MEDIA RELEASE Part One

School research identifies 1300 Geelong students ‘at risk’

Recent research published, data and practice trial developed by The Geelong Project (TGP) has identified 1300 young people across Geelong schools at risk of school drop-out, homelessness, mental health, drug & alcohol and justice concerns.

The same research, coupled with teacher and youth worker inputs, enables schools and community service agencies to confidently identify students ‘at risk’ and pave the way for them getting the help they need.

Mike Kelly CEO Time for Youth, the lead agency for The Geelong Project says ‘The Student Needs Survey, undertaken across Geelong schools, allows schools and early intervention workers to pinpoint vulnerable students, who without help, are likely to drop out of school and/or become homeless. ‘By combining science with the expertise of the teaching and youth service professions, we can now point with confidence to ‘who is at risk’ and better understand how much risk is at stake’.

The Student Needs Survey, developed by Swinburne University, has been trialled in Geelong secondary schools over the last two years, providing a snapshot of young people at risk in Geelong.

A Swinburne report by Associate Professor David MacKenzie and Dr Monica Thielking, has estimated that there are 1300 identifiable vulnerable young people in Geelong schools with issues ranging from serious levels of family conflict, mental health issues through to imminent school leaving. The vast majority will not be reached and supported by an already overwhelmed social and education support system that is responding to young people already in crisis.

Associate Professor David Mackenzie, who has led the development of the population screening of risk for The Geelong Project says ‘identifying risk in the way that we have done this in Geelong means that resources can be efficiently deployed to achieve results for those who need help. Also, we have learned that issues at this early pre-crisis stage should not be separated out into distinct program responses but managed in a whole of community approach. This kind of effort is what is known as ‘collective impact’ and it challenges the conventional wisdom about how support and service systems should be organised and funded. The current service system is not good enough to accomplish what it aims to achieve’.

TGP partners now maintain they have the means to accurately target limited community resources to vulnerable young people who are likely to drop out of school, become homeless, and or struggle with debilitating effects of mental health and drug abuse.
This new research opens up the possibility of getting to those who are most vulnerable before the onset of a crisis, with the potential of making a huge difference to the lives of young people, as well as making huge savings to the taxpayer, who ‘bear the burden’ of youth unemployment, homelessness and costs of health care.

“We are now facing the distressing situation where we can identify those young people and families who are going to fall into crisis – yet our service system is largely designed to wait until they are in deep trouble before doing anything – and then it’s so much harder to effect any real change. Being able to identify vulnerable young people is half the battle- we need to be able to respond to the problem as well’ says CEO Mike Kelly

Whilst the Swinburne report suggests that most of these young people face life long disadvantage if nothing happens for them, the report concludes that the ground breaking model, developed and trialled in Geelong, holds the key to addressing growing issues facing young people and communities, locally and nationally.

David MacKenzie says ‘a reform of our service system working closely with and in schools is the key to changing the lives of our most vulnerable youth. It is most encouraging that in the initial TGP pilot with 95 at risk students across two education catchments, 100% of the trial group were kept at school, supported at home or in safe accommodation and connected to their communities. This suggests that the model is extraordinarily promising and it deserves an extended trial’.

Staff from Deakin University Geelong have expressed interest in collaborating with the evaluation component of this project. ‘This new research opens up the possibility of getting to those who are most vulnerable before the onset of a crisis, with the potential of making a huge difference to the lives of young people, as well as making huge savings to the taxpayer who bear the burden of youth unemployment, homelessness and costs of health care’ says Dr Lloyd Owen who has a background of work with young people in government and non-government services and research projects at La Trobe University. He is now involved in social work field education and assessment at Deakin University.

Mike Kelly says ‘TGP is demonstrating that seemingly intractable problem of youth homelessness and school drop- out are not insurmountable - and in Geelong’s case can be successfully tackled by close collaboration between schools and youth service agencies’

‘For the first time, we now have at our disposal very important tools and processes that enable us to identify who the students are that need help, what kind of help they need, and the level of assistance needed. The challenge that schools and youth services have been working on - is how to get a coordinated ‘whole of community and government’ response to the problem’.

Contacts

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Background information

The Student Needs Survey involves a systemic, replicable and scalable approach to proactive early identification of young people at risk. It incorporates the at risk of homelessness indicator (ARH) and disengagement from school indicator (DS) as developed by Mackenzie and Chamberlain. The SNS also provides the basis for tracking to measure long term outcomes. Students across schools in Geelong have been surveyed using the Student Needs Survey (SNS) – a validated tool – developed by Swinburne University. Work to date has identified a large number of unsupported young people at high risk.

The SNS Survey and Data from practice has found:

- The pilot student needs survey of 5236 students found 1.2% of students were at high risk (scores 9-10) and another 3.5% where risk is indicated (scores 7-8)
- The at risk group in Geelong was 4.7% of the total school population
- The at risk profile was distributed fairly evenly across the secondary years
- This means that there are opportunities for early intervention across the whole secondary cycle
- Female students are more at risk than male students (55% female 45% male)
- Indigenous students are five times more at risk than others
- About 10% of at risk students were indigenous
- Students at risk of homelessness were more likely to be using drugs and had contact with the police
- Students at risk of homelessness were three times more likely to have sought help in relation to mental health issues
- Students at risk were less able to cope with stress and adversity
- Substantial numbers of students disengaging from school were also at risk of homelessness, although this did not necessarily go hand in hand
- The SNS screening tool worked in being able to identify risk
- School staff remarked that SNS with the screening process involving teachers and students, had found many students with serious issues that had not come to the attention of schools
- The prevalence of homeless school students in Geelong was found to be 50-60 on one night
- Data indicates that 253 individual young people couch surf each year, whereby they stay for example at a friend’s place and indicate a wish not to return home
- Information from the pilot study highlights the fact that there is a crossover of presenting concerns in the early intervention space. Of the 95 young people supported during the pilot 90% had behaviour concerns, 80% school disengagement issues, 60% family violence issues, nearly 50% mental health concerns, and nearly 30% drug and alcohol issues.
School disengagement

The State Government 2014 On Track Survey found the percentage of Geelong Students who complete year 12 and go onto university is now almost 7% lower than the states 54.3 percent average, with the gap having grown from 5% last year. 25.3% of Geelong’s early school leavers said that they were out of work – a 10% increase on 2012 and significantly higher than the 16.9% State average.

Youth unemployment continues to rise in Geelong, which highlight the struggle faced by early school leavers. According to the latest ABS data 20.7 percent of Geelong Youth aged 18-24 are unemployed.

Homeless: having inadequate access to safe and secure housing.

Latest statistics from shelters show that at least 150 people are without stable or safe accommodation in the Geelong region each night, This figure includes children as young as 10 years old.

100 of these homeless people each night are young people (Youth Entry Point data 2014)

Youth homelessness in the Geelong region is a problem and a growing one. On census night 2011, there were 6,130 young people aged 12-24 counted as homeless in Victoria. They made up 27% of Victoria’s recorded homeless population. The Australian Bureau of Statistics cautions that youth homelessness is undercounted and real numbers are higher. The homelessness rate has been growing faster among young people than in the general population.

Between 2006-11 the youth homelessness rate in Victoria increased by 33% amongst 19-24 year olds, and by 24% amongst 12-18 year olds. Some groups of young people are especially vulnerable. For example, young people from refugee backgrounds are 6–10 times more likely to be at risk of homelessness than Australian-born young people.

At least 80-100 of the homeless people in our community each night are young people. In addition to this there are many more couch surfers who represent an additional large number of homeless youth in this region (approximately 17,325 couch surfers in Australia). The rate of homelessness in Geelong is growing, as seen in connection with the rates of youth unemployment, family violence and high school dropout rates which are all increasing.