

Homelessness and sexual assault

Each issue of ACSSA Aware includes a profile that offers a perspective on current issues in service delivery. In this edition, ACSSA speaks to DANIEL MOSS and DAVID TULLY OF of SideStreet, a counselling service of UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide.

ACSSA: Can you describe the work of SideStreet, and how the service responds to the issue of sexual assault?

SideStreet: At the start of 2002, UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide began to operate SideStreet Counselling Service. SideStreet works with young women and men aged 12 to 25 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and have experienced sexual and/or physical abuse. SideStreet provides a counselling service that has the flexibility and responsiveness to engage young people dealing with the effects of abuse and homelessness. The service provides counselling to young people in the metropolitan area of South Australia and consultancy to workers across the state.

The establishment of the service was an important recognition that sexual abuse is a significant contributing cause and factor in the continuation of youth homelessness. Research states that between 50 per cent to 75 per cent of young people who are homeless have experienced childhood sexual assault. Effective counselling and support that addresses the issues of abuse is effective in promoting physical and mental health, emotional well being and therefore also stable housing outcomes.

Too often the effects of abuse are not addressed through young people's trajectory through homelessness. Too often the experience of underlying trauma is the common theme that draws together young people who experience long-term homelessness rather than short-term crisis homelessness. What is often absent from the service response to these young people is any consistent and coordinated response to the effects of the abuse they were subjected to. Often service delivery models fail in combining practical assistance with effective responses to childhood trauma.

Once young people become homeless they are at extreme risk of further victimisation. However, the extent of this risk is poorly understood, researched or responded to. In the report *Living Rough: Preventing Crime and Victimisation Among Homeless Young People* (Report to National Crime Prevention Strategy, 1999) this matter of victimisation of young homeless people is documented. The report notes: "There is a shortage of material which identifies programs and models which target young homeless people at risk of victimisation and crime. The programs available deal more commonly with young people as perpetrators rather than victims of crime. There are few models which deal specifically with homeless young people who experience sexual assault."¹

A research paper entitled *Victims of Violence: The Case of Homeless Youth*² looked at this issue. This research examined the experiences of victimisation amongst young homeless people in Melbourne. It was found that in a 12-month period, 65 per cent had been physically assaulted, and 52 per cent had been sexually assaulted. The research also found that, overall, 76 per cent of females and 29 per cent of males have been sexually abused whilst homeless, and that, of those who had experienced these crimes, only 20 per cent tell service providers about the abuse.

ACSSA: What is the SideStreet service framework?

SS: SideStreet is designed to be able to respond to young people who are homeless and have traditionally had trouble gaining access, or keeping in contact with, counselling services. The service employs an active assertive outreach model that allows workers to continue to work with the young person if they change areas. Counselling can occur in a variety of locations depending on the client's needs. The model provides a significant advantage to young people who are often transient and moving from service to service and place to place.

The focus of the service is on issues of childhood sexual assault and recent sexual assault but works extensively with related issues of domestic violence, suicidal ideation, relationships, alcohol and other drugs. Young people present to the service with a wide range of issues. ➤

The service also looks at developing creative engagement processes. This might mean meeting the young person at some place they nominate rather than at an office. Often young people come to the service with friends or become connected into the service while waiting for a friend who is using the service. The service is designed to address the needs of young women and men: about two thirds of the clients are young women and about a third young men. Young women work with female counsellors and young men generally work with male counsellors.

In terms of response strategy, SideStreet works on three broad levels:

- (1) Provision of counselling, support and resources for young people.
- (2) Provision of consultancy to the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) youth sector. Part of our task at SideStreet is to work within the SAAP sector to make workers aware that many young people within their services are struggling with issues such as anger, violence, poor self-esteem, self-harm, suicidal ideation, drugs and alcohol, and unsafe sexual practices as a result of sexual assault. Therefore SideStreet aims to provide support to workers so that they may be able to more effectively and confidently work with young people around these issues, and facilitate referrals when appropriate.
- (3) Provision of education and training to the youth sector and wider community about childhood sexual assault and the connection to the issue of youth homelessness.

ACSSA: What is the philosophy underlying SideStreet's approach to service provision?

SS: As an organisation, UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide works from a strengths perspective, and SideStreet maintains a central philosophy that young people are not to blame for the abuse that they have been subjected to. The service in both its counselling and consultancy work seeks to identify social constructs that have young people feeling responsible for the abuse they have experienced. Clear understandings about power relations between men and women, adults, children and young people are central to this task. Tactics used by men who sexually offend against children and young people involve the use of psychological and emotional strategies to separate and isolate boys and girls from other family members, especially mothers.

In the work of SideStreet we often see young people struggling with the effects of abuse in many different ways. The connection between the abuse and the difficulties they are facing is not often acknowledged by others. If young people feel blamed for their behaviour without any acknowledgment of the abuse and injustice inflicted upon them it is hard for them to see ways forward. By acknowledging injustice and misuse of power young people are often empowered with the opportunity to understand the effects of abuse differently. This allows young people to see their grief, sadness or anger as more than damage or deficiency but as a genuine reaction or response to injustice, unfairness and abuse of power and privilege.

Within that, we work to provide a flexible, non-threatening service, which has the ability to allow young people opportunities to gain different understandings about what happened to them. We are very aware of not trying to impose a therapeutic or counselling language on young people. The importance of young people experiencing counselling "like normal discussion", rather than a weird thing that someone will do to them, is important.

ACSSA: Is the public conception of homelessness limited?

SS: It is politically more comfortable to think of young people who are homeless as "runaways", or drug addicts who just want to "party" or won't face up to family problems, rather than victims of crime that we as a society often ignore.

For the vast majority of homeless young people, violence and sexual abuse at home had begun the merry-go-round of living on the streets, staying with strangers, stopping off at friends' places, squats, and living in supported accommodation. Due to having to leave home before they are emotionally and cognitively ready and having to stay in unsafe accommodation means that these young people are at significant risk of further abuse and exploitation. This then leaves young people with no choice but to rely on strangers, whether within services or on the streets, for the care, understanding and protection they can be generally expected from parents.

It is important to see this leaving home as a protest and resistance to intolerably unjust conditions rather than the "running away" being seen as maladaptive or "not facing up to family problems". However too often these young people are left to fall through a system that further labels them as failures and reinforces a self-perception of being hopeless, to blame and of no value. Far too often in considering child protection matters young people who are experiencing homelessness are left out of consideration or are put in the "too hard basket".

Childhood sexual assault also plays a role in other pathways into homelessness. Often the effect of sexual abuse that is historical or occurred outside the family plays a major factor in family conflict. The effects of abuse in young people's lives often relate to issues of drug and alcohol use, emotional difficulties, depression, self-harm and anger. All these issues are cited as major factors in family conflict or in conflict in alternate care/ foster placements that can lead to homelessness. It can be seen that for some young people the abuse may not have occurred in the family home or by a close family member but still plays a major role in them becoming homeless and remaining homeless for longer periods of time.

ACSSA: What myths would you most like to debunk about young people and homelessness?

SS: Young homeless people are neither helpless nor hopeless; they have genuine needs and experiences, which are largely unrecognised or ignored, and have skills that, with assistance, can enable them to contribute fully to their own lives and that of the community. The public still seem to confine their definition of homeless people as those that sleep on the streets. What they do not recognise is that there are many young people who spend years between friends couches, SAAP agencies and relatives. These young people have little chance of procuring permanent housing, have very little support, and are constantly unsafe.

ACSSA: What are the greatest challenges you face in providing the service?

SS: The young people we work with have significant needs around health, housing and income. This means we have to deal with a lot of systems such as mental health, corrections, State statutory departments and youth housing providers. We are lucky that within the organisation we also run a youth Health Service called StreetLink. This allows ready access to a GP and nurse who are very skilled at working with young people.

Young people can have difficult relations with other services providers around accommodation. Due to the effects of abuse, these young people are seen as having behavioural problems, drug and alcohol or mental health issues, which means they are asked to leave services or are not suitable for accommodation models. This means we are in position of trying to advocate with services or somehow materialise housing options for young people.

ACSSA: What are the most important skills workers at SideStreet need?

SS: Most critical is the ability to initially engage with young people in ways that open up space for them to feel comfortable to talk about difficult issues and know that they are being listened to and believed. To talk about issues that are not easy for young people to communicate, in an honest and down to earth manner, is of critical importance. Counsellors at SideStreet utilise a range of skills, particularly in engaging young people in a counselling process, assessing issues of risk and, when appropriate, assisting with practical issues. This necessitates an awareness of the client's stage of physical and emotional development and learning style, rather than imposing a model.

ACSSA: Was it difficult securing recognition of the need for a service like SideStreet?

SS: Some service providers have been traditionally reluctant to acknowledge the experience of sexual abuse of young people within their services. One of the crucial tasks for SideStreet early on was to work within the sector to create cultures that did not reinforce silencing of young people's stories. There is still, despite some improvements, reluctance within society to recognise the large prevalence rates of sexual abuse. SideStreet has attempted to work with services so that these attitudes of denial are not replicated within services.

ACSSA: How do young people's experiences of homelessness impact on their need for services?

SS: Young people need services that are flexible, are willing to follow them around, are willing to advocate for them and which believe in them, particularly considering that many of them have had bad experiences with services throughout their lives. It has been important that our service is not time limited as many homeless young people will leave and return to our service at a later date. A service culture that is professional but relaxed and flexible is important. An important feature of SideStreet is that it is able to provide continuity of workers for young people as they move around the service system.

ACSSA: What service would SideStreet most like to be able to provide, that is currently not feasible?

SS: There are many ways we would like to develop. To be able to provide more in the way of training and service development would be ideal. To do more group work and have the resources to adopt a community development approach with young people would also be useful. It would be beneficial if we could look more at resource development for youth workers and other service providers. ➤

ACSSA: Does homelessness have an impact on the decision to report sexual assault/abuse or pursue a criminal justice response?

SS: Sexual assault is greatly underreported amongst homeless youth and those who do not live in a stable or supportive environment for a number of reasons, including: vulnerability to further violence as a result of reporting, such as continued threats or retaliation for reporting from the perpetrator's friends/family; a history of negative experiences with police and state welfare authorities; fear of not being believed and/or past experiences of not being believed; and feeling like they put themselves at risk by their actions and therefore do not deserve to be protected, or that they are to blame.

It is important to note that despite these barriers many young people do choose to report, particularly to protect younger siblings and other children and young people. This courage needs to be acknowledged and we need to do more work so that the legal system can work with these young people.

Endnotes

1. Strategic Partner Pty Ltd. 1999. *Living Rough: Preventing Crime and Victimization Among Homeless Young People*, Report to National Crime Prevention Strategy.
2. Alder C. 'Victims of Violence: The Case of Homeless Youth', in *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*. 24 (13) March 1991.

■ ACSSA is grateful to Daniel Moss and David Tully of SideStreet Counselling Service for taking the time to answer our questions about the service.

Sidestreet Counselling Service

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GOOD PRACTICE PROFILE

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault is developing a national collection of Good Practice Programs and Responses for Sexual Assault. This collection, accessible from the ACSSA website, provides an important resource for informing the work of service providers and policy makers in developing or refining models for responding to sexual assault.

Sexual Violence Services Tampon Card, Yarrow Place Rape and Sexual Assault Service, South Australia

An example of good practice recently added to the collection is the Sexual Violence Services Tampon Card project, by Yarrow Place Rape and Sexual Assault Service in collaboration with De Jour, an Australian, female-owned company producing sanitary products for women.

The objective of this project was to provide women throughout Australia with information regarding sexual violence and contact numbers for support services, in a way that was discreet and private. This was achieved through developing an information card on sexual violence, with contact details for support services in each state, and utilising De Jour's method of distributing health information to women by including the sexual violence information card in De Jour tampon packets. The message on the card emphasised that seeking help takes courage, that women should be believed and not blamed, and that confidential support is available.

"Good practice" aspects of the project included:

- demonstration of sensitivity towards the barriers faced by women in disclosing and reporting sexual violence, by providing information to women in a private way that does not identify them as someone who has experienced sexual violence and presenting the message that confidential help is available;
- taking account of research indicating that most women who have experienced sexual violence will tell a friend before anyone else, information cards carried the message "believe – don't blame" to women who may hear a disclosure of sexual violence from a friend.

Submissions invited

ACSSA invites submissions of examples of Good Practice Programs and Responses for Sexual Assault from service providers, policy and program developers, educators and trainers, researchers and others working to address sexual violence. These can be programs, approaches or initiatives currently or recently conducted.

For more information or to contribute a program by completing the short online questionnaire, go to www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/gpdb/goodpractice.html or contact ACSSA on (03) 9214 7888.