth when they hit the street, or much earlier in the "homeless career path". It also seems to emerge younger: we suspect Aboriginal young people start moving around earlier, move out of home earlier, and also on to the streets and sleep rough at a younger age.

Homeless young people are often the victims of crime as well as the perpetrators, and we were also told stories of physical and sexual assault and exploitation which occurred when the young people were homeless, both whilst staying on the streets and also when staying with friends and family.

It was clear from our interviews that the pattern we described at the commencement of the paper (crime – homelessness – crime – intervention) is often a cycle and not a linear path, ie:



[8] Chamberlain & MacKenzie (1998) op cit.

Offending/illegal acts can keep disrupting housing arrangements, ad infinitum. So, for example:

> *Marie is 13. Her mother died of a heroin overdose, and three older siblings are in prison. She told of several weeks she spent living on the streets when she took speed, pills, drank a lot, sniffed paint and smoked dope and cigarettes. She met up with an older sister on the street and they managed to get a flat together. However, due to her sister's drug use there was no money for food or anything else, and she eventually went back on the streets. She then moved in with an uncle, but she said he spent most of the household money on drugs and also stole to support his habit, including from her. She ran off.*

7. Intervention: contact with the criminal justice system

The story we have presented so far is that:

> *young people who are victims of crime and grown up in dysfunctional and difficult environments, which include offending by the adults around them,*
>
> *do not have access to stable and safe housing;*
>
> *and become homeless, for shorter or longer times,*
>
> *and when homeless commit offences.*

Eventually , sooner or later, these young people hit the young offender system. And what happens then?

Previous research has indicated that the young offender system is the dominant pathway to services for Aboriginal young people in South Australia, and particularly boys.[9] This pattern was supported in the interviews we did for this study.

The reasons for this are complex and include systemic barriers, the nature of services, and simple things like access to information. The issues of attitude, however, emerged particularly strongly in our study, for example:

> *Ben (18) says he has never had any contact with services other than through the juvenile justice system. For him, using services would be "a shame job". He says he would get a hard time from his cousins: it is important to be viewed as independent and able to look after yourself.*

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[9] Rogers, N (1997) *A Window on Vulnerability: Young people in contact with community services,* Department of Human Services, SA; and Rogers, N (1998) *A Different View: Aboriginal young people in contact with community services,* Department of Human Services, South Australia.

Consequently, when young people do hit the juvenile justice system; there is both a responsibility and an opportunity to make a difference. It may be first chance of interrupting a cycle or providing basic necessities to very deprived youth. The young offender system can and should be a place for intervention to prevent homelessness. Given the emphasis on rehabilitation as well as on punishment and containment in juvenile justice, homeless young people do access to services and support through the doorway of the Court.

The good news from our interviews was that these services were actually very important to young people. So, while they, of course, did not like being arrested, controlled and confined, they did appreciate some of the benefits, notably food, health care, education, having somewhere safe and stable to stay, support and activities.

Some young people have far better access to these basic necessities of safe development and healthy living when they are in the juvenile justice system and in detention than they ever have outside. So, for example, we have the young women who, when asked about use of health services outside detention, laughed and said:

> *"Healthy! The only time we're healthy is when we're inside".*

Emotional support, from a consistent adult, was what the young people most frequently identified that they wanted. They also sometimes got it, at least to some degree or for a limited period, through the juvenile justice system: from youth workers in secure care; from police; from social workers and from formal mentoring arrangements.[10] The young people wanted adults who would listen, understand, and could be trusted. They wanted good personal relationships of care.

A young offender order can also provide another opportunity for education, and a chance for some special assistance with learning. We were surprised at how important this was to young people. The older ones especially knew the limitations placed on their future by their educational attainment, and their basic levels of literacy and numeracy. Even some tenuous reconnection back into education and training was appreciated.

> *"I can't read properly and I can't get a job. Nana was right about schooling".*

Employment assistance was similarly valued. Those who wanted to "stop getting into trouble" knew that boredom and idleness were big factors in offending, and education and employment were tightly connected to "having something to do". The life aspiration of one young woman was simply:

> *"To be busy and not be bored".*

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[10] Mentoring received an especially good press from the young people – all those who had been involved in a mentoring program spoke very highly of it.

These young people have great needs. Despite these positive responses, unfortunately the intervention available to them through the juvenile justice doorway and the homelessness system is probably not enough for many of them to break the cycle. Whilst there are many reasons why this is the case, a few issues that particularly emerged through the study were:

- The intensity of response that these young people need is often not possible or available;

- We are still struggling to develop and provide the right range of accommodation options that will suit these young people, and we know there are no simple easy solutions to what these might be;

- There is still too much of a distinct sectoral feel between the key programs and areas, including homelessness, young offender, and the health systems. We do not have a holistic and encompassing response to individuals.

- The support offered – the caring relationships and the case management– is often attached to residence in a certain service or a legal order and when that concludes so does the relationship. As young people move across the system – which these young people do continually - they have many different workers. Continuity of care does not exist.

The other major question which arises is: when should we intervene to prevent offending? Our work would suggest that intervention in any part of the homelessness-offending cycle is capable of changing the future and what happens next. But it is clear that back with the family, at the start of the pattern, is preferable. Aboriginal families need holistic, flexible, intensive, empowering and respectful responses and support. There is simply not enough of this at the present time.

Finally, we would argue that young people should not have to wait to get arrested to access very basic services and necessities of life. And clearly the behaviour of children should not be criminalised because they need to eat.

Acknowledgment

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> We would also like to acknowledge the services and workers who supported the study, in particular, Kumangka Aboriginal Youth Service and the Metropolitan Aboriginal Youth Team within Family and Youth services.