

ACHIEVING (EXTRA)ORDINARY ASPIRATIONS

A RESEARCH PROJECT EXPLORING THE ROLE THAT THE STEP AHEAD PROGRAM HAS PLAYED IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE AFFECTED BY HOMELESSNESS

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2011



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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the 29 young people who participated in this research. Their willingness to share their stories has made this research possible.

We thank Michelle Puckey for her diligent work in transcribing our interviews.

We extend our appreciation to the staff of Melbourne Citymission, particularly those supporting the Step Ahead program. In particular, we would like to thank Lisa O'Brien and Mandy Baxter for their valuable feedback and advice.

We thank Melbourne Citymission and Victoria University for funding this research.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many young people affected by homelessness are determined to continue with the usual activities pursued by those in their age group. In extraordinary circumstances, they aspire to achieve what most Australians consider to be ordinary, achievable goals – completing their education and establishing a career, relationships and a home. Such goals may be ordinary in the sense of commonplace but their achievement against all odds can be extraordinary. The *Achieving (extra)ordinary aspirations* research was undertaken in 2010-2011 by Victoria University and Melbourne Citymission. It focuses on the experiences of young people who have used the Melbourne Citymission Step Ahead program, reporting on the young people's views about different aspects of the model, how they experienced it, and what made a difference in their lives.

The research used a mixed methods approach including in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a personally administered survey, and a review of the participants' case notes from their time with Step Ahead. The researchers attempted to contact all 63 previous clients of Step Ahead. Of these, 42 were contacted by telephone, email or post, and 29 agreed to participate in the research. While we cannot assert that the sample is representative, Melbourne Citymission staff who reviewed this report advise that in their opinion the outcomes for the young people who agreed to participate in the research are probably no better and no worse than the outcomes for those who were either uncontactable, or declined to participate. About half of the research participants had been accommodated in Melbourne Citymission's co-located studio apartments (Lion Garden), and about half in shared, dispersed Transitional Housing Management (THM) properties. Step Ahead no longer uses shared accommodation because of changes in Office of Housing fire regulations and all units are now single occupancy.

Past research into homelessness has established that disrupted education, poor employment prospects and homelessness are closely linked (Grace, Batterham & Cornell 2008; Grace, Wilson & Coventry 2006; MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008; Mallett et al. 2004; Wingert, Higgit & Ristock 2005). According to Anderson and Quilgars (1995), foyers are 'an integrated approach to meeting the needs of young people during their transition from dependence to independence by linking affordable accommodation to training and employment' (cited in Lovatt, Whitehead & Levy-Vroelant 2006, p.152). Step Ahead is usually referred to as a foyer-like service. Young people are housed in fully furnished, self contained units, flats or houses for up to three years and receive ongoing intensive motivational casework and a structured program of learning activities.

Recent 'pathways' research with young people affected by homelessness draws attention to the sub-groupings within this population. Researchers have described sub-groups that have different pathways into and through homelessness (Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008; Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al 2010), different levels of engagement with services (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al 2010), and distinctive service needs depending on where they are on their pathway through homelessness (Karabanow 2008). These are not fixed sub-groups, but rather they are groupings used by the authors to make sense of and convey the findings of their research. In this research we use three sub-groupings to describe and understand the participants' life circumstances at the time of their interviews. The three categories are 'well protected against homelessness', 'protected against homelessness' and 'vulnerable to homelessness'.

Pathways into Step Ahead

Twenty-nine Step Ahead ex-residents participated in this research. About half were female and about half were male. Approximately half of the participants were born in Australia and half were born elsewhere. Sixteen of the participants had English as a first language. The average age of participants when entering the program was 20 years. Australian born participants were, on average, homeless for a much longer period before entering the program than overseas born participants, who tended to enter the program soon after becoming homeless.

Immediately before entering Step Ahead, about half of the participants were staying in crisis accommodation. Others were 'couch surfing', staying with friends, or in transitional housing or supported accommodation. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, lifestyles exposing them to risks of harm, and a history of abuse at home were common among the young people entering Step Ahead, as was serious conflict with other family members. Three young people were identified as having substance issues and two had been in statutory care.

Going through the program

Step Ahead provided all of the young people in this research with supported accommodation when they were homeless. They had no other good options, and the service protected them from making the transition to chronic or street homelessness at that time. The important elements of the program included the provision of safe, affordable accommodation, individualised support by youth workers, supported access to other services,

programs such as budgeting and cooking, and a contractual expectation that the young people would pursue education, training and/or employment.

The research participants' engagement with the Step Ahead program and their transition through the service was far from straightforward. We found that a number of dynamics affected participants' progress through the program, including their mental health, emotional stability, engagement with education and employment, capacity to meet program requirements, and whether or not they were sharing their accommodation with another person.

Exiting

The average length of time spent in Step Ahead was 596 days or 1.6 years. Participants described a range of experiences associated with their exit from Step Ahead. These can be broadly categorised as *graduating*, *leaving of their own accord*, *requiring different care*, and *required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program requirements*. About half the participants graduated and four left of their own accord. Roughly one third of participants required different care or broke conditions of the program and were required to leave, with a number of participants leaving for both reasons. Upon exiting Step Ahead, roughly one third of all participants moved into community housing, one third moved in with family and friends and one third went into other accommodation. While private rental was commonly sought by participants, it was rarely an affordable option for exiters.

Pathways after Step Ahead

At the time the researchers conducted the final interview for this study on 9 December 2010, the average time elapsed since a client had left Step Ahead accommodation was 986 days, or 2.7 years. The average age of interview participants was 23 years. The eldest was 28 and the youngest was 19. The young people participating in this study can be broadly described in three groupings according to their vulnerability to homelessness at the time of their interviews for this research:

Well protected against homelessness

Protected against homelessness

Vulnerable to homelessness

Fourteen, or about half the participants were well protected against homelessness. Participants were placed in this group because of active study, employment or parenting and some combination of good health and wellbeing, strong connections to others and stable housing. Overall, young people in this group can be described as having a range of opportunities, a sense of ontological security, robust interdependencies with the world around them and the resources to achieve their aspirations. The group included six males and eight females, ten overseas born and four Australian born.

Ten participants were protected against homelessness. The young people in this group were generally not able to access housing without some form of support, as they had not yet accumulated sufficient education or labour market experience to sustain it independently. About half were working or studying or combining the two, while the others had clear plans for future participation. Supportive relationships and community connections were generally evident, although some still required the assistance of services to maintain their wellbeing. The group included three males and seven females, four overseas born and six Australian born.

Four participants were vulnerable to homelessness. These young people were living in short term housing and did not have the education or employment participation necessary to secure stable housing in the future. They had ongoing difficulties with their health and wellbeing and, with one exception, were yet to identify interests and aptitudes that might lead to greater opportunities. The group included three males and one female, with all the males Australian born and the female overseas born. Each of the four young people in the vulnerable group had suffered serious damaging events in their lives.

Who did Step Ahead work well for?

Step Ahead worked well for all of the overseas born males, and most of the overseas born females. The program supported them at a vulnerable time and protected them from harm. It focussed their efforts on education and employment and, for those who were new to Australia, gave them time and guidance to acclimatise to a relatively unfamiliar culture and environment. It enabled an escape from difficult family circumstances and the opportunity to gain vocational qualifications and establish a work history. Many possessed a strong drive to

succeed, which functioned as a protective factor, but this alone may not have been sufficient protection from homelessness without the assistance of a service such as Step Ahead.

For the Australian born participants whose relationships with family had broken down, the emotional, material and practical support they received, particularly during times of crisis, was as important as the life skills components of the program. Mostly adolescents, these young people were negotiating a stage of life where values, identities and aspirations were being explored in sometimes risky and erratic ways. Many of the Australian born young people had life histories indicating that they would have been at risk of making the transition to chronic or street homelessness without the support of Step Ahead.

Young people with emotional problems and milder forms of mental illness used the support and stability of the program to overcome their psychological difficulties. It seems that the symptoms experienced by these young people were mostly reactive to past traumas and conflicted domestic relationships, and once the stressors were removed, the symptoms gradually decreased. The relationship with workers was central to this recovery, as was a stable place to live and a chance to develop a positive sense of identity.

Those who made the transition from secondary school to university in Step Ahead used the program as a stable base to concentrate on achieving good results. Step Ahead assisted these students, some of whom would have found entry and engagement with university life impossible otherwise. Those who pursued studies through TAFE or other institutions used their time at Step Ahead to explore different career options and develop their interests and aptitudes.

In summary, we find that Step Ahead worked particularly well for homeless young people who needed time and support to acclimatise to a relatively unfamiliar cultural environment; for adolescents requiring support and safety to negotiate a transition to adulthood; for those with mild, reactive emotional and psychological problems; and for those transitioning from secondary school to higher education.

Who did Step Ahead not work well for?

This research confirms the understanding that the foyer model is not appropriate for young people with serious mental health or substance issues, or a combination of the two. Participants with serious mental illnesses recognised that they had opportunities in the program, but felt unable to make the most of them. Three young men suffered acute mental illness while living at Step Ahead and each left without greatly improving their mental health. This limited their educational achievements. Outside the program, with more intense support from specialist services or family members they were able to improve their mental health, and one of them continued with his education.

Some participants had other barriers to engaging in education, employment or program activities and they too fared poorly in the program. Those with little physical or psychological capacity for engagement may do better in specialist contexts where the focus is on identifying and overcoming the barriers without the contractual expectations of foyer-like programs.

A few participants felt an urgent need for intimate, emotional connections with others. These young people did not feel the relationship with their worker was sufficient and a closer engagement was desired. With their emotional needs unmet, these participants engaged in activities that conflicted with the program expectations, particularly those around regular hosting of guests, and were subsequently required to leave.

Living with other young people affected by homelessness can impose risks, and two participants experienced incidents that undermined their sense of security and safety in their accommodation. One incident involved a theft from a resident's unit and in the other, a participant reported an assault by the guest of a fellow resident.

In summary, we find that Step Ahead did not work well for participants struggling with acute mental illness or those with other psychological or physical barriers to participation in education, employment, and program activities. It did not work well for those with unmet needs for intimate, emotional connections with others, and those who experienced incidents that undermined their sense of security in their accommodation.

If Step Ahead made a difference, how did it help?

Step Ahead made a difference in the lives of all of the young people interviewed for this research. It offered them suitable, affordable, safe accommodation at a time when they were homeless and had no other good options. Without Step Ahead, these young people were at risk of making the transition to chronic or street homelessness. Our research interviews with the participants indicate that it was the combination of accommodation and support that made it possible for them to pursue their education and employment. Even the research participants who

remained vulnerable to homelessness at the time of the research interviews spoke of the respect they received in the program, and their appreciation for what they were offered, even if they were not in a position to make the most of the opportunity at that time. The support that made a difference to the young people included the flexible, individualised support provided by youth workers, including practical assistance such as books and school uniforms, working on personal development, motivation, and supported referral to other services. The program activities focussing on life skills such as budgeting and cooking, relationships, health and wellbeing, and community connectedness were an integral part of what made a difference for participants. Not all aspects of the program were equally valued by all participants, but each aspect was valued by some. Being accepted into Step Ahead was a source of self esteem for some of the young people. Program expectations were an integral part of how Step Ahead made a difference in young people's lives, including supporting their motivation. Aftercare for up to six months following exit is an important feature of the program, although not used by all.

The following paragraphs discuss how Step Ahead made a difference for participants, in terms of accommodation and home, education and training, work and money, personal relationships and community connectedness, and health and wellbeing. Detailed information about each of these outcome domains is included in the body of this report.

Accommodation and home

Step Ahead provided suitable, affordable, safe accommodation for the participants. However, home is more than accommodation, and the support that accompanied the accommodation created the opportunity for the young people to make a home for themselves. Many Lion Garden residents were grateful for the stability and peace of mind their single occupancy flats provided, and were able to host visits from friends and family. Some reported that the most important contribution Step Ahead made to their lives was the ability to live alone.

The Step Ahead program workers needed to strike a balance between clients making their own decisions about activities and guests, and workers' responsibility to preserve amenity and safety for all residents. Most participants expressed appreciation for the workers' enforcement of expectations, and indicated that they had achieved an appropriate balance.

Participants leaving Step Ahead were assisted by program staff to establish exit accommodation, often shared accommodation with friends or family, or subsidised community housing. At the time of their interviews for this research, private rental and community housing were the most common types of accommodation, each nominated by seven respondents. Four participants lived with family and an equal number in public housing. Four participants were still formally in the homeless population, living in transitional/supported accommodation, although one of these had secure ongoing accommodation with a specialist youth accommodation and support service. Two participants live in houses they are purchasing.

Education and training

The overwhelming view of participants was that Step Ahead played an important enabling and supporting role in their education. Most participants completed some formal education during the program and more than half were studying at their time of exit. Forty per cent were studying at the time of interview. All but one had moved past Year 9 level and more than half have completed Year 12. Nearly half have completed some post school study. When compared with comparably aged Victorians, Step Ahead participants had lower average attainment but were more likely to be studying. When compared with other homeless young people, Step Ahead ex-clients have high educational attainment. It seems that with the assistance of Step Ahead, homelessness has delayed rather than prevented the completion of their education.

Work and money

Practical and financial assistance from workers was an important part of Step Ahead, according to the research participants, but did not change the reality of having to make do with a very limited income. The fixed subsidised rent was an important source of stability for the participants, although the limited and insecure nature of their income sometimes left them short. In these instances, support from the program to negotiate with creditors and access emergency resources were a vital source of security for young people who may otherwise have faced more dire consequences.

Participants were strongly motivated to find employment, in most cases for financial reasons. The practical assistance they received from the program resulted in some people obtaining employment after entering the program, and improving their skills and confidence in finding employment later in life. A few participants who were struggling with their mental health or other domains in their life found the prospect of employment too demanding and were not committed to maintaining employment during the program.

Since leaving the program, a number of participants have found more stable employment and were enjoying the financial and other benefits. Seven participants mentioned that they had travelled overseas on holiday or to visit family, and this was seen as a valued achievement. At the time of interview, some participants identified with their present work and see a future in it, others see their employment as a temporary means to an end and hope for higher skilled and more rewarding positions in the future, being strongly motivated to study. A number of participants articulated clear career goals for the future. Some participants were without employment and struggling to find opportunities, others were concentrating on caring for their young children or study instead of seeking employment. At the time of interview, ten participants were not employed or studying. Two of these were young women who had become mothers and were spending their time on the unpaid work of caring for their children. Four of the ten had immediate plans for study. Four young people, or about one in seven of the sample, are disengaged from work and study, experiencing health problems and social isolation.

When compared with figures for Victorians of a comparable age, the research participants were less likely to be employed, and more likely to be studying. A higher proportion of the research participants were not participating in either study or employment.

Personal relationships and community connectedness

Participants reported that the relationship with their worker was central to their experience of the program. The relationship was developed through regular meetings to discuss education, employment and training, and program participation, through practical assistance to achieve immediate goals, and through time spent together discussing the client's wellbeing and relationships. Many comments about workers were positive and reflected a successful engagement on practical and personal levels. On the whole, participants remembered their workers favourably and were highly appreciative of the broad range of supports they received while in the Step Ahead program.

Young people in Step Ahead usually maintained some relationships with family members and research participants generally reported that their family relationships had improved. In some cases this was associated with resolving outstanding conflicts and misunderstandings. Some participants associated their improved family relationships with developing a more mature perspective. Some reported receiving assistance from Step Ahead or other workers to reconcile with their families, sometimes with direct mediation and sometimes with advice and counselling to the client. Being securely housed was mentioned as a source of strength for young people in dealing with their family, as it enabled a more equal and adult context for interaction. On balance, the evidence suggests that Step Ahead was effective in assisting young people to improve relationships with family.

Relationships with other clients in the program were mixed. A number of participants commented that getting to know other clients assisted them to develop a better perspective on their own situation, make friends, broaden their social horizons and feel comfortable and connected with the group, while others reported some of these elements along with some experiences of discomfort and conflict.

When describing their life at the time of interview, many participants spoke of their friends and networks of interdependence. Two participants reported having a small number of friends after disconnecting from their previous drug using peers. None of the participants reported having significant connections among homeless or drug using peer groups. A number of participants spoke of forming new networks of social connections with 'like minded people' during or after their time at Step Ahead. University was mentioned as an important place of social connection, as were ethnic communities, share houses, workplaces, extended families and sporting groups. One participant spoke of an improvement in his mental health after connecting with a new group of friends while in shared accommodation after he left the program.

Nearly two thirds of the respondents said they felt connected to a community and three quarters said they had someone other than a family member or social worker to talk to about difficulties. The most common number of people to talk to was two, and the average was between three and four. Some participants described feeling isolated at the time of interview, mostly as a result of having moved away from areas where friends lived. Eighty percent participated in community activities such as team sports, gym membership, volunteering with a community group, or participating in an ethnic or a university group.

Health and wellbeing

About half the participants reported experiencing poor mental health while in the program, and about half of these experienced significant improvements while in the program, which they attributed to changed living circumstances and the support offered by the program. Step Ahead was generally seen as a safe space to deal with problems. Some of the recreational opportunities available to participants were seen as helpful.

About one in five interview participants mentioned that drug use was a feature of their lives during the program, describing a mixture of fun and masking psychological pain as their motivation. All but one of these mentioned that they were offered access to specialist treatment. Although research participants did not typically take part in rehabilitation while in Step Ahead, four went on to receive specialist treatment later. Substance using participants generally reported their substance use was associated with a peer group or with depression and that it existed for a period of their life which has now passed. No participants mentioned that substance abuse was an issue in their life at the time of interview.

Most clients who had experienced mental illness during the program had improved by the time of interview, associating their improvements with living alone or in an environment with positive relationships, cessation of drug use and improved connections with other people. Some found music and spiritual literature had been helpful. Those who had experienced serious mental health problems reported faring better, but were aware that their mental health remained somewhat tenuous.

At the time of their interviews, the majority of research participants reported good or very good physical health and wellbeing. Overseas born participants reported better health and wellbeing than Australian born participants, and those reporting good or very good wellbeing were likely to report good or very good physical health as well.

Limitations of the Step Ahead program

Some limitations of Step Ahead identified in this research relate to inherent aspects of the program such as selection of young people for the program and how they are supported within the program. Other limitations relate to the availability of community-based supports and opportunities. Organisations such as Melbourne Citymission typically engage in ongoing monitoring and improvement in their programs, as well as long-term advocacy and service development work in order to improve community-based supports. The limitations reported here relate to Step Ahead and community-based supports as they were at the time that the research participants were with Step Ahead. The authors draw attention to these limitations, acknowledging that action may already have been taken to bring about change in these aspects.

Step Ahead did not work well for young people suffering serious mental illnesses, and it would be better if these young people were not accepted into the program. However, it is unclear whether it is possible to distinguish at intake between young people suffering from disorders that will improve in changed circumstances, and those who have serious mental illnesses. Half of those suffering mental illness reported no improvement or further deterioration during the program. Two clients reported that sharing their THM properties contributed to their mental illness. Loneliness and drug use typified the experience for those whose mental health did not improve. Two participants exited the program with acute mental illness and entered specialist care. This finding reinforces Step Ahead's position that foyer-like services are not appropriate for young people suffering serious mental illnesses.

Some participants experienced loneliness while at Step Ahead. Living in close proximity to other young people, and having organised activities did not necessarily assist with overcoming loneliness. Some participants' predominant memories were of unbridgeable divides of language, background, interests and aspirations.

Two-thirds of the THM residents experienced difficulties with their co-tenants. These problems varied from lack of goodwill and communication to outright hostility, creating an unwelcome source of stress and distraction. Two THM residents reported that their experience of shared tenancy exacerbated their mental health problems. Sharing accommodation was a problem for most participants who did so, and the move towards single occupancy would appear to be a useful step.

Two participants experienced incidents that undermined their sense of security and safety in their accommodation. Having expectations, procedures and practices in place to minimise the risk of such incidents is clearly an important part of foyer-like services.

Step Ahead was not able to offer much in the way of direct contacts or networks leading to job opportunities and participants were required to search for work through 'cold' contacts. Structural factors of high turnover and tenuous commitment between employers and employees meant the task of finding and keeping suitable employment was an ongoing challenge for most participants. Clients typically spent significant time and energy searching for part time and casual employment to complement their studies, or full time employment to establish a career. If Step Ahead

could develop more partnerships with employers, particularly those operating social enterprises or other transitional labour market programs, the success of clients in finding and keeping rewarding employment could be improved.

About one third of participants discussed some reservations about their workers. Two young people said that their workers were ill equipped to deal with their mental health issues. Several thought that they would have done better with a different worker because of some characteristic such as gender or age. Some would have preferred less contact with their worker, and some wanted more, while others felt disappointed about a determination the worker had made about guests, or conflicts in shared properties. While the worker-client relationship was a positive experience for most, advising young people that it is acceptable to request a change of worker may provide for better relationships in the future.

Community housing was the stepping stone out of the program for one third of the research participants. This was an affordable option, but many found that their neighbours presented security concerns. A greater range of affordable accommodation options for young people exiting Step Ahead would ensure a smoother transition.

Moving out while still studying full time put young people at risk of housing instability, frequent moves and financial stress. At the time of interview, participants had typically moved house every year or so and nearly half faced moving from their present accommodation in the coming six months.

Conclusion

Foyer-like services provide stable, affordable, medium term, suitable, supported accommodation to homeless young people. They assist their clients to develop the life skills required for a successful transition to adulthood, and provide resources and support to pursue education, training and employment. These services have been beneficial to the clients of Step Ahead, who had control of their own space and gained a vital sense of ontological security. The structured learning activities for budgeting, cooking and self care were valuable for many of the clients, as were the referrals and links with external services. The personal support from workers was delivered flexibly and responsively and was instrumental for a number of clients in emerging from a period of emotional turmoil. Participants were assisted to access specialist counselling and family mediation services, and many reported gaining confidence and maturity while in the program.

Step Ahead assisted the research participants to pursue their education. At the time of their research interviews, over 80% had completed year 12, and 37% had completed post-school qualifications, including some university degrees. Nearly half were still studying at the time of the interviews, eight at university and four at TAFE. Clients benefitted from the considerable resources provided for education: computers, books, school uniforms, and travel expenses. The majority of participants advanced their education in the program, and most successfully continued study after they left. The practical assistance participants received in finding employment resulted in some people gaining employment after entering the program, and improving their skills and confidence in finding employment in later life. Upon exit from the program, participants were assisted to access affordable accommodation and establish themselves in their new home.

Literature about foyers indicates that this type of service works best for young people who do not have high or complex needs, and are motivated to engage with education, training and employment. It would be easy to imagine a straightforward service that provides young people with the accommodation and services they need in order to complete their education and obtain employment. The picture that emerged from this research was much more complex. It may well be the case that within the homeless population, the young people accepted into foyer-like services are seen as having relatively low needs and high motivation. However, at their time of entry to Step Ahead, our participants were homeless, with no other good options for accommodation and support. These circumstances imply quite long term, damaging experiences in the past of every participant who entered Step Ahead. Coming to terms with past damaging experiences and forging new lives for themselves was far from straightforward. In general, completing their education took longer than for the average young person in the population, and the support of the Step Ahead program and its workers was essential to assisting the participants to overcome the many obstacles they faced. Some achieved extraordinary outcomes, and most can be described as protected from future homelessness.

Introduction

Many young people affected by homelessness are determined to continue with the usual activities pursued by those in their age group. In extraordinary circumstances, they aspire to achieve what most Australians consider to be ordinary, achievable goals – completing their education and establishing a career, relationships and a home. Such goals may be ordinary in the sense of commonplace but their achievement against all odds can be extraordinary.

The *Achieving (extra)ordinary aspirations* research was undertaken in 2010-2011 by Victoria University and Melbourne Citymission. It documents the outcomes for 29 young people who have used the Melbourne Citymission Step Ahead service. It reports on their views about different aspects of the service, how young people experience it, and what made a difference in their lives. The study contributes to understandings about how this kind of intervention works to support and assist young people. The research draws on existing outcome data within MCM, and original qualitative data.

THE STEP AHEAD PROGRAM

The foyer model of accommodation and support for young people is designed for homeless young people who wish to pursue education, employment and training as an important priority in their lives. The 'foyer' metaphor incorporates the idea of a foyer as a kind of entry room, with many doors opening from it. The idea is that engagement with the service opens doors to many other services and opportunities for young people whose life chances and opportunities have been severely damaged by their experiences. The accommodation provided is medium term, and the support available includes a strong focus on employment, education and training. Contracts or agreements that commit the residents to engage in employment, education and training are often part of the foyer services.

The Melbourne Citymission Step Ahead program was the first foyer-like model for young people in Victoria and became operational in 2004. The program began as a pilot called the Youth Transitions Model (YTM) and was funded jointly by the Myer Foundation and the Office of Housing Youth Homelessness Action Plan (YHAP). In 2007 the program received recurrent funding from the Department of Human Services and was renamed the Step Ahead program. It incorporates up to three years of supported housing with education and casework for young people aged 16-25 years who are at risk of homelessness or dislocated from mainstream supports. The program aims to help young people negotiate a transition from 'dependence to independence' (Melbourne Citymission 2010), and to find a satisfying job or improve employability in order to secure a better quality of life. There is an expectation that young people make a commitment to engage in developmental activities, including personal, recreational and vocational activities. Young people who enter the program are subject to a number of conditions: completing a computer-based assessment and drawing up an independence package; meeting their case manager on a weekly basis and remaining in regular contact; participating in core programs; and participating in house meetings. In addition, clients are made aware that the program does not tolerate acts of violence; threats or intimidation; bullying or discrimination; illicit drug use; unlawful activities; or vandalism to property or resources. Overall the program encourages empowerment and responsibility through involving the young people in project developments and decisions. Young people can stay in the Step Ahead program for up to three years.

Participants are housed in fully furnished, self contained units, flats or houses for up to three years and receive ongoing intensive motivational casework and a structured program of learning. One accommodation option for the program is the Lion Garden property, located in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, where eight tenancies are managed by Step Ahead in partnership with Housing Choice Australia. A ninth unit is reserved for a residential support volunteer (lead tenant). Residents share communal facilities. House meetings and shared activities provide opportunities for involvement in the management of the program and property. Typically, younger clients or those with higher needs are placed in Lion Garden.

The second accommodation option of the Step Ahead program, typically hosting older or lower needs clients, provides single occupancy properties located across the inner south and the inner north of Melbourne for a further twelve to fourteen young people. The tenancy arrangement for this accommodation is through a partnership with Homeground and Yarra Community Housing (formerly Metrowest). For the sample in our study, these properties were typically shared with other Step Ahead residents. Because of a change in Office of Housing fire regulations, this is no longer the case.

The young people who enter the Step Ahead program are supported to maintain or recommence their involvement in education, training and employment activities, usually including a mix of secondary school, part time or casual employment, university, TAFE, or adult education courses. Step Ahead works actively with young people to expand their options and improve their situation. Support can include advocacy and referral, assistance in CV and cover letter writing, job search, information about occupations, qualifications and courses, and interview skills and techniques.

Managing income and expenditure is one of the major challenges for this group of young people. Participants are responsible for bills and general living costs. Caseworkers assist young people to keep track of their finances, make informed choices about contracts and purchases and overcome debt and legal issues. Step Ahead has access to a number of brokerage funding sources to assist clients in meeting household, education and training costs and often refers clients to appropriate financial counselling and legal services.

Step Ahead participants are assisted to develop good practices in day to day routines such as cooking, laundry and cleaning. This can be done through direct assistance from the case worker or through WHEELS, a pre-employment and living skills course, a separate program offered through Melbourne Citymission. Melbourne Citymission also facilitates Step Ahead clients' access to a number of other internal and third party programs.

Young people receive assistance to access exit accommodation. Once a young person has moved on from the Step Ahead program into other housing they are offered six months of aftercare. Staff ensure that residents are settled and coping, whether they have moved on into private rental, back with family, into community housing or on to another service provider. Aftercare may involve support to sustain their exit accommodation.

In 2009 Melbourne Citymission expanded their foyer-like services with the addition of Ladder Huddle St, a new partnership between Melbourne Citymission, the AFL Players Association, AFL Foundation, DHS Housing and Community Division, and Yarra Community Housing. Like Step Ahead, Ladder Huddle Street supports homeless young people to develop independent living skills and community connections. The Ladder Huddle Street program provides up to two years of housing, links to employment, education, training and mentoring services.

Melbourne Citymission's foyer model continued to evolve with the addition in mid 2011 of the Youth Precinct, comprising self-contained units and a number of integrated services. Available for two year tenancies, the units are provided as a stepping stone for young people to explore their employment, education or training options.

Melbourne Citymission have integrated management of the three foyer-like services under the title 'Foyer Plus'. Common elements across Foyer Plus include fully furnished, self-contained units, and ongoing intensive casework motivating participation in various types of education, training and/or employment.

POLICY CONTEXT

In 2008, the Australian government released its new homelessness policy framework *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*. This framework introduces significant new funding, specifies medium and long term targets, and outlines strategies for improving service responses. *Breaking the cycle*, one of the three main strategies articulated in the policy, recognises that 'specialist housing is required to meet the needs of individual groups within the homeless population' (FHCSIA 2008, ch.5, p.47). Foyer accommodation supporting participation in employment, education and training is specifically listed as an appropriate service for young people affected by homelessness.

The road home articulates an 'urgent need to improve the evidence base to inform the delivery of high-quality services to people vulnerable to homelessness', recognising that 'strategies to reduce homelessness should be informed by research, critical evaluation, practitioner expertise and the needs of individual clients of specialist homelessness services' (FaHCSIA, 2008, ch.6, p.58). In articulating a research agenda to support the new policy framework, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs identified that 'the outcomes (particularly long term outcomes) for people using specialist homelessness services ... need to be assessed' (2009, p.3).

In 2009, the Victorian Government announced that it was developing a new homelessness policy framework and released a discussion paper, *Homelessness 2020*. The discussion paper emphasises the importance of fostering the social inclusion of people experiencing homelessness, and foreshadows a stronger emphasis on prevention and early intervention. During 2009 the Victorian Department of Human Services worked with the service sector to develop proposals for further Foyer-like service models in the state.

In documenting the experiences of past Step Ahead clients, this study will inform a developing policy area and contribute to the evidence base on the usefulness of foyer-like supports for young people affected by homelessness.

Literature review

Past research into homelessness has established that disrupted education, poor employment prospects and homelessness are inextricably linked (Grace, Batterham & Cornell 2008; Grace, Wilson & Coventry 2006; MacKenzie & Chamberlain 2008; Mallett et al. 2004; Wingert, Higgitt & Ristock 2005). It is clear that young people experiencing homelessness are likely to require support equivalent to that enjoyed by their peers with supportive homes in order to achieve their goals.

Internationally, research into homelessness has moved from a focus on factors such as violence, mental illness and addictions associated with homelessness towards looking more at the experiences of people affected by homelessness, as researchers attempt to develop understandings that can assist with prevention, early intervention, service response and service design. The 'factors' research focussed on risk factors, and factors associated with homelessness (see for example Tam, Zlotnick & Robertson 2003), and this research continues to make an important contribution. In the early 1990s, ground-breaking research into youth homelessness started to explore homeless 'careers', identifying key transitions, for example the permanent break with home and the transition from temporary homelessness to chronic homelessness, along with typical timing and influences (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1994). This was a significant theoretical advance on previous research, more dynamic and less static than the focus on factors, and it has changed the course of subsequent research, policy and practice. However, the notion of a 'homeless career' has been criticized for being a deterministic view. Recent homelessness research and practice has shifted from the idea of a 'homeless career' to focus on pathways into and out of homelessness (Clapham 2003). This pathways research is distinctive, bringing together structure and agency, and asking how people get into and maybe out of difficult situations over time (Anderson & Tulloch 2000; Clapham 2002, 2003; Fitzpatrick 1999; Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008; Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al 2010, May 2000; Morris, Judd & Kavanagh 2005; Robinson 2003). This approach holds out the possibility of capturing complexity and diversity, including the dynamic interactions over time of personal, environmental, cultural and structural factors. While the 'factors' and 'careers' research relies heavily on large quantitative data sets, the 'pathways' research primarily utilises qualitative data gathered using biographical and narrative methods (Roberts 2002). These methodologies and the increasing level of nuance and complexity achieved by 'pathways' research has allowed the identification of different groupings within homeless populations, with implications for service delivery in specialist homeless and mainstream systems.

Three recent 'pathways' studies have generated new insights into how sub-groupings within the homeless population might be conceptualised: Mallett Rosenthal, Keys et al.'s (2010) *Moving out moving on: young people's pathways into and through homelessness*; Johnson, Gronda and Coutts' (2008) *On the outside: pathways in and out of homelessness*; and Karabanow's (2008) *Getting off the street: exploring the processes of young people's street exits*. The three studies propose different typologies: Johnson Gronda and Coutts (2008) base their typology around entry points into homelessness, while Mallett et al. group their participants by their living arrangements at the end of the study, and Karabanow constructs a series of stages between homelessness and successful exit from 'the street'.

Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al.'s (2010) *Project i* was a longitudinal (5 years) study of young people accessing homelessness services in Melbourne and Los Angeles. Six hundred and ninety two homeless young people in Melbourne took part. Identifying a representative sample, the researchers developed in-depth case studies of 40 young people and used the case studies to profile the typical experiences, contexts and needs of young people in each group. The primary theoretical concern of Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys (2010) is the interplay between structure and agency. Homelessness research, argue the authors, tends to focus either on structural issues such as poverty and housing shortage, or individual agency and behaviour for example determination and persistence, without adequate attention to the interaction of the two. A specific study of youth within the homeless population, Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al. (2010) identified four groups, each defined by their living arrangement at the conclusion of the study, a street based group (unstable homeless), a service based group (stable homeless), those in a part time family home (unstable home), and those in a family home/private rental group (stable home) (Mallett et al 2006, Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al. 2010).

Mallett Rosenthal, Keys et al.'s (2010) street based group had significant participation barriers and high support needs. The service based group (stable homeless) had no street-based experience, few moves, and good transitional pathways to supportive medium-term accommodation. These young people had remained engaged with both education and employment over two years. They had a history of disconnection from families rather than sustained abuse. This group comprised equal numbers of males and females and was the only group where most came from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. They were unlikely to return to their family home where many had experienced cross-cultural/intergenerational conflict. Some had mental health problems but there was little personal or parental drug or alcohol misuse. They were typically highly motivated and hopeful. Among their service needs were time and space away from home, a rapid accommodation response, intense personal support from services and maintenance of education and employment. Typically unmet service needs included culturally sensitive family mediation and counselling services prior to and after leaving home, strategic support in times of crisis, and mentoring.

Mallett Rosenthal, Keys et al.'s (2010) 'unstable home' group were those living part time in the family home (unstable home). From highly stressed family environments, these young people experienced strong feelings of parental rejection and did not return home permanently, although after attempts at reconciliation, family relationships improved over time. Some had previously been placed in state foster care. Accommodation was typically couchsurfing or renting and personal and place-based connections were retained. They remained highly vulnerable because of on-going drug and/or alcohol misuse, mental health problems and the challenges of maintaining an adequate income in low-paid and insecure jobs. This group had a high use of support services but low use of accommodation services. Time and space to develop independently of family was important, as was establishing a strong relationship with a worker. The research found that this group required more long-term case management, intensive mental health support, support with school, employment support through a key worker, and family mediation/case conferencing.

The final group identified by Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al. (2010), were those in the family home/private rental group (stable home). They had three distinct accommodation pathways: couch-surfing with extended family and friends; transition through crisis to medium term accommodation to home or private rental; and, most commonly, home to private rental accommodation with partners. Most had only two or three moves before returning to stable home-based accommodation; all reported improved relations with parents. Many retained close links with their family over two years, although it was males rather than females who returned to their parental home. This group had more females than males and tended to be older at time of leaving home. They had few entrenched personal and family problems, with low incidence of personal/parental mental illness and drug/alcohol misuse and higher self-esteem. All were from an Anglo-Celtic background and three-quarters came from single parent or step-families. They were low service users and most remained in education and part-time employment. Many (mostly young women) did not identify as homeless or as service users and many (mostly young women) desired independence. For this group, the quality of relationship with workers made a difference, as did being valued by key adults, including family, partners, friends and workers. Emotional, not necessarily material, support from workers was vital. Continuing contact with parents, combined with time, space and the opportunity to become mature fostered the development of personal direction and purpose, positive self-belief and the sense of a positive future. This group would have fared better with more strategic support to assist rapid exit from homelessness and targeted support for education and employment.

Johnson et al.'s (2008) study interviewed homeless 'households' in Melbourne as they were leaving emergency accommodation (n=103), then again after 12 months (n=79). The study sought to identify the structural *and* individual dynamics that moved people into, through and out of homelessness. Rather than gathering demographic information, researchers asked participants about the sequences of events and interactions prior to becoming homeless for the first time; about their lived experience of being homeless; and where possible, their process(es) of exiting homelessness and reintegrating with the mainstream. Using these data, 14 composite cases studies were produced, directly quoting participants and highlighting thematic streams within the broader data. The study found five typical pathways into homelessness: domestic violence, housing crisis, mental health, substance use, and people who have their first experience of homelessness before they are 18 years old. Johnson et al. (2008) argue that understanding how people became homeless, or 'where people have come from' (p.204) is essential in identifying successful strategies for exiting homelessness. Within the youth pathway, the most relevant group to foyers, two subgroups emerged: dissenters (conflict with internal family rules/cultural and identity tensions) and escapers (abuse at home).

With their typology in relation to young people, Johnson, Gronda and Coutts (2008) demonstrate some sharp distinctions between 'escapers' and 'dissenters'. 'Escapers' tended to be less trustful and socially adaptive, with earlier disengagement from education, employment and training (EET) and poorer employment prospects. Escapers' trajectories tend to mirror those from the substance abuse pathway, and some escapers 'swapped pathways' into the substance abuse or mental health pathways after becoming homeless. Escapers tended to associate with other homeless people, becoming enmeshed within a damaging homeless subculture. They were more likely to sleep rough and remained homeless for longer than their dissenter counterparts. By the time of the second interview, a number of the escapers who had exited homelessness had invested significant energy into finding employment, but without success. The reason for this was generally attributed to their poor employment histories.

Dissenters, on the other hand, endeavoured to maintain a connection with mainstream society and avoid stigma by distancing themselves from the homeless population, a characteristic they share with those entering homelessness from the domestic violence or housing crisis pathways. While people in this cluster tended to remain homeless for less time than those on the other pathways, 'some, typically single, remained in the homeless population for quite a long time. This was mainly because of constraints in the housing and labour markets.' (p.207) During this time, they ran the risk of having their homelessness compounded as their connections inevitably moved from the mainstream to the margins. For dissenters, Johnson, Gronda and Coutts (2008) found that 'early intervention programs assisted them to retain their connections to the mainstream and avoid the homeless subculture [which is] critical if they are to get out and stay out of homelessness.' (p.217) While 75% of

dissenters managed to 'get out and stay out' of homelessness by the second interview, stability was often precarious. With 'few economic opportunities ... it was a constant struggle to stay afloat' (p.180)

While *On the outside* helps us understand the critical elements of where homeless young people came from and *Project* helps us to see common pathways after a period of homelessness, Karabanow's (2008) *Getting off the street* outlines stages in a process of exiting street homelessness. The beginning stage of this process, *precipitating factors* is initiated by disenchantment, boredom or a traumatic event that destabilises the routines of homeless life and motivates change. This motivation must then be augmented with the support and encouragement of others and a personal commitment from the young person, a stage Karabanow calls *the courage to change*. *Securing help* is then necessary and often involves engagement with services, searching for employment, education and training opportunities, and securing supportive housing. *Transitioning from* includes the development of self esteem and supportive, 'non-street' connections, and requires the severing of bonds with the homeless subculture and the places it inhabits. The penultimate stage, *change in routine*, involves active participation in education and employment, stable housing, and the nurturing of aspirations for the future. It requires greater development of drive, physical health and psychological wellbeing. Karabanow characterises the final stage, '*successful exiting*, as 'being in control', 'having stability', 'feeling proud', 'enjoying life' and 'being able to take care of yourself' (776).

Karabanow (2008) recognises that these identified stages are not mutually exclusive, and that the pathway through them is not typically linear; the vast majority of 'street youth' make multiple attempts at exit. The typology offered by *Getting off the street* recognises that each stage in the exit from homelessness requires a service response enabling the young person to move towards the next stage, rather than focussing prematurely on the ultimate personal, housing and employment outcomes. In this sense, *Getting off the street* encourages a process rather than outcome orientation in assisting young people to exit homelessness.

For policy makers and practitioners working to assist young people affected by homelessness in Australia, each of these pathways studies illuminates separate but complementary insights. The circumstances in which young people become homeless has a large bearing on their pathway through and out of homelessness; as young people negotiate these pathways they move backwards and forwards through a series of stages between the poles of street life and being 'able to take care of yourself' in stable homes, each stage requiring specific personal and structural responses. Five years after becoming homeless, some young people are based on the streets, some in services, some in unstable family homes others stably housed. Common patterns and themes can be identified among the young people in each of these destinations but the complexity of individual circumstances makes each pathway unique.

In summary, pathways research into youth homelessness has added nuance and sophistication to evidence previously established by 'factors' and 'careers' type research. It has explored the relationships between homelessness and associated life domains – community connectedness, services, relationships, health and wellbeing, home, education, work and money; and established some typologies describing the diverse population, prioritising needs at different stages of the pathways and indicating possibilities for greater specificity in service planning.

Outcome domains

Homelessness is about more than accommodation, and young people affected by homelessness have usually experienced multiple disruptions in their lives (Grace, Batterham & Cornell 2008). In recognition of the complexity of homelessness, both research and services typically attend to a number of different domains of life. For this research, we focus on the domains of accommodation and home, education and training, work and money, community connectedness and personal relationships, and health and wellbeing.

Accommodation and home

The defining characteristic of homelessness is the absence of a home. If homelessness is to be rectified, a home must be part of the remedy. The 'cultural definition' of homelessness (Chamberlain 1999) turns upon the physical characteristics and tenure arrangements of accommodation, but for most Australians, 'home' has an additional meaning.

The term 'ontological security' originates from Giddens' theory of human existence and is 'a person's fundamental sense of safety in the world ... necessary in order ... to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety' (Giddens 1991 cited in Kinnvall 2004, p.746). Ontological security can be found in a secure and positive sense of who we are, meaningful social activities, stable reliable social networks, and a sense of our purpose and where we fit in the world (Johnson & Wylie 2011). Although the sources of ontological security are broad, some discussion has focussed on its relationship with home (e.g. Saunders 1986, Padgett 2007). According to Dupuis and Thorns (1998), home maintains ontological security as a site of constancy in the social and material environment, as a spatial context in which the day to day

routines of human existence are performed, as an opportunity to be free from surveillance, and as a secure base around which identities are constructed. For homeless people, some or all of these functions of home are absent, causing a plethora of negative effects.

For accommodation to create the sense of ontological security typically provided by a home, some guarantee of the longevity and security of tenure is essential. It must also support the day to day routines of human existence, such as cooking, sleeping, relaxing and washing (Dupuis & Thorns 1998). It must support the construction of an individual identity by being a site for hosting guests, featuring personal decorations or receiving mail, and it must be free from surveillance, allowing its inhabitants a degree of freedom in choosing how to occupy their time within it (Dupuis & Thorns 1998). If a support service aims to provide a home for its clients, rather than just accommodate them, it must enable these functions. It must also foster the skills of its clients to create a home of their own once outside of the service. If it does so, clients may benefit from an experience of ontological security and the enabling disposition this entails.

Within the pathways literature reviewed above, *On the outside* helps us understand the critical elements of where homeless young people came from and *Project i* helps us to see common pathways after a period of homelessness, Karabanow's *Getting off the street* outlines stages in a process of exiting street homelessness. These frameworks emphasise the importance of interrogating the relationships between accommodation prior to entering a service, the accommodation during the service and accommodation after the service has been delivered. In considering the outcomes of a youth foyer service, it is therefore necessary to gather data on each of these phases and understand the connections and disconnections between them.

Education and training

A common theme of the pathways studies was participation in education and training as a step in exiting homelessness. Apart from providing daily routines and mainstream community connection, participation in education assists the development of self esteem and skills for finding rewarding employment in the future (Grace, Gronda & Coventry 2009). Remaining engaged in education is recognised as a protective factor against transition to chronic homelessness (Wingert et al 2005). Services that enable the continued or renewed education participation of their clients are more likely to achieve good outcomes over the long term.

There is some evidence that providing accommodation and case work to young homeless people assists them to participate in education. An interim evaluation of a foyer-like service in Sydney found that 'it has helped to stop young people from dropping out of education and becoming homeless' and among the residents, 'aspirations to go on to tertiary education appeared high' (Randolph & Wood 2005, p.7). Sustained case work with young homeless people has been shown to improve education outcomes (Grace & Gill 2008). Combining stable housing with sustained case work and assistance to participate, as is the case in foyer models, seems to promise better outcomes than mainstream alternatives presently available, but there is limited research directly evaluating practices for engaging young people in education, employment and training (Grace, Gronda & Coventry 2009).

Work and money

Homelessness and unemployment are related problems, each compounding the other. Finding employment is made more difficult without adequate housing, while housing problems are exacerbated by unemployment. The relationship between employment and housing is illustrated by research suggesting that young people's participation in stable employment is associated with longer tenancies in public housing accommodation (Horn and Campbell 2003).

A number of studies have considered the barriers to employment that are faced by young homeless jobseekers. *A foot in the door*, Horn's 1998 study of 63 clients of Hanover SAAP services, aged 25 or less, *Out of work*, O'Meara's 1996 study of 98 SAAP clients, and Parkinson & Horn's 2002 study of 135 homeless job seekers on Newstart *Homelessness and employment assistance*. These find that young homeless people are significantly disadvantaged in the labour market by lack of education, long-term unemployment, and erratic or no work histories.

Establishing meaningful and rewarding employment is a necessary step in a successful transition to adulthood and widely considered to be an important factor in overcoming homelessness. Apart from providing a secure income to pay for accommodation and other essentials, employment provides (mainstream) community connectedness and daily routines, personal development and self esteem (Grace, Gronda & Coventry 2009).

Finding and keeping employment is mentioned in each of the pathways studies as a component of successful exit from homelessness. For those who had exited homelessness in Johnson, Gronda and Coutts' 2008 study, tenuous employment made their accommodation precarious and a return to homelessness too close for comfort. A number of the 'escapers' who had exited homelessness had invested significant energy into finding employment, without success. The reason for this was generally attributed to their poor employment histories. While 75% of 'dissenters' managed to 'get out and stay out' of homelessness, with 'few economic opportunities ... it was a constant struggle to stay afloat' (p.180). Each

of the three (non-street based) groups profiled in the *Project i* study had assistance with finding employment listed as a service need, and for the family home (unstable home) and family home/private rental (stable home) groups, this service need was typically unmet. However, those in the stable home groups often managed to access employment or education independently. The penultimate stage in Karabanow's *Getting off the street* study is defined as a *change in routine*, including active participation in employment, although progressing to that stage is predicated upon previously *securing help*. The pathways studies demonstrate that young people in the service system typically do not have the building blocks in place to access and maintain employment on their own. Providing support to put the building blocks in place is part of assisting young people to exit homelessness.

Personal relationships and community connectedness

Human social connection is important at many levels. These levels could be described as structural, social and personal. At a structural level, connection with mainstream opportunities is often referred to as social inclusion. At a social level, connection with networks of people who provide a sense of belonging to a community and form a protective net around individuals is often referred to as social capital. At a personal level, relationships with other people typically give meaning, purpose and pleasure to daily life. All three of these levels are significant for young people affected by homelessness.

'Social inclusion' and 'social capital' are both questionable terms. However, these concepts, used with caution, can contribute to an understanding of the experiences of young people affected by homelessness. Homelessness has been described as an extreme form of social exclusion: 'homelessness can be understood as a set of consequences that arise when social exclusion occurs in a context within which little or no assistance is given to those who experience it' (Pleace 1998 p.57). The discourse of social exclusion's corollary, social inclusion, suggests that providing opportunities for homeless people to be included as members of a community will assist them to exit homelessness. Inclusion in human community takes many forms including workplaces, families, civic society, public for a, and so on. Social capital is defined by Firdion (2005, p.1) as 'a network of social relations that the individual can deploy in his strategies'. Social capital relationships should be distinguished from those protecting against loneliness, but can nevertheless play an enabling role. Firdion has argued that a paucity of social capital, when ascribed to an individual rather than society, is a valid indicator of risk of homelessness.

At a personal level, loneliness has been defined as an 'unpleasant emotional and physical feeling arising from the absence of commitments to enduring social bonds' (Franklin and Tranter 2008, p.3). It has been associated with substance use, mental illness and homelessness (Franklin and Tranter 2011). Franklin and Tranter (2011) suggest that loneliness is 'a major social structural problem of our time' and that policy measures to reduce loneliness have 'considerable scope to increase well-being and social vitality' (Franklin & Tranter 2011, p.1). They use findings from a survey and literature review to demonstrate that loneliness is a result of the quality not the quantity of social contacts. They demonstrate that 40% of those who live alone experience loneliness as a serious problem and that lonely people report being more than twice as unhealthy as those who are not lonely. They show an association between housing tenure type and levels of social connection, with renters and public tenants more likely to be lonely, and home owners and mortgagees less so. Insofar as homeless young people are usually accommodated in the least secure tenure types, they are at greater risk of loneliness than their suitably accommodated counterparts. In addition, young people affected by homelessness typically have less family support, more geographic mobility and more propensity to be suffering substance issues and mental illness, thus their risk of loneliness is further compounded.

It seems likely that ameliorating loneliness among homeless young people is likely to improve their health and wellbeing and their chances of exiting homelessness and entering mainstream participation. This theory is supported by evidence from the *Project i* study which found that better relationships with supportive partners and with family was correlated with homeless young people reducing or giving up their drug use (Mallett et al 2003; Keys, Mallett & Rosenthal 2006).

Relationship types of particular significance for young homeless people are those with support workers, families, peers and networks of social capital. The quality of these relationships may help shape a pathway out of homelessness and towards a broader experience of social inclusion. For a young homeless person to develop relationships, social capital and social connectedness, they must possess the necessary social skills and have access to appropriate social structures. By providing assistance to develop these skills and access these structures, programs are likely to assist young people to exit homelessness.

Health and wellbeing

Compromised health and wellbeing is a recurring theme in the pathways typologies. The longer young people spend in homelessness, the greater their risk of becoming habituated to routines and behaviours that endanger their mental and physical health and lead to long term disadvantage and marginalisation (Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008). This is one of the reasons that early intervention has been given a high priority in recent policy development (FHCSIA 2008). For services to be effective in assisting young people to exit homelessness, they must

provide not only a rapid exit from homelessness to halt the further deterioration of health and wellbeing, but also enable the young people to heal from the damage they have already sustained and promote their health and wellbeing to enable mainstream participation in the future.

Substance use and mental illness are important features of poor health and wellbeing among young people affected by homelessness. Substance use, mental illness and homelessness have a complex causal relationship, with research suggesting that each can be a cause or effect of the other (Mallett et al 2003). Homelessness can be most entrenched when substance abuse and mental illness co-occur. The *Project i* research (Mallett et al. 2003) found that half of their sample felt they needed or were dependent on drugs or alcohol, with alcohol and marijuana being the most commonly used drugs. A 2007 AIHW report found a very close relationship between mental health and substance use problems among SAAP clients under 25 years, with all but a few presenting with both.

Pathways research explores the links among different elements of experience, rather than merely establishing valid associations between factors. In considering the relationships among substance use, mental illness and homelessness, a pathways approach calls for a nuanced understanding of their co-occurrence, and exploration of how services can assist people to improve difficult and complex situations.

The foyer model

Integrating housing support with progress towards rewarding employment is one of the defining features of foyers, in Australia and internationally. According to Anderson and Quilgars (1995), foyers are 'an integrated approach to meeting the needs of young people during their transition from dependence to independence by linking affordable accommodation to training and employment' (cited in Lovatt, Whitehead and Levy-Vroelant, 2006, p.152).

Both France and the UK have extensive foyer provision, with 36,000 and 4,500 flats or bed spaces respectively (Lovatt, Whitehead & Levy-Vroelant 2006). These foyers cater for a diverse range of needs, and are locally specific in each case, with some catering for employed young people, others for unemployed and high needs, including refugees and at-risk young people, with varying sizes and levels of paternalism and support (Lovatt, Whitehead & Levy-Vroelant 2006). Foyers in France have a long history, with about half set up in the 1950s during post-war regeneration, and the other half in the 1960s in a time of housing shortage coupled with high unemployment (Quilgars & Anderson 1997). The services and accommodation have been varied and adapted over time to meet changing social and economic needs, but at the core of the French foyer movement there are five principles: local management; providing housing; training and support in the context of a mutual contract; social mix and group living; and a predominant share of the revenue coming from clients, with remaining costs met by government subsidy (Randolph & Wood 2005).

Foyers in the UK were introduced by government in the early 1990s and modelled on the French system. Government subsidised their development through a fund for Housing Associations to bid for capital funding. According to Randolph and Wood (2005) foyers in the UK are typically focused on the needs of 16-25 year olds who are homeless, based on a holistic approach, integrating accommodation, training and job search assistance with services to meet other needs, and based on an individual formal agreement, contract or action plan specifying conditions of continued residence.

Reviews of the UK system have found that while demand for foyers has steadily increased, their service delivery focus has adapted to different economic climates, for example with increased buoyancy in the labour market, services have tended to focus more on lifestyle, social and psychological needs rather than employment outcomes. Foyers in the UK have tended to cater for the transitional housing component of the Continuum of Care spectrum (Randolph & Wood 2005).

A study by Quilgars and Anderson (1997) into 500 young people accessing foyer services in the UK found that most young people used the employment, education and training services without compulsion, and the comprehensive nature of the support – not just employment, and not just housing – was highly valued. A quarter of young people left foyers with employment and permanent housing, however a significant number exited due to breaching their tenancy, highlighting the importance of 'aftercare' support. Quilgars and Anderson identified that many of the young foyer clients who did not attain employment nevertheless made steps along the way to securing a job.

A later UK study by Smith et al. (2006) following up a sample of 126 ex-foyer clients found that two thirds of the sample were in full or part-time work, training or education at the first follow up interview, declining to just over half by the second interview. Both UK studies found that employment and accommodation outcomes were highly dependent on local housing and labour market conditions.

While foyer models are dynamic and responsive to time and place, their basic tenets of early intervention, medium-term accommodation with individual support to develop life skills and achieve mainstream aspirations are a close fit for the needs of many young people within the sub-groupings identified by recent Australian and North American pathways research. The critical role of education, employment and training in establishing a stable life beyond homelessness is a particular emphasis of the pathways research findings and is also a consistent feature of foyer models. Foyers have been identified by the Victorian State Government and the Commonwealth as preferred forms of specialist accommodation within the homelessness service system (FHCSIA 2008, FHCSIA 2009, DHS 2010). Despite this prominent position on the research and policy agenda, relatively little is known about how foyers assist young people to exit homelessness, especially in the Australian context. Research such as the study reported here will better equip service providers and policy makers to develop effective services in the future.

Critically, a better understanding of how services such as foyers assist, or might assist young people, must account for how the dynamics of individual and behavioural characteristics interact with, and are shaped by the structures of the foyer model and the broader service systems, economic conditions and cultural conditions. Pathways research has sought to make sense of the interplay of structure and agency through the use of qualitative data gathered using biographical and narrative methods. The research design of this study builds on previous research and literature to contribute to an understanding of the experiences of young people affected by homelessness, and what services and strategies might assist them.

Research Design

This research falls within the tradition of critical social research, in that it aims to make life better for a disadvantaged group, young people affected by homelessness. Within the critical paradigm, it utilises a mixed methods approach, focusing on the subjective experiences of previous Step Ahead residents, in particular what their involvement with the service has meant to them in their lives, and documenting outcomes for these previous residents. It was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval HRETH 10/156. The study aims to contribute to understandings about how this kind of intervention works to support and assist young people. What is it about foyers that makes a difference, and enables young people to achieve their (extra)ordinary aspirations? This report makes the findings available to workers delivering services, organisations designing services, and government bodies making decisions about service funding in the future.

Methodology and methods

This research set out to explore what the Step Ahead service meant to previous residents, and what part it played in their lives. The mixed methods approach included in-depth, semi-structured interviews focusing on outcomes, a personally administered survey, and a review of the participants' case notes from their time with Step Ahead.

Twenty-eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with previous residents. The intention of the research was to collect richly subjective data with an emphasis on a narrative approach, encouraging participants to tell stories about their time with Step Ahead and their lives since (Roberts 2002). This approach differs from previous biographical approaches in that it does not seek to establish a sequence of events, but rather focuses on experiences and meanings, encouraging participants to tell stories from their own perspectives in order to illustrate and communicate their experiences with Step Ahead and what part the service has played in their lives.

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews had two sections. In the first part of the individual interviews, the interview questions (see Appendix 4) were used flexibly by the interviewers in order to create a free-flowing, meaningful interview about what participants thought was important about the Step Ahead service, and what (if anything) made a difference in their lives. They were asked about what they thought should be included / not included in services such as Step Ahead. They were encouraged to tell stories to communicate the answers to the questions, and asked to reflect on their lives since they were in the program. In the second section of the interview, participants were asked some quite structured questions, and the answers were recorded on the interview schedule, which included a survey form (see Appendix 4). The questions related to accommodation, employment, education and training, health, wellbeing, and feeling part of a community. Altogether, the interviews took approximately 1 hour. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo in preparation for data analysis. Data from the administered survey were coded and entered into SPSS in preparation for analysis.

With participants' consent, their case notes from their time at Step Ahead were reviewed, utilising a case note analysis tool (see Appendix 5) developed specifically for this research by the authors. The case note analysis tool provided a standard format for recording information on clients' background at time of entry, supports received during the program, education, employment and training participation and completions, their situation at time of exit from the accommodation and the program, and qualitative themes emerging from the case notes. Given the summary nature of case notes in general, the qualitative data sourced from case notes was generally used in conjunction with interview data. In addition to the case notes themselves, the researchers reviewed participants' responses to a client evaluation form developed and administered by the Step Ahead program. These client evaluation forms were available for 17 of the 29 ex-clients whose case files were reviewed.

Information from all fields in the case note analysis were coded and entered into SPSS in preparation for analysis. In the data analysis, each participant was treated as a 'case' with data from the different research activities linked in order to develop as full a picture as possible of that participant's experiences, what they meant to the person, and their own reflections on their lives and the service. Data collection, management, and analysis in this research was informed by Yin's (2009) case study approach.

While Melbourne Citymission program staff reviewed a draft of this document and provided feedback and advice on interpretation of the research findings, this research focused specifically on the subjective experiences of program clients, and no interviews with staff were conducted. Further research involving consultations with Melbourne Citymission program staff would be a valuable addition to the evidence base in relation to foyer-like services in Australia.

Recruitment and informed consent procedure

Appendix 1 contains a flow chart detailing the recruitment and informed consent procedure, as approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Melbourne Citymission made the ex-residents' contact details available to the researchers. Potential participants were contacted by telephone or email and invited to participate. If they agreed, an appointment was made for a researcher to come to their home or

another suitable place to interview them. A Consent Form (see Appendix 2) and Information to Participants (see Appendix 3) were sent to them in the mail or by email. On the day of the interview, the researcher answered their questions about the research, and the consent form was signed before the interview began. Participants were asked to consent to the interview, to the researchers reviewing their case files at MCM, to a focus group, a life writing session and a further in-depth interview. It was explained that the researchers wished to conduct the first two of these procedures for all participants, and the remaining three only if required, and only for some of the participants who were interested in further participation.

Sample

Initial review of records at Melbourne Citymission revealed that 63 people had previously been clients of Step Ahead, since its establishment in 2004. Of these, 28 were young men, and 38 were young women. Attempts were made to contact all of these young people. Of the total 63, 42 were contacted by either telephone or email. Of these, 29 agreed to participate in the research. Of these, interviews were conducted with 28, and 29 case records were reviewed. This final sample consisted of 12 young men and 17 young women, a total of 46% of the total population of ex-residents of Melbourne Citymission's Step Ahead.

In interpreting the findings of this research, it should be noted that a difference in experience and outcomes may exist between those young people who were contactable (42) and those who were not (21). A difference may also exist between those who gave their consent to participate (29) and those who did not (13). Young people whose lives are more chaotic and itinerant are less likely to be contactable, and thus less likely to have been participants in the research. Many reasons may be behind the choice of the former clients who did not agree to participate in the study, including having achieved some stability in their lives and not wanting to revisit a former very difficult time. While we cannot assert that the sample is representative, Melbourne Citymission staff who reviewed this report advise that in their opinion the outcomes for the young people who agreed to participate in the research are probably no better and no worse than the outcomes for those who were either uncontactable, or declined to participate. Step Ahead management are not aware of any former program clients having become street homeless. The inclusion of nine participants who were required to leave the service as a consequence of not meeting program expectations, and four who were vulnerable to homelessness at the time of interview suggests that negative experiences or outcomes did not necessarily present a barrier to participation in the research.

With 46% of all ex-Step Ahead clients included, we believe that the research documented in this report provides a valuable insight into the experiences of young people in the program, and what difference Step Ahead has made in their lives.

Data analysis

The researchers analysed the interview transcripts using both conventional thematic qualitative data analysis, and narrative analysis techniques. The transcripts were imported into NVivo. The researchers developed a preliminary coding schema based on previous research, and their reflections on the interviews. The transcripts were then coded, with more codes being added as themes emerged from the data. Each theme was then examined and the written analysis, capturing the diversity of experiences and views of the participants was prepared.

The data was explored for patterns, particularly examining whether outcomes were different for different groupings of participants. Characteristics explored in this way included age, gender, type of accommodation, type of exit, and place of birth. Where patterns emerged, the relationship was further explored and reported. This was the case, for example, with some of the different experiences and outcomes of overseas born and Australian born participants.

The transcripts were re-visited to identify stories that participants told. These were linked with survey and case note data in order to produce a profile of each participant that includes not only details about their experiences, but their own perspectives on their experiences, in the form of the stories they chose to tell about Step Ahead, and about their lives. Further, each transcript was re-analysed to identify answers to the research questions:

What did the participants' time in Step Ahead mean to them?

What, if any, difference did Step Ahead make in the participants' lives?

If the service did make a difference in participants' lives, how was this achieved?

The survey and case note review data were analysed using SPSS, and detailed descriptive tables and charts were produced for inclusion in the research report.

Findings

In this findings section, we commence with a broad brush description of the young people in the study, their pathways into the Step Ahead service, their pathways through the service, the ways they exited from the service, and their pathways after Step Ahead. Next we describe in broad terms their circumstances at the time of the interviews for this research. For this purpose we have grouped the research participants into three outcome groups:

- Well protected against homelessness
- Protected against homelessness
- Vulnerable to homelessness

Next we provide some answers to the following questions:

- Who did Step Ahead work for?
- Are there predictors of good outcomes?
- Who does Step Ahead not work for?

Following the broad introduction to the findings, we have included seven vignettes based on individual participants' stories, in order to illustrate the diversity of the participants and their experiences. The remainder of the findings section presents our detailed findings, and answers the question: 'If Step Ahead made a difference, how did it help?' The detailed findings begin with a description of the research participants, followed by sections about:

- Accommodation and home
- Education and training
- Personal relationships and community connectedness
- Health and wellbeing

Pathways into Step Ahead

Twenty-nine ex-Step Ahead residents participated in this research. About half were female and about half were male. Approximately half of the participants were born in Australia and half were born elsewhere. Only sixteen of the participants had English as a first language. The average age of participants when entering the program was 20 years. Australian born participants were, on average, homeless for a much longer period before entering the program than overseas born participants, who tended to enter the program soon after becoming homeless.

Immediately before entering Step Ahead, about half of the participants were staying in crisis accommodation. Others were 'couch surfing', staying with friends, or in transitional housing or supported accommodation. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and a history of abuse at home, and serious conflict with other family members were common among the young people entering Step Ahead. Three young people were identified as having substance issues and two had been in statutory care.

At the time of the participants' stay, Step Ahead provided two types of accommodation. The program manages eight units in the Lion Garden complex in the Melbourne CBD, and a further seven properties in various locations across the inner and middle suburbs of Melbourne, allocated under the Transitional Housing Management (THM) program. Once accepted into the Step Ahead program, 14 of our participants were allocated a residence in the Lion Garden property and 15 went into one of the THM properties designated for the program. Research participants allocated to THM properties tended to be older and were more likely to be overseas born than those from Lion Garden.

Going through the program

For all of the young people in this research, Step Ahead provided them with supported accommodation when they were homeless. They had no other good options, and the service protected them from making the transition to chronic or street homelessness at that time. The important elements of the program included the provision of safe, affordable accommodation, individualised support by youth workers, supported access to other services, programs such as budgeting and cooking, and contractual expectations that the young people would pursue education, training and/or employment.

The research participants' engagement with the Step Ahead program and their transition through the service was far from straightforward. We found that a number of dynamics affected participants' progress through the program, including their mental health, emotional stability, engagement with education and employment, capacity to meet program requirements, and whether or not they were sharing their accommodation with another person.

Exiting

The average length of time spent in Step Ahead was 596 days or 1.6 years. Participants reported a broad range of experiences at the time of their exit. These can be broadly categorised as *graduating*, *leaving of their own accord*, *requiring different care* and *required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program expectations*. Roughly one third of participants were required to leave Step Ahead after breaking the conditions of their place in the program. Upon exiting Step Ahead, roughly one third of all participants moved into community housing, one third moved in with family and friends and one third went into other accommodation. While private rental was commonly sought by participants, it was rarely an affordable option for exiters.

Pathways after Step Ahead

At the time the researchers conducted the final interview for this study on 9 December 2010, the average time elapsed since a client had left Step Ahead accommodation was 986 days, or 2.7 years. The average age of interview participants was 23 years. The eldest was 28 and the youngest was 19. The young people participating in this study can be broadly described in three groupings according to their vulnerability to homelessness at the time of their interviews for this research:

This research provides the opportunity for a retrospective look at what their time in Step Ahead meant to the young people in the study, through the lens of how things turned out for them after exiting the service. The following section discusses in general terms how things have turned out for these young people who were homeless, and arguably highly vulnerable to worsening homelessness at their time of entry to the service.

Outcome groups

A feature of the pathways literature is to recognise the diversity and uniqueness of individual pathways through homelessness, but propose typologies to assist the development of service responses and articulate typical experiences. The three studies considered in the literature review for this study propose different typologies: Johnson, Gronda and Coutts (2008) base their typology around entry points into homelessness, while Mallett, Rosenthal and Keys et al. (2010) group their participants by their living arrangements at the end of the study, and Karabanow (2008) constructs a series of stages between homelessness and successful exit from 'the street'.

In identifying an appropriate typological structure for this study, priority was given to outcomes at the time of interview and specifically, the level of vulnerability to homelessness understood in the context of the broader outcome domains of *accommodation and home*, *education and training*, *work and money*, *personal relationships and community connectedness* and *health and wellbeing*. The young people participating in this study can be broadly described in three groupings according to their vulnerability to homelessness at the time of their interviews for this research. This section gives an account of the characteristics of these three groups that we refer to as:

Well protected against homelessness

Protected against homelessness

Vulnerable to homelessness

Well protected against homelessness

Fourteen, or about half the participants were well protected against homelessness. Participants were placed in this group because of active participation in parenting, employment or study. In addition, their health, wellbeing, community connectedness and housing circumstances were taken into consideration. Overall, young people in this group can be described as having a range of opportunities, a sense of ontological security, robust interdependencies with the world around them and the resources to achieve their aspirations.

The group included six males and eight females, ten overseas born and four Australian born. Nine of the group lived in THM accommodation at Step Ahead while the five others were based at Lion Garden.

The stable, safe and affordable accommodation provided by Step Ahead after a period of homelessness was enormously significant for the young people in this group. Beyond that, different participants turned different elements of Step Ahead to their advantage.

At their time of entry into the program, Australian born women, Leanne and Vanida, were living in shared accommodation where drug use, conflict and risky behaviour were part of the culture. While both young women continued recreational drug use and a 'party lifestyle' in the program, their exposure to risk was greatly reduced and they were presented with an opportunity to begin constructing a new adult identity of responsibility, engagement and normative compliance. During the next couple of years, both young women took this opportunity and can now look forward to 'normal' lives of opportunity and inclusion.

A third Australian born woman, Elaine, entered the program without risky behaviours or peers and was able to steadily progress through secondary school and begin a traineeship while within the program, later improving relations with her family, getting a promotion in her company and buying a home with a long term partner.

Of the overseas born women in this group, two are distinguished by their strong motivation to succeed academically and a sustained focus on studies despite facing great difficulty. Both Nosrat and Shahla were born in Iran and left difficult family circumstances in their mid to late teens. For these young women, participation in Step Ahead enabled them to continue focusing on their undergraduate studies and ultimately, graduate. Both were involved in post-graduate studies at the time of interview.

For the other overseas born women in this group, Aheza, Penina and Ayan, who were all born in Africa, Step Ahead played a different role. Each was profoundly unfamiliar with Australian culture and ways of life, and required significant assistance to orient themselves as independent adults. Health education, and assistance to develop planning, English language, financial management and learning skills were all instrumental in this transition. At the time of interview, all had attained a Trade or TAFE qualification and had established an employment history. Aheza was working, Ayan was studying and Penina was raising a family. None reported poor health or wellbeing and each felt connected to a community.

The time to acclimatise in their new environment was also valuable for the five overseas born men in this group, for whom English was not a first language. Communication was a major barrier to education and employment participation and with little other support, having somewhere safe and secure to live while they developed language and cultural skills in their new environment prevented their circumstances from deteriorating. Two of the young men had developed psychological problems during the difficult transitions from their countries of origins, and required time to heal. Three of these young men had established jobs and employment histories at the time of interview, while two had not. Three were studying. Each of the young men took time to explore their aptitudes and interests and the intersecting education and employment opportunities, changing courses on a number of occasions. While the journey towards establishing themselves in rewarding work and supportive communities continues, these young men appear likely to succeed.

Only one male, Australian born participant, Giles, was considered well protected against homelessness at the time of interview. From a relatively privileged background, Giles was able to spend time overcoming the psychological difficulties arising from a troubled family environment, and pursued the opportunities offered at his well resourced secondary school. As a result of his time in the program, Giles was able to progress to university along with his peers, without the burdens imposed by a prolonged period of homelessness.

Of all the fourteen young people considered well protected against homelessness, the median time spent in Step Ahead accommodation was 614 days. At the time of interview five lived in private rental accommodation, three in community housing, two in public housing, two in housing provided by family and two in housing they were purchasing. Ten, or just over 70% found their accommodation suitable or highly suitable, with two unsure and one finding it unsuitable. Over three quarters had lived at their present address for over six months, but just under forty percent had lived there for less than a year. Most had moved two or three times in the average timeframe of around three years between leaving Step Ahead and attending the interview. In the contexts of their other outcomes this frequency of moving could be seen as mobility rather than transience.

Seven had attained no higher than secondary school at the time of interview but eight were studying, one at TAFE and the others at university. Two had already attained degrees. Three had attained TAFE certificates and one had a TAFE Diploma. Half the group had paid employment at the time of interview, with four working full time and the others part time. Apart from two women whose time was committed to full time parenting, all were working or studying at the time of interview. Four were working and studying.

All but two of the group reported connection to a community. Ten, or over three quarters felt they had someone to talk to (not including a family member or social worker) about difficulties, with the median number of people being three. Nine, or three quarters felt they could access

practical assistance when required. Seven, or just over half reported participation in community activities. Two men had children, although neither of them lived with their child at the time of interview. One participant reported 'average' health and two reported 'average' wellbeing¹, all other reports were good or very good.

Protected against homelessness

Ten participants were protected against homelessness. Participants were placed in this group because their housing was stable and, in most cases, some progress was observed in employment or study. Health and wellbeing problems appeared below the threshold of causing major disruption. The young people in this group generally required ongoing support to remain in stable housing, as they were not yet able to sustain it independently. Supportive relationships and community connections were generally evident, although some still required the assistance of services to maintain their wellbeing.

The group comprised three males and seven females, four overseas born and six Australian born. Six were based in THM properties while in Step Ahead, while the others were at Lion Garden.

All of the Australian born young people (three males and three females) in this group suffered to some degree with poor mental health or emotional difficulties during their stay at Step Ahead. Sean and Chris were both acutely unwell at times, which limited their engagement with the program, work and study. Both required a higher intensity of care than the program was able to provide and spent time as psychiatric inpatients while with Step Ahead. Tara and Amanda both struggled with loneliness and depression, and felt an urgent need for intimate, emotional connections with others. This led to difficulty in adhering to program rules, especially around the hosting of guests and substance use. For these two young women, the relationship with a worker was insufficient and a closer engagement was desired. Both were required to leave Step Ahead after breaching the rules and subsequently spent time in services offering more intensive support. For Michelle and Trish, the support provided by the program was instrumental in achieving emotional stability, and each engaged in work or study.

For these six Australian born participants, the life skills component of the program was less important than the emotional, material and practical support they received, particularly during times of crisis. For some, the life skills and some other obligatory elements of the program were unwanted.

Each of these six Australian born young people had a high chance of spending time in primary (street) homelessness without the support of Step Ahead, where their achievements are unlikely to have occurred.

Zichan was born outside Australia, but spent a significant part of his childhood in Australia and had English as a first language. For Zichan, like Michelle and Trish, the support provided by the program was instrumental in stabilizing emotionally, and enabled him to engage in work or study, although without distinguishing achievements.

The other three overseas born participants, Aber, Abrinet and Fodia, were all female, without work and living in public housing. Fodia and Abrinet were both with the program for short periods. Abrinet and Aber have both completed a Trade or TAFE qualification and Fodia had not completed secondary school. None have an established work history. Aber exited Step Ahead after more than two years and moved into community housing while continuing her studies. After a period of travel, she returned with no tenancy in place, education enrolment or employment contacts and was forced to return to live with her family, despite ongoing conflict. Each of these three young women may presently enjoy greater opportunities if they had stayed with program longer and established greater resources for independent living.

Of all the ten young people identified as protected against homelessness, the median time spent in Step Ahead accommodation was 571 days, shorter than the 614 days spent by their counterparts in the *well protected against homelessness* group. Three lived in community housing at the time of interview and the same number in public housing, while two lived in transitional or supported housing. One lived in private rental and one in housing provided by family. Half of them had lived at their present address for more than a year, with 60% finding their property suitable or very suitable. In the average timeframe of two years since they left Step Ahead, half had moved house twice and one third were still at the same address. Housing stability amongst this group was greater than for the *well protected from homelessness* group, perhaps because of fewer opportunities for mobility.

¹ Wellbeing was described to the participants as emotional and mental health.

Three had not completed secondary schooling while the others had attained year 12 (4) or a Trade/TAFE qualification (3). Three were studying, all at TAFE. Six, or over half the group were not employed at the time of interview.

Seven, or over two thirds of the group reported connection to a community and the same number had someone to talk to. The median number of people to talk to was four. Seven participants reported access to practical assistance when they needed it. Half the group participated in community activities. Over half the group reported their health as average or worse and the same number reported their wellbeing as average or worse.

Vulnerable to homelessness

Four participants were vulnerable to homelessness. Participants were identified as vulnerable to homelessness because they were living in short term housing and did not have the education or employment attainment or participation necessary to secure stable housing in the future. These young people had ongoing difficulties with their health and wellbeing and, with one exception, were yet to identify interests and aptitudes which might lead to greater opportunities. The group included three males and one female, with all the males Australian born and the female overseas born. All had been Lion Garden residents.

Each of the four young people in the vulnerable group had suffered major damaging events in their lives, with long term implications. Gordon was placed in child protection at age nine and moved into residential units at age fourteen. Zach had suffered violence from his father and experienced acute mental illness and substance dependence since his mid teens. Mathew had developed chronic problems with binge eating and, since his mid teens, had suffered from morbid obesity, over-sleeping and incapacity to engage with work, study or inter-personal relationships. Ulla, who had moved to Melbourne after conflict with her immigrant, but English speaking family, reported an assault by a guest at Lion Garden during her stay with the program and returned to her family. A few months later, she returned for a further six months in Step Ahead accommodation after relationships had broken down again.

Each of the three young men were unable to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by Step Ahead because of problematic behaviours, and were ultimately exited from the program after breaking the rules. Gordon became intoxicated and stole DVDs from another resident's unit, Mathew was unable to meet his study and employment requirements, and after repeated interventions, Zach continued abusing substances and failing to attend program activities. We may conjecture that their incapacity to comply with the rules of the program exemplifies a broader incapacity to comply with dominant norms and practice a level of self control. Despite their difficulties within the program, Step Ahead did not discharge these young people quickly, with the median stay being 498 days. It is evident that when difficulties arose, Step Ahead continued to work with the young people, even in very challenging circumstances.

During her second stay with Step Ahead, Ulla spent six months in a THM property but was required to leave when, after minimal engagement with the program, her time-limited support period expired. Just 20 years old, Ulla entered a cycle of short term unstable rental, boarding houses, refuges and transitional accommodation, where she remained at the time of interview, over three years later. In addition to the accommodation difficulties, her reported assault while at Step Ahead and the subsequent circumstances of her exit interrupted her pathway out of homelessness and damaged Ulla's sense of ontological security and self esteem.

Gordon and Zach both spoke highly of the program and the opportunities it offered them. For Gordon the opportunity to learn life skills and become more mature was important, while Zach recognized that in retrospect all the opportunities for success were available through Step Ahead, although he was not able to grasp them. Ulla enjoyed living in Lion Garden and appreciated the sense of community, access to counseling and life skills education, but her experience was clouded by the reported assault and circumstances of her exit. Mathew felt hostile to the obligatory elements of the program and did not report any benefit from the support offered.

At the time of interview, Mathew, Gordon and Zach were without work history, disengaged from employment and education and suffering health problems. Ulla was working and studying, but moving between transitional properties regularly, making her connection with student life tenuous. Zach and Mathew were living in transitional housing. Mathew had lived in his property for three years and expected to stay there until public housing became available, while Zach had been there for two months and expected to move into an inpatient psycho-social rehabilitation service within weeks. Both had both moved three times since leaving Step Ahead. Gordon had moved seven times in the five years since he had left the program, including a seven month stint in prison. At the time of interview he shared private rental in an area on Melbourne's fringe. He had been in his accommodation for one year, and expected to stay there a further six months

None of the group reported connection to a community, although all said they had someone to talk to. Gordon and Mathew had one person to talk to, while Zach had two and Ulla had three. No participation in community activities was reported. None of the group reported good or very good health, although one reported very good wellbeing. Other responses were 'not good' or 'average'. Ontological security for this group appears not to have been achieved.

Who did Step Ahead work for?

Step Ahead worked well for all of the overseas born males (except Zichan, who had English as a first language and spent formative years in Australia) and most of the overseas born females, who were well protected against homelessness at the time of interview. The program supported them at a vulnerable time and protected them from harm. It focussed their efforts on education and employment and gave them time and guidance to acclimatise to a new culture and environment. It enabled an escape from difficult family circumstances and the opportunity to gain vocational qualifications and establish a work history. Many possessed a strong drive to succeed, which functioned as a protective factor, but this alone may not have been sufficient protection from homelessness without the assistance of a service such as Step Ahead.

For the Australian born participants whose relationships with family had broken down, the life skills components of the program were less important than the emotional, material and practical support they received, particularly during times of crisis. Mostly adolescents, these young people were negotiating a stage of life where values, identities and aspirations were being explored in sometimes risky and erratic ways. Many of the Australian born young people had a high chance of a transition to chronic or street homelessness without the support of Step Ahead.

Young people with emotional problems and milder forms of mental illness used the support and stability of the program to overcome their psychological difficulties. The symptoms experienced by these young people were mostly reactive to past traumas and conflicted domestic relationships, and once the stressors were removed, the symptoms gradually decreased. The relationship with workers was central to this recovery, as was a stable place to live and a chance to develop a positive sense of identity.

Those who made the transition from secondary school to university in Step Ahead used the program as a stable base to concentrate on achieving good marks. Step Ahead helped able students reach their potential, some of whom would have found entry and engagement with university life impossible otherwise. Those who pursued studies through TAFE or other institutions used their time at Step Ahead to explore different career options and develop their interests and aptitudes. The unfortunate timing of some exits interfered with study.

In summary, we find that Step Ahead worked particularly well for homeless young people who needed time and support to acclimatise to a new cultural environment; for adolescents requiring support to safely negotiate a transition to adulthood; for those with mild, reactive emotional and psychological problems; and for those transitioning from secondary school to higher education.

Are there predictors of good outcomes?

Good outcomes were more likely to be achieved by overseas born participants than by their Australian born counterparts. Sixty-six percent of the overseas born participants were well protected from homelessness at the time of interview, compared with just 31% of Australian born participants.

Those who achieved good outcomes tended to stay longer at Step Ahead than those who did not. The median stay in Step Ahead accommodation for those who were well protected against homelessness at the time of interview was 614 days, while those who were protected against homelessness stayed a median of 571 days. For those who were vulnerable to homelessness, the median stay was 498 days. The relationship between longer stays and better outcomes is clearly complex. Those who were faring well had less cause to leave than those who were not, but those staying longer had more time to build their resources in a supported environment than those who left earlier.

It is clear that the resources developed by Aber, Abrinet, Fodia and Ulla were not sufficiently robust to generate many opportunities outside the program and a longer stay probably would have improved their circumstances at the time of interview. Vanida was doing her first year 12 exam at the time of her exit and it is likely that her performance was affected, while Shahla mentioned that the timing of her move interrupted her studies. Shahla, Penina and Ulla all mentioned during their interviews that they would have preferred a longer stay.

We find that longer stays at Step Ahead are associated with better outcomes and, in a few cases, the circumstances and timing of exits compromised the likelihood of good outcomes.

Step Ahead obliged participants to attend program activities, follow the rules of residency and actively engage in education and employment. Some participants were already inclined towards participation and engagement, and used the program as a platform to do so. Others were less inclined towards participation but understood that it was in their best interests and adhered. Some were steadfastly unable or unwilling to comply and were eventually required to leave. Good outcomes were disproportionately achieved by the young people who complied with the participation requirements of the program.

Participants who stayed in the THM accommodation were more likely to be well protected from homelessness at the time of interview than those who stayed at Lion Garden. Nine of the fifteen THM residents, or 60%, were well protected, compared with five of fourteen, or 36% of Lion Garden residents. It is likely that this is a result of a management practice of placing higher risk young people at the co-located venue, thus we do not find that residing in a THM property is predictive of good outcomes per se. However, most of those who shared their accommodation, all of whom were THM residents, mentioned some difficulties in getting along with their cotenant. These conflicts tended to be a significant feature of their memories of Step Ahead. Sean and Chris both reported that the circumstances of sharing their accommodation actively contributed to the deterioration of the mental health. While they do not appear to have caused negative consequences over the long term, cotenant conflicts provided an unwanted source of stress for young people in already difficult circumstances and attenuated the other positive effects of the program.

In summary, good outcomes were associated with overseas birth, longer stays in program accommodation and an inclination towards compliance with program obligations. In addition, we find that most of the participants living in shared properties had a less positive experience of Step Ahead than those who lived alone.

Who did Step Ahead not work for?

This research confirms the understanding that the foyer model is not appropriate for young people with serious mental health and/or substance issues. Participants with serious mental illnesses recognised that they had opportunities in the program, but felt unable to make the most of them. Sean, Zach and Chris suffered acute mental illness while living at Step Ahead and each left without greatly improving their mental health or developing the pre-conditions for engagement and opportunity. It was only outside the program, with the more intense support from specialist services or family members that they were able to begin recovery.

Some participants had other barriers to engaging in education, employment or program activities and they too fared poorly in the program. Those with little physical or psychological capacity for engagement may do better in specialist contexts where the focus is on identifying and overcoming the barriers without the contractual expectations of foyer programs.

Some participants felt an urgent need for intimate, emotional connections with others. For these young people, the relationship with a worker was too much at arm's length and a closer engagement was desired. With their emotional needs unmet, these participants engaged in activities that conflicted with the program rules and were required to leave.

Living with other young people affected by homelessness can impose risks. Two participants experienced incidents that undermined their sense of security and safety in their accommodation.

In summary, we find that Step Ahead did not work well for participants struggling with acute mental illness or those with other psychological or physical barriers to participation. It did not work well for those with unmet needs for intimate, emotional connections with others, and those who experienced incidents that undermined their sense of security in their accommodation.

Vignettes

The following vignettes introduce some of the participants in this research. The vignettes combine qualitative and quantitative data collected for individual participants with their first person accounts, edited from interview transcripts. The purpose is to feature some of the individual experiences and unique voices of the young people in our research. Pseudonyms are used for all participants, in order to protect their privacy, and identifying details such as suburbs have been changed.

Elaine

Elaine first became homeless when she was 16 years old. She remained at school and stayed with a friend who lived nearby, but after about 18 months, she was asked to leave. She moved into Lion Garden aged 17, while she was studying year 11.

Despite moving to the city, Elaine maintained friendships, sport, and schooling in her town of origin, on Melbourne's outer western fringe. She also kept some shifts at a retail outlet there, where she continued to work until she turned 18. She lost her job due to the employer being required to pay adult wages.

In addition to her other commitments, Elaine attended some program activities. She maintained a relationship with her boyfriend, whose family were supportive. While staying at Lion Garden, Elaine received assistance to attain a Responsible Service of Alcohol certificate and her driver's license. She also received travel tickets, clothes and a computer for her studies.

After finishing year 12, Elaine found work in an office as a trainee. The pay was very low, but it nevertheless created difficulties with eligibility for her health care card, Centrelink payments and rental subsidy. She was assisted by her worker to negotiate these matters with Centrelink. At this point, Elaine felt ready to move out of program accommodation, but other accommodation was unsuitable or unaffordable due to her limited income. After she completed her traineeship and secured a promotion at work, Elaine was able to move in with her boyfriend's parents in Caroline Springs. She had been living in Lion Garden for a little over two years. She did not accept the offer of aftercare support.

At the time of interview, a little over one year later, Elaine was still working full-time for the same company. She was living in a home she had purchased with her partner ten months earlier. She reported good wellbeing and average health, due to a chronic health problem. She felt supported and connected to a community, although she did not participate in community activities.

I had to move out of home or either one of us was going to die. My parents divorced when I was two. I went with my mother until I was four, until she basically didn't want me anymore, so my Dad took me. That wasn't a very good relationship; he was trying to do his best but just didn't know how. My dad got a new girlfriend and she moved us up to the country. So with the straining relationship with my father and I and moving to a place that I didn't know or didn't like or didn't want to be, I became very depressed and suicidal, so I thought I have to leave or I will die, basically. And at that stage I just thought right, no one else is going to help me I'll help myself so I left and moved in with some friends. You can't do that for ever so I looked for alternative living arrangements. I went to school in Melton so I had to catch a train from the city to Melton each day and back home again. The trying to support myself moneymwise was very difficult because I'd be going to school the majority of the week then I'd have to work as much as I could to put towards rent and stuff. I was not in a good place at all, I was quite depressed. I was not necessarily homeless but I did have to leave where I was at and that's where I found Step Ahead program.

It pretty much saved me from going bonkers. I know I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't have the Step Ahead program place to stay that was stable. I sort of knew all the cooking and the cleaning, I'd been doing it with my Dad anyway so that sort of side of things was not necessarily applicable to me. It was more I had to learn how to relate better with people. I felt that that was a big influence in now how I react to situations when previously would have yelled about it; I did learn how to control that a bit better while I was in that situation, especially living with eight other people in very close proximity.

I quickly learnt my way around. I generally really liked it. I loved that fast pace of the city. I loved that you could walk everywhere to get something. The lead tenant that lived in the flat, he was great. He was really helpful if anyone had any problems. I did make some friends, quite good friends, with some of the people in the units.

There was a lot of freedom. There were never any restrictions on what you can and can't do. I found the group activities really annoying to be honest. Especially with having work, study and everything else that you have to try and get done and then coming

home and hearing about this group activity that you have to go to. I think they should be optional but I think they're a good idea because you get to know your other housemates. So maybe I would have them not as often.

Emotionally, I'm not necessarily a talking about my feelings kind of person, so that kind of support I wouldn't say benefitted me as it may benefit other people. It definitely was great to have it there but I tend to try and deal with my issues by myself. It did benefit me in the fact that if I did need to talk about something I could — but if I didn't want to I didn't have to. It was never sort of pressured into doing it so I felt my mental stability got better with time. Because I was never pressured to have to say anything or pressured to do anything per se they were just very helpful and understanding of the way you felt.

I had a lot of help with my resume. I'm not the best reader and writer around. I learned a lot regarding resumes and interview skills. It was quite strict in that you did have the weekly meetings with the social workers. Some people do need that and some people might need fortnightly or might need monthly. They might not need so much assistance in the way of the person being there and they may need it in other ways. One of the main things I would change is more tailoring to individual situations.

My relationship with my father got a lot better as soon as I moved out because we weren't in each other's faces 24/7. I think in the long run it's done us a world of good. We get along quite well now. Also the financial strain never really necessarily eased up but it got really easier to live with because you knew what you were up for every week. So having the stability of Lion Garden and the Step Ahead program allowed me to say okay, well I need so much for bills and I'd be able to do that amount of work, whereas before you'd struggle because you'd be changing all the time and you wouldn't know how much you were going to need.

I have to say that they've got quite a well rounded system. The social workers are A grade. If they keep getting more of people like that then I think the kids will be fine. I also think there needs to be more education regarding drug and alcohol and maybe programs where you get kids that have been successful out of the program to come back speak to the ones that are currently in it.

I was in a relationship while I was in the program with my partner Greg. Now we're engaged and getting married next year. We've built our own house, I work. I'm an account manager at the company and am looking to moving up again in the near future. So that's that side of things. Financially we're quite alright. I do have a good social network too; we have lots of friends.

Zichan

Zichan was born in Hong Kong and lived with his father. He moved out of home at the age of 15 when his father was unable to accept his sexual orientation. After spending 14 months couch surfing, Zichan moved into Lion Garden. He was 17 years old and had finished year 11. He aspired to be a lawyer.

Zichan suffered from anxiety and early in his time at the program was periodically suicidal and was self harming. He received a high level of support from workers with his family and intimate relationships and with emotional issues. He found it difficult to focus on school and was often assisted to refocus. His worker assisted Zichan to access health services and with income and budgeting. Despite these challenges he completed year 12 while at the program and found jobs in retail. He participated in Spanish language class, received massage sessions, went to the gym, volunteered with community organisations, participated in art projects, and was politically active.

After a little over a year and a half in the program, Zichan enrolled in University in another city and moved to student housing there. After a few months he discontinued his course and received support from Step Ahead to move back to Melbourne.

At the time of interview, he was living in community housing with another tenant, where he had been nearly a year. He was very happy with his tenancy and planned to stay there as long as he could. He had lived in four locations in the three and a half years since leaving the program. He was working part-time and had an active social life.

I wasn't too disorganised back then but I didn't have a lot of social support. I was very withdrawn from society. I didn't trust a lot of people. I was very depressed and I, yeah. I was pretty depressed about relationships, family, friends, myself, you know I was just depressed on the entire scope, yeah, entire field. I don't know. I was couch surfing. Friends and friends' parents were saying, okay, you've lived here enough now, you've got to move on. That was really tough. I just didn't have a secure location and like I don't usually talk about things to people, but I ended up living with a person who was alleged to have been involved with child pornography. I was 17 at that time and so I was an easy target. I had nowhere to go. I was like hey, it's a room for my head, over my head, you know, Fuck. If he's like that so be it. At least I'm not living on the streets. When I moved to Lion Garden the workers

they were very helpful. I was just falling to pieces and they just helped me back together so they were good in terms of support that way. They provided financial resources for you to study, they provided uniforms, text books, so they gave the environment where you can succeed. I don't think they could have done anything any better.

I think I had social problems back then and most of the people that live within the Lion Garden complex probably have their own quirks as well. It's a mish mash of different problems all together in one big melting pot. Look there were people there into loud music. I don't mind the odd loud music just, you know, maybe certain genres. And I couldn't sleep one time so I called the cops on them. I don't know, I shouldn't have done that and I mean, we've all gone through similar stuff but I thought, okay, if we're living in a place now and that's what normal people do, then maybe I'll do what normal people do. One of the workers had to explain to me, no, no, no, go through us before solving shit by your self. I'd get too involved in other people's problems. One girl's period was late and I don't know why I did this but I was a silly, silly young person and I contacted her social worker saying she might be pregnant and they dragged her to get her tested. I felt like I was the old grandma that knows everyone's business but wants to help.

Living in the city at such a young age I thought it was such a privilege. Me and my mates went out to eat around the city all the time. It was like, we didn't have an expensive budget because we didn't, we were all on Centrelink but we had the ability to find places and it was like a champagne taste, beer budget. We ate around. It was quite lavish. Lavish for a person on Centrelink anyway. We just enjoyed ourselves, went out a lot, St Kilda Festival, Luna Park, lots of raves. It gave us that platform to be a bit more outgoing because, you know, you're right in the centre of everything. People saw it as, oh wow, you know, you've got a nice place in the city, they thought of you as, you know, someone with status. It made me feel a bit valued I guess within the community.

I know myself a bit better now. The life journey has helped. And at work I'm a bit power hungry now. I want to make changes to society and the way, for me right now, is working, it's either people are there, have been there for thirty years, they don't know what things are like. So my thinking is that I want to reinvigorate the way they run a company, change the way they see things and I can't do that from my position right now. I've got a list set up on the wall. I've got these, you know, what I think is the steps, the right steps and the right direction to get there, so education's part of it. The only way to move on up is to study and study, get a better position and then use that sphere of influence to change for the better.

Trish

Trish had been living with a partner but after the relationship ended she was unable to re-establish a home on her Centrelink income and endured an extended period couch surfing. Trish was 24 years old when she entered Step Ahead, having finished school at year 11. She had been homeless on and off since she was 11 years old.

Trish moved into a THM property and established a good relationship with her housemate. She sought her worker's help to get a driver's licence and after a while found full-time work at a hotel, paid cash in hand. Trish was only marginally engaged with the program and missed many appointments with her worker, although she noted in her service evaluation that she had received assistance to deal with emotional issues, to access other services and to engage in social and recreational opportunities.

Trish suffered a number of crises during her time in the program. She had her money, keys and other belongings stolen from her by her mother, and was assaulted by gate crashers at a party. She was injured at work and lost her job after missing several shifts. She fell into rental arrears and the tenancy managers took the matter to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

Trish reported depression and began attending counselling. She was breached by Centrelink and had her income withheld, worsening her rent situation. She reported another drunken assault to her worker, and sought help in dealing with debts accrued through a money lending organisation.

After being with the program for 12 months, Trish began a course in community services. She applied for subsidised housing but was not earning enough to qualify. A second VCAT hearing on rental arrears was held, but Trish found work and was able to pay the debt. She was accepted into community housing and moved out of her THM property after 18 months. She continued to be supported through aftercare for a further eight months.

At the time of interview, Trish remained in the community housing, where she had been for over a year. She expected to stay there for two more years and found it highly suitable. She was working full-time and reported average health and good wellbeing. She felt connected to a community and had support when she needed it, but tended not to engage in community activities.

Everything hit shit bottom, no one was there to help. I was the victim. I had just recently broke up with my fiancé and don't have a family to fall back on or anything like that so I was pretty much backpacking in Melbourne, like yeah, fun, and sleeping on friends' couches and stuff. I mean a lot of people who would allow me to go stay there with them were mainly half-house people, you know, took drugs and did stuff. I was depressed, deeply depressed. And I could have gone down a few roads, you know hanging around people and stuff like that. Getting into Step Ahead, it made me want to get better and do things the right way around. So, this time I got taught to actually do things the right way so, with the skills to continue doing the right thing.

I remember the first day we went and did a get together activity, outdoors thing and like to get out and act like a kid occasionally and we went to a scout thing and had to jump through things and do all things and everyone was sitting there going, I don't want to do this and I was the first one saying I'll do it, I'll be up! Yeah, I mean they offered a lot of that type of stuff.

I got along with my workers. So I didn't mind going to see my workers. It got me out, like yeah. They took time to listen. Offered me anything I needed help with. In that way the depression just kind of worked itself out. Even though they always offered me to go like to counselling and stuff, that they pay for it, it just figured itself out in its own.

Probably the main thing I learned was how to share a place with someone that you don't know and getting, being accepting, of another person. I did feel like I had to answer to them for everything when I first moved there, though. I was 24 years old and having to answer for the first time in my life. It got a bit ugh at first but I got used to it and I mean, the longer I was with them, the less they did it. They got me driving lessons. I did the WHEELS programme as well. They helped me out with uniforms and stuff. There was other stuff you could do, I was invited, but I was working most of the time and didn't go because I didn't have time.

Now I've accomplished a lot. I've moved on. I have cut off ties. I've learned to cope with my mother, which was one thing I had a big problem with. I'm working, I'm just like, yeah, I've got new friends now I've started a new life. So, yeah, I've gotten healthier. I've got a little sister, she's thirteen and she's autistic – now she can come and stay with me. I've got a sense of security now, really with everything I've achieved.

Shahla

Shahla and her sister were born in Iran and lived in a blended family. They left home after male family members exposed them to violence and substance abuse. Shahla was 19 years old and studying at University when she left home, and she found it difficult to find secure affordable housing while studying. One and a half years after leaving home, Shahla and her sister moved into a Step Ahead THM property.

While she was with Step Ahead, Shahla continued studying at university, and with the assistance of her worker, eventually found a steady job in retail. She learned to cook and budget, but with both sisters studying full-time, they struggled to make ends meet. Although she was glad to be away from the stress of the family home, Shahla found that independent life was at times lonely. Her case notes suggest that she was not motivated to participate in program activities.

After two years and four months in the program, Shahla and her sister were deemed to be ready for independence and were asked by workers to move on from the program accommodation. Refusing accommodation suggested by a worker and unable to afford rental accommodation, they moved into a single room together in a house shared with others.

Shahla was 23 years old at the time of interview and was living with her sister in private rental, where they had been for around three months. They had lived at three different addresses in the 15 months since leaving Step Ahead. Shahla had completed her undergraduate course and was studying for a Masters degree. Although she was working part-time, money was still short. The sisters hoped to stay in their present accommodation for two years. Shahla reported very good health and wellbeing, although she did not have anyone outside her family to talk to about difficult issues or to ask for help with practical tasks.

It was so good to know I had my sister. We were facing a difficult time. We were having a lot of problems at home with my stepfather, so we actually had to leave home. It was so, it's like when we went home, you know, people go home to relax and calm down and unwind, but we went home and it was just like you wanted to get out of there because, yeah, it was just like hard time at

home. We met a few people along the way who were actually on their own and they didn't have anybody and I just thought imagine that. So it was actually good we were together, we had it better than the others in that way.

We were in one location for three months and then we were placed in a house for three years. It was a stable home for us where we didn't have to keep moving around because before that we were sort of just staying at friends' places on different nights, whatever we could get. We were so young, we didn't have experience in, about living on your own. We didn't know how to cook, we didn't know how to manage finances, so it was really, yeah, it took us a while to get used to everything. Now we had rent, bills, we were studying full-time so we couldn't work and yeah, we were both on youth allowance and yeah, that was a huge issue for us so we had to work around those kind of things. So it just took time and practice to get used to and there were times where we would run out of money so we would have to go to Melbourne Citymission to get food vouchers or whatever might be of help to us. We didn't really have time to spend with friends because we were so busy with everything else and you can't really tell people about your situation either, about the family issues.

Financially it was a lot more difficult but even when we were at home it wasn't the greatest because mum's on a pension and yeah, we used to live in the commission flats, so I mean it wasn't a huge difference, but at least, you know, you've got three incomes, my mum, my sister and I, and you've got a bit more to work with. And yeah, she did the cooking and stuff at the start but towards the end she got very sick.

To be honest it's not a great memory. I'm quite sort of introverted so even if I did have issues at the time, I really, I couldn't speak to anybody else about it. The strongest thing that comes to mind is that it was really lonely and that it was a really difficult time because we'd never been away from home. I mean we were away from home prior to moving to that area, but we always had other friends around us — so it wasn't the greatest. We didn't spend a lot of time at home either. We were at uni and we'd just come home to sleep there, yeah. But having that new place, having that time and not having any complications at home, that definitely reduced stress levels.

Toward the end of the lease the workers approached us and said, you know you have to move on now to private rental or whatever. They gave us certain options, they recommended a newly built property to us through private rental and we were looking at paying something like four hundred and sixty dollars a week for the two of us and we were studying full-time, none of us were working. So I mean the thought of that private rental was just absurd. So they sort of pushed us out, one week before the lease was about to end they said you girls look like you're in a good position, you'll be fine on your own, you can move on. I found they took more interest in people who had drug issues, legal issues, who were more extreme. But what difference is there between the person who is on drugs because you're in the same financial position, neither of you have family support, so I mean, one is studying and one is not. Why would there be a difference between the two? So I found that when they said you don't need us anymore it's like that's it, you're on your own because you don't have a drug issue.

So after that we moved into private rental, renting just a room because it was too expensive. So we moved once to a friend's house and after that we moved another time. It's taken a few years but eventually we've sort of adapted to the new lifestyle. Yeah, we've still got friends and we still go and visit my mum because she's quite sick so, yeah. I mean we visit her, we're still studying, looking for work, so it's sort of a balance now.

Gordon

Gordon was placed in child protection at the age of nine and moved into residential units when he was 14. At 18, he left statutory care and entered Lion Garden, having completed year 10. His case notes record that at the time of his entry he had been a long-term cannabis user, had difficulties with anger management, few independent living and social skills and had no contact with family.

While he was at Lion Garden, Gordon completed year 12 at TAFE. He attended music short courses, but did not complete them. He held a few temporary part-time jobs and work experience placements. Case notes document that Gordon made substantial progress on his social skills and maintained a relationship with his girlfriend, but was a high needs client, receiving intensive support from his worker to access health and legal services, participate in education and employment, and to improve his living skills and budgeting practices. On occasions, Gordon ran out of food and was assisted with emergency provisions. He was cautioned for disturbing other residents with late loud music, hosting friends late at night and not attending TAFE.

Gordon's case notes state that he was required to leave after 15 months due to 'being intoxicated in a communal space and upsetting another resident'. He moved into crisis accommodation, before entering a residential rehabilitation program and being diagnosed with a psychotic illness. At the time of interview, Gordon was living in rented accommodation with his only friend. He had lived in seven different places in the previous five years, including prison. He did not feel connected to a community, was not working or studying, and reported 'average' wellbeing and 'not good' health.

I love the tunes man. I bought a Sherwood entertainment system and as soon as I bought that I just pumped the shit out of it. I was pumping tunes every night and blew a couple of fuses in the amplifiers, had to take them back and get them fixed. But I didn't get any complaints except from my youth workers because they were there some days and yeah, they would hear my music pump out the windows and they told me to tone it down. But I was a bit of a rebel back then, I didn't really want to listen. I'd been in residential units from the age of 14. I didn't really like my parents that much. The way they didn't really care about me. It was a tough thing to face; it was at the start but I've gotten used to it. I've just learnt to do my own thing and not give a fuck about my parents or any family. If they gave me the time of day that'd be different, you know, there'd be some respect there. But thinking about it back then the workers supported me, they helped me to become stronger man, by not really caring about what my family thinks and they gave me some guidelines into how I can live life without them. They felt my pain. Thinking about back then they helped me grow into adulthood and mentally. Yeah mentally, like how to behave respectfully towards people too, like the neighbours and cranking the tunes, how to shop wisely, like with money and don't blow it all at once.

I don't have deep roots man. That's why I'm more streetwise than anything. Lion Garden was like my home town because I was living there for two years. I haven't lived anywhere else for that long. Yeah. I'm independent in that way, where I can just leave here tomorrow and find another joint to live at and it would be fucking easy man, for me.

I was copping fines every now and again for transport, like with no ticket and I had them all waived for me because I wasn't smart enough to learn that responsibility back then, but I learnt after those fines were waived that I had to take it into my own responsibility. I could've learnt the hard way and done some community work for it and I would've accepted that - but it's just the youth workers. I told them the situation and they referred me to Benita, my lawyer, and said she could probably get them waived for me and that's what happened. It taught me how to respect others man, yeah like instantly, man and that was just from having my lawyer waive those fines. That was just a huge amount of respect there man. Because yeah, I think that respect goes a long way man. It does. I never got respect from my family, I got respect from the workers I was living with at the residential units but other than that I didn't get much respect. Until I lived at Lion Garden, then things changed. So that helped me change a lot. It's taught me how to have an open mind now towards others and not judge people.

I did the wrong thing by going into another resident's apartment while his door was open and took all his DVD's and I went to sell them down at the security guard at the car park around the corner and I got busted for it, like red handed. I got kicked out of Lion Garden for that. I don't blame them for kicking me out of there man, I did the wrong thing and it was pretty stupid. But I had some awesome times. It was just a real flexible living atmosphere, environment that anyone could start off at. Especially if they were street kids and been in, like through rehabilitations and residential units, so it was a pretty good kick off for life, you know.

So, you know, in retrospect, every day is a learning curve in that way because I respect every lesson that's been taught to me, like even though it just could be signs, could be, you know, just people you meet and know and how they talk to you man. It's just wisdom mate, wisdom comes to you like straight after man. Like through every conversation you learn.

Penina

Penina was born in Sudan and entered Step Ahead at the age of 25. Having been homeless for two years, she was staying with a cousin when she was asked to leave due to overcrowded conditions. She contacted Frontyard at Melbourne Citymission and was allocated a THM property through the Step Ahead program.

Penina had completed year 10 and expressed a desire to continue her education and achieve an independent life. During her stay in the program Penina was enrolled in English classes, but struggled to attend. She was often counselled by her worker for not attending scheduled meetings or meeting program participation requirements.

She found work in a cafe, a clothing factory, and later for an airline, and sometimes played volleyball. Penina had help from her worker in understanding rent increases and developing budgets. She had some clashes with her flatmate and broke program rules by having her brother move into the property without program consent.

After three months with the program, Penina left to move in with her brother and his girlfriend, where she lived for about a month before moving to country Victoria for work in a food processing factory. At the time of interview, three and a half years after leaving the program, she was living in a public housing estate in inner Melbourne with her partner and their daughter, and she was expecting another baby. They hoped to transfer their tenancy to a more suitable area. She was not working or studying, although she had completed a Certificate III in English at TAFE. Penina felt supported and connected to a community, reporting average health and very good wellbeing.

I'd been in Australia three years with no family at all. I was a bit stressed. My father was sick, my mum sick back in Sudan and I wanted someone to help me to, you know, like counselling or something. I was living with a friend and wasn't comfortable in the house. I was living in sitting room and then I stopped going to school. I was looking for work, I'm looking for house and it was too much, you know, look for house and look for job. I talk to social worker and they helped me a lot with everything. They give me a house first thing, that's a big, like I can say that's a big thing to give me a place to stay. Then after a while they help me getting a job. They helped me to go back to school.

I was thinking I was the only one while I go through this stuff. Then at the house it was like, it was like the— how you call it? The group was like mixed. There's Ethiopian, there's Somalian and they had Sudanese like me here. All of us was like the same, you know. And some people like Australian but they have the same condition as well. Some were like move out from their houses and stuff. It was really fun. I really enjoyed a lot and help my stress as well. Yeah, because I see other kids like me and then we just talk and I forget everything.

Sometimes it's hard with my housemate. She wasn't sleeping at night. I was Christian, she was Muslim and she wasn't sleeping at night. Every like night time she's awake and I was working so I need to sleep. She wasn't doing nothing. She wasn't going to school, she wasn't working, she was sleeping all day and at night she's awake so it was hard for me. They tell her not to, you know, but nothing changed really. But I just let it go. I turn my music on and slept.

I learn how to live in like Western world and how to look after myself as well. Like we were teach about how to use, you know, like protection, like, yeah. And we have to still see the doctor for six month, did a blood test, look after yourself and when if someone got a boyfriend or partner how to look, you know, for some, if we get sick we need to see a doctor first and always use protection. We learn cooking— I know how to cook, but it's okay to learn to cook Australian food. Budgeting was good for me— like it's difficult when I come to Australia because back home there we're not used to money. Some people work in farms and survive in the farms. I didn't use money back home but when I come here everything's money. I pay rent with money, I look after myself with money, everything's money. I know nothing. So it's really helpful for us like as African, Somalian, Ethiopian and me, Sudanese, to do this programme. I wanted to stay for longer but because I'm like, it was a help from twenty-five under and I was over twenty-five, so I couldn't have anymore.

Giles

Giles lived with his Melbourne based parents until protracted physical and verbal conflict with his father prompted him to leave. He lived briefly with siblings before moving into Lion Garden at 17 years of age. When he entered the Step Ahead program, Giles had low self esteem, was experiencing severe depression, poor health and was potentially suicidal. He was continuing his year 11 studies at a secondary college near Lion Garden, where he had been studying previously.

Giles was highly committed to his studies and extracurricular activities. He pursued his interest in art with extra painting classes, had a weight training regime and took advantage of a massage program offered through Step Ahead. Giles received support from the program to manage his commitments and balance the demands on his time. He received support from his worker to negotiate the evolving relationships with his family and to manage bills and finances.

After completing secondary schooling, Giles was supported by Step Ahead to apply for a scholarship to attend University. He successfully managed the transition into undergraduate studies, and during the holidays he found casual work.

While at Step Ahead, Giles seemed to succeed in everything he attempted; education, painting, part-time work, personal development and particularly in improving his health and overcoming depression. After living at Lion Garden for two and a half years, Giles moved into a community housing property while continuing undergraduate studies.

At the time of interview, he was still studying at University and working at night. He lived in a shared rental property where he had been for six months, although he was unsure about its suitability and expected to move within a couple of months. In the four and a half years since leaving Step Ahead, he had moved three times.

Well pretty much at the time I came to the program I just moved out of home because of issues really living with my parents at the time. I guess one of the main things with my parents was simply a lack of understanding. While they could provide I guess the normal comforts of a living arrangement, I couldn't just live with them because of the atmosphere. It was a pretty crucial time in my life so and I didn't really want to – I had the option of going interstate to live with my sister but I didn't really want to uproot everything I had here.

The crucial thing was the support network for moving out and living alone obviously because I was clueless when it came to it so, in terms of how to set myself up financially, I had no idea of how to manage that, so that was the main crucial thing it provided aside from just a stable living environment. Because I mean, it wasn't something planned, it was literally just bam, I left.

It was definitely a transitional stage. I think the main thing was that you're in a scenario where you're forced into a stage of your life you're not quite prepared for yet. I mean, if you look at the fact that I still have friends now who are 23 who are still living at home and have no idea how to support themselves and when you're forced in that scenario, I mean, you've two ways. You either freak out and just don't know how to comprehend or you've got to learn to deal with it. Obviously I had issues with my parents at the time, my personal issues, I had phobias and other issues at the time. So it wasn't just a case of every week, alright we're going to take you and show you how to cook up potatoes, how to pay your electricity bill. There were times when they'd sit you down and go alright so how are you? I mean for me I felt that was a lot better than psychologists, whose way of thinking was a bit different. The communication was lot more genuine than what I was used to. Like, I mean you can sit there with someone you can relate, you can both relate on a core topic and once you've got that kind of I guess similarity then you're more trusting, you're more open to listening to what they've got to say. So it was like having a mentorship thing.

I guess they got me at the right stage and prevented my issues from becoming something irrevocable in my life. Like I had in the past been, like prior to I had been suffering things like depression and so forth and I was suicidal but I mean that was obviously dealt with being on antidepressants and so forth. But still, like, when you come to that point in your life a lot of it can come back. So being more provided for, I guess is a safety net just to prevent any of that kind of issue becoming something a lot worse than it was. I mean, it's possible if I didn't get in the program, I could have like gone off and worked and tried to support myself through high school which would have been extra stress and I don't think I would have done as well. I don't even want to think about it now because I don't know how I would have ended up. . .

The location was fantastic. Aesthetically and I guess on a coolness factor but for me the most important thing about that was my school was literally like a stone's throw away from the city but I think one of the, I guess, side effects of living there as well was being put into the city. It had different effects on people but for me it actually encouraged me more to move onto the next transition. Like there was times where I'd be walking to school and be wanting to actually be at Uni or wanting to be working. Just, I guess it provided a goal. Not that I didn't have that goal but you're in this atmosphere where you're waking up in the morning and everyone's bustling getting ready for work and going to work and then, you know, at night you know, I'd sit on the balcony just listening to the bustling night life and I guess it made me aware of the next stage because at that stage I was still kind of confined in the comforts of high school and in some ways that did I think mature me a lot more. Prior to living there, I mean, prior to that my world pretty much revolved around home and the small social circles I had at school and school itself. When I started working with the youth worker I noticed just how sheltered my life had been beforehand. It was a real shock to the system just to come into that. It did make things difficult at the time but I'm glad because, you know, the last thing I want to be is some ignorant wanker walking down the street.

My parents would still come and visit me there or I would visit them but I think two empowering ways were, one, at the end of the day I've got my own place. So no matter how things went it was like alright sorry guys, I'm going to go bed, I'll see you later and then they'd leave. But also at the end of the day, like if anything did get a bit weird or there were issues we couldn't deal with, we

had the youth worker there so it wasn't like before — it was a safety barrier — especially when they came to visit me. It kind of snapped my parents out of whatever state of thinking they were in at the time. The program also taught me key things about myself, my parents and how my family was set up. Like learning to help me deal with emotions rather than bottling them up. Like its okay to be angry as long as it's the right kind of angry. Because the problem I had before was I was afraid to get angry because I saw what happened when my dad would get angry. It also taught me a different strain of thinking rather than just looking at someone and criticising them for their flaws, try and sit back and at least contemplate why they would do something. For my own peace of mind because I didn't want to go through life holding grudges.

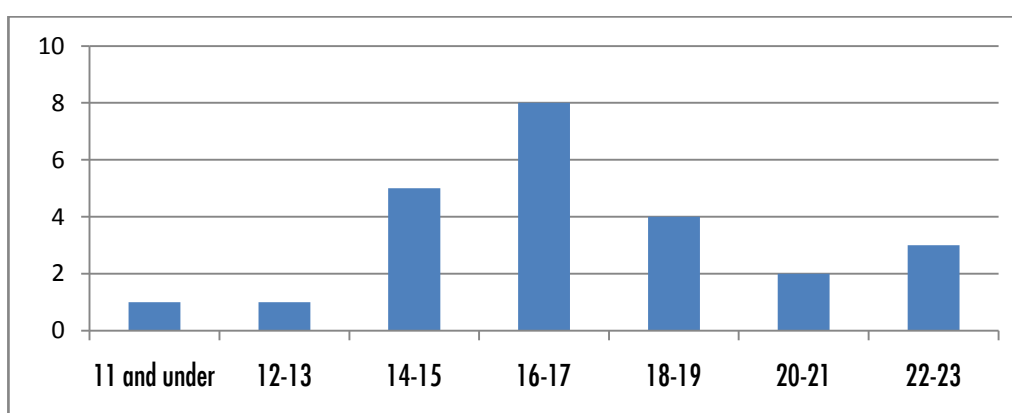
On a core level one of the most important things was I knew everyone who lived there. Maybe not intimately or on a friendship level but I at least knew a face to go to if shit hit the fan. That was something like back then I didn't fully appreciate but definitely now. Towards the end of the programme, I'd done my first year at University and they pretty much just said look we're not forcing you but we've felt like you've pretty much completed the programme and they offered me this place in Camberwell. So I decided to take it because I was like the same, I felt like yeah, I think I've benefited enough in this as it is and time to move on I guess.

THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Twenty-nine ex-Step Ahead residents participated in this research. Sixteen of the participants (55%) were female and 13 (45%) were male. Approximately half (14) of the participants were born in Australia and half (15) were born elsewhere, including ten from Africa (five from Ethiopia, two from Sudan and one each from Somalia, Cameroon and Kenya), two from Iran, and one each from China/Hong Kong, New Zealand and Pakistan. Sixteen participants had English as a first language. Those from African backgrounds tended to have more than one 'first language'. Amharic was spoken by three clients; Oromo, Swahili and Somali spoken by two each. Other languages spoken by clients include Cantonese, Dinka, Persian, Tigrina, Arabic and Urdu.

The average age of participants when entering the program was 20 years (n=28). The eldest entrant was 26 and the youngest 16 years. The length of time spent homeless prior to entering the program (n=24) ranged from 0 to 13 years, with the median time being 1.8 years. During the interviews for this research, participants were asked at what age they first left home or became homeless. Figure 1 illustrates the results.

Figure 1 - Age first left home / became homeless²



Based on participant reports of when they first moved out of home or became homeless, the median age for becoming homeless was 17, the youngest was 11 and the eldest was 23. A difference between Australian and overseas born participants was observed in the age that participants first became homeless, however there was little difference in the age at which participants entered the Step Ahead program. Australian born participants were, on average, homeless for a much longer period before entering the program than overseas born participants, who tended to enter the program soon after becoming homeless. The median age for becoming homeless was 15 years for Australian born participants compared with 19 years for their overseas born counterparts. This finding is in accord with *Project i*, which found that a group comprising mostly CALD background young people were older upon becoming homeless than another group comprising predominantly Anglo-Celtic, Australian born young people (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al 2010, ch.3).

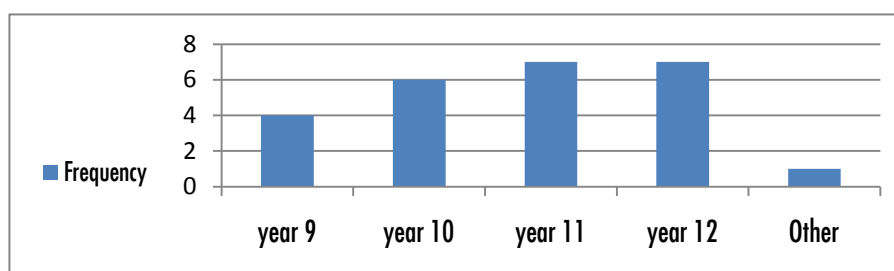
The age at which Australian born and overseas born young participants entered Step Ahead were comparable - Australian born participants were an average of 19 years of age compared with 20 years for the overseas born group.

Completed level of education at time of entry

Fourteen research participants (n=25) had completed Year 11 or 12 studies by the time they entered the program, while ten had completed Year 10 or less. Figure 2 shows the frequency of educational attainment levels at the time of entry.

² The sample for this study included less than half of the sampling frame and was possibly subject to sampling bias. The study participants may not be representative of the cohort. This limitation applies to all quantitative data presented in this report.

Figure 2 - Completed level of education at time of entry



To be recruited into the Step Ahead program, participants had to meet the eligibility criteria:

- homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- currently living or connected to a service in Victoria;
- aged 16-25 years of age; and
- requiring support to move through a transition from dependence to independence (Melbourne Citymission 2008, p. 7).

In addition to meeting these criteria, applicants are subject to a 'rigorous assessment' in an interview where staff 'assess the young person's commitment to independent living and the Step Ahead program' (MCM 2008, p.7).

Case file documents recording the referral and intake of clients revealed some information about family context and a broad range of issues relating to the young person's homelessness. Although this information is brief and incomplete, it is informative to note the common themes. Among the 29 case files reviewed:

- twelve recorded mental health issues such as depression and anxiety;
- eight recorded abuse at home,
- nine had families based overseas,
- three mentioned the young person's substance issues; and
- two mentioned histories in statutory care.

According to the case notes, about half of the participants (13, n=27) were staying in crisis accommodation prior to entering the program. 'Couch surfing', or staying with friends was the next most common type of accommodation, followed by transitional housing or supported accommodation. Figure 3 shows the frequencies of clients occupying accommodation types immediately before entering Step Ahead.

Figure 3 - Accommodation immediately before entering Step Ahead

Accommodation Type	Frequency
crisis accommodation	13
friend's place	4
transitional housing/supported accommodation	3
siblings	2
private rental	2
other	2
parents	1
Total	27

Those who entered Step Ahead from crisis accommodation were more likely to be overseas born than those entering from other accommodation. This finding is in accord with *Project i*, which found that a group comprising mostly CALD young people were more likely to use the homelessness service system than other groups. Sixty-one percent of clients entering Step Ahead from crisis accommodation were born overseas, compared with 36% of those entering through other avenues.

Type of Property

Step Ahead provides two types of accommodation. The program manages eight units in the Lion Garden complex in the Melbourne CBD, with a ninth unit housing a live-in support volunteer (lead tenant). This accommodation has some shared facilities and follows a traditional youth foyer format. A further seven properties in various locations across the inner and middle suburbs of Melbourne, allocated under the Transitional Housing Management (THM) program, are also managed and supported by Step Ahead. These properties function as a dispersed foyer, a model also employed in the UK (Smith 2004). At the time that the participants lived in the THM properties, they were generally shared between two Step Ahead clients. Because of a change in regulations, THM properties are now single occupancy.

Participants in the sample were evenly distributed between Lion Garden and the THM housing. Once accepted into the Step Ahead program, 14 of our participants were allocated a residence in the Lion Garden property and 15 went into one of the THM properties designated for the program. Among all former clients of Step Ahead, 30 have been residents of Lion Garden and 38 have been residents of THM properties, which were predominantly shared with other clients. A number of young people have moved from one to the other during their time with the program.

Research participants allocated to THM properties tended to be older and were more likely to be overseas born than those from Lion Garden. THM residents had an average age of 22 years compared with 18 years among the Lion Garden cohort, and 67% of THM residents were born outside Australia, compared with 36% of Lion Garden residents.

Differences in outcomes and experiences of those in the different accommodation types were observed across a range of domains and are detailed throughout this document. Notably, Lion Garden residents rated their experience at Step Ahead more highly than those in the THM housing. In exit evaluation forms completed by clients and administered by the program (n=16), 50% of Lion Garden residents rated their overall experience as excellent, compared with 20% of THM residents. Frequency tables of the exit evaluations can be found in Appendix 6 of this report. Lion Garden residents were more inclined towards participation in program activities than their THM counterparts. According to the review of case notes, 67% of THM residents required a high or medium level of worker support to maintain involvement in program activities, compared with 50% of Lion Garden residents.

A likely explanation for the discrepancy in program participation is the need for THM residents to travel to attend many activities, while Lion Garden residents had the opportunity to do more at home. The most obvious explanation for the discrepancy between satisfaction with the service is that the THM residents typically shared their properties, mostly experiencing conflict with their cotenant, while Lion Garden residents lived alone.

Time elapsed between leaving Step Ahead and interview

At the time the researchers conducted the final interview for this study on 9 December 2010, the average time elapsed since a client had left Step Ahead accommodation was 986 days, or 2.7 years. The longest time elapsed was 1900 days, or 5.2 years and the shortest was 296 days, or .8 of a year. These are the timeframes in which the experiences represented in the following data occurred. The average age of interview participants was 23 years. The eldest was 28 and the youngest was 19.

ACCOMMODATION AND HOME

Homelessness has been associated with poor health and wellbeing, social exclusion and poor education, employment and training outcomes. Providing young homeless people with accommodation will address the immediate housing crisis, but if it does not contribute to a sense of ontological security, it is unlikely to improve circumstances in these domains, or create a sustainable exit from homelessness (McNaughton & Sanders 2007). Dupuis & Thorns (1998) define ontological security as 'a sense of confidence and trust in the world as it appears to be. It is a security of being' (p.27) In the present context, we might define ontological security as the difference between accommodation and a home. The literature concerning ontological security proposes a number of ways a home may enable ontological security. A home enables individuals to:

- entertain friends and family
- relax, play and sleep
- undertake routines such as cooking and washing
- escape from the stresses of everyday life
- experience longevity and security of tenure
- construct an individual identity
- be free from surveillance,
- have a degree of freedom in choosing how to occupy time
- return to a secure base if in trouble or fatigued
- feel a sense of status
- replace the routines, networks and familiarity of a 'disordered' life

(Johnson & Wylie 2011; Dupuis & Thorns 1998; Saunders 1986; Padgett 2007; Hiscock et al. 2001; McNaughton & Sanders 2007)

If a support service aims to assist its clients to develop health and wellbeing and make a sustainable exit from homelessness, it must enable these functions. If it does not do so, it risks being a source of further disruption to the development of ontological security and the vulnerability this entails. Qualitative research on homeless women by McNaughton & Sanders (2007) found that housing can erode ontological security where it is only available in circumstances of loneliness and isolation or where it is a magnet for 'criminals and manipulators' (McNaughton & Sanders 2007, p.894).

Pathways research recognises the relationships between accommodation prior to entering a service, the accommodation during the service and accommodation after the service has been delivered. In considering the outcomes of a youth foyer service, it is therefore necessary to gather data on each of these phases and understand the connections and disconnections between them.

This section discusses the living arrangements of young people in the sample, before during and after their time in Step Ahead, paying particular attention to questions of ontological security.

Summary

The young people moving into Step Ahead gained a vital sense of protection from exposure to the risks that homelessness entails. This security enabled a focus on other priorities such as improving mental health, pursuing study, stabilizing finances and developing relationships. For some, this sense of security was initially mitigated by difficulties in adhering to the obligatory elements of the program, although they adapted and became more comfortable over time. Others continued to breach the rules, establishing patterns of under-performance and disengagement, gradually eroding their tenure.

The location of Step Ahead accommodation was important for participants, enabling connection with a new geographic area and identification with dynamic, cosmopolitan environments of opportunity. This was especially the case for Lion Garden residents. Proximity to school was important in order to enable continuity of studies.

The experience of sharing their home or living alone manifested in different ways for different people. While clients placed in Lion Garden had sole occupancy of a unit, most THM based clients shared their property with another client, although due to regulatory changes this is no longer the case. Many Lion Garden residents were grateful for the stability and peace of their single occupancy flats and were able to host visits from friends and family. Some reported that the most important contribution Step Ahead made to their lives was the ability to live alone, freeing them

to make progress without the stressors and turmoil of sharing accommodation. Others in Lion Garden experienced loneliness, and their choices in hosting guests often broke program rules and caused disruption to other tenants.

Two-thirds of the THM residents experienced difficulties with their co-tenants. These problems varied from lack of goodwill and communication to outright hostility, creating an unwelcome source of stress and distraction. Two THM residents reported that their experience of shared tenancy exacerbated their mental health problems. After difficult experiences of sharing, a number of participants found relief in moving out of Step Ahead into more functional shared, or sole occupancy accommodation.

With a few exceptions, participants stayed in their Step Ahead accommodation for between two and three years. Exits from the program could be categorised as graduating, leaving of their own accord, leaving due to different needs or being required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program expectations. Research participants referred to being required to leave as being 'evicted', although as Homeground are the tenancy managers of the properties, Step Ahead are not able to evict their clients from their accommodation.

Typically, exiting clients found private rental prohibitively expensive, although most of those who graduated or left of their own accord managed to do so without falling into a new cycle of homelessness or instability. These clients tended to appreciate the need to make room for other young people to access the program and had come to view themselves as sufficiently independent to do so. The move tended to be stressful for those who were studying full time because of financial constraints.

A few clients with acute mental health or substance issues accepted their need to move on and address their issues in more specialised settings. For them, Step Ahead formed one chapter of a longer journey towards greater stability. Moving out was generally seen in a positive light, although there was some regret that they had not been in a position to make the most of the opportunities presented by the program.

Half of the Lion Garden cohort, and one third of all participants were required to leave their Step Ahead accommodation for reasons of non participation in work, study or program activities, violating guest rules or disturbing other clients. These participants had typically been with the program for a year and a half when they were asked to leave, and had established a pattern of problematic conduct. They tended to be younger and Australian born. Some of these clients believed they were treated unfairly by the program, but all accepted that they had been unable to fulfil their obligations.

Participants leaving Step Ahead tended to go into shared accommodation with friends or family or into subsidised community housing accessed with the assistance of Step Ahead. Community housing was the stepping stone out of the program for one third of the sample, although many in community housing found that their neighbours presented security concerns.

At the time of interview, 19 participants (n=27) found their present accommodation suitable and affordable but around one third, mostly in subsidised accommodation, found it unsuitable, usually for security reasons. They had typically been quite mobile between properties and tenure types and nearly half faced moving from their present accommodation in the coming six months. Their housing choices were often governed by financial and family considerations, some having made difficult compromises by leaving areas close to friends and connections. Some had moved frequently and were in circumstances of insecure tenure with little connection to their local area.

Step Ahead as home

Security of tenure

Experiencing security of tenure relates to the type and expected duration of tenure, affordability and feelings of confidence that the legal and personal relationships underpinning the tenure are stable and predictable. Participants unanimously appreciated the security of tenure offered by Step Ahead after a period of homelessness, many mentioning it as the main benefit of the program.

For Trish, the move to Step Ahead was an opportunity to escape from a risky environment.

Well I had just recently broke up with my fiancé and I don't have a family to fall back on or anything like that so I was pretty much backpacking in Melbourne, like yeah, fun and sleeping on friends couches and stuff. I mean a lot of people who would allow me to go stay there were mainly half house people, you know took drugs and did this so getting, going into there ... it kept me, I was able to keep away from everything. (Trish)

This was especially the case for overseas born participants. Retta explained:

You come to new country, you know, when I come here in Australia I don't know anyone here, you know. So it's a lot of problem because I can't find house, accommodation, you know ... I don't have that problem when I moved to Melbourne Citymission ... I don't know about Australia. Even at that time, you know. I don't think anything, you know. Just I went to terrible house, that's it, that accommodation first ... You know things with time, you know, after time but before I don't know anything. (Retta)

Ayub explained the desperation of homelessness, and that the lack of somewhere to stay is debilitating:

This is really, really, like this is the most frustrating moment for somebody. You don't know where you're going to - it's a such a big issue. People don't realise where, it's like people don't realise importance of it. You don't know where you're going to sleep next night so it's like it destroys everything. You can't concentrate, you can't do anything and one night you can maybe, one night you can stay at the Macca's but next night your body would be exhausted. You can't. I had no option. (Ayub)

Sean put it bluntly: '[if] I hadn't have had that place [Step Ahead accommodation] to actually live then I would've been fairly fucked because I didn't have the choice of going home.'

Michelle explained that Step Ahead gave her a previously unknown sense of financial certainty because her accommodation had a fixed rent price and her tenure there was secure. This certainty assisted her to budget more effectively.

Location

Participants were generally very appreciative of the location of their Step Ahead accommodation. Lion Garden residents Giles, Elaine and Zichan appreciated the pace and vitality of the city centre. They loved 'that you could walk everywhere to get something', 'the coolness factor' and 'the fast pace'. Zichan described it as 'lavish for a person on Centrelink' and for Giles, school was 'a stone's throw away'.

Leanne had always wanted to live in the suburb where her THM property was located. Having the opportunity to do so made her 'really comfortable and relaxed', and she continued to live in the area after leaving Step Ahead. Michelle, also in a THM property, connected with her area through school and work and stayed there after she left the program.

In some instances, participants said that their environment affected their self image and aspirations. For Giles, living in the city 'encouraged me more to move onto the next transition.' He recalled that:

You're in this atmosphere where you're waking up in the morning and everyone's bustling getting ready for work and going to work and ... listening to the bustling night life ... that did I think mature me a lot more. Because while some guys were sitting there focusing on what we're going to with the schoolies end of year, I'm thinking about man I want to be at university. (Giles)

Zichan's place in the city made him 'feel a bit valued ... within the community' and gave him a 'platform to be a bit more outgoing because ... people saw it as oh wow, you know, you've got a nice place in the city, they thought of you as, you know, someone with status.' This can be contrasted to his previous experience:

I just didn't have a secure location and like I don't usually talk about things to people but I, it was like that bad I was couch surfing and I ended up living with a person who was alleged to have been involved with child pornography. I was seventeen at that time and so I was an easy target. I had nowhere to go. I was like hey, it's [a] room ... over my head ... If he's like that so be it. At least I'm not living on the streets. (Zichan)

Safety

Feeling safe at home requires a low risk of loss or damage to personal property and the absence of threat to physical and emotional wellbeing. The range of experiences reported at Step Ahead span from high feelings of security through to the need to flee from threat.

A feeling of physical security and safety was reported by Lion Garden resident Aber and THM residents Ayan and Abrinet.

In a THM property, safety was connected to the relationship with a housemate, as Ayan explains.

Being in a safe environment. Like, you know, I had the accommodation and I was with a person that I knew. Step Ahead what they did was the person that we were sharing house, we got to know each other before we moved in together and she was such a nice person to be around and you know, share the house with. So it was really the safe side of it, yeah. (Ayan)

In Lion Garden, security was more about physical barriers from the street.

The security was tight and that was really good. (Aber)

On the other hand, Ulla, Giles and Zichan reported incidents that eroded their sense of security. Ulla reported to her worker that she had been assaulted by the guest of another resident.

I actually had to go, move into a refuge because I was assaulted at the time and I had to move out straight away. That was why I had to move out of the program. I just thought that they were still there in a way ... It was within another resident's home. But it wasn't the resident themselves, it was a friend of theirs and they didn't think that that person was capable of doing such a thing. (Ulla)

Ulla was satisfied with the program's response to the incident, 'they took it very seriously', but she had to move out because a 'sense of security there kind of got lost.' Apart from the immediate trauma, Ulla said that the incident affected her year 12 marks and her relationship with men: 'I'm very scared of men' she said.

A number of participants remembered a situation in which Mathew was robbed by two fellow residents. Mathew recounted the story first hand.

I went downstairs once to visit my uncle ... he goes it'll just be five minutes. So I left the door open and five minutes turned into an hour ... then ... two ... tenants ... came down, stumbling, they were clearly drunk, carrying all these DVDs, as much as they could carry in their hands. ... I walked up back to my house like ten minutes later with this massive hole in my, where I had like two hundred DVDs against the wall and like at least fifty of them are gone. I'd realised yeah, they'd took them.(Mathew)

Although Mathew was satisfied with the program's response, the incident changed his attitude: 'after that I was pretty shut off and didn't want to go to any more movies'. The incident affected other residents too. After the incident Giles remembered that he 'just got more nervous', 'you just couldn't feel comfortable in that actual unit.' He remembered thinking 'you always have that slight little like inkling in the background oh well, how much can you trust who you're living with.'

Zichan recalled a time when he left 'computer gadgets in the communal area ... and somebody took them'.

Program Requirements

Participation in Step Ahead is conditional upon a number of program 'Expectations'. These are expressed in an initial contract signed by participants, a Residents' Handbook provided to clients upon entry, and a tenancy agreement with the property managers. These expectations include:

- participation in education, employment and training activities;
- participation in programmed appointments for recreation, house meetings, life skills, and case management;
- not copying or lending keys to anyone;
- staying in touch with workers and keeping them up to date with life events; and
- restrictions on hosting regular guests, particularly overnight.

For some, the obligatory elements of the program created a sense of anxiety. While most program clients understood the rationale for the rules and adhered, some were unable, or steadfastly unwilling to meet all of these obligations, presenting a dilemma to program workers and managers: risk erosion of program integrity or force their clients into a new cycle of instability, vulnerability and even homelessness. The compromise was a system of warnings and sanctions with the client ultimately being required to leave their accommodation if problems persisted.

Two overseas born clients, Abrinet and Ayub were not initially at ease with the obligatory education, employment and training participation. Abrinet reflected:

You can't stay for the day. Like you have to go look for a job or either you have to be student and like go to school but you just don't go - like the day you just, you don't spend the day there, even if you don't have anything to do but you have to be out there and do something. I think that was a bit strong thing for that time. (Abrinet)

After a period of rough sleeping and homelessness, Ayub placed a very high value on the security of tenure offered through Step Ahead, but with his education, employment and training participation becoming erratic due to mental illness, he was intimidated by the program obligations. 'I was not happy initially. I felt really terrified always because I felt that they going to expel me of the housing.'

Ayub recalled that, early in the program, miscommunication and misunderstanding with his worker created anxiety that management would get 'the wrong image of me', which could in turn undermine his tenancy. After a change of worker, Ayub stayed in Step Ahead accommodation for two and a half years and received aftercare support for a further year. His case notes document that during this time he achieved progress across a range of life domains. He stabilised his mental health, enrolled in University, accepted his sexual orientation, visited his family in Pakistan, moved into independent accommodation and began a relationship.

Mathew was deeply at odds with his obligations as a Step Ahead client, eventually being required to leave for non-participation. He observed:

Everything is compulsory ... for such a sort of helpful place ... you had to do this, this or this or you got the boot. You got three warnings and then they ask you to leave, which happened to me. I got kicked out. ... everyone who lives there is homeless so to bring people in and then say you have to do this, this or this or we're going to kick you out, it's a bit stupid, backwards. Rather than help you with whatever, because I'm sure, you know, they're not doing it to spite whoever's running it. 'I'm not going to go to school, you know, just to stick it up you' ... That's probably why I'm so negative towards it. It was just a joke. Every week you had to go there and do this forced stupid contrived plan of what you wanted to do for the week and it got so pointless and so stupid to the point where my goal was, I wrote, my goal is to come back here next week and do the same plan next week. Every week. (Mathew)

Restrictions apply to Step Ahead residents' hosting of guests in their accommodation, particularly regular overnight guests, lending keys or leaving guests unattended and engaging in activities likely to disturb co-tenants or neighbours. Case notes document that among Lion Garden residents, six of the fourteen, or just under half of clients experienced some difficulty in abiding by these rules. Among THM residents the incidence was much lower, with two of the twelve for whom valid information was collected.

Three interview participants mentioned restrictions on their hosting of regular guests, particularly overnight. Gordon negotiated with his workers about his girlfriend's visits, evidently reaching an amicable resolution. 'I had a girlfriend ... she wanted to move in ... She had her mum's to live at as well ... I talked to them [workers] about it ... She wasn't really allowed to live there but the youth workers learnt to accept that she was there for a good time, good block.'

While she was living in Lion Garden, Tara's mother began staying there regularly. Case notes suggest that she was disruptive to Tara and other residents. Tara told workers that she had been harassed by an acquaintance and was experiencing fear and anxiety on her own. The issue escalated after repeated requests and warnings from program staff were disregarded by Tara and her mother. Tara recalled:

My mum was staying around and they didn't like it and they were going to kick me out for it and they made me stay in a refuge for a month because my mum was staying over and then they banned her and I told them about the situation and they didn't care ... you can't tell people what, when and not to see other people and all that sort of stuff. I think with my experience of being around these programs and all that sort of stuff, I think like they're trying to be like a family situation but they're not really because like they're trying to tell you not to bring people and all that sort of stuff and I think well if I was in the situation where I had my own kids or if I was in a real life family situation you wouldn't tell your kids not to bring whoever or whatever so it's kind of, you know, weird and all that sort of stuff. (Tara)

Case notes record a number of instances of Amanda being counselled after hosting guests. Concerns were first raised by another tenant after a friend of Amanda's visited late at night to borrow money. A formal warning was issued after she gave keys to her boyfriend. A second formal warning was issued after an intoxicated guest she was hosting became abusive and had to be physically removed by another Lion Garden resident. Amanda was unable to accept that the sanction for this final incident was an indefinite ban on hosting guests at Lion Garden. She explained:

I got into trouble one time. Silly mistake. I take full responsibility for it but I think the sentence that they gave me was quite harsh. They wouldn't let me have anyone over indefinitely ... knowing my underlying issues, the main issue was isolation and that was

driving, that was the full force of bringing me down emotionally... and didn't feel they were addressing that emotional need that I came to them originally about. (Amanda)

Amanda reflected on her choices in the program and the broader theme of supporting 'broken' young people:

I've just been battered for so long but I'm free now and then all of a sudden you go into these programs and they're like, you know, these are your responsibilities and expectations but the thing is your mind can't get around responsibility ... yet because you're not stable, if that makes sense. I'm not saying they shouldn't ... have rules and regulations. Every place should have boundaries, every place should tell you how you should act or what you should do but I think, I think what they need to understand, or people need to understand is that when someone's unstable how can you expect an unstable person to be fully responsible for things when they don't even know how to love themselves or look after themselves, you know what I mean? There's that extra - you've got to have that extra empathy for them because they're not functioning normally. They're like I said, they're broken people, you know, you need extra patience for them. I just, yeah, I think they - I didn't get that I guess at the Step Ahead program towards the end.(Amanda)

It is important to note that the above comments about the guest rules and other obligatory elements of the program disproportionately represent those who struggled with them. Analysis of the coding sources reveals that participants who were required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program expectations and those who were not participating in education, employment and training at the time of interview were more likely to mention the program rules than others. Perhaps this is because participants who made acceptable decisions about guests and were inclined towards participation did not tend to experience the same sense of compulsion from obligatory elements of the program, so rules were less prominent in their recollections and comments.

As a counterpoint to the negative comments regarding guest rules and obligations, a number of participants recalled that the program allowed them previously unknown freedoms and opportunities. Elaine and Giles both recalled 'a lot of freedom'. Leanne observed:

They were really lenient with a lot of things. They gave me a go rather than just kicking me out which I was used to because previous places I was in, I was smoking marijuana then so it's different again because that makes you aggressive and I was kicked out of a lot of places before then, they're just like no tolerance pretty much. What is it? Two weeks' notice and you're out and they don't really organise anywhere else for you to go or anything. But at this place they tried to make sure I had somewhere to go and all that sort of stuff. They're a lot more supportive. A lot more.(Leanne)

Other people in the home

Having an element of control in the coming and going of other people within the home is vital to ontological security. Expressing connection with others by hosting them, or enforcing a distance between oneself and others by excluding them, allows a home to be a place of intimacy, security and self expression.

At some stage during the interview, most participants commented on the benefits and/or pitfalls of sharing or living alone in Step Ahead accommodation. Transcripts reveal a diversity of experiences in both realms, but the most common theme was the downside of sharing. Case notes recorded that, of the twelve THM based clients for whom this information was available, eight, or two thirds, experienced significant conflict with their co-tenants.

Sean, Leanne and Penina mentioned the difficulty of negotiating cultural differences with their housemate.

The dynamic that we had in the household exacerbated the problems that I had ... Yeah, I was living with one other guy. And we had like very different reasons for being in there. He was, I mean, we barely spoke the two years that we lived together ... it was not a good feeling like in the house. He was a refugee and we gave it a go to begin with. I mean, we had a couple of days where we had a bit of a drink and chatted and stuff and swapped stories of our lives and his was much more dramatic. Like he's, you know, quite a life. Not a good one. But there was enough of a gap between our personalities that made it and between our English comprehension ability to make it next to impossible to get a - I mean, to sum it up I'd walk in the house, I'd say how you going, he'd say good, how are you, I'd say good and we were both lying and then I'd go to my room which I set up as a house within a house. Like I had a bar fridge and a television and a couch and that and then we wouldn't see each other again. And that didn't change much. (Sean)

She was from a different country as well. I think we tried to get along but we're just two very different people. I was a bit of a party animal back then and she sort of was very quiet and yeah, we just didn't get along.(Leanne)

She wasn't sleeping at night. I was Christian, she was Muslim and she wasn't sleeping at night. Every like night time she's awake and I was working so I need to sleep ... She wasn't doing nothing. She wasn't going to school, she wasn't working, she was sleeping all day and at night she's awake so it was hard for me. (Penina)

I think they[her housemates] were all just looking for something different ... I think that's the hardest thing about something like Step Ahead, is matching people together.(Michelle)

For Chris and Sean, the challenges went beyond discomfort with cultural differences and into feelings of violation and being unsafe. Chris said that his housemate used drugs, was stealing from him and had trouble with hygiene and cleanliness. Sean's room was broken into and he suspected that one of his housemate's friends was the culprit. On another occasion three of his housemate's friends 'went around the back of our house and like peeped through my window while I was with a girl having sex'.

Steven and Yusuf had bad experiences of sharing bills. Some time after leaving Step Ahead, Yusuf discovered that he had a bad credit when applying for a mortgage. His record was blemished after the new tenants in his Step Ahead accommodation continued using his name on utility bills without paying. Steven had trouble establishing good will in financial dealings with his housemate:

He used me. He's not like stealing ... [he] said to me we can have home phone and internet at home and I say oh yeah ... I said okay, you sign the contract for forty-five dollar and I will come back and give you half of the money. When they come back he signed the contract ninety-nine dollar. I said hey man, why did you do this for? He say we have unlimited calls ... So he start complaining like maybe you should, have shower too much. I say man, we don't have like water bill, we don't pay water. He say how about the gas ... So a lot of argue.(Steven)

A number of participants remembered seeking the assistance of their worker in negotiating with housemates. Case notes document that typically, conflicting housemates participated in house meetings supported by a worker to resolve the issues.

Although disappointed about the worker response, Penina was accommodating: 'they call her for meeting and they tell her not to, you know, but nothing changed really. But I just let it go. I turn my music on and slept. But I couldn't do anything about it.' Chris and Sean both felt disenfranchised by the program after they reported their problems and were not satisfied by the response. After that, Chris 'didn't want to be part of the program' and felt 'they didn't want me in there.' Sean said his worker 'didn't try enough in my opinion with the thing with the sex basically.'

Like all that happened is the guy that I was living with was given a warning and told not to have those people come back again but he did have one of those people come back continually after that ... I just think it would've been better if were separated when that happened because that, after that, I mean, I don't even think we spoke after that really. We both hated each other after that!(Sean)

Aden had a better experience after reporting problems to his worker:

Because that other young person had a lot of party activities going at that time so we didn't suit each other so I kind of, my social worker told him that he was going to move onto another place which was more appropriate for him. So and after that I was on my own for a couple of months and then, yes, they brought in another person. So yeah, that person was well good. There was no problems there. (Aden)

Michelle complained that there seemed to be issues with the confidentiality of her complaints 'because a lot of the time if I had a problem I'd go to a worker and the other person would know.' On the other hand, Ayan and Ayub had good memories of sharing. Ayan felt 'safe' with her housemate, 'such a nice person to be around and ... share the house with' and appreciated the opportunity to get to know her before they moved in. Ayub considered himself 'lucky' because his housemate did not steal and 'I didn't have any problems with him'.

Trish, Retta, and Yusuf understood their sharing experiences as opportunities for learning and growth. For Trish, it was the 'main thing' she learned at Step Ahead, for Retta, whose housemate was a 'really nice person', it was learning a 'new kind of living'. Yusuf said sharing was 'hard', but 'it gave me a good experience and just make me more flexible'.

Vanida and Leanne both had bad experiences of sharing in the past and were glad for the opportunity to live alone. Vanida said: that it 'really meant a lot to me that I could have a place for three years, on my own'. 'I just had that place which was one thing I was sure of.' Leanne said:

I wasn't as depressed when I moved into the Step Ahead... because I found it hard living with other people... because of the drugs ... in the youth housing... people don't care about cleaning their house. They spill bong water all over the carpet, you know, the carpets are dirty, you can't sit on the floor because it's yuck and moving into this place the carpets were nice and the place had been well looked after and I felt finally like I had a home, not just somewhere to stay. (Leanne)

Other participants mentioned some downsides of living alone. Zach reported

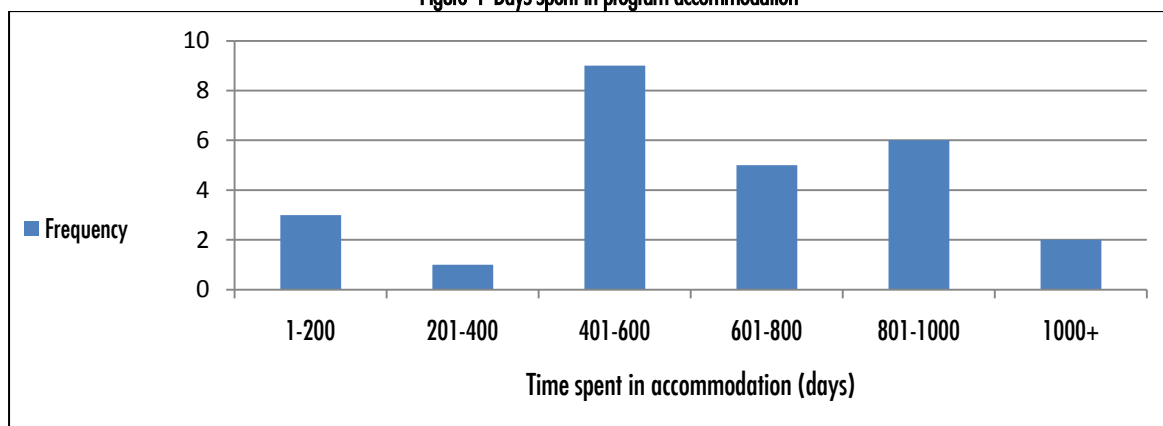
Being in the middle of the city in a little apartment on your own you get quite lonely and you're willing to let just about anyone in your front door and you know, get in trouble. (Zach)

Mathew, who has a problem with obesity, found that his food habits deteriorated after ceasing to share cooking and shopping duties. Shahla and Tara spoke of their loneliness. Gordon, who had moved into the program from statutory care, also longed for more connection with others: 'I felt a bit isolated ... because everyone was doing their own thing and they didn't have the time of day for me.' Giles lived alone in Step Ahead but shared later and would have liked to learn about it while in the program. Despite his difficulties sharing, Sean said he 'would have killed himself' if he lived alone.

Exit

Step Ahead clients are eligible to spend up to three years, or 1095 days in the supported accommodation offered by the program, however many left before this time. Of the 26 research participants for whom the dates were available, 50% left before their 600th day. The average time spent was 596 days or 1.6 years. The shortest stay was 39 days and the longest was 1235 days or 3.4 years. Only one participant exceeded the 3 year timeframe. Figure 4 shows the amount of time spent in program accommodation by numbers of clients in 200 day intervals.

Figure 4- Days spent in program accommodation



With an average 590 days in program accommodation, THM residents tended to have about the same length of stays at Step Ahead as Lion Garden residents, who stayed for an average of 602 days.

Participants reported a broad range of experiences at the time of their leaving Step Ahead. These experiences can be broadly categorized as *graduating, leaving of their own accord, requiring different care* and *required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program expectations*. Analysis of individual cases reveals that many young people moved out for a combination of reasons, often blurring distinctions between these types. The experiences of some participants have been used in the following section to illustrate the range of exiting experiences.

Graduating

About half the participants reported being asked to move out of their Step Ahead accommodation because their time had expired or they were ready for independence. Some were happy to move on, others were not.

Yusuf 'was ready' and 'had to find his own way' after three and a half years with the program. He had finished high school and had a job when he independently found a rental property. Workers provided a rental reference, but Yusuf refused their offer of help to move and purchase household items: 'I was working so pretty much I had, I just bought my own things', he said.

Before he moved into a community housing unit, Giles remembers his workers saying:

'we're not forcing you but we've felt like you've pretty much completed the program'. It was never like a 'see you later', it was like 'well the option is here if you want it'. So I decided to take it because I was like the same, I felt like yeah, I think I've benefited enough in this as it is and time to move on I guess.(Giles)

Vanida and Retta were neutral about their move. Vanida had been with the program nearly three years and was doing her first exam in year 12 when she was advised by her worker that a vacancy with Melbourne Affordable Housing had come up. She took the vacancy and chose not to access the after-care support available. The timing of this move seems insensitive and motivated more by the availability of the community housing than the needs of the client. If a larger pool of affordable housing options were available, this situation may not have been necessary. Approaching 25 years old, Retta had 'aged out' of Step Ahead and moved into community housing organised through his worker briefly before moving out of Melbourne to study.

Aber had been in the program a little more than two years when she moved into community housing. She did not mention whether she was comfortable with the move or not, but simply explained that she moved to community housing and received aftercare for six months. 'They check on you and all that but after a while, maybe six, seven months, one year they leave you.' Aber explained that if she still had the opportunity to access after care, 'I would love it, I still would'.

Penina would have preferred to stay longer. She was 25 years old when asked to leave because of her age, but did so reluctantly because 'I wanted to get home, I wanted to do all these groups and stuff'. Penina was working and was able to move in with her cousin. Penina reflects that afterwards, 'I proud of just look after myself'.

Shahla reported that she and her sister had been at Step Ahead for just over two years and were approached to move out of the program at short notice. 'They said you girls look like you're in a good position' she remembered. Shahla said 'we would have loved to go through to [individual] private rental' but they found that it was too expensive and decided to share a room together in a friend's house. Shahla explained that the move caused significant stress to both girls, who were studying and without work. They struggled to pay the increased rent, 'we couldn't afford it' she said. Shahla said it was unfair that they were moved on. 'I think the time period should just depend on ... circumstances and individuals', she said.

Ulla left the program twice, initially returning to family in another capital city after an incident at Lion Garden, and subsequently after overstaying the six months of Step Ahead accommodation granted to her upon her return to Melbourne. Ulla remembered that:

I actually had nowhere to move to and I don't think they were quite happy about that. During that time I saved up money to move out, as a bond and I lost my bond money ... They said 'yeah, two weeks, if you don't find a place we'll have to take you to court'. (Ulla)

With the help of a former youth worker, Ulla found a place in a women's refuge.

Leaving of their own accord

Four participants left of their own accord. Although she did not speak about it in the interview, Ayan's case notes record that she moved back with family after they withheld their support for her to marry her boyfriend unless she returned to live with them.

Although he did not mention his exit from the program in the interview, Aden's case notes record that with the assistance of his worker, he started looking for alternative accommodation after he had been with the program for two years. At this time Aden began falling into rental arrears. Aden's worker found his property abandoned after he had been with the program a little more than two and half years.

Requiring different care

Some participants were exited from the program because of their care needs. Zach reflected that his life was dominated by issues that were:

... completely outside the program ... mainly drug and alcohol issues and sort of like emotional issues ... I probably should've asked for help sooner but the help was there if I wanted to go and ask for it, but the thing is in that kind of situation people can't come and ask you, you've got to go and sort of seek it yourself. (Zach)

Zach 'was pretty bad on like prescription pills' and after a 'drug induced psychosis' he 'ended up in a psych ward'. Sean remembered: 'I started cutting myself quite regularly and yeah, it was always on my leg and then one night I got drunk and it was on my arm and then I called my psychiatrist and I went into hospital for about two months.' Gordon remembered being asked to leave 'because I was caught at Lion Garden smoking dope and drinking up all the time'. 'They sent me to a rehabilitation program' he said, where he lived for 'eight, nine months'.

Each of these participants reflected that they were not able to make the most of their time at Step Ahead:

Everything that any sort of tenant there could want is there, they've just got to sort of seek it out ... I don't know if I was able to participate in the program as well as I could have ... I probably could've taken better advantage of the situation, it wasn't like a really great time in my life. (Zach)

Before I went into the Lion Garden through residential units and that was like depressive, real depressive because I had no parents fucking showing up at the door man. That's what pissed me off real hard man. And I brang that along with me to Lion Garden and that's what I regret. (Gordon)

I think that this program works a lot better for... helping people engage in society and for me I didn't want to engage ... So I think I needed something different to this service. I think I was mismatched and if I had have been in a better place then I would've realised that but I didn't do anything. But yeah, I just drank heaps basically and I was pretty happy getting more and more stuck in it, into depression basically. I think I was in the wrong program. (Sean)

Required to leave

Over one third (9) of the research participants (n=28) were required to leave their Step Ahead accommodation as a consequence of not meeting program requirements. This includes most of the participants who left requiring different care. Participants who were required to leave referred to their exit as an 'eviction'. According to the case notes, the reasons documented include:

- rent arrears (1);
- overstayed short term accommodation agreement (1);
- non-participation in education, employment and training (1);
- continued to host guests after several warnings not to do so (2);
- threatened co-tenant (1);
- non-participation in program (1);
- intoxicated in a communal space and upset another resident (1); and
- substance use, subletting room and non-engagement in program (1).

The average time spent in Step Ahead accommodation for those who were required to leave was 540 days, 87 days shorter than the average of 627 days for those exiting voluntarily.

Notably, Lion Garden residents were more likely to be required to leave than their THM counterparts and Australian born participants were more likely to be required to leave than those born overseas. Seven, or 50% of the Australian born clients (14) were required to leave, compared with two, or 13% of overseas born clients (15). Forty-three percent of Lion Garden residents and 21% of THM residents were required to leave.

Tara reported that 'the reason why I didn't stay with Step Ahead was because I wasn't, you know, doing training and education or anything like that.' After a brief stint in crisis accommodation, Tara moved into another supported accommodation program for young people. After two and a half years in Step Ahead, Mathew had not been able to engage with education or employment. He received a first warning after dropping out of high school. Mathew said he dropped out after having a number of difficulties. First he was upset by a large phone bill, 'I didn't even leave the house for like a week'. Then 'they still hadn't had my text books', and he was without an internet connection so he 'couldn't do any

homework'. He later attended a hospitality course but dropped out 'just because I didn't really want to go'. Mathew's third warning was for 'not participating in the activities they had'. Mathew remembered that the workers were 'trying to be nice and that' but 'when I got to that three, three point warning thing ... they were going to kick me out.[1] 'went back there and begged them to let me stay. And I'm like I'll do whatever, school, whatever'. After his appeals were unsuccessful, Mathew said 'I went and lived at my mate's two bedroom flat, with his flatmate'.

After breaching the payment plan for her rental arrears on several occasions, Leanne said:

I went in[to the tenancy manager] and I was maybe two hundred dollars short. I owed about six hundred dollars and I think I was a hundred and fifty, two hundred something like that short and she said to me it's at the point, they said to me if I didn't pay it like in a couple of days there were going to issue a notice to vacate and I said look I can only give you this and she said something about no you can't, it has to be all paid at once and yeah, so I didn't end up paying it because I didn't pay it all at once ... I ended up with this lovely police lady kicking me out of the house.(Leanne)

After asking around, Leanne found a shared rental property close to her work. Leanne recalled being 'really angry' about the circumstances of her exit. Leanne reflected that while at Step Ahead, she was in a 'reckless mode': 'I was partying a lot, taking a lot of drugs'. Leanne says that it was not until age 21, after she had left the program, that she 'really did pull my life together'. Leanne reflected that, in the meantime, '[my worker] was there to support me, she tried but when you're nineteen, twenty and you want to do what you want to do there's not a lot anyone else can do really'. Leanne observed that without the support of Step Ahead during this stage of her life, 'I might have stayed in that same spot for a little bit longer and not move forward as quickly.'

After conflicted relationships with a series of housemates in a THM property, Aheza sent an email to her worker explaining frustrations with her current co-tenant. Aheza reported that, in the email 'I said like I'm so frustrated that I feel like I can kill her. ... I was evicted within a day from that email and I had nowhere to go' she recalled. Her case notes record that Aheza found accommodation at a friend's place.

Despite being required to leave for violating guest rules, in circumstances that she felt were 'quite harsh', Amanda said:

I really appreciate the fact that they chose me and they gave me that place because I was staying in Lion Garden at the time and it was a really nice place and I'm grateful, ever so grateful for their help and for believing in me and seeing potential. (Amanda)

Amanda reflected more broadly on the experience of young people from troubled backgrounds.

Because a lot of people who get out of abusive backgrounds they don't have a sense of self because their boundaries are constantly stepped upon and so they're made to feel like they don't know themselves and they're just drifting apart. And at that time I was still finding myself and I think I wasn't quite sure with what I needed in terms of independence or what I was ready for. I think I just sort of jumped into things with an unstable mind set.(Amanda)

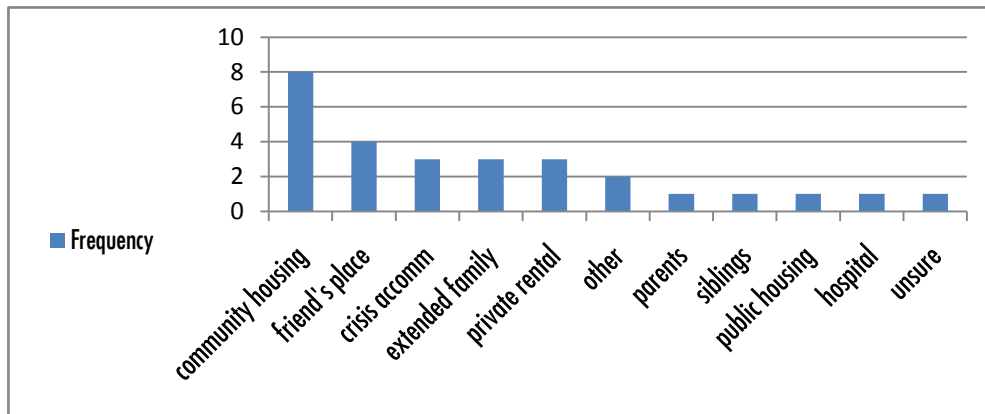
Housing after Step Ahead

Upon exiting Step Ahead, roughly a third moved into community housing, a third moved in with family and friends and a third went into other accommodation. Over the next two to three years the young people moved house every year or so. After this time, private rental was the dominant accommodation type, while community and public housing still accommodated around one third of the original group. Around 80% of participants had been living in their present accommodation for longer than 6 months and a similar number for less than two years. Security of tenure, safety, location, affordability, family considerations and relationships with co-tenants remained important themes for participants. The details of this journey and the diverse experiences of individual participants is the subject of this section.

Independently or with the assistance of workers, most participants found a suitable new home after moving out of Step Ahead. While independent private rental was commonly sought by participants, it was rarely an affordable option for exiters. Upon leaving Step Ahead, nine participants, nearly one third of the sample (n=29) moved in with friends or family, including parents (1), siblings (1), extended family (3), or a friend's place (4). The next most common option was community housing, accounting for eight participants. Strong interagency links between a major Melbourne provider and the Step Ahead program enabled this option. Other accommodation types for exiting participants were public housing (1), hospital (1), crisis accommodation (3) and private rental (3).

Figure 5 illustrates the frequency of accommodation types.

Figure 5 - Accommodation at time of exit



Each of the three who entered crisis accommodation were required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program expectations. Others who were required to leave moved into a friend's house (2), or private rental, community housing, hospital, or other accommodation (1 each). Of those who exited Step Ahead accommodation voluntarily (n=18), eight moved into community housing and an equal number moved in with friends or family members.

A number of participants were concerned about security in the community housing they occupied after Step Ahead. In his community housing apartment, Giles 'had a few issues with the neighbours. ... There was people suffering from different mental illnesses ...[and I] wasn't really equipped to deal with it' so he took up the option to move in with his brother. At the time of interview, Giles was living in a shared rental property without his brother.

Aber spent time living with her sister in a community housing property, which she found to be 'a little bit scary'. It was a 'normal house' where 'anyone can knock and scare'. She would have preferred the security of an apartment complex. Despite there being a 24 hour concierge for her apartment block, Aheza was somewhat concerned about safety in her community housing accommodation. 'The neighbours are a bit weird ... but it's all good because I really don't get to stay home that much anyway' she reported.

Chris mentioned that although his community housing apartment was 'very safe', there were problems in the building: 'one or two people are making it very unsafe', he said. Chris wanted to move out with his partner 'when she's ready'.

Other community housing residents were faring better. After leaving Step Ahead, Aheza rented privately for 'a long time' before moving to a city apartment provided by a community housing agency. 'It's great', she said of the property, and 'I can stay there for as long as I want'.

Since leaving Step Ahead, Zichan had lived in a series of properties provided by the same community housing provider. In one of these properties he shared with a number of other students, which he found difficult. Zichan was sharing his current accommodation with one other tenant, and was happy there. When asked how long he intended to stay there, he replied 'for the rest of my life', 'it's a nice place, it's cheap subsidised rent.' Zichan mentioned that he had an outstanding credit card debt and was concerned that legal proceedings could ensue 'if they find me'.

Location was an important characteristic of accommodation for a number of participants. Michelle was distressed when she learned that the housing she was to occupy after Step Ahead was to be in another part of Melbourne, rather than in the area she had lived while in the program. 'I love that area. And I would've done anything to stay there ... [I] cried the whole first night' she said. Michelle's accommodation is provided through another supported youth housing initiative. Although she rated her present accommodation as unsuitable, the rent was affordable and the landlord flexible with payments and Michelle did not feel immediately inclined to move back to her preferred location.

Moves since leaving Step Ahead

Since leaving Step Ahead, participants had lived in an average of three different properties, commonly moving between shared properties with siblings and friends and living alone, occupying properties provided privately, through the community, public or THM systems. The maximum

number of moves was seven, and five people had not moved again after exit from Step Ahead. The most common response was two properties, accounting for ten people.

Finances had a large bearing on participants' housing choices. Zichan, Shahla and Ayan spoke about financial difficulties at the time of interview. Ayan was living with a relative because it was affordable, but would prefer to live in her own apartment. Shahla was renting, balancing work and study and finding that finances remained an issue for her. Interview participants were asked to indicate if they could afford their current accommodation. All but two said they could (n=27).

For some participants, family circumstances were a factor in their housing choices. Some participants tried to move back in with their parents after leaving Step Ahead, usually with poor results. Aber did so after returning from travel overseas, having forgone her previous job and community housing tenancy. At the time of interview, Aber was still in public housing with her family and unfortunately the conflict was 'maybe even worse than before'. 'I had a huge fight with my family about religion', she said. 'With my family it's still ongoing, it's very depressing. They just jack at me anytime.' Aber was still living with her family in public housing at the time of interview.

After he was discharged from the psychiatric institution he moved into after Step Ahead, Zach moved in with his mother. 'After that I left there because we were arguing and like yeah, it was getting very heated. And I lived in Carlton in a refuge for about a month', he said.

Ulla returned to Sydney to live with her family after she first left Step Ahead, but soon returned to Melbourne after the relationship broke down. She contacted Step Ahead, where she was accommodated in a THM property for six months. After leaving Step Ahead (for the second time), Ulla spent time in crisis accommodation, a shared rental property, then couch surfing, at a boarding house and then a women's refuge, but recently has been finding herself 'in a lot of THM properties'. She wanted 'to get out there and just get my career sorted' and live in private rental like 'normal people do' but was 'scared of trying to find private rental because it's so expensive'.

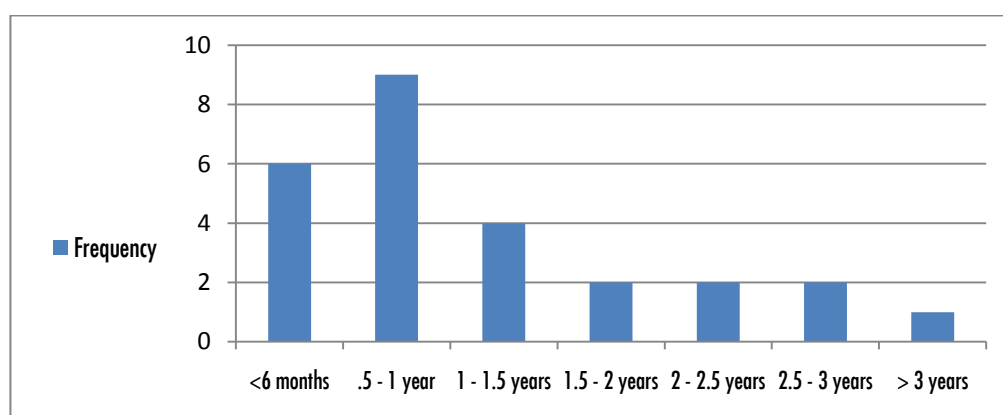
Time in present accommodation

Around 80% of participants had been living in their present accommodation for longer than six months, but few (20%) had been there for longer than two years. The shortest duration was three weeks and the longest was three years. The average duration was 420 days and the median was 1 year. Of those who had lived in their present accommodation for less than six months, three lived in private rental and one each lived with siblings, community housing and transitional housing/supported accommodation.

Those who had lived in their accommodation for one year or less had left the program an average of 954 days prior to the interview, compared to 966 days for those who had lived in their accommodation for longer than one year. This suggests that the figures for longevity in present accommodation were not greatly affected by the inclusion of those who had left the program recently.

Figure 6 illustrates the time respondents have spent in their present accommodation.

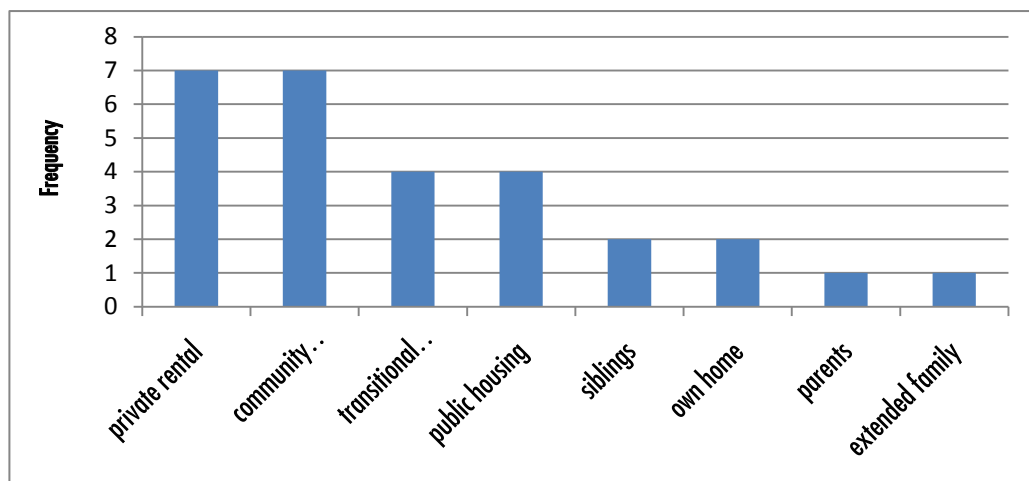
Figure 6 - Time spent in present accommodation



Living arrangements at time of interview

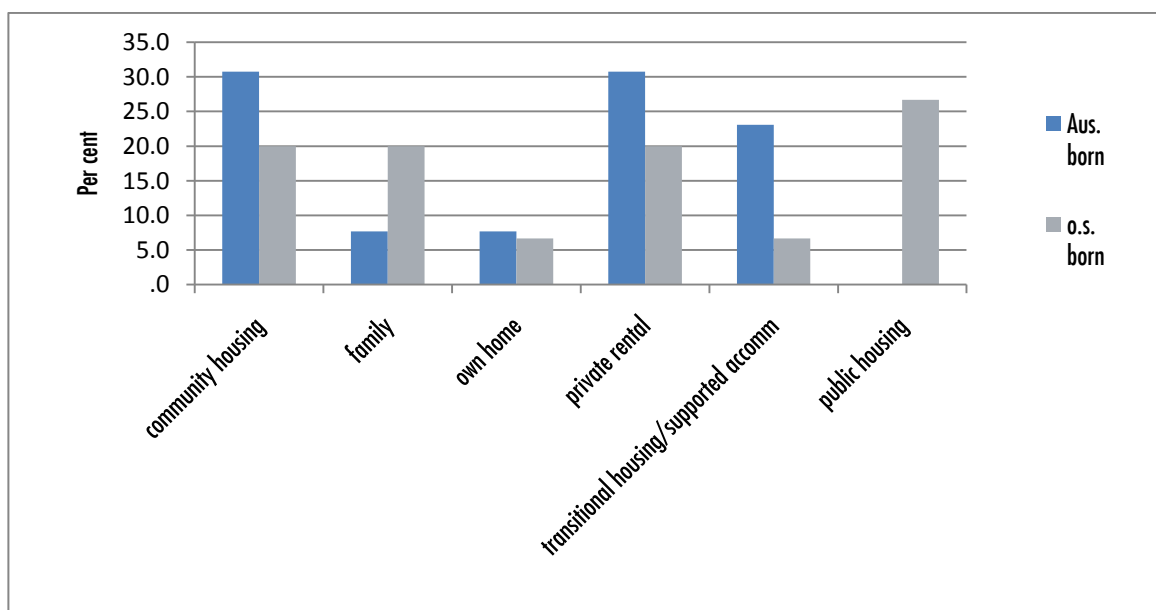
At the time of interview, an average of 2.7 years after exit from Step Ahead, private rental and community housing were the most common types of accommodation, each nominated by seven respondents. Four respondents lived with family and an equal number in public housing. Four respondents were still formally in the homeless population, living in transitional/supported accommodation, although one of these had secure ongoing accommodation with a specialist youth accommodation and support service. Two participants live in houses they are purchasing. Figure 7 illustrates the number of clients in various accommodation types.

Figure 7 - Current accommodation type



Overseas born participants were more likely to be living in public housing than their Australian born counterparts, who were more likely to be living in transitional accommodation. None of the Australian born were living in public housing and three were living in transitional accommodation, while four of their overseas born counterparts were in public housing, and one was in transitional accommodation. Figure 8 represents the present accommodation types of Australian and overseas born participants.

Figure 8 - Current accommodation type for Australian and overseas born



Mathew, who was born in Australia, was living in a transitional property, where he expected to stay until he was offered public housing. He was unsure where his property might be located but said 'I don't really mind where I live as long as it's close to some form of transport that isn't V-Line'.

Overseas born Abrinet moved from Step Ahead into a public housing property where she has lived since. She finds the property suitable and expects to stay there for a few more years. Fodia, another overseas born public housing tenant said she hoped to stay in her present accommodation 'for the rest of my life'.

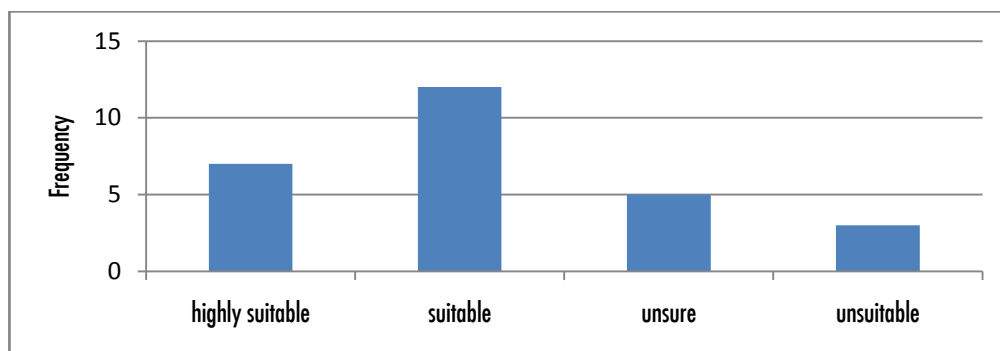
Family was an important consideration in housing choice for a number of participants. Four participants had become parents at the time of interview. Leanne lived in a rental property with her partner and child in what she described as an 'upmarket area'. 'It's a little bit hard some areas because a lot of people do sort of frown upon people who have kids early' she said.

Penina found that the location of her public housing property to be 'a bit crowded for the babies' and 'it's hard to find childcare, day care is really hard'. She reported that 'every time I go to park with my daughter I see needle on the floor' and has applied for a transfer within the public housing system. 'I don't mind, anywhere' she said of her preferred location.

Yusuf and Steven were fathers. Yusuf and his partner had bought a family home in the outer suburbs, but he was staying elsewhere at the time of interview, while Steven had made plans to travel overseas to visit his family and meet his one year old son for the first time. Elaine and her fiancé had bought a house and moved in together.

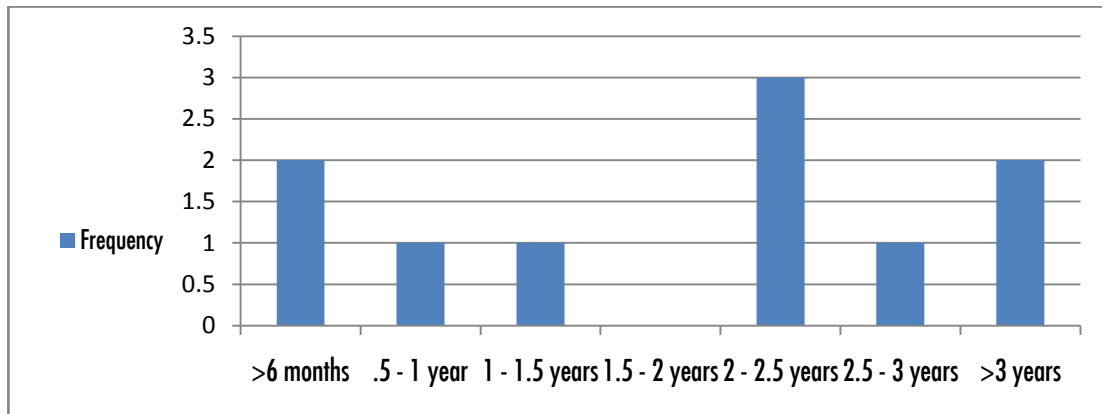
Interview participants (n=27) were asked to rate the suitability of their present accommodation on a four point scale. Seventy percent of the sample responded that their present accommodation was either suitable (44%) or highly suitable (26%), and 30% responded that they were unsure (19%) or that it was unsuitable (11%). Two, or half of the public housing tenants (n=4) found their accommodation to be unsuitable, while only one community housing tenant felt the same way (n=6). No private rental or THM tenants said that their accommodation was unsuitable, although 33% of renters (n=6) said that they were unsure about its suitability, as did 20% (n=5) of THM tenants. Figure 9 illustrates the responses

Figure 9 - Suitability of present living arrangements



When interview participants were asked how long they expected to stay in their present accommodation (n=27) most (15) gave non-numerical answers. Six of these were responses such as 'indefinitely', 'long term' or 'as long as I like', five indicated that they were unsure or that their tenancy was contingent upon external factors (such as the availability of public housing) and four indicated an intention to move soon. Of the numerical answers (n=10) the average and median was just over two years, the longest was six years and the shortest was 60 days. Figure 10 illustrates the frequency of time intervals for numerical figures given by clients.

Figure 10 - Expected tenure at current accommodation



Literature about homeless young people generally defines accommodation durations of less than six months as insecure housing. Of those giving a numerical answer to the question of expected duration, three expected to have to move out of their accommodation in six months or less. Adding this figure to those qualitatively expressing an intention to move soon or those who were unsure, a total of twelve, or just under half the sample were presently living in insecure accommodation.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Literature discussing youth homelessness is unanimous in finding that education participation and attainment is protective against homelessness and assists in establishing mainstream participation. It has been shown to develop self esteem and lay foundations for rewarding work in the future (Grace, Gronda & Coventry 2009). However, these findings do not diminish the array of challenges faced by those supporting homeless young people through education. Volatile relationships, money troubles and lack of resources, employment responsibilities, poor physical and mental health and identification with marginalised subcultures can all disrupt study. Clear identification of aspirations and aptitudes can be delayed by the necessities of survival in a world without fixed points of support. Without family support, a series of false starts amid the plethora of options can sap confidence and motivation. These challenges faced many Step Ahead participants and their workers. Their experiences, achievements and outcomes are the subject of the following section.

Summary

The overwhelming view of participants was that Step Ahead played an important enabling and supporting role in their education. Most participants completed some formal education during the program and more than half were studying at their time of exit. Most had completed some education in the time between leaving Step Ahead and the interview and 40% were still studying. All but one had moved past year 9 and more than half have completed VCE. Nearly half have completed some post school study. Compared with Victorians of a similar age, the Step Ahead sample appeared to be taking longer to complete their education, rather than missing out. When compared with other homeless young Victorians, Step Ahead participants had much higher attainment.

A number of participants reported that their ability to study was greatly improved outside the tensions of the family home or insecurities of homelessness. Participants reported a range of practical and financial supports to continue their education. This assistance enabled those who were engaged and motivated to achieve their specific goals. For others, the assistance and participation requirements of the Step Ahead program formed an effective incentive to re-energise their participation. They took the opportunity to explore different possibilities and discover their interests and aptitudes, often with a few false starts. A few struggled, achieving below their potential or cycling through a series of enrolments without fully engaging.

Many participants were distracted from study by other pressures. At times, workers assisted them to make decisions and prioritise different domains of their life. Travel to and from educational institutions was improved for some participants, but those who remained enrolled at their previous institutions were sometimes burdened with long commuting journeys.

Study in Step Ahead

As a youth foyer, participation in education, training or work is a program requirement of the Step Ahead program. Case files documented that this remained a focus for workers and clients during and after the program: 23 of the 29 case files reviewed documented a high or medium level of support provided in this area. Fifteen of the 16 participants for whom exit evaluations were available indicated that they had participated in education (school, TAFE, university and short courses) while in the program.

Some clients were disengaged from education at the time of entry and enrolled after joining the program, while others continued at their previous institutions.

Workers often assisted with finding appropriate courses and institutions for young people to attend, organising scholarships, bursaries and brokerage funds to cover expenses such as books, information technology, uniforms, transport, and tuition fees. Workers often liaised with educators regarding the welfare of their clients, negotiating their participation requirements and support needs. In some cases workers arranged additional tuition for clients, short courses and special access to learning facilities.

Sixteen participants spoke of their final years of high school while at Step Ahead and they all mentioned at least one way in which their schooling was assisted by the program. Nosrat, Michelle and Giles noted that their ability to study was greatly improved outside the tension of the family home. Living close to their school made Aden and Giles' daily trips more convenient. Elaine remained at her original school after moving into Lion Garden and had to travel outside the metropolitan area each day to attend.

Vanida, Aber, Zichan and Ulla mentioned support for their education through the purchase of uniforms, computers, textbooks or extra tuition. New migrants Penina and Steven were assisted by workers to identify a need to improve their English skills, and were enrolled in language classes. Aheza, Michelle, Aber and Penina said that they would not have passed without the support they received through the program.

Vanida spoke of the program's role in her return to school.

Even though I wasn't like all that excited about going to school at first, I still knew that like it's good for me to go to school ... Because at that time I had only the highest level of education was year nine so I would've been really screwed if I didn't keep going.
(Vanida)

The program was central in Aheza's decision to return to study.

I was staying in a youth refuge and they suggested that I do the Step Ahead program and then they told me if I do that course, the three days, that I would be able to get a house. So I did that and I was offered a place after that. (Aheza)

Gordon, Penina, Mathew and Steven were disengaged and started at a new institution after moving in, while Vanida, Abrinet, Sean, Elaine and Giles continued at their previous school after their entry into Step Ahead. Vanida and Abrinet reported that their attendance and engagement improved after moving into Step Ahead. Vanida entered the program in year 10 and was still in secondary college when she exited the program during year 12. At the time of interview she had been studying at University for two years.

Several participants spoke of attending University while staying at Step Ahead. Giles and Nosrat moved successfully from year 12 to undergraduate studies while living at Lion Garden. Nosrat remembered being upset when she received her year 12 score because it fell below the entry requirement for her chosen course. Her worker contacted a scholarship program and negotiated with the administrators. After doing a practice interview with the worker, Nosrat met with the University and was able to enrol in her chosen course. At the time of her interview for this research, Nosrat had graduated from this course and she reflected that without Step Ahead's assistance to enrol, she would not have had this opportunity.

A number of Step Ahead residents attended TAFE while in the program. These were mostly Australian born young people who had not finished year 12, or overseas born young people with English as a second language. Chris was working full time as a cook throughout most of his time at Step Ahead and re-engaged with hospitality studies before leaving the program. Gordon studied retail and attended a drama short course, but his attentions were evidently elsewhere at the time, 'I thought I was gangsta' he said. He did not complete either course, but said he gained some benefit from both.

Ayub completed a TAFE Diploma and Retta completed a TAFE Certificate while at Step Ahead. Later, they both went on to study at University. Ayub says:

If I was not here with the Melbourne Citymission or with Step Ahead I was not going to finish my degree, I was, I was not going to probably get a job, my life would have been different. So if tomorrow, if I become, if I'm a good company working and doing good job and have a car and house I will say it, the all credit goes to Melbourne Citymission and Step Ahead. It totally changed everything.
(Ayub)

Aden was sixteen when he moved into Step Ahead and 'simply wanted to get a job', so after attending a careers expo with his worker, he enrolled in a bricklaying pre-apprenticeship. After four months he realised 'it wasn't what I wanted to do' and left the course, finding a traineeship in warehousing instead. After doing a TAFE certificate, Aden later studied health services.

After Trish entered the program, she decided to study childcare. She finished her Certificate II and part of Certificate III. For her:

[Step Ahead] gave me the initiative to do it, so yeah I did know it but they gave me the initiative to do it and kind of put in perspective of how to do things as well ... it gave me help in mind space to get back on job, to get back on track to get a job and you know, stuff like that. They gave me the confidence to know how to do it. (Trish)

Not all the outcomes were positive: Gordon, Ulla, Mathew, Sean and Zach remembered their school attendance as poor. Mathew and Leanne quit before they completed. Zichan, Michelle and Ulla all finished high school, but they were disappointed with their marks. Each was unsure about their aspirations for the future and remembered being unsettled in the final years of school. Gordon said 'back then, I didn't really care much about what my future could hold for me.' Zach described his passing year 11 as 'a fluke ... real luck'. After that:

[I was] still having trouble with drugs and alcohol and stuff at that stage and I think ... I sort of came good for a while and wasn't doing anything like that and I was doing screen printing and then I went onto, I got a hairdressing scholarship but yeah, I didn't finish that so yeah, I went to school in a few different places ... the program definitely did sort of like facilitate that and wanted that to happen but at the same time it's sort of like it's the individual that has to apply themselves sort of thing and that just wasn't what I was doing.(Zach)

Having finished year 12 while in statutory care, Tara was newly enrolled at University when she moved into Step Ahead. Tara said she 'didn't fit in with university' and was 'going through a hard time'. She wasn't 'prepared for it' because 'the year 12 teachers don't tell you about it and it was kind of strange'. Tara dropped out of University to pursue other interests, but at the time of interview she intended to re-enrol in the coming year.

Some clients lacked motivation to pursue their studies or faced other internal barriers such as poor wellbeing, mental health problems or substance issues. Eighteen of the 29 case files reviewed documented difficulties in maintaining motivation to participate in some form of education, employment and training.

Many clients were unsure as to where their interest and aptitudes lay and partially attended a series of courses in which they did not fully engage. Many clients had their education interrupted to some degree by the financial necessity to find and keep employment. Some combined full-time education in the semester with work commitments on the weekend and holidays and were uncomfortably pressured by their schedule.

The level of education at the time of exit was established for 23 participants. Of the four who had completed education beyond school, one had a university degree, two had a trade or TAFE certificate and one had a TAFE diploma. Nineteen clients, or 80% of those for whom valid data was held had no post-school qualification at the time of exit. Of these, twelve had attained year 12, four had attained year 11 and three had attained no more than Year 10.

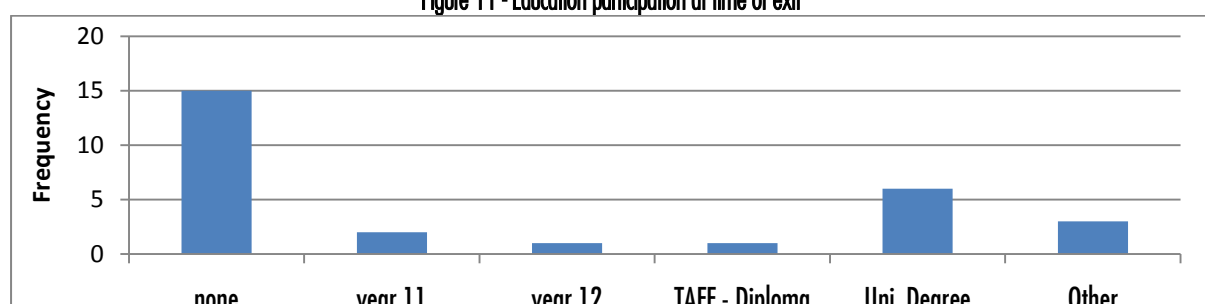
Eighteen of the 29 clients, or just over 60%, completed some formal education while in the program. This does not include those who participated for a period of time without completing their course. Seven clients progressed to finishing year 12 while in Step Ahead, while years 10 and 11 were each completed by two clients. Two completed a trade or TAFE qualification and one completed a university degree. Eleven clients did not complete any formal education while in the program. Four of these clients were working regularly during the program and four were studying at the time of their exit.

THM residents were less likely to complete education courses than Lion Garden residents. Seventy-one percent of Lion Garden residents completed some education during their time with the program, compared with 53% of THM residents. It is likely that this difference is due to the THM cohort being older and more educated when they entered the program. At the time of entry into the program, THM residents were on average four years older than Lion Garden residents, and 55% percent of them had completed year 12, compared with seven percent in Lion Garden. Despite their higher completion rates during the program, Lion Garden residents were still less educated than their THM counterparts at the time of exit, with 82% of THM residents having completed secondary school or further education, compared with 59% of Lion Garden residents.

Twelve of the 16 exit evaluations in the sample indicated that, on their own assessment, clients had improved or improved greatly in their education, employment and training capacity while in Step Ahead.

During their review of the case notes, researchers recorded any known education participation at the time of exit. Nearly half the participants were studying at the time of exit. Figure 11 shows the frequency of education participation types.

Figure 11 - Education participation at time of exit



Six were studying at University and three were pursuing their VCE. One was studying at TAFE and two at other institutions. Fifteen participants (n=28) were not participating in education at the time of their exit from the program.

Participation and attainment at the time of interview

During the interview, participants were asked about their current level of educational attainment. Comparing these responses with the education level documented in the case notes, we can identify whether participants have completed any education since leaving the program.

Of the 21 participants for whom valid data was available, twelve, or most had progressed their education since leaving Step Ahead and nine had not. Since leaving the program, Mathew had recently made another attempt at finishing year 12, but soon withdrew from his course:

I was on a diet and you know, I'd have one meal a day and the drawback, like it's a very strict diet basically lean meat and vegetables, so I woke up with like no energy. I went to like one week of classes and then the next week I was, you know, running late, I'd come home dead tired, wake up the same and yeah, so I chucked that in. (Mathew)

Chris had returned to complete his studies as a chef just before leaving Step Ahead, but had gone on to study Youth Work at university full time.

At the time of interview, all but one had moved past year 10 and more than half had completed their year 12. Nearly half had completed some post-school study, including seven at TAFE and two with university degrees.

Benchmarking education outcomes

Most Step Ahead participants improved their educational attainment during the program and afterwards. Nearly half the participants were still studying at the time of interview. These outcomes stand in stark contrast to those for other homeless young people, and education participation at the time of interview was greater than that of similarly aged Victorians, although the attainment was lower.

The gains made by Step Ahead participants can be demonstrated by comparing their levels of attainment at different points in time. Comparing the levels of attainment at their time of entry into the program, at the time of exit and at the time of interview reveals that significant progress has been made in the average timeframe of 4.3 years. Figure 12 illustrates the level of educational attainment at three points in time for all participants.

Figure 12 - Educational attainment at entry, exit and time of interview

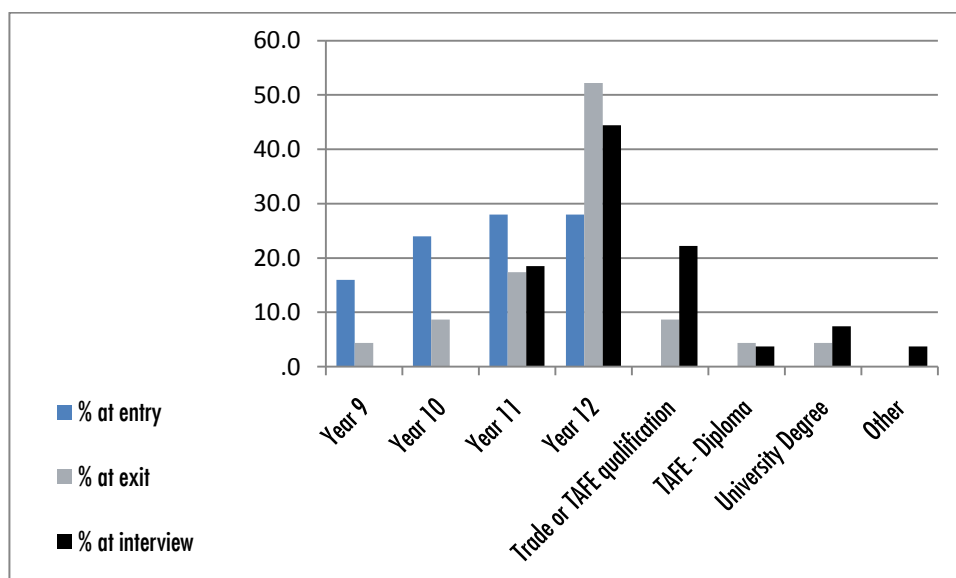
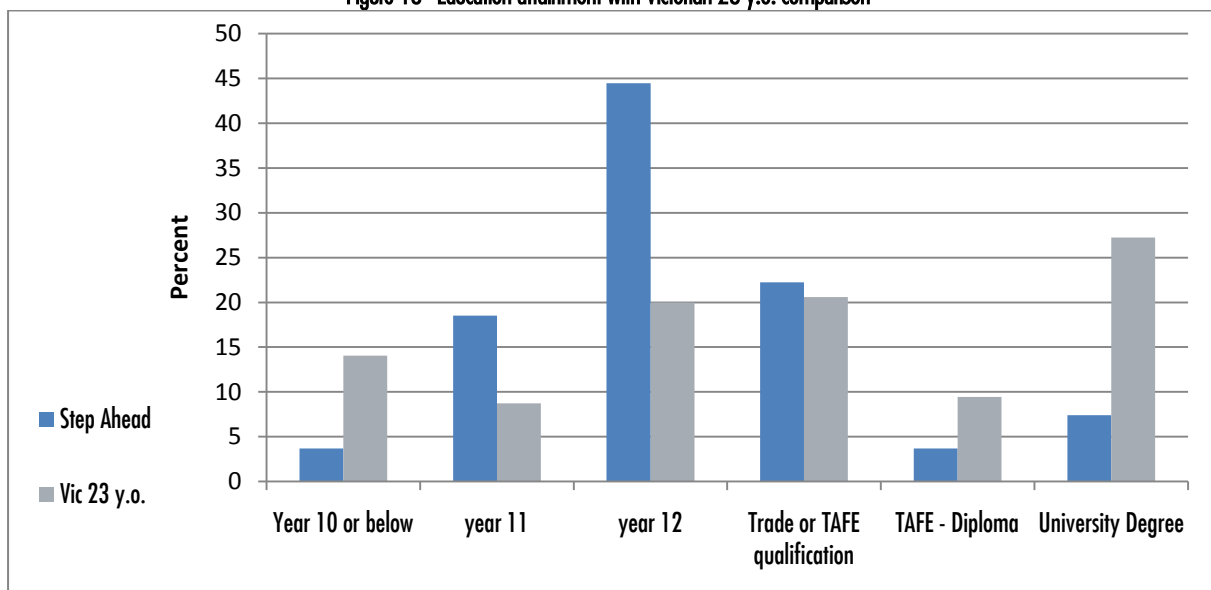


Figure 12 demonstrates that most participants increased their attainment while in the program, and most increased their attainment between the time of exit and interview. Just above one quarter had finished secondary school at the time of entry, while over 80% had completed secondary school at the time of interview. At the time of entry, no participants had post-school qualifications, compared with 37% at the time of interview. Nearly half were still actively studying at the time of interview. Twelve were currently in education or training and fifteen were not. Of those who were studying, eight were at University and four were at TAFE.

Comparison with other samples can establish a wider perspective in understanding the educational achievements of the Step Ahead program and its participants.

The first comparison employed here is with the education attainment of Victorians of a similar age from the 2006 ABS Census (the average age of the Step Ahead sample was 23 years at the time of interview). The proportion of Victorians and Step Ahead clients who had not completed year 12 was similar, but nearly four times as many Victorians had completed university. Data illustrating the highest level of education attained by the Step Ahead sample and Victorian 23 year olds is illustrated in Figure 13.

Figure 13 - Education attainment with Victorian 23 y.o. comparison



This data shows that the Step Ahead sample are much less likely to have completed University than Victorian 23 year olds, but participation data shows that more Step Ahead participants were still studying than their Victorian counterparts. In the 2006 Census (ABS), 72% of Victorian 23 year olds were not studying while 20% were studying at University and six percent were studying at a Technical and Further Education institution. In the sample for this study, 56% were not studying, 30% were at University and 15% were studying at a TAFE at the time of interview. Figure 14 illustrates participation for the two samples.

Figure 14 - Education Participation - Victorian 23 y.o. comparison

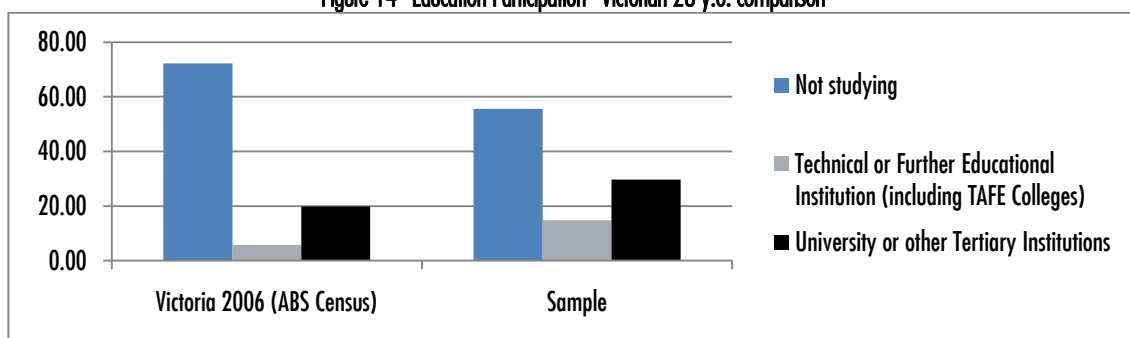


Figure 14 illustrates that at the time of interview, former Step Ahead clients were twice as likely to be studying at TAFE as Victorians of a similar age and, as proportions of their populations. The delayed educational participation and attainment of Step Ahead ex-clients must be seen in the

context of their lower levels of family support and the difficulties they experienced during their adolescence. Although they have progressed more slowly through the education system, considering the wider context, the Step Ahead sample appear to be pursuing their educational goals.

While benchmarking against all Victorians provides useful information, the comparison is problematic because of the barriers faced by young people affected by homelessness. A comparison of educational achievement with the other homeless young people provides another perspective on the achievements of the Step Ahead ex-residents. The only comparable data in relation to homeless young people comes from the YP⁴ trial of joined up services for homeless jobseekers (Grace, Batterham & Cornell 2006). Educational attainment figures for YP⁴ participants who received the joined up service (taken from Grace & Gill 2008) are represented in Figure 15 for comparison with Step Ahead.

Figure 15 - Education attainment - YP4 comparison

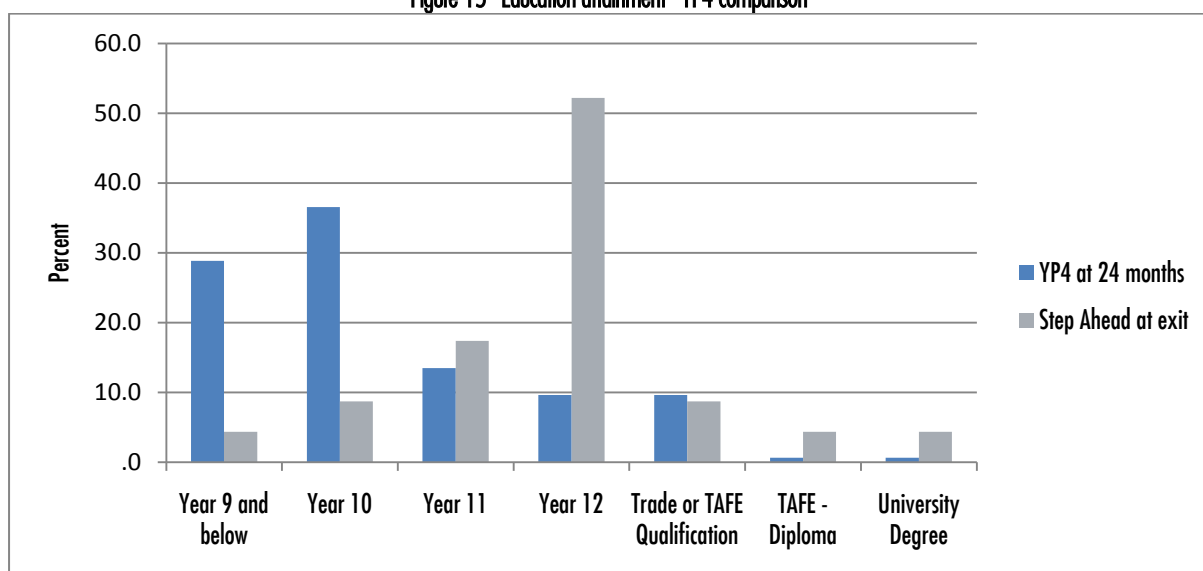


Figure 15 shows that Step Ahead clients at exit from the service had much higher levels of educational attainment than the YP⁴ group after 24 months with the trial. Seventy percent of Step Ahead participants had completed secondary school or attained post school qualifications, compared with 21% of YP⁴ participants. While this comparison shows Step Ahead clients to have higher educational achievement in comparison with another group of young people affected by homelessness, it should be noted that the two groups are quite different in some respects.

Step Ahead participants were aged 16 to 25 years and subject to an interview where staff 'assess the young person's commitment to independent living and the Step Ahead program' (MCM 2008, p.7). YP⁴ participants, on the other hand were jobseekers aged 18 to 35 and were not screened for commitment to education or employment. Step Ahead participants were more engaged in and inclined towards education than their YP⁴ counterparts, regardless of their participation in the Step Ahead program. This can be demonstrated with reference to Step Ahead participants' attainment at entry: more than half the Step Ahead participants had attained something above Year 10 at entry, compared with 35% of YP⁴ participants at exit (Grace, Batterham & Cornell 2006).

A further problem of comparability between YP⁴ and Step Ahead datasets is that of age. Age is an important factor when considering educational attainment because young people generally achieve higher levels of attainment as they progress through early adulthood. While the average age of the YP⁴ sample is not specifically given for the point in time their attainment was established, their average age at the time of recruitment to the program was 23 years (Grace, Batterham & Cornell 2006). Assuming uniformity of attrition from the sample across all age groups, their average age after 24 months in the program would be 25 years, three years older than Step Ahead participants' average age at exit (22 years) and five years older than Step Ahead participants at the time of entry (20 years).

In summary, Step Ahead participants had achieved strikingly higher educational attainment than YP⁴ participants, but were behind Victorians of a similar age. The high rate of ongoing participation for Step Ahead participants will bring them closer to the Victorian average as time goes on. Ultimately, neither comparison is ideal because the circumstances of Step Ahead participants were different in important ways. The only appropriate baseline comparison for Step Ahead attainment at the time of interview are the Step Ahead figures at entry to, and exit from the program. Comparison with both these baselines suggest that a clear majority of participants improved their attainment while with the program and continued to do so afterwards. The ongoing participation of nearly half the participants indicates that their attainment will continue to improve. These findings indicate that Step Ahead has achieved strong success in promoting the educational attainment of its clients.

WORK AND MONEY

Establishing meaningful and rewarding employment is a necessary step in a successful transition to adulthood and widely considered to be an important factor in overcoming homelessness. Apart from providing a secure income to pay for accommodation and other essentials, employment provides (mainstream) community connectedness and daily routines, personal development and self esteem (Grace, Gronda & Coventry 2009). At an age when many young Australians still receive significant financial and in-kind support from their parents, young homeless people are typically required to be more financially independent, having to make do with conditional and often erratic welfare payments and earnings from entry level employment. These severe financial constraints can cause ongoing stress and anxiety, limit access to necessary items such as food, clothing and household items and greatly curtail access to the cultural, educational and recreational spaces available to young people in a vibrant but expensive city such as Melbourne. The ex-Step Ahead residents' experience of these challenges is the subject of the following section.

Summary

Money was an ongoing concern for Step Ahead residents during their stay. Practical and financial assistance from workers was important to them, but did not change the reality of having to make do with a limited income. The fixed subsidised rent was an important source of stability for the participants, although the limited and insecure nature of their income sometimes left them short. In these instances, support from the program to negotiate with creditors and access emergency resources were a vital source of security for young people who may otherwise have faced more dire consequences.

Participants were strongly motivated to find employment, in most cases for financial reasons. The practical assistance they received from the program resulted in some people gaining employment after entering the program, and improving their skills and confidence in finding employment later in life. The program was not able to offer much in the way of direct contacts or networks leading to job opportunities and participants were required to search for work through 'cold' contacts. Tenuous commitment between employers and employees meant the task of finding and keeping suitable work was an ongoing effort for most participants

A few participants who were struggling with their mental health or other domains in their life found the prospect of employment too demanding and were not committed to maintaining employment during the program.

Since leaving the program, a number of participants have found more stable employment and were enjoying the financial benefits. In some cases this work has led to new personal connections, in others work got in the way of maintaining existing relationships. Some participants identify with their present work and see a future in it, others see their employment as a temporary means to an end and hope for higher skilled and more rewarding positions in the future. This is often a strong motivator behind further study. A number of participants articulated clear career goals for the future.

Some participants were without employment and struggling to find opportunities. Others were concentrating on family duties or study instead. About one in seven of the original group are disengaged from work and study, experiencing health problems and social isolation.

When compared with figures for Victorians of a comparable age, the research participants were much less likely to be employed. This suggests that many former Step Ahead clients have not successfully established secure and ongoing employment and that overall, there is room for improvement in establishing employment outcomes for Step Ahead clients. Partnerships with transitional labour market programs and social enterprises may offer opportunity for foyers to alleviate this pressure in the future. There are also opportunities to improve outcomes through more active engineering of social networks between clients and the business community.

During Step Ahead

The case notes indicate that 23 of the 29 Step Ahead clients participated in some paid work while in the program. With a few exceptions, it was short term, casual work in retail (10) and hospitality (10). Clients commonly participated in work placements, documented in 8 of the 16 exit evaluations. Low income, debt and regular compliance and administrative problems with Centrelink payments strongly motivated young people to search for and find employment. The search for employment was a strong focus for clients and program staff, with 22 of 29 case files documenting a high or medium level of assistance to find employment. The assistance often included help drafting and printing CVs, developing job-search strategies, providing internet access for job search, developing career goals and presentation skills, practising interview techniques, and transport to interviews.

Ulla, Penina, Trish, Leanne and Retta recalled finding employment with assistance from Step Ahead soon after moving into the program. Ulla kept that same job until the time of the interview, despite having occupied insecure housing since then. Zach found employment with Print Side Up, a social enterprise offered by Melbourne Citymission.

Aheza explained that the support of Step Ahead allowed her to quit work that was unsuitable, because she was confident of finding a better job with her worker's help. Abrinet reported that the support she received to write a C.V. and covering letters gave her more confidence and success in job searches since she left the program. Trish mentioned that the program boosted her confidence in searching for employment.

While a few young people found stable, rewarding employment in which they evidently did well and were valued by their employers over periods of months and years, the majority of young people faced a number of internal and external barriers in finding and keeping work. Moving out of their neighbourhood of origin with its opportunities and contacts affected some. One resident lost shifts after turning 18 and qualifying for an increased minimum wage. Another was injured at work and received no further shifts. A number found work outside normal hours, but could not continue because of its effects on study, sleep and wellbeing. Some lost or left their jobs because of missed shifts, conflict with colleagues or just being unable to manage the demands of employment among the other issues in their lives.

Gordon and Sean had a number of brief stints in the hospitality sector but were not able to sustain positions for long. Sean said 'I didn't want a job because I knew that I wouldn't be able to sustain the energy that you need to keep up employment.' Six weeks after starting his first job, Gordon's employer said 'go find another place to work at' because he got an apprentice chef to take over my job'. Mathew briefly worked in a video store but left after a dispute about his pay.

Most Step Ahead residents lived on a very low income, comprising welfare payments and some wages. For some, this caused considerable strain, particularly at times when rent or bills were due or when unexpected costs were incurred. Case notes document difficulties in paying the (subsidised) rent and utilities for seven of fourteen Lion Garden residents and eight of twelve THM residents. These problems were often precipitated by an interruption to the flow of income by administrative issues with Centrelink, breaches of mutual obligation requirements, and unstable employment. Workers typically spent a significant proportion of their time assisting their clients with financial difficulties, including negotiating payment plans with utility retailers and the landlord, Homeground, which leases the properties to Step Ahead clients. Clients were regularly provided with public transport tickets and some accessed emergency food or grocery vouchers supplied by the program. Financial difficulties were an ongoing source of anxiety and inconvenience for many clients, sometimes interrupting study and the activities of daily life.

During their interviews, Elaine, Gordon, Abrinet and Shahla said money was a major challenge for them during their time at Step Ahead. Ulla and Gordon said the program's general assistance with budgeting and developing good habits with money was particularly significant for them. Penina explained how the budgeting skills component was particularly significant for some overseas born participants:

It was good because for me like it's difficult when I come to Australia because back home there we're not used to money. Some people work in farms and survive in the farms. I didn't use the money back home but when I come here everything's money. I pay rent with money, I look after myself with money, everything's money. I know nothing. So it's really helpful for us like as African, you know, Somalian, Ethiopian and me, Sudanese is good for us like to do this program. I really enjoyed that program, how to look after my money, how to manage the money as well. So I did that program and it was really helpful a lot. (Penina)

Mathew, Vanida and Steven spoke about the assistance they received when negotiating a specific financial shock or hardship. Vanida was unable to pay her electricity bill and was assisted by a worker to negotiate a payment plan with the company. She was unaware of this possibility beforehand and has used the option on a number of occasions since leaving the program. Steven felt obliged to send money to his family overseas, which left him short when a bill was due. Step Ahead assisted him by paying half a bill, for which Steven was very grateful. Mathew took out his first mobile phone contract and was surprised to receive a \$5000 bill. Step Ahead referred him to YouthLaw for legal assistance and the matter was resolved favourably.

A number of participants mentioned the 'cheap' rent they paid at Step Ahead. Vanida also mentioned the assistance she received to set up the direct debit facility for her rent. At times, matters were complicated when residents fell into rent arrears with the tenancy manager of Step Ahead's properties. In a small number of cases rental arrears resulted in legal hearings and for Leanne, they resulted in her being required to leave. A number of participants left their accommodation with outstanding rental arrears.

Despite these negative experiences with the rent, having a consistent structure of rental payments was seen as an improvement from the previous circumstances of some participants. Elaine and Michelle reported that stable rental arrangements provided a better context for budgeting. Elaine explained:

The stability of Lion Garden and the Step Ahead program allowed me to say OK, well I need so much for bills and I'd be able to do that amount of work whereas before you'd struggle because you'd be changing all the time and you wouldn't know how much you were going to need or if you were going to be able to pay rent or anything.

After Step Ahead

Interview participants were asked about their current employment participation. Twelve had paid employment and fifteen had none. Of those who were employed, five were full time, five were part time and two were casual. Of those who were unemployed, five were studying and two were parenting full time. A further three had immediate plans to return to study and one had immediate plans for work. Four, or about one in seven participants, were disengaged.

Some time after moving out of Step Ahead, Sean began full time work at a local café where he remained employed for two and a half years. He valued the stability and extra income this provided. After taking up study full time, he moved into 'after school work' and reflects that 'it's really great working with kids. If you're in a bad mood they always cheer you up.'

Penina left the airline work she had while at Step Ahead and found a job in food processing in regional Victoria, where she met her fiancé.

After leaving University, Zichan also worked for an airline, but left to support a partner during ill health. He later moved into customer service for a large transport company where he was working at the time of interview.

Elaine undertook a business traineeship and has since progressed through the company. Aden works in a hospital and is optimistic about the opportunities there: 'there's a lot of things that you can do ... there's all different positions you can move on to or go to school and study more and, you know, so I'll see how that goes.'

Aheza went from a few shifts per week in a supermarket to working full time as a supervisor and cashier at the time of interview. When with Step Ahead, she undertook a work placement with a law firm. Aheza said '[I] just didn't see myself going through papers every day but now I have changed. I would love to be just locked in an office doing paperwork.' She feels motivated to 'finish uni and get a proper job'.

Steven, who arrived in Australia as an athlete, overcame language barriers to find employment in the fitness and security industries. He continues competing internationally: 'I'm number nine in the world now' he said.

As students, Ayan, and Abrinet were in and out of short term, part time appointments. Ayan does reception and Abrinet is in accounting. Amanda is volunteering, 'to keep myself busy until I get a proper job', but hopes to study as well. Aber is studying and looking for a 'survival job'. 'I have qualification but it's not helping me so I don't really mind anymore' she said.

Tara found work for a few months doing door to door sales, but found it was not what she wanted to do.

My life just turned around... it was a good job but it was long hours, I wanted to get back into my dancing again because, yeah, I just kind of missed it and I just - when I was on road trip ... I kind of had this, I don't know, this kind of weird thought where I was missing all my friends because I didn't see my friends for a long time and all that sort of stuff and it was basically six days a week from eleven to eight o'clock at night, so it was kind of hard so I didn't really have that much of a life and, it was a good job though. Yeah. But just wanted to get back into my dancing again. (Tara)

Tara was not employed or studying at the time of interview. Mathew and Gordon have not been employed, and at the time of interview, both were exempted from participation requirements for health reasons.

Six participants mentioned that they had saved up for travel overseas since they left the program. This was perceived as an opportunity for expanding horizons or reconnecting with family, and often left the young people with a desire to travel again. Aheza said.

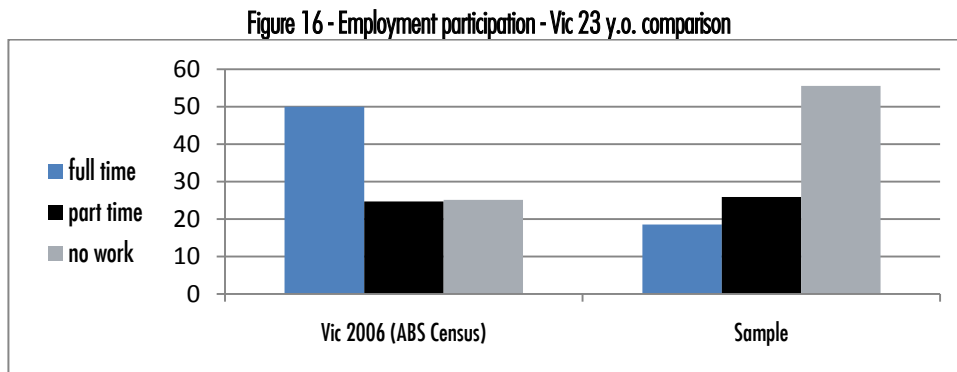
Yeah, it's a great experience and I cannot wait until next year because I'm planning to go again. Yeah, it's good. I went to Norway, I went to the States and I've seen different kind of people and rude, polite, nice, poor, rich, everything. So I think I've learned a lot as well from that. And I would love to go again. I will definitely. (Aheza)

A number of participants had clear career goals. Amanda, Retta and Ulla want to do nursing, Sean wants to be an author, Leanne wants to move into wedding planning and Ayan wants to work in communications, especially in the fashion industry. Chris, Yusuf, Aheza and Aber all aspire to work in the social welfare field. These career aspirations strongly motivate ongoing study. Zichan aspires to move up through the ranks with his present employer:

At work I'm a bit power hungry now. I want to make changes to society and the way, for me right now, working on [industry] it's either people are there, have been there for thirty years, they don't know what things are like. So my thinking is that I want to reinvigorate the way they run a company, change the way they see things and I can't do that from my position right now. The only way to move on up is to study and study, get a better position and then use that sphere of influence to change for a better good.(Zichan)

Participation figures and benchmarks

To get a sense of how the Step Ahead participation figures look against a comparable population, data for Victorian 23 year olds in the 2006 Census (ABS) is illustrated in Figure 16 for both cohorts.

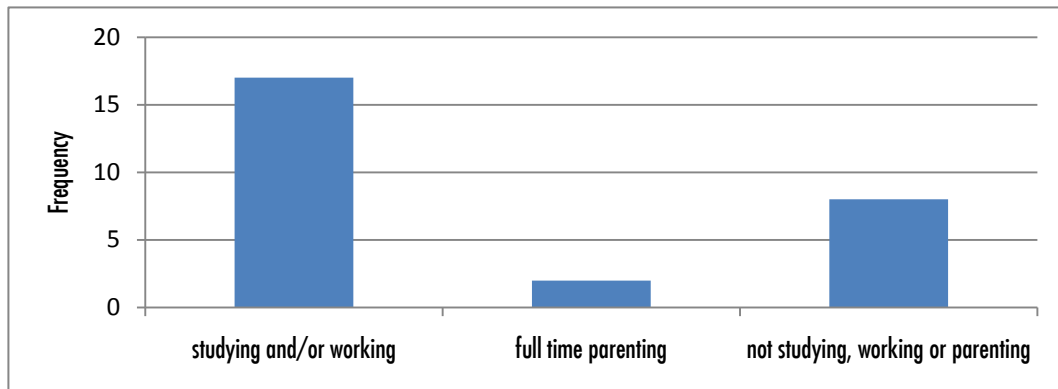


About 50% of 23 year old Victorians were working full time, while 25% were working part time and 25% were not working at all. In the Step Ahead sample, 19% were working full time, 26% were working part time and 56% had no work. These figures need to be understood in the context of the study being undertaken by participants, detailed in the previous section.

This data shows that compared with Victorian 23 year olds in 2006, the Step Ahead sample were much less likely to be employed, and more likely to be disengaged. This suggests that many former Step Ahead clients have not successfully established secure and ongoing employment, in part due to their ongoing study commitments.

Combining responses for the questions about current education and employment participation reveals that 17 participants, or 63% were currently engaged in work or study and ten, or 37% were not. Of the ten who were not working, two were full time mothers, four intended to begin study in the near future and four were disengaged. Of those who were participating, seven were working and studying, five only worked and five only studied. Figure 17 illustrates the frequencies of different types of education, employment and training engagement for the Step Ahead sample.

Figure 17 - Current EET participation



Those who exited voluntarily were more likely to be participating in study and work than those who were required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program expectations. Two thirds (14 of 17) of those exiting voluntarily were participating, and two thirds of those who were required to leave were not participating (6 of 9). No difference between Lion Garden and THM residents was observed in education, employment and training participation at the time of interview, although overall outcomes at the time of interview tended to be better for THM residents.

The 63% EET participation rate among Step Ahead participants is comparable with a UK study of outcomes of foyer leavers by Smith (2006) which found that 61% of ex-residents were in full-time or part-time work or education or were combining work and education six to twelve months after leaving the service. The Step Ahead figures for overall education, employment and training participation can also be compared with Victorian 23 year olds in the 2006 census. Figure 18 illustrates these figures, along with comparable figures for the Step Ahead sample.

Figure 18 - EET participation - Vic 23 y.o. comparison

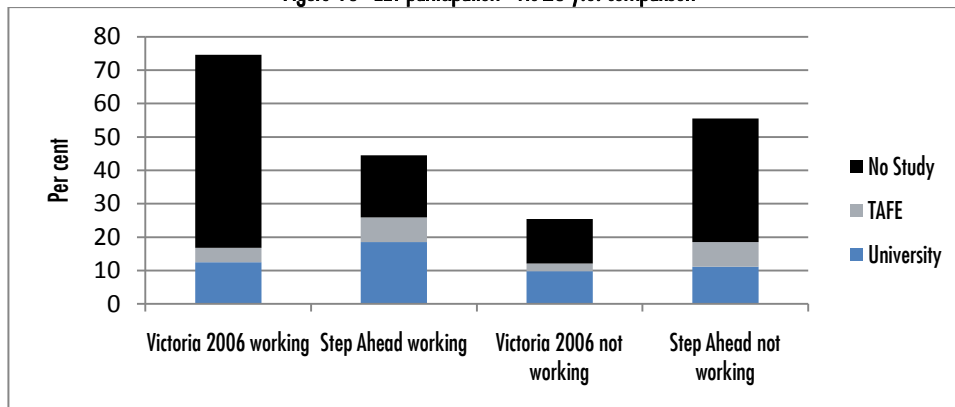


Figure 18 shows that over three quarters of Victorian 23 year olds are working, compared with less than half of the Step Ahead sample. Among those Step Ahead participants who were working, a higher proportion were also studying compared with Victorians. Among those who were not working, a similar proportion of research participants and Victorians were studying at university. Over one third (37%) of the Step Ahead cohort were not working or studying, compared with 13% of Victorians.

A 2010 publication by the Victorian Department of Human Services providing information about the development of foyer like models in Victoria suggests that 'social enterprise ventures can add value to a Foyer-like model'. Transitional labour market programs operating within social enterprises can 'assist the job-seeker to find rewarding and sustainable employment in the long term' (Hunt & Hart 2008). While one participant mentioned employment with a Melbourne Citymission social enterprise, Print Side Up, developing further partnerships with appropriate social enterprises and transitional labour market programs offers an opportunity for Step Ahead to improve employment outcomes for its clients in the future.

Firdion (2005) argues that a paucity of social capital can be associated with homelessness. In the domain of work and money, it would appear that many participants lacked the social capital (or the specific 'field' of social capital) to access stable and rewarding employment during and after their time at Step Ahead. Developing structures and contexts enabling clients to develop connections with employers offers an opportunity for Step Ahead to improve employment outcomes in the future.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

The pathways literature on youth homelessness emphasises the need for good quality relationships. Personal and enduring relationships have been shown to protect against loneliness, improve health and wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of worsening homelessness (Grace Gronda & Coventry 2009). They have also been found to assist the reduction or cessation of drug use (Keys, Mallett & Rosenthal 2006). Friendships between homeless people are common and Johnson and Wylie (2011) find that these relationships address the need for 'a sense of belonging and acceptance and counteract the loneliness and isolation that many people experience' (p.13). These relationships can lead to their own problems, however, as they often 'lack depth and are opportunistic in nature' (p.13). The pathways studies find that immersion in the homeless subculture can entrench homelessness. Providing young homeless people with the structures and contexts to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with those outside the homeless subculture is vital to creating pathways out of homelessness. Relationship types of particular significance for young homeless people are those with workers, families, partners, peers and networks of social capital (Firdion 2005, Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys et al 2010). The experience of Step Ahead participants in developing such relationships is the theme of this section.

Summary

Young people in Step Ahead usually maintained some relationships with family members. At the time of interview, participants generally reported that their family relationships had improved. In some instances this was associated with the reduced burden of living together, in others with resolving outstanding conflicts and misunderstandings. Some participants associated their improved family relationships with developing a more mature perspective. A number reported receiving assistance from the workers to reconcile with their families, sometimes with direct mediation and sometimes with advice and a referral for counselling. Being securely housed was mentioned as a source of strength for young people in dealing with their family, as it enabled a more equal and adult context for interaction. Sometimes improvements were uneven, with reconciliation being achieved with some family members and not with others. In a few instances, relationships with family, or lack thereof proved destabilising for participants. One client was required to leave because of her mother's visits, another returned to Step Ahead after an attempt to reintegrate with her family failed, and one client associated his ongoing anti-social behaviour with an unresolved anger at his family's rejection. Given the complexity of family issues, it may be unrealistic to expect that all clients would succeed at improving them, or even that it is advantageous to do so in all cases. On balance, the evidence suggests that Step Ahead was effective in assisting young people to improve relationships with family.

Participants reported that the relationship with their worker was central to their experience of the program. The relationship was developed through regular meetings to discuss education, employment and training and program participation, through practical assistance to achieve immediate goals (driving clients to appointments, access to services, gathering information about education, employment and training opportunities and so on) and through time spent together discussing the client's wellbeing and relationships.

The majority of comments about workers were positive and reflected a successful engagement on practical and personal levels. However, about one third of interview participants were in some way critical. Two participants stated that their workers were ill equipped to deal with their mental health issues. A number of participants reported that they were unable to relate with their worker because of some characteristic such as age or sex, but tended not to raise this with them or with program management.

Some participants experienced their relationship with their worker as something of a bother and would have preferred less contact, while others felt disappointed about a determination the worker had made about guests, or conflicts in shared properties.

Relationships with other clients in the program were mixed. A number of participants commented that getting to know other clients assisted them to develop a better perspective on their own situation, make friends, broaden their social horizons and feel comfortable and connected with the group, while others reported some of these elements along with some experiences of discomfort and alienation. Some participants' predominant memories were of unbridgeable divides of language, background, interests and aspirations. A number of participants experienced serious and protracted conflicts with their housemates. Two participants experienced events that undermined their sense of security and safety in their accommodation.

By the time of interview, most bonds between former clients appear to have dissipated. A number of participants knew of the whereabouts of other former clients, but only one mentioned an ongoing friendship from the group.

A number of THM and Lion Garden residents spoke of loneliness while in the program, citing time pressures with work and study, geographic dislocation from previous networks and struggles with depression and substance use. Loneliness has been associated with substance use, poor

mental and physical health and homelessness (Franklin and Tranter 2011). Ameliorating loneliness among Step Ahead participants would appear to be a priority for the program.

When describing their life at the time of interview, many participants spoke of their friends and networks of interdependence. Two participants reported having a small number of friends after disconnecting from their previous drug using peers. None of the participants reported having significant connections among homeless or drug using peer groups. A number of participants spoke of forming new networks of social connections with 'like minded people' during or after their time at Step Ahead. University was mentioned as an important place of social connection, as were ethnic communities, share houses, workplaces, extended families and sporting groups. One participant spoke of an improvement in his mental health after connecting with a new group of friends while in shared accommodation after he left the program.

Most participants reported feeling connected to a community, having someone to talk to, and having someone to assist with practical tasks. However, some participants described feeling isolated at the time of interview, mostly as a result of having moved away from areas where friends lived.

Parents and families

The cause of homelessness for many Step Ahead clients was a breakdown of their family relationships. All but a few participants mentioned their families at some point during the interview. No one spoke of having lost contact with their family and most reported that relations had improved since they entered Step Ahead.

For many, moving out of the family home and, after a period of instability, into Step Ahead, brought a fresh dynamic into their family relationships and created an opportunity to move beyond past grievances. For Nosrat, Giles and Ayan, the support offered by the program was instrumental in this process.

Ayan moved out of her family home after a 'disagreement' with her mother. Once in Step Ahead, Ayan's worker acted as a mediator. Ayan believes that 'because of that we made it up'. 'It was just a misunderstanding ... so we sorted it out and now it's alright' she said.

Nosrat, who had a good relationship with her mother, but had difficulties with her sisters, got 'a lot of good advice' from workers about 'how to go back and talk to them and keep in touch.'

Giles reported that his move into Step Ahead 'snapped my parents out of I guess whatever state of thinking they were in at the time.' It was a 'wake up call to them' that 'a relationship ... is potentially damaged.' He felt 'safe' to meet them from time to time at his Lion Garden flat where 'no matter how things went or it got a bit awkward' he could say 'sorry guys, I'm going to go bed, I'll see you later'. He also felt protected in these encounters by the support of the youth worker, who formed a 'safety barrier'.

For some participants, it was just the process of becoming more mature rather than any specific support from Step Ahead that enabled them to improve relations with their parents. Vanida had distanced herself from her parents because she was 'doing a lot of drugs and ... felt a bit guilty.' Vanida reported that 'the last year that I lived in Lion Garden I sort of was getting better with my parents and since then it was really good.' When asked if Step Ahead had assisted in this process she said 'I think it was on my own account'.

At the time of interview, Mathew enjoyed regular contact with his father. Mathew explained that although '[my father ... pretty much dragged [me] out by the collar in the middle of the night', now 'I can - I see the humour in it'. Mathew reflected that, in the past, he saw his Dad as:

[The] bastard that won't let me do what I want which sort of led me to getting kicked out anyway. You know, using the internet to download music or play games and that and not do my homework which is what I didn't want to do, which is what I shouldn't be doing which sort of got him angry. (Mathew)

Mathew used to 'try and push his [father's] buttons' but now he can 'make light of his methods' and 'I can also have a proper conversation with him'. Mathew only mentioned his mother once during the interview. He reflected that 'my mum lived in Perth, but even though [my father] kicked me out ... I still have more respect for him than I do for my mum.'

Elaine thought her mother might be 'on the other side of the world ... I don't speak to my mother very often' but was in touch with her father. She explained:

Well my relationship with my father got a lot better as soon as I moved [out of home] because we weren't in each other's faces 24/7, so that allowed us to get to know each other without him necessarily so much trying to be a father if that makes sense, we could sort of get to know each other as individuals instead of he's there to tell me what to do.(Elaine)

Workers and program support

In speaking about the assistance offered by program workers, participants tended to speak of direct practical assistance and personal support. Many also commented on the workers' style and approach.

Giles said he felt very ill equipped to deal with the challenges of independent living and spoke of the importance of learning life skills and the emotional support he received from his workers. He said that this holistic support to develop independent living skills created a very different relationship from that which existed between him and his psychologist, describing the relationship as more trusted and grounded.

Gordon spoke about the importance of receiving guidance from workers on coming to terms with his childhood, developing living skills and 'teaching life'.

Vanida spoke of the importance of guidance from her worker when she was sixteen, without much life experience and lacking access to parental advice. A number of participants fondly remember the receipt of gifts from workers or other mentors in their life and appreciated the thoughtfulness and generosity.

A couple of participants mentioned their appreciation of the practical support provided by their workers - particularly finding health services, dealing with welfare payments and finding accommodation after Step Ahead.

Supports mentioned by participants include:

Practical

- explaining about Australia
- taking client to careers exhibition
- help moving house
- help finding a scholarship
- help staying in contact with parents.
- C.V. building skills, how to act in interviews, help finding work.
- help finding a doctor
- help with interview skills, C.V. writing
- assistance with access to co-located services at FrontYard
- food vouchers.

Personal

- giving me confidence
- reinforcing 'the right way'
- attending magistrates court hearing on residency
- 'I was falling to pieces and they helped me back together.'
- 'when everything hit shit bottom, no one was there to help. So they were [there] so that was a good thing.'

Styles of working

'If I did need to talk about something, they could but if I didn't want to I didn't have to.'

'They left you to figure out what you wanted to do with your life, they saw you once a week and helped you access what you needed.'

'Played a motherly figure.'

'Ask a million questions and she was patient and tolerant'.

'She was always calm. She was very poised ... She has a lot of patience'.

'I learnt [from workers] to have more faith in myself, goal set, mind map how you're going to go about it and really go through with it.'

One participant reported that her worker was a convenient person to ask for advice, 'with my friends I wouldn't call them that much because I feel like I'm taking their time', she said. Others appreciated the non judgmental nature of support, and the time taken to listen.

Yusuf credits his Step Ahead worker for the inspiration to work in the social welfare field, and this may be the case with the four others who have similar aspirations.

By the time of interview Gordon had done a long stint in a rehabilitation centre and spent seven months in prison since he left Step Ahead. Gordon says he has learned a lot through these experiences. When asked to nominate the most important of these lessons, he nominated the assistance he received through Youth Law and Step Ahead to have some transport fines waived. 'That was just a huge amount of respect there' he remembered. 'I never got respect from my family', but the assistance with the fines 'taught me how to respect others'.

Researchers reviewing case notes recorded the level of program support documented for each client across 14 different typical areas. A four point Likert scale was used, comprising the values *high, medium, low* and *none/missing*. Figure 19 illustrates the percentage of the sample receiving a high or medium level of support in the various types of support provided.

Figure 19 - Percent of sample receiving high or medium level of support by support type

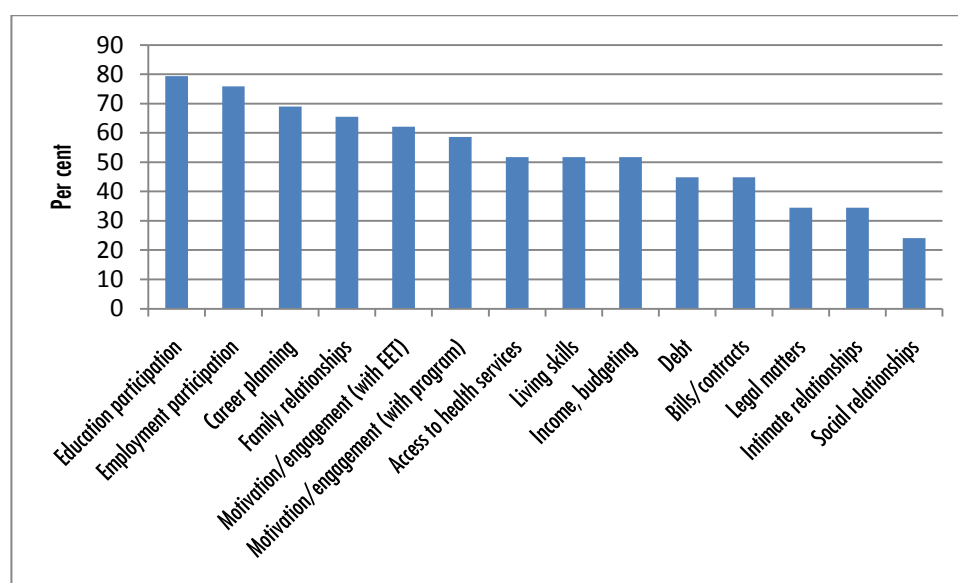


Figure 19 illustrates that support for education and employment participation was accessed at a medium or high level for over 75%, or three quarters of clients in the sample (n=29). Support with career planning and family relationships was accessed by around 65% of the participants, while motivation and engagement with education, employment and training and program activities was received by around 60%. A medium or high level of support with living skills, income/budgeting, bills/contracts, and access to services was provided to around half the participants. Overseas born residents were more likely to receive help from their worker to address debt issues (53%) compared with Australian born participants (35%), and with bills/contracts (67% for overseas born residents compared with 36% for Australian born). These figures represent a lower skill base and higher support need for financial management among those unfamiliar with their role as an Australian consumers.

In addition to these supports, researchers noted other supports documented in the case notes of eleven participants. Supports documented include access to counselling (7) and meeting education costs such as books, computers, clothes and transport (7). Support to access recreation opportunities and scholarships for studying was also documented for a number of participants.

Occasionally, participants would reject offers of support from workers. Assistance in dealing with substance issues, moving house after exit or general assistance with education, employment and training engagement are some examples of the types of support refused.

Despite the supports offered, four participants experienced the relationship with their worker as something of a bother. Two of these could be described as determinedly withdrawn and disengaged from their families, studies and work, while the other two had been independent for longer and felt able to negotiate their pathway with less support. Trish described her reluctance:

When I moved into there at first, like I felt like I had to answer to them everything ... I knew that my worker had to know everything but it felt like, yeah I was, I was 24 years old and having to answer, for the first time in my life. I've never had to answer to anyone, like my mum, no-one so to all of a sudden to be telling someone, I'm doing this, I'm going here I'm doing this. It got a bit ugh at first but I got used to it and I mean the longer that I was with them, the less, they just had to do it as part of their job description. So that would be the only thing, it just makes us feel like kids. I suppose there's a lot of ... people out there who would need it. (Trish)

Despite this downside, Trish reported: 'The actual worker, fantastic'. Some clients commented that scheduling times to meet with their workers was difficult amid their study and work commitments. Sean was deeply depressed and struggled to meet with his worker.

It started off with we'd have I think fortnightly meetings and we'd discuss things like homework groups and cooking classes and things like that, just the basics. But I was struggling with it. I needed but I wasn't able to engage with them because I had a lot heavier stuff going on ... I kept pushing these sessions away and delaying them until I think the worker said 'obviously you're not, you know, willing to engage in like fortnightly sessions and stuff, do you want to spread it out a bit more and I'll give you some more space' which is probably not what I needed but it was what I wanted and it's what I sort of - maybe I shouldn't have been able to do this but I felt like I forced him into that position and I was pretty head strong ... the guy was doing the right thing by not letting me completely withdraw. I mean, I would've lost my place in the program so if I had have thought that I could've completely withdrawn then I would've kept pushing away but I did - I think we had a conversation where he was like 'you can't keep pushing me away or else, you're not, like you can't be in the program if you're not in the program, we can't just give you a house.' (Sean)

Sean also avoided program activities.

No I never went to them. Like they'd have those group ones and I never went to them because I didn't want to be, I didn't want to consider myself a part of the program basically. But I was and it might've helped if I had have gone to them, it might've made me more willing to accept the help that the guy was offering me. (Sean)

Six participants mentioned support needs that they felt were not met by program workers. These ranged from a perceived failure to deal with house conflict in shared properties, a failure to be flexible with guest rules when the client felt lonely and isolated, a failure to support an interest in the chosen career, or a general slowness in response to requests.

Five participants were of the opinion that their worker was not a good match for them. Some reported that they would have related better to an older or younger worker, others a male or female. A common reason for this feeling was an association with strongly negative experiences in the clients' recent past. One client, who had ceased contact with his father after protracted and damaging conflict with him found his worker to be too paternal. Another experienced difficulty in relating to 'older' people in general because, as a teenager in the care system she felt 'judged'. A female client who experienced difficulties relating to men due to past experiences felt she could have disclosed more of her personal issues with a female worker. One client wished to speak about his issues as a gay man with a female worker rather than the heterosexual male to whom he was assigned. One client felt that her young worker was not sufficiently 'street smart' to be taken seriously as a mentor and confidant.

Some participants who expressed discontent at their worker also identified another worker within the Step Ahead program or another program who represented a preferred option.

Two participants experiencing severe mental health problems found that their worker was ill equipped to deal with their problems. Only one participant reported raising their concerns about their mismatch with the worker, and in this case the client was assigned to a new worker and reported a much better experience thereafter.

One client mentioned her feeling that both workers assigned to her in the program had been really well suited to her and that she enjoyed seeing them.

One of the features of the Lion Garden complex is a ninth unit housing a volunteer lead tenant. Three participants mentioned their memory of the lead tenants, which was typically occupied by a number of people during a client's stay. Elaine remembered 'the main one while I was there' as 'great. He was really helpful if anyone had any problems'. Zichan on the other hand reflected that 'they didn't play an important role and I think it would have been one more flat that could have been released for a young person.' Giles remembered a couple of occasions where an incident at Lion Garden had occurred and the lead tenant was not around to assist.

On balance, participants remembered their workers favourably and were highly appreciative of the broad range of supports they received while in the Step Ahead program.

Other clients

An integral part of the Step Ahead program for Lion Garden residents are the weekly 'house meetings'. Nosrat, Gordon and Vanida reported that the house meetings assisted them in 'dealing with issues'. Nosrat remembered the social events as 'a big help', 'just to see what they [other residents] were facing or like if they had any issues and we could just talk it out.' Gordon reported that 'it was good because I wanted to hear other people's opinions about how they're living, how they're managing in their residential home and I learnt a fair bit from other people's opinions and views on the subject.' Vanida remembered that 'there was a lot of noise issues so it was like sort of a good way to have a meeting.'

Zichan, Amanda and Gordon reported that they had been quiet or introverted during some of the house meetings. Zichan remembered that 'you put in what you want to take out of it'.

Lion Garden and THM residents participated in social activities. Most participants mentioned these events at some stage during the interview. Participants remembered some of the activities:

birthday celebrations	museum day
kris kringle	a camp for a day in the bush
just dinner	picnics
taking us to the pool	trip to the zoo
kick of the footy in a park	a scout thing and had to jump through things
bowling	games night
laser skirmish	movie night
CPR, first aid class	aquarium

Trish remembered her enthusiasm as she participated in a group activity:

I remember the first day we went and did a get-together activity, outdoors thing and like to get out act like a kid occasionally and we went to a scout thing and had to jump through things and do all things and everyone was sitting there going 'I don't want to do this' and I was the first one, 'I'll do it, I'll be up'. (Trish)

Penina fondly remembered a camp activity:

We just like play and sharing some stuff and do a lot of thing. It was really helpful, honestly ... I really enjoyed a lot and help my stress as well. Yeah, because I see other kids like me and then we just talk and I forgot everything ... Because I was thinking I was the only one while I go through this stuff. It was like, it was like the - how do you call it? The group was like mixed. There's Ethiopian, there was Somalian, and they had [inaudible] like me here. All of us was like the same, you know. And some people like Australian but they have the same condition as well. (Penina)

When remembering these events, a few interviewees used the word 'fun'. Giles and Elaine reported that these events helped them in getting to know other housemates. 'If I need to borrow a cup of sugar at least I can knock on the door and go hey, you know', Giles said.

A number of participants reported that the activities had their downsides. Michelle, Aheza and Trish felt that, with their other obligations, they did not have the time to participate in the activities: 'I found really annoying to be honest', 'having work, study and everything else that you have to try and get done and then coming home and you hearing about this group activity that you have to go to.' (Elaine).

Zach was able to participate in the program activities but showed empathy for the young people who could not.

It was always like one or two people who - like it changes - but who were [not] participating because different things were going on in their life and whatever and, yeah, or they didn't feel that they fit in or they, you know ... and they got in trouble for that because that's a condition of the program. So I guess, you know, I guess it has to be there, they need to sort of apply that structure otherwise everybody would be just running around mad. It's a hard one isn't it? (Zach)

Mathew and Zach did not feel that the activities succeeded in creating a sense of unity with other residents. 'We were all just strangers and everyone's got their own problems and that so yeah, it was just weird and awkward,' Mathew said. Zach observed that 'they're just people that live in the same building. It's not like there's any sort of camaraderie.'

On the other hand, Nosrat remembered 'it was fun', 'it felt very close', Aheza said 'everything was great', while Ulla and Penina 'miss' the meetings and activities. On balance, the activities were remembered favourably by participants.

Several participants mentioned that their encounters with other clients in Step Ahead left them more tolerant and less judgmental. Nosrat explained that:

Some people that you just see and like straight away you go no, 'I'm not going to talk to that person' but like when you see them, like when I was living there, some of the people that I saw and they started talking, they're not really that different from you ... I think I'm less judgemental and a lot more tolerant of like what other people do, the mistakes that other people make. (Nosrat)

Meeting other young people in a similar situation assisted Nosrat to understand her experiences of family conflict as more 'normal'. Nosrat reported that with these broader reference points, 'it was easier to, then go back home and like discuss the issue, the problems with my mum and my other family members'.

In Giles' encounters with other clients, he gained a more sophisticated view of social disadvantage.

My perceptions before then of ... troubled youth but also like the more disadvantaged people of society, was a lot more of like the media based ones ... [At Step Ahead] I went through two, three different ways ... Attitude first was ... they're all bums who aren't doing anything ... then ... they're all wonderful people ... and then kind of realise through harsh circumstances okay no, it's always going to be grey. (Giles)

A number of participants remembered friendships and social connections they made with other clients during their time at Step Ahead.

Ulla had only recently arrived in Melbourne and found her first new friends in Lion Garden. She remembered that 'there was a sense of community there, everyone just 'hi' and 'bye' or 'come over, have dinner' or, you know, it was good. Actually I really liked living there, it was really nice.' Mathew remembered movie nights shared with fellow residents.

Tara reported feeling that:

They were all lovely people and they'd all obviously been through interview processes to get in there and they wouldn't put dangerous people in with, um, in that sort of situation so I think that the program was successful in that aspect. (Tara)

Nosrat mentioned her friendship with another Lion Garden resident: 'we kind of had a lot in common and I felt like we could talk and she was going through a similar situation.' Zichan and Giles also mentioned friendships struck up after recognizing common characteristics.

The young people in Step Ahead come from many different backgrounds: families with wealth and status, working migrant families, disadvantaged Anglo-Australian families, statutory care, and refugees with little family contact were all represented. The residents spanned an age range of ten years, some studying at University or working full time and others in year 10. Some were highly articulate and some were outgoing, while others were shy or lacked social and communication skills. A few had only recently begun speaking English. Many were anxious or depressed, and some were substance affected. Perhaps the only characteristic uniting all the participants of this study was the need for stable accommodation and assistance to engage in their work and studies.

The profound diversity among the client group was mentioned by a number of participants as a reason for their difficulty in making friends and building trust with other Step Ahead residents. Giles and Tara said that their relatively privileged education circumstances created a barrier between themselves and other Lion Garden residents.

I couldn't really become friends with them because like, you know, they were younger than me ... they weren't actually younger but they were just - yeah, I didn't have anything in common with them and I was the only one in university and everyone else was doing year eleven or twelve and it just, you know.(Tara)

I still had ... the luck of being in a really good high school. I mean, that is something I also don't throw away off-handedly because that is something like that I think also just gave me a bit of an advantage to some of the people ... there were some people who came in that program that obviously had similar goals I had, similar aims but I just, but still trying to get that means and so it wasn't hard to relate to them but it was just, I don't know, maybe a little bit of guilt sometimes but just like for example if you - like this never happened but like I'm using it as a for instance, but say like if I come home and was talking to someone in the common room and just gone on about like oh, you know, so I was having this hard day at school, God, God, God and it happened to be someone [inaudible] at the time who was struggling to find a school. You know, you kind of feel that oh crap, you know, here I am going on about how I did with school and this person's really trying to get into it. Like that never happened but that's just an example of how it kind of felt.(Giles)

Gordon, on the other hand, felt 'isolated' because 'other people were getting through life like easy as and me, I was having my ups and downs all the time. That's what made me cut loose.'

Giles and Zichan mentioned the importance of peer networks – and their capacity to affect the behaviour of young clients. They both suggested that peers should be taken into account when considering the suitability of potential Step Ahead clients.

Friends and networks of interdependence at the time of interview

When describing their life at the time of interview, many participants spoke of their friends and networks of interdependence. Three participants spoke of having moved into different social circles. Vanida remembered a time when her friends were a 'bad influence', but more recently associates with people who she has met at work or University and who 'do the same thing as me'. Zach and Trish said they had a small number of friends after disconnecting from their previous drug using peers.

At Step Ahead, Shahla remembers that she and her sister were 'really lonely' and did not 'really have time to spend with friends because [we were] so busy with everything else and you can't really tell people about your situation either'. Shahla reported at the interview that she and her sister have 'still got friends and we still go and visit my mum'.

Zichan remembered a time before Step Ahead when he 'didn't have a lot of social support' and was 'an easy target'. Since he 'got life back on track', Zichan has tried to 'connect with like minded people' and, like Vanida, has made friends through University, particularly through political activism.

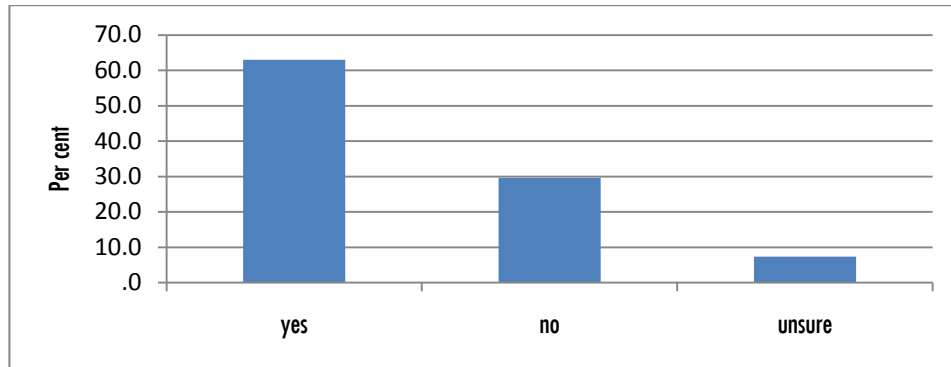
After Sean moved out of psychiatric care, he moved in with his brother and a friend. Sean says that at that time he 'literally didn't talk', but with the friendly company in his new house 'I was speaking more'. Sean has since moved into another share house and expanded his circle of friends: 'I'm much better socially' he said. 'I'm just part of that group now and they're really good friends ... They've got jobs ... Like really good, respectable jobs and ... I feel like it's motivating me to get through uni'.

Aheza and Michelle are both connected to their ethnic communities and Abrinet connects with her friends through a regular game of soccer. Retta connects with his local community through volunteering at a local community centre.

Some participants reported feeling socially isolated in their present locations. Gordon does not know many people where he lives, but said of his flatmate, who he has known since he was twelve, 'I've only got one friend that I really consider to be the person I need in my life'. Mathew used to live close to friends, but since moving to another part of the city he can 'only talk to my friends on the phone and computer because they're far away'. Leanne, a full time mother said 'everyone's sort of on the other side of the city'. She and her partner planned to move closer to friends when he finds a job closer to that area.

Participants were asked to respond to the question 'Do you feel connected to a community (either a local community or a network of people with similar interests?)' by selecting *yes*, *no* or *unsure*. Eighteen, or nearly two thirds of the respondents (n=27) said they did feel connected to a community and around one third said no (8) or unsure (2). Figure 20 below illustrates the feelings of community connectedness among the Step Ahead sample.

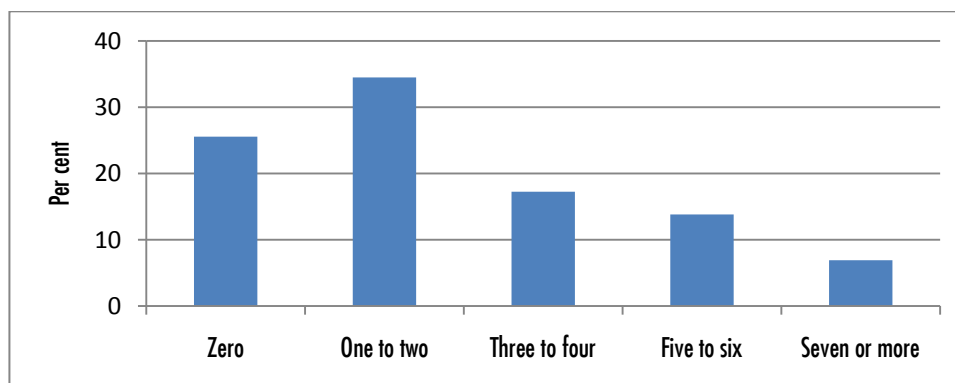
Figure 20 - Feel connected to a community



Greater community connectedness was reported by Step Ahead participants who reported their wellbeing as good or very good compared with those who did not: over 80% of participants with very good or good wellbeing (n=16) reported that they feel connected to a community, compared with 36% per cent of those who did not.

Participants were asked to respond to the question 'If you were worried about something, do you have someone outside your family that you could talk to (not a worker in an agency)?' by selecting from the responses *yes*, *no* and *maybe*. Twenty-one respondents, or over three quarters (n=27) said yes. The remainder selected no (5) or maybe (1). If participants selected yes to this question (n=21), they were asked how many people they had to talk to. The modal response was 2 people, selected by seven respondents, and the mean was around 3.5. The lowest response was 1 and the highest was 10. Figure 21 illustrates the responses.

Figure 21 - Number of people to talk to

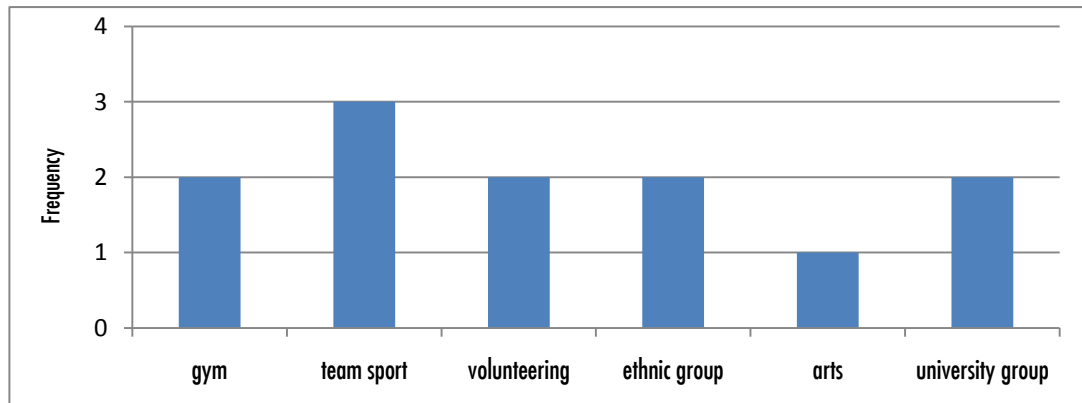


In the Step Ahead sample, those who reported good or very good wellbeing tended to have more people to talk to than those who did not. The median number of people to talk to for those with good or very good wellbeing was four, compared with a median of two for those without good or very good wellbeing. Overall, indicators for health, wellbeing and connectedness tended to cluster together, indicating inter-connectedness of these indicators.

Participants (n=26) were asked to respond to the question 'If you needed some practical assistance, for example lifting something heavy if you were moving house, do you have someone you could ask for help?' by selecting from *yes*, *no* or *maybe*. Nineteen respondents, or just under three quarters selected *yes*, with the remainder (7) selecting *no*.

Participants (n=27) were asked to respond to the question 'Do you participate in community activities such as sports, clubs, or organised groups?' by selected *yes*, *no* or *maybe*. Twenty two respondents, or over 80% selected *yes*, with the remainder (5) selecting *no*. Participants answering *yes* were then asked to specify what type of activities they participated in, without prompting for responses (n=12). Three respondents identified team sports, and attending a gym, volunteering with a community group, participating in an ethnic group or a university group were each identified by two respondents. One respondent identified an arts activity. Figure 22 illustrates the results.

Figure 22 - Type of community activity



HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Each of the pathways studies reviewed earlier in this document considers the negative and compounding effects of homelessness upon the health and wellbeing of young people, and understands an improvement in health and wellbeing as part of the pathway out of homelessness. While health and wellbeing are goals in and of themselves, they also enable success in other domains: relationships, education and work. Assisting clients to heal from past trauma and develop healthy lifestyles is an essential element of service provision to young people who have experienced homelessness. Data concerning health and wellbeing, for young people in the Step Ahead sample are the subject of this section.

Summary

About one in five interview participants mentioned that drug use was a feature of their lives during the program, describing a mixture of fun and masking psychological pain as their motivation. All but one of these mentioned that they were offered access to specialist treatment. Although clients did not typically take part in rehabilitation while in Step Ahead, four of the research participants went on to receive specialist treatment later. No participants reported that their worker's response to drug use was inappropriate.

Some participants reported benefits from treatment but more often their recovery was associated with maturation or personal choice. Substance using participants generally reported their substance use was associated with a peer group or with depression and that it existed for a period of their life which has now passed. No participants mentioned that substance abuse was an issue in their life at the time of interview.

About half the participants reported experiencing poor mental health while in the program. A number of participants attributed the onset of their mental health problems to a specific cause, usually arising from their family or experiences of being homeless.

Around half of those reporting poor mental health experienced significant improvements while in the program, which they attributed to changed living circumstances and the support offered by the program. Step Ahead was generally seen as a safe space to deal with problems. Some of the recreational opportunities available to participants were seen as helpful.

Half of those suffering mental illness reported no improvement or further deterioration during the program. Two participants reported that sharing their THM properties contributed to their mental illness. Loneliness and drug use typified the experience for those whose mental health did not improve. Two participants in the research exited the program with acute mental illness and entered specialist care.

Participants with mental illness tended to place great importance on their relationship with a counsellor outside Step Ahead. Ten of sixteen participants indicated that the level of emotional support they received in the program was satisfactory or good.

Most participants who experienced mental illness during the program had improved by the time of interview, associating their improvements with living alone or in an environment with positive relationships, cessation of drug use and improved connections with other people. Some found music and spiritual literature had been helpful. Three participants, or about one in ten, reported poor mental health at the time of interview, and each of these felt they were living in compromised circumstances: in supported accommodation (2) or with family in public housing (1).

Accommodation and living circumstances emerge as a strong theme associated with mental illness. Most participants reporting mental illness at the time of entry, during the program or at the time of interview associated their mental wellbeing with the relationships in their domestic space. Often the problem was conflict, but some participants reported loneliness and lack of connection as the source of their troubles.

Most participants reported good or very good wellbeing and physical health. Overseas born participants reported better health and wellbeing than Australian born participants, and those reporting good or very good wellbeing were more likely to report good or very good physical health.

Substance use

Substance use is often a feature of the lives of young homeless people and is commonly associated with poor mental and physical health. Only a few of the case notes reviewed recorded alcohol and drug issues at the time of entry into the program, although this may not be an accurate representation of overall client drug use³. Case notes indicate that eight participants experienced substance issues during their stay. Six interview

³Agencies referring clients to Step Ahead completed application forms detailing clients' situation at the time. As Step Ahead is targeted to clients without high and complex needs, workers and clients wishing to gain entry into the program may have underestimated or withheld information about drug use.

participants mentioned their drug or alcohol use while at Step Ahead. Zach said, sometimes 'it's just a bit of fun', and Gordon remembered 'some awesome times man, just like getting pissed up, like pissing up most nights and I was smoking a bit of marijuana'. Leanne was:

taking a lot of drugs, party drugs ... it was like start at eleven o'clock on Friday night and went continuously until Sunday. Back then all the happiness that was in my life was the drugs ... If I could describe all the happy moments, I was high. (Leanne)

Drug use for fun was often closely related to dealing with psychological pain: 'when like life's a bit shit and you're living in a shit situation and stuff, that's when it becomes a sort of band aid on the situation' Zach said. Similarly, Gordon remembered 'I used to drink up all the time and smoke up all the time but there was a reason behind it. It was because I didn't want to go into, fall into depression.'

With the exception of Zichan, each of the six participants using substances at Step Ahead mentioned the option of drug and alcohol counselling. Leanne participated in a program, and Gordon moved into a rehabilitation facility when he left Step Ahead accommodation. Zach refused the offer of help, but on reflection thinks 'I probably could've taken better advantage of the situation'. He remembers that 'the help was there if I wanted to go and ask for it, but the thing is in that kind of situation people can't come and ask you, you've got to go and sort of seek it yourself.' Similarly, Vanida said: 'they were also offering help, telling me I need help, it's there but I never did engage in any help of that. I sort of just dealt with it myself.'

Vanida and Leanne linked their drug use to their peer group. Both remembered the major factor in ceasing use was an increase in work or study responsibilities and a change of social scene.

Penina had avoided the temptations of intoxication at the time of interview and was proud of having done so. 'I was strong not to take drugs, not drink alcohol, just be, you know [sober]', she said.

Documented substance issues were much more prevalent among Lion Garden residents, half of whom experienced some substance issues during their stay with the program, compared with only one THM resident. A likely explanation for this difference is a management strategy to place higher needs clients in Lion Garden accommodation where more active monitoring and support is available.

Mental health

Case notes document six THM residents and ten Lion Garden residents experiencing mental health concerns or lack of wellbeing during their time at Step Ahead.

Mental health problems were mentioned by 15, over half of interview participants. These problems were evenly spread among Australia born and overseas born residents, among those who went on to participate in education, employment and training and those who did not, and those who exited voluntarily and those who were required to leave as a consequence of not meeting program expectations. The word most commonly used to describe the experience of mental illness was 'depression'. Participants also spoke of 'emotional issues' or being 'emotionally unstable', 'mentally unstable', being 'lonely', going 'bonkers', being 'unwell' or 'unable to function properly'.

Most participants understood their mental health problems as arising from a specific cause. The family of origin was mentioned in this context by about half of the participants. A few observed that their experiences of homelessness had been very stressful and had damaged their mental health. Some overseas born participants spoke of persistent, debilitating worry about the plight of their families abroad. Another spoke of an unspecified 'incident' that had occurred about six months prior to his entering Step Ahead.

Six participants mentioned that at some point prior to entering the program, they had felt suicidal or attempted suicide. When asked about the difference Step Ahead made to their life, two participants mentioned that suicide would have been a likely outcome without the program.

Leanne, Penina, Giles and Zichan spoke about their time at Step Ahead as a safe place to work on their problems, receive help and progress towards healing:

My father was sick, my mum sick ... They were back in Sudan, yeah, and I want someone to help me to you know, like counselling or something, I was a bit stressed. And then I got that, in this program ... I talk to [a Step Ahead] social worker and they helped me a lot with everything and everything was settled. (Penina)

I suffer depression a lot, it runs in the family. My mum suffers long term depression which is hard ... I suppose I wasn't as depressed when I moved into the Step Ahead. I think that did help me, moving there because I found it hard living with other people. (Leanne)

I was at a stage where this had all happened and I think the benefit of this program has always been that I guess they got me right at that stage and prevented it from becoming something [inaudible] in life ... it's a very taxing time and to try and load that on with the stress of trying to work and support yourself but also dealing with all your demons and personal problems, like I'm safe to say I probably would have burnt out at some point. (Giles)

Yeah. I was very depressed and I, yeah. I was pretty depressed about relationships, family, friends, myself, you know, I was just depressed on the entire scope, yeah, entire field. (Zichan)

When asked if Step Ahead was a 'safe' place to go through his depression, Zichan replied 'definitely, yeah, because they gave all the support they could.'

Other participants continued to struggle with poor mental health during the program: two engaged in self harm while in the program and one participant spoke of feeling suicidal after she was required to leave Step Ahead as a consequence of not meeting program expectations. For Gordon, Amanda and Zach the program did not improve their situation. Zach and Sean reported that sharing their property exacerbated their problems, but also reported underlying emotional and psychological problems. Clients struggling with mental illness recognised that they had opportunities in the program, but felt unable to make the most of them:

Some days I was lonely even though I had people coming over. Mentally I was lonely so I kind of cracked the shits some days and cut loose and bashed in a few walls but yeah, that's just depression man.(Gordon)

Well it was a really tumultuous time for me emotionally because I was quite unstable emotionally and I was really not in the best head space at the time ... I just made a lot of mistakes and so to be honest it was a time of stress. Yeah, like the program was great in itself but I didn't feel I was getting what I needed emotionally. I didn't feel I was - the main issues, the underlying issues were being addressed. I felt like overwhelmed in a way. Like I wasn't able to handle what was given to me so to speak.(Amanda)

I also had my own issues going on by the time it was sort of time to move in [to Step Ahead accommodation]. I don't know if I was able to participate in the program as well as I could have ... Mainly drug and alcohol issues and sort of like emotional issues.(Zach)

Sean described self destructive behaviour he pursued during his time at Step Ahead:

[I] pushed all my friends away as well, yeah, I'd broken up with the girlfriend so I basically pushed every single person in my life away and then just relied on the bi weekly sessions with my psych ... and then tried to feel independent, like completely independent. But I wasn't and I understand that and that's why I ended up in hospital ... at the time it was all aimed to lessen the guilt of hypothetically killing myself. If no one relied on me and I relied on no one then, yeah, it wouldn't matter as much if I killed myself. So it was a big plan and it took a long time and it takes a lot of effort to push friends away and family and stuff.(Sean)

When asked what sort of support would have helped, Sean answered:

At a basic level I needed to patch up relations with my brother would've helped because even I pushed him away and we actually get on really well ... And to push him away was to push away the family in general because he was the main link that I had to the family ... no program that I can think of would've been a route to re-engage me in much at all. (Sean)

Eventually, Sean' mental health issues led him out of the program, through a period of being an inpatient at a psychiatric service and then into a share house with his brother.

Those who spoke of the challenges to their mental health during the program nevertheless tended to recognize some benefits of having basic needs met. For example, Amanda said:

If it wasn't for that government program being there for me, helping me, I wouldn't, I don't think I would've handled it any longer in that situation I was growing up in anymore. I think I'd probably be either living on the street with nothing because I didn't know

those programs existed. But when I found Front Yard [a service also run by Melbourne Citymission that makes referrals to Step Ahead] is when my life was better. (Amanda)

A number of participants with mental illness tended to place great importance on their relationship with a counsellor. For those who were not already receiving counselling and were wanting to do so, workers made referrals to a counsellor. Workers did not usually conduct counselling with mentally ill clients themselves. In a few instances, workers spoke with their client's counsellor after a crisis, but did not do so as a matter of course. Case notes suggest that negotiating the boundaries between casework and counselling was an ongoing task for some clients and workers. In their exit evaluations, ten of sixteen participants indicated that the level of emotional support they received was satisfactory or good.

Recreation activities

The case files of just under three quarters of the participants recorded participation in team sport (5), exercise at a gym (4), drama activities (4) and music (3). Many participants took part in language and massage classes organised by the program. Workers regularly organised for brokerage funds to pay for recreational activities or negotiated special access for their clients. Gordon spoke about acting in some drama classes he took while at Step Ahead.

I did have an interest in it. I was pretty good with it too but like I didn't know how to open up that much because my heart was like black, black as coal but like I learned to open it up slowly.(Gordon)

Health and wellbeing after Step Ahead

For Ulla, 'at times it's like hard to be happy. ... There'll be days where I'm happy but all the time it just like creeps up on you' she said. Aber also struggles with feeling 'down'. Michelle says her 'depression's gotten worse'. Even if Michelle was still at Step Ahead, she says that 'there's nothing that they could really do'.

Ayub, Zach, Chris, Sean, Retta and Amanda all say they have improved significantly. Chris and Ayub associate their psychological improvement with living alone, while Sean associated it with moving in with his brother after leaving the program.

Ayub, who was previously in a 'terrible condition', said 'I have improved a lot and I think I'm living a healthy life'. Ayub associated this improvement with improved self confidence and not having to share his accommodation. Retta, who described his wellbeing as 'very good', said that his earlier troubles were associated with 'thinking about my family because I live here alone. 'Now, you know, I have the girlfriend' he said.

Zach said that in the past 'I made quite a mess of my brain' so in the previous year he had spent time 'recovering ... and just sort of getting back into the swing of things' and 'trying to build up my concentration'. 'I try not to rush myself at the moment' but 'I feel like I'm sort of ready to take on [work or study]' he said. A few other participants spoke about transitions that have helped them overcome personal problems or deal with the legacy of past difficulties. For some participants, the passing of time was healing in itself. Chris stated: 'with my mental health it was more prolonged, so the more time, they say time heals. Pretty much, for me.' Sean had a similar experience:

I can remember the end of when I was in the program, just like I would've been in hospital for two months, not at the unit and it was definitely like that and it had come to a point where it was just about getting through time. Like not things in general but actually moving through time to a point where, because depression passes, it goes in waves, even if nothing happens it does, it becomes less painful. I just don't think your brain is able to sustain being that depressed for that long because it's a lot of energy to be so depressed.(Sean)

Ulla mentioned the therapeutic value of music. She recalled that in her younger years, 'church wise we were brought up in and that's where the musical side came out. My dad was also an instrument player, like he played a lot in bands and stuff.' Moving away from her family and community also meant moving away from music: 'I just kind of pushed the music side of me away. I was just so angry like through the years and I hated it'. More recently, Ulla has reconnected with her musical side:

I took it up and I did well. It helped me get through ... sometimes I just feel very, you know, I don't know, feel very like overwhelmed with everything and just go there [to the piano room at University] and just play and I'm okay.(Ulla)

Although she is not religious, Amanda said:

The major turning point that made me be happy and changing my life was the Bible ... in Proverbs it's got a lot of wisdom writing and I found I could apply it to my life today and I felt it explained a lot of things and made things clear to me ... It teaches about forgiveness and it teaches about treat others the way you want to be treated... forgiveness is to free yourself from that past, from the bitterness, from that injustice, you know ... I have a lot to live for, I have a lot of potential, I reckon I'm an awesome person, I should start believing that now and should start focusing on myself. So I'm like 'I forgive them, I'm over it, I refuse to hold this pain in my life anymore and let it move me and you know, make me depressed and give me destructive relationships'. I'm going to change and a lot of it had to do with after the reflection, you had to change a lot of bad behaviours that you were brought up with, you know? (Amanda)

A number of participants mentioned physical health concerns they were experiencing at the time of interview. Zichan identified the poor air quality in his workplace as a cause of poor health, and his lacking 'the means to like buy healthy food all the time'.

Ulla, Mathew, Retta and Elaine mentioned their concerns about excess weight. Ulla tends to 'eat a lot of takeaway'. Retta identified a sedentary lifestyle as the problem.

Mathew said that 'three years ago living at my mate's house ... I reckon I was two thirty plus kilos'. He has been told that 'I could go on like that and potentially die by the time I'm thirty from whatever health condition or get some other kind of health condition and die slowly'. Mathew received support from social workers, during his time in Step Ahead and afterwards, to visit doctors, specialists, dieticians, clinics, and gym programs. Attending these services and adhering to their regimes has interfered with Mathew's study and other activities. At the time of interview he had an exemption from the Job Network because of his weight. Mathew said that he had disengaged from all treatments but intended to re-engage in the near future.

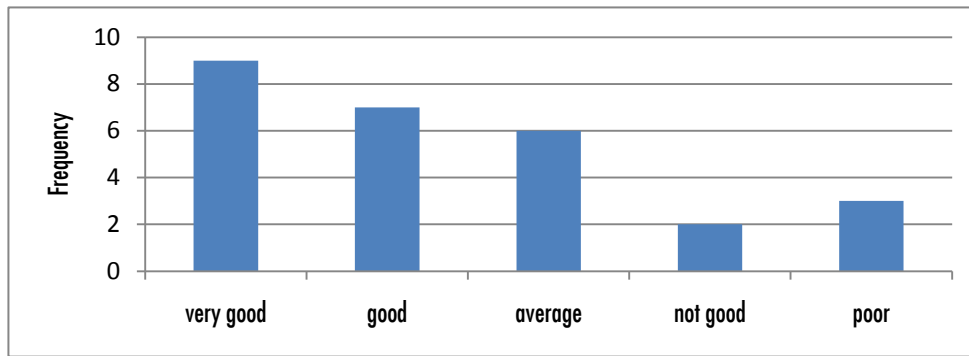
A number of participants mentioned chronic health issues they were experiencing. Amanda has 'a pinched nerve' which had been an issue since she was fifteen and 'when I had that breakdown because of so much stress in my life. ... It's always killing me. That's why I'm not working at the moment', she said. While Elaine was at Step Ahead, she discovered that she had issues with her reproductive organs. 'The social workers were very good and they pointed me in the right direction'. At the time of interview, Elaine seemed resigned to living with these issues and said 'I'm not very good with doctors, I was supposed to go back to the specialist a couple of years ago, but I haven't done that'. Trish said that 'in the past six months had a problem with my, I've had a breast scare so I've been in and out and doing stuff like that'. She thought that the issue had been resolved: 'cross my fingers', she said. Michelle described her overall health as poor, but other than mentioning depression, she did not elaborate.

Each interview participant was asked if they had experienced drug or alcohol issues since leaving Step Ahead. Only Zach, Zichan, Tara and Leanne mentioned using substances after Step Ahead, and none of the participants spoke of substance issues at the time of interview. Tara, who had been 'drinking too much' explained that she was getting help from a youth substance abuse service for a while, but relapsed afterwards, which caused her to lose contact with a close friend. It was the assistance of another close friend that succeeded in solving the problem: 'he made me realise that I didn't need to do it anymore and he's just been a very great help'.

Zach has now decided that 'I don't need it. I haven't touched anything at all for over a year.' Leanne explained 'I had my last joint there on my twenty-first birthday ... and I haven't touched it again.'

Participants were asked to respond to the question 'how would you rate your overall health at the moment?' using a scale comprising *very good*, *good*, *average*, *not good*, and *poor*. Sixteen respondents, or nearly sixty percent (n=27) selected very good (9) or good (7). Forty per cent selected average (6), not good (2) or poor (3). Figure 23 illustrates these results.

Figure 23- Current level of health



Australian born participants reported poorer health than their overseas born counterparts, with 46% of Australian born participants reporting good or very good health compared with 71% of overseas born participants.

Participants were asked to respond to the question 'how would you rate your wellbeing at the moment? By wellbeing we mean your mental and emotional health' using a five point scale comprising *very good*, *good*, *average*, *not good*, and *poor*. Sixteen respondents, or nearly sixty percent (n=27) selected very good (8) or good (8). Forty per cent selected average (8), not good (2) or poor (1). Figure 24 illustrates these results.

Figure 24 - Wellbeing

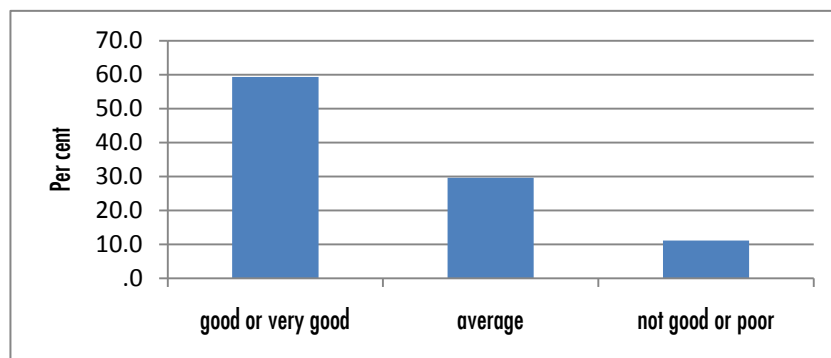
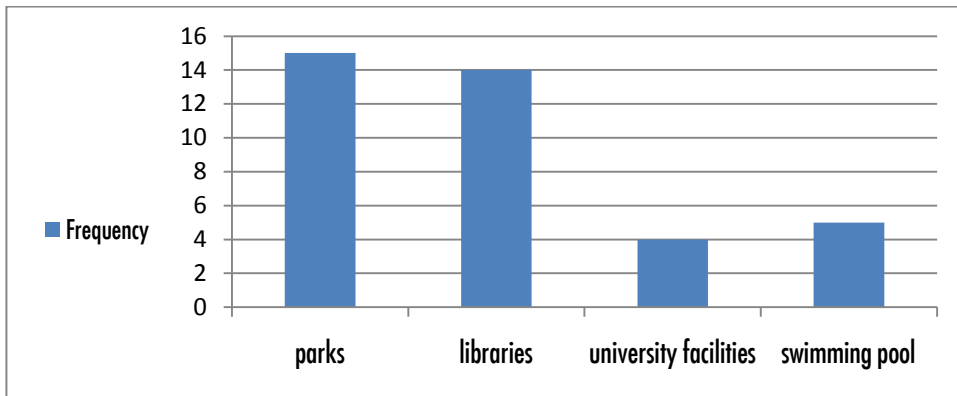


Figure 24 shows that a majority of Step Ahead participants reported good or very good health.

In line with their poorer physical health, Australian born participants also reported poorer wellbeing than overseas born participants: forty-six percent of Australian born participants described their wellbeing as good or very good compared with 71% of their overseas born counterparts.

Participants were asked to respond to the question 'Do you use community facilities such as parks, public libraries and swimming pools?' by selecting *yes*, *no* or *unsure*. Twenty-two respondents, or just over 80% selected *yes* and the remainder (5) selected *no*. The participants who answered *yes* were then asked to specify the community facilities they use, without being prompted for answers. Fifteen respondents, or just over 70% (n=21) said that they use parks, while 14, or two thirds said that they use libraries. Swimming pools are used by five respondents and university facilities by three. Five respondents identified that they use one type of community facility, eleven identified two and five nominated three types. Figure 25 illustrates the results.

Figure 25 - Types of community facilities used



Conclusion

Step Ahead clients come from a broad range of backgrounds, present with diverse needs and follow many different paths during their time in the program. The program offers accommodation, some programmed group activities, personal support adapted to individual needs, referral and linking with other programs, services and supports. Step Ahead has rules and requirements that are made clear to clients, and staying in the program is conditional on meeting these program expectations. While acknowledging the uniqueness of each client's experience, the following paragraphs provide a general description of young people's movement through the program.

Step Ahead accepts young people who have become homeless after leaving a family home or their country of origin and are staying in crisis or transitional accommodation, or temporarily with friends or relatives. Eligible clients do not have high or complex needs, and are willing and able to participate in education, training or employment. The research participants had a median age of 20 years (16-25 year olds are eligible). Most had not finished secondary schooling. Some had managed to maintain study, while others had become disengaged. About half of them have suffered from mental illness, mainly depression, mostly related to family conflict or experiences of being isolated, vulnerable and homeless. Having been out of home for an average of around three years, most had some experience of attempting to live independently, but tended to lack skills in budgeting, paying bills and maintaining respectful relationships with others in their domestic space. They were generally without employment and had little in the way of qualifications, skills or workplace experience. They were living on extremely limited incomes.

Once clients have been accepted into the program, Step Ahead workers allocate an available space in one of the eight self contained apartments in the Lion Garden complex in Melbourne's CBD or in one of seven properties across Melbourne's inner southern and northern suburbs (THM units). The Australian born, younger and more vulnerable clients tend to be placed in Lion Garden, while the older, lower needs, and overseas born clients tend to be placed into THM units. For the young people in this study, the THM properties were usually shared with other clients of the program, although changes to regulations now prevent this. Prior to moving into a THM property, clients were given the opportunity to meet with their potential co-tenant and develop a rapport. A youth worker is allocated to the young person, and assists the client to arrange a regular deduction of (subsidised) rent from their welfare payments and connect utilities to their property. They ensure household items are available and help the young person become familiar with their local area. Clients are informed about rules regulating the hosting of guests and other requirements of their tenancy.

Once a young person is accommodated with the program, a youth worker helps the client identify preferred options for study and work and assesses their service needs. The youth worker investigates options and develops action plans for the young person to access relevant services, engage in schooling or enrol in a vocational course and find some casual or part time work, usually in retail and hospitality businesses close to their home. Assisted with books and fees for school, public transport tickets, updated CVs, references and advice, the young person is expected to engage with their opportunities and work towards independent living.

In regular meetings with their worker, the young person is expected to demonstrate evidence of progress and bring to the attention of the worker any issues causing hindrance. The worker offers all reasonable assistance to remove these hindrances and assists the young person to navigate a steady path through any emerging obstacles.

In addition to work and study, the young people are expected to attend classes and events run by the program, where it is anticipated that they will learn living skills, build friendships with other clients and have opportunities for growth and development. In Lion Garden, residents attend regular meetings with other tenants, discussing issues concerning their living space or broader matters. Sometimes they also share meals, social outings and celebrate birthdays and milestones together. THM residents are assisted to travel to attend some of the program activities.

Over time, as young people tackle the challenges of work and study, their attendance at program activities sometimes becomes patchy. They occasionally miss appointments, drop out of contact for a period or reduce program interaction to a minimum. Workers often remind clients of their obligations, but tend to be accommodating of young people's other engagements.

Nearly all of the tenants sharing THM properties experienced difficulties in getting along with their housemate. Workers were regularly called to intervene, resolving issues and making decisions about the ongoing viability of shared tenancies. In some cases, co-tenants compromised and 'muddled through', in others one tenant was moved to another property. In a small number of cases, one tenant was exited from the program because of their conduct towards a housemate.

After around one and a half years, about one third of the clients had developed a pattern of not meeting program expectations and were asked to leave the program. These clients were generally younger and Australian born, had struggled with participation in employment and study, and had more troubled backgrounds. About half of these clients move from Step Ahead into crisis accommodation.

A few other participants spent much of their time in the program struggling with issues that the program is not well equipped to address; acute substance issues or mental health problems. Once these issues culminate in a crisis, clients move into specialist services to focus on regaining their health.

Some participants completed secondary schooling and moved into further study or discontinued their education and focused on work. Workers often initiated discussions about moving out of the program and assisted participants to look for rental properties or apply for a community housing tenancy. For some, this seemed like a natural and comfortable progression. For others, the prospect of finding other accommodation brings unwelcome stress and anxiety: rental properties tend to be prohibitively expensive without a steady and well paid job, public or community housing is usually in an environment of concentrated disadvantage and an unfamiliar area, while opportunities to live with family or friends involve the difficult compromises of sharing a home. Having to move out of Step Ahead before completing education was experienced as disruptive by those in this situation, and they sometimes lacked the means to establish themselves in stable accommodation following exit.

With the assistance of workers, most participants found a suitable new home: about one third moved into community housing, one third shared with friends or family and a third went into other accommodation. For clients seeking aftercare, workers kept in contact for anywhere between a few weeks and one year and provided assistance where they could. Over the next two to three years, the young people continued to work and study, moving house every year or so. Private rental and community housing became the dominant accommodation types, accounting for half of the original group, while the others live with family members, in public housing or transitional/supported accommodation.

By the time of the interviews for this research, about one third of the participants had completed a University degree or a vocational qualification and just under half of them are still studying. Just under half have paid employment, including a majority of the students. About one third of the participants are not employed or studying. Some of these have plans to return to work or study in the near future, others are full time parents. About one in five of the research participants are disengaged from work and study, experiencing ongoing health problems and social isolation.

Foyer-like services provide stable, affordable, medium to term, suitable accommodation to homeless young people. They assist their clients to develop the life skills and personal habits required for a successful transition to adulthood, including resources and support to pursue education, training and employment.

These services have been beneficial to the clients of Step Ahead, who had the opportunity to make a home for themselves and take control of their own space, gaining a vital sense of ontological security. The structured learning activities for budgeting, cooking and self care were valuable for many of the clients, as were the referrals and links with external services. The personal support from workers was delivered flexibly and responsively and was instrumental for a number of clients in emerging from a period of emotional turmoil. Participants were assisted to access specialist counselling and family mediation services, and many reported gaining confidence and maturity while in the program.

The practical assistance they received in finding employment resulted in some people gaining employment after entering the program, and improving their skills and confidence in finding employment in later life. Clients benefitted from the considerable resources provided for education: computers, books, school uniforms, and travel expenses. The majority of participants advanced their educational attainment with the program, and most successfully continued study after they left. Upon exit from the program, participants were assisted to access affordable accommodation and establish themselves in their new home. Most participants were stably and suitably housed at the time of interview.

Step Ahead has successfully assisted homeless young people to make a transition towards opportunity and engagement. The following paragraphs indicate opportunities to improve the service.

Clients typically spent significant time and energy searching for part time and casual employment to complement their studies, or full time employment to establish a career. Tenuous commitment between employers and employees meant the task of finding and keeping suitable work was an ongoing effort for most participants. At the time of interview, many clients had yet to establish secure and ongoing employment. Developing partnerships with employers, particularly those operating social enterprises or other transitional labour market programs, offers an opportunity to improve the success of clients in finding and keeping rewarding employment in the future.

Sharing accommodation was a problem for most participants who did so, and the move towards single occupancy would appear to be a useful change. Around one third of participants moved into community housing when they exited Step Ahead, and this option provided a valuable step towards self-funded housing. A number of those in community housing reported feeling insecure and uncomfortable with their immediate neighbours. While we recognise that it is outside the control of the Step Ahead program, the availability of safer community housing, or a greater range of affordable accommodation options for young people exiting Step Ahead, would ensure a smoother transition.

While the worker client relationship was a positive experience for most, a few participants reported the relationship was limited by some unsuitable characteristic of the worker. To give the best chance for a positive worker-client match, providing an explicit invitation to request a change of worker may provide for better relationships in the future.

A small number of clients experienced serious mental health or substance issues, or a combination of the two, during their stay. It is recognised that these young people fall outside the criteria for the program, and that correctly assessing such problems from the outset is not always possible. The experience of the seriously mentally ill and substance affected participants reinforces Step Ahead's position that foyer-like services are not appropriate for young people in these circumstances.

In the interests of further research on the experiences of young people in foyer-like services, it would be worthwhile to record at intake the names and details of three people who will always know where to find the young person along with the current practice of asking for permission to contact clients in future for research purposes (without in any way pre-empting the right to say no to future participation in research).

Literature about foyers indicates that this type of service works best for young people who do not have high or complex needs, and are motivated to engage with education, training and employment. It would be easy to imagine a straightforward service that provides young people with the accommodation and services they need in order to complete their education and obtain employment. The picture that emerged from this research was much more complex. It may well be the case that within the homeless population, the young people accepted into foyer-like services are seen as having relatively low needs and high motivation. However, at their time of entry to Step Ahead, our participants were homeless, with no other good options for accommodation and support. These circumstances imply quite long term, damaging experiences in the past of every participant who entered Step Ahead. Coming to terms with past damaging experiences and forging new lives for themselves was far from straightforward. Some achieved extraordinary outcomes, such as university degrees, good jobs, and establishing their own stable families. However, in general, completing their education takes longer than for the average young person in the population. This is understandable in light of the obstacles faced.

When young people become homeless, foyer-like services provide a secure base in suitable, affordable, safe accommodation, with extensive, flexible, individualised support, and clear expectations of the young people. These services provide the opportunity for young people to reclaim the life chances that homelessness takes away. With this level of support, it is possible for them to gather the resources of self esteem, life skills, relationships, education, employment, health, wellbeing, and community connectedness that can protect them against future homelessness.

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