

RESEARCH BRIEF

No. 33: March 2023



PATHWAYS TO YOUNG ADULT HOMELESSNESS IN WESTERN NATIONS: RISK FACTORS IN THE TEEN YEARS

Margaret Kuklinski, PhD
Director

Jennifer Bailey, PhD
Assistant Director

MISSION OF SDRG

To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- Conduct research on factors that influence development
- Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- Study service systems and work to improve them
- Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

As part of the cross-national International Youth Development Study (IYDS)—which focuses on youth in the United States and Australia—scientists at SDRG and the University of Melbourne have published two of the first studies to identify risk factors for young adult homelessness by spotlighting experiences in the teen years.

HOMELESSNESS AS A GLOBAL BURDEN

Homelessness is a worldwide public health issue, and pathways into homelessness for young adults involve many social, economic, and policy factors. Of concern, prevalence of young adult homelessness in two Western nations—the United States and Australia—has been stubbornly high and increasing in the past decade. Approximately 567,000 people in the United States (8.4% of whom are 18-24 years old) and 290,400 people in Australia (14.2% of whom are 18-24 years old) were unhoused in 2019. People experiencing homelessness are at heightened risk of acute and chronic illness and early mortality from preventable causes, which highlights the need for greater investment in preventing homelessness and its underlying causes.

THE NEED FOR DETECTING RISK FACTORS DURING ADOLESCENCE

Identifying risk factors for young adult homelessness earlier in life is central to guiding evidence-based prevention approaches, particularly those that support youth who are at higher risk for homelessness. Although experiences in the teen years are crucial in setting the stage for life functioning in adulthood, currently not much is known about how these experiences may influence risk for homelessness

later on, in the transition to adulthood. The lack of research evidence on pathways into homelessness creates a barrier to adapting prevention-intervention programs that target risk factors in the teen years.

SDRG RESEARCHERS IDENTIFY RISK FACTORS IN THE TEEN YEARS

Two recent studies have assessed the effects of family risk factors at age 13 on later risk factors in peer, school, and community contexts at age 15, and homelessness at age 25. These studies were carried out by researchers affiliated with the International Youth Development Study, a long-term study that began in 2002 and looks at the development of healthy and problem behaviors among people in the state of Victoria in Australia and the state of Washington in the United States. Overall, findings suggest that two types of family risk factors—poor family management and family conflict—occurring early in adolescence, are important predictors of peer, school, and community risk factors in the teen years, which in turn lead to homelessness in young adulthood.



A model of adolescent risk factors for young adult homelessness. Two recent IYDS studies have tested this model. One study drew upon data from both the U.S. state of Washington and the Australian state of Victoria.¹ Across both states, less positive family management strategies at age 13—such as lack of clear rules and low parental monitoring—predicted several risk factors at age 15: peer drug use, school suspension, academic failure, and lower neighborhood attachment. These risk factors, in turn, predicted young adult homelessness. Another study focused only on the Victoria sample found that higher levels of family conflict at age 13 predicted increases in two risk factors at age 15, friends' use of drugs and interaction with antisocial peers, which in turn predicted a greater likelihood of young adult homelessness by age 25.²

SHAPING THE PREVENTION LANDSCAPE

Evidence from the two IYDS studies suggests that prevention programs targeting risk factors from adolescence to young adulthood may reduce risk for later homelessness. More concretely, identifying risk factors within family settings—such as family management and family conflict—is an essential step in connecting adolescents who may be at a higher risk of later homelessness with the most appropriate prevention programming. For example, Communities That Care (CTC) has shown success in reducing teen health risk factors, including those identified in the IYDS studies as increasing risk for young adulthood homelessness. Additional family-focused programs delivered prior to or during the early teen years should include conflict management and healthy relationship skill-building within the family, as well as supports for healthy functioning within peer, school, and community settings. These emerging findings from IYDS have applications for prevention services both in the United States and Australia.

RECENT SDRG ARTICLES ABOUT HOMELESSNESS

¹Heerde, J. A., Bailey, J. A., Toumbourou, J. W., Rowland, B., & Catalano, R. F. (2022). Adolescent antecedents of young adult homelessness: A cross-national path analysis. *Prevention Science*, 23, 85-95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-021-01267-y>

²Heerde, J. A., Bailey, J. A., Kelly, A. B., McMorris, B. J., Patton, G. C., & Toumbourou, J. W. (2021). Life-course predictors of homelessness from adolescence into adulthood: A population-based cohort study. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.06.007>.

FUNDING INFORMATION

U.S. NIDA grant R01DA012140 and NIAAA grants R01AA025029 and R01AA017188.

University of Melbourne - Melbourne Research Fellowship and Westpac Scholars Trust - Research Fellowship.

Australian National Health and Medical Research Council grants 491241, 594793, and 1047902, and Australian Research Council grants DP109574, DP0663371, and DP0877359.