



MEDIA STATEMENT

‘A new place to call home’ is key to ending youth homelessness

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A Melbourne academic believes more innovative forms of accommodation could fix Australia’s escalating youth homelessness crisis.

Releasing new research into the risks of homelessness to young people, Dr Paul Stolz of Swinburne University of Technology said that for many young Australians “homelessness did not necessarily mean rooflessness”.

“Overcrowding is one of those factors that can be experienced within a home, which can seriously damage a young person’s sense of belonging, stability, identity, and sense of ‘being at home’.

“Overcrowding may turn ‘homes’ into ‘houses’, and can invite in other alienating factors, such as family violence, which for many young people is the major reason for leaving home prematurely.

“Fortunately, there is a way out for these young people. Many of the risk factors associated with youth homelessness can be addressed by early intervention strategies which reinstate the foundations of home, such as security, privacy, safety, and social and emotional development,” he said.

The research, which was undertaken on behalf of Kids Under Cover, explored the impact and effectiveness of programs designed to address overcrowding by providing young people with their own space, independence and, importantly, a sense of ‘home’.

According to Kids Under Cover CEO, Jo Swift, the research is timely given that around 24 per cent of Australia’s growing homeless population are aged between 12-24.

“Approximately 85% of requests for our backyard studios are to solve crowding in the main residence,” Ms Swift said.

“Since last year, we’ve seen a 123 per cent jump in the demand for this service. This rise in applications is due, in part, to the current lack of affordable and available housing options, and the pressure this is placing on families and young people.

“Youth homelessness has its own distinct needs and challenges. The research identifies that innovative accommodation solutions can provide a pathway of possibility for young people and their families by safeguarding their social and emotional well-being and strengthening their independence,” she said.

Dr Stolz interviewed 35 young people and their families who had taken part in the Kids Under Cover Studio Program. These participants ranged from living in the studio for up to six months, to exiting the Studio Program after several years, and beyond.

“The research indicated the importance of ‘home’ to a young person. The home is where the foundations are laid for a sense of belonging, attachment, privacy and identity. When these foundations are undermined, or compromised, the consequences can be catastrophic for a

young person and their family. These include family fracture, increased welfare dependency, reduced educational and employment opportunities, and the risk of long-term homelessness.

“The research confirmed that the Kids Under Cover Studio Program reverses these destructive forces by providing a clear re-establishment of the physical and symbolic elements of home. A young person’s progress over the longer-term for educational re-engagement, identity development, sense of belonging and attachment, job aspirations, and independence are linked to secure accommodation,” he said.

Dr Stolz said that an unexpected finding from the research was that young people with significant mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, experienced dramatic improvement from studio provision. “In every instance, where mental health issues were identified, either as anecdotally from the family or from professionals, the recovery was tangible,” he said.

Some of the other key research findings, included:

- **Youth homelessness in Australia:** Homelessness does not necessarily mean rooflessness. Symptomatic circumstances of homelessness can be experienced within the boundaries of home. Addressing these symptomatic circumstances can have an impact on young peoples’ lives.
- **Impact on family relations:** More stable family relations increased the sense of belonging and of being at home and increased the desire to remain at home.
- **Impact on physical and mental health:** Overcrowding can negatively impact both physical and mental health. Young people with mental health issues, particularly depression, can experience dramatic improvement from studio provision.
- **Social and educational development:** Study participants consistently remarked on the studio providing a renewed sense of home leading to greater social and educational development, with the space of the studio providing for privacy and a quiet place to aid study and educational achievement.
- **Employment opportunities and aspiration:** The impact of the provision of a studio on a young person’s employment aspiration and opportunity is significant. The additional space of the studio can provide the foundational elements of home that allow development and aspiration to flourish for young people.

Dr Stolz found there were very few similar programs, nationally or internationally, providing additional space uniquely for young people.

“There are programs allowing for the provision of moveable units for the elderly or those with a disability (Victorian Government, moveable units), but no similar early-intervention programs for young people.

According to Dr Stolz, youth homelessness remains a problem in many developed countries. “Finding innovative solutions with real impact remains challenging. Early intervention is the best approach for positive social and economic outcomes for young people and society in general,” he said.

Dr Stolz said that innovations like the Kids Under Cover Studio Program should be embraced in future public and private housing initiatives.

“We have a way out. Social innovation in housing, with innovative architecture, structure, support, and exit points, builds agency and resilience in youth to help them self-navigate from homelessness”.

“Social housing in Australia is more an end point, than a starting point. The research showed the Studio Program can prevent that end point. It is a U-turn out of dependence, instead of into dependence,” he said.

“For social innovation to operate effectively, successfully and in a cost-effective way it requires an environment of trust, support and good collaboration between government and organisations like Kids Under Cover so that together they can make it happen.

“We need to give innovation space to breathe and flourish, and create solutions to entrenched problems.

“When innovation is truly enabled things tend to happen and work,” Dr Stolz said.

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For further information, or to arrange an interview or pic opportunity with Jo Swift or Dr Paul Stolz, please contact Richard Amos, RoyceComm on 0418 344 978 richard@royce.com.au or Adi Stevens, RoyceComm on 0407 411 088 adi@royce.com.au