

## A rural community seeks possibilities in addressing youth homelessness

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**Introduction:** Characteristics of youth (15-25 year olds) at increased risk of homelessness in Australia are being female, live in poverty, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders heritage, have a mental illness, come from a non-English speaking background, live in state care or live in rural and remote Australia. Rural youth homelessness is described as hidden and often an unacknowledged issue for the general community. Homelessness can result in young people disengaging from educational, training and employment pathways and may impact significantly on their physical and mental wellbeing, and social behaviour. Rural homelessness has not been extensively researched, with studies tending to be localised to one region and recruiting small numbers of participants. The level of youth homelessness varies across rural areas depending on demographic shift, economic distress, labour patterns, the cultural makeup and social resources.

**Aims:** A working party of rural youth service providers in partnership with local university researchers developed a community project in early 2014 with the following aims:

- To understand the local issues influencing youth homelessness in the Riverland region of South Australia.
- To develop useful approaches to address youth homelessness in the Riverland region.
- Information sharing and networking between existing service providers.

**Methods:** Current literature was reviewed with a focus on youth homelessness in the rural context, and the effectiveness of strategies and models already implemented by communities.

A 'World Café on Youth Homelessness' was held to identify issues specific to Riverland communities, and to explore opportunities for possible accommodation solutions. Relevant service providers and community members with an interest in rural youth homelessness were invited to participate. Group discussions were facilitated, and centred on core focus questions. These questions were developed in partnership with local providers with expertise and knowledge within the local rural homeless youth context.

**Results:** The main themes emerging from the world café were:

- Riverland-specific issues
- raising awareness and literacy
- lack of youth specific accommodation
- connecting homeless youth to their community
- cultural and gender issues
- existing homeless supports and services
- challenges for youth under 16 years
- innovative strategies.

**Conclusions:** The Riverland service providers identified that research could assist in providing an evidence-based approach, informing the development of programs and policies to better support rural homeless youth. They also affirmed that while there were many challenges in trying to meet the needs of rural homeless youth in the Riverland, there was also a commitment to collaborate and identify possible solutions.