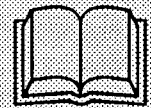


book reviews



Youth homelessness

Early intervention and prevention

Chris Chamberlain & David MacKenzie

Australian Centre for Equity through Education, Sydney, 1998

Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie have never been content to confine their research into youth homelessness to theory and academic speculation. Throughout the 1990s they have developed their understanding of the real worlds of homeless young people, and used their knowledge to provoke and challenge governments and the broader community to take action to remedy an increasingly disturbing situation.

Their expert testimony underpinned many of the recommendations of the Morris Inquiry (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995), and they have always given their time generously to community and government bodies engaged in the development or evaluation of programs to assist homeless young people or those at risk of homelessness.

This latest publication is both a synthesis of their research findings throughout the 1990s, and a new and compelling articulation of what has become their 'signature tune': a call for improved coordination of programs to address youth homelessness under the twin banners of early intervention and prevention.

The book begins with a succinct history of public consciousness of youth homelessness in Australia and the early, often poorly informed responses to the issue by governments and other agencies. This history is enlivened by accounts of the researchers' experiences as participant observers at the Information Deli – a pioneering service to support street kids in central Melbourne.

Much of the reportage is presented verbatim, in the often confronting language of the young people themselves. This readiness to present the experiences of homeless young people, without judgement or qualification, alongside a systematic account of eight years of research makes this book relevant and accessible to a wide range of readers.

Chapter Two presents a case for the definition of homelessness which underpins the essential recommendations for policy and practice which are articulated in the later chapters. While acknowledging the importance and pioneering status of the Burdekin Report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989),

its popularisation of the "street kid" stereotype is identified as the reason for much misdirected effort and funding in the ensuing years.

An alternative picture of homelessness as a process with identifiable stages is presented. Street kids are the end product of the process – choosing to identify themselves with the homeless sub-culture; wholly detached from family and community supports; and unresponsive to programs of assistance intended to rehabilitate them to mainstream society. Intervention much earlier in the process, before the young person makes the transition to chronic homelessness, is much more likely to meet with success.

Subsequent chapters explore ideas relating to the numbers of homeless young people and the typical duration of episodes of homelessness. It emerges that most young people who eventually become chronically homeless experience their first episodes of homelessness while still in school. Systematically, the case is established for early intervention programs based in schools as the most effective measure to interrupt the process and provide the necessary supports before a young person enters the ranks of the chronically homeless.

Through the *National Census of Homeless School Students* (1994) and the *Students At Risk Survey* (1996), Chamberlain and MacKenzie developed a coherent picture of the youth homelessness phenomenon in Australia which could be used to develop a coordinated national response based on early intervention and prevention. It is their conviction about the urgent need for such a response which is the impetus for this book.

Reviewed by:

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