

Experiences of Young Parents in the *Hope to Home* project in the Outer Growth Corridors of Melbourne

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Young Parents and Housing Insecurity

A convergence of social and economic factors places young parents in outer growth corridors at a disproportionate risk of experiencing housing insecurity, yet with notable exceptions,¹ this phenomenon is underrepresented in the Australian literature. In the first place, the heavy time demands imposed by early child-rearing mean that at least one, if not both young parents are likely to be unemployed or underemployed. Increasing casualisation means that workplace maternity/paternity benefits are often unavailable, and there is little safety net for guaranteeing casual shift work. Systematic exclusion from employment opportunities is often coupled with the fact that young parents have few economic assets, and suitable housing with two bedrooms is unaffordable on one income (or at worst case, the Parenting Payment).

Unaffordable housing and rental prices in the major metropolitan cities and high childcare costs mean that young people are more likely to remain in their parental homes for longer. Almost two-thirds of young people living at home (62 per cent) cannot afford to move out, with most expecting to stay until at least 30,² meaning that when they become parents themselves, they are often forced to leave.³

The *Hope to Home* project, run by Hope Street Youth and Family Services, emerged to address the issue of exit options for young people at risk of homelessness.^{4,5} The program secured, in partnership with local real estate agents in Melton (in the outer-Western growth corridor of Melbourne) and Whittlesea (in the outer-North-Eastern growth corridor of Melbourne), private tenancies with

bonds and leases co-sponsored with Hope Street for 30 young people (aged 18 to 25) in each location. Young people assessed as suitable for participation in the program were selected to transition through these co-sponsored leases, with regular support services such as workshops and case management provided by a transition coordinator at Hope Street.

One unanticipated feature of the Hope Street program was the number of parents with accompanying children presenting. This included 17 parents with 27 dependent children. This is clearly a major problem; of the 16,260 households presenting to housing services in the Western Region of Melbourne in the 2015–2016 year, 20.2 per cent included dependent children (Western LASN data).⁶

In this article, we detail some findings, triangulated from service user data from the *Hope to Home* project, a longitudinal online survey completed by participants every three months, and semi-structured interviews with service users, which present some of the experiences of young parents in the growth corridor of Melbourne in transitional housing.

Findings from the Parents in the *Hope to Home* Cohort

Thematic analysis of the three sources of data described above resulted in four main themes reflecting the experiences of parents in housing insecurity in the growth corridors. In total, analysis was conducted based on 55 sets of service user data, 79 online surveys, and 16 interviews.

Finding 1 — Importance of networks of family and friends in parenting.

As new outer-growth corridor areas such as Melton and Whittlesea are disadvantaged in terms of the

availability of public infrastructure and amenity, and offer less job opportunities, they pose a difficult choice for new young parents: to stay where their existing networks of family and friends are located, but offering fewer socio-economic opportunities, or to abandon their support networks in favour of locales offering better employment and educational opportunities. For some parents, such as Mike and Katrina, two clients of the *Hope to Home* program in Melton, this is not an option due to the demands on family and friendship networks by young children, as well as work:

Our families and friends are in Melton. We couldn't escape. We grew up here. It's too hard to move out of Melton without stable work and everything.

Finding 2 — Cost of an additional bedroom with an additional family member.

In some cases, the driving factor away from a previously suitable housing arrangement was the inability of family or friends to house new babies. The new economic situation brought about by having a child (or in some cases, an additional child), means that while overall income remains the same, the young people's family situation and necessity to provide accommodation space for children changes. Systematic discrimination also impeded new couples' ability to upsize tenancies in the growth corridor upon having a baby.

Finding 3 — Poor transport and/or significant distances to work.

Transport from outer-growth corridors to either a regular place of work, or work as a subcontractor (for example labourer) on multiple sites around the city can be time-consuming, costly, and threaten continuing employment. A number of participants in *Hope to Home* Melton reported difficulty

with the unreliability of the V-Line service connecting Melton with the greater Melbourne Metro public transport network, citing this as a barrier in their ability to hold down jobs after being blamed for late starts due to train and bus delays. This is a disadvantage in being in the outer-growth corridors, where infrastructure hasn't kept pace with the population growth. For example, Trevor, a father of a young baby states:

It can be hard because public transport is not reliable enough as well. It has cost me a lot of jobs. Cancelled trains or a train half an hour late... I generally have to leave town for work, being that I'm a welder... at the moment most of the work is Dandenong way which is not even... traffic wise, that's easy a five to six hour drive a day there and back. The last place I was working, for the hours I was doing, I wasn't getting paid enough. I was working 12-hour days and coming home at the end of the week with \$700.

Similarly, Mia, a mother participating in the *Hope to Home* Melton program, reflects on the disproportionate impact of a driving license suspension in an outer-growth corridor with poor public transport:

There have been times, like when I paid the rent...and she'll just come with a jar and stuff, it really helped and helped me to go places... helped me...to get my car back on the road because I haven't been working because of that, has been making me stay home because my license has been suspended... help take you places, make you meet new people to help you out.

Finding 4 — *Hope to Home* program important in providing exit option to private rental accommodation.

The *Hope to Home* program, in the provision of a rental bond, lease guarantor, and transition support in the form of both funding and caseworker, was reported to be of great assistance to young parents involved in the program. Most participants reported that the transition facilitation managers were



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of critical importance in assisting with their children's needs, and as reported in more detail in the final report,⁷ young parents were particularly motivated to improve their housing circumstances. The major problems reported by young parents in the growth corridors which the program assisted with were; the previous inability to secure appropriate tenancy, and baby and child needs which were assisted by the transition facilitation coordinator.

Discussion

The experiences from this cohort show that becoming a parent can exacerbate problems related to some of the pathways into homelessness, including insecure employment and income, and mental stress leading to mental illness. In addition to that, it can result in previously suitable housing arrangements becoming unsuitable, and the need to upsize in a context where this can be made difficult by lack of rental history or employment.

In this case, a significant factor for housing insecurity cited by young parents participating in *Hope to Home* was the nature of employment opportunities in growth corridors, with low job prospects and high youth unemployment. If growth corridors are to provide for the population moving there, which in this economic

climate includes families, then there must also be adequate provision of facilities such as childcare, schools, maternal and child services, and public transport for those who do not have a car.

The *Hope to Home* projects in Melton and Whittlesea dealt with an unanticipated large number of young parents in the outer-growth corridor of Western and Northern Melbourne. A key benefit which was not originally costed for in the model was the large number of children accompanying the young clients of the program, thus the importance of the impacts and benefits was probably underestimated. While it is difficult to cost the intergenerational benefits of providing stability and independence for young parents on their children,

it is obviously substantial. Within the business case, there are ripple effects in primary prevention of intergenerational homelessness and greater connection with, and understanding of, young people by community partners.

Endnotes

1. Sherry K 2015, Family homelessness in a growth area, *Parity*, vol. 28, no. 7.
2. Walkley P 2017, Keep the old cubby house, *Money* (Australia Edition) no. 202, p. 67.
3. Tomaszewski W, Smith JF, Parsell C, Tranter B, Laughland-Booŷ J and Skrbiš Z 2017, Young, anchored and free? Examining the dynamics of early housing pathways in Australia, *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 20, no. 7, pp. 904-926.
4. Baxter, M 2015, *Hope to home: unlocking the rental door: a community and business initiative*, *Parity*, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 39-40.
5. Bennett, D 2016, Responding to youth homelessness in outer growth corridors: a research project in the city of Melton, *Parity*, vol. 29, no. 5, pp. 14-16.
6. Gill, P, Ooi, D and Chiodo, L 2018, *Hope to Home evaluation report: a research project evaluating the effectiveness of a new model for improving the lives of young people affected by homelessness*, Victoria University, Melbourne, Victoria.
7. Ibid.

* Dr Daniel Ool and Dr Peter Gill are researchers at the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University, Melbourne, and were commissioned by Hope Street Youth and Family Services to conduct an evaluation of the *Hope to Home* project in Melton and Whittlesea from 2016-2018.