

Making a Difference: First Report of the Longitudinal Evaluation of Reconnect - Executive summary

The Reconnect Program is a Commonwealth Government initiative designed to address the problem of youth homelessness. The Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) funds the evaluation of the program. This first evaluation report documents the findings arising to date from the evaluation of the Reconnect program. The evaluation has found considerable evidence for the effectiveness of Reconnect as an early intervention program. However, the extent to which the outcomes reported here are sustainable will not be known until the final evaluation results are reported on in late 2003.

The Reconnect program grew out of a pilot conducted as part of the Prime Ministerial Youth Homelessness Taskforce in 1996-1998. The program concerns itself with homeless young people or those at the risk of homelessness, and aims to improve their levels of engagement in family, work, education, training and the community. It currently funds 93 early intervention services nationally.

This report draws on a range of source documents, particularly the results of the first round of a major longitudinal study which is investigating Reconnect client outcomes and Reconnect's impact on building community capacity for early intervention. Data has also been sourced from the Reconnect Data Collection, which collects information about young people who use Reconnect. The source documents are described in some detail in the Appendix.

The evaluation to date has found substantial evidence that the Reconnect program is working effectively in:

- achieving reconciliation between young people and their families
- improving the stability of young people's living situations
- engaging young people in employment, education and training and with their community
- improving community capacity for early intervention into youth homelessness.

From December 1999, when Reconnect was established, to July 2002, some 9,591 young people and/or their families have used Reconnect services. Overall, around 70% of these people reported improvement in their situation at the end of support provided by Reconnect.

Reconnect's impact on family reconciliation

The young people and families using Reconnect services have complex problems, including significant levels of conflict. The difficulties that families face are often entrenched and severe, and include high levels of reported violence, financial difficulty, school problems, mental health and substance abuse issues, and legal problems. Responses to the client study indicate that in the face of these complex problems, Reconnect services are helping to make significant improvements in parents' relationships with their children, to decrease the level of conflict within the family and to increase young people's sense of self worth.

Reconnect's impact on stabilising young people's living situations

Reconnect is successfully targeting young people at risk of enduring homelessness. More than a third of the young people who use Reconnect overall reported having left home

previously—a quarter of them on at least two occasions. The longitudinal client study revealed an even more unstable and volatile situation. Almost 60% of the young people who responded to the study had left home in the previous year—half of them once; 21% twice; 14% three times; and 14% four times. This is a matter of grave concern given other research which has shown the link between multiple home leaving and more enduring youth homelessness. It points to the critical need for effective interventions to break this vicious cycle of instability by reconnecting the young people more securely to their families or, failing this, finding stable and appropriate alternative options.

The data shows that Reconnect is playing this role and having a positive impact. It is reducing early home leaving and improving the stability of young people's living situations. Around one quarter of young people using Reconnect were not living with a family member at the beginning of support. By the completion of support, half of these young people had returned home. Similarly, before support from Reconnect, 16% of young people were living in temporary arrangements with friends or relatives, and by the completion of support this figure had dropped to 6%. The second round of the longitudinal client study, to be completed later this year, will provide information about the extent to which these gains are sustained after contact with Reconnect has ceased.

Reconnect's impact on engaging young people in education, employment and community

Most young people using Reconnect services have a troubled relationship with education, reporting high levels of suspension, expulsion and unstable schooling. A third of the young people in the client study had changed school more than five times since starting school; more than 50% had been at their current school for less than two years. Almost half of the young people in the study reported suspension and 9% reported at least one incident of expulsion. Fifty percent of the young people reported that they often or almost always hated being in school.

Reconnect services work hard to establish good relationships with schools and to improve young people's linkages with education. In the client study, almost half the young people leaving Reconnect services reported that Reconnect had helped to improve their interest in school or work. Parents leaving Reconnect support were significantly more likely to report feeling happy with the school their child was attending than those first seeking support.

Most young people in the client study (66%) were in education, reflecting the age group of Reconnect clients. However a significant proportion of young people were also engaging in some form of employment: 22% of young people in the client study reported working and attending school, while 37% of those not in education reported working. Reconnect seems to be making some differences in linking young people to income and to employment and/or education. After support, the proportion of young people with no income fell from 41% to 26%. The percentage of young people who were involved in neither education nor employment fell from 13% at the beginning of support to 7.9% by the end of support.

Reconnect's impact on building community capacity for early intervention

The evaluation has not only assessed Reconnect's impact on young people and families; it has also attempted to document Reconnect's impact on the capacity of the broader service system to increase its focus on early intervention in youth homelessness. Two studies investigated aspects of six Reconnect services' work with networks and other organisations; the longitudinal community study is examining twelve Reconnect services in depth, assessing these services' impact on other agencies' practices as well as on the functioning of the broader service system. The longitudinal community study conducted

individual interviews with 73 service providers who work closely with Reconnect services, meetings with 82 further service providers and focus groups with parents and young people.

The first round of the study found evidence that Reconnect services are having a positive impact on community capacity for early intervention, through:

- building community infrastructure by providing a flexible service responsive to young people and families; by sharing access to brokerage funds with other service providers; by increasing the skills of service providers, young people and families; and by developing new services or service responses to address gaps.
- improving the practices of other service providers. Some Reconnect services have influenced other service providers to work with the Reconnect client group so that early intervention occurs using approaches consistent with the Reconnect model.
- adding value to service networks. In a few of the cases studied, Reconnect services are assisting service networks to develop more integrated systems that can identify needs and enable cooperation in addressing them.

The evaluation (based on three separate studies of 18 Reconnect services and the service networks they work within) has found that Reconnect services have been having a positive impact on community capacity across very varied communities. While Reconnect services face more complex tasks in building capacity in some contexts than in others, effectiveness of capacity-building efforts appears to be primarily linked to: the length of time that services have been operating; the skills and leadership qualities of staff; and clarity around the capacity-building role.

Findings about the Reconnect service delivery model

The evaluation was designed not only to assess the impact of Reconnect's work with young people, families and communities, but also to provide a basis for understanding *how* the Reconnect model achieved these impacts.

The evaluation to date has confirmed that the Reconnect model (articulated as the Reconnect Good Practice Principles) continues to assist service providers to achieve the impacts outlined earlier. There is evidence that Reconnect services provide a flexible approach to intervention that is focused on meeting the specific needs of young people and families: Reconnect staff will often work with the young person and parents separately where this is needed, using a 'tool box' of approaches including counselling (29% of cases), family mediation (10% of cases), assistance with education (9% of cases), and practical support (35% of cases). Overall, the Reconnect model fosters 'the service fitting around the client, not the client fitting around the service'. This approach is supported through the use of 'brokerage funds' that allow Reconnect workers to buy in assistance to meet the specific needs of young people. Finally, the model fosters flexible collaboration with other providers in order to meet the needs of young people and families.

The evaluation has found that Reconnect is an effective early intervention service, but that demand is increasing as the program becomes more established, so that pressure is being placed on Reconnect's capacity for early intervention. Reconnect services have sought to deal with increased demand through strategies such as increased collaboration with other agencies or the provision of group programs. However, some Reconnect services are beginning to tighten criteria for accepting referrals, a strategy which may undermine the responsive and flexible model that has been crucial to the program's success (the impact of demand on Reconnect services will be explored further in the second stage of the community study).

There is evidence that Reconnect services are reaching groups of clients with particular needs, although this varies across the program. Due to the difficulties in the current data collection, it is unclear the extent to which Reconnect services are reaching families from culturally and linguistically diverse populations. The growth of Indigenous-specific services has led to a substantial increase in the number of Indigenous clients (14% of all Reconnect clients). As Reconnect services gain more experience at working with these client groups, more will be known about the extent to which the overall practice model of Reconnect will need to change if the same positive outcomes are to be achieved.

Policy and program issues arising from the evaluation

Reconnect is emerging as a particularly effective program in relation to the Government's policy objectives aimed at strengthening families and communities. In particular, the program evaluation to this point indicates that it is:

- demonstrating significant improvement in the relationships between young people and their families, helping to re-establish a sense of closeness and to reduce conflict
- targeting its interventions effectively to prevent early home leaving, so that a significant group of young people return home after Reconnect intervention and/or have their living situation stabilised
- positively impacting on young people's engagement with education and employment
- demonstrating effectiveness in building broader community capacity for early intervention into youth homelessness.

The evaluation findings highlight factors that have contributed to the program's success, including:

- flexible administration of funds from FaCS that allow Reconnect services to adapt service delivery to local need
- the provision of infrastructure development to the program that has helped to maintain and build skills across Reconnect services and ensure that a consistent model of practice occurs across the program
- the emphasis on working collaboratively, which has improved service delivery to young people and families and appears also to have increased the cost-effectiveness of the program.

These findings also highlight the need to maintain and strengthen Reconnect infrastructure, particularly as the demand for Reconnect grows. The complexity of circumstances of young people and families using Reconnect require highly skilled workers with adequate case loads if Reconnect is to continue to achieve the outcomes found to date.