

A Recipe for Success: How independent living skills can prevent accommodation breakdown in young offenders exiting secure care

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Juvenile offending and homelessness are not two separate issues, but are intricately linked. The reason behind a return to crime and a breakdown of accommodation is often a lack of independent living skills. This article will describe how SYC proposes to support young people to navigate the transition from detention, to mitigate the risk of becoming homeless and to desist from offending.

Each year SYC supports and assists over 4,000 young South Australians to access and maintain appropriate accommodation, to address their offending behaviours, and to assist them to reconnect with family, school, employment and the community.

Two of the core services provided by SYC are Trace-A-Place® and Triple JPET, a specialist Juvenile Justice Job Placement Employment and Training program.¹ Since 1981 Trace-A-Place® has been the central referral service into Youth SAAP. It plays a pivotal role in providing case management to the 800 or so young people who seek

emergency or medium term transitional accommodation in metropolitan Adelaide each year. Triple JPET provides intensive therapeutic interventions aimed at assisting young offenders to address the areas of need most closely associated with the reasons they offend and to assist them to map a positive pathway out of crime that involves education, vocational training or employment.

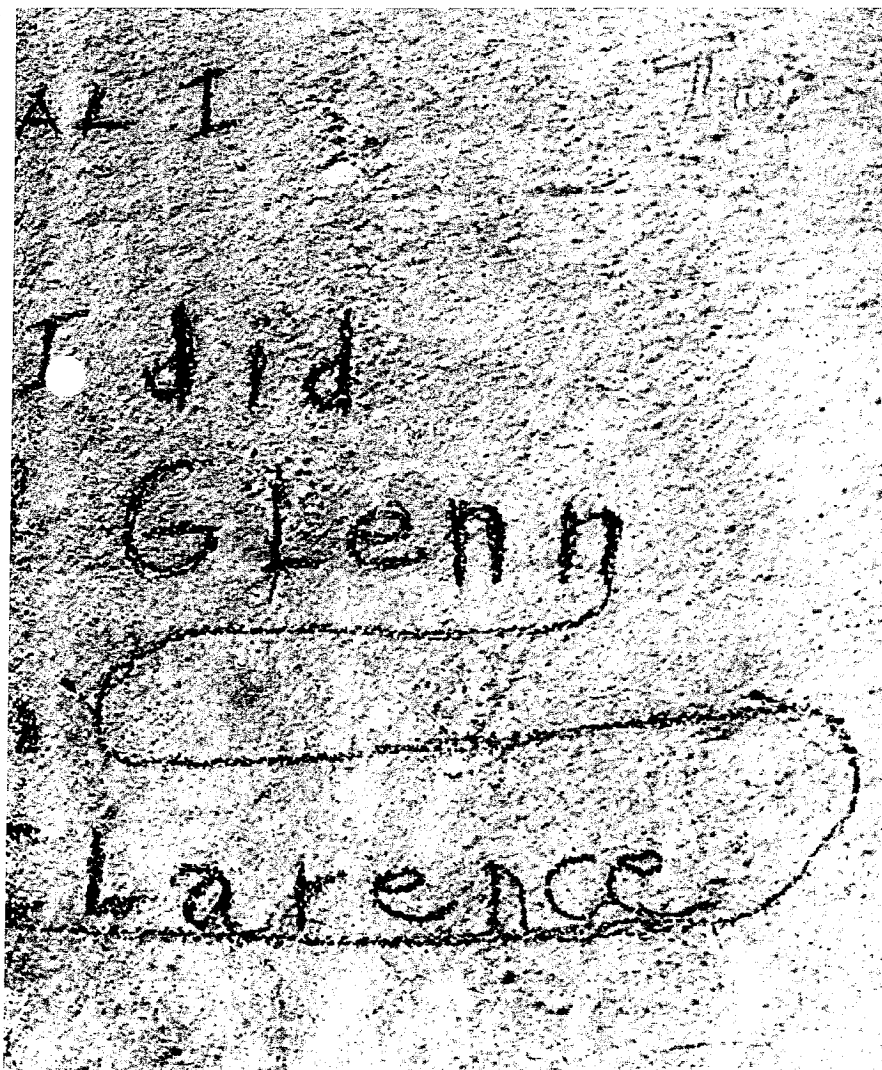
During the course of working with young people who have experienced multiple accommodation placement breakdowns and who have been held in a youth detention facility, SYC has found that these young people struggle to transition into independent accommodation post-release, and that their accommodation breakdown regularly gave rise to further offending. Two key consistent reasons associated with their return to crime were a lack of independent living skills and the influence of peer relationships.

Data was collected over a period of 14 months on 21 young people participating in SYC's Triple JPET program. Each had served a detention order ranging in duration from 2 months to 1 year, with an average of 4 months (n = 21). The young people ranged in age from 15 to 20 years of age, with an average age of 17 years (n = 21).

Of the total cohort, 52% of those who had not received any living skills training re-offended (n = 11). Of this subgroup, 81% also experienced accommodation breakdown (n = 9) and 64% stated that this accommodation breakdown was directly influenced by peers (n = 7).

Of the 21 case files assessed, 48% had received basic life skills training (n = 10) yet still re-offended, with 40% suffering accommodation breakdown (n = 4); 50% of these cases were determined to be influenced by peers (n = 2). This data supports SYC's theory that accommodation breakdown and recidivism is linked to a lack of life skills and that peer influence plays a key role in this relationship.

Young people who have been sentenced or held on remand for more than 3 months face a culture shock as they move out of an 'institutionalised' routine that is structured, non-negotiable and requires minimal decision making (Borzycki, 2005).



The challenges they face, in addition to desisting from crime include:

- The loss of personal belongings due to the inability to store possessions while in custody;
- Institutionalisation and the decreasing ability to live independently;
- Aggression, emotional over-control and a loss of self esteem, and
- Strengthening of criminal social networks.

Much work has been done, both nationally and internationally to show the links between homelessness and recidivism. Successful transition from detention back into the community has to cover more than just the supply of a bed (Law 2005). In the Lipsey and Wilson (1998) meta-analysis, interventions aimed at improving independent living skills and community integration were identified as the most effective in reducing recidivism in both institutionalised and non-institutionalised young offender groups. The SA Social Inclusion Unit identified the transition from incarceration back into the community was a key point for intervention.

Informed by this body of research, SYC's proposed solution to breaking the cycle of homelessness and (re)offending is to deliver a flexible module based, independent living skills program for young people, both in detention and continued upon release. Proposed modules include interpersonal relationships, problem solving, conflict resolution as well as a variety of important practical independent living skills such as cooking, budgeting and cleaning.

A vital first step of such a program is to conduct a detailed assessment with each program participant so that the program responds to the needs of participants and is responsive to their individual learning styles.

It is essential that the program continues once the young person is released into the community, to provide a continuation of support through this transition point and to enable the young person to continue to practice the strategies learnt whilst in detention.

As confirmed by the data above, peer influence can be extremely strong, particularly amongst those aged 15–21 years of age. For those who are entrenched in the homeless subculture, peers are regarded as family and exert significant influence over life choices, particularly involvement in crime.

SYC has devised a model to represent the effect of peer influence. The model is cyclical and consists of 5 key stages.

1. Release from youth detention centre, becoming homeless and linking in with other homeless young people for support.
2. One person in the peer group ("tenant") obtains accommodation.
3. The accommodation is placed at risk due to a lack of skills in

managing the tenancy, resulting in the peer group "moving in", escalation of anti-social or criminal behaviours.

4. Tenant is evicted or is detained due to further offending.
5. The peer group disperses.

The key is to intervene prior to Stage 2; to support young people to learn independent living skills to manage a household, as well as to learn conflict resolution and negotiation skills, learning to say no, and skills to develop healthy relationships. Identifying possible areas of peer influence, before a young person negotiates the transition from detention to independent living is essential in breaking the homelessness — (re)offending cycle.

Embedding the peer influence model into an independent living skills program is the way in which SYC proposes to support young people to address their offending behaviours and to maintain stable and safe accommodation. In this our 50th year, the independent living skills program will become a vital part of SYC's integrated range of services that are aimed at addressing social disadvantage for young South Australians and helping them to achieve their personal goals and aspirations. ■

Footnote

1. JPET is an Australian Government funded programme administered by DEEWR. It is offered nationally to young people aged 15–21 (inclusive) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and/or facing multiple non-vocational barriers to overcome their barriers and achieve greater economic and social participation. SYC in partnership with Youth Education Centre is the sole provider of a specialist Juvenile Justice JPET programme.

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