

CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

The problem of homeless youth is not new, and according to the Committee's evidence has been with us for a long time. It appears, however, to have become more visible in recent years.

There are a number of explanations as to why this may be so. One reason could be that the problem has increased. This cannot be stated with any certainty, however, as statistics on the subject have only recently been available and these are considered far from reliable. The media has obviously contributed to a more general awareness of the problem though it does tend towards sensationalism and gives the impression that the problem *is* a new one, and indeed a very large one. As well, with the problem being recognised by governments and community groups through the provision of services such as crisis accommodation, what may have been a largely hidden phenomenon has been able to surface.

The Committee has considered a number of aspects in this chapter. To begin with it has looked at the family unit —its changing nature, the pressure it is being subjected to by our modern society and the need for it to be supported. To understand the nature of homelessness one must understand the nature of society today. Changing community attitudes, rapid technological change, chronic unemployment, inflation, high rents, a scarcity of housing, television, consumerism —all typify our social fabric. The stresses arising from these and other factors seem to be becoming too much for many of our families to overcome, resulting in family dysfunction. The family unit itself is changing, becoming more and more isolated. The extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins seems to be losing out to the nuclear family, with a consequent lack of support in times of need and difficulty.

Next, the Committee has spent some time considering available survey material on the problem of homeless youth. Just who our homeless youth are, why they become homeless, and from what situation they are coming is not straightforward, but surveys on the subject do provide a rough profile. The effects of homelessness on young people are also difficult to gauge for while homelessness is a consequence of a multiplicity of factors, so must be its effects. One could say the same of the needs of homeless youth. Indeed, it was stressed to the Committee repeatedly by witnesses that homeless youth must not be regarded as a homogeneous group, and whilst a rough profile emerges from the data, it must be regarded as no more than that.

Having considered what it believes to be the two fundamental aspects of this chapter, the Committee has turned its attention to a number of issues about which it is either particularly concerned or towards which it feels attention needs to be directed. First, the effect unemployment is having on not just homeless youth but on our young people generally. Secondly, the education system. The Committee has noted the importance of the school as an identifying agent of children experiencing family problems, as well as noting some shortcomings with current teacher training courses and the school curriculum. Thirdly, the Committee has made mention of what appears to be a

serious problem but on which it has very little information —homeless youth with institutional backgrounds.

Finally, the Committee has looked at the position of two groups of people who it feels are of particular concern and in need of services other than those already being provided for homeless youth —Aboriginal and Indo-Chinese refugee youth. The Committee was gravely concerned with the high numbers of Aboriginal youth (relative to the general Aboriginal population) depicted in survey material. This is despite various factors (discussed in that section) which are obviously having the effect of reducing the numbers of Aboriginal youth using the services surveyed.

Like Aboriginals, Indo-Chinese refugee youth must be recognised as a special group with special needs. Their cultural background is vastly different from that of Anglo-Saxon youth and consequently they are not readily assimilated into the homeless youth services currently available.

The Committee feels that all these issues are worthy of considerable attention by both the community and governments.

The family

A number of factors are influencing the family today to the point where it appears that the traditional concept of family is changing. Perhaps as little as a generation ago the image conveyed by the word 'family' was one of father, mother and children, where father was the breadwinner, mother remained at home to tend house, and the children to a large extent resided at home until they married.

The family unit is undergoing various changes. The structure of the family is altering, the family is becoming more mobile, values are changing and greater social pressures are having to be borne.

A number of dramatic changes to the family occurred during the seventies. According to evidence received from the Victorian Government, 'changing attitudes of Australians towards marriage, fertility and family formation are underlined by marked trends in the key social components of household formation'.¹ There has been a substantial decline in formal marriages. In 1971 there were 118 000 marriages in Australia but despite an increase in population only 104 000 in 1979. In 1971 there were 13 002 official divorces but by 1980 this figure had risen to 39 258. There were 101 000 first marriages in 1971 but this had declined to 74 799 by 1980.

The seventies also saw a substantial trend towards an increase in divorces, and remarriages involving at least one divorced partner rose from 17 000 in 1971 to 30 000 in 1977.² (The Committee is unable to provide more recent figures.) The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports from the 1976 Census that most marriages of over 30 year olds were remarriages, and 80 per cent of divorcees under 30 remarried within six years. Statistics from the 1981 Census are not yet available. The Borrie Report of 1978 states that almost 20 per cent of all marriages are remarriages.³ Also, it has been estimated that by the late 1980s lone parent families may constitute 30 per cent of the total population, and that one in three children in Australia will at some time in their lives experience living with a single parent.⁴

The family has also undergone change due to the increasing number of mothers entering the workforce. Indeed, whereas in the past it was not common for mother to be working outside of the home, today the situation is almost reversed. Social pressure on women over the past decade has encouraged them to pursue careers of their own rather

than be content with the supporting role of wife and mother. Many women feel a need to justify remaining at home as full-time homekeepers. Others have tried to combine the traditional role with a place in the workforce, and it may well be that women under such stress lack the energy to constantly demonstrate the demanding support required by growing children. The Committee does not believe that mothers in the workforce of necessity negatively affects the family—indeed the situation may positively influence the family either by relieving financial pressures or by being more suitable to the individual mother's needs than a full-time home role. It does, however, contribute to the changing nature of the family.

Family structure has also changed due to young people being more likely to leave home today than in the past to establish themselves independently prior to marriage. Not so long ago it was 'normal' to remain at home until one married, unless education or work pursuits required moving to a different location (particularly so for country youth). When the economic climate is favourable the transition from family life to independence can generally be accomplished smoothly. Present conditions, however, such as chronic unemployment, inflation and scarcity of inexpensive housing can severely impede the transition.

It does seem that there has been a decline in the extended family network and an increased isolation of the nuclear family. One reason for this may be the increased mobility of families. The current average term of residence of a family in one house is four to six years.⁵ Data from the 1976 Census shows that about 40 per cent of the population moved house between 1971-76. Sixteen per cent of people over one year of age changed residence during 1975-76. Annual surveys of internal migration conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics since 1969 show that on average those who moved did so a number of times during the five year period.⁶ A consequence of mobility is a loss of support from the extended family, friends, neighbours and informal community networks. The young are also faced with disrupted schooling and a loss of friends.

As well, as cities grow suburbs become further and further apart, which can increase isolation by reducing contacts with family and friends. Many new suburbs do not have established community groups and may have only limited recreational facilities. A good deal of time and money that may otherwise have been spent with the family is spent instead travelling to and from work. Consequently, there is less time, money and energy available for family activities. It seems reasonable to surmise that a family living without traditional supports such as relations and friends is more vulnerable to the growing pressures on households today and hence is more likely to break down under stress.

According to evidence received by the Committee, it is a common occurrence that with the breakdown of one nuclear family and the formation from it of two separate households, the adolescents accepted in the original household do not find a place in the reconstructed families. Where in the past a relation or family friend would have provided board, this is not so often the case now.⁷

Family values are also changing, with parents and children often clashing over the old and the new. This is particularly so in regard to migrant families, where parents conflict with their 'Australianised' children over traditional values and social customs. For example, migrant parents often come from a rural background whilst their children are raised in urban Australia. The parents have high expectations of their children often wishing them to undertake tertiary education. The children, on the other hand, may prefer some other form of education or training. The struggle between parents and children as the former attempt to retain the traditional moral and social customs of their homelands while their children try to meet the demands of their Anglo-Australian peer groups can create serious family friction. The Committee was told that 'one outcome of this tension, the breaking away of youth from the tight family circle, is likely to have

more exacerbatory effects upon parental attitudes, often precluding any possibility of reconciliation'.⁸

The family today is subject to enormous social pressure. We have become very much a materialistic society, with the media (particularly through advertising) and the ready availability of finance (hire purchase, credit cards, etc.) conveying the impression to us all that even the most expensive goods are within reach. Indeed, to fulfil the image of the ideal family, the caring mother, the trendy teenager, etc., such goods are portrayed as necessities. We are becoming more and more a society divided along economic lines, of those who have and those who have not, leading to frustration and bitterness.

Many young couples today expect to have almost immediately what their parents often never attained in a lifetime. Families are postponed until the house is fully furnished, the new car and the colour television bought, and so on. We seem to be becoming a more introverted and self-concerned society, expecting and demanding more and yet perhaps willing to give less. Whereas not so long ago one would know almost everyone in one's street, today many of us do not know our immediate neighbours. How much television and advertising have contributed to this change is a separate question worthy of its own report.

Apart from increased pressures on the family generally, there seem to be greater social pressures being placed on youth. Our young people are having to grow up much faster than they did in the past. The media and advertising have again played a significant role here, aiming more and more at the younger generation. For example, even six and seven year olds are conscious of fashion today, and nine to 13 year olds form a large part of the music industry market. There is a much greater awareness of sexuality among youth, and increased pressures on them as a result of the sexual freedom which is part of today's society.

Society seems to be showing the signs of these strains and pressures. Today we have an increased incidence of drug problems, crime rates, divorce rates, cardio vascular and other stress related diseases, etc. The Committee believes that there is an urgent need for less emphasis to be placed on consumerism and more weight to be given to greater communication between people, especially extended family members, and to relaxation and leisure pursuits.

Support for the family

Many families may have been able to avoid family breakdown had some form of assistance been available to them at the time of crisis. Refuges do fulfil this role to an extent by enabling both the young person and the family a breathing space, a period to reassess the problem. Unfortunately, in the main they are unable to provide follow-up care and need to be regarded as only one part of a broader range of services. The type of assistance necessary will vary according to the individual family's needs. In some cases material assistance such as income maintenance or improved housing may be necessary. In other cases counselling (in the case of migrant families, or families with authoritarian fathers, for example) may be desirable. Measures taken prior to family breakdown which prevent that breakdown from occurring would prove far less costly in all aspects of the word than picking up the pieces after the breakdown has occurred. The Committee realises, however, that while this is the most desirable course to follow it is very difficult to devise programs that enable early intervention.

Nonetheless, all levels of government have a responsibility in this regard, particularly in the form of funding. Community groups, where possible, should be the bodies through which support services are supplied. Members of these groups can provide mutual support which assists in lessening the pressures on the family arising from

'coping' in isolation. As was stated in evidence to the Committee, 'co-operative developments such as these break down the endemic isolation and closed nature of the modern Australian 'family', helping to prevent tension and conflict within'.⁹

The Committee recognises that the responsibility of the family for its members should not be shirked and passed on to the community at large. It also recognises, however, that some families are simply unable to cope. Traditionally it has been accepted that parents will support their children both financially and emotionally throughout their school years and until such time as they become employed and independent. Most young people make the transfer to independence with solid family support and little recourse to outside assistance. With high levels of unemployment and inflation and, more particularly, the steady rise in the average duration of unemployment, more and more families are finding it increasingly difficult to assist their children financially beyond school years.

One must also recognise the situation where although parents have no financial problems, emotionally they are lacking as mothers and fathers and hence are unable to give to their child the caring support needed. It may be that the parents' own backgrounds have been lacking and as a consequence no learning or understanding of parenthood has taken place.

Conclusion

Increased pressures of modern society coupled with economic hardship are forcing families to withstand more and more pressures merely to survive. Yet the family is the basic unit of our society and its stability is therefore fundamental to the stability of society itself. Support of the nuclear family by the extended family, friendships and community groups need to be encouraged. A very high percentage of our homeless youth are coming from broken families or families undergoing crisis. This in itself points strongly to a need to strengthen the family before breakdown occurs.

Where there is no contact with the extended family, parents are lacking an avenue of support during periods of difficulty, or the opportunity of 'time out' from the responsibility of being parents. Some families, however, are totally dysfunctional and unable to supply any support to their children. It is unlikely that these families can be helped and hence responsibility must be passed on to the government.

A profile of homeless youth

'In every survey, interview or research project, it is overwhelmingly apparent that the average, well adjusted teenager does not become homeless. Even if an independent-minded young person leaves home, he is able to muster the support of friends and also of his own family, and he/she ends up in a socially acceptable living situation. . .

*The youth that become homeless have already been rejected, abused, victimised by parents, or extremely socially disadvantaged.*¹⁰

Dr Barnardo's, Australian Capital Territory

The Committee has been told repeatedly in evidence that homeless youth are not a homogeneous group, that they differ in their reasons for becoming homeless, their needs and the effects of homelessness on them. Whilst the Committee acknowledges this to be so, it feels nonetheless that a profile of homeless youth can be drawn from available data.

Statistical data on homeless youth needs to be approached with caution. In most cases the sample population is small and the period during which the survey was conducted a month or less (and hence not reflective of the year-round situation). Most surveys were responded to by the workers amongst homeless youth rather than the youths themselves, and hence subject to value judgements.

The surveys have generally been conducted by youth refuge workers or at youth refuges. The groups sampled from these sources can only be regarded as a subset of the total homeless youth population, as funded agencies are not the only places where young people seek shelter. Indeed, it appears that there are a number of homeless youth (though the size of the group is unknown) who do not approach government and welfare agencies providing services.

Most surveys involved questionnaires using a fixed choice format. This can create a number of problems, particularly in regard to interpreting the statistics. For example, in relation to 'causes of homelessness', family conflict and unemployment would in very many cases be interrelated. The surveys, however, separate these categories. One wonders how the respondent (as stated above, generally not the young person concerned) reacted. Were both categories marked, or was one given precedence over another on the basis of a value judgement?

A number of surveys on homeless youth have been made available to the Committee. No attempt has been made to collate this data as, in the main, the approaches taken in its collection vary extensively. Consequently, each survey has been considered in isolation, the Committee merely drawing from it information relating to the characteristics of homeless youth. Most percentages have been rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Report on the Youth Services Scheme

In its Report on the Youth Services Scheme prepared for the 1982 Autumn Conference of the Welfare Administrators, and the Council of Welfare Ministers, the National Committee for Evaluation of the Youth Services Scheme noted the following characteristics of the users of services under the Scheme. (This information applies to New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Information from Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory was not available at the time this Report was prepared.):

- The majority of youths accommodated under the Scheme are 15 to 17 years of age with only about 25 per cent of demand coming from 18 to 25 year olds. (One must, however, allow for the Scheme's formal age restriction of under 18 year olds which, although not strictly adhered to, may have a bearing on the number of over 18 year olds using the services available.) Males and females are fairly evenly represented, though Queensland has a higher proportion of older males. The majority of youths under 16 are females.
- Over 80 per cent of users are white Australian. However, Aborigines are represented in the sample in higher proportions than in the general Aboriginal population. In South Australia, the proportion of Aborigines in the sample population is as high as 9 per cent as against the general South Australian Aboriginal population (10 — 19 year olds) of just over one per cent.
- Excepting Queensland, only a small proportion of users are from interstate.
- The highest proportion of users are available for work but unemployed. (Depending on which state is examined, 64 per cent to 87 per cent of users are available for work, and 68 per cent to 90 per cent of these are unemployed.) The vast majority of users have inadequate or no income (income was generally unemployment benefits and for many this amounted to only \$36 a week). Probably many or most of those

without income on arrival at the refuge are waiting the required period to receive benefits. Often these have not been applied for by youths before approaching a refuge.

- Excepting Queensland, around 50 per cent of youths approach the services directly from their former homes which, for the majority, are either the parental home or the home of relatives. Of these, about 50 per cent live with lone parents or with reconstructed or de facto families. About 25 per cent of the sample have been living independently or with friends prior to approaching the service, whilst about 25 per cent have used 'rough shelter' prior to seeking emergency accommodation.
- The predominance of unemployed in the sample population plus a large number of youths coming from parental homes 'must indicate that this is a major source of stress disrupting families, and preventing youth from making a normal transition from dependence to independence'.¹¹
- Approximately one third of youths return home after leaving the refuges, others going to independent situations or friends, hostels or other welfare accommodation. About 50 per cent of those who came directly from the parental home return to that home while of those previously living independently, slightly more than half return to a similar situation. About half the sample could be seen as experiencing a temporary difficulty which is resolved given time and a supportive environment ---that is, a breathing space. The other half who do not return to their former living situation are generally in need of further assistance.
- Users show a high incidence of family conflict or breakdown and emotional difficulties. Sexual abuse/incest is significant amongst female users. This might explain why young females appear particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

Report of the Victorian Consultative Committee on Social Development --- Youth Accommodation Report, May 1979

Data collection for this survey took place over a three-week period. Eight hundred and ninety seven persons between the ages of 12 and 25 were surveyed from 92 agencies. Virtually all agencies were situated within the Melbourne metropolitan area.¹²

The data showed that family problems were contributing to 35 per cent of males' and 43 per cent of females' homelessness. Unemployment was seen to be responsible for 23 per cent of males and 10 per cent of females being homeless.¹³ (The point was made in this survey that family breakdown and unemployment could not really be separated as causes of homelessness.)¹⁴ Other factors which were contributing to homelessness were alcohol/drug problems (10 per cent male, three per cent female), high rent/eviction (six per cent male, 11 per cent female), newly arrived in Melbourne (14 per cent male, seven per cent female) and 'other' (13 per cent male, 30 per cent female). This survey did not allow for any interplay or interchangeability of influences to emerge.

Excluding a number of tertiary students who also completed questionnaires, 70 per cent of males were unemployed (19 per cent were employed) and 54 per cent of females were unemployed (17 per cent were employed).¹⁵ The remainder were either at school, under 15 but not at school, or involved in home duties.

North West Youth Accommodation Working Group, Victoria, Hope Street Shelter

These figures reflect the Hope Street Youth Shelter's annual statistics for the period 28 July 1980 to 28 July 1981. A total of 237 youths had been accommodated by the refuge, which caters for 13 to 20 year olds. This number included approximately equal numbers of males and females.

Sixty five per cent of youth were between 15 and 17 years of age and 23 per cent of youth were state wards. Seventy two per cent were unemployed, with 45 per cent on unemployment benefits while 35 per cent had no income at all. Eleven per cent were employed.¹⁶

South Australian Council of Social Service

This survey was conducted over a two week period during March 1980. It involved 362 people between the ages of 12 and 25 from 37 agencies.

Family problems were found to be the main contributory factor to homelessness, with 34 per cent of males and 55 per cent of females having this factor attributed to them. Financial problems were a contributory factor for 16 per cent of males and 8 per cent of females.¹⁷ It was stated in the survey that in general 'family problems' included a combination of factors, 'notably a lack of communication and understanding together with financial stresses, brought about by unemployment.'¹⁸ This survey saw the movement of youths to the city as a long term contributory factor to homelessness, and felt that the current situation was probably exacerbated by the employment situation in rural areas and the more mobile lifestyle of today's youth.¹⁹

Accommodation Needs of Adolescents, Tasmania (1977)

Unfortunately this survey is rather outdated. It covered 11 agencies with 156 questionnaires being completed. The age range considered included nine to 21 year olds (though concentrated on 13 to 19 year olds) and the information was sought over a period of one month.²⁰

Two-thirds of the youth concerned in the survey were between the ages of 14 and 17. It was concluded from this that those adolescents most likely to be needing accommodation are the 14 to 17 age group. More females than males under the age of 15 were reported as requiring accommodation whereas the reverse was true for youths 16 years and over.²¹

Over half of the youths surveyed came from two parent families whilst over one-quarter came from one parent families. It was found that less than half of the families studied conformed to what was described as the generally accepted norm of either one parent working and one involved with home duties, or both parents working. From this the researchers concluded that one-half of the families in this study are in situations which usually would not be considered normal.²²

A high incidence of unemployment existed amongst the youth (60 youth). There was also found to be a noticeable lack of students over the age of 16 (2 youth) though 79 youth between 9 and 16 were students. Most of the youth (109) were living with their family prior to requiring alternative accommodation, though this applied more to females (60) than males (49).²³ Out of the group of 156, 111 were seen to need a change of accommodation because of family conflict, no other factor figuring significantly in this survey.

Canberra Youth Refuge, Australian Capital Territory

This data relates to the period July 1980 to February 1981 and covers the age range 12 to 19.

Of the 66 youth encountered by the refuge during this eight month period, 56 per cent were 16 or 17 years of age, 73 per cent were at the refuge due to family breakdown and none had an income above the unemployment benefit level (all residents were either on unemployment benefits or had no income). Criminal records were not uncommon amongst the males but there were few amongst the females. Few had completed

year 10, most leaving school at the first opportunity. Common amongst the unemployed were low aspirations, expectations and self-esteem.²⁴

Living skills of the youth were minimal and diets and self-presentation were poor. No migrant or Aboriginal children were present within the refuge population. Sixty two per cent of the youth had been living with family or relatives prior to the refuge, and 38 per cent returned to their families after refuge accommodation. Twenty per cent sought further care (institution, other emergency accommodation, drug rehabilitation centre).²⁵

It was felt by the researchers that Canberra's high divorce rate, highly mobile population (with the concomitant loss of support from the extended family and friends) and chronic youth unemployment (well above the national average) contributed to the problem of homeless youth - the young having to face 'problems previously reserved for the more world-wise adult'.²⁶

Wayside Chapel —The Shepherd of the Streets Program, Sydney

Up until the time this survey was submitted to the Committee the refuge had seen equal numbers of boys and girls. The average age of boys was 14, girls 14.5. Fifty six per cent of girls came from single parent homes compared to 30 per cent of boys. Thirty six per cent of boys were state wards compared to 16 per cent of girls. Twenty eight per cent of boys were mildly retarded as compared to two per cent of girls, while 22 per cent of girls required psychiatric treatment compared to 18 per cent of boys.

Surprisingly, 26 per cent of boys were involved in prostitution, almost twice the number of girls (14 per cent). Forty six per cent of girls had drug and alcohol related problems as did 22 per cent of boys. Thirty four per cent of boys and 22 per cent of girls had been involved in petty crime. Eighty per cent of youth seen had moderate to severe difficulties with communication skills.²⁷

Community Seminar on Homeless Youths, Western Australia

A small group of social work students at the Western Australian Institute of Technology undertook this survey. The 13 to 25 age group was studied with data being collected from the Jesus People (New Life Centre).

It was found that on average the person seeking accommodation was male, Australian, single and 18.6 years old. Eighty six per cent were unemployed at the time of admission. Less than 50 per cent had reached third year level at secondary school, 33 per cent had reached second year level and eight per cent had only attended primary school.

Thirty three per cent admitted to previous penal offences and 13 per cent were on probation or parole. Twenty five per cent had undergone psychiatric treatment and 17 per cent stated they had either an alcohol or drug problem.²⁸

Perth's Homeless Youth Research Project —January to August, 1980

This survey was a joint project of the Homeless Youth Project Committee and the Western Australian Institute of Technology Social Work Department. The research was conducted by Sheryl Carmody, a social worker. Unfortunately Carmody places a large emphasis on hostel accommodation and hence the report is largely concerned with young people residing in hostels. Carmody admits that from information gathered many homeless youth, particularly females,²⁹ do not approach hostels.³⁰

Unlike most surveys the data was gained mainly through personal interview with homeless youth as well as workers in the field and concerned persons in the community.³¹ Carmody considers two groups; those residing in hostels, and those 'sleeping out'.

Hostel population

The hostel population consisted of 70 persons, predominantly male. The ratio of male to female was 55 (79 per cent):15 (21 per cent). However, there are more homeless persons' hostels and shelters available for males than females in Perth. A greater percentage of people were 19 and over (70 per cent) rather than 15 to 18 (30 per cent), with 60 per cent of females and 22 per cent of males being less than 19.³² The figures relating to 15 to 18 year olds do not correspond with data from the Eastern states, the implication being that Perth's 15 to 18 year olds predominantly do not seek refuge at the hostels.

There is a high transient population using the hostels, with 67 per cent of youth having lived in Perth for less than one year.

Of the hostel population, 60 per cent of fathers and 71 per cent of mothers were Australian born. Within the general Perth population, 52 per cent of fathers and 53 per cent of mothers are Australian born.³³

Significantly, 70 per cent of the youth at hostels had during their lifetime at least one change in the adults caring for them, and 41 per cent had two or more changes.³⁴ Carmody states:

'Overwhelmingly the data collected on the family life of the youth hostel population presents a picture of instability, with resultant inadequate nurturing of the children concerned.'³⁵

Institutional care had been received by 30 (43 per cent) of the youth.³⁶

With regard to schooling and trade qualifications, 87 per cent left school prior to 17 (in comparison with the general population rate of 78 per cent) and 83 per cent had no qualifications (compared to 65 per cent of the general population).³⁷

A characteristic common among the sample of homeless youth was a history of offences against the law. Fifty-one (73 per cent) of the youth had appeared in either a children's or adult court. The offences were common criminal offences—breaking and entering, drunkenness, assault, etc., rather than crimes directly related to a state of homelessness such as vagrancy and stealing for basic needs.³⁸

Unemployment was grossly over-represented among the hostel population in comparison with the general population. Sixty-five (93 per cent) of the hostel youth were not fully employed, 11 (16 per cent) of this number having casual employment.³⁹ The data suggests that unemployment is a major factor determining the majority of youth at the hostels seeking residence there, the exceptions being youth who reside there due to an adverse home situation.⁴⁰ Carmody points out that the unemployment position of some youth in the hostels seemed to be symptomatic of their overall state rather than a cause of their present predicament.⁴¹

A number of factors led to the youth leaving home, as well as an interplay of factors. Significant amongst these were 'finding work' (33 per cent) and 'home situation' (20 per cent). In some cases there was a pronounced interplay between these two factors.⁴²

Non-hostel population

In contrast to the hostel population the non-hostel homeless youth (those 'sleeping out') were predominantly of Perth origin. These young people were broadly of three types; transient youth, youth with accommodation problems due to low income, and youth who were homeless because of family circumstances.⁴³

There were a number of reasons why these youth preferred not to reside at hostels. They included what some saw as a loss of dignity and independence by accepting 'charity', dislike of the hostel atmosphere (for example, the religious orientation), a wish not to be accommodated with 'undesirables' such as alcoholics, drug addicts, etc., the cost of hostel accommodation and little or no income.

An interesting point made by Carmody and noted in much of the Committee's evidence is the reluctance on the part of youth to leave their familiar surroundings and friends to move to an area where accommodation is provided, such as hostels in the inner city in the case of Perth.⁴⁴

Jesus People Welfare Services Inc. medical/social study of homeless youth at New Life Centres by Bill Plozza and Glen Brand, Perth

This survey is somewhat different from other studies of homeless youth as it is concerned with the medical and psychiatric health of the youth surveyed as well as their social background. Consistent with other studies with regard to social background, it found that characteristics of the youth included broken homes, unemployment, a police record and few stable relationships. Where general health was concerned, it was felt that in the main no significant trends had yet developed but that due to heavy smoking by many of the youth, a large proportion would be looking at disease such as chronic bronchitis, heart disease, cancer of the lungs, stomach and brain, etc. in 20 years time should the practice continue.

On the whole it was felt that the medical health of those observed was reasonable, but that the psychological health was poor and an area of concern. Though it was found that only a few were suffering from gross psychiatric disease, there was a high incidence of personality disorders which interfered with the youths' lifestyles and their ability to cope in society.

Of the 50 subjects interviewed, it was found that 70 per cent were unemployed, 42 per cent failed to complete 10 years schooling (compared to six per cent of West Australian school children in the general population), 52 per cent were from broken homes, 70 per cent had criminal records and 38 per cent had served goal sentences.⁴⁵

Physically, 38 per cent had dental problems, 10 per cent had ear disorders, 12 per cent suffered from skin disorders, 64 per cent of females had gynaecological disorders, 30 per cent were moderate or heavy smokers, 68 per cent smoked marijuana regularly and 28 per cent used hard drugs.⁴⁶

With regard to family background, 24 per cent lived from the ages of 5 to 14 with both parents. Thirty four per cent were brought up by one parent, six per cent were raised by relatives, two per cent had lived with non relatives and 10 per cent had been raised in institutions.⁴⁷

Only 14 per cent of the 50 youths had lived in Perth most of their lives while 64 per cent had been in Perth for less than two months. It was the opinion of the researchers that those who had been in Perth for longer than six months had obvious physical, psychiatric or drug problems. All were unemployed and appeared uninterested in acquiring employment. Sixty six per cent of the youths lived at the Centre due to lack of finance, and 34 per cent because of personal or family problems.⁴⁸

Though unemployment was regarded as a considerable problem by the researchers, they felt there were more important factors operating within the group. Very few had trade skills, most lacked initiative and ambition and were regarded as socially inadequate. It was felt that because of their social inadequacy it was difficult for the youths to interact and co-operate with workmates and employers, and this led to an early termination of employment. The researchers commented that 'this group does not constitute a physically or even psychiatrically disturbed population, but is socially handicapped'. They believed that social retraining plus a basic trade skill was needed.⁴⁹

The researchers also felt that an inefficient use of leisure time contributed to behavioural maladjustments and suggested the use of organised sport and other group activities to reduce idle leisure time, create interest, improve self-esteem and increase social interactions.⁵⁰

'Rough profile'

With the many qualifications in mind that one must allow for with the survey material, the Committee has extracted the following characteristics which it feels provide a rough profile of homeless youth:

- male or female
- 15 to 18 years of age
- probably Anglo-Saxon
- has experienced conflict within the family (for example, disputes with parents, unable to get along with defacto parent or authoritarian father)
- may have been subject to physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse
 - ... often comes from a 'non-traditional' family such as a single parent or defacto family
- low income, probably unemployed
- little education
 - ... possibility of a drug or alcohol problem
- possibility of a criminal record
 - ... lacking in basic living skills
 - ... poor diet and self-presentation
- low confidence and self-esteem
- may have institutional background.

The Committee stresses its awareness that there are homeless youth who do not fit this description. It feels, however, that the data does suggest that youth with these characteristics are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, or, at least, that it is youth with these characteristics who are most likely to approach agencies and refuges for support should they become homeless. The Committee is unable to draw any conclusions with regard to the 'hidden' homeless youth, those who are 'sleeping out', living with friends or in some other way securing shelter.

Effects of homelessness

It is very difficult to determine the effects of homelessness. Homelessness cannot be viewed as a single entity. It is a combination of situations such as family conflict, unemployment, low socio-economic background and emotional problems, and therefore what one may regard as the effects of homelessness need in fact to be regarded as the effects of a multiplicity of factors causing homelessness. As well, individuals will differ with regard to the impact homelessness will have on them.

The Committee was told that concurrent with homelessness there is often a total breakdown in the young person's support system, particularly family and friends. At a time when they are not ready for independence, the young people find themselves isolated. The Committee was also told that the problems of homeless youth are often escalated through frequent misuse of both alcohol and drugs. Motivation declines, which leads to a disinterest in seeking employment and in trying to cope. Self-esteem diminishes and the young person becomes more and more unstable. This can lead to moves towards subcultures in an attempt to find 'some form of existence for themselves and self-esteem and respect'.⁵¹

Unfortunately, homelessness can lead to criminal activity merely to secure the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, etc. Young girls especially are susceptible to prostitution, particularly if there is the corresponding problem of a drug habit which needs to