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Moving on

Austudy and the lives of
unsupported secondary students

Gill Tasker



Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Funded by the 1994 Youth Strategy Action Grants Program
of the Youth Bureau Department of Employment Education and Training



Prevention of Youth Homelessness Project

BROTHERHOOD
BROTHERHOOD OF ST LAURENCE

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Foreword

Despite some ambivalence about how far support for young people is a community responsibility, Australia has developed a comprehensive system of income support for young people who might not otherwise be able to continue their education. Among those who benefit from Austudy are those homeless young people who have to continue studying unsupported by their parents.

Based on the experiences of 35 such students completing secondary school in 1994, this report tells of the difficulties they face. Loneliness and distress from broken family relationships had to be dealt with. The demands of daily independent life on a very low income intruded into their study. The precarious balance of the students' day-to-day existence could be readily upset.

Inevitably Austudy—in its policies, procedures and personnel—played a crucial role in the lives of its beneficiaries. So too did schools: the particular ways in which they operated could make the difference between young people with such complex domestic circumstances coping or giving up, as previous Brotherhood of St Laurence research (Morris & Blaskett 1992, Thomson 1993) has highlighted. With support from schools and other individuals in place, however, young people with motivation and clear goals could and did succeed in their final year of schooling.

This is good news not only for the young people themselves but for Australia, since we cannot afford to waste their talents. And education remains crucial to their chances of avoiding future unemployment.

The Student Homeless Rate of Austudy is the major way in which Australia is responding to young people who, despite being unsupported, wish to continue at school. The experiences of the young people in this study should help the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET), and the community more widely, to understand the value and importance of this form of income support and to consider ways of making further improvements. To this end, senior DEET officials have been brought together with young people interviewed in this research. As a result DEET has already begun to institute some changes.

It should not be forgotten, however, that this study deals only with those who have been able to use the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy successfully. In any week,

over 10,000 secondary students are homeless. Only half this number receive Austudy. And not all who do are able to continue at school.

Since it began in 1986, the payment of the Student Homeless Rate to young people has been controversial. Some critics have seen it (and the equivalent allowance for young job-seekers) as encouraging teenagers to leave home when they would be better cared for by their families. For this reason, governments have been reluctant to actively provide information to secondary students about the payments.

The fear of the critics is not supported by this research. Causes of family breakdown were serious and usually long-standing. By bringing some stability to the lives of the unsupported young people, the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy appears to provide an opportunity, one clearly sought by the students, to rebuild relationships with their families.

This report recommends a number of important ways in which the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy can be reshaped to enhance its value to homeless young people and to the community. Greater efforts are needed to:

- avoid harmful interruptions to payment, particularly where family relationships are being rebuilt and some parental support may become available;
- improve knowledge of and access to Austudy;
- ensure that the young people gain the most support possible from their first contact with DEET by earlier involvement of social work staff; and
- lift levels of payment for younger students.

Alison McClelland
Deputy Director
Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Abbreviations

CES	Commonwealth Employment Service
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DSS	Department of Social Security
H&CS	Victorian Department of Health and Community Services
NESB	Non-English Speaking Background
SAC	Student Assistance Centre
SHR	Student Homeless Rate (of Austudy)
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
YAC	Youth Access Centre
YHA	Young Homeless Allowance

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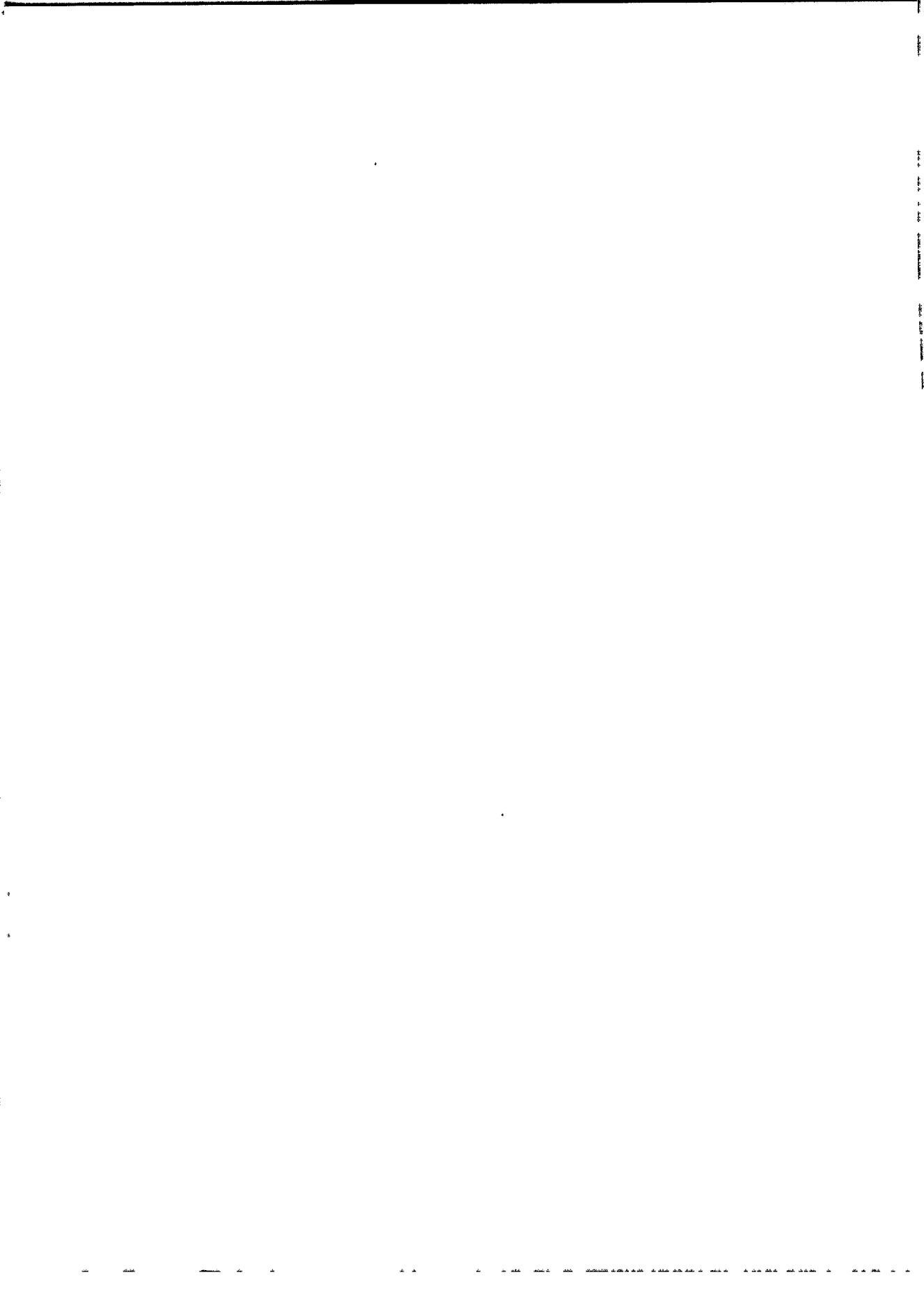
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Summary of findings and recommendations

This report presents the findings of the Homeless Student Research Project, undertaken through the Prevention of Youth Homelessness Project of the Brotherhood of St Laurence with funding from the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET).

The purpose of the study was two-fold:

- to gain insights into the value of the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy (SHR) to the young people who depend upon it, and
- to identify the supports available to and constraints on young people who undertake to continue and complete their secondary schooling after leaving the parental home.

The report first outlines the development of the process by which the SHR is delivered, and in so doing identifies the problems and tensions within the Department in administering applications by homeless students. It also provides a statistical profile of recipients of this income support scheme drawn from DEET records.

The study reports on the experiences of 35 students who undertook their final year of secondary school in 1994 whilst living without parental support. The students were drawn from the DEET database and through informal networks. Thirty-three of the 35 students were recipients of the SHR. Five students discontinued their studies during the year.

The students attended 23 schools across the region serviced by the Dandenong Student Assistance Centre. This area includes outer south-eastern suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne, around Springvale and Dandenong, and the rural areas and provincial centres of the La Trobe Valley and East Gippsland.

In late 1994 each student participated in an in-depth interview that was structured around the themes of family, school and community. The respondents were encouraged to talk informally about their life before and after leaving home and about their interaction and relationships with family, teachers, friends and professional support services.

A second interview, which took place in 1995, focused on the transition from secondary school.

Findings

The students' experiences provide an insight into how well they were supported, not just through SHR but also through other community institutions, including the schools they attended.

The findings indicate that the provision of intensive support networks aimed at helping young people in family crisis has benefits both to the individual and to the community, as young people take advantage of their opportunities and move on to participate more fully in community life.

The young people valued the educational opportunities afforded to them, despite the personal hardship which they may have endured while achieving their goals.

The major findings of the study are grouped by the themes used in the interviews with the young people: relationships with family, experiences of schools, living independently in the community and transition to post-secondary life. Issues for Austudy are identified.

Family

The reasons for the young people leaving home are complex and diverse and are influenced by circumstances both within and external to the home. Poor communication in combination with factors such as physical and emotional abuse were the most commonly cited reasons for leaving home. Leaving home was unlikely to be pre-planned.

All respondents acknowledged the importance of and their desire to establish or maintain some contact with parents and other family members. Having left home, over time most respondents could report an improved relationship with parents.

School

The majority of respondents felt it was a priority to remain at the same school after leaving home.

A key message from the students was the importance of the prevailing school culture being capable of fostering self esteem and confidence, by accepting students in their own right irrespective of their background or current circumstance. Similarly, the value of a positive and consistent relationship with at least one staff member, who could provide ongoing support, encouragement and advocacy within the school system, was

stressed. The lack of such a relationship appeared to be one difference between students who completed Year 12 and those who did not.

Some students, particularly males from a non-English-speaking background, had considerable problems in articulating their needs and asking for help.

Most students were motivated by strong personal goals and by the support of at least one other significant relationship outside the school.

The imposition of school fees and levies was cited as a common pressure on the students.

A major pressure was in reconciling the adult responsibilities of independent living with a school environment that presumed dependence. This was most evident in the school's response to issues such as absenteeism.

Living independently in the community

Living independently and taking responsibility for all daily needs was harder than the students had expected. Depression, due to loneliness, anxiety about family and/or financial worries, was common. Limited financial resources were a constant source of pressure and adversely affected participation at school.

Finding accommodation presented difficulties due to lack of suitable affordable options. Proximity to school and living in the company of those sympathetic to study were a priority; group housing was not always an harmonious environment and conducive to study; boarding was the best alternative for some.

Maintaining continuity in social and cultural attachments in local communities was generally considered to be important—the sense of belonging was stressed by the students, especially in country areas.

Transition to post-secondary life

The majority of respondents achieved their first choice in their chosen career path. Students moving from secondary to tertiary or further education reported that poor administration and the lack of clear advice about Austudy entitlements led to delays and discontinuities in payments which caused unnecessary hardship.

The costs of tertiary enrolment and required text books was generally unexpected and a major financial setback for many students, who had no capacity to save.

Finding new accommodation to live closer to tertiary institutions, or when no longer eligible for supported housing, created difficulties, particularly when moving to an unfamiliar area.

Issues for Austudy

While the delivery of SHR has changed in response to concerns raised over recent years, a number of significant weaknesses are still apparent. DEET has been unable to effectively employ a system that provides a consistent approach to service delivery throughout Australia. Country applicants are particularly disadvantaged as they have limited access to specialist staff who are able to deal with SHR enquiries.

There has been a reluctance to develop professional (social work) services, both at Student Assistance Centres and Youth Access Centres. Access to professional social work services is limited and dependent upon an internal referral system. This contributes to delays in payments and in so doing causes additional anxiety to the applicants. The internal referral system places the professional worker at the end of the line rather than at the forefront of the process where their skills can be used to maximum potential.

Data held by DEET on its SHR clients does not provide sufficient information to show the nature of the client group.

Most students disliked the name 'Student Homeless Rate' for their allowance, arguing that it was stigmatising and gave an incorrect perception of their situation.

Although the younger students receive less income support, there was no evidence of a difference in the cost of living for those under 18 years in age compared with those 18 years and over.

Recommendations

The final chapter of this report discusses the research findings around a number of themes, highlighting the value that students placed on continuing their schooling and their yearning for positive family contact.

It also presents a number of initiatives or directions which should be pursued by government or non-government agencies. The emphasis of these is on the need for an integrated approach in targeting support services.

The discussion and the strategies recommended are designed to encourage policy makers to see the need to develop and implement a pro-active approach to service delivery practice. Whilst this will require more resources in the short term, the longer-term gains of enabling young people to achieve their educational potential are clearly in the community's best interest.

In relation to schools, it is recommended that:

1. The Directorate of School Education should ensure the adequate resourcing of pastoral care programs in Victorian schools.

2. The Directorate of School Education should ensure that there is an identified Student Welfare Co-ordinator position in every school.
3. The Directorate of School Education should provide for staff training so that teachers understand the problems which students face living without parental support.
4. School councils should be required to develop policies to address the needs of disadvantaged and, in particular, unsupported students. Issues such as absenteeism should be covered by these.
5. School councils should undertake to work with their wider community to ensure that young people at risk of homelessness have knowledge of, and access to, support options in their local area.
6. Federal and State Governments should sponsor initiatives to develop a network of local tutoring programs for students living without parental support.

In relation to school fees and levies, it is recommended that:

7. School councils should be required by the Directorate of School Education to exempt homeless students from paying voluntary contributions or 'fees' by offering an equal grant to the school by way of compensation.

In relation to accommodation, it is recommended that:

8. Federal and State Governments should undertake to expand and further develop the range of housing options for young unsupported people, in particular to:
 - a) sponsor local initiatives to develop emergency and longer-term placements with families within school communities;
 - b) allow greater flexibility in the guidelines for Community Adolescent Placements to cover the period of transition from school; and
 - c) improve the availability of housing options for young people in the public rental sector.

In relation to the SHR Austudy payment and its delivery, it is recommended that:

9. DEET should demonstrate its commitment to servicing the needs of vulnerable young students by developing a consistent, appropriately resourced service delivery system throughout Australia.
10. The Federal Government should urgently review the level of income support to

independent young people and remove the discrepancy between payments to those younger than 18 years old and those aged 18 and over.

11. DEET should give consideration to moving to weekly payments as is done by the Department of Social Security for Youth Training Allowance.
12. The Student Assistance Scheme should address the issue of ongoing education expenses for both secondary and tertiary students by providing a one-off payment at the beginning of the academic year to enable SHR recipients to adequately equip themselves for study.
13. DEET should undertake a case-management approach with all Year 12 SHR recipients and ensure they have sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision about their income support entitlement during the process of transition.
14. DEET should develop a more informative database regarding SHR recipients in the Student Entitlement Process System (STEPS) to be introduced in 1996.
15. The name of the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy should be changed to the 'Unsupported Student' rate of Austudy.
16. All SHR recipients identified as not complying with Benefits Control Unit attendance checks should be referred back to the social worker for further investigation prior to an overpayment order being issued.
17. The Benefits Control Unit, schools and social workers should work more closely to establish more appropriate absenteeism guidelines for SHR recipients.
18. DEET should continue to develop and evaluate strategies to publicise students' eligibility for income support particularly at the younger age range and during the period of transition to post-secondary studies.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Over the past decade, Australia has assisted young people to continue their schooling, even when they are unable to live with or be supported by their parents or other family members. Income support is provided to such students through a special rate of Austudy payments called the Student Homeless Rate (SHR).

Only a tiny fraction of all secondary students are forced to take up this income support payment to continue their schooling, but those that do are perhaps the most obviously disadvantaged of secondary students, having to contend not only with their studies and all the difficulties of surviving on an extremely low income in unstable housing, but also with the emotional and other personal issues associated with their leaving home.

This study provides an evaluation of how well these students are supported, not just through Austudy but through other community institutions, including the schools they attend. Informed by previous work within the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET) of the author, who was employed as a Contract Social Worker from 1987 until 1994, it first outlines the development of the process by which SHR is delivered so as to identify problems and tensions in the Department in administering applications by homeless students. It also provides a statistical profile of recipients based on available data from DEET.

The study then reports the experiences of 35 students who undertook their final year of secondary school in 1994 whilst living without parental support. Thirty-three of the 35 students were recipients of the SHR. Five discontinued their studies during the year. The study is based on the views of the young people about their situation and experiences.

It is this viewpoint which is most important in assessing how well the Australian community's support for these young people is translating into successful personal and educational outcomes.

Previous studies on youth homelessness

While there are a number of studies of youth homelessness, relatively little is known of the particular characteristics and experiences of the young homeless people who depend on SHR.

The emphasis of many studies on youth homelessness has been on the reasons for homelessness, on lifestyle issues and on barriers which prevent or inhibit homeless young people from participating in community life (for example Maas & Hartley 1988; HREOC 1989; Hirst 1989; O'Connor 1989; HARP 1993).

More recently, there have been studies focusing on the importance of encouraging young people to continue in the education system despite separation from their family. The issue of access to, and the adequacy of, income support for homeless students and young people has been a particular focus of Brotherhood of St Laurence reports (Magree & Elkington 1993).

Morris & Blaskett (1992) examined the financial needs and spending patterns of 32 homeless secondary students from six selected schools in metropolitan Melbourne and concluded that the level of income support for homeless students was inadequate. The study also explored ways in which schools could support homeless students to continue studying, highlighting the importance of school-based support services and how they influence a student's experience at school.

Thomson (1993) documented the situation of 51 young people who were either homeless or at risk of homelessness in the Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria, examining the barriers they faced in obtaining income support. Lack of information and knowledge concerning available income support schemes, poor access to bureaucracies and problems with administrative procedures were found to be important barriers to income support.

The study reported here is a further contribution to understanding the life experiences of homeless secondary school students and assessing the value of the SHR as it is currently delivered by DEET.

Context of this study: prevention of youth homelessness

This study was undertaken in the context of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Prevention of Youth Homelessness Project. This five-year project evolved in response to ongoing concerns about the plight of vulnerable young people who were unable to live at home and were becoming marginalised and isolated from community support networks. It has been exploring ways to strengthen the attachments of young people at risk of homelessness to potential sources of support in their community: in their immediate

and extended family, in the educational setting, in employment and in agencies in the local community. These stronger attachments can in turn facilitate the process of transition to adulthood and independence.

The focus of the Project over 1993 to 1995 has been the communities of Ballarat and Dandenong. The latter was the site for this research.

Being developed in the context of the Prevention of Youth Homelessness Project, this study has sought to understand the general support mechanisms and resources necessary to help young people to stay at school and to develop a better appreciation of the factors that support or constrain their continued school attendance.

Beneficiaries of the SHR were a group of particular interest to the Prevention of Youth Homelessness Project because of the students' achievements—they had not only obtained some income support but had remained at school while living independently for an extended period of time. The students' experiences at school and the ways they were able to obtain the necessary support to maintain themselves could provide valuable insights into the obstacles they encountered whilst pursuing their secondary studies. Their resourcefulness and ability to respond to the opportunities afforded them could provide useful information to help other young people develop protective strategies.

The purposes of the study

This study had two underlying purposes.

1. To gain insights into the value of SHR to young people attempting to complete secondary schooling while living away from their parental home.
2. To determine which factors act as supports to or constraints on the ability of these young people to succeed in this attempt.

Implications of this approach

These purposes are somewhat different from those of other studies into youth homelessness, with two important implications.

First, previous research has grappled with the issue of the accurate definition of homelessness. In this study, the students were 'homeless' in the sense that they initially met and continued to meet the criteria for the SHR.

Subsequent chapters discuss how and why Austudy defines and categorises students as homeless; here it is sufficient to note that Austudy definitions have been employed throughout in the interests of continuity and cross-referencing to DEET data.

Second, selection of a target population and successful study of a sample of that population required more formal and considered methods of contact than have been possible in some other studies. Thus young people were principally contacted via Austudy rather than through their contact with refugees or support agencies, as has been the case with other studies.

The target population

The study focus was young people who used SHR to maintain their schooling. The following criteria were used to define the target population:

- the group should be reasonably typical of SHR users;
- the group should cover rural as well as metropolitan students, since little was known of the situation of students away from major cities;
- the students should be undertaking the same year of schooling, so as to provide some comparability within what would inevitably be a small sample; and
- the students should have been dependent on SHR for a substantial period of time.

Since both the modal and median age for Austudy SHR recipients is around 17 years (see Chapter Three), it was decided that the study should focus on Year 12 students. The Dandenong Student Assistance Centre covers both the south-east suburbs of Melbourne and the eastern part of Victoria, and so this was a natural geographic focus for the study.

The objectives set out for the study therefore included:

1. To establish the nature of the population who have been in continuous receipt of the SHR of Austudy in Dandenong Student Assistance Centre region, and who would have completed Year 12 in the Victorian education system in 1994.
2. To investigate the factors that act as supports and constraints on young people who are not living within their parental home but have chosen to complete Year 12.
3. To investigate the reasons why the young people left home, and examine students' perceptions of their family relationships since that time.

Research method

The target group for the study was young people who were undertaking Year 12, living without parental support, and who had been dependent on SHR for an extended period of time.

Assembly of the study sample

Contact with the target population in order to assemble a sample was undertaken with the co-operation of DEET, who provided data on the profile of SHR recipients both nationally and in Victoria and mailed students who met the following selection criteria:

- they were in Year 12;
- they had been in receipt of SHR of Austudy at some point in 1993;
- they were still in receipt of this benefit on 31 May 1994;
- they had originally lodged their application with the Dandenong Student Assistance Centre; and
- they had been paid under the categories of 'extreme family breakdown' or 'other exceptional circumstances'.

This last criterion excluded about 25 per cent of the students, most of whom were paid under the category of domestic violence. It was felt that these students could feel threatened or upset by the invitation to take part in the study.

In August 1994, letters were sent to the 72 students within this target group, inviting them to participate in the research project by calling a 1800 freecall number. They were to be paid an interview fee of \$30.

A further 30 letters were sent to schools and key service providers in the region, outlining the purpose of the project.

Following a poor response to the first letter, a second database search was undertaken by DEET, this time retrieving students who were still in receipt of SHR as at 31 August 1994. This exercise was conducted to establish the number of students in the target group who had discontinued their studies. However, the results identified a further eight students as meeting the criteria.

In October 1994 a letter was sent to these students, together with those previously excluded in the first round on the basis of their payment category. A second letter was sent to those in the first group who had failed to respond to the initial contact.

Feedback from some respondents suggested the quality of the data held by DEET and used for these mailings was not as good as it appeared. When interviewed, it emerged that several young people contacted had discontinued their studies and Austudy payments some time prior to the data retrieval process. Other students who met the criteria and were recipients of SHR were not on the database and came to the attention of the researcher by word of mouth, or via schools.

Twenty-four of the final group responded to the DEET letter, while the remainder came from these other sources.

The final composition of the group of 35 young people, therefore, was slightly more varied than originally intended, as it included some young people who discontinued their studies in 1994, some had been away from home for less than 12 months, as well as two respondents who were not in receipt of SHR.

First interviews

Interviews were conducted between October 1994 and January 1995. The young people were asked to select the interview location. Most of the interviews were conducted at their place of residence, while some opted for the school and several young people preferred to attend the Youth Resource Centre at Dandenong.

The formal interview took up to one and a half hours, with participants being asked a series of questions exploring family background, educational history, accommodation details, access to support systems including experiences related to income support, and their aspirations for the future. In addition, there was specific discussion on issues related to their family, the school environment and the factors that either impeded or facilitated their educational progress during their time away from the family home.

In many instances detailing the family background and structure proved to be very complex as it involved more than one household with various combinations of step-families, blended families and de facto relationships. Some young people had moved back and forth from the homes of their natural parents, over a period of many years. For the purposes of clarity and consistency with the Austudy application process, references to parents are to natural parents. For example, the 'parental' home is the residence of the natural parent where the young person last lived. There is one exception to this situation as one respondent was without a natural parent in Australia. The information in this instance was based on the home of his guardian.

Second interviews

A second round of interviews was conducted over the telephone in May 1995. These interviews focused on the post-secondary school experience.

Organisation of the report

This report contributes two sorts of data towards an assessment of the value of the SHR in supporting homeless young people to complete their schooling. The next two chapters provide information on what is known of the use and importance of SHR, while the subsequent chapters present the experiences of the young people dependent upon it. Case studies of some individual students' experiences are included in these chapters; pseudonyms are used to protect their privacy.

Chapter Two examines the development of the SHR, formerly called the Young Homeless Allowance, as it has been delivered by DEET.

Chapter Three provides a statistical profile, drawn from DEET records, of recipients of this system of income support.

Chapter Four provides the profile of the study area and presents the characteristics of the 35 participants in the study, while the following chapters are structured around the key themes and influences in the lives of these students.

Chapter Five describes the circumstances in which young people have left their parental home to live independently. It also examines how young people have attempted to maintain contact with their parents and other family members.

Chapter Six describes the young people's experience within the school environment, and examines how students have been able to obtain ongoing support to remain at school. Factors affecting those young people who discontinued their studies are also described.

Chapter Seven refers to community supports and problems young people encountered whilst living independently both in the secondary and post-secondary phase. The results of a follow-up interview six months on provides the comparison between expectations and reality.

Each chapter concludes with a summary, particularly of the implications and considerations for the Austudy SHR process.

Chapter Eight then discusses the findings of the report and provides recommendations for improving the circumstances for homeless students wanting to remain in education. The purpose of these recommendations is to ensure that policies and procedures encourage and develop young people's transition to independence in a positive way, to best reap the social and economic benefits of successful and motivated young adults.



Chapter 2 **The history of the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy**

This chapter describes the history and development of policy and administrative changes within the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), in relation to the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy (SHR). Until 1991 the allowance was called the Young Homeless Allowance (YHA).

As this report focuses on the recipients of SHR, the information is presented from a DEET perspective with reference by way of comparison to the Department of Social Security (DSS) system which administers a similar allowance.

Acknowledging the needs of homeless youth

In 1985 the Hawke Government announced a new, comprehensive, long-term strategy for young people. The Prime Minister, in his Priority One statement of 20 August 1985, said:

The Government believes that an important element in any youth policy must be to provide adequate financial support for young people to engage in education and training, as well as for those who are unemployed. The income support structure should not only provide adequate support but it should also be equitable and as simple as possible whilst reflecting and supporting the broader objectives of other youth policies and programs, including particular attention to the needs of disadvantaged young people.(cited in Dawkins 1986)

The Priority One strategy incorporated a complete rationalisation of all income support to young people and sought to bring together a more comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to youth services. The changes were to impact in all areas including education, training, employment, income support, and youth support services and were to be phased in over several years.

One of the key goals of Priority One was to improve the opportunities for young people to achieve their potential in education and ensure there was no financial

disincentive to leave the education system prematurely. As the Minister for Education, Susan Ryan, stated in her media release on 19 August 1986:

The Priority One strategy is about meeting the needs of young people and helping them to achieve their aspirations. Education is one of the most powerful tools in this process.

From 1987 secondary and tertiary student allowances will come under the new AUSTUDY scheme, relating allowances to age rather than level of study. Allowances for most categories of students will be increased as rates are progressively aligned with the rate of unemployment benefit. (Ryan 1986)

In the area of income support, the Priority One strategy acknowledged for the first time the financial plight of disadvantaged young people. The YHA was a new benefit payable to independent young people who were no longer able to live in their parental home.

The DSS was to administer the allowance to those young people aged 16 and 17 years old who had left the education system. The Department of Education, which amalgamated with Employment and Training in 1987 to become the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), was responsible for the administration of the allowance to homeless young people who wanted to remain in the education system.

The Hawke Government was keen to demonstrate its commitment to youth and so brought forward the introduction of the YHA from 1 January 1987 to 1 July 1986. It was to be paid at the rate of \$73.28 per week.

Implementation of the YHA

The intention of the Priority One strategy was to rationalise income support to young people. However, from the outset the introduction and administration of the allowance was problematic. The provision for two departments to administer the Allowance created a division between students and others. There was also confusion about entitlement and inconsistencies in the administration of the eligibility criteria. The Social Security Act and the Student Assistance Regulations contained identical provisions in relation to the eligibility for YHA, but they differed in the prescriptive operational guidelines developed to assist staff to administer the Allowance.

These problems continued to plague both departments over the next decade as they struggled to understand their client group and continued to compare their respective departmental performances.

Client group

The age differences in the specific target groups of each department created problems amongst young people and service providers. There were inconsistencies across Australia in relation to the eligibility of young people at the lower age range. By specifying the minimum school leaving age as the eligibility criteria the independent non-parental means-tested allowance inadvertently included 15-year-olds, in states where 15 was the minimum school leaving age. This broadened the target group beyond the usual dependent rate which was applicable to 16 to 24-year-olds. Normally income support was provided to parents of under 16-year-olds through the DSS family allowance system, as it was assumed they were living in a dependent family situation.

Since the introduction of the Allowance, DEET has under-publicised this provision, to the serious disadvantage of the younger age range. The 1995 application form (DEET 1995a) still makes no reference to this group of young students.

Administration

The Austudy Student Assistance Scheme replaced the existing Secondary Allowance Scheme and the Tertiary Education Allowance Scheme. A student's entitlement to support under all these schemes was based on the administration of a parental means test. All applications and correspondence were forwarded in writing to a central location where they were processed accordingly.

The introduction of YHA as a discretionary payment, made without a means test on parental income, was not considered to require a different approach or process. Students were still required to prove their eligibility via a written application. In addition to the standard Austudy form, YHA applicants were required to complete a separate 'Homeless additional information form' along with their own statement. They were also required to provide written supporting statements from people who were familiar with their personal circumstances.

Administering a discretionary payment was foreign to the departmental culture, which had previously dealt only with objective assessments of a financial nature. The YHA introduced a subjective assessment process to staff who lacked expertise and training in dealing in this area. In addition, staff had little experience in dealing directly with young people. Unlike the DSS, DEET had no established network of social work staff who were able to facilitate the application process. There was no time allowed, nor opportunity offered, for personal interviews in the early years, and applicants were forced to represent their family problems and conflicts in writing. In effect, the administration of the Allowance was incorporated into the established Departmental practices with little consideration given to the special needs of the client group.

Eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria for YHA were extremely rigid and the application process assumed that students would be able to describe their family problems in detail. It also assumed a standard range of experiences or specific incidents that resulted in the young person leaving home. The YHA guidelines were that:

- young people had to prove they had lived away from home continuously for a period of six weeks or more, and then satisfy an assessing officer that their personal circumstances met one of the following conditions:

*there is no parental home; or
the parents will not allow the student to live in that home under any condition; or
it would be unreasonable to expect the student to live with the parents
because of domestic violence, incestuous harassment or comparable
circumstances;*

- in this context, "home" was defined as the home of either or both of the natural or adoptive parents; and
- in addition, the student must not be:

receiving or likely to receive continuous support, either direct or indirect, in cash or in kind, from parents or any other person acting as his or her guardian on a long-term basis; or receiving continuing income support from another Commonwealth Department or a State or Territory Authority.

These guidelines created many difficulties for students trying to articulate the specific and often traumatic causes of their homelessness. The process assumed the same level of literacy and coherence from all applicants between the age of 15 and 24 years. The younger students were disadvantaged, particularly if they lacked the support of an advocate to help them work through the application process. An analysis of the age range of recipients in the first few years indicated that there was a trend for the approval rate of applicants to increase with age. One factor cited in a Departmental policy circular as effecting this trend was the students' ability to document their circumstances (DEET 1988).

Evolution of the YHA

By 1988, there was considerable public criticism concerning the administration of YHA by both Departments. In 1988 the National Youth Coalition for Housing reported the problems which young people encountered gaining income support. It was particularly critical of the strict eligibility criteria, the six-week waiting period, the

inadequacy of the financial support and the bureaucratic processes young people were subjected to in an attempt to gain access to income support. The problems of young homeless students were further complicated by the Department's inability to service their special needs either by ensuring access to appropriately experienced personnel or by adequately publicising the existence of the Allowance.

Internally, the Department failed to allocate sufficient resources to ensure that administrative problems faced by both staff and the client group were adequately addressed. Lengthy turn-around times in the assessment of applications became self-defeating for the scheme as students were forced to leave school due to lack of money.

In response to community pressure and an acknowledgment within the Department that staff lacked expertise in assessing YHA applications, some regional areas of DEET took the initiative to contract some part-time social workers as early as 1987. Their role was to review the written applications and where possible interview the students to establish their eligibility for the allowance. In addition they were to provide recommendations to the senior administrative officers who were, and still are, responsible for the final decision regarding income entitlement. A referral to the social worker was seen as a last resort to resolve the applicant's eligibility.

The National Inquiry into Homeless Children

The publication of the Burdekin report, *Our homeless children*, in February 1989 brought the issue of youth homelessness into the public arena. The dimension of the problem and the failure of social systems to adequately respond to the needs of young people was well documented and publicised. The groundswell of public sentiment imposed some pressure on government departments to examine and evaluate their administrative and service delivery practices.

In response DSS issued a directive that all YHA applicants be interviewed by social workers commencing from the 1 January 1990.

In the Budget of 1989-90, it was announced that, as of 1 January 1990, the waiting period for YHA would be reduced from six weeks to two weeks. In cases involving sexual abuse and domestic violence, where there would be no waiting period.

Internal reviews of YHA

In late 1989 there was a further response. An interdepartmental committee of DEET and DSS recommended that both departments conduct a review of the administration of the YHA, with specific reference to the consistency of approach. A background paper (DEET 1990) asserted that there were inconsistencies across the country as well as between departments. It appeared that DSS had a higher rejection rate than DEET,

indicating they were interpreting eligibility criteria more stringently. DEET, on the other hand, had inconsistent trends across the states, with some centres showing a disproportionately high number of YHA beneficiaries compared with other areas. Concern was expressed at that time that YHA application procedures were being exploited by some applicants. Some areas had more tertiary applicants (usually 18 years and over) than secondary students, which did not reflect the intended priorities of the scheme.

The breadth of the age range has continued to be problematic for DEET policy makers. On one hand it was necessary to make the operational guidelines appropriate for the younger-age range whilst not encouraging older students in post-secondary schooling to take advantage of the guidelines. This situation is still applicable today.

The outcome of these internal reviews resulted in the two Departments adopting different criteria for the allowance in the belief that changes would result in a better targeting of the intended client group.

From 1 January 1991, the waiting period for all YHA was completely removed. DSS recipients gained three additional benefits.

- The criteria for independence were significantly altered with the introduction of independent rate of Job Search Allowance (JSA) for those people aged 18 years and over who had not lived in the home of a parent continuously for six months. This meant a young person was recognised as being independent in their own right after this time.
- YHA beneficiaries (under 18 years) became eligible for rent assistance, though there was an 18-week waiting period.
- DSS extended their criteria in the 'other exceptional circumstances' category to include 'long-term domestic disharmony'.

These improvements in the DSS system created a further anomaly, however. Young people receiving independent rate JSA wishing to return to study could face a financial disincentive. Their independent status would not automatically be accepted by DEET. Intending students had to re-apply and prove that their circumstances met eligibility criteria. The lack of rent assistance for students increased the disparity with JSA beneficiaries.

Formulation of the SHR

The effect of the DEET review of YHA was to accentuate the distinctiveness of the DEET approach from that of DSS. The name of their allowance was changed to the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy (SHR).

DEET chose to replace the categories of 'no family home' and 'not allowed to live at home' with 'extreme family breakdown'. This was in response to a groundswell of opinion within the Department suggesting that the original categories were the most commonly abused by the client group because applicants and their parents were able to simply state they were not allowed to live at home without providing any substantial reasons. It was suggested that the wording of the guidelines and regulations did not adequately reflect the original concept of a complete family breakdown. The introduction of 'extreme family breakdown' was intended to place greater emphasis on the reasons why students were being forced to leave the family home.

DEET policy officers were also mindful of the growth of a parent lobby group which publicly stated that the allowance was too easily obtained and was responsible for breaking up families. The policy changes were therefore also intended to strengthen the commitment to interviewing parents to ensure that all avenues of support were explored before the allowance was paid. This focus also committed DEET to the notion that they had to develop their professional services, as administrative staff considered that they did not have either the time nor the expertise to interview students and families about conflicts at home. The 1991 guidelines therefore acknowledged the need for, and introduced the role of, the social worker at the regional level for the first time.

SHR eligibility criteria

As a result of these changes, from 1 January 1991 students were eligible for the SHR if:

- (i) they are above the minimum school leaving age in their State or Territory ; AND*
- (ii) they do not live at the home of either or both of their natural or adoptive parents because of domestic violence, sexual harassment, serious family breakdown or other exceptional circumstances. (DEET 1991)*

In 1992 the wording of this was further modified to read :

Students qualify for SHR if :

- (i) they do not live at the home of either or both of their natural or adoptive parents because their physical or mental health would be substantially at risk from domestic violence, sexual harassment, extreme family breakdown or other exceptional circumstances; OR*
- (ii) their parents are (or their sole parent is) in prison, or physically or mentally incapacitated, and unable to provide a home or care for the student; AND*

(iii) they do not get financial or other support from either of their natural or adoptive parents or from any other person or organisation on a regular or long-term basis.

“Extreme family breakdown” for SHR purposes means an irreconcilable breakdown or severance of the relationship between the student and other family members. It is to be understood as being similar, in the gravity of its effect upon the student’s physical or mental health, to the consequences of domestic violence or sexual harassment.

It is not possible to assess the seriousness of the “family breakdown” without thorough knowledge of the overall family situation. Therefore, applications on the grounds of “extreme family breakdown” should not be approved unless the health/welfare professional’s statement shows that the student’s situation has been fully investigated.

Other exceptional circumstances means circumstances that actually exist in the parental home which pose a severe threat to the student’s physical, emotional or mental health or well being. This maybe on the basis of criminal activities, physical neglect psychological abuse, abnormal demands, family homelessness. (DEET 1992)

The DSS and DEET considered their changes as a result of their review of YHA to be practical responses to their differing client group needs. However, in reality the situation for young people became confusing and unco-ordinated. There were financial disincentives to return to study, problems of eligibility and continuity of payments when transferring between departments, as well as a different focus on service delivery for independent young people.

Unfortunately for young people, some of the original goals of Priority One were lost to the bureaucratic processes.

Evolution of the SHR

Recent years have seen the SHR evolve somewhat further, particularly in its delivery at local levels and particularly because of a changing policy environment. While some of the earlier delivery problems remain, there has been a gradual convergence between the income support available to homeless students and jobseekers.

Access and delivery

The amalgamation of the Department of Education with Employment and Training in 1987 to form DEET created the potential for a network of offices that could enhance young peoples’ access to Austudy. It was intended that the Commonwealth Employment

Service (CES) network would be used as Austudy lodgement centres, while the Youth Access Centres (YACs) would enhance the quality of service delivery to young people in particular. As the combined network incorporated country areas, it was envisaged this system would provide local access to potential applicants in areas previously serviced by a central administration.

The YACs were originally established to provide young people with a co-ordinated service that provided information on a range of issues including employment, education, income support and community services. However, the YACs have not been sufficiently resourced with specialist staff, such as social workers, to adequately carry out this role in relation to SHR applicants. A comprehensive study conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Thomson 1993) has detailed young peoples' experience of this service delivery system.

Adding responsibilities for education payments to those already handled through the CES network proved problematic and created many tensions within the Department. The CES staff made it clear at the time that this additional responsibility of advising on Austudy applications did not take into account their existing workloads and required them to develop knowledge of a complex scheme that was completely foreign to them.

The Student Financial Advisers Network (1990) in their submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training in 1990 stated that 'CES staff do not appear to be adequately trained and are currently not capable of giving even basic information to students. SFAN believes that DEET needs to make a greater commitment in time and money for training and back up to overcome the current problems with the CES.'

Since the late 1980s DEET has devolved the central administration of the Austudy scheme and established regional areas serviced by Student Assistance Centres (SACs). Each SAC has a network of CES and YAC offices that service local communities. There are now eight SACs around Victoria although Area Country, which services part of rural Victoria, is still located in Melbourne. Each SAC has a contract social worker, specifically engaged to facilitate the administrative process of SHR. The number of hours they are employed is determined by the local needs and priorities of regional managers. The SHR application process has remained essentially the same, however, with the social worker receiving referrals from the administrative officers. This process means the social worker is still at the end of the processing line rather than at the beginning.

The inconsistency between overall policy and actual service delivery is evident in the ad hoc development of services at the regional level.

Policy changes

In 1992 the Government announced that the age at which recipients were viewed as independent from their parents would be progressively lowered from 25 years - to 24 years on 1 January 1993 and 22 years on 1 January 1995. This will reduce the target group for SHR to the 15 to 22 year age group.

In the 1994 Federal budget, the Government extended eligibility for rent assistance to the recipients of SHR from 1 January 1995. For the first time, students were entitled to the same benefits as young people who had left the education system.

The introduction of the Youth Training Initiative, announced as part of the white paper on employment in 1994, sought to address the inconsistencies between departments regarding the eligibility criteria for homeless young people under 18 years old. The Youth Training Allowance was created under the Student and Youth Assistance Act, replacing Job Search Allowance from 1 January 1995. DEET is now responsible for the policy of the Youth Training Initiative and Allowance, and DSS continue to administer the income support program to those young people who have left the mainstream education system.

The eligibility criteria for DSS recipients of what was formerly YHA were modified to reflect the SHR provisions. The eligibility category 'not allowed to live at home' was replaced by 'unreasonable to live at home'. It is envisaged the criteria for all under 18-year-olds will be the same from 1 January 1996.

The effect of these policy changes has been to bring the income support available to homeless students and unemployed young people closer together. A further move towards more systematic support has been to formalise arrangements with state and territory governments.

The State/Territory and Commonwealth Protocol

The introduction of a Protocol between state or territory and Commonwealth governments in 1994 was intended to ensure that the needs of all homeless people under 18 years of age, and particularly for those under 16 years, were adequately met. The agreement between DSS, DEET and the relevant state or territory authority (in Victoria it is the Department of Health and Community Services) seeks to establish referral processes that ensure 'at risk' young people are adequately supported and protected. Prior to its implementation there was significant concern expressed regarding the failure of the state governments to provide sufficient resources to adequately care for and protect young people.

The successful implementation of the Protocol is dependent on appropriate resources being allocated by all departments. The Commonwealth departments now refer all

under 18-year-olds to a social worker for assessment. Clearly, this is a resource-intensive approach requiring utilisation of professional services that has been resisted by DEET to date.

Family mediation pilots

In the 1994 Federal budget, DEET announced the establishment of family mediation pilots from 1 January 1995. The intention of the pilot program was to identify SHR applicants and their families who may benefit from a referral to a community-based service. DEET anticipated this approach could reduce the number of young people leaving home and therefore create potential program savings.

The Morris report

In response to ongoing community concern regarding aspects of income support to young people, the House of Representatives established a Parliamentary Inquiry in 1994. The Committee, chaired by Mr Alan Morris, MP was given wide-ranging terms of reference. These included :

- the availability of family support and welfare services (including mediation services), their role and effectiveness in reducing homelessness and in resolving differences before young people leave home;
- the integration of income support provisions for homeless young people with services that assist family reunion, transition to stable independent living and opportunities for education, training and employment; and
- the appropriateness of income support arrangements for homeless young people, noting the need to not create undue incentives to leave home or school.

The Morris report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995) was tabled in Parliament in June 1995 and comprehensively addressed all aspects of youth policy, income support and services to young people and their families. The Committee made 129 recommendations, 18 of which relate to the administration of income support. The inquiry highlighted the current inadequacies of the dual departmental income support system. The Committee was particularly critical of DEET for its lack of understanding of the client group and its failure to adapt its systems to meet the needs of vulnerable young people. The criticisms included both the external service delivery as well as internal processes related to debt recovery.

Although falling short of recommending that one department be responsible for all income support, the Committee recommended a 'single integrated assessment system which can be accessed by either DSS and/or DEET' (House of Representatives Standing

Committee on Community Affairs 1995, p98). In order to achieve this outcome, DEET would need to completely restructure their current focus and service delivery approach.

Chapter Five of the Morris report outlines the main areas DEET would need to address to effect positive change. Specifically, the report endorses the development of social work services to meet the needs of young people at the beginning of the application process, preferably on the day of the inquiry, rather than the current cumbersome system that relies on referral by administrative officers. All these processes contribute to delays in the assessment of eligibility, leaving the young person without immediate income support.

The Morris report is an important public document that comprehensively addresses issues related to youth. The recommendations seek to restructure and re-focus resources to young people and their families. It should provide the foundation stone for Commonwealth and State youth policy in the future.

Summary

The Priority One strategy was intended to provide a foundation stone for youth policy in Australia from the mid 1980s. The Student Homeless Rate of Austudy (SHR), originally the Young Homeless Allowance, was the income support scheme established to help young people living without the support of their parents to remain at school.

In response to public criticism the strict eligibility criteria for SHR were modified over the years. Most of the reforms, such as the removal of the waiting period, were achieved by 1992; however independent students were ineligible for rent assistance until 1995.

In the early phase DEET experienced many problems administering this allowance. The main reasons for this were the lack of trained staff, a centralised inaccessible service and a cumbersome application process. The younger applicants (under 16 years old) were further disadvantaged by poor publicity regarding their eligibility to apply for income support.

The introduction of the State/Commonwealth protocol of 1994 sought to heighten awareness of the plight of younger homeless applicants and ensure they were adequately supported within the community. The establishment of regional Student Assistance Centres and the employment of contract social workers went part of the way to resolving some of these service delivery problems. Inadequacies in the system still remain as the format of the application process has remained essentially unchanged, however.

The Inquiry into Aspects of Youth Homelessness tabled in Parliament in June 1995 comprehensively addresses all elements of youth policy in Australia. The Inquiry highlighted many inadequacies in the current structure and service delivery systems

affecting young people. The Committee recommended 129 steps to improve services to young people and their families.

Issues for Austudy

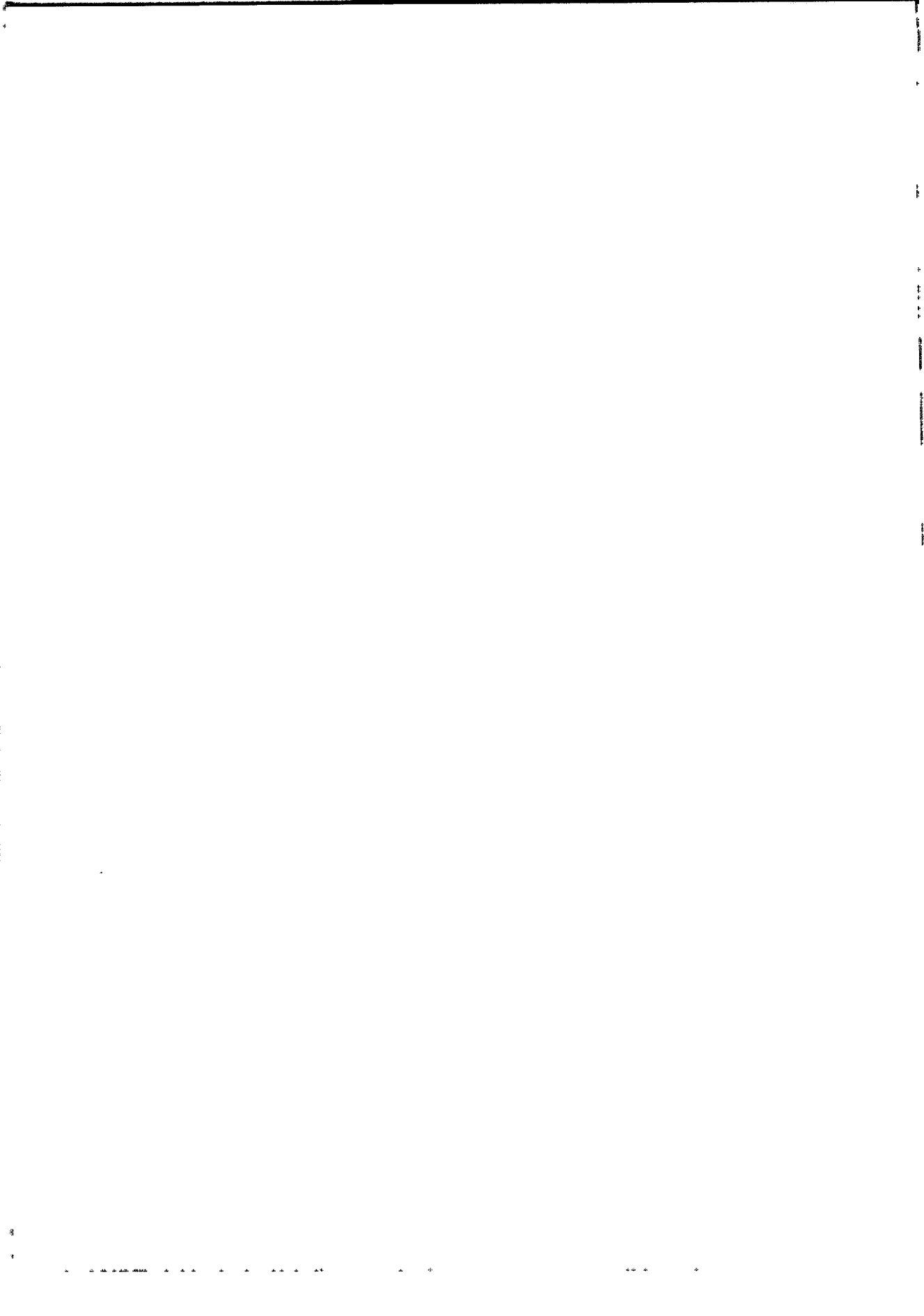
Based on the information discussed in this chapter the following issues arise for Austudy:

The application form

- The 1995 Austudy application form and the additional SHR form make no reference to the eligibility of young people who have reached the minimum school leaving age (15-year-olds in Victoria).

Administration

- The current service delivery model employed by DEET fails to adequately meet the needs of the client group due to the failure to develop appropriately-resourced professional services throughout the SAC and YAC network.



Chapter 3 **The recipients of the Student Homeless Rate**

This chapter provides a profile of Student Homeless Rate (SHR) beneficiaries and examines trends at both national and state levels.

Information presented is drawn both from annual Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) Management Information Systems compilations and from analyses of the DEET client database. No data was available prior to 1988.

The extent of homelessness

Estimating the number of homeless young people in the community has some difficulties. Estimates will depend on which of a number of different definitions of 'homelessness' is used, as well as the sampling approach adopted. The problem of assessing whether youth homelessness is increasing or not has been exacerbated by a lack of consistency regarding the age range of the young people being studied.

Despite these problems, however, even cautious investigators have found there to be significant numbers of homeless students. In 1989 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) estimated there were between 20,000 to 25,000 young people under 18 years without access to the family home.

In May 1991 Mackenzie and Chamberlain (1992) estimated there were between 15,000 to 19,000 homeless young people, with 8,000 to 10,000 of this group between the age of 12 and 18 years.

In May 1994, Mackenzie and Chamberlain (1995) conducted a census of homeless secondary students across Australia. It was estimated that 11,000 secondary students were homeless during this week. The researchers estimated from this data that between 25,000 to 30,000 students experience homelessness during the year.

Numbers of SHR recipients in Australia

SHR beneficiaries are a small group in the Austudy population. Applications for SHR have consistently represented less than 4 per cent of all Austudy applications.

In comparison with the estimates of student homelessness, the numbers of students receiving SHR are also low. Table 1 shows the total numbers of SHR recipients in Australia since 1988.

Table 1 Number of students in receipt of SHR at any time during year, Australia 1988 to 1994

Year	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Number	6,168	8,503	10,949	13,693	16,286	16,450	16,039

Source: DEET Management Information Systems Data 1988-1994.

The number of recipients of SHR shows a steady increase until 1992, when the growth began to slow. The 1994 figures indicate a slight decrease in the total number of SHR recipients compared with 1993. This is contrary to the trend detailed in the work by Mackenzie and Chamberlain (1995), who assert there has been a large increase in homeless numbers.

The adequacy and usefulness of these DEET figures is limited. The numbers are cumulative, showing the total number of recipients who have been on pay at any stage in that year. The figures do not discriminate between continuing students and new applicants. Information is therefore not readily accessible illustrating the trends amongst SHR beneficiaries. Little is known, for example, about the average length of time a student is in receipt of SHR and what happens to them when they are no longer in receipt of payments.

DEET has not regularly made point in time numbers of recipients publicly available. Nor has the Department made available the proportion of applications that have been rejected. Both these issues have important implications for the development of resources at both the inquiry and processing stage. The number of SHR applications lodged also has an impact on the Austudy social work service as, more often than not, the applicant would be referred for further investigation.

Information supplied to the Parliamentary Inquiry indicated that 10,638 students were in receipt of the SHR in April 1994 (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs 1995). Of this group 5,092 were secondary students. This is about half the 11,000 secondary students estimated by Mackenzie and Chamberlain (1995) to be homeless in their census week.

SHR recipiency by states

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of SHR recipients across the states.

Table 2 Australian distribution of SHR recipients expressed in per cent terms

Year	Vic	NSW	QLD	WA	SA	Tas	NT	ACT	Total
1991	26.2	34.1	14.9	6.7	8.5	2.9	0.9	5.9	100.0
1992	28.8	31.3	14.2	6.5	9.1	3.1	1.0	6.0	100.0
1993	29.9	31.8	13.7	6.0	9.1	3.0	1.2	5.3	100.0
1994	32.3	31.9	12.2	6.3	9.4	2.4	1.0	4.5	100.0

Source: DEET Management Information Systems Data 1991-1994.

The distribution of SHR recipients across Australia is in reasonable proportion to population in the various states, with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Northern Territory (NT). The higher proportion of SHR recipients in the ACT has been a source of concern to policy makers over the years, as discussed in Chapter 2, and local knowledge of this phenomenon may have been a factor influencing policy formulation.

The Victorian figures

An examination of the distribution of SHR recipients over time indicates that the number in Victoria is increasing faster than in other States. In 1991 Victoria had 26.2 per cent of the overall numbers of homeless students; however by 1994 this proportion had increased to 32.3 per cent. One explanation for this increase might be the deep and prolonged recession in Victoria that may have contributed to additional stresses on families.

Table 3 shows the total number of SHR recipients in Victoria since 1988.

Table 3 Number of students in receipt of SHR at any time during year, Victoria 1988 to 1994

Year	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Number	1,149	1,759	2,485	3,588	4,683	4,924	5,180

Source: DEET Management Information System Data 1988-1994.

The Victorian figures show a more rapid uptake of SHR than the national figures. Between 1991 and 1992, for example, there was a 30 per cent increase in the number of SHR recipients compared with the national figure of 19 per cent. In 1994, the national

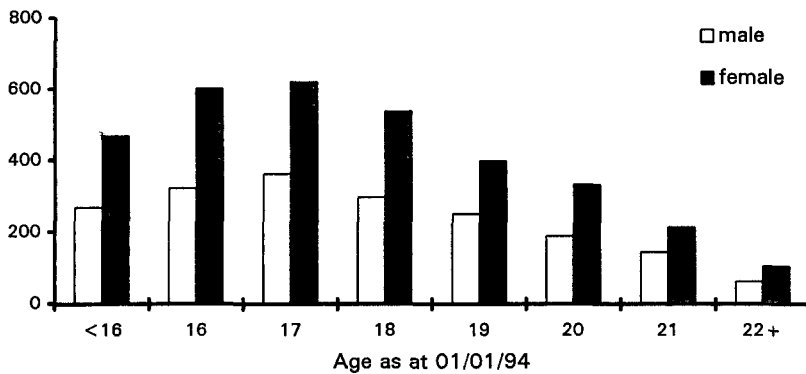
figures indicate a slight decline in the total numbers of SHR beneficiaries, whereas Victorian numbers show an increase of 5 per cent.

Profile of Victorian recipients

Figure 1 shows the age and sex distribution of SHR recipients in Victoria in 1994. These figures are consistent with the national age and gender distribution figures, and show that young women outnumber young men as recipients of SHR in all age groups.

Figure 1

Total number of SHR recipients in Victoria in 1994 by age and gender



Source: DEET database

In 1994, 63 per cent of all SHR recipients in Victoria were female. This has been a consistent trend over the years.

Sixty-seven per cent of SHR students were aged 18 years or younger in 1994, the mean age being 17.7 years. Of that group, 64 per cent were females. Females 18 years and younger represent approximately 43 per cent of all students receiving SHR.

The other major type of data held by DEET on SHR beneficiaries is the category under which they are paid. Table 4 presents the Victorian population of SHR recipients by category of payment.

Table 4 The 1994 Victorian recipients of SHR by category of payment and SAC

SHR	Austudy code	Bendigo	Box Hill	Caulfield	Dandenong	Footscray	Melbourne	Northcote	All
901	Domestic violence	31	83	66	118	110	158	76	642
902	Sexual harassment	10	16	21	25	14	42	8	136
903	Other exceptional circumstances	14	53	105	51	176	152	64	615
905	Transfer from YHA DSS	21	24	48	38	11	48	16	206
906	No Parental responsibility	1	4	-	19	4	29	11	68
908	Psychological abuse	6	8	17	21	18	143	33	246
910	Abnormal demands	3	34	5	5	3	13	9	72
911	Family homelessness	4	5	2	7	2	9	1	30
912	Extreme family breakdown	159	578	464	629	233	664	220	2947
913	Parents medically incapacitated	-	1	3	2	27	5	36	74
	Other ^a	5	10	3	9	1	16	5	49
	No code	21	16	13	12	9	16	8	95
Total		275	832	747	936	608	1295	487	5180

Source: DEET database

a 'Other' includes Austudy categories: 904 Denial of access, 907 Criminal activity, 909 Physical neglect and 914 Parents in prison

Administrative officers are responsible for determining the category under which a student is deemed eligible for SHR payments. Social workers, in providing recommendations, are also obliged to identify the category establishing eligibility. The coding of complex situations—the information provided by the student—into a single category is based on subjective opinions.

'Extreme family breakdown' is the most commonly coded reason establishing a students' eligibility for payment. This covered 56 per cent of all cases in Victoria in 1994. This category is generic in nature and is often the option preferred by administrative officers and social workers as it does not imply that one single issue contributed to the student leaving home.

Table 4 shows some regional variation in categorisation, in the use of 'other exceptional circumstances', for example. This is most likely a reflection of different interpretations of the categories by the SAC staff rather than a reflection of differences in the client group. It highlights the need for regular training and discussion amongst SHR assessors and Austudy social workers with the view to establishing some common ways of interpreting applications and categories of payment.

Summary

Estimating numbers of homeless young people has been the subject of several studies. Most recent findings indicate an increasing number of young people experiencing homelessness in any one year.

The data supplied by DEET does not reflect this trend at a national level. The numbers of students in receipt of SHR has remained relatively constant since 1992. The number of SHR recipients remains significantly lower than estimates of numbers of homeless secondary students.

The data collected and made available by DEET provides only limited information on the profile and history of SHR recipients.

The Victorian figures indicate continued growth in the numbers of SHR beneficiaries.

Females represent approximately 63 per cent of all SHR beneficiaries. Recipients 18 years old and younger represent 67 per cent of all students on pay.

Issues for Austudy

Based on the information discussed in this chapter the following issue arises for Austudy:

Database

- The current collection and processing of data in relation to beneficiaries of SHR is inadequate, because only cumulative year to date figures are published. This system fails to show information such as point in time figures and trends in the average length of time a student is in receipt of the allowance.



Chapter Four **The students**

This chapter introduces the students whose experiences form the main part of this study. It first describes the locale of the study, introducing the socio-demographic characteristics of the region from which the students came. It then introduces the study group, providing a family profile and describing their current circumstances.

The study area

As discussed in Chapter 1, the target group for this study were students from the area serviced by the Dandenong Student Assistance Centre (SAC), which is part of The Department of Employment, Education and Training's (DEET) larger Victoria Area South East. It is an area that covers all of Gippsland and part of south-east Melbourne, and represents four DEET regions (see Figure 2).

The established suburban and industrial area of *Springvale* is one region. The burgeoning growth corridor from Dandenong to Pakenham, including Wonthaggi and Phillip Island, is another, known as the *Dandenong* region. *East Gippsland* covers the high country, coastal and rural areas to the Victorian border. South Gippsland and the industrial and service centres of the La Trobe Valley comprise the DEET *La Trobe* region.

The study area includes a diverse range of living situations, from isolated rural communities to well-serviced urban centres. The range of lifestyles and socio-economic circumstances is equally diverse; with the exception of inner-urban Melbourne, the study area offers a chance to capture the diversity of young people's experiences across Victoria.

Population

The study area had an estimated population of 525,623 in 1991.

According to data presented by the Office of Labour Market Adjustment (DEET 1994), the growth rate in the *Dandenong* region between 1986 and 1991 was 19.6 per cent, compared to the state and national growth rates of 5.6 per cent and 8 per cent

respectively, and this is indicative of the rapid development activity in the growth corridor through Berwick and Pakenham. Population growth in the *La Trobe* region approximated that of the state average over the same period, with some losses in the La Trobe Valley and South Gippsland.

The population age structure for the study area as a whole is generally similar to the state and national averages. However, the *Dandenong* region has a relatively younger population, reflecting younger households in the growth corridor, and a markedly lower proportion in the over 55 year-old age group. In contrast, the *La Trobe* and *East Gippsland* regions have a lower proportion in the 20-24 year-old group, which may reflect the need for young adults to travel beyond the region for further education and/or employment opportunities. This loss of population is also significant in the 15-19 year-old and 45+ year-old age groups, which may reflect the substantial job losses and retrenchments experienced in the region since the late 1980s.

Dandenong and *Springvale* combined have a significantly higher proportion of the population (35 per cent) coming from a non-English speaking background (NESB) than the Victorian and national (24 per cent) averages. Conversely *La Trobe* and *East Gippsland* have a much lower NESB/overseas born population (12 per cent).

Employment

Economic activity in the study area reflects the impact of industry restructure, the decline of manufacturing and the general downturn of the Victorian economy in the early 1990s.

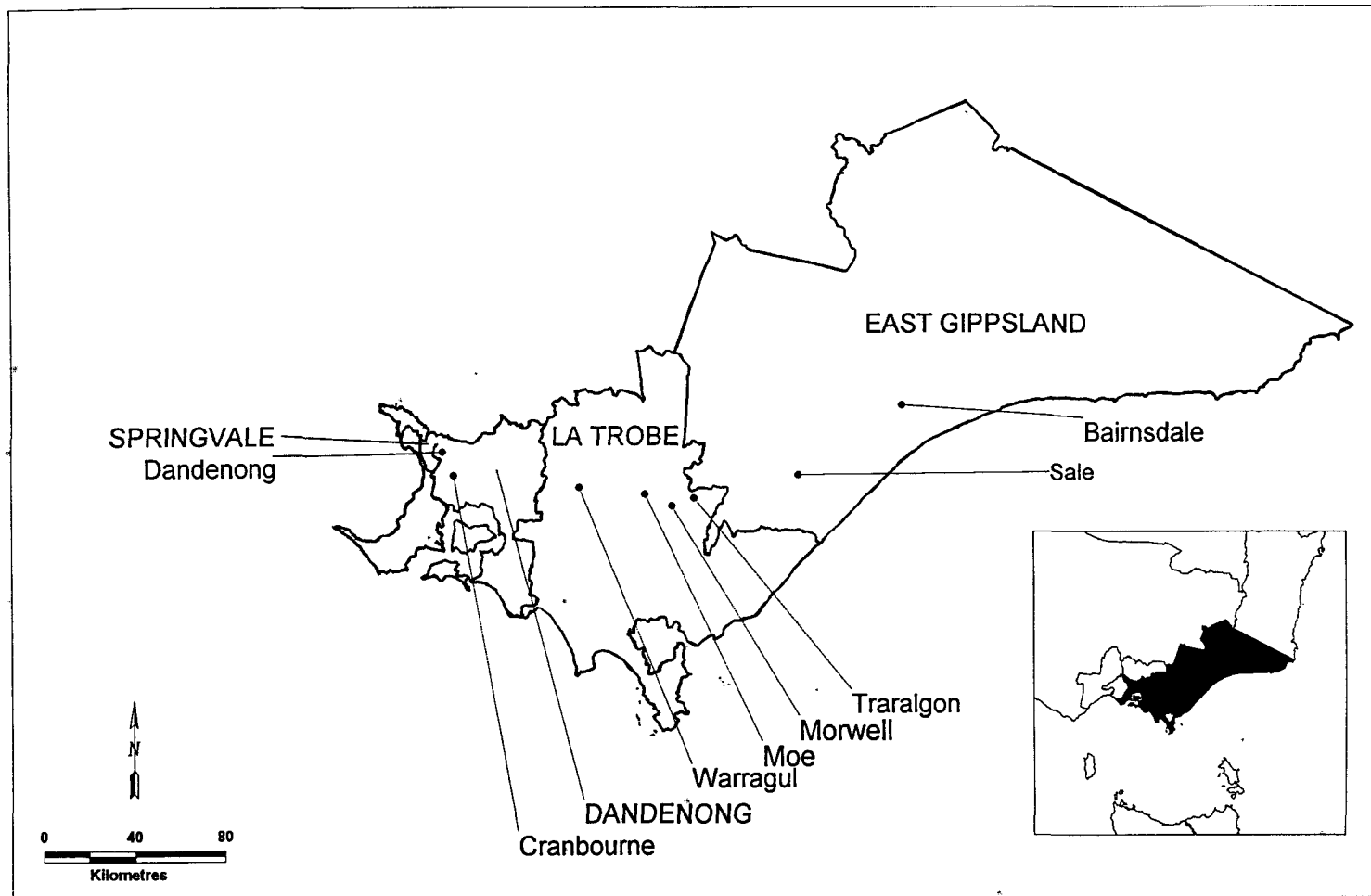
The unemployment rate in June 1993 for *La Trobe* and *East Gippsland* regions, at 15.9 per cent, was significantly higher than the state (12 per cent) and national (10.8 per cent) averages. At that time the heavy impact of retrenchments in the region was evident: 5.8 per cent of persons had lost their job, compared to the national average of 3 per cent. This trend has continued since then with the down sizing of the public sector and the power industry.

In May 1993, these regions together also had a higher proportion of teenagers who were full-time unemployed (11.3 per cent) than the national average (8.1 per cent). They further had a high unemployment rate for young adults (19.5 per cent) compared with a national rate of 11.2 per cent.

By contrast, the *Dandenong* and *Springvale* regions had unemployment rates for teenagers and young adults that were lower than both the state and national averages.

The resurgence and diversification of the dairy industry and tourism development are positive features in some specific parts of the *La Trobe* region. There has also been an expansion and upgrading of tertiary institutions in the La Trobe Valley which has

Figure 2 Map of study area



improved local access to higher education and training and also created further employment options within the institutions.

Education

The proportion of teenagers (of 15-19 years old) attending school full-time reflected the state average (55.1 per cent) in May 1993 and is higher than the national average (49 per cent).

The population has a significantly lower proportion with a degree or higher qualification (4.4 per cent for *La Trobe and East Gippsland* regions and 5.0 per cent the *Dandenong and Springvale* regions) compared with the state-wide (8.4 per cent) and national (7.6 per cent) averages. *Dandenong and Springvale* also had a lower proportion (3.6 per cent) of the adult population with a diploma level education.

In keeping with these low tertiary figures, *Dandenong and Springvale* (65.1 per cent) and *La Trobe and East Gippsland* (63.7 per cent) had higher proportions of the population without any post-secondary qualifications than the state or national averages (61.9 per cent and 61.1 per cent respectively). Tertiary education attendance is likely to be influenced, amongst other things, by the location of higher education institutions and the associated need for many students to live away from home. This may explain the significantly lower proportion of young adults aged 20-24 years at full-time tertiary study in the area compared with the state and national averages. However, while the *Dandenong and Springvale* regions also had a low percentage of teenagers at tertiary institutions (12.4 per cent), the *La Trobe and East Gippsland* region, at 17.2 per cent, approximated the state and national averages (17.2 per cent and 16.3 per cent). This disparity could be attributed to teenagers choosing tertiary options within these regions while maintaining dependence on family for accommodation and financial support.

In the skilled vocational category, known previously as 'trade qualifications', the study area exceeded the state and national averages. It is worth noting, however, that it is this occupational group that has experienced a high proportion of retrenchments in the region.

The students

Chapter 1 of this report set out the rationale for and method of assembling the study sample. The target group was 1994 Year 12 students who had been in receipt of SHR for a year or more.

Table 5 shows that the Dandenong SAC, which serves the entire study region, had responsibility for some 97 such students on 31 May 1994, some 17 per cent of the total Victorian numbers. This is a slightly higher number than would be expected on the

Table 5 Victorian target population—Year 12 students in 1994 who had been in receipt of payments in 1993

SHR	Austudy code	Northcote	Melbourne	Box Hill	Caulfield	Dandenong	Footscray	Bendigo	TOTAL
901	Domestic violence	14	21	14	13	16	12	6	96
902	Sexual harassment	2	5	2	1	2	1	1	14
903	Other exceptional circumstances	6	20	6	12	5	25	-	74
905	Transfer from YHA DSS	2	4	2	1	2	1	2	14
906	No parental responsibility	3	3	-	-	1	1	-	8
908	Psychological abuse	2	14	-	-	3	-	3	22
910	Abnormal demands	1	-	1	1	-	1	-	4
911	Family homelessness	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
912	Extreme family breakdown	22	62	53	35	67 ^a	39	14	292
913	Parents medically incapacitated	4	1	-	-	-	5	-	10
	Other ^b	-	7	3	-	-	-	-	10
	No code	-	3	1	2	1	2	1	10
	Total	56	140	83	65	97	87	27	555

Source: DEET database retrieval for students on pay as at 31 May 1994

a A further eight were subsequently identified on a second database retrieval exercise conducted on 31 August 1994.

b Other includes Austudy categories: 904 Denial of access, 907 Criminal activity, and 909 Physical neglect.

basis of population alone, but may reflect both the higher school attendance rates of teenagers in the area.

All the 35 young people interviewed for the study were enrolled to commence their Year 12 studies in the Victorian education system at the beginning of 1994. Twenty-nine of the 35 young people completed their Year 12 in 1994. Five discontinued their studies during the year, while one young man intended to complete extra subjects at Year 12 in 1995.

Age and gender

Table 6 shows the composition of the group by age and gender. The majority of the young people were female and were under 18 years old.

Table 6 Age of the students by gender

Age at 1 January 1994	Male	Female	Total
16 years old	2	7	9
17 years old	6	9	15
18 years old	1	6	7
19 years old	1	3	4
Total	10	25	35

Income

Thirty-three of the group had been in receipt of SHR of Austudy while they were living away from home and attending school. One young man was deemed ineligible and was in receipt of the maximum means-tested dependent rate (\$129.80 per fortnight), while one young woman considered herself ineligible and had therefore not applied for SHR. She had left home of her own accord and was financially independent.

Table 7 shows the students' sources of income.

Table 7 Sources of income by gender and by age

Income source	Gender			Age group		
	Male	Female	Total	Under 18	Over 18	Total
SHR only	5	16	21	10	11	21
SHR plus job	1	6	7	4	3	7
YHA (DSS) ^a	1	2	3	3	-	3
DSS plus other ^b	2	-	2	1	1	2
Other	1	1	2	2	-	2
Total	10	25	35	20	15	35

a Job Search Allowance (JSA) plus Young Homeless Allowance

b one student had casual job, the other had been in receipt of an annuity

Twenty-one students were totally dependent on SHR. The five young people who had left school were required to transfer their income support from DEET to Department of Social Security (DSS). Those young people under the age of 18 years automatically transferred to the YHA. This is an additional payment to JSA raising the income support to the equivalent SHR amount. Those over 18 years received the JSA at the adult rate.

In 1994, the SHR of Austudy was \$218.40 per fortnight for 16 and 17-year-olds, and \$241.50 for those 18 years and above. This discrepancy disadvantages younger students, as they received \$23.10 a fortnight less than others. Seven young students were able to supplement their income via casual jobs. However, many reported that having to engage in this activity seriously hampered their study time.

Location and completion of studies

As mentioned earlier, a number of the students did not complete Year 12. Effort is made in this study to examine the differences between this group and the larger group who did complete their secondary schooling.

The students came from all parts of the study area and attended 23 schools. Half lived in areas more than 40 kms from the Melbourne Central Business District, most of these living in regional centres in the La Trobe Valley, while a small number resided in country towns in the Gippsland region.

Table 8 shows the profile of the group by geographic location.

Table 8 Location of student by completion of school and gender

Location	Completed Year 12		Discontinued Year 12		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Metropolitan ^a	5	11	2	-	18
Non-Metro	2	12	1	2	17
Total	7	23	3	2	35

^a Metropolitan is defined as within 40kms of the Melbourne Central Business District.

Family background

Students came from a variety of backgrounds in terms of parents' place of birth and ethnicity, marital status and educational achievement.

Ethnicity

Table 9 gives a profile of the group by parental birthplace, gender and school completion.

Table 9 Family background of the students by school completion and gender

Parents born	Completed Year12		Discontinued Year 12		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Overseas	4	10	-	-	14
In Australia	3	13	3	2	21
Total	7	23	3	2	35

Various ethnic groups were represented in the study. They ranged from long-established groups such as Italians and Dutch to more recent arrivals from Vietnam and Cambodia, Africa and the Pacific region. Three families were from New Zealand.

Fourteen respondents came from families where at least one parent was born overseas. Seven participants were themselves born overseas with the eighth being born in Australia but living most of his life abroad.

In seven of the 14 families with an overseas-born parent, English was not the spoken language in the family home. They tended to be the families who had arrived within the past 10 years, and included all the male participants.

For the remainder of the report the 11 participants who had at least one parent born in non-English speaking countries will be referred to as the NESB group.

Eight young people reported that they had an older sibling who had previously been expelled from the family home under similar circumstances. A further five students left their parental home with a sibling, all of whom became beneficiaries of either SHR or YHA from DSS. One-third of the group represented the eldest child in the family, and another five were only children.

Table 10 shows the marital status of the parents.

Table 10 Marital status of parents

Marital Status	Number
Intact	12
Single parent	1
Separated	5
Widowed	5
Widowed/re-married	3
Separated/re-partnered	8
Total	34

Note: the number of reports is as less than the number of students as participants include two siblings. Information is based on situation of major custodial parent, which in all cases was the home in which the students last resided.

One-third of the group had parents who were living together, while another third came from 'blended families' where their parent had established a relationship with another person. In a number of cases, parents had re-partnered in several separate instances. The remaining third lived in a home where, for a variety of reasons, there was only one parent.

Table 11 shows the educational achievement of parents.

Table 11 Educational achievement of natural parents

Education	Number
No schooling	1
Primary	5
Lower Secondary: to Year 10	34
Higher Secondary: to Year 11/Year 12	9
Tertiary	11
Not known	8
Total	68

Note: the number of observations is only 68 (rather than 70) as group includes two siblings.

The educational backgrounds of the parent group show that 40 of the 68 parents had obtained Year 10 or less, with six parents having either no schooling or primary level only. Three young people reported that one of their parents had returned to education in the past few years and is currently studying to achieve a standard of Year 12 or higher.

The vast majority of students had therefore achieved a higher standard of education than their parents.

Work and income

Seven young people stated that the parent(s) with whom they were last living were totally dependent on DSS benefits. The other young people came from households where at least one adult was working full-time, with one-third having both adult figures engaged in some type of paid employment. This was usually of a skilled or unskilled nature (rather than professional).

Living conditions away from home

Almost all students had been living away from home for the twelve months or more prior to completing their Year 12.

Table 12 shows the length of time that the young people had been living away from home.

Table 12 Length of time since students left home, by age and by gender

Length of time	Age		Total	Gender		Total
	16-17	18+		Male	Female	
Less than 12 months	3	1	4	3	1	4
12 mths to 23 mths	15	4	19	4	15	19
24 mths to 35 mths	2	2	4	2	2	4
36 mths or more	4	4	8	1	7	8
Total	24	11	35	10	25	35

Note: students' age is as at 1 January 1994. Length of time since leaving homes is as at December 1994.

The average age for leaving home was 16½ years. Twelve participants had been away from home for more than two years, with half of this group being under 18 years old at the beginning of their Year 12 school year. More than half this group had left their parents' home before they were 15½ years old, with three moving away at 14 years of age. Only one of these three 14-year-olds was known to, or ever referred to, the Department of Health and Community Services (H&CS), the Victorian department

responsible for the welfare of young people under 15 years old.

Distance from the family home

Table 13 gives details of the distance the young people are currently living from their parental home.

Table 13 Distance living from parental home, December 1994, by completion of schooling and gender

Distance	Completed Year 12		Discontinued Year 12		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Within 2 km	3	5	-	-	8
2 km - 5 km	-	7	2	1	10
6 km - 10 km	1	3	-	-	4
11 km - 20 km	1	6	-	-	7
21 km or more	2	2	1	1	6
Total	7	23	3	2	35

Twenty-two young people were residing within 10 km of the parental home, and have remained within their known community. This issue and others related to family are discussed in the following Chapter 5.

Current accommodation

Table 14 shows the variety of accommodation the young people were living in at the time of interview.

Table 14 Accommodation arrangements of students by gender

Accommodation	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Self-rented private	3	10	13
Self-rented public	1	3	4
Boarding with relatives	2	3	5
Boarding privately	3	2	5
Supported accommodation	-	8	8
Total	9	26	35

Note: supported accommodation category includes both youth housing schemes and adolescent community placement.

Twelve young people were housed in subsidised housing including supported accommodation and Ministry of Housing units and houses. The privately rented facilities ranged from a caravan situated in a caravan park, to flats, units and houses.

Table 15 shows the amount of rent paid per week by gender and age.

Table 15 Rent paid per week by gender and by age of students

Amount	Gender			Age		
	Male	Female	Total	<18 years	18+ years	Total
None	2	-	2	2	-	2
\$1-20	-	4	4	4	-	4
\$21-40	3	9	12	7	5	12
\$41-60 ^a	3	11	14	9	5	14
\$61+	2	1	3	2	1	3
Total	10	25	35	24	11	35

^a includes four respondents whose payment included full board.

At the time of interview, 11 participants aged under 18 years were paying more than \$41 per week, compared with six respondents over 18 years. They were living in a variety of situations. The three young people paying in excess of \$61 per week were all renting privately, with two living with a friend and one living alone. Two were from country towns where there had been restricted choice. The two males paying no board were living with relatives.

The younger group were significantly disadvantaged, as they were contributing a higher proportion of their income to rent, being entitled to a lower rate of SHR.

Nine students were totally dependent on SHR and could not access subsidised housing.

Summary

The 35 young people who participated in the study came from a diverse geographic region. Eighteen young people lived in metropolitan areas while 17 lived more than 40 km from Melbourne.

The participants were enrolled in 23 schools, with five discontinuing during their Year 12 studies. The majority of the group had either SHR or YHA as their only source of income.

One-third of the group came from families where at least one parent was born

overseas. The parents in 12 students' families were married, 11 re-partnered following a death or separation and 11 were single-parent households. The majority of parents had achieved an educational level of Year 10 or less.

Twelve young people had been away from home for more than two years, with the majority (19) having lived away from home for at least 12 months but less than two years. Most of the students (22 out of 35) lived within 10 km of their parental home, and had remained within their known community.

Seventeen participants were living in self-rented accommodation, with 13 of these in the private rental sector. Eight participants were living in supported accommodation with the remainder of the group boarding with either relatives or other families.

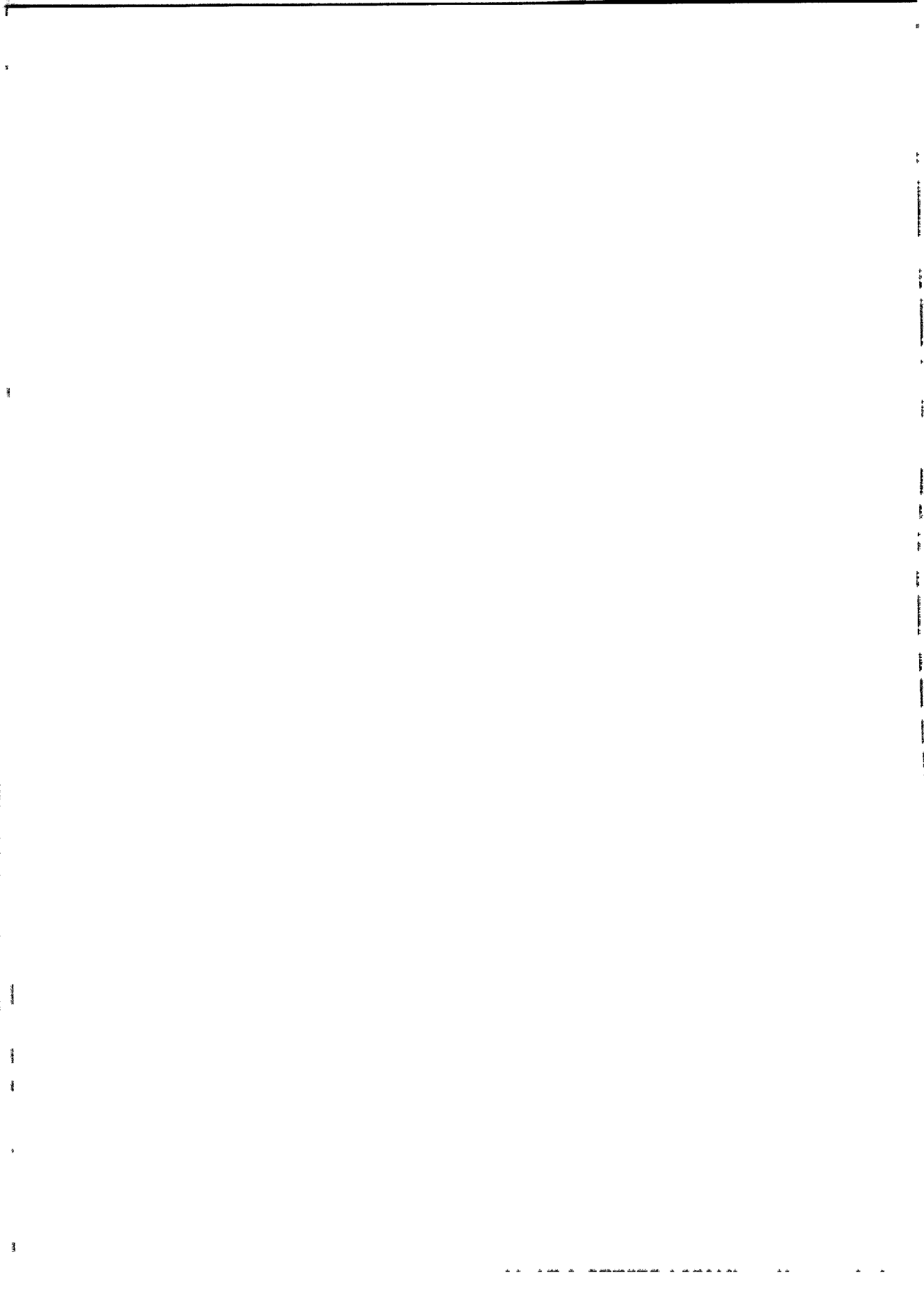
The amount of rent or board paid per week ranged from none to more than \$61 per week, with the majority contributing between \$21 and \$60 per week.

Issues for Austudy

Based on the information discussed in this chapter the following issue arises for Austudy:

Payments for students younger than 18 years

- The discrepancy in payments between those for the younger students and those 18 years and older assumes that the daily living expenses of the younger group are cheaper.



Chapter 5 **The family**

This chapter examines the changing nature of the young people's relationship with their natural family, from the time when they were living at home to the current situation. All the young people were asked to describe in some detail their perceptions of their family situation while they were living in the family home. Each respondent was asked to complete a series of concentric circles identifying their support networks at the time they were living with their parents. They were asked who they went to when they needed help of any type. They were later asked to repeat the exercise to reflect the situation at the time of interview. The reasons for leaving home and the manner in which they left were discussed, as were their feelings and perceptions of their family situation since they left. It was of particular interest to examine how young people had come to terms with their family circumstances and how they re-connected, if at all, with their family unit.

The majority of young people reflected on a combination of problems and conflicts that were adversely affecting their family's ability to function adequately at the time they were resident there. These factors included pressures that were external to the family unit, such as economic stress and work-related pressures, as well as internal factors, such as abuse, various addictive habits, adjustments to marital separations, marital stress or difficulties in interpersonal communication. The majority of young people perceived these problems to have been in existence for more than two years, and they believed with hindsight that leaving home was inevitable and the only alternative. The final act of either being expelled from the family residence, or agreeing to leave, or planning to leave, was usually related to a specific, sometimes seemingly trivial incident that was the culmination of all the family pressures at the time.

Most young people reported a degree of anguish about their family circumstances and the manner in which they had superficially resolved their differences. The act of leaving home had lessened the immediate pressure within the home, but had by no means helped individuals within the family unit resolve their longer-term problems. This was particularly evident in the case of those young people who had witnessed the same pattern with other siblings.

Why the students left home

So as to understand why young people leave home, the respondents were asked to describe the circumstances in the household in which they had been living. These discussions elicited greater detail about the total family interaction than by focusing on the one specific incident that forced them to leave.

Asked to summarise the possible reasons for leaving home from a list of 14 options, the young people tended to choose various combinations of three factors that contributed to a build up of family pressures. These findings are summarised in Table 16. The categories presented were selected as they most closely related to the Student Homeless Rate (SHR) of Austudy eligibility criteria.

Table 16 Reasons cited for leaving home

Category	Number of responses	Category	Number of responses
Poor communication	28	Money	5
Physical abuse	16	Psychological abuse	3
Emotional abuse	16	Cultural barriers	2
Chronic drug/alcohol abuse	8	Sexual abuse	2
Problems with step-parents	9	Other: domestic pressure ^a	2
Issues of rules and discipline	7	Health problems	1
Lack of support for study	5	Settlement issues	1

^a Unreasonable parental expectations in relation to domestic duties.

Note: Respondents could cite more than one reason.

Because the information provided by the participants was complex and generally involved a combination of the categories identified in the table, the data is presented in a descriptive manner, under general headings. This thematic approach illustrates the family situations in which conflict arises.

Communication problems

Unsatisfactory communication was identified by 28 of the 35 respondents as being an underlying factor in their family conflicts. This was typically described by the respondents as a lack of understanding of them and their needs. Issues ranged from parents' inability to acknowledge children's changing needs as they developed a greater sense of 'self' and independence, through to a limited understanding of the range of pressures young people face as students. Several described their parent(s) as strong personalities who maintained a desire to control and own the household.

Seventeen respondents specifically cited inflexible attitudes by at least one of their parents as the reason why they felt pessimistic about resolving their family conflicts while they lived there. In some cases these attitudes did not change when they left home and this remained a significant factor in the young person's ability to maintain a relationship with their parents.

Some young people felt that their parents were totally engrossed in their own situation and were simply incapable of appreciating the point of view of others in their households. For example, seven parents were identified as having a diagnosed psychiatric condition which adversely affected their ability to relate to other family members.

Abuse—emotional, physical or psychological

Half the group cited emotional abuse as being one of the factors that resulted in their leaving home. This was characterised by verbal abuse such as name-calling and denigrating remarks. This was cited by some of those who also identified physical abuse.

While emotional abuse is inevitably more difficult to define, it is significant that it was rated equally with physical abuse.

Half of the group indicated that they had experienced a degree of physical violence in their family household and identified this as one of the main reasons why they left home. There were several common themes in the reports of family violence.

One theme is that of the household that has experienced chronic problems, with the young person reporting that their family has endured the pattern of violence throughout their lives. The young people in this situation, however, have invariably grown to realise that this is not necessarily something to be tolerated by them or other family members.

A second theme is the household that for some reason has experienced serious pressure—either external or internal to the family unit—which manifested itself in bouts of violence previously not known to family members.

In nine of the family situations where violence was identified, the perpetrator of the violence was an adult male figure—either the father, step-father or the de facto partner. In the remaining seven families, the perpetrator was the mother or step-mother. In eight of these 16 cases, the young person had related these violent episodes to other addictive behaviours, such as drug and alcohol abuse:

My Dad gambled a lot and drank a lot so when he came home drunk that really wasn't pleasant and stuff. So he would get violent and stuff like that ... he drank every weekend but he didn't hit all the time but it felt like it.

Most of the violent men were reported as having experienced significant economic stress or work-related pressures in the 12 months leading up to the young person leaving home. One parent had been retrenched, another had gone bankrupt, and two were in low-income occupations where the availability of money always appeared to be a problem. Two fathers were engaged in high-pressure occupations, which the young people said adversely affected their stress level at home.

Three of the seven violent women had been single parents for an extended period of time. They all faced financial problems, and on reflection the young people perceived that their parent was very frustrated with their circumstances:

For 14 years Mum's always done it on her own. She got frustrated with us, instead of Mum yelling or grounding us or taking away privileges Mum used to kick into us or hit into us. Mum never drank, she just has too much on herself and just used to take her anger out on us kids.

Ongoing violence proved to be particularly distressing to young people where it involved men attacking their female partners. Four young women described long-standing situations where their mothers were being abused but, for whatever reason, were unable to seek help or move away from the relationship on a permanent basis. In all four cases, the prospect of marital separation had been discussed between the mother and daughter, but the adult—although acknowledging the teenager's point of view—was not able to make that final decisive move herself. Some of the families had separated on a temporary basis, but the mother eventually returned to the abusive partner.

The outcome in these cases was that the young people left for reasons of their own safety, leaving their mothers behind. This situation left them feeling perplexed and disappointed as, given the choice, the young people would have preferred to stay with their non-abusive parent:

Five times they had their arguments and she was going to leave, stuff like that. At the time of me wanting to go they had resolved their arguments. I wanted to go. Mum had a house and everything but she just didn't have the bond for it.

The remaining four young people reported that they were often hit by their parent as a means of resolving family disputes related to issues of rules and discipline around the home. These issues included such things as curfew times, and the young person's desire to pursue an independent social life or an independent identity:

Dad took my side a lot of the times and Mum was threatening to leave him if he took my side. She left home. She went to live with her mum and dad and my sister and Dad hated me for that so I said listen I'm going to leave home so Mum can come back sort of thing. Basically I was always forced to leave home. It wasn't a family environment at all not that I could see a family environment. She came at me with a

knife one day chasing me around the house with a broom and mop just things like that just because I disagreed with her. She was always comparing me to other kids. Why can't you be more like her and like I'd go but I'm not like her I'm me you know. I have my own mind and live for myself. This is what I want to do and my beliefs were totally different from theirs. I knew what they were teaching me was wrong.

Issues with step-families

In 'blended family' situations involving violent step-mothers, two young people described a circumstance of intense dislike by this adult figure of the step-children. Although the majority of the acts were committed in the absence of the natural father, the young women involved expressed great disappointment that their father offered little support to them or any hope that things might improve. As in the cases of family violence discussed above, they were left with a feeling that their parent had chosen their partner over their own children:

My step-mother only belts you when my Dad is not home and you know you can't say anything when he comes.... I don't know. Like one day he went to work and she locked the door and everything and she started bashing my sister up. It was really bad. Like we tried to get the keys but she wouldn't let us get the keys."

Did your Dad really appreciate what it was like?

No. We try to tell him. I don't know. He was always quiet you know and it seemed like he couldn't do much. She was always in control. We were really young too. Every time we tried to tell him my step-mother would say we were dobbing. We just don't bother anymore.

Nine of the 11 young people living in blended families reported problems with their step-parent. Three of those family units completely broke down in circumstances of violence as discussed above. The remaining six related their problems to a lack of understanding of each other, and general resentment that their natural parent appeared to take the side of their partner over the children. This situation was particularly evident in circumstances where the young person had grown up in a single-parent household for an extended period of their lives. These dynamics led to situations where the young person felt very resentful and unwanted:

Me and my step-father didn't get along. Eventually it turned out that Mum started taking his side and I wasn't getting along well with her. Everything I did five minutes late, coming home from the street, if I said I'd be back at 11.30 and I was back at 11.35. Got my arse kicked. Everything. If I had my music up too loud or if I had my music on, or if everything. I used to just take it and say yeah yeah or whatever. But now towards the end of it I just got so sick I just ended up in raving arguments with him and Mum. Just full-on arguments and I'd end up walking out of the house or

just go to my room. The biggest thing was money. Step-father didn't like having to pay for me, he didn't think it was his responsibility.

Death of a parent

Eight parents had experienced the death of a partner. The impact of this circumstance varied, depending on the age of the child at the time of death. Three students were adversely affected by this circumstance, and identified this as the turning point in their lives. Although the situations were completely different, the three young people shared the same experience of the surviving parent being unable to effectively manage this tragedy, and consequently the children suffered. One young person was continually blamed for creating stress that contributed to the death of the parent, while another's parent secretly courted and re-married without any discussion with the children.

Economic hardship

Those young people who had been living in a single-parent household - in most cases, with their mother - faced a combination of problems. Economic stress was reported to have a major impact on these households, particularly in the circumstances where the parent was a long-term Department of Social Security (DSS) beneficiary or engaged in unskilled work. Parents facing this type of financial hardship were more often than not unable to fully support the young person in pursuit of their academic aspirations. Poor study conditions were noted by some as a continual point of conflict.

Many of the young people who had been away from home for an extended period were able to reflect back on their family situation and identify the degree of frustration their single parent must have endured. The economic and emotional stress experienced by them was perhaps one aspect of family life that had not been fully appreciated by all parties at the time. Those factors also impacted on the young person in relation to domestic responsibilities and the minding of younger siblings. Conflict was apparent when both parties could not come to a reasonable arrangement that accommodated the individual needs of all the family.

Sexual abuse

Five young women cited experiences of sexual abuse during the course of the interview process. Only two attributed leaving home to these experiences, and it was the manner in which the disclosures were handled that provoked the exit from the parental home. The perpetrator in the other three cases was a member of the immediate family, and the issue had not been disclosed until some time later.

One family is still unaware of these allegations, while another has had this information disclosed since the young person left home. A further two families who

were informed of the situation while the young woman was still at home were disbelieving and, despite referrals to the police and charges being laid, have still not offered support to the young person. In that predicament, the young person was forced to leave the family home, as interpersonal relationships were completely divided and hostile. One young woman's family has tried to address the issue in a more constructive manner via therapy. However, the issues proved to be very complex and she eventually left home to preserve her own health and well-being.

In all five cases the degree of anguish suffered by these young women has meant that they have sought individual counselling since they left home. Several commented that these experiences have significantly affected their ability to trust men and relate to their boyfriends.

Four of these five cases were not reported as part of the Austudy application process, which gives considerable weight to the argument that there is significant under-reporting of this particular issue in the official statistics.

Long-term family dislocation

Two young people experienced long-term family dislocation, particularly in their first ten years of life. Long periods of time away from their natural parents, either in foster care or with extended family members, had left these young people with a feeling of insecurity within their natural family unit. Various attempts to re-integrate them had failed, and the young people were left feeling they were to blame. In one case, there had been extensive involvement by the state government authority, but various attempts to reconcile the differences had achieved no positive outcomes, as the young person considered that the sessions focused on her as a 'problem', rather than on addressing the broader issues of their lack of communication. Describing these Health & Community Services (H&CS) worker's sessions she said:

I never felt comfortable enough with them to say to them well this is what she does to me how do you think I feel ... it all seemed so job-like.

The other young woman felt unloved and unwanted, and she was unable to resolve that feeling of alienation at the time. A lack of understanding of each other, and poor communication, led to a complete breakdown in the fragile family dynamics:

I knew she never really wanted to be a mother. Yeah she always told me that.

Other reasons for leaving home

Two young people related part of their conflicts at home to cultural barriers. Both expressed the opinion that their parents' beliefs and parenting style were very inflexible and significantly influenced by their own upbringing in another country. They considered

this style was very old fashioned and their parents had not adjusted to the Australian way of life. In one case the parents arrived more than 20 years ago whilst the other family arrived in Australia in 1981.

In contrast, settlement created problems for one young man who arrived in 1992. The stress associated with relocating a large refugee family became too much for him.

Excessive and unreasonable demands regarding domestic duties were cited by two young people from a non-English-speaking background (NESB). Both considered their parents had too great an expectation about the amount of domestic responsibility they could manage around the home. In one case, the young woman was expected to constantly mind her younger siblings, while the other was required to perform all the household chores in place of his mother who was no longer living in the family home.

How they left home

Table 17 summarises the manner in which young people left home.

Table 17 How the young people left home by gender

How left	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Expelled	2	7	9
Planned	5	8	13
Left after argument	3	8	11
H&CS	-	2	2
Total	10	25	35

One third of the group (13) had given some thought to leaving home and in some way planned to go. This usually followed a total feeling of pessimism that the family was unable to overcome the recurring problems.

Six respondents from this group had had intensive counselling over an extended period. These processes had not effected change so the young person had concluded the only way to escape the problems was to leave.

Interestingly, six of the other seven were NESB young people. In the young people's opinion seeking help for the family as a whole was unlikely to ever be acceptable. The other young man had some medical problems, which he was aware affected his tolerance levels and in so doing made him difficult to live with.

Seven of the 13 young people who planned to leave met no resistance to the idea of leaving the family home. Some had warned at least one of the parents of the impending move, while others left more on the spur of the moment, when the opportunity arose.

Most often this was when they had some immediate access to shelter. However, it did not necessarily mean they had made longer-term plans to gain income support.

Twenty-two young people had left home in overtly hostile circumstances. That is, they were either expelled, removed by H&CS or fled after a serious incident. The turmoil created by such circumstances often resulted in the young people facing chaos and becoming highly agitated. They usually had minimal personal and material possessions which further complicated their situation, especially in terms of attending school. Regaining access to possessions left behind was a further problem which sometimes required either a covert operation, or protected access using either the police or a community worker. This action often led to a further inflammation of the families' problems.

Family supports prior to the young person leaving home

From the students' descriptions of their network of supports, obtained via the concentric circle exercise, the majority of young people relied more on informal networks than formal (or professional) ones during the time they were living with their family.

Six young people left their circles blank, saying they were completely isolated and had not discussed their family problems with anyone. A further 21 stated that the only people on whom they regularly relied to help them through family conflicts were friends and other family members. In this situation family members included the extended family network from other households, such as aunts, uncles and grandparents.

Only eight respondents had formed an attachment to a professional worker and nominated them in one of their circles. Seven of the eight were counsellors associated with school-based services—either a Student Welfare Co-ordinator, Chaplain or School Support Network worker. The eighth respondent, a young woman, nominated the police because they helped her through a family ordeal. The respondents described these as particularly supportive relationships which had usually been established over an extended period. Four of this group of eight had chosen not to involve the rest of their family in the counselling process, but had viewed the counsellor/support person as their own lifeline.

The majority of respondents explained that their support networks were poorly developed because they were simply too young to fully appreciate how to gain support or help. This factor, coupled with a strong sense of family loyalty and a family culture that dictates that problems be dealt with in the family home, meant that these young people were quite isolated. This issue was particularly relevant to those young people from families who had immigrated more recently, as the language and cultural differences created further barriers to getting help of any type. A typical explanation was that these family matters were just not spoken about and obtaining help from

'outside' was shameful to the family name and foreign to their cultural mores.

Eleven respondents had sought help from a school-based service prior to leaving home, as discussed in the following chapter. This could have been at anytime during their secondary schooling, and it might have been at a previous school. Nine respondents involved their parents in this process in an attempt to resolve family conflicts. One young woman sought individual counselling from a community health centre prior to leaving home, and another had extensive involvement with H&CS in the years preceding her final departure. Five of this group of 11 had also accessed a community-based service in an attempt to address the same problems.

The young people reported that the counselling processes had not been able to effect constructive change, as the battle lines had already been drawn and family members were unable to alter their positions. Several people reported that their parents would agree to be more flexible in their handling of family disputes in the counselling sessions, but when they returned home family communication quickly deteriorated to the previous patterns:

Yeah, my sisters had a go at it first. With counsellors trying to work it out ... the counsellors sitting on one side and my Mum on the other trying to talk it out. It would work for about three weeks and then it would stop. I tried it once. I was in Year 9 and then she was all right for a few weeks and then it stopped ... [I told them] we're sick of the constant yelling as it was making everyone unhappy ... Yeah we've all been through the counsellor bit.

Only two young women of the 22 who did not seek help considered that counselling or mediation prior to leaving home could have prevented them from leaving. One felt that some crisis counselling or police intervention might have stopped her father's drinking and associated violent episodes. The other thought that some of the heat of the arguments could have been diffused and that perhaps both parties could have learnt to appreciate each other's point of view. The others were of the firm belief that their problems and conflicts were too deep-seated, and they were pessimistic about the effectiveness of counselling or mediation at that point.

Maintaining contact

All the 35 respondents expressed some desire to maintain contact with either their parents or other family members. Establishing this contact, having left the home, proved more difficult for some than others.

Those young people whose parents offered no resistance to their leaving the family home usually allowed the child to visit the home. However, the young person was aware that little had changed within their family's dynamics, so they preferred to remain at a distance, particularly in the early stages. Their energies were focused on basic

survival as they had to acquire income support, find suitable accommodation and try to maintain a regular, productive presence at school. Those young people who left home in hostile circumstances faced much greater chaos and turmoil as the process of leaving home had left them in shock. They were confused about their family circumstances and what the future might hold for personal contact with family members, particularly those non-offending parties whose friendship they valued. These young people also had to focus on organising themselves as quickly as possible, as they were very aware they could not allow too much disruption to their academic program.

One young man explained his thoughts about leaving home:

The outside world, yeah, is a lot harder than it looks. I thought oh yeah it would be simpler you know, it's going to be nothing. I didn't know much about Austudy. I thought, oh yeah I get a part-time job and go to school, pay rent and go for it you know.

It's impossible to do work and go to school. The hours are really hard and I found out about Austudy. It's not easy to get Austudy, and it's not easy to survive by yourself.

Some young people chose to completely isolate themselves from their parents until they were ready to make contact. It was important to them to control this, as they felt very distressed by their expulsion from the family home. Some tried to make some initial contact to reassure their family that they were safe. Others attempted to smooth things over; however this type of contact was not necessarily met with a friendly response. Only a handful of respondents had any professional intervention at this point which was aimed at facilitating any reconciliation, and none of these counselling attempts achieved a positive outcome at that point, as either one or both parties were not able to accept any responsibility for contributing to the family breakdown.

By the time a young person had been away from home for a few months many of the initial positive gains had been replaced by a feeling of depression and aloneness. Most young people admitted it was much harder to live independently than they had ever thought. Trying to keep up at school was very stressful, as they were very aware of how much more time they had to spend just looking after themselves in a domestic sense compared with other students who were living in supportive households.

Many young people said that these pressures became all-engrossing, and that their own emotional state was worsened by unresolved family conflicts or feelings of guilt regarding their family situation. These feelings usually led the young person to initiate some direct contact with their family, hopefully to begin a healing process.

One young man was not able to effect the positive response from his parents that he had hoped for:

My parents kicked me out of home you know. So I thought who cares? You kick me

out ... I'll go. Then the first month it didn't work for me and that's when I came home and begged to let me in but they didn't accept me. So then I said, I thought OK I can't think stupid 'cos I'll die so I've got to think smart ... I mean I worked it out slowly with a bit of paper of what I had to do. I'd tick it off what I had to do. Each week I'd write a new one. I had to grow up quickly. I think you do grow up quickly.

You do get homesick. I got homesick bad. In the first month I'd sleep at friend's house, girlfriend's house, friend's house, mate's house, everywhere you know. It wasn't fun. I got homesick. That's why I went home to try.

One young woman was rewarded by her tentative approach to her family:

With me and Greg we didn't talk for five months - it's only because I was too nervous but then I thought I better make any effort. I thought he's Mum's husband you know, they're officially married. It's about time I made an effort for us to become friends again. So I did.

Within the first 12 months, most young people had tried to initiate some form of contact with their family members. Several had returned home but the previous hostility re-appeared quickly and the idea was abandoned.

The early phase of being away from home can be characterised by a very sharp learning curve. The young person must grapple with how to manage on a meagre allowance, organise the housekeeping, learn to deal with their own problems and sort out their place within the changed family structure.

As the time away from home coincided with increasing study pressure, many young people spoke of cycles of depression that made it hard to keep going. This was particularly evident among the young people who had not been able to resolve their anguish about their home circumstances. It played on their minds and made a difficult situation even harder to endure.

Several young people described a situation where they thought they were going to crack up under the pressure of basic survival. They didn't want to ask for help because sometimes they weren't sure what type of help they needed. They depended on people around them to help them through tough times, but sometimes this led to personal conflict with friends or house-mates that in turn forced them to move house.

The most troubled young people sought professional help, as they realised it was going to be impossible to keep going unless they did so. For many this was the turning point: helping them move towards taking control and knowing what was realistic and what was impossible. Many young people reflected with some regret that they had waited so long to seek help, as they realised they had suffered unnecessarily.

Current family relationships

The young people were asked to describe their current relationship with individual family members, detailing the frequency and the nature of the contact. The concentric circle exercise was repeated to reflect their current support networks. In this context, the notion of family was broadened to include parents, siblings, grandparents and other extended family members.

The participants were also asked to rate their current relationship with their parents compared with when they were living at home. The results are summarised in Table 18.

Table 18 Rating of current relationship with parents by gender

Rating	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Better	2	19	21
Same	5	1	6
Worse	3	5	8

Improved relationship

The 21 participants who reported improved relationships with their parents did so most commonly for several reasons. Obviously not living together removed the day-to-day pressure placed on relationships in a domestic setting. All young people reported they had improved their ability to communicate with their parents. This had occurred because the young people believed and perceived some change, even if only small, in their parents' attitudes towards them. Their parents appeared to be more accepting of them as an individual and as a young adult who had survived independently. The anger that had been present at the time they were at home had been dispelled, creating a less hostile environment. Some parents displayed interest in their academic progress and their achievements. The young people themselves also realised it was important for them to be seen to be making an effort and perhaps modifying their own behaviour and attitudes to help facilitate the process. Four young people who left home for serious safety reasons reported that the offending parent has since modified their behaviour and created a more stable home environment. The young people felt this had occurred as a direct result of their leaving.

Most of these young people reported regular, if only brief, contact with their parents. Depending on the nature and complexity of the reasons for leaving home, the contact with parents took various forms. Telephone contact was most frequent, followed by visits to either the young person's residence or the parent's residence. In some situations

it was left to the young person to initiate the contact, and in others, particularly those family circumstances where there was a problem with only one parent, they would usually initiate contact away from the family home during times the offending partner was absent.

Several of these respondents had returned home for a short period to try living together. None of them was able to successfully re-integrate in the domestic setting despite being highly motivated at the time:

The reason I moved back [after 18 months] was because I realised my mum was dead, and that I only had one parent left. I was trying to get along with him. I wanted to get closer to him and have a bond with my father. But it didn't work.

The main reason cited for this failure was that the young people felt they stepped back into the same situation they left. Many parents spelt out the ground rules on their arrival which, in the young person's eyes, did not reflect any greater flexibility than when they previously lived in their parents' home. The young people felt their experience of independence should be acknowledged by their parents and taken into account by negotiating more reasonable domestic rules. Both points of view perhaps needed to be tested, and rather than risk a total disintegration of the relationship it was preferable for the young person to remain independent, allowing both parties to reap the benefits of an improved relationship.

The other important element contributing to the betterment of the relationship was the young person acknowledging its strengths and weaknesses and developing strategies to obtain optimum support. Several young people specifically stated that they had had to take some responsibility for controlling themselves and the situation. They were also aware that if they wanted to maintain relationships with siblings, particularly younger ones at their parents' home, it was necessary to tolerate their parents.

All participants in this group had strong connections with their siblings, and they cited this relationship as very important. Some had daily contact with their siblings at school, others had visits and telephone calls from them. In situations where there were long distances between the young people, they had made specific arrangements to contact each other on a regular basis (for example, on Sundays when STD phone calls were cheaper).

Some of these young people nominated either one or both of their parents in their circle exercise. In their opinion their parent had moved back into their perceived support network, albeit at a distance.

The case of 'Gayle' illustrates how this family worked towards improving their relationships.

Gayle lived with her sister and family in a country town. Their parents worked very hard and long hours in their family business, which they had had for many years. Their grandparents lived nearby and were actively involved in supporting the family. They sometimes cared for the sisters before and after school while the parents were engaged at work. Gayle said there had been problems at home for at least four years prior to her leaving home. Looking back, Gayle believes that the basis of the problems at home were poor communication and pressure related to running a family business that had been hit hard by the recession:

They had quite a lot of pressure, so when they came home ... they would often abuse us. They used to put their hassles onto us. We wouldn't get any homework done we just ended up going to our room crying all the time.

There was just no communication. We'd be lucky if we had a five-minute conversation with Mum once a week. And that was it.

The family problems were evident to some teachers at the school, but the option of counselling was not taken up as Gayle feared that her mother, whom she described as a very controlling and an inflexible person, would not alter her position and the situation might then be further inflamed. Gayle had run away on several occasions, but had always returned within a day or so.

Gayle said that they really tried to work their problems out by having family discussions, but nothing was effective. She said both parties were genuinely sorry for the situation they found themselves in, and often her father, in particular, would apologise for their hostile outbursts. At one point a community worker was called upon to talk to both parties but again the process was unsuccessful, as neither party was able to change the way they communicated.

Gayle ran away for the last time following a big argument. She was 17 and in Year 11 at school. She stayed at a friend's place. Gayle told her parents where she was, and after a week her father notified her that he had discussed the situation with his wife and they believed now it would be best if she left on a permanent basis. They allowed her to collect some possessions. Although not actively helping to find accommodation and support for his daughter, Gayle's father facilitated the process of income and housing support by making himself available to workers to contact him, confirming the family breakdown. Gayle remained in some contact with her parents and grandparents even though it was occasional. She found living independently and going to school much harder than she thought. It was isolating and quite depressing not having family support:

The place looks good but it's hard living away from home especially doing school. It's not like a family, it's like not warm and cosy. Even if it feels

comfortable it's not like being at home.

After being away from home for 10 months Gayle wondered if things would be much better at home. The pressure of school and various other personal problems she faced seemed overwhelming. She described herself as not a particularly good student, and she was having trouble understanding and managing Year 12. She decided to try a week back with her parents. Unfortunately the situation deteriorated to what it had been like prior to leaving and any positive gains made while she was away from home were in danger of disintegrating. She decided it was better to live independently and know that there was access to support when she needed it, rather than risk losing all positive communication with her family members.

Gayle said she knows her parents care about her because they remain in contact, sometimes help with school work and occasionally visit. She values that contact and wants to keep things that way.

Relationship much the same

The six respondents who stated their relationships with their parents were 'much the same' felt pessimistic about any improvement in the foreseeable future. There was a common theme of unhappiness, in that nothing they could do or say could facilitate a more satisfying relationship with their parents. In all of these circumstances it was the young person who initiated the contact, rather than the parent. Four of the six maintained some type of regular, if only infrequent, contact with at least one of their parents. This took the form of either visits to the family home or telephone calls. They appeared to do this out of a sense of loyalty more than anything else. The remaining two respondents still kept company with their siblings.

There was a general sense of disappointment in their parents as role models and their inability to offer the young people any form of guidance or support, either currently or in the future. These parents also displayed no interest in their children's ongoing struggle to remain at school to achieve Year 12. Three young people described their parents as personally incapable of change as they were not particularly motivated to do so:

She wrote me a letter and sent it to the school one time. That was really hard. She wrote a letter saying I miss you, I love you all this stuff. The writing was all messy and she's really a neat writer. She was drunk or something. I was just walking to class reading this letter. I hated that.

The other three perceived their parents to be personally trapped in a circumstance that was unlikely to change, or with a complicated set of personal problems that also inhibited change. These parents were single and long-term DSS recipients engrossed in their own problems, and in various ways placing unreasonable burdens on their

children. In the worst situation, contact with the parent led to demands for financial help from the student. This was the situation of three young men facing demands from their mothers:

The case of 'David' illustrates his viewpoint that things were much the same.

David was the third child in a family of four. He lived with his single mother and young brother. His two older siblings had left home in similar circumstances to him.

David said there had been problems in the family home for many years. The home environment deteriorated in the late 1980s when David's father was no longer living there. David said his father provided the 'buffer zone' between the children and their mother. When conflict arose he would intervene to prevent the problems from escalating:

She knew no-one could stop her from hitting us. My dad used to stop her from hitting us.

David said his mother had chronic problems. She was constantly in ill health, had major problems managing on her pension and was always yelling and verbally abusing the children. David felt quite distressed by the constant denigration and what he described as his mother's lack of interest and neglect of them:

She just let me run wild, that's the thing I didn't like ... People need to be told what to do, not like extensively, but just a little bit so that they show they care for you.

Counselling had been sought by the children at one stage but the process had no lasting effect, with the family environment quickly deteriorating back to a scene of constant arguments and name-calling. David had been giving some thought to leaving home as he felt unable to live with the constant fighting. He had run away several times before. Following an intense argument, David told his mother he was leaving. She agreed with him and he left.

David never ceased contact with his mother partly because he wanted to check on his brother, and partly because of his pets. He found that returning to the house or seeing his mother even if it was just down the street, ended in an argument. They still appeared locked into the same problems as she complained to him about her situation and how he was a burden to her.

David said his mother "didn't really care" whether she saw him or not. David has sought counselling to help him cope with this situation.

Relationship worse

In the eight cases where the young person described the situation as worse, seven students stated that their relationship, and indeed contact, with their parents was non-existent. Either the parent or the young person had completely severed the link because of ongoing hostility and a total inability to deal with the family conflicts.

In several cases, the young people had returned home at some stage - usually, they said, for the wrong reasons. Problems with accommodation forced them to return to their parents' home, often with disastrous consequences. This served only to increase hostility on both sides and created circumstances where re-creating links with their parents became virtually impossible. In the worst cases, intervention orders had been taken out against the parent to prevent any further harassment.

In the one case where a young woman still had contact with her parent, she attributed the deterioration to her mother's total inability to change her own situation. She felt haunted by her mother's domestic and marital problems about which she had refused to take any action. The young woman had tried to escape the ongoing family dramas by moving away; however her mother continued to impose this emotional burden on her by continually complaining of her position.

Contact with siblings by this group was difficult because of the complete family breakdown with the parents. Only two were able to maintain that link - and that was at places away from the parental home and without the knowledge of the offending parent.

However, in the most hostile situations, members of the extended family had developed a special role. Three young people had weekly contact with grandparents who had taken an active role in initiating and maintaining contact with the young person. The young people reported their grandparents as caring individuals who wanted to establish a degree of impartiality in the family disputes. These young people appreciated their presence. The two young people who were most alienated from their family were children of immigrants who had no extended family in Australia.

The case of 'Vicki' illustrates how family relationships had deteriorated over time.

Vicki is the eldest girl in a family of four. All the children lived at home. She said she had longstanding personality conflicts with her father who, she said, was a heavy regular drinker. Vicki's mother worked in the afternoons and, being the eldest daughter, she was expected to organise many of the domestic tasks at home in her mother's absence. Vicki said this created the situation where she was in constant conflict with her father:

Everything I did he'd jump down my throat because I had to basically run the

house because my Mum worked really late and stuff. Whenever he had a chance to yell at me he'd do it. And so I just got sick of it basically.

After many years of unhappiness at home Vicki approached a counsellor for help. She developed a strong relationship with this person who, realising the seriousness of the situation, suggested some family counselling. Vicki was not keen to involve them because she was worried about it 'backfiring' and only creating more problems. In Vicki's opinion there was little hope of things changing at home so she decided she would leave. Vicki, then 16 years old, told her parents she was leaving the night before she went. A big argument followed. Her father tried to sabotage her plans and refused to co-operate with any mediation process, indicating he'd sort his own problems out.

The student was encouraged by a community worker to maintain contact with her family; however this was met with a negative response by her father.

Vicki said her father "just didn't want to, like he said you left just don't come back". Vicki's father tried to prevent her from having contact with other family members, particularly her mother. Vicki was aware of her father's threats against her mother for continuing this contact.

Vicki said she was 'really stressed out' by all these ongoing family problems, and the day-to-day problems of living independently. She was taking her anger out on people at school, describing her behaviour as fairly 'obnoxious'. She hit a real low point, and seriously considered leaving school, but was convinced of the merits of staying until the end of Year 12.

After nine months of trying to manage this situation Vicki decided to sever the ongoing contacts with her mother, as she felt responsible and guilty about the additional problems this contact was causing at home. Vicki secretly maintains contact with her siblings.

Summary

In describing and reflecting on their family circumstances, most of the young people alluded to long-term conflicts that had significantly affected the family's ability to live together. Poor communication was understood by the majority to be the basis of the problems. This factor in combination with other stresses, both internal and external to the family unit, created an untenable living environment.

Abuse, both of a physical and emotional nature, was the most likely factor contributing to a total family breakdown. Most young people expressed a pessimistic view of their family's ability to constructively address issues within the home and to change the manner in which they related to each other. Age, lack of known services,

and family loyalty and culture were suggested as inhibiting factors. NESB young people were more likely to feel these pressures and not seek help. Relatively few young people and their families obtained professional help to resolve the conflicts prior to the young person leaving.

Two-thirds of the participants left their parental home in hostile circumstances, with little or no pre-planning. The remaining third had given some thought to the idea of leaving but had not necessarily organised or anticipated sufficient support to help them through the crisis. Eleven respondents came from families where a sibling had previously left the family home or where the siblings left together.

Irrespective of the nature and the degree of conflict within the parental home, all participants acknowledged that it was important to establish some contact with either their parents or other family members. The process of achieving this depended on individual circumstances; however the manner in which the young person left the family home affected their ability to maintain contact. Those young people who left in hostile circumstances were more likely to have difficulty establishing contact with their parents than those who left in a planned way.

Within 12 months most young people had established contact with some family members. Contact with siblings and other extended family members became very important for those young people who continued to experience the greatest difficulty with their parents.

The majority of young people reported at the time of interview that their relationship with their parents had improved since leaving home. Living apart, away from daily domestic pressures, and an acceptance by both parties that they needed to be more tolerant and accepting of each other and their attitudes were the most commonly cited reasons for the improvement in their relationship. The young people in this situation, although tentative about their future within their changed family structure, generally felt optimistic.

Those young people who were unable to achieve better communication with their parents were generally pessimistic about their future roles within the family. They were unhappy and disappointed that they had not been able to effect positive change. The main factors contributing to this circumstance was an inability of both parties to resolve ongoing conflict, and the young people's perception that their parents were not motivated or were unable to change their situation.

Issues for Austudy

The discussion in this chapter has many implications for the policy and administration of Austudy.

Reliability of data

- The application process assumes that the student is capable and willing to voluntarily articulate the full details of their circumstances. These findings indicate a strong reluctance to do this. This situation can contribute to under-reporting of issues such as domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Professional support workers

- The application process assumes that the student has established a relationship with a professional worker prior to leaving home. These findings have shown these relationships do not commonly exist.

Application process

- The written application process demands a retrospective assessment of the factors leading up to the crisis of leaving home. This is often an unrealistic expectation particularly for young people who have been expelled from their parental home. These findings indicate that this knowledge develops over time.

Family mediation pilots

- Most young people described long-term family problems where both parties had developed entrenched positions. These findings indicate that family mediation on its own is unlikely to be an effective means of resolving family conflicts. Enforced mediation, as a pre-requisite to SHR payments, is also unlikely to achieve positive outcomes for the same reasons.

Maintaining contact

- All young people expressed a strong desire to re-establish contact with their parents and other family members. However these relationships are often fragile. Attempts to improve communication should not be confused with issues of on-going eligibility for SHR.



Chapter 6 **The school**

This chapter examines the young people's experiences in the Victorian secondary education system. All respondents were asked to detail their educational history since Year 7. A discussion in a semi-structured format followed, investigating their relationship with their school prior to leaving home and their experiences since they had become independent. It was of particular interest to examine the students' knowledge and awareness of school support networks, and how they had chosen to use them. The students were also asked to identify the areas they had found to be most problematic within the school structure and those areas that had created barriers to their attending school.

The 35 students in this project attended 23 different educational institutions, located throughout the target area. They included two metropolitan Technical and Advanced Education (TAFE) colleges, five senior colleges and 16 secondary colleges. Four schools had three or more respondents in attendance.

Twenty-nine of the 35 completed their Year 12 in 1994, while five discontinued their studies during the year. One young man has returned to complete some extra subjects at Year 12 level in 1995.

Education prior to Year 12

Twenty-eight of the 35 respondents had been studying continuously at the secondary level, whilst seven young people had left school for an extended period and had chosen to return to complete their Year 12 in 1994, most having re-enrolled at Year 11, the start of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

The VCE is attained through the study of subjects in Years 11 and 12, with a pass in English as a necessary requirement. The Common Assessment Tasks (CATS) in each subject are completed and assessed during the school year, with most subjects requiring external examination in November of Year 12.

Those students who wish to go on to tertiary education have to attain sufficient points in their VCE to gain entry into the chosen field of study at a particular tertiary institution.

The VCE can be obtained through study at various institutions. These include TAFE colleges, senior secondary colleges for Years 11 and 12 only and secondary colleges including Years 7-12. In examining the school experience of the 35 respondents, a distinction can be made between these two groups: the seven young people who had a break in their secondary schooling—the 'returnees'—and those students who remained at school continuously. The distinction is important for several reasons. The 'returnees' were generally older and had returned to the education system after having either been in the work force or dropped out of education primarily due to overwhelming personal problems. Six of the seven young people had been away from home for some time prior to their re-enrolment. All seven made a conscious decision to return to school even though they would be economically disadvantaged by doing so. Those in receipt of income support from the Department of Social Security (DSS) would have lost their rent assistance entitlement, and those who had been working also faced a drop in income.

Separate issues for returnees and continuing students sometimes emerged and are noted in the discussion that follows.

The issues facing the five young people who discontinued their Year 12 studies will also be examined. Three of these were returnees.

School selection

Table 19 summarises the number of changes of school since the young person left his or her parental home.

Table 19 Number of changes of school since left home by school completion and gender

Changes	Completed Year 12		Discontinued Year 12		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
None	6	14	1	2	23
One	2	6	1	-	9
Two	-	1	1	-	2
Three plus	-	1	-	-	1
Total	8	22	3	2	35

The majority of students (23) had not changed schools since leaving home. Sixteen had been attending the same school since Year 7.

These students described a sense of comfort and familiarity with their school environment. They had established social networks, and they knew the school culture and ethics. Even if the teachers were unaware of the degree of their family problems,

the students did not want to complicate their situation any further by changing schools. Many were forced to endure several residential changes simply to be able to stay at the same school. They hoped that some residential support of a long-term nature would eventuate so their lives would be less chaotic and problematic.

Of the seven returnees, four returned to their known school. Most exercised this option as they were still resident in the same area and their choices were limited, particularly for the young woman from a country town. Nevertheless, the young people considered it to be an advantage to re-enrol at a familiar institution.

The other three returnees who had chosen different institutions embarked on a calculated selection process that took account of their specific needs. This choice involved considerable travel. These young people assessed various aspects of the school which included the academic reputation of the school, the range of subjects offered, and the staff's attitude and acceptance of them, knowing they were living independently.

This point is illustrated by Sandra who lived in an area where there was a choice of three schools.

[School no. 1] stuffed me around when I rang them up. Then I went to [School no. 2]. They were stuck up and rude like you can't do this and you can't do that. They were acting as though I was some sort of freak, and I went to [School no. 3] the next day. They were just really nice. So I went there.

So you really shopped around. What were you looking for?

A school that wasn't going to follow me around because I had a nose-ring in and stuff.

Those students who changed schools without a break in their education did so for similar reasons. Most of the young people expressed dissatisfaction with various aspects of the school they were attending and preferred to change schools to have a fresh start. Three students said that they were asked to leave the school as their behaviour was unacceptable to teaching staff.

Enrolment process and school levies

All the young people who changed schools after leaving home were enrolled as students without parental support. Having selected a school that they considered met their needs, some students were immediately confronted with a demand for a contribution to the school by way of a 'levy'.

Two returnees were unable to enrol at a secondary college until they paid an up-front contribution of one-third of the school levy, with the rest to be paid in instalments throughout the year. The two women who attended TAFE, although entitled to a

considerable concession for enrolment fees, were also expected to pay on enrolment.

The remainder of the group were informed of the levy and were pursued for the payment throughout the year. This usually took the form of a letter of demand detailing the amount owing. This figure ranged from \$160 to \$300 depending on the subjects taken.

Despite protests regarding their inability to pay this total fee, the outstanding debt was still sought. In some cases this was held against the student, preventing them from participating in some school activities. Most students expressed distress at being subjected to this process. They felt the whole account was well beyond their means and they would not be in a position to repay the debt at any stage.

Support from the school

As discussed in the previous chapter, 11 young people stated they had sought help from a school-based support worker at some stage prior to leaving home. This could have been at any school they attended. Nine students had involved their parents in this process of conflict resolution.

Seven of these young people described a strong supportive relationship with this worker. The remainder of the group stated they had not discussed the nature and extent of their problems at home with any person at the school. Lack of knowledge of available support services and family loyalty were the main reasons suggested by the young people as inhibiting the support process.

School response to crisis

After having left or having been expelled from the family home, six respondents stated they sought the help directly of a counsellor at school. The students stated they went to this worker for crisis help—which included practical help, advice and counselling. Discussing the range of accommodation options, as well as help to complete an application for income support, were the most immediate needs. The more informed student welfare counsellors were able to directly refer the young person to appropriate community services for additional support services.

Ten young people were already linked into the school support network, so their support was ongoing. They also required some practical advice and help with their Austudy applications. Only four of these 10 were referred to local community youth services. In five of these cases where ongoing support existed, the counsellor attempted direct contact with other family members with a view to reconciliation or mediation. Two parents made an approach to the school for help and advice.

The remaining 13 young people who remained in the education system at the time of leaving home did not directly initiate any contact with any person at the school in the early weeks following that move.

There appears to be several reasons why this situation occurred. More than half of this group of 13 were not actually attending school at the time they left home. The family breakdown occurred during the school holidays (eight during the Christmas holidays), so the immediate help they required was obtained from another source. Some sought help from community-based services which attended to all their immediate needs, such as accommodation and income support. Others struggled on without any form of professional help and tried to resolve their own difficulties. On their return to school, some students did not feel inclined to reveal their personal problems to the school staff. Some considered it was not the school's immediate concern as they had income support and had established reasonably stable accommodation. Others, particularly from the recently arrived immigrant groups, felt very sensitive about their circumstances and less inclined to ask for help.

One young man admitted forging signatures on notes for an extended period of time in an attempt to hide his personal problems. Another had no books for more than four weeks. He felt too ashamed to say anything and was unaware of what help was available within the school setting to facilitate the process of income support. Within several months all 35 students' independent status had become known to at least some of the school staff. Demands for parental permission or absenteeism notes had usually forced the issue.

Ongoing school support

The school response, and the students' ongoing relationship with school staff, played a critical role in their ability to successfully manage their secondary studies. Even in circumstances where the students were well supported outside the school environment, they were still dependent on the school staff maintaining an appreciation of some of the complex personal problems they faced daily.

Many students made the point that they were not wanting special treatment but rather an understanding of some of the pressures of living away from home, that they had to assume 'adult responsibility'. These pressures ranged from surviving on a basic income with few educational resources, to coping with unresolved family conflicts which impacted on their emotional and mental well-being, to being fully responsible for themselves in an independent lifestyle.

Georgia is an example of a continuing student who sought support from her school.

Georgia attended the same school since Year 7. Being the eldest in a large family she felt considerable pressure at home, as her father was prone to violent outbursts mainly directed towards his wife.

Georgia's mother had left the family home with the children on several occasions. However, she always returned. Georgia felt uncomfortable with this circumstance and had sought support from a staff member at the school. She confided in this person over a number of years, expressing her distress regarding the ongoing marital conflict and the effect it was having on her. Georgia felt pessimistic about the possibility of her parents changing their ways, particularly as she felt she was unable to effectively communicate her point of view to her parents.

After consultation with her counsellor, Georgia decided to leave her parents' home:

I just got sick and tired of it.

Georgia moved in, and remained with another family in her local community. She continued to receive ongoing counselling and advice from her counsellor who also facilitated the Austudy application process.

Georgia never thought about leaving school as she had a particular career path in mind, and wanted to achieve tertiary entrance. She commented on how much she enjoyed attending school as she had many friends and she felt the teachers were very helpful, friendly and dedicated to providing extra support when required.

Maintaining contact with family members was important to Georgia. She was particularly concerned about being cut off from her younger siblings. She felt tentative at first with her mother whom she knew was disappointed with her actions:

At first things were really bad as I didn't know what to say.

Georgia was able to talk through some strategies with her counsellor regarding establishing positive contacts with her family. Confidentiality was important, as Georgia had other family members at the school. She needed to be sure neither her situation nor that of her siblings was going to be compromised in any way.

Georgia was able to confidently apply herself to her studies and completed her Year 12. Georgia obtained tertiary entrance to her chosen field.

School atmosphere

Some educational institutions were better equipped than others to deal with the range of problems faced by independent students. This was partly reflected in the formal allocation of resources provided to help vulnerable young students and partly in the attitude and ability of the staff to empathise with young people who were without parental support. The degree to which the institution had experienced or been exposed to issues of student homelessness was also relevant.

Common themes arose during the course of the interviews highlighting the various strengths and weaknesses of school systems. These issues will be examined in some detail.

Many young people spoke very positively of their school experience. They described on a supportive situation, where the staff were prepared to offer extended tuition or help to any student when required. They spoke of a positive atmosphere amongst fellow students and staff. They felt that they were accepted as an individual in a diverse population, irrespective of their appearance, age or family circumstance. In the cases where the students had been away from home for more than two years, school became even more important to them. One described it as her 'big security blanket' whilst another said it was a place to forget about all her troubles. There was a particular sense of comfort for those students who had been at the same school since Year 7.

Conversely, some students complained that their experience at secondary school had been marred by unsympathetic attitudes of staff, and a school atmosphere that was less tolerant of individual differences and the 'abnormal' situation of students living away from home. In some cases this was related to particularly conservative values within the school with little experience of independent students. Others gave the impression there were so many problems in the school that staff were overwhelmed or uninterested in providing the individual attention to any student in need:

There's obviously something wrong 'cos of all the homeless kids, I'd say 90 per cent have left. I mean why? There was about 25 of us I reckon in Year 12 at the start of the year. They've left now 'cos they just couldn't handle it.

Some described their schooling as a constant battle to keep going, with the worst scenario being the students discontinuing their studies.

School amalgamations was one issue mentioned by some students. They felt the transitional process had placed great stress on the school community as a whole and this process contributed to a strain on resources for both the teaching staff and the students.

Establishing relationships

One of the crucial factors in contributing to a young person's positive experience at school was the ability to establish a rapport with an individual staff member. This relationship served many purposes, both formal and informal. In some circumstances it was important to have an ally on staff who could advocate for the individual student when the need arose. Behaviour problems or poor academic performance were suggested as two examples of this situation. Informally, the presence of an approachable adult with whom the student felt a bond contributed to a sense of security.

The development of relationships appears to be dependent on the individual circumstances. Half the students initiated the contact themselves, either prior to leaving home or immediately after they left. In these cases, the students were seeking help from a known person in a defined welfare role. The adult contact was well known within the school and their profile was a positive one. They were approachable and most importantly they were respected for their ability to maintain confidentiality.

The remainder of the group were more tentative in their attempts to initiate direct contact with welfare co-ordinators. They may have had some casual consultation and preferred not to continue the relationship for a variety of reasons. They may have been too shy or mistrusting to actively pursue asking for help. Many young people acknowledged that asking for help was a particularly difficult task and that they often deferred the action until they were really desperate. The males from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) appeared the group most reluctant to ask for help. However, once an informal approach was made to them by an empathetic staff member, usually a teacher, their circumstances changed dramatically and a highly valued relationship developed. One young man explained that he was shy and had trouble trusting people:

Before I'm not telling anyone. I'm a man, a very strong man and I can cope with any situation. I wasn't going to tell anyone about my problem. Now I have someone to talk to. She knows by my behaviour if I'm down.

Those returning to study appeared to be particularly tentative about making formal approaches for help, but tended to form closer bonds with teachers. Those relationships usually began over school work-related matters and then developed as trust strengthened. Typically this group wanted to control the amount of personal information they divulged, as several had been away from home for many years and were tired of people focusing too much on their personal problems:

I've had a lot of people trying to help me. They always intrude too much. It's good to have someone to talk to but they just don't want to do that. They want to talk and talk and talk and you just get sick of it. You want to have a friend. That's what I was looking for was a friend.

Absenteeism

Absenteeism was the issue most commonly cited by the respondents as a problem area. Many young people stated they were sometimes placed in the position where they needed to take time off school. This may have been for appointments, sickness or the necessity to organise accommodation, banking or other domestic tasks. On some occasions it was related to feeling depressed or unmotivated.

Many students complained they had difficulty with this situation as the school staff would not accept their excuse as legitimate. The process of writing notes became problematic as the independent students had no adult figure in their domestic setting who could verify their circumstances. Many students complained of feeling victimised over this predicament, as the staff displayed little empathy for them. Their entitlement to Austudy was used as a threat and in some cases they had their entitlements docked accordingly. School attendance is part of a regular checking system employed by the Benefits Control Unit of the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET). Information from the school regarding attendance is completed on DEET forms and is passed directly to this unit. Anomalies are then referred back to the assessing officer for action. Many students recognised that establishing an attendance standard was important. However, they felt it could have been administered in a fairer manner:

It's a conservative school ... I needed to sign my own notes and stuff like that. They weren't going to let me, they wanted me to get a court order saying I could do that. I thought that was really stupid 'cos I was over 18 and I'd left home.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was another issue that was raised by the respondents as being extremely important. In a school environment that engendered a positive atmosphere, students commented that they felt their personal circumstances and those of fellow students remained private and that confidentiality was respected. The school and staff were discreet and sensitive in their approach to all students. Students chose to give permission for their personal details to be discussed with other staff where it may have impacted on their academic performance, school attendance, or degree of motivation.

In less positive environments, students said they felt they were 'victims of gossip' and that everyone knew things about them that they hadn't told them directly. The students who experienced this problem had greater difficulty establishing strong links with staff members as they were less inclined to feel in control of their own situation. The very nature of their independent living and homelessness contributed to a heightened degree of sensitivity about their personal life that needed to be respected. In the longer-term this situation really worked against the student, as they invariably chose not to confide in the staff again and in so doing limited their potential for support.

The issue of confidentiality also became problematic in some circumstances involving the other family members. Some students had siblings attending the same school so it was particularly important that contact with other family members did not compromise the student living away from home. Others had fears they may be harassed by a parent at school. Some schools had not addressed this issue and were less than sympathetic in this situation:

I requested they don't give any information out to my mother about where I was living or what I was doing or anything like that. They refused. They said no they weren't going to. If she asked they would tell her.

Academic aspirations and achievement

Common to all those young people who completed their Year 12 was the strong desire to achieve a goal. Some had set their sights on completing their secondary schooling whereas others had expressed great determination to obtain tertiary entrance.

Achieving this goal seemed paramount in these students' minds and they had given little serious thought to leaving school. Many of these higher achievers stated they had a particular vocation in mind and had always wanted to fulfil this aspiration:

I wasn't going to let my parents wreck my life.

Other students stated they wanted to prove to their parents they could make it despite the constant denigrations they had received when they were living in their parents home:

I'm not a bludger. That's what they were calling me at home.

I want to prove to my parents, not only my parents but to my friends, that I'm not a bludger. I want to do something with my life.

Others in the group wanted to be the first in their family to have achieved a minimum standard of Year 12. They had been encouraged by at least one of their parents in their early life to aspire to this goal as that opportunity had not been afforded to their parents. The family culture was to value the education process as this was a means to achieve economic success.

Academic performance

Many students expressed frustration with their personal circumstance and the effect it was having on their ability to achieve their academic potential. More than half the group described themselves as being capable students. However, many of them spoke of being angry that their family breakdown had placed them in a disadvantaged situation.

This feeling extended not only to the emotional turmoil they had experienced as a result of leaving their family home, but also to the impoverished physical circumstances in which they found themselves.

Eight students felt their study environment was worse than when they were living at home. Lack of resources, such as a proper desk or even a television created difficulties for students when access to such facilities was assumed at school. Some also had problems purchasing books and stationery.

On the other hand, some schools had allowed students unlimited access to educational facilities and resources and encouraged any disadvantaged student to use them when required.

Those young people who had been away from home for more than two years were almost resigned to the fact that they couldn't do as well as they might have in other circumstances. Some had struggled since Year 8 to remain at school, and they had faced many situations that affected their school performance:

I always got good marks in school, but I could have gotten much better. I'm probably sitting on a 'C'. Because of this stuff that's been going on is really affected my schooling.

What stuff?

With my parents, going to court, just everything.

Two young women who were residing in a community adolescent placement had the benefit of a personal tutor to help with their studies. The tutor was not associated with the school, and visited on a regular basis to provide individual tuition and encouragement with the student's study program. Both young women found this to be of enormous value as they felt the service had helped them to focus on their studies and had maintained their incentive to complete their secondary education.

The other students in the group were asked their opinion of this tutor system. The majority concurred it would have been something they would have liked, as the one-to-one adult contact would have sustained their motivation.

Motivation

All 35 respondents were asked about how they maintained their motivation to remain at school. Those returning to school felt they were in a better personal circumstance and could apply themselves more readily to the study situation. They had developed supportive relationships with people outside the school environment who were encouraging them to return to school. These relationships proved vital during times of personal stress or when study pressure was at its peak. Those students who were

continuing with their secondary studies also spoke of the importance of particular relationships outside the school setting and the role they played in keeping them motivated on a daily basis.

For some, the support or encouragement came from a flatmate or long-time boyfriend or girlfriend. Other students had various extended family members who were very important because they took an interest in the student's work and activities. In some cases, improved communication with one parent inspired the student to apply themselves to their studies.

In situations where siblings were living together, they appeared to have developed a special bond that helped them remain attentive to their studies.

Common to all those young people who completed their Year 12 studies was the existence of a special relationship that had been established for more than twelve months.

Within the school setting, the respondents related their motivation to continue their studies to various aspects of the school experience. Encouragement by school staff was mentioned as one of the most important elements to sustaining motivation.

As the VCE is structured to include continual assessment projects, maintaining confidence and meeting timelines were very important. Study pressure was cited by 20 students as being one of the main problems they faced while living away from home. (see Table 22) Many students stated that receiving positive feedback and some good marks for completed work helped them considerably. Those who had developed a strong relationship with a staff member spoke of the influence of this relationship, particularly during times of self doubt or overwhelming study or personal pressure. Knowing they could talk through their problems with this empathetic adult figure gave them great comfort and inspired them to keep achieving.

Those students who had developed weaker attachments to individual staff members were more likely to feel fragile and less confident in managing their work load.

'Sally's' situation illustrates this process. After Sally had been away from home for six months, she recalled her feelings:

I felt confused. I didn't know what I was doing.

Her family situation was causing her great distress. She had a casual discussion with the welfare co-ordinator:

I just didn't feel comfortable, and I felt I had to tell him everything before I got a response.

Sally said she became increasingly depressed.

I just didn't want to go (to school). I just didn't want to go anywhere.

Sally said she was very quiet in class and found it difficult participating in any discussions. Mid-year, Sally received two good marks with her work. A teacher took the time to ring and congratulate her on her performance. Sally said that encouragement inspired her to keep going even though her family situation was still a distracting influence. She said:

Now they notice if I'm not there or not.

Sally summed up the situation:

If you've got no-one interested in you, you think why in the hell are you doing it. No-one here is interested. When you are out of home you lose sight of what you are aiming for.

The case of 'Phillipa' illustrates the circumstance of a returnee.

Phillipa lived with members of her extended family for most of her life. She would visit her parents on weekends. She described her childhood as quite disruptive as with each move to another relative she had to change schools. Phillipa left school at Year 10.

On her sixteenth birthday her mother asked her to come and stay with her. Against her grandmother's advice she left and moved to the country with her mother and sister. The arrangement lasted eight months, with Phillipa being asked to leave following a major argument:

You could tell she didn't really love me. It was rejection that I felt.

Phillipa jumped on a train back to Melbourne and spent the next 15 months moving around different refuges and various places in the private rental sector. Phillipa said during that time she was very confused, was crying all the time and felt "emotionally exhausted".

On the advice of a girlfriend she had self-referred to a community-based social worker with whom she developed a close and trusting relationship. With her help Phillipa was able to talk through some of her problems, move on to taking control of her circumstance, and plan her future:

I decided the next year [1993], no matter what happened I was going to go back to school. That's what I always wanted to do.

Phillipa chose to attend a TAFE college because she perceived that to be a 'freer' environment and more accepting of older students. She described her experience there as a very positive one, the teachers: *deal with you on a one to one basis,*

and are more than willing to help you, or understand the pressures you face outside the school setting. Phillipa maintained contact with her social worker whom she described as her inspiration. She knew she could contact her at any time.

Phillipa said although it remained difficult studying and living independently she maintained her motivation because:

I really want to help people. That's kept me going. Maybe if I go to Uni. I might be able to help people.

Those who discontinued Year 12

Five young people discontinued their studies prior to their completion of Year 12. Three of the five were returnees and had resolved to return to school to further their studies with the view to bettering their employment options in the future.

Although each individual faced specific problems that contributed to their inability to remain at school, there were several key common factors:

- all five young people were hesitant in establishing and then maintaining a strong relationship with a staff member over an extended period. Several found a teacher with whom they had some rapport but for various reasons these staff were moved on, and the students were unable to easily relate to other staff members;
- four of the five young people had significant personal problems that were related to a particularly traumatic incident. As a consequence, they felt rather vulnerable and fragile, and pre-occupied with their own problems which sometimes led to difficulties with concentration. These problems also led to increased absenteeism as it was necessary to attend numerous appointments outside the school system:

I just couldn't handle it [school]. It was just too much as I had everything else to worry about.

- these factors meant this group of young people were more likely to feel alienated and different, particularly if they had enrolled at a new school, were older, or had a limited informal social network;
- most importantly, none of the group of five had a specific goal they wanted to achieve by being at school and as a result had problems with motivation. One young man articulated this:

Poor motivation led to poor results, which then confirmed a sense of lack of achievement.

You receive about 70 per cent negative feedback as opposed to positive, it reinforces a low drive and low self-esteem.

Continuing to attend school became overwhelmingly difficult and inevitably led to their questioning why they were there? Several were disillusioned with the content of their courses, which they believed was becoming less relevant to their daily lives:

Year 11, I was going to school everyday, that was fine. Got to Year 12, I started off going to school regularly and then school started getting really boring and monotonous 'cos I'd been there by 13 years. I just had enough. I was fed up. I started thinking why am I here. I've seen so many others who have gone all the way through down to Year 12, got their VCE and they've been unemployed ever since. I thought it wasn't worth the hassle.

All five young people felt they had made the right decision to leave school. Several expressed regret that they were unable to manage their schooling and they thought they may return to some type of study, albeit part-time in the future. In considering this option, all agreed they would not return to a secondary school environment but would search for something more flexible, that accommodated their individual needs more appropriately.

Having made the decision to discontinue their studies, all five believed there was nothing more the school could do to influence this decision. In advising the staff of their intent two were encouraged to reconsider, while the others' decision was endorsed. No-one recalled being given any clear advice as to the range of options that might be available to them in the foreseeable future. They simply signed out and left.

The case of 'Henry' illustrates the problems faced by young people who discontinued their studies.

Henry had left school at Year 10 and obtained an apprenticeship. He was the eldest of three children remaining in the parental home. Henry's mother had chronic addictive habits which she was unable to overcome. These problems had led to long-term domestic disharmony and a marital conflict. These conflicts in the home impacted on Henry and he eventually lost his job as his mother was harassing him at work.

Henry decided his best option was to return to his secondary school studies. He enrolled at Year 11, at a new institution that he believed would give him a fresh start and that offered him the range of subjects he wanted to pursue. During the year Henry's family problems escalated and he left home, as he "couldn't take it anymore".

Henry was aware of the welfare co-ordinator at the school but he felt reluctant to divulge his personal situation:

I never really asked them for help. I didn't really want to ask anyone for help.

Henry had developed a rapport with one teacher who helped him keep motivated. He completed the year and returned to do Year 12 in 1994:

The reason why I went back for the next year was because I had an Art teacher that could help me and learn off ... The next year they got this other teacher. I didn't like anything she said ... I ended up arguing and swearing at her.

Henry felt deeply distressed by his home circumstances and was worried that his younger siblings were also going to have unhappy feelings about their childhood. He felt powerless to change the situation, guilty about his inability to manage:

I just couldn't concentrate. Like I'd go to school get into class and the teacher would ask me to do something and I'd just think what am I doing here? ... [!] just wasn't getting anywhere with it. I was just stupid. The government was giving me money and it's not even going to the right use.

Henry eventually left school, to look for another job. Reflecting on whether he had made the right decision Henry replied:

Yeah I do. I still think I wish I had a better education. I wish I could have done better. You know, I really wish I could have just stuck it out.

Summary

In discussing the students' experiences at school, common themes developed regarding factors that helped young people remain at and enjoy their time at school, compared with problem areas that create barriers to this process.

In examining the school experience, a distinction was made between those continuing in their secondary studies and those returning to study after a break (returnees). Issues concerning those who discontinued Year 12 were also examined. School selection was an important factor with the students. The majority had not changed schools since leaving home. Four of the seven returnees re-enrolled at their previous school, with the remainder seeking a school they considered more appropriately met their needs.

One of the major barriers students can face when either changing schools or returning to school is the demand for an up-front contribution to the school levies as part of the enrolment process. In schools where they were known, students living without parental support were pressured for payments throughout the year.

A central theme that emerged in relation to the school experience for all students

was the establishment of a positive relationship with a staff member who was able to provide ongoing support and encouragement. School environments that facilitated this process engendered positive self-esteem and confidence amongst students by accepting individuals irrespective of their family background or current circumstance. They respected confidentiality and gave prominence to the development of both formal and informal student welfare networks throughout the school.

Some students had sought help prior to leaving home. They were better placed to deal with the crisis of leaving home than those who had not been able to obtain the same degree of support. The main reasons for not seeking help prior to leaving home was lack of knowledge of available support services, particularly for younger students, and family loyalty. NESB students were less likely to ask for help both prior to leaving home or after leaving home.

Half the group sought help from the student welfare co-ordinator either prior to or immediately after leaving. Accommodation and income support were their main needs at that point. The remainder of the group were either not at school at the time they left home or chose not to initially ask for help.

The returnees and those who experienced difficulty in asking for help were more likely to gain ongoing support from a teacher rather than a staff member in an identified welfare role. An inability to develop a strong relationship with a staff member was identified as a factor contributing to students discontinuing their Year 12 studies.

Absenteeism was described as a problem for most students, as they did not have an adult figure who was able to verify their reason for being absent. In the less empathetic environments, students felt they were unfairly treated as they had trouble effectively conveying some of the problems they encountered as a result of living independently. Attending appointments or moving house were examples of some problems faced.

Maintaining motivation was a particularly difficult task for all young people wanting to complete their Year 12 studies without parental support. Encouragement, particularly by teachers and the student's support person, was noted as important elements in overcoming continual study pressure associated with the VCE system. The desire to achieve a stated goal was also an important factor. All those students who completed their Year 12 had set themselves the goal of at least achieving that end. The more ambitious students wanted to pursue their studies at a tertiary level. Conversely the absence of an academic goal or defined career choice was one contributing factor leading to the decision of those who discontinued their Year 12 studies.

In circumstances where there was improved family relationships, students commented this helped them remain attentive and focussed on their studies. Where family relationships had not been satisfactorily addressed students found themselves distracted and were less able to concentrate on their school work. In the worst cases the

students discontinued their studies as they were unable to overcome their personal distress associated with their family problems. Supportive relationships with people outside the school network were also noted as being important in helping and encouraging the students to apply themselves to their studies.

Most students felt a degree of frustration that their personal circumstance would adversely affect their academic potential. These feelings were related to the emotional turmoil created by their family problems as well as their disadvantaged financial situation, which sometimes meant they were unable to fully participate in the curriculum or gain access to sufficient resources.

Issues for Austudy

From the discussion in this chapter the following are issues arising in relation to recipients of SHR:

Inadequate income

- The demand by schools for a contribution to enrolment fees and school levies is an additional financial burden for SHR recipients who are unlikely to have any capacity to save. These findings indicate that the students' inability to contribute to these fees is distressing and sometimes leads to the students limited participation in the school curriculum.
- Attending school incurs many additional expenses for books, stationery and educational resources. These findings indicate that students are unable to meet these costs and they are either dependent on material aid or persevere with insufficient resources.

Absenteeism

- The need to take time off school for a range of reasons was cited by many students as a problem area. These findings indicate that there are many misunderstandings about this issue and the process employed by some schools to monitor absence notes is disadvantaging vulnerable students.

Chapter 7 **Living independently**

The previous chapters examined the two major influences in the lives of the students - family and school. However, there are a number of other factors that contributed to the students' ability to live independently.

This chapter identifies the availability and usefulness of government and community support services as perceived by the respondents, notably access to income support. It examines the accommodation options that the young people experienced and the relative advantages and disadvantages of different living arrangements. It also presents their views on the definition of 'homelessness'.

The problems experienced by the respondents since they left home and their expectations for the future are summarised. These provide an interesting comparison with the responses yielded in the follow-up interviews six months on. The chapter concludes with a description of the transition period between school and the tertiary/work environment.

Youth and community services

As the 35 respondents came from a large and diverse geographic region, their use of community resources varied. The provision of youth services across the target area appeared to be uneven. The most common problem cited was access to subsidised housing, either youth housing schemes or public sector rental. Most young people's knowledge of, and access to, community resources prior to leaving home were limited. There appear to be several reasons for this. As many young people had not expected to leave home when they did, they had no obvious need to seek help via a community-based service. This situation was compounded by the young age of some of the participants when they had left home. Lack of visibility of some of the support services, particularly in the metropolitan areas, also contributed to this circumstance. As the community services were scattered throughout the area, the services were compartmentalised and it became difficult for young people to obtain information about the range of services available. Many young people said when they were first seeking help they were unsure of what to ask about. Their initial concern was for shelter and money, but their longer-term needs were unclear. Those young people were appreciable

of being able to obtain help from a single person who was able to deal with a range of problems, provide advice or act as a referral point. Those students who were able to locate a youth resource centre were considerably better off as they were able to use this service as a central resource point.

Community health centres located in country towns were a visible, central source of help and were well known within their neighbourhood. Young people were more easily able to self-refer to these services or be directed there by other friends or adults from whom they sought help. This situation proved particularly advantageous for young people who left home during the school holidays.

Nine young people had not used any community-based youth service other than the Austudy network since the time they left home. They were young people who were able to independently organise their accommodation and income support. They usually had the help of either relatives or family friends who had known of their family problems for an extended period.

Although 16 students sought help from the student welfare co-ordinator, only 10 were referred to local youth services via the school. The remaining six organised all their help from a school-based service only.

Sixteen young people either self-referred or were directed to the community-based service by other sources. Five students in this latter group were actively supported by a youth worker who directly approached the school to inform them of the change of home circumstances and the new living arrangements.

Accommodation

Accommodation was reported to be one of the crucial factors contributing to a student's ability to remain at school.

Many students expressed strong opinions that finding suitable and stable accommodation, particularly in the days immediately after leaving home, was one of the key factors facilitating the process of being able to stay at school. Without stable shelter and a suitable study environment, it was impossible to function adequately at school, particularly at Year 12 level.

Number of moves

Table 20 illustrates the number of moves made by the young people prior to their current residence.

Table 20 Number of moves since leaving parent's home

Response	Male	Female	Total
None	2	5	7
1-2 moves	4	11	15
3-4 moves	3	6	9
5-6 moves	1	1	2
7+	-	2	2
Total	10	25	35

The 24 young people who have moved between one and four times usually followed a similar pattern. They knew that the place in which they initially sought shelter (either a friend's place or extended family situation) was only a temporary measure until they could find more suitable long-term shelter. Only four respondents used a youth refuge at any point.

Many young people who were living in the private rental sector expressed a degree of frustration with their situation. Firstly, many had experienced some difficulty with real estate agents accepting them as reliable tenants. The younger the applicant the more problematic this issue became. Secondly, there were specific problems locating suitable housing close to the school. In some country areas there appeared to be a significant lack of options available for young people. As most young people did not want to change schools, particularly in Year 12, or leave their known community, they chose to tolerate the higher rents rather than face the prospect of moving. Most young people stated it was a priority to be within walking distance of their school.

The seven young people who had remained in the same accommodation since they left home described themselves as being most fortunate to have obtained accommodation that had lasted for the duration of their secondary schooling. Three students remained in a family situation and two young women were able to move immediately into supported youth accommodation that just happened to have a vacancy at the time.

Many young people complained that accommodation which housed groups of people other than students was totally inappropriate and allowed them to be distracted from their studies or, in the worst case, encouraged poor school attendance. They then had to make a conscious effort to move away from this situation which more often than not forced them into the private sector rental market.

Many students stated that one of the hardest issues to deal with was controlling their own independent environment, that is, feeling strong enough to expel other young people who would 'hang around' because there was no adult supervision.

In the four cases where there were more than five moves, the young people were

unable to comfortably settle in any environment. Conflict with other residents, problems with money, poor access to resources or knowledge of them, were cited as factors contributing to this degree of mobility.

Living situation

Table 21 illustrates the living arrangements of the students.

Table 21 Living situation

Residence with	Male	Female	Total
Sibling	1	4	5
Parents	1	-	1
Extended family	1	3	4
Friend	2	7	9
Shared household	2	7	9
Other family household	2	2	4
Alone	1	2	3
Total	10	25	35

Ten young people were living with either a sibling, parent or aunt/uncle. One young man had recently moved in with his natural father whom he had not known for the major part of his life. Both the males in this situation paid no board, whereas all three females contributed to their upkeep.

The young people who were living with extended family had been there for several years and regarded their accommodation as a long-term stable arrangement. The five young people living with siblings had developed a particularly close relationship and they felt they derived some benefit in sharing their resources and keeping each other company. The four females living with siblings had all been able to obtain subsidised housing which also improved their living arrangements. The three young people who lived alone were all from country areas and had found themselves in this situation after a series of misfortunes. They had all moved at least twice and had limited options available to them in their area. They all rented within the private sector.

Four young people chose to live in a family situation. The two young men felt they needed the extra support of a boarding arrangement where everything was provided for them, whereas the two young women remained independent but chose the option for its proximity to school.

The remaining 18 were living with either a friend or in shared accommodation including youth housing schemes and adolescent community placements. Most of these

arrangements were the choice of the young people at the time. They were not always harmonious households, particularly in the shared or group setting. Most people described at least one antagonistic incident in the time they had been resident there, that had significantly affected their well-being and ability to function adequately at school.

Youth accommodation services

Although at the time of interview only eight young people were resident in a youth housing scheme, 15 young people had used these facilities at some stage. There were a variety of opinions expressed regarding the provision of these services. Most young people acknowledged there was significant potential for conflict to arise in these shared facilities as residents did not necessarily know or like each other.

In youth housing services where young people reported a positive experience they commented on a particular management style. They considered the staff were empathetic, supportive and approachable and were fair in their management of domestic disputes. The young people appreciated the attentive approach of the workers who were actively involved in their daily lives. They were able to provide practical advice and help. Most importantly they followed through with their actions.

In other youth housing services the residents were more critical of the management of the program. They had less confidence in the workers being able to address household conflicts and they considered the staff were not attentive to their needs. Staff appeared to spend less time with the residents and sometimes were unable to provide adequate follow-up to problem areas or complaints. The young people said this process was frustrating and affected their rapport with the workers:

There's no use being supportive and saying all this stuff you are going to do just to make you feel better. You have to follow it up. Like if you really want to help someone you'll actually do it not just say I'll do this for ya and that for ya and make them all happy and send them off to the refuge and forget about them. There's no use doing that.

In summary, the essential elements perceived to create the best available conditions for students were:

- living in an environment that was quiet and equipped for students' needs; eg. a desk;
- living in the company of people who were sympathetic to the needs of students;
- living close to the school so transport and access were not a problem. Most students chose the cheapest option of walking to school wherever possible. It was also noted

that living long distances from school created barriers to regular attendance, as the effort required to get to school sometimes adversely affected their motivation;

- living in subsidised accommodation meant that students spent a smaller proportion of their income on housing and therefore had more money available for other essential items, such as food.

Homeless or unsupported student?

The respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be homeless. This proved to be a particularly vexed question as many young people sought to qualify their answer. Twelve said they were homeless. Generally this response was related to being without the emotional and physical support of their family.

Fourteen respondents said they did not perceive themselves to be homeless as they considered the term related to having no shelter. They felt settled and in control of their residential situation, so the term was not appropriate to them. Seven were unsure.

This question did provoke some rather hostile responses in relation to the name of the allowance they received—Student Homeless Rate. Many students said they found this a particularly demeaning term which did not really reflect their situation.

Phillipa's comments illustrates the feelings of many in the group. She had been away from home for three years, and had a part-time job.

You are in receipt of the SHR of Austudy. Do you consider yourself to be homeless?

Not now

Why?

'Cos I have a roof over my head ... Let me say that again. I do see myself as homeless in the sense that I don't get any support from my parents and I don't get any support from anyone at all as I'm looking after myself independently. In the sense of homelessness where everyone is living on the street and living in poor conditions - no I don't see myself in that state. I see myself as pretty well-off but as I said it's been hard and it's taken a long time.

Future accommodation

Many young people were acutely aware that their residential circumstances were likely to change again in the foreseeable future. Most students who intended to pursue their studies at a tertiary level were inevitably facing change. There were two main reasons for this situation. Firstly, the preferred tertiary institution was some distance away

which would force a change. Secondly, the students in youth housing schemes were required to vacate the premises. This situation arose from a variety of reasons. Some longer-term residents in youth housing schemes were aware they were required to move on as their initial contract which had been negotiated for a maximum time of two years had expired. Generally they were prepared for this move, and felt sufficiently independent to be able to cope without the additional support. Several other young people were required to leave their accommodation as they had completed their secondary studies, or they had turned 18. Again this was part of the condition of their contract with the organisation.

Of the five young people who had discontinued Year 12, three were considering moving but had no apparent plan in mind. They were dissatisfied with their living arrangements and hoped to find something more suitable. The other two young men were firmly ensconced in a family situation and had no intention of leaving this supportive environment.

Access to income support

Nineteen of the 35 young people stated they were not aware of income support prior to leaving their parental home.

The ability of the young people to gain income support depended on their own resourcefulness and the knowledge of adults from whom they sought help. Sixteen young people sought help with their Austudy application from the school. Ten obtained help from community-based services and eight completed their applications independently. One young woman did not lodge an application as she had been advised her circumstances did not meet the eligibility criteria. She was also financially independent.

The majority of young people described the Austudy application process as being cumbersome and time-consuming. Obtaining three written supporting statements immediately following a major family breakdown was difficult. Writing their own statement and presenting the reasons for the family conflict was particularly hard for some young people who were very distressed by family breakdown. There was also a degree of anxiety associated with uncertainty of the application process and whether their claim would be approved for payment:

I was just really nervous about it 'cos I thought they might knock me back. I'd always heard they were really tough on all applications and it was hard to get that rate, you know the homeless rate. But I didn't have a problem.

More than half the group said their application was referred to the social worker for an interview, even though they (the applicant) considered they had sufficient documentation illustrating the nature and extent of the family breakdown. These

interviews were conducted over the telephone and usually involved obtaining permission to talk directly with the applicant's parents. This process inevitably led to delays in processing as the application needed to be reviewed by an administrative officer and then contact made with the student to establish a suitable interview time with the social worker. The efficiency of this process depends on the work load of the social worker at the time.

Eventually 33 of the 35 students were granted the Student Homeless Rate (SHR) of Austudy. However, four young men experienced particular problems with their application process, and were forced to ask for a review of their case. Three were able to establish their eligibility at this point, whereas one young man was told his circumstances did not fit the stated eligibility criteria. He was left with no option other than to apply for the dependent parental means-tested student assistance, which left him considerably financially disadvantaged.

All young people experienced a minimum of three weeks wait where they were totally without income support and dependent on those around them. The students described this as a demeaning experience, and the longer it was endured, the more demoralising it became:

Mrs V lent me money to get a new birth certificate and help me get a Tax File Number. It took about four weeks and it was a real hassle.

It was such a relief when the money came through I just didn't know what to do with it. Really I didn't. It was quite a while before I had money of my own. I was making sandwiches here and that was it. I just wasn't buying anything or doing anything, knowing that you have to live off other people that aren't even your family.

If I didn't have them, I'd probably be living on the streets now 'cos I wouldn't have been able to organise that myself. I wouldn't have been able to get money. I just would have had nowhere to go.

Students who had experienced problems with the Austudy application process, said they preferred to take the direct approach and ring or visit the Student Assistance Centre (SAC) for an explanation. The country applicants used their local Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) network as a lodgment centre, but generally found the workers lacked the knowledge or expertise to deal directly with the student's complaint. Most problems related to the initial delay in receiving approval for SHR payment. Establishing the nature of the problem resulting in the delay could only be obtained from the processing centre as it is usually necessary to locate the file to obtain this information.

Health care

Most young people had been able to find and use health services which used the bulk-billing system. However, very few had any knowledge of dental services available to Health Care Card holders, and they had hoped nothing would go wrong with their teeth. Several young people required emergency dental work which had proved to be very expensive. One young woman was tolerating an abscess on her tooth at the time of interview. She was unable to get to a dental service to have the tooth attended, so was constantly relying on pain-killers:

I ended up going to my old dentist that cost me \$300 so I'm still paying that off. At the Dental Hospital you have to wait months before you'll get seen.

Sense of belonging

Many young people described a sense of belonging in their own neighbourhood or community. They described a very important network of friends that they had relied on for support. They had developed a good working knowledge of available services. This was particularly the case for those young people who had remained in the area in which they had grown up. Twenty-two young people were living within 10 km of their parental home. Three non-English-speaking background (NESB) young people were active members of culturally-based community groups. These social and cultural activities were very important. It not only gave the young people a sense of belonging but also gave them a greater appreciation of their cultural heritage. For some this feeling of being part of their community was so strong they had made the decision they would not move from the area in the future even though it may limit the options available to them.

Seven young people stated they regularly played sport or were members of a sporting club. Five were young women from country towns, and two were young men who resided in the metropolitan area. The remainder of the group played no sport on a regular or irregular basis. Several young people commented that they had played sport prior to leaving home but had given it up due to practical problems such as transport.

Other young people who had moved away from their familiar community after they left home had found themselves drifting back to their 'old' neighbourhood because they were missing the companionship of old friends. These young people regretted moving, because they felt lonely and alienated in the new surroundings. They had under-estimated the difficulty of integrating in a new situation.

There were other young people who felt no particular sense of belonging to their area, mainly as they had moved around so many times that they had not been in a position to develop strong social networks. Ten young people indicated they had a poor social life and rarely went out. This was due to lack of money and friends to accompany them.

Problems of independent living

All the young people were asked what were some of the hardest things they have had to face in the time they have been at school and away from home. The respondents were given a list of 18 issues to be discussed, and they were asked to indicate which issues were relevant to them and why.

Table 22 Problems faced by young people in the time away from parental home (frequency of responses)

Category	No.	Category	No.
Depression	27	General health (including teeth)	11
Lack of money	27	Living independently (looking after yourself, eg. lifeskills)	10
Study pressure	20	Poor social life	10
Personal relationships	17	Poor study conditions	8
Transport	16	Unstable accommodation	8
Loneliness (isolation)	13	Lack of support from school	7
Managing money	13	Missing parents	6
Asking for help	12	Finding help	4
Missing other family members	12		
Other	3		

Significantly, lack of money and depression were cited by 27 of the 35 respondents. Most people described the distress of trying to manage on the SHR of Austudy or Youth Homeless Allowance (YHA) from the Department of Social Security (DSS). It was described as a particularly shocking experience for a young person in the initial phase after leaving home, when their lives were in disarray and they faced what appeared to be an overwhelming number of problems. Gradually over time, for those who were able to settle to a more predictable lifestyle, the young people learnt to develop strategies to cope with their low income. This often involved learning how to access charities or welfare networks that were able to provide material aid, or food vouchers. Several young people were able to obtain some type of employment whilst one young woman became temporarily involved in prostitution as a means of resolving her financial worries.

Those respondents who did not cite lack of money as a problem usually had access to money from other sources, such as the auspice agency of their housing program, so they were able to borrow and then pay it back at a later stage.

Depression was most often attributed to poverty combined with impact of family problems. Most of the 27 respondents who identified this issue described a degree of chronic unhappiness in their lifestyle that turned to more severe bouts of depression

when daily problems became overwhelming. Several young people had contemplated suicide.

Coming to terms with their family problems, and the realisation that they were unlikely to be able to return home, appeared to be a common theme in the early stages. Many young people described the anguish and turmoil this caused them. Eleven young people felt so disturbed by these experiences they sought individual counselling to facilitate a healing process.

Transport was cited as a problem, primarily for the expense it incurred and the inconvenience that total reliance on the public transport system created. One-third said they really missed living with their siblings and being part of that 'family environment'. In some of the more hostile circumstances, parents had deliberately excluded the young person from any further contact with other family members. In some cases this was a short-term response to the process of leaving home, and in others it became a more entrenched position that lasted for long periods. This alienation and total detachment from the family unit further exacerbated a feeling of isolation. More than half the group had acquired a pet of various types. They felt this helped fill the void of loneliness. Those young people who had been away from home for a period greater than 12 months, felt the constant pressure of being fully responsible for oneself in all aspects of life.

Asking for help was an issue one-third of the group found to be difficult. Most young people preferred to try and struggle on alone rather than continually asking for help. They found it to be a demeaning experience admitting they were not coping. Many of the others who did not cite asking for help as a problem, said they had moved on, realising if they were going to survive they needed help.

Domestic and financial pressures were areas that worried most people. The pressures appeared to be an unanticipated consequence of being independent, with those students wanting to keep abreast of their study feeling trapped by this circumstance.

Most of the young men admitted they had very poor lifeskills and had considerable trouble managing themselves. In some cases this situation forced them to look for accommodation that provided full board. The young women, on the other hand, generally felt they had the skills but they complained about the amount of time it took to care adequately for oneself. They were conscious of inadequate diets and the fact they were often forced to eat poor quality food.

Study pressure was a perceived problem that grew with time. Most students felt the pressure of Year 12 was much greater than previous years and the continual assessment program throughout the year was found to be very trying. Lack of support from school also contributed to this perception.

Conflict in personal relationships had adversely affected half the group. These were usually problems related to either household arrangements or boy/girlfriend relationships.

General health problems had had an impact on many people. Some had chronic problems such as re-occurring viruses, or glandular fever. Most related these illnesses to poor diet and lifestyle. They felt quite powerless to effect the type of change necessary to create better health. Only a small minority had visited a dentist or had any idea of dental services available to them.

In looking back over the time they were away from home, many young people deeply regretted the circumstances they were in. They wished their circumstances were different, and that they had been able to live with their family in a 'normal' situation.

Of those who survived to the end of Year 12, most looked back with a sense of pride and achievement in that they had actually achieved one of their goals.

In contrast to this group were those who terminated their studies during the year. They had no sense of achievement and were more inclined to feel they had failed.

The future

All the young people were asked about their future plans and what they expected to be doing in six months time. They were also asked to comment on any particular problems they expected to face during that time. Most young people had given considerable thought to their plans and prospects for the following year, and what change it was likely to bring to their lives.

The 30 young people who completed their Year 12 studies had a range of expectations. One young man had already obtained an apprenticeship, and he was looking forward to a healthier financial situation and a productive working life. Six others had no specific plans to study or work. They were taking the 'wait and see' option, primarily because they felt very drained by the experience of studying Year 12.

Twenty-three students had plans to continue to study in some capacity. Several students were so single-minded about their tertiary course options that they had applied to various universities around the country. Others were more flexible in this area, preferring to remain in a similar geographic location, to avoid too much upheaval in their lives. This group, satisfied that they had completed their Year 12, viewed it as a foundation stone to furthering their education and in so doing increase their employability and career options.

The five young people who had discontinued their studies appeared less clear about their future directions than those who had completed their Year 12. As they had all been away from school for at least five months they had already experienced a degree of boredom and monotony in their everyday lives. They expected the next six months would be the same unless they obtained employment. The two women saw working as the only option, but both recognised this was going to be a particularly difficult task as

they lived in country towns where work for young people was scarce. The three young men had a few ideas about employment possibilities but were not optimistic about them materialising. This group appeared generally more disillusioned about the future than those who completed Year 12 as they had no clear options immediately obvious to them.

The majority of young people said the biggest problem they expected to face over the next six months, irrespective of their choice of options, was money. All the 30 students were aware their Austudy payments would cease on the last day of the year. With the exception of one student, most of the group were confused about their entitlement to income support beyond that date. Most students were anxious about what would happen to them during the period of transition from secondary school to a tertiary institution. These young people felt financially vulnerable as they had no savings or resources to fall back on. They looked to the future with a feeling of unease and nervousness as their livelihood depended on good advice from bureaucrats to ensure a quick and smooth resolution to their problem. It was yet another hurdle for them to overcome, with most of them resigned to the fact that there was no easy solution to many of their problems.

The follow-up

In the initial interviews, which were held during September 1994 to January 1995, the young people were asked about their future plans and what they expected to be doing in six months time. Most of them had given considerable thought to their plans and the changes ahead. Many at that time were facing an uncertain future with mixed feelings.

The follow-up interviews, undertaken over the phone in May and June 1995, provide an interesting and generally encouraging postscript.

The main aim of the follow-up was to find out what the young people were doing and how they had managed the transition from school into the work force or on to further education. The timing of a mid-year call was intended to allow sufficient time for those continuing with study to have settled in to their courses and new environments, as well as to allow for some perspective on the realities of the transition experience.

The young people were asked whether they had experienced any particular problems in relation to finances, study demands or accommodation and were given the opportunity to identify any other negative or positive factors in their lives.

At the time of the follow-up only four of the young people were unable to be contacted or did not respond.

Current situation

Table 23 shows the young people's current situation.

Table 23 Young people's situation at follow-up interviews

	Completed Year 12		Discontinued Year 12		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Year 12 repeat	2	-	-	-	2
Studying (tertiary)	2	15	-	-	17
Working	-	2	2	-	4
Apprentice/trainee	3	1	1	-	5
Unemployed	-	2	-	1	3
No response	-	3	-	1	4
Total	7	23	3	2	35

Nineteen of the 30 young people who completed Year 12 in 1994 commenced further study in 1995. This includes two young men who opted to repeat Year 12 to improve their results.

At the time of the follow-up, two young women had since decided to defer for various reasons.

Four of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) graduates, three young men and one young woman, have apprenticeships or traineeships that involve a combination of paid work and study. Another two young women are working. Both expressed interest in returning to education at a later date.

Two young women are on unemployment benefits. Both have been quite persistent in pursuing their preferred career but have been either unsuccessful in getting into a suitable tertiary course or unable to find appropriate work experience as planned.

Of the five who discontinued Year 12, two are working, one has an apprenticeship the fourth is unemployed, and one did not respond.

Expectations versus reality

Twenty one of the respondents are known to be pursuing or have had the opportunity to pursue, their first choice of either work or study, as nominated in their interview in 1994.

Amongst the 11 known to be studying in their field of first choice, several are now

considering deferring or dropping out, or have already done so, for various reasons, namely:

- pressure of study and money worries
- under stimulated/disappointment with course
- homesick for local community
- family tragedy.

Those remaining are generally positive and motivated about what they are doing, but there is a prevailing concern amongst all the students about finances. The students who were most positive, despite finding study a challenge, were supplementing their student assistance through part-time work or having taken out a loan.

The seven young people who are working as their first choice, whether it be in full or part-time work or in an apprenticeship/traineeship, were noticeably the most positive and enthusiastic. All referred to the positive situation of receiving an increased weekly income independent of bureaucratic processes. Several were also relieved to have escaped the pressure of study and felt that they needed a break. Not all of the young people found work straight away.

Of the eight known not to have achieved their first choice as nominated in 1994, four are positive and enthusiastic about what has eventuated for them notably:

- One young person has taken up an apprenticeship in an unexpected trade but is pleased and motivated by his opportunities.
- One young man unsatisfied with his VCE results has moved interstate to seek more stable accommodation with family friends and is enthusiastic about trying to improve his options with better marks this year.
- Two students who achieved access into tertiary study but not into their nominated courses, are enthusiastic about the courses they are now doing, although they are both trying to cope with difficult financial circumstances.

Of the remaining four, two are unemployed and another two young women are undertaking tertiary courses but are overwhelmed by study, family and/or financial problems.

One respondent had no particular direction or motivation in the initial 1994 interview and is currently on unemployment benefits with continued uncertainty about future options.

The transition experience

The young people continuing into tertiary study have had to contend with a number of hurdles that most other VCE students would face with the financial and emotional support of their families and peer group. New accommodation, lack of transport, tertiary entry fees and the cost of prescribed texts can present overwhelming problems for people with few if any resources behind them.

The Austudy process

The financial situation of the young people has been a major factor in how they perceive the transition from school. For some the inconsistent administrative processes of the continuing Austudy payment over the holiday period undermined the start to their tertiary education.

The Student Assistance program requires students to lodge an application each calendar year. Payments cease on 31 December in any one year, and continuation of payments throughout the holiday period is only guaranteed if early lodgement of the new form is received.

Year 12 students in normal circumstances cannot apply for student assistance until they have been offered a tertiary place, which is usually towards the end of January. Hence there is a period of anywhere up to 12 weeks where there is no student assistance paid. However, there are several exceptions to this situation, SHR recipients being one of them.

Twenty-six students were entitled to apply for continuation payments based on a possible intention to study in 1995. However, only three had a straightforward experience in lodging their claim having received the appropriate form in time for it to be processed for the following year.

The remaining 23 had various difficulties. Most were without any source of income for several weeks early in the new year which has had lasting consequences in terms of accrued debt, compromised living arrangements, and/or a difficult start to the academic year.

Gaining access to information regarding this transition period also caused confusion amongst some students. Several young people rang or approached the SAC for advice concerning their future plans and entitlement to income support. The young people found it difficult to obtain clear accurate advice regarding their continuation payments. SAC staff advised some students that they could not apply for income support until they had confirmed their tertiary offer. Faced with this situation, several students were forced to transfer to DSS for payments in the new year period. When the tertiary offers were announced they then had to cancel that payment and transfer back to the

Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET).

One young country woman whose initial interview was conducted early in the new year explained her predicament:

There's a free call you can ring up and ask for anything you want to know. They were meant to send me continuation form if you are going to a TAFE or uni. course.

Did you ever get it?

I rang them up and asked for it. Some lady said it was in the mail. And I didn't receive it. So I rang up again and said I didn't receive my Austudy form.

This was back in December?

Yeah, I said to them look what's going on. I didn't receive it. The guy said if you didn't receive it then you won't get it unless you ring the CES and get it from them. I thought, oh great! I told him a girl had told me it should be in the mail and he said she shouldn't have told you that because it's not.

I thought oh great! So I rang them up and the CES sent me a form. So I sent them in. Just recently I received another continuation form with an additional form so I sent that in yesterday. So I've still got to wait for my forms to be done before I get any money.

So you still haven't had any money this year?

Nope.

The importance of the continuing payment is underlined by the tight financial circumstances experienced by most of the respondents during the VCE year, and their incapacity to save any money to carry them through a prolonged non-payment period.

In addition, those proceeding to university apparently had no idea of the costs involved in enrolling or in acquiring the necessary text books and stationery. There is no indication that any of the students received anything other than the most basic of assistance at the various tertiary institutions.

At least 10 of the students, from both Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and university, cited money/finances to be a major concern. Of these, six are known to have taken out either a supplementary loan (or part of) or a student loan. Several students were considering, or had considered, some form of loan to deal with all the new financial difficulties that further full-time study presented. For several of the students there has been the additional expense and disruption of having to move closer to their tertiary institution, especially for those who have been required to move out of supported

accommodation into the private rental market.

It is apparent that financial uncertainty or actual hardship is a major factor undermining the motivation and commitment of the young people undertaken further study.

The case of 'Su' illustrates the hardship caused by problems with continuing payments

Su had left school at Year 10 following a series of family traumas. She returned to school at Year 11 some time later. Su had been living in supported accommodation but left on completion of her Year 12 studies. Su did not receive notice about continuing payments and consequently was without any money for five weeks. To pay the rent and contribute to the purchase of a fridge and furniture, she borrowed money from a family friend.

Having got in to her chosen field at university, she moved again to be closer to the institution. Su began her studies, however she was faced with unpaid university enrolment fees of several hundred dollars and the cost of the prescribed texts. Su felt overwhelmed by her financial predicament and concerned about the prospect of going further into debt, she has been forced to defer her studies.

Accommodation

At least six of the 17 students taking up tertiary study have moved to be close to their TAFE or university. For several of the students, this has involved leaving longstanding support networks in their local community, which has been particularly stressful for some. Another six, representing workers as well as students, have moved or are intending to do so soon to meet the rules of their supported accommodation. Those who have already moved from subsidised and/or supported accommodation into the private rental market have been shocked, not at the lack of support but at the costs involved. One of the university students is considering deferring because her current accommodation is too far from the university. She has moved too many times in the last year or so to want to move again and has already taken out a loan to keep her head above water.

At least 10 of the young people indicated that they are involved in long-term, stable relationships and living with their partner. In some instances the partner's family pays a strong supporting role for the young person.

The case of 'Gina' illustrates the problems associated with accomodation

Gina changed her accommodation twice during Year 12 because she did not get on with the other tenants. She was within walking distance of the school. She acknowledges that she was difficult to live with at the time because she was very stressed and angry.

She has been reluctant to move again to be closer to uni. but is finding the travelling exhausting and expensive. She doesn't know anyone at uni. and would rather stay in an area near her friends. She borrowed money to purchase a concession card as well as some of the required texts for university, but had not anticipated all the costs of enrolment. She was threatened with late fines and invalidation of her enrolment, all of which took time and much negotiating to sort out.

Although she is still keen to continue with her course, Gina is feeling worn down with study and commuting and the struggle of managing her limited finances. She is considering deferring to work and save some money but is uncertain about job prospects.

Summary

In examining the problems of living independently, both in the secondary and post-school situation, the young people identified accommodation and income support as the two critical factors enabling young people to remain at school.

Very few young people were able to avoid subsequent moves after having left home. Finding suitable long-term accommodation near the school was often difficult. Many young people were forced to rent in the private sector as there was limited access to subsidised housing. The respondents preferred to remain in their known community and school wherever possible so sometimes this circumstance led to compromising their living standards.

A significant number of respondents lacked knowledge of income support options prior to leaving home. Their capacity to complete the application and obtain the benefit depended on the individual. More than half the group had their application referred to the social worker for additional information. All young people had a minimum of three weeks without income support.

The issue of income support became problematic again at the end of the Year 12 studies as few students understood their entitlements and consequently experienced considerable personal distress sorting out their arrangements.

On reflection most young people found living without parental support more difficult than they expected. Sole reliance on an inadequate income led to an impoverished lifestyle. This was one factor that led to feelings of depression. Living without the

company of family members and unresolved family conflicts also contributed to this feeling of being overwhelmed by personal problems.

In looking to the post-secondary experience most young people planned to continue their studies. They were nervously optimistic about their results and what lay ahead. Significantly those young people who discontinued their studies were less optimistic about the future as they had no clear career path. A follow-up interview was conducted in May-June 1995. The majority of participants achieved their first choice in their chosen career path. Most had continued their studies. Finances still remained the predominant concern.

It is encouraging that so many of the respondents consider themselves to be generally happy and motivated in what they are doing, despite the difficulties they have faced and are, in some cases, facing still. At least 21 of the respondents could be described in such positive terms.

Of the other eight whose attitude is known, they are depressed and unhappy because they are either dealing with a specific family/personal crisis or they are overwhelmed by study pressures or financial difficulties.

Issues for Austudy

From the information presented in this chapter the following issues arise for Austudy:

Lack of knowledge

- Lack of knowledge of income support entitlement remains a problem. These findings indicate more than half had no knowledge of SHR prior to leaving home.
- The lack of knowledge regarding income entitlement during the period of transition seriously disadvantaged some young people. These findings indicate information dissemination is poor and staff within DEET and the community lack expertise in this area.

Specialist skill

- Assessing SHR applications is a specialist task, demanding professional skills. These findings indicate that more than half the applications required social work assessment as the information insufficiently addressed the eligibility criteria.

Application delays

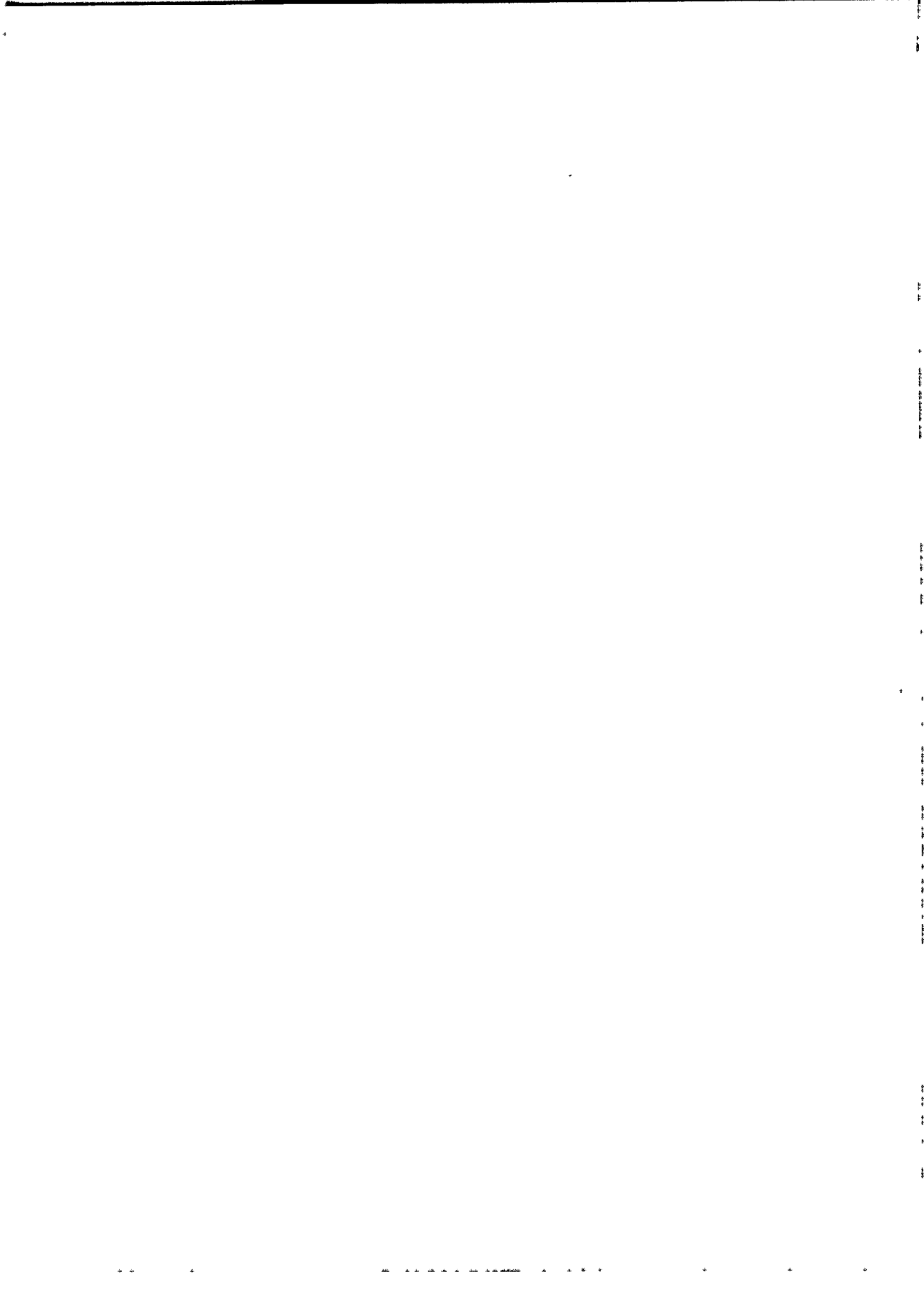
- The application processing is time consuming and creates many delays. These findings indicate most students were without income for at least three weeks after leaving home.

Country applicants

- Country applications are disadvantaged as the local staff lack knowledge of SHR issues and they have limited access to specialist personal.

Name of allowance

- The name of the allowance—Student Homeless Rate—does not reflect the nature of the population. These findings indicate the beneficiaries find this a demeaning term.



Chapter 8 **Discussion and recommendations**

This study has focussed on the experiences of students who have been living away from their parental home while enrolled to complete their Year 12 studies in 1994. Five discontinued their studies during the year. The participants came from a large geographic region covering both metropolitan and country areas. There was a diverse range of family backgrounds and compositions as well as varying lengths of time away from the parental home. The experiences of all these young people has provided some valuable information regarding factors that enhance students' ability to remain at school as well as factors that contribute to a young person's decision to leave school.

The study has provided an in-depth examination of the family circumstances and school environment as the two critical aspects in the students' lives. It has explored a number of other factors that impact on the capacity of young people to survive independently.

In its examination of the key elements in the respondents' lives, the study covered three distinct phases. It examined the family circumstances prior to young people leaving home and the events that led them to leaving home. It described the school environment and its effect on the process of leaving home and establishing themselves independently. It also looked at the ongoing existence of young people outside the school environment, and how they establish themselves in the community. The participant's ability to re-establish communication links with their parents and other family members was also explored.

It is within the framework of these three phases that this chapter will examine the problems arising for young people living without parental support.

General observations

The process of interviewing the respondents highlighted the diversity and individuality of experiences. Where their circumstances were similar invariably each individual responded to the situation in their own way. While many young people had similar

feelings about issues, such as the importance of re-establishing communication with family members, they employed various strategies to achieve the same outcome. These findings demonstrate that homeless young people are far from being an homogenous group.

All young people had different but equally complex stories to tell; however some common themes have emerged.

The value of education

Most young people valued the opportunity to continue their education:

- School was a familiar experience and environment that provided them with a sense of stability and an element of security in their lives.
- Attending school was a means of maintaining contact with peers, friends and in some cases other family members.
- Being enrolled at school gave their lives a defined focus that in many other ways was chaotic.

For many, school was a means of achieving a specific goal, whether it was completing their secondary studies or a longer-term career path. The individual determination to achieve their goals within the school system was demonstrated by those who compromised their living situation to maintain continuity in their schooling, or attend a more flexible school some distance away.

Those who discontinued Year 12 made a decision to do so for practical reasons. Attending school was an additional pressure in their lives that had become an unproductive and negative experience.

The long-term beneficiaries

The long-term beneficiaries of the Student Homeless Rate (SHR) of Austudy (those young people who had been away from home for more than two years) were those who were youngest when they left home. Seven were aged 15 years or younger when they left home and this factor set them apart from the general group. The process of establishing stability in their lives was harder, particularly for those who had no extended family to fall back on. They had greater difficulty obtaining help, asking for help, and verbalising their feelings. The process of establishing emotional stability placing their family problems and conflicts in some perspective took longer. This group of young people also felt the greatest sense of loss regarding their teenage years as they were forced to fend for themselves at such an early age.

The importance of family

After having left or been expelled from the family home, all young people experienced varying degrees of anguish in coming to terms with conflict they experienced within their family home. This period of turmoil was followed by an equally difficult period of adjustment of learning to live independently and without the company of family members. A sense of loneliness led many young people to the realisation that restoring some positive links with their family members would be beneficial to all concerned. At the time of interview most young people were presenting a paradoxical point of view. Ideally they felt they wanted to be part of their family and enjoy the benefits that are associated with family life. Realistically they knew these feelings were fanciful and the situation was not a viable proposition. Comfortably adjusting to this situation usually took at least 12 months.

Seeking out adults

Another central theme was the desire to seek out an adult who could be trusted and with whom they could develop a meaningful relationship. In the absence of close parental guidance and interest, these relationships were very important. They gave the young people a feeling of being valued as someone took an interest in them personally without focussing on their problems. In the best possible situation there was continuity of support from the time the young person left their parental home. This relationship often provided the young person with a good role model that helped restore faith in the good aspects of family life.

Accessing support

Having been forced into an independent living situation most young people expressed a reluctance to continually be asking for help from those around them. The feeling of being a burden to others and an attitude of 'needing to do it alone' sometimes led to young people placing themselves in desperate situations. Many young people were surprised by the degree of goodwill offered to them by other adults or families who were aware of their plight. Although appreciative of the support there was a degree of tension associated with developing these relationships. As they grew in importance, the young people felt concerned not to 'blow it' by becoming too dependent.

Living independently

Most young people were completely naive about the expense and degree of responsibility required to live independently. The shock of having to attend to monotonous domestic tasks became overwhelming for some. Organising and establishing routines, in conjunction with decision making in the absence of adults,

were areas of concern.

Most young people described bad experiences. These ranged from incurring debts, being ripped off by friends or acquaintances or associating with undesirable company and engaging in illegal activities. This range of circumstances led most young people to consider they had grown up very quickly and had learnt to be suspicious and wary of trusting people.

Managing on Austudy

It is indicative of the young peoples' resourcefulness that they have been able to manage on a fixed income that is below the poverty line. Managing initially with no income, and then learning to cope with an inadequate income, placed most young people in a situation where they had to develop survival strategies. These included ways to obtain material aid, food vouchers and to shop wisely. All these strategies took time to develop and in most cases participants had to learn from very bad mistakes, as they did not have anyone to guide them through the initial learning phase.

Managing on this income contributed to a feeling of inadequacy as many young people felt they should be able to manage but they knew it was simply impossible. There was also a degree of ongoing anxiety related to the fragility of the situation. Living each week as it came meant there was no capacity to deal with extra expenses or a crisis. Many young people worried about their financial vulnerability and the threat of incurring extra debts.

Mental health

Bouts of depression and chronic unhappiness were issues common to most participants. Coming to terms with the family conflicts and the problems associated with the expulsion from the family home were the main factors contributing to those feelings. Several young people had contemplated suicide as they felt so disturbed by their experiences and their inability to change their situation. Living in impoverished circumstances and feeling the pressure of having to stay motivated with their studies also contributed to a feeling of being overwhelmed.

Country versus metropolitan

The experience of participants in the country or regional centres was sometimes different from that of young people living in suburban areas. Participants who grew up in rural areas appeared firmly ensconced in their community and resisted the idea of change even in situations where it was to their detriment. Anonymity became a problem for some people in country towns, as their change of residence was obvious to all. For

some this became an issue when they needed support for their Austudy application, as other community members did not want to be seen as taking sides in a family dispute. Travelling long distances was also a disincentive particularly if they wanted to remain at the same school. Those who lived in the city appeared less conscious of an attachment to a particular neighbourhood and less fearful of moving away from a nominated area. The metropolitan areas had greater options for young people especially in relation to transport and schools.

However, awareness of community support was sometimes limited as the services were scattered throughout the area. Country participants were more likely to have knowledge of youth services as the centres were more visible and known to local people.

Towards an integrated approach

Most young people reflected on a combination of problems and difficulties that were adversely affecting their family's ability to live together. Some of these problems were related to economic or work-related stress, while others were factors within the home such as addictive habits, marital stress/separation and interpersonal communication. Poor communication in combination with physical and emotional abuse were the main reasons given for leaving home.

On reflection, most young people considered these problems within their family had been in existence for some years. As time went on the problem grew worse and positions within the family home became entrenched. Leaving home seemed an inevitable way of resolving the conflict.

In describing these situations, the majority of young people explained they had not sought help outside the extended family unit. Some had remained silent about their plight whilst others had only confided in other family members.

Very few young people recall anyone in their family seeking help for the ongoing conflicts occurring within the family home. The main reasons given for this situation were ignorance due to age and sense of family loyalty. The young people felt seeking help or discussing family problems outside their family network was unacceptable and posed an additional threat to their future well-being. This resistance to obtain help particularly for those families where siblings have previously left the home is disturbing.

Most young people felt that by the time they had left home there was little if any possibility of resolving the conflict.

These series of circumstances highlight the need to develop some community strategies that can encourage both young people and other family members to seek help at an earlier stage so there is some chance the family may be able to employ more

productive strategies to resolve conflict.

Whilst schools are prime sites for identifying and supporting families with problems, services need to be developed with an integrated community focus.

This study has shown that many families resist seeking help partly through ignorance and partly through a strong feeling of wishing to solve their own disputes in their own way. Efforts need to be made to increasing the profile of community-based services that can help families through these difficult times. Promotion of the idea that it is acceptable to seek help also needs to be considered. It is imperative that services reflect the cultural diversity of the community, as well as incorporating a range of responses to individual family needs. These may include individual counselling, family or marital counselling, family therapy or mediation.

Visibility of services in a centrally located facility has been shown to be an effective way of reaching community members during times of crisis. Many young people experience problems or crisis during times when they are not at school, for example, during Christmas holidays. Having knowledge of and access to resources during these times is vital. Equally having support in the post-secondary phase is important.

This study has shown that continuity of support for young people is an important factor in helping young people adjust to living independently. Families also need ongoing support to deal with their sense of loss and disappointment with their situation.

School-based services

The young people in this study valued the opportunity to pursue their secondary studies whilst living away from home. Most of the students given the right support were able to take advantage of their opportunities and complete their secondary schooling.

The participants related a range of experiences at 23 different schools across the target region. The strength of a school is its ability to develop and maintain internal pastoral care structures that can respond flexibly to a range of diverse needs. SHR beneficiaries have been shown to be a very varied group. They may be young people who have experienced chronic abuse of either a physical or emotional nature. They may be young people returning to school after having spent some time in a chronic homeless lifestyle on the streets, or they may be young people from families where English is not spoken at home. Either way a student's needs and ability to seek out help within the school setting is an individual process.

This study has shown that some schools are able to effectively create a positive school atmosphere, by developing strategies and policies to help disadvantaged and unsupported students. Several factors affect this process; namely the prominence and resources allocated to pastoral care and the attitude of the staff to help disadvantaged

and unsupported students when the need arises as well as acceptance and tolerance of the needs and situations of individual students.

The role of the Student Welfare Co-ordinator is central to offering support particularly to students who have been at the same school for an extended period of time. The students have had the opportunity to assess the value of this service by its reputation. Half the group had sought help from the Co-ordinator either prior to leaving home or immediately after the crisis.

These students felt their needs would be met and confidentiality would be maintained. These schools valued the work of the Student Welfare Co-ordinator who was usually easily accessible, attentive to the longer-term needs and had good rapport with the students.

In less positive circumstances students felt they were unable to establish a rapport with the Student Welfare Co-ordinator. Important matters such as confidentiality may not have been given due attention and there was sometimes a feeling of inadequacy as the person could not or did not have the time to attend to all the ongoing needs. In schools where there were higher populations of disadvantaged and unsupported students there appeared to be problems in this area. The attitude of staff and the degree of sensitivity they displayed towards the SHR beneficiaries was also an important element in enhancing a positive school experience. These attitudes not only affected classroom performance but also impacted on issues such as school attendance and motivation. More empathetic staff were able to understand the total pressure on the young people living independently and take this into consideration when administering school policies, whereas less sympathetic staff were dismissive of claims about other problems and less interested in adopting a personal approach. Sometimes these attitudes were due to lack of knowledge, at other times they appeared to the student to be related to an attitude of 'not another homeless kid'.

This study has shown that most SHR beneficiaries who engaged in the study are genuinely interested in achieving and they feel sensitive about their status. Those returning to education after a break have particular needs in this regard and their position needs to be recognised for the efforts they are making to apply themselves to the study situation.

Several students had the additional benefit of a home tutoring program to help them with their studies. They found this to be a valuable service not only for the academic input but also for the encouragement it gave them on an individual basis. Most students considered this would be a program they could have benefited from.

It is therefore recommended that:

1. The Directorate of School Education should ensure the adequate resourcing of pastoral care programs in Victorian schools.
2. The Directorate of School Education should ensure that there is an identified Student Welfare Co-ordinator position in every school.
3. The Directorate of School Education should provide for staff training so that teachers understand the problems which students face living without parental support.
4. School councils should be required to develop policies to address the needs of disadvantaged and, in particular, unsupported students. Issues such as absenteeism should be covered by these.
5. School councils should undertake to work with their wider community to ensure that young people at risk of homelessness have knowledge of, and access to, support options in their local area.
6. Federal and State Governments should sponsor initiatives to develop a network of local tutoring programs for students living without parental support.

School fees and levies

Many students reported one negative aspect of their school experience was the continued pursuit of fees and levies for their various subjects. Most students felt they had little chance of contributing to these bills, as they had no savings capacity from their fortnightly entitlements.

The school administrations appeared to do one of two things: either demand some money up-front during the enrolment process, or continually issue the student with bills throughout the year. The latter was reported to have a very distressing effect on the students, who more often than not was experiencing major difficulties existing on the SHR entitlement. One student said she was prevented from fully participating in Year 12 activities, as she had not paid her levies.

Several students could not enrol until they had made some contribution to the fees.

It is therefore recommended that :

7. School councils should be required by the Directorate of School Education to exempt homeless students from paying voluntary contributions or 'fees' by offering an equal grant to the school by way of compensation.

Accommodation

Access to both emergency and longer-term affordable housing close to schools was nominated as a crucial factor in enhancing a student's ability to remain at school. The availability of these facilities was found to be scarce and uneven throughout the study region. These findings have been supported by previous Brotherhood of St Laurence studies notably Thomson (1993) and Morris & Blaskett (1992). The introduction of rent assistance to SHR recipients since this study began is to be applauded and goes part of the way to alleviating the financial stress associated with paying high rents.

The participants in this study were living in a variety of situations and their preferences were related to individual choice. Some young people wanted to live within a family environment, whereas others considered they had adequately developed independence skills to care for themselves, in either shared settings or with a friend. Others had the benefit of living in a supported accommodation scheme. This could have been a youth housing scheme or a community adolescent program that caters for young people to the age of 18 years. Both of these schemes usually offer accommodation for a contracted time-limited period while the young person is studying at secondary school.

These findings indicate the development of a range of options within communities is a crucial factor in helping young people to remain at school. It is also important that in providing these facilities, factors other than age are considered, particularly in the post-secondary transition phase. Several young people in this study were required to leave their accommodation because they had finished school, but had not decided their career options so they were unsure of where to relocate to.

It is therefore recommended that:

8. Federal and State Governments should undertake to expand and further develop the range of housing options for young unsupported people, in particular to:
 - a) sponsor local initiatives to develop emergency and longer-term placements with families within school communities;
 - b) allow greater flexibility in the guidelines for Community Adolescent Placements to cover the period of transition from school; and
 - c) improve the availability of housing options for young people in the public rental sector.

Austudy

Chapter Two examined the history and development of the SHR service delivery issues.

The administration in the early phase of the allowance was marred by internal problems, a central administration and difficulties adapting to a new student assistance scheme. The introduction of a non-parental means-tested allowance brought a new focus to the work as assessing SHR applications required specific subjective skills in an environment that traditionally employed objective measures. There was also poor targeting of the intended client group; the younger students completing their secondary education. In response to community pressures and administrative officer's concerns, the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) initiated some changes to their service delivery program. These included the employment of some contracted social workers to deal specifically with the SHR applications.

Since the late 1980s DEET has devolved their central administration of the Austudy scheme and established regional areas serviced by Student Assistance Centres(SAC). Each SAC in turn has a network of Commonwealth Employment Centres (CES), including Youth Access Centres (YAC) responsible for receiving and advising on Austudy applications. This network created the potential for DEET to develop an expansive quality service delivery program particularly in the country regions. However DEET has been unable to effectively employ a system that provides a consistent approach to service delivery throughout Australia. There are several reasons contributing to this situation.

There has been a strong resistance to adequately develop the whole student assistance network, particularly in relation to professional social work services. YACs, for example, do not have specialist Austudy or SHR staff placed there. The professional services that do exist have developed in an ad hoc manner and are often under-valued, under-utilised and generally on contract and therefore not part of established processes. Central policy makers and administrators have not been able to effect the necessary positive change needed at the regional level, to provide consistent quality service for a small but needy group. This is partly due to the fact that education is only one small component of a large Department where there are often competing priorities.

All these issues have lead to ongoing suggestions that one department administers all income support to young people rather than both the Department of Social Security (DSS) and DEET as is presently the case. Whilst there continues to be a dual system comparisons will be made. The DSS has developed some innovative programs such as the Youth Service Units designed to provide a comprehensive range of services to young people. If DEET is to continue to administer SHR they need to develop a comprehensive strategy that reflects an understanding of the client group and a preparedness to develop pro-active strategies to enhance the administrative practices.

The introduction of the case-management approach to young people who are living without parental support and who have left the education system provides the model for DEET to develop a more comprehensive strategy for a similar group of young people who have remained in education.

It is therefore recommended that:

9. DEET should demonstrate its commitment to servicing the needs of vulnerable young students by developing a consistent, appropriately resourced service delivery system throughout Australia.

This can be achieved by:

- undertaking to provide funds to develop social work services throughout Australia;
- placing less emphasis on the written application process, particularly for the younger applicants and providing the social work intervention and assessment at the beginning of the process rather than the end;
- ensuring specialist SHR social workers and administrative officers in the SAC staff are accessible. This would require the social work position to be full-time, operating on normal office hours;
- ensuring staff who deal with either SHR enquiries or applications are sufficiently trained and sensitised to the needs of young people;
- ensuring all YACs including country centres have at least part-time social worker services available to the client group;
- providing a co-ordinated outreach service to the small number of schools with high homeless populations;
- ensuring both YAC and SAC enquiries staff are given clear instruction and training on this issue.

Lack of money and managing money

More than two-thirds of the group cited lack of money as being a major problem in their lives. They found it was very difficult to make this money stretch for the fortnight between payment, and were often forced to either go without food or approach other sources for help, eg. welfare organisations for food vouchers.

As 24 of the 30 students were under 18 years of age at the beginning of their Year 12, they were further disadvantaged by the fact that their income entitlement was less

than their 18-year-old counterparts.

A significant number of young people were forced to rely on the charity of others when bills could not be paid. This was particularly evident in situations where young people did not have access to subsidised housing and were forced to pay a much higher proportion of their income in rent. Other Brotherhood studies (Thomson 1992; Morris & Blaskett 1991) have also supported this finding and in the light of no evidence pointing to lower costs paid by independent students aged less than 18 years have recommended the difference in payments between under 18-year-olds and over 18-year-olds be abolished.

Some students said they had problems managing their money and preferred the DSS system of weekly payments, which helped avoid the length of time between payments, and the 'boom/bust' cycle.

It is recommended that:

10. The Federal Government should urgently review the level of income support to independent young people and remove the discrepancy between payments to those younger than 18 years old and those aged 18 and over.
11. DEET should give consideration to moving to weekly payments as is done by the Department of Social Security for Youth Training Allowance.

Fees and levies

This study has shown that students are struggling to survive on an inadequate income and when additional expenses related to school and post-secondary school attendance are demanded, they are simply unable to pay. Ongoing costs for items such as stationery and books were prohibitive and students were unable to purchase the required text. This was particularly evident at the tertiary level where there were many additional, unanticipated expenses.

This finding supports previous Brotherhood of St Laurence work in schools (Morris & Blaskett 1992).

It is therefore recommended that:

12. The Student Assistance Scheme should address the issue of ongoing education expenses for both secondary and tertiary students by providing a one-off payment at the beginning of the academic year to enable SHR recipients to adequately equip themselves for study.

The process of transition

Very few SHR recipients understood their entitlement to income support during the period of transition from Year 12 to their chosen career path. This study identified problems in areas of poor information dissemination, poor advice, and late receipt of continuation forms. All recipients are entitled to continue their payments until they have decided not to pursue study in a recognised course. With the introduction of the Youth Training Allowance DEET has developed a case management approach for young people living without parental support who have left the education system. The recipients of SHR are equally vulnerable and should be entitled to a similar approach particularly at the end of their secondary schooling when they are facing a series of difficult decisions about their future.

It is therefore recommended that:

13. DEET should undertake a case-management approach with all Year 12 SHR recipients and ensure they have sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision about their income support entitlement during the process of transition.

This can be achieved by:

- offering an appointment with the SAC social worker to discuss options available to them;
- SAC staff conducting an information seminar in schools where there are large numbers of SHR beneficiaries;
- ensuring all Year 12 SHR beneficiaries are correctly identified on the database and they receive their continuation form early in Term 4;
- DEET undertaking a direct marketing campaign to schools and youth service providers highlighting this information;
- highlighting this information on the Austudy and SHR application form and incorporating more detail in the National Union of Student's guide (DEET 1995b).

Data

Estimating the number of homeless people, and more specifically homeless students, has been a controversial issue for the past decade. A recent census by Mackenzie and Chamberlain (1995) which looked at the number of students within schools who experienced homelessness at a particular point in time, showed that the numbers of homeless had increased over the past three years. Such a trend is not apparent from the DEET data. DEET's inability to produce meaningful figures that show point in time

numbers, rejection rates and client profile trends has left the department open to criticism, particularly as their yearly figures are reflecting a slowing of growth rates in SHR numbers. The current processing database system is due to be upgraded and replaced by the Student Entitlement Process System in 1996. It is envisaged this system has the capacity to be more efficient and able to develop client profiles. However, careful attention needs to be paid to ensuring STEPS is programmed to easily retrieve data showing point in time numbers, and client profile trends such as the length of time a student is in receipt of SHR.

It is therefore recommended that:

14. DEET should develop a more informative database regarding SHR recipients in the Student Entitlement Process System (STEPS) to be introduced in 1996.

The name of the allowance

The name given to the allowance for independent students has been a source of concern for some years. Most participants disliked the term and felt it projected an unfortunate image and gave them a label. Half considered it did not reflect their correct circumstance as they had shelter.

These students are being paid within a scheme that normally requires a parental means test as the majority of young people live within a supported family unit. As they are the exception, in that they are unsupported, the label 'homeless' is superfluous.

It is therefore recommended that:

15. The name of the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy should be changed to the 'Unsupported Student' rate of Austudy.

Absenteeism

The need to have time away from school was a common issue amongst the respondents. This may have been for a variety of reasons ranging from practical everyday matters such as banking to attending appointments or moving house. Whilst it is recognised minimum standards of attendance are necessary, these young people have additional pressures placed on them compared with their colleagues living within a supported environment. Currently schools complete Benefits Control attendance checks several times throughout the year. This information is forwarded to administrative officers for action with no reference to social workers for special consideration.

It is recommended that:

16. All SHR recipients identified as not complying with Benefits Control Unit attendance checks should be referred back to the social worker for further investigation prior to an overpayment order being issued.
17. The Benefits Control Unit, schools and social workers should work more closely to establish more appropriate absenteeism guidelines for SHR recipients.

This could be achieved by:

- the SAC social worker maintaining a higher profile within the school network and offering consultative support directly to schools prior to large overpayments being accrued.

Publicity

More than half the group were unaware of income support prior to leaving home. Whilst there has been some progress in the area of publicity since some of these participants left home, it is particularly concerning that genuine applicants are still ignorant of their entitlements. It is also disturbing that there is still misunderstandings concerning the eligibility of 15-year-old students and graduating Year 12 students. Previous Brotherhood of St Laurence studies notably Thomson (1993) also concluded publicity within schools was poor and young people lacked knowledge of income support programs.

It is therefore recommended that:

18. DEET should continue to develop and evaluate strategies to publicise students' eligibility for income support particularly at the younger age range and during the period of transition to post-secondary studies.

This process could be further enhanced by:

- more comprehensive outreach work to schools by SAC workers
- greater participation in regionally based co-ordination meetings and activities that involve schools and youth sector workers.

Conclusion

This study has documented the experiences of 35 young people who have been living independently whilst they have been studying. It has shown that young people value the educational opportunities afforded to them despite personal hardship they may have endured achieving that goal. These findings indicate that the provision of intensive support networks aimed at helping young people in family crisis have benefits both to the individual and community at large.

Given the appropriate help, young people are able to maximise the opportunities and move on to participate more fully in community life. The history and development of the income support scheme has shown the government has been reactive to community pressure and resistant to allocating sufficient resources to the administration of the SHR.

The discussion and strategies recommended are designed to encourage policy makers to see the need to develop and implement a pro-active approach to service delivery practice. Whilst it is acknowledged this will be a resource-intensive approach in the short term, the longer-term gains from enabling young people to achieve their educational potential is in the community's interest.

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In any week, more than 10,000 students attending secondary schools around Australia are homeless. Despite the hardship and turmoil in their lives associated with the lack of parental support, many young people struggle to continue at school.

This study examines how well such students are supported in their efforts to move on and to fulfil their educational goals. In particular, it provides a new perspective on the delivery and value of the Student Homeless Rate of Austudy, the payment designed to assist such young people.

Moving on presents the life experiences of 35 young people who undertook their final year of secondary school living away from their parental home.

Exploring their interactions with their families and schools, it also tells of the difficulties the students faced in everyday life. The climate of their school, the strength of personal friendships and attachments with teachers, as well as their personal motivation, all influenced academic success.

Moving on provides a unique perspective on the value of Austudy to homeless young people. Building on the author's long history of working with unsupported students, it identifies changes needed both in the delivery of Austudy and in the resourcing and operation of schools.

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