



Australian Government

Department of Family and Community Services



‘I’m looking at the future’ Evaluation Report of Reconnect

'I'm looking at the future' Evaluation Report of Reconnect

Final Report

October 2003

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Glossary of terms

Action Research	Action research is a process by which change and understanding can be pursued at the one time. It is usually described as cyclic, with action and critical reflection taking place in turn. The reflection is used to review the previous action and plan the next one (Dick, 1999).
CALD clients and communities	CALD refers to individuals or groups from ‘culturally and linguistically diverse’ backgrounds. CALD is increasingly replacing the term Non-English Speaking as a way of describing peoples from the wide range of cultures and language backgrounds that currently live in Australia. The term CALD does not usually include Indigenous peoples.
First-to-know agency	First-to-know agencies are agencies likely to be the first to identify young people or families having difficulties that might result in the young people leaving home early. First-to-know agencies are often schools, general practitioners, police or youth agencies. The term was first used by Crane & Brannock (1996).
Good Practice	‘Good practice’ refers to processes or procedures that contribute to achieving the outcomes a service or program has established as its goal. It is not a static concept—good practice changes as insights into how to achieve good outcomes emerge from experience, research, reflection and evaluation. It is also not as prescriptive a concept as the alternative term ‘best practice’—for it acknowledges that there are likely to be different ways to achieve desired outcomes and that, in any field of endeavour, increasingly effective work practices are likely to develop over time.
Independent Assessment Reports	Performance assessment reports of the 65 Reconnect services established in the first and second funding rounds (between 1999 and 2001). These reports summarise the findings from assessments of effectiveness of the individual services conducted as part of program management. The assessments involved: analysis of self-evaluation reports from individual agencies; interviews with State and Territory FaCS staff, interviews with Reconnect staff and staff of other stakeholder services. Effectiveness of Reconnect’s work was assessed in relation to: management practices; improved coordination of services; family focussed early intervention strategies; working with Centrelink; and action research.
Longitudinal community study	A qualitative study of 12 Reconnect services over an 18 month period, to investigate whether, and to what extent, Reconnect services build community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness.
Longitudinal study of Reconnect clients	A survey of 455 Reconnect cases—young people and parents entering and exiting Reconnect services in late 2001, followed up by a second survey of the same group in late 2002. The survey investigated the profile of Reconnect clients, measured the complexity of their cases, and used objective and validated scales for measuring intervention outcomes and the sustainability of those outcomes.

Reconnect Administrative Data (RAD)	Administrative data supplied to the Department by Reconnect services on each client (young person) and on all services provided. The Reconnect Administrative Data (RAD) is a primary source of data for this evaluation report.
Reconnect auspice	A non-government organisation that manages a Reconnect service site. Auspice agencies include: large welfare agencies that operate many different programs; local government; health services; SAAP services; Indigenous organisations; and smaller youth service agencies.
Reconnect Good Practice Principles	The Reconnect Good Practice Principles are the seven principles used to define the Reconnect service delivery model. The principles were developed in the original Youth Homelessness Pilot Program through debate amongst practitioners on what was emerging as ‘good practice’ in the pilots. They were further refined as a result of practitioner forums held with Reconnect in 2001.
Reconnect Program Evaluation Strategy	The strategy developed and implemented by the Reconnect Evaluation Steering Committee to guide the evaluation of Reconnect. It has included funding of the longitudinal client and community study and the smaller case studies.
Reconnect service	The local body providing services to Reconnect clients.
ReconnectAR	A website for Reconnect services to exchange information concerning their action research and learning emerging from their work.
SAAP	The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. Jointly funded by Australian, State and Territory Governments, SAAP provides accommodation and assistance to homeless people across Australia.
Tool box of interventions	The range of approaches used by Reconnect services when assisting young people and their families. Commonly, the Reconnect ‘tool box’ includes the use of counselling, mediation, practical support, group programs and community development projects.
YHPP	The Youth Homelessness Pilot Program, precursor to Reconnect. The YHPP was established under the guidance of the Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce. A report on the YHPP, <i>Putting Families in the Picture</i> , was published in 1998.

Executive Summary

Reconnect has been in operation since 1999 as a national early intervention program aimed at reducing youth homelessness. An Australian Government initiative, it seeks to reconnect young people (aged 12 to 18 years) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, with their families, education, employment and community. The program's precursor was the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program, managed by the Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce, whose final report, *Putting Families in the Picture*, was published in 1998.

'I'm looking at the future' is a quote from one of the young people surveyed during the Reconnect evaluation, and is one of many such statements made by the program's young clients. The circumstances of young people using Reconnect services led many of them to express hopelessness when Reconnect first came into their lives. In contrast, by the end of contact with Reconnect the majority of young people had significantly more optimistic outlooks. *I'm looking at the future*, in outlining the key findings of the Reconnect evaluation, helps to explain this change.

The Reconnect program

Reconnect services work with young people and their families in flexible and holistic ways. The Reconnect service delivery model includes: a focus on responding quickly when a young person or family is referred; a 'toolbox' of approaches that include counselling, mediation and practical support; and collaboration with other service providers. As well as providing assistance to individual young people and their families, Reconnect services also provide group programs, undertake community development projects and work with other agencies to increase the broader service system's capacity to intervene early in youth homelessness.

There are now 98 Reconnect services located in disadvantaged communities throughout Australia. By 30 June 2003 these services had provided free assistance to approximately 16,000 young people and their families. An additional 10,000 young people had participated in group programs offered by the services.

The Reconnect evaluation

The Reconnect evaluation was designed to provide insight into:

- the outcomes for young people and families using the program and the extent to which outcomes are sustained over time;
- the extent to which Reconnect has contributed to an improvement in community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness;
- the effectiveness of strategies used by Reconnect services in working with young people, families and communities; and
- the effectiveness of the program's management.

Principal sources of data for the evaluation were: two longitudinal studies that investigated respectively client outcomes and community capacity-building outcomes; program data on young people using Reconnect services; assessments of the

effectiveness of individual Reconnect services; a report on 'good practice' emerging from the program; and two case-study reports which examined the way six Reconnect services worked collaboratively with other service providers. Of these sources, the two most significant were the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients and the Reconnect Administrative Data (RAD).

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients surveyed young people and parents entering and exiting Reconnect services over a four-month period in 2001 and surveyed them again 10 months later. The respondents to the study were closely representative of the total Reconnect client population.

Early intervention in youth homelessness

Youth homelessness remains a significant national issue. In 2001, a census of schools identified 26,000 homeless young people, a rate of 14 per 1000 young people.

The main factors contributing to young people becoming homeless have been identified as the decline of employment opportunities, a shortage of affordable housing, an increase in family breakdown and other issues associated with poverty. Early intervention in these factors with the aim of preventing homelessness may also reduce the likelihood of other negative outcomes for young people, such as youth suicide, substance abuse and criminal involvement. Recent research on young people's development has found the ongoing interaction between risk factors and protective factors in each child's life is vitally important. Exposure to greater risk leads to greater vulnerability; greater experience of protective factors leads to greater eventual resilience.

The 'early' in 'early intervention' signifies not so much early in *life* as early in a pathway that may lead to an adverse outcome. Most young people who become homeless do so in stages, starting with a tentative break (leaving the family home for a night without parental permission) and moving on to more definite breaks, where the young person no longer sees themselves as part of a family unit. The Youth Homelessness Pilot Program found that it was possible to intervene early in this progression by working with families to reduce conflict and to increase young people's connection with school and their community. Where a young person chose to live independently, or could not continue living at home (for safety or other reasons), the YHPP found that young people's connections with family could nonetheless be strengthened or maintained. These findings provided the starting point for Reconnect.

Key evaluation findings

The principal over-all finding of the evaluation was that Reconnect intervention resulted in significant positive outcomes for young people and families. Specifically, Reconnect has been notably successful in improving stability in young people's living situations. Reconnect intervention has a major effect in achieving family reconciliation by increasing the capacity of families to manage conflict and to improve communication.

Profile of young people and families using Reconnect services

Young people using Reconnect have, for the most part, not yet left home or have only recently left home. The majority of Reconnect's young clients (57.5%) were living with parents when they first gained support from Reconnect; of those, 50% had previously left home at least once. There is some indication that with the passage of time there was

an increase in the proportion of young people being helped by Reconnect who had previously left home.

Young people seen by Reconnect services are most commonly:

- aged 14 to 17 years (75%)
- female (61%)
- Australian born (93%)
- non-Indigenous (89%)
- educated to Year 10 or less (79%)
- in full-time education (66%)
- living with parents (57.5%)
- referred by schools (22%) or families (20%).

Reconnect is assisting young people and families who are significantly disadvantaged and who have complex problems. A key finding of the evaluation is that 37.3% of Reconnect cases involve a high level of complexity and thus require longer periods of support. Many high complexity cases are young people from an Indigenous or CALD background and require longer periods of support. Two thirds of the cases sampled involved poverty (66.0%) and/or violence (64.3%); in approximately a third of cases substance misuse (40.3%) or mental health issues (32%) were present. Almost a third (32%) of young people had been suspended from school, and 9% of young people assisted by Reconnect had been expelled from school.

Outcomes for young people and their families

Improvement in the stability of young people's living situations

Young people living in temporary situations fell from 16.5% at Reconnect's initial intervention to 5% at exit from the services. Reconnect intervention also increased the stability of young people's living situations in relation to parents—young people living with parents increased from 57.5% at the start of support to 62% after support, an increase which was found across all age categories.

Improvement in young people's ability to manage conflict

Family conflict is the most frequently cited reason for young people and their families seeking assistance from Reconnect services (48% of clients cited this reason). Reconnect intervention appears to be particularly effective in assisting families to manage family conflict better.

There was a dramatic improvement in young people's reported ability to manage family conflict, and this improvement was sustained over time. Young people reporting good or very good skills in managing family conflict increased from 12% before Reconnect intervention to 44% after ceasing support from Reconnect. Correspondingly, two thirds of young people estimated their skills in managing conflict to be poor or very poor prior to Reconnect support, a figure that dropped to 16% after intervention. This reported

change persisted for a year after intervention had ceased (the duration of the longitudinal study).

Parents reported similar improvements in capacity to manage conflict: the proportion of parents reporting good or very good skills in the area increased from 11% to 47% between entry into Reconnect and Wave Two of the longitudinal survey.

Improvements in communication within families

Young people and parents also reported improvements in communication following Reconnect intervention. The proportion of young people who felt their family communicated well increased from 22% before Reconnect intervention to 41% afterwards.

Parents' reported improvement was more pronounced: the proportion of parents reporting their family communicated well or very well increased from 11% before Reconnect intervention to 42% at the second survey. Parents reported feeling increased closeness with their children and less alienation after Reconnect intervention, although this effect was not sustained over time.

Improvements in young people's attitudes to school

The majority of young people using Reconnect services were in full-time education (76%) — a participation level which was unchanged by Reconnect intervention.

However, the evaluation found that, for the majority of young people using Reconnect, experience of school was not a happy one. Reconnect clients tend to change school frequently: 52% of young people had been at their current school for less than two years. Just over one third of young people (36%) reported being bullied, 18% saying that it happened on 'most days'; more than half (53%) of the young people surveyed reported hating school often or almost always; 43% reported having been suspended and 10% having been expelled. The longitudinal study found a significant improvement over time in the extent to which young people felt liked and respected at school.

Improvements in engagement with education and employment

The proportion of young people employed full time or part time increased from 2% at the start of support to 5% at completion. The proportion of young people who were not in education, training or employment dropped from 15% at program entry to 11% at exit. Education participation rates and unemployed (looking for work) status remained unchanged. However, in the light of the findings on case complexity of Reconnect clients, maintaining young people's participation in education can be viewed as a positive achievement.

Engagement with community

One of Reconnect's objectives is to improve young people's engagement with their community. Although self-reported improvements were found in this respect, other measures used in the longitudinal study to track increases in participation in community activities found no significant improvements over time.

Clients' views of outcomes

Three quarters of young people and parents reported overall improvement in the situation that led them to Reconnect. More than half of young people (55%) and parents

(52%) attributed ‘a lot’ of this improvement to the Reconnect intervention. Reconnect services are highly regarded by young people and parents using them: more than three quarters of young people and at least 80% of parents expressed satisfaction with their relationship with their caseworker, how they were treated and their ease of access to Reconnect.

Outcomes in relation to building community capacity for early intervention into youth homelessness

The evaluation found substantial evidence that Reconnect services are effective in building community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness within the communities where they are located.

The Longitudinal Community Study drew eight conclusions:

- Reconnect services are highly effective, relative to their small size, in increasing community infrastructure for early intervention;
- Reconnect services build capacity through collaborative approaches and by strengthening service networks;
- Reconnect services build capacity by assisting other organisations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention;
- Reconnect services’ positive impact on capacity continues to build over time where they have adequate resources and stable management;
- the Reconnect model can be highly effective in achieving participation by Indigenous communities in approaches that support early intervention;
- community characteristics, service infrastructure and location can enhance or constrain the ability of Reconnect services to build community capacity, but will not predict the level of capacity building possible;
- key factors in an individual Reconnect service’s ability to build community capacity appear to be: a clear understanding of and commitment to the Reconnect model; teamwork; and leadership; and
- Reconnect’s national infrastructure has been a significant factor in assisting services in building community capacity for early intervention.

The Reconnect service delivery model

The Reconnect service delivery model has demonstrated its ability to assist young people and families in a wide range of circumstances, using a variety of intervention approaches. The degree of consistency in service delivery is noteworthy, particularly given the actual size of each Reconnect service (typically two to three workers) and the complexity of their clients’ situations. Factors that have contributed to the success of the model include:

- the innovative service design developed from the evaluation, research and articulation of good practice of the original pilot program;
- the Good Practice Forums, and the Good Practice Principles that emerged from them, helped to ensure significant consistency in the Reconnect model;

- the emphasis within the program on action research at the service level which has encouraged continuing innovation and helped to promote collaborative approaches; and
- a national approach to evaluation which can be used for program improvements.

Maintaining the range of Reconnect intervention approaches

The evaluation found that Reconnect services consistently used flexible and client-driven intervention approaches. The range of approaches used is consistent with evidence-based research on promoting resilience in vulnerable young people.

This flexibility and range is valued by Reconnect clients and other community service providers, and has contributed to positive client outcomes and to the increase in capacity for early intervention in communities.

The evaluation found, however, that Reconnect's capacity to maintain the range of intervention approaches is at risk. The risks identified include: increasing level of demand for Reconnect services; increasing complexity of individual cases; high staff turnover; and resourcing issues. There is evidence that some Reconnect services have begun to cut back on approaches that are critical to the service delivery model, and that less skilled staff may be being employed.

Working effectively with specific client groups

The pilot program identified a number of client groups as requiring specific, tailored responses. The evaluation found that Reconnect services' work with these groups is increasingly effective, but that there is need for further improvement.

Reconnect services that target Indigenous communities are engaging communities and adapting Reconnect to their specific cultural needs. Culturally appropriate approaches adopted by these Reconnect services include the employment of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, building good relationships with respected people in the community and a willingness to be guided by the community.

Some Reconnect services that do not specifically target Indigenous communities, but which have significant Indigenous populations within the communities they serve, have been less successful in meeting the needs of young Indigenous people. This appears to be mainly due to a lack of understanding and knowledge of how to go about developing a culturally appropriate service.

Findings in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse communities were similar, though less clear cut. The few Reconnect services that target these groups appear to be working very effectively with young people and their families, particularly in using community development approaches. The delivery of culturally appropriate services is a complex matter, about which most Reconnect services are still learning.

Finally, some Reconnect services have been more successful than others at supporting parents. Parents interviewed in the longitudinal study and those responding to the survey indicated that there is some way to go before Reconnect services can find an appropriate balance between challenging coercive parenting styles and providing support through the painful process of parenting young people. Similarly, Reconnect

services are struggling with balancing the needs of young people and those of parents and finding cost effective ways to support both.

Program management issues

The evaluation found that on the whole the management of the program was effective and influential in ensuring the success of Reconnect services at the local level, and that some issues will need to be addressed to ensure the program's future strength.

Ongoing evaluation and monitoring

Reconnect has had a strong emphasis on evaluation and ongoing learning; the systematic support for action research has helped services to reflect on their practice and modify it in the interest of greater effectiveness.

However, the limitations in Reconnect's data collection system have inhibited the capacity of services and the program as a whole to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery. Many issues will need to be monitored over the coming period if the program is to continue to be successfully innovative and cost effective. A robust, accurate and useful data collection is essential for the ongoing development of the program.

In particular, the development of effective interventions for particular client groups as specified in this evaluation will require reliable, detailed monitoring of practice. Research conducted elsewhere may be of use in this connection, but cannot take the place of rigorous, ongoing evaluation of the program itself.

Strengthening program management

A key strength of Reconnect has been the extent of National and State FaCS support to Reconnect services. FaCS has supported regular meetings of Reconnect staff that enhance and share skills and knowledge, and has promoted flexible and innovative practices. The Reconnect program guidelines, use of the Good Practice Principles, support of action research and the emphasis on evaluation have all helped to build a consistent and successful service delivery model.

The program has also been successful at developing and supporting Indigenous services, recognising that in order to achieve effective, culturally appropriate services lengthy consultation and engagement processes will sometimes be necessary.

The program has been less successful in engaging State and Territory Government central agencies so that effort can be maximised and responsibilities be shared. There is also an identified need to promote Reconnect more widely with other relevant Australian Government program areas to ensure that appropriate links are made.

Broader policy issues raised by the evaluation of Reconnect

This evaluation has identified a number of policy issues that go beyond the immediate scope of the Reconnect program.

Need for greater coordination in early intervention effort and support for parents

While the links between early childhood and later life outcomes have been recognised, until recently the bulk of State-based early intervention programs have been directed towards early childhood. The research on promoting resilience cited in this evaluation indicates the value of continuing to build protective factors for young people throughout their development into early adulthood.

While the importance of supporting parents and families is recognised as vital for early childhood interventions, there are few programs that ‘put families in the picture’ when late childhood is reached. Parents using Reconnect services are appreciative of access to a service that works with them and their children at the same time. However, parents also want more assistance and support than Reconnect services can currently provide.

Australian, State and Territory Governments should continue to work together to develop a national early intervention strategy which ensures positive outcomes for children and young people *as they mature*. There is also a broader need for a coordinated strategy to support parents. A strategy to support parents requires a national approach whether it is part of the early intervention agenda or is developed in tandem.

Need to address the disengagement of vulnerable young people from schooling

This evaluation found widespread evidence of negative school experiences among young people using Reconnect services. In addition, a substantial body of research indicates that schools are key sites for identifying at risk behaviours and supporting young people through the transition to adulthood. While schools obviously cannot be blamed for changes in the broader economic and social spheres, they are nonetheless key agents in dealing (or failing to deal) with these changes.

An integrated national strategy for early intervention for early childhood, middle childhood and youth would draw attention to the inter-relationship of schools with family and community rather than regarding schools purely as vehicles for pedagogy. Possible areas for future development are: national common indicators for schools that not only measure educational competencies, but also identify suspension and expulsion rates and gather data on young people’s experiences in relation to bullying and enjoyment of school; a national strategy of alternative education approaches for young people who are already disengaged from the school system; comprehensive programs to support schools, particularly those located in disadvantaged areas, to address the needs of vulnerable young people.

Part One: Reconnect Evaluation Background

In December 1998, the Prime Minister, the Hon. John Howard, launched the final taskforce report of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program, *Putting Families in the Picture* (Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce, 1998), and announced the establishment of a national early intervention program to address youth homelessness: the Reconnect Program.

Reconnect is administered by the Department of Family and Community Services. Since 1999, three rounds of funding have established 98 Reconnect services nationally. The program aims to reconnect young people (aged 12 to 18 years) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, with their families, education, employment and community.

I'm looking at the future is the final evaluation report of the program. Its title is a quote from one of the young people who completed a survey about their experiences with Reconnect; it sums up the feelings expressed by many young people during the evaluation. The difficult life circumstances of young people using Reconnect services meant that many expressed hopelessness when they first came into contact with Reconnect. In contrast, the evaluation found that by the end of contact with Reconnect the majority of young people were significantly more optimistic. *I'm looking at the future* helps to explain these changes.

This report

This report seeks to provide an evaluative response to questions outlined in the Reconnect Program Evaluation Strategy devised by the Evaluation Steering Committee. These questions relate to:

- the program's outcomes for young people: Has the program been effective in achieving family reconciliation? Has it been effective in improving the stability of young people's living situations and engaging young people in education, employment and community? Were outcomes sustainable over time?
- the program's outcomes in relation to communities and early intervention in youth homelessness: To what extent has the program contributed to an improvement in community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness? To what extent has the program encouraged the participation of Indigenous communities?
- the strategies used by Reconnect services to work with young people, families and other agencies: To what extent has the Reconnect model been utilised; what insights have been gained in working with specific groups; what is the nature and level of involvement with other agencies? and
- how the program's management has facilitated or hindered its development (including the extent to which there are partnership relationships with community agencies and with State and Territory Governments).

Part One: Reconnect Evaluation Background provides information on the background to the program and its policy context, on the program itself and on the evaluation. Readers familiar with this background may prefer to move directly to Part Two: Key Evaluation Findings.

Part Two: Key Evaluation Findings aims to provide the reader with an understanding of the learnings emerging from the program. Each of the sections in Part Two concludes with a discussion of the implications and issues arising from the findings.

The first section of Part Two outlines the characteristics and circumstances of young people and families using Reconnect. It highlights the increasing complexity of Reconnect cases and the implications of this complexity for Reconnect service delivery.

The second section of Part Two outlines the impact that Reconnect services have had on these young people and families. The third section examines the impact of Reconnect services on building community capacity for early intervention. Each of these sections draws largely on the two longitudinal studies undertaken for this evaluation. These studies have been released separately and interested readers are urged to look at these longer and more substantial documents.

The fourth and final section of Part Two examines the work of Reconnect services, discusses what has been learned from the way they provide assistance, and looks at some questions that remain unanswered. This section includes an examination of the way the program has been managed and the extent to which this has assisted the work of Reconnect services and, more broadly, early intervention to reduce youth homelessness.

Part Three: Future Directions takes the issues raised in Part Two and examines them in relation to the future of Reconnect. Part Three includes recommendations on practices that should be sustained to ensure successful outcomes and those practices or considerations that could help to strengthen the program in the future.

Context for Reconnect

Reconnect's beginnings: The Youth Homelessness Pilot Program (YHPP)

Reconnect was built upon the evaluation findings of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program (YHPP), established in 1996 as a response to perceptions that young people had access to inappropriate income support and that this was contributing to youth homelessness. A taskforce, made up of representatives from government and community organisations, was established by the Prime Minister to consider the issue.

The taskforce reviewed the extensive literature on youth homelessness available at the time, particularly the work of Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1996; 1998; 2002) and that of Crane and Brannock (1996). It accepted that since the 1970s, the transition from dependence on family or other support networks to independent life in the community had become increasingly difficult for many young people. Fewer employment opportunities for young people, a shortage of affordable housing, family poverty, changing patterns of family formation and family breakdown were the main factors identified as contributing to growing numbers of young people becoming homeless (*Putting Families in the Picture*, 1998: 8).

Most young people who become homeless do so in stages, starting with a tentative break (leaving the family home for at least one night without parental permission) and moving on to more permanent breaks, where the young person no longer sees themselves as part of a family unit (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002: 33).

Once young people become involved in the sub-culture of homelessness they begin to see it as a way of life. Previous inquiries and studies have found that these young people 'come to accept crime, substance abuse, drug dealing and prostitution as a normal part of everyday life' (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002: 33).

The YHPP aimed to develop a service model that could effectively intervene early or before a young person had left home, to prevent irreparable harm to relationships within the family. The program worked towards an outcome of 'family reconciliation', a term that places value on a young person maintaining ongoing positive family relationships whether living at home or away from home. The YHPP also aimed to strengthen young people's engagement with education, employment and their community to assist their chances of a successful transition to adulthood.

The resulting YHPP service delivery model included: a focus on working with young people and their families in a holistic way; working closely with schools and other 'first-to-know' agencies; and working collaboratively across the service system to increase early intervention.

The YHPP funded 26 pilot services, which provided assistance to 2,700 young people and 2,000 parents over a two year period. The YHPP evaluation found that family reconciliation was achieved for two thirds of all cases, as reported by both young people and parents. Close to one third of the young people who had left home prior to support returned home after intervention.

Youth homelessness as a continuing national issue

Youth homelessness remains a significant national issue. In 2001, a census of schools identified 26,000 homeless young people, a rate of 14 per 1000 young people.

Young people between 15 and 24 years of age are the largest client group of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). One in every 80 people in this age group became SAAP clients compared with one in 120 people aged 25 to 44 years. Of these young people, 60% are women; 40% are men. SAAP agencies targeting young people received 35 per cent of all SAAP funding to agencies in 2001–02.¹

While SAAP services assist people who are homeless, there are many homeless people who do not reach, or are turned away from, SAAP services. To help get a fuller appreciation of the extent of youth homelessness, two national censuses of homeless school students have been carried out — one in August 2001 and another in May 1994.

The 1994 census was conducted in secondary schools, using the cultural definition of homelessness: 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' homelessness. Primary

¹ SAAP is a joint Commonwealth-State program. The Commonwealth contributes \$840 million to the estimated total program funding of \$1.457 billion over the five years of the current agreement.

homelessness means literally without a shelter, while secondary homelessness includes people who are staying in temporary accommodation with no access to secure housing elsewhere. Tertiary homelessness refers to occupants of single rooms in boarding houses who live there on a long-term basis.

Homelessness is increasingly recognised as a 'process' rather than a single event. Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1998) have developed the idea of a 'homeless career' in which young people go through a number of stages before identifying as 'homeless'. Part of this process relates to the number of times a young person leaves home before making a final break.

The report of the census findings, *Youth Homelessness 2001* (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002) combined the school census data with data from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). The study found that there were 26,060 homeless young people in the census week, a rate of 14 per 1,000 young people. More than two thirds (69%) of schools reported some cases of homelessness in the census week. The bulk of these students (93%) were in the State schools system.

More young women than young men are reported as homeless (55% and 45% respectively), a gender difference also found in the first national census. When broken down geographically, the mean age for homeless young people ranged from 14.5 years in the Northern Territory to 16.4 years in the ACT. The mean ages for the other States, ranged from youngest to oldest, was 15.1 years (WA), 15.4 (Queensland), 15.7 (NSW), 15.9 (South Aust) 16.1 (Victoria), and 16.3 (Tasmania).

The study also found that there were three patterns in the spread of homelessness: lower rates were reported in NSW, Victoria and the ACT (10 to 12.5 per 1,000); higher rates in Queensland, SA, WA and Tasmania (17 to 21 per 1,000); and extremely high rates in the Northern Territory (69 homeless young people per 1,000). (Note: if homeless students living in remote communities are removed from the overall total, the Northern Territory has a rate similar to Queensland) (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2002).

The study examined whether there were patterns in homelessness that related to differential school effectiveness in different States— i.e. whether some school systems were more effective than others at keeping homeless young people in school. The study found that this was the case: in the ACT 58% of homeless young people were still in the education system while in Western Australia only 27% of homeless young people remained in education. The study results reinforced the view that schools are an important setting for effective early intervention aimed at preventing youth homelessness.

The results of the national census, combined with the SAAP figures on young people, indicate that youth homelessness is a critical issue for Australia. Australian and State and Territory Governments have initially responded with programs that offer crisis intervention for young people once they are homeless. Increasingly, however, there has been recognition of the need for strategies that intervene early—before young people become homeless. This recognition has led to a greater interest in the research relating to child and adolescent development.

Findings from child and adolescent development research

The focus on developing more positive outcomes for children and young people in Australia has been growing over the past two decades. This has been in response to increasing concerns about the interplay between socio-economic inequality and individual characteristics that lead to some young people having greater resilience and some being more 'at risk'. Youth homelessness in this context has been viewed as a risk factor leading to poorer outcomes as adults.

Research on child and adolescent development has led to a renewed focus on early intervention, particularly in early childhood. The links have been made between experiences in the first years of life and outcomes in later years: a number of studies demonstrate the importance of renewed social investment in the early years. The research indicates that human development is shaped by the ongoing interaction between risk factors and protective factors in each child's life. Where a child or young person is exposed to more risk, this leads to greater vulnerability; the more a child or young person experiences protective factors, the greater their eventual resilience in the face of difficult life events (Sanson, 2002).

This focus on the early years brings with it a tendency to put less resource into early intervention approaches in adolescence. However, the research indicates that while the timing of early experiences can matter, 'more often than not, the developing child remains vulnerable to risks and open to protective influences throughout the early years of life and into adulthood' (Sanson, 2002: 19).

This research leads to some important conclusions about effective early intervention approaches, namely: that adolescence should be regarded as an important transition where it is possible to identify those at risk of poor outcomes, and to take opportunities to build on protective factors already present in a young person's life. Early intervention is not confined to approaches that intervene early in life; it also includes those interventions that are made early in a pathway that may lead to an adverse outcome.

For this reason, early intervention strategies need to move beyond identifying risks to finding successful ways of promoting protective factors and resilience. While adverse life circumstances cannot be eliminated, young people's resilience can be increased to help deal with these circumstances and prevent further harm. Increased resilience can also assist recovery, to some extent, from the hurt already incurred. Unfortunately, less is known about intervention approaches that promote resilience in practice than is known about what factors seem linked to resilience conceptually (Newman, 2002: 9).

In summary, Newman's review of resilience principles has found that:

- risk factors are cumulative—the presence of one increases the likelihood that more will emerge;
- transition points in children's lives are both threats and opportunities;
- where the cumulative chain of adversities can be broken, most children are able to recover from even severe exposure to adversities in early life;
- managed exposure to risk is essential if children are to learn coping mechanisms

- key resilience promoting factors include: support from family; good educational experiences; opportunities to exert agency; and valued social roles;
- acute episodes of stress are less likely to have long term effects on children's development than are chronic adversities;
- high self esteem may often be a protective factor, but it is not necessarily an appropriate outcome of all interventions, and its absence is not the root of every child and adolescent problem; and
- the promotion of resilience involves trade-offs—the goal is effective adult adjustment, not eliminating the legacy of all childhood trauma.

(Source: Newman, 2002)

These conclusions from research are useful in understanding both the Reconnect program model and the results of the evaluation of the program as outlined in this report. In particular, the evaluation finding that many of the young people who use Reconnect have multiple risk factors needs to be understood in the context of this research on promoting resilience. Part Three of this report, *Future Directions*, picks up these broader research findings and offers some reflections on how they may assist the future development of the program.

Policy context for Reconnect

Welfare reform and structural ageing considerations provide a broader framework for many of the Australian Government's current efforts in the social policy area, including those targeted at young people. Structural ageing of Australian society highlights the need for governments to ensure that all young people are equipped to take their place in the social and economic growth of Australia. Welfare reform, with its focus on increasing economic participation and supporting social engagement while maintaining an effective social safety net, aims at building people's capacities to be more self-reliant.

Participation is seen as a critical aspect in developing stronger families, stronger communities and more resilient, self-reliant individuals. In the case of young people, participation prepares them for independence, sets them on a pathway to education and employment, or out of the welfare dependency dead-end, depending on their circumstances. The focus of current policy and programs is on early intervention and on helping young people who experience adverse life circumstance and who are reliant on income support, to take up work, further study and other activities that can improve their life chances and positive longer-term social and economic outcomes.

Equally important is targeted assistance for young people undergoing transitions from education to work and from home to independence. Such transitions are critical life events that can be smooth and right for young people, or that can be difficult and wrong. Maximising the chances of successful transitions leads to young people's engagement and self-reliance.

Problems affecting individuals at particular points in the life cycle can influence what happens to them, and their children, later in life. This is one of the reasons why FaCS has adopted the life-cycle policy approach. It is also the reason why early intervention strategies are so important.

Young people raised in families that rely on income support are more likely than other young people to leave school early, become unemployed, have children at a young age and become recipients of income support themselves. Around 850,000 Australian children live in 435,000 jobless families. It is considered that children and young people whose parents work, even in lower-paid jobs, have better outcomes and participation rates in education, training and employment.

Young people who leave school early or are disconnected from their communities do not engage well with community organisations, do not normally participate in alternative forms of education or training, and often experience unemployment and poor social and economic outcomes.

Vulnerable and at-risk young people who face particularly difficult circumstances, such as being a parent, being in foster care, having a mental or physical disability, being homeless or being Indigenous, have significantly reduced chances of making successful transitions to independent and self-reliant adult life. These young people are much more likely to become long-term recipients of welfare support, are more vulnerable to poor health outcomes and social problems—as are their children. Currently, the Australian Government spends an average of \$1.9 billion each year on income support payments to more than 200,000 vulnerable young people aged between 15 and 24.

Early intervention programs such as Reconnect, that support young people's engagement with their families, communities, education and training and that contribute to lower rates of homelessness, place young people in a better position to participate successfully in the labour market. They contribute to sustained positive outcomes for young people and benefit them, and the society, both economically and socially in the longer term.

Valuing young people and investing in their physical and mental health and general well-being, reducing risk-taking lifestyles, building young people's skills and resilience as well as strengthening the capacity of families and communities to support young Australians are important elements of the Government's current policy agenda, particularly important at times when family structures, work force patterns and the society in general are changing and when pathways for young people have become more complex. The policy objectives recognise the importance of investment in existing service networks for young people and the necessity to work in partnership with other levels of government, corporate sector and the community to provide appropriate support services and to achieve a reduction in long-term welfare and income-support dependency. The Reconnect program is part of a range of measures the Government has put in place to implement these objectives and to meet the broader welfare reform goals and needs of young people, their families and communities.

FaCS is cognisant of those needs and their changing nature in the continually evolving socio-economic and demographic parameters of the Australian society. Consequently, in the case of Reconnect, FaCS is determined to ensure that the program remains responsive and flexible whilst preserving its intent and integrity and continuing to deliver successful outcomes for young people and their families.

1.1 The Reconnect Program

This section of the report provides an overview of the Reconnect Program and its defining characteristics.

Program objectives

The Reconnect Program aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- family reconciliation, wherever practicable, between homeless young people or those at risk of homelessness, and their families; and
- engagement of young homeless people, or those at risk of homelessness, with employment, education, training and community.

Program establishment and spread

There are now 98 operational Reconnect services. At the end of the pilot period, in December 1999, round one of Reconnect funded 29 services. This initial group was made up of the majority of the original YHPP services. Since this initial phase, there have been two additional funding rounds: 44 services became operational progressively from July 2000 and a further 25 progressively from July 2001.

Reconnect services were established following needs assessment of local factors including: the population of young people in the target age range (12 to 18); the degree of socio-economic disadvantage; and concentrations of young people from particularly vulnerable population groups, namely Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. In each chosen locality, a suitable auspice organisation was chosen by tender to manage the Reconnect service. In some cases, particularly in the case of Reconnect services targeting Indigenous communities, the search for a suitable auspice involved a lengthy consultation process with the community before a funding decision was made.

Reconnect services are auspiced by a wide range of community organisations and typically employ two or three full-time staff with part-time administrative support. Of the existing Reconnect services:

- 14 target Indigenous young people;
- 2 target culturally and linguistically diverse communities;
- 9 are located in remote areas;
- 53 are located in metropolitan areas; and
- 36 are located in rural/regional areas.

Program design

The Reconnect service delivery model has a number of features that differentiate it from more traditional approaches to services for young people. It:

- is focused on young people *and* their families;
- includes an emphasis on flexible delivery approaches;

- allows services to work both at an individual level and at a broader community level; and
- provides capacity to use ‘brokerage funds’—funds to be used flexibly to assist clients through paying for access to other services and/or to provide creative solutions to problems facing young people and their family.

The Reconnect service model is based on seven Good Practice Principles, namely:

- **Accessibility of service**—providing services that respond quickly, in places where people are able to access them, in a manner that invites participation. There are a number of ways in which Reconnect operates differently to other service models in relation to access. First, Reconnect attempts to make contact with the young person or parent within 24 to 48 hours of referral, as the YHPP found this to be a highly effective time for intervention. This period is the window of opportunity when the young person and/or family is most open to accepting help. Second, Reconnect services are prepared to offer services in the family home, school and other settings that assist in building a sense of safety with clients. The willingness to provide outreach services in this way contrasts with traditional approaches where clients must attend appointments at the service providers’ offices.
- **Client-driven service delivery**—flexible service delivery that adapts to the particular needs and circumstances of both young people and parents, and that provides practical support, a range of intervention approaches, and links to other services and supports. Reconnect service providers first engage with a young person and their family, work with them to identify their key issues and then select from a ‘tool box’ of intervention approaches in order to best meet their needs. Reconnect service providers offer practical support to address immediate needs (such as obtaining legal help, or securing accommodation and income support), provide counselling and/or mediation, run group programs and provide opportunities for young people to learn new skills. Other services for young people typically offer a single intervention approach only.
- **Holistic approaches to service delivery**—on the understanding that young people’s personal and family problems are not isolated from other aspects of their lives, Reconnect considers the broader contexts of education, employment, health and community involvement as part of service delivery. The holistic approach to assessing needs has meant that Reconnect service providers have been able to engage young people and their families more effectively than many other service models.
- **Working collaboratively**—working with other key agencies to develop effective ways to improve early intervention approaches that can support young people and their families. Reconnect recognises that if effective support is to be provided, good linkages with other service providers are critical. Working collaboratively with other agencies goes beyond having good individual relationships with other service providers. Reconnect service providers work with other agencies to identify and address issues facing young people and families across communities so that the likelihood of young people leaving home early can be reduced.

- **Culturally and contextually appropriate service delivery**—being sensitive to cultural and contextual differences in service provision. Reconnect services have had to find ways of engaging with a wide range of young people and their families. At base, Reconnect service providers work to value and respect young people within their cultural context. This has resulted in the employment of staff from diverse backgrounds so that service providers can more easily engage with the full range of Reconnect clients.
- **Ongoing review and evaluation**—integrating evaluation and review into service development so that young people and families can benefit from effective practices. A key feature of Reconnect has been its use of action research as a tool for reviewing service delivery at the local level. Action research is an evaluation framework that assists service providers to examine their work systematically with the help of those involved in the program, and to investigate ways in which it can be improved. Action research is supported at the national program level through the provision of training and the inclusion of action research as a requirement within the reporting framework.
- **Building sustainability**—ensuring continuity of support for individuals and families, and working in ways that empower people and communities to sustain their own change processes. The Reconnect service delivery model has recognised the need to work beyond an individual level within a framework that helps to develop communities. Reconnect services also help young people and families to become involved in community-based projects which improve social connectedness and address issues that underpin disadvantage.

These Good Practice Principles were developed in the original pilot program and were further tested within the Reconnect program via the Good Practice Forums, which brought together representatives of all operational Reconnect services in December 2001. The Good Practice Principles are consistent with other research findings into successful intervention approaches to assist positive child and adolescent development. These findings have emphasised: strengths-based learning approaches; intervention strategies that recognise the broader context of the child and, therefore, offer a spectrum of intervention approaches; the need to provide flexible access to services; the need to involve parents; and approaches that develop stronger family relationships (Vimpani, 2003).

The Principles are used as a framework to ensure that any agency auspicing a Reconnect service understands the underlying model for service delivery. Two reports on good practice have emerged, based on the Principles (one prepared during the YHPP, the other in connection with Reconnect)². These reports spell out in greater detail the range of delivery practices that are used to implement the general Principles.

Reconnect services use the Principles as an induction tool for new staff and as a method of explaining the early intervention model to other agencies. Service providers report to the Department on their work in relation to each Principle. The Principles are also used

² The reports on good practice were developed as part of the documentation of the national forums of YHPP (1998) and then Reconnect services (2002) respectively. The YHPP report was provided to all Reconnect services on establishment; RPR Consulting, *Reconnect Good Practice Forums: Final Report* (2002) is available on the Family and Community Services website.

by independent assessors as one of the components for assessing the performance of Reconnect services.

Program management

Reconnect is managed through the state and territory offices and the national section of Youth Bureau of FaCS. At the national level, program management focuses on the development of and reporting on the overall program; at the state level, individual Reconnect services are monitored.

The national Reconnect Program is supported through a range of initiatives, including:

- resourcing individual Reconnect services to undertake action research. Resources have included an action research kit, training courses and a support website (ReconnectAR);
- development and implementation of the Reconnect Evaluation Strategy. This has included funding of the longitudinal client and community study and two smaller case studies;
- articulation and documentation of good practice emerging from the implementation of the program. National forums were held in 2001, bringing together all Reconnect service providers to share and identify good practice; and
- collection of data from and assessment of performance of individual Reconnect services. Each Reconnect service provides data on the young people using the program. In addition, each fully operational Reconnect service is independently assessed in the final year of its funding period against a range of performance criteria.

1.2 Reconnect Evaluation Sources

The Department of Family and Community Services established an Evaluation Steering Committee in 1999 to develop an overall evaluation methodology for Reconnect, so that at the end of the three-year establishment period, a clear assessment could be made of the program's effectiveness in:

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

The Reconnect Evaluation Committee comprised representatives from related program areas within FaCS, an academic with expertise in youth homelessness, and a Reconnect service-provider representative. The committee developed a detailed evaluation strategy that included identifying key evaluation questions and commissioning specific research initiatives to gather data.

Key evaluation questions related to:

- program outcomes for young people (the effectiveness and sustainability of outcomes for young people in relation to family reconciliation, living situations, and engagement with education, employment and community);
- program outcomes in relation to broader community capacity for early intervention (the extent to which the program has contributed to improving community capacity for early intervention regarding youth homelessness);
- participation by Indigenous communities (the extent to which the program has encouraged participation);
- program processes and strategies (the means by which the program achieves its outcomes, the utilisation of a range of strategies to address specific issues and gaps, and relationships with other services providers); and
- program management and development (the extent to which FaCS managed the program through a partnership approach with communities and with State and Territory Governments; the extent to which FaCS has assisted the spread of innovative practice).

Sources of data

This report relies on data from a number of sources:

- two longitudinal studies of Reconnect outcomes—a client study, *The Statistical Report on the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients* (RPR Consulting, 2003) and a study on Reconnect's impact on building community capacity, *Report of the Reconnect Longitudinal Study: Building Community Capacity for Early Intervention* (RPR Consulting, 2003). The latter is referred to in this

report as the Longitudinal Community Study. These studies have provided key data for this evaluation report and are described in greater detail below;

- administrative data on each client (young person) and service provided, supplied to the Department by Reconnect services. The Reconnect Administrative Data (RAD) is a principal source of data for this evaluation report and is also described in greater detail below;
- a report on Good Practice Forums held in December 2001, *Reconnect Good Practice Forums: Final Report* (RPR Consulting, 2002). This details the good practice identified by services as leading to positive outcomes in relation to: working with young people and their families; working with specific client groups; and capacity building. It also outlines challenges faced by services and by the program as a whole, and has been used in this evaluation report as a source of data on program issues and delivery practices;
- reports of the performance assessments of 65 Reconnect services established in the first and second funding rounds (between 1999 and 2001), *Independent Assessment of Round 1 Reconnect Services* (ARTD, 2002) and *Independent Assessment of Round 2 Reconnect Services* (ARTD, 2003). These reports summarise the findings from the individual service assessments conducted as part of program management. The assessments involved analysis of: self-evaluation reports from individual agencies; interviews with State and Territory FaCS staff; interviews with Reconnect staff and staff of other stakeholder services. They assessed the effectiveness of Reconnect's work in relation to: management practices; improved coordination of services; family-focussed early-intervention strategies; working with Centrelink; and action research. The information from these summary assessment reports has been used primarily to inform sections of this report relating to program management and service delivery practices;
- individual Reconnect services' reports on the findings emerging from action research undertaken at the local level. In all, 52 services reported on their action research findings; and
- findings of two smaller studies on Reconnect services, which examined six Reconnect services' roles in local service networks. The first study, *Youth Homelessness: Case Studies of the Reconnect Program* (Evans and Shaver, 2001), looked at four Reconnect services' approaches to working collaboratively, especially in their involvement with their local service networks, and is available on the FaCS Web site. The second, unpublished study, *Investigation of the Impact and Effectiveness of Reconnect in Port Adelaide-Enfield and Southern Metropolitan Adelaide* (Barnett, 2001), also examined service delivery practices and network involvement. These studies were used to inform the Longitudinal Community Study design and have been used in this report as a source of data in relation to community capacity building.

These sources of data for the evaluation are considerable and provide a detailed picture of Reconnect services at work.

For the purposes of this report, the two longitudinal studies and the Reconnect Administrative Data (RAD) have been used to identify the profile of Reconnect clients

and assess the outcomes of Reconnect services. The Good Practice Report, the results of action research, the two studies of Reconnect service network involvement and the Independent Assessment Reports have been used to inform the sections of this report discussing the Reconnect model and the approach used to support the program's national infrastructure.

1.2.1 The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients

1.2.1.1 Survey design

Reconnect clients selected for the survey were interviewed at two points in time, approximately ten months apart. Wave One of the survey commenced in November 2001 and Wave Two was administered in October 2002.

The longitudinal survey was designed with four aims:

- to allow an analysis of the effect of Reconnect services on the lives of young people and parents (by asking new clients about their lives and experiences at two points in time—in the early stages of support and at the conclusion of support—to determine the effect of Reconnect on their lives);
- to examine the long-term benefits of Reconnect services (by surveying clients who were exiting Reconnect at the time of Wave One, asking them similar questions to those asked of entering clients, and resurveying both groups some ten months later—Wave Two of the survey is used to assess the extent to which positive outcomes of receiving Reconnect services are sustained);
- to allow an initial analysis of the benefits of Reconnect services. This analysis was conducted after Wave One of data collection, and compared responses of entering and exiting clients. Although it is impossible to determine whether differences between these groups are due specifically to Reconnect intervention, this data does provide an indication of the probable effects of receiving Reconnect services³; and
- to provide a detailed picture of the circumstances of young people and families assisted by Reconnect. The RAD collects detailed information about young people but not their parents. By surveying both young people and adults, the evaluation survey provided an opportunity to learn more about the broader circumstances of Reconnect clients.

For reasons of client confidentiality, Reconnect services were asked to administer the survey on behalf of RPR Consulting (the consultants contracted to undertake both longitudinal studies). Although it was primarily a mail survey, there was provision for clients of limited literacy or with difficulty in reading English to be surveyed by telephone. Each Reconnect service was provided with a quota of cases to survey and was asked to approach:

- new clients (both young people and their parents) entering the service in October and November 2001; and

³ It was not possible to incorporate a control group in the evaluation survey design as the consultants were engaged well after the Reconnect Program had been developed. Therefore, entering clients (who had had little contact with Reconnect services at the time of the first survey) were used as a quasi control group.

- clients (both young people and their parents) exiting the service in September and October 2001.

The surveys used self-reported assessments of the impact of Reconnect services, as well as validated scales (identified through a comprehensive literature search) to identify appropriate, tested measures of levels of engagement. The measures selected were appropriate across the dimensions of Reconnect's early-intervention work.

Measuring Case Complexity

In addition, a scale was developed to enable each case to be rated in terms of the complexity of issues dealt with. Case complexity ratings for exiting clients were collected during Wave One, whilst those for entering clients were collected during the survey's second wave.

The case complexity scale was piloted by ten Reconnect services, who provided feedback based on their own assessments of what made a case complex. While some caseworkers pointed out that cases which only had a few factors could sometimes require more intensive assistance than some with a large number of factors, there was broad agreement that a high number of factors generally indicated a highly complex case.

The longitudinal survey sought information about the range of complex circumstances facing young people and their families in two ways:

- young people and parents responding to the survey were asked questions about whether their family's problems were affected by: insufficient money; violence; drug and alcohol issues; legal problems; illness or disability; and/or mental health issues; and
- caseworkers were asked to record, for each case at completion, whether any of a list of 44 case complexity factors had *significantly impacted on the management* of the case. The factors were grouped under key headings: conflict with authorities; physical or emotional violence; sexual abuse; mental illness; substance abuse; disability; child protection; poverty; homelessness or living situation; living skills; and identity conflict. Within each grouping, caseworkers noted whether the presence of a factor within the family had significantly impacted on case management. For instance, under the mental health grouping, the problem could be classed as: a diagnosed mental illness that is being managed well; a diagnosed mental illness that is not being managed well; a suspected mental illness that is not diagnosed; or a present risk of suicide.

The data on case complexity was used to test consistency between caseworkers', young peoples' and parents' perceptions of issues affecting families. It was also used to identify low, medium and high levels of case complexity (with approximately one third of cases in each category).⁴

⁴ Caseworkers rated all cases sampled for the survey, thus allowing a comparison between survey respondents and non-respondents. Analysis of case complexity in both groups found only two differences: survey respondents were slightly less likely than non-respondents to have been suspected of family violence; and respondents were slightly less likely than non-respondents to have experienced school expulsion. (Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients 2003: 28).

1.2.1.2 Survey Response

According to information provided by Reconnect services to FaCS, 1,001 cases were ultimately selected to participate. Of these, 516 were new clients and 485 were clients whose support period had ended. A case could consist of a young person only, adult(s) only (in most cases, parents), or both a young person and adult(s).

In *Wave One*, responses were received for 455 cases, making an overall case response rate of 45.5%. Of the total case responses, 198 comprised questionnaires from both adult and young person, 143 comprised a young person's response only, and 114 comprised only one or more adult responses. Thus, 341 young person questionnaires and 353 adult questionnaires were available for analysis. The response rate for exiting cases (46.0%) was slightly higher than for entering cases (45.0%).

In the *second survey wave*, responses were received for 260 cases, which represented a Wave Two response rate of 57.1%. Of the total case responses received in Wave Two, 80 comprised questionnaires from both adult and young person, 89 comprised a young person's response only, and 91 comprised only one or more adult responses. Thus, 169 young person questionnaires and 186 adult questionnaires were available for analysis. The response rate for entering cases (59.1%) was higher than for exiting cases (55.2%).

1.2.1.3 Sample representativeness

To assess the extent to which survey respondents were representative of the Reconnect client population, characteristics of survey respondents were compared with matching distributions for three separate client groups: the original sample, as selected by Reconnect services; all Reconnect clients whose details were recorded in the new RAD (as at the extraction date of 26 June 2002)⁵; and Reconnect clients recorded in the new database who had support periods of at least 20 days (as at the extraction date of 26 June 2002).

There were no significant differences between young people who responded to the survey, and those who were asked to participate. In general, survey respondents are also closely representative of all Reconnect clients, with the exceptions outlined below.

The most notable difference between the Reconnect client population and sample respondents is related to the length of support provided by Reconnect. Sampled clients and survey respondents are about three times as likely to have had support periods of 6 months or more. It is possible that this difference is produced by the difficulty in comparing data from two Reconnect databases over time, rather than an actual difference in the populations. When a comparison is made of all Reconnect clients who either entered the program during October and November 2001 or left the program over the same two months, then the proportion of cases receiving support for six months or more is virtually identical (24.4% among all Reconnect clients and 24.7% among survey respondents).

Proportionally, more Indigenous clients exist in the Reconnect population than are represented in the survey. Indigenous clients made up 14% of the Reconnect client population at the time of the data extract but just 6% of the selected sample and 7% of

⁵ The new database became operational on 1 July 2001. All Reconnect client forms received by FaCS after this date are entered into the new client database.

survey respondents. The RAD shows that, as of May 2003, Indigenous clients represent 11% of Reconnect clients. One possible explanation for this discrepancy (as identified through the Good Practice Forums and through the consultants' phone contact with Reconnect services) is many Indigenous clients are supported for lengthy periods because of the complexity of their cases.. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the RAD which shows that 42% of Indigenous cases were still active as at May 2003, compared with just 28% of non-Indigenous cases. It is therefore likely that agencies were not able to identify many Indigenous exiting cases during the survey period.

1.2.1.4 How the data was analysed

The primary aim of Reconnect is to reduce homelessness by increasing the level of engagement of 'at-risk' young people with family, community and employment and education. In analysing levels of engagement, a number of psychometric scales of connectedness were used. In the absence of a suitable control group, these scales, along with other indicators of connectedness, were examined separately for entering and exiting clients to assess differences which could have been due to the receipt of Reconnect services—the rationale being that entering clients in the first survey wave had had little contact with Reconnect services and, as a result, formed a quasi-control group. In addition, the longitudinal nature of the survey enabled change in these measures to be compared so that some assessment of the sustainability of client outcomes from receiving Reconnect services could be made.

Unless otherwise specified, all analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients in this report is based on responses to Wave One, as it provided more cases for analysis (341 young people and 312 parents) than Wave Two. Assessments of change over time in levels of engagement, however, are made using data from Wave Two, which yielded 169 young person replies (of which 57.4% were originally entering clients) and 171 adult responses (of which 53.2% were originally entering clients).

1.2.2 The Longitudinal Community Study

The Longitudinal Community Study sought to evaluate Reconnect services' impact on building community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness. Twelve services were selected for the study, representing 17% of the 69 Reconnect services operating at the time the study began. The selected services:

- had been established through different funding rounds, resulting in services that had been established for longer and shorter periods (seven from the first round of funding, five from the second);
- were located in different areas (two remote, three urban, five urban with semi-rural areas, two rural); and
- had different target groups (five mainstream targets, three with Indigenous primary or secondary targets, two CALD targets and one Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) young people target).

All services selected for the study agreed to participate.

1.2.2.1 Conduct of the study

The study visited the 12 sampled services at two points of time—November-December 2001 and October-November 2002. In addition to in-depth interviews prior to the site

visits, Reconnect staff members were interviewed by phone three times over the course of the study.

The two-day site visits allowed the researchers to conduct the following:

- in-depth, primarily face-to-face interviews with service providers that work closely with Reconnect services, such as school counsellors, Centrelink staff, staff of mental health services, youth workers, migrant service workers, workers within SAAP services). Seventy-three providers were interviewed in the first round of the study, 71 in the second round. Slightly more than two-thirds of those interviewed participated in both rounds;
- meetings with groups of service providers drawn from networks with which Reconnect services were involved. Service networks varied depending on the geographic area but generally included: a youth network (such as youth centres, schools, adolescent health services, juvenile justice services); family service networks (such as family support services, State and Territory welfare agencies); and service networks focused on specific population groups (such as culturally and linguistically diverse groups and Indigenous people). Eighty-two people participated in these meetings in the first round; the second round involved more targeted meetings with specific groups of service providers and included 28 participants; and
- focus groups with young people and parents. Fifty-seven young people and 46 parents participated in the first round; 10 young people and 16 parents in the second round.

The interviews, meetings and focus groups sought to develop an understanding of:

- the communities in which Reconnect services were located by examining the communities' history and culture, the key issues contributing to youth homelessness in each local area, and the extent of collaboration in the service network;
- the way Reconnect services worked within their communities and how they were perceived; and
- how early intervention in youth homelessness was understood and in what ways it could be strengthened.

1.2.3 The Reconnect Administrative Data

The Reconnect Administrative Data (RAD) is collected by Reconnect services for each young person who is a client. The data collection includes, before and after assistance from Reconnect, information on the young person's age, ethnicity, living situation, income, education and labour force status, and on the main reasons for seeking assistance. In addition it records whether the young person or a parent/guardian initiated assistance and, on exit from the service, collects information on young peoples' and parents' views of outcomes of the assistance provided by the Reconnect service.

The data has a number of limitations. In particular, it does not include information on parents' circumstances, making it difficult to assess the success of some targeting of Reconnect services' work (for instance the extent to which Reconnect services are

providing assistance to CALD families). These limitations are discussed further in Section 3.2.

An interim form of the RAD operated from the program's inception until 30 June 2001. Since then, a new RAD has operated. While the two RADs are substantially the same, small differences in the definitions and questions mean that the two databases were not easily integrated. A report on the data from the original RAD was published in December 2001. There has been no formal report on data collected since 2001.

This evaluation report has relied upon three sources of information using the RAD:

- the Reconnect Data Report published by FaCS in December 2001, referred to in this report as RAD 2001;
- the analysis undertaken by RPR Consulting of the new RAD covering the period 1 July 2001 to 20 May 2003, using unpublished data supplied by the Department, referred to in this report as RAD 2003; and
- Reconnect Outcome Reports prepared internally by FaCS, analysing the changes in young people's situations overall, their level of engagement with family, education, training, employment and community. This data covers the period 1 July 2001 to 31 December 2002, and is referred to in this report as RAD Outcome Reports.

Part Two: Key Evaluation Findings

2.1 Young people and families using Reconnect services

2.1.1 Use of Reconnect Services

As at 30 June 2003, Reconnect services had provided individual assistance to approximately 16,000 young people and their families since the program's inception in December 1999.⁶ In addition, approximately 10,000 young people and parents had been provided with group-based interventions including:

- education programs (such as parenting programs, anger management, mediation training) and recreation programs (such as adventure based programs, music programs);
- cultural identity programs (such as 'back to country' programs for Indigenous young people);
- support programs (such as parent support groups and support groups for same-sex-attracted young people); and
- therapy programs (such as therapy based programs for violence, drug use).

Reconnect assisted 8,029 young people and their families between July 2001 and May 2003. 38% of these cases were still current in May 2003. Of the closed cases, 40% were assisted for less than two months and 31% for between two and four months. For 15% of closed cases, support lasted between four and six months. Approximately 15% were assisted for more than six months.

Reconnect services provide a family-focussed approach. Initial requests for assistance were made by young people in 44% of cases, by parents in 32% of cases and by both the young person and parents in 18% of cases. In more than half the cases (54%), both the young person and family were supported; 34% involved support of the young person only and in 8% of cases parents alone were supported.

2.1.2 Profile of young people using Reconnect

The young people seen by Reconnect services are most commonly:

- aged 14 to 17 years (75%);
- female (61%);
- Australian born (93%);
- non-Indigenous (89%);
- educated to Year 10 or less (79%);

⁶ A temporary RAD operated from December 1999 to June 30 2001, when a new RAD was established. The figure is an approximation due to overlap in counting between the two databases. From December 1999 until 17 September 2001, Reconnect services had 6,021 clients commence support. From 1 July 2001 until 28 February 2003, 8,281 clients commenced support. The period 1 July 2001 to 17 September 2001 has therefore been double-counted in this figure.

- in full-time education (66%);
- living with parents (57.5%); and
- referred by schools (22%) or families (20%).

2.1.2.1 Changes over time to this profile

Support patterns

There has been a gradual change in the duration of support provided to Reconnect clients, with a decrease of 3 percentage points in the number of clients being seen for less than one month and a corresponding increase of 4% in the number of clients being seen for longer periods. There has also been a gradual increase in the number of young people returning for support to Reconnect (from 5% in 2001 to 12% in 2003). This large increase may reflect the increasing number of complex cases which the typically short interventions of Reconnect services have been unable to resolve. It may also simply reflect the growth and current longevity of the program, as the opportunity for repeat use of Reconnect services was limited before 2001, when the program had been in operation for only a year.

Greater proportion of girls

The fact that more girls than boys are assisted by Reconnect is in line with Chamberlain and Mackenzie (2002) who found that 55% of homeless young people were girls. In Reconnect, there has not been a significant change in the over-representation of girls since the YHPP. Interestingly, the gender imbalance of Reconnect clients is not consistent across age groups. There are almost equal proportions of boys and girls aged 12-13, while the highest imbalance occurs in the 14 to 17 age group (63% girls) before dropping again to 54% girls among those aged 18 years and over.⁷ The reason for a higher proportion of girls seeking assistance in Reconnect and in homeless services more generally is not yet understood sufficiently well and requires further investigation.

Increase in Indigenous clients

There has been an increase in the number of Indigenous clients since 2001. Until 2001, Indigenous clients constituted 7% of Reconnect clients, a figure which climbed over the next two years to 11%. This increase corresponds with the introduction of new Reconnect services that target Indigenous communities. The *Independent Performance Assessment of Round 2 Reconnect Services* found that 18% of Round 2 service clients were Indigenous, but that four Indigenous services accounted for half of all Indigenous clients (9.7% of the total clients).⁸

Over time, Reconnect services are seeing young people at a later stage in risk of homelessness

The RAD to June 2001 indicated that 33.5% of young people living at home at the start of support had left home at least once previously. By February 2003, 50% of young people living at home at the start of support had left home at least once previously.⁹

⁷ RAD 2003: sex by age.

⁸ ARTD 2003: 15

⁹ There is an apparent discrepancy between figures provided in the RAD 2001 report and those attributed to the study here. The RAD 2001 report noted that 75% of young people lived with families, a figure that included parents and a

Patterns of referral and other client characteristics did not significantly change in this period, although there does appear to be a trend towards more complex clients and longer support periods.

2.1.3 Profile of parents using Reconnect

The typical parent using a Reconnect service cannot be identified from the RAD, as no information is collected about parent characteristics. The RAD data shows that only 22% of young people were living with both parents, while 29% were living with their mothers and 7% were living with fathers.¹⁰

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients did collect information about characteristics of parents who responded to the survey.

Parents responding to the survey were most commonly:

- women (74%);
- married or living with a partner (58%). Male parents (63%) were more likely than female parents (45%) to be living with a partner;
- educated to Year 10 or less (51%);
- in employment in the week prior to the survey (57%); and
- living in relatively stable situations. In the previous year, only 16% had made one move, 3% had moved two or three times and 1% five or more times.

The profile of survey respondents appears to be different from the general Australian population in two ways:

- Educational qualifications of Year 10 or less were more common among Reconnect survey respondents than among the general population (51% versus 44%); and
- Reconnect survey respondents were less likely to be employed than were adults in the general population in a similar age range (57% compared to an estimated 71%)¹¹.

2.1.4 The complexity of Reconnect cases

The original pilot program and Reconnect were designed to provide intervention early enough in a family's situation to reduce the number of young people leaving home early. The experience of the pilot program demonstrated that for many young people and their families, only short-term interventions were needed to reduce the risk of homelessness significantly. Based on this experience, the Reconnect program was

number of other categories not easily comparable to the 2003 figures. To ensure consistency between the data sets, the 2001 data was reanalysed to ensure the figures compared only young people living with parents at the start of support.

¹⁰ RAD 2003: Living situation before support

¹¹ The 2001 Census of Population and Housing found that 75.2% of adults aged 24-54 (the age range most likely to accurately capture parents of Reconnect clients) were employed. As the Reconnect survey is skewed towards female respondents, and females have a lower workforce participation rate, an Australian employment rate standardised to a similar sex distribution is estimated to be 71%. Census of Population and Housing: Selected Education and Labour Force Characteristics, Australia, (2001) (ABS Cat. No 2017.0), Table B25.

established with an assumption that only a small proportion of young people would require longer and more intensive interventions.

Reconnect as a national program is likely to see young people and families who are enduring considerable stress. The pilot program, like Reconnect, placed services in areas of high social and economic disadvantage, based on an analysis of need. The later rounds of Reconnect funding were particularly targeted to areas with high levels of Indigenous young people and to rural areas.

Current research confirms that risk factors are interconnected and will be intensified when a ‘child lives in an environment where poverty, racism and low social capital are endemic’ (Newman, 2002: 12). A key question for the evaluation and the design of the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients was the extent to which the complexity of young people’s circumstances impacted on the capacity of Reconnect services to achieve positive outcomes as a result of their intervention.

Examining case complexity also provides some insight into intervention strategies—where young people’s circumstances are very complex it may be too late for ‘early’ intervention or for short-term assistance. However, the broader research on promoting resilience amongst young people in complex life circumstances indicates that interventions using appropriate strategies can assist young people to gain coping skills and build on their strengths. For this reason the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients was designed to measure case complexity and to assess client outcomes in relation to complexity scores.¹²

The data on case complexity was also used to test consistency between caseworkers’, young peoples’ and parents’ perceptions of issues affecting families. The study found that there was considerable consistency in self-reported problems by young people and families, and caseworkers’ assessments of factors within these matched cases.

2.1.4.1 Low, medium and high complexity cases

For ease of analysis, cases were grouped into:

- **low complexity** (fewer than 4 factors present, 34.8% of cases). Cases rated as low complexity typically involved: conflict related to the growing independence of the young person and parenting styles; family breakdown as parents were separated or divorced; drug use by the young person and/or growing disengagement from school;
- **medium complexity** (4 to 6 factors present, 30.3% of cases). Cases rated as medium complexity typically involved, in addition to the factors outlined in low complexity cases, factors such as: financial pressures within the family; the young person being excluded from home; and violence within the family; and

¹² Young people and parents were asked to report on whether their families problems were affected by: not enough money; violence, drug and alcohol issues; legal problems; mental health problems; illness or disability. Caseworkers rated each case on completion against a list of 44 possible case complexity factors only where, in their opinion, the factor had significantly impacted on the management of the case. The factors were grouped under key headings including: conflict with authorities; physical or emotional violence; sexual abuse; mental illness; substance abuse; disability; child protection; poverty; homelessness or living situation; living skills and identity conflict. The maximum score each case could rate was 24, as some factors were mutually exclusive.

- **high complexity** (more than 7 factors present, 34.9% of cases). Cases rated as high complexity typically involve greater intervention from other service systems such as the justice system, child protection or alternative care, mental health and disability services. Young people from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds were significantly more likely to have a high complexity rating.

The complexity groupings were used to analyse outcome findings in the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients. To provide the reader with a greater sense of the young people and families falling into these groupings, the evaluation has included some short case studies from a sample of Reconnect services. These case studies, which use fictitious names, can be found later in the Section.

2.1.4.2 Case complexity findings

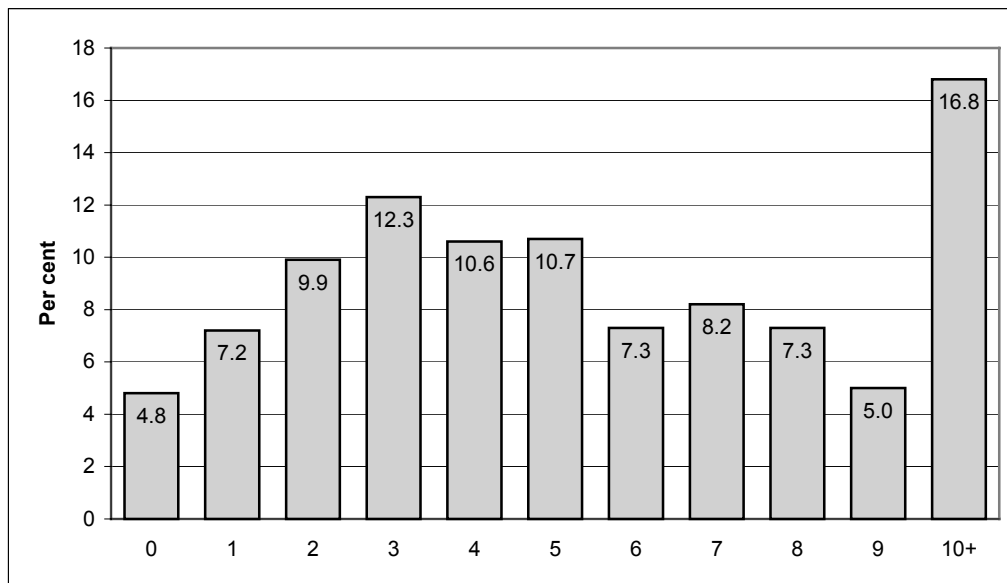
Figures 1 and 2 provide a picture of the spread of factors across cases, and the factors that were highest across all cases. *Statistical Report on the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients* (RPR, 2003) gives greater detail on each grouping.

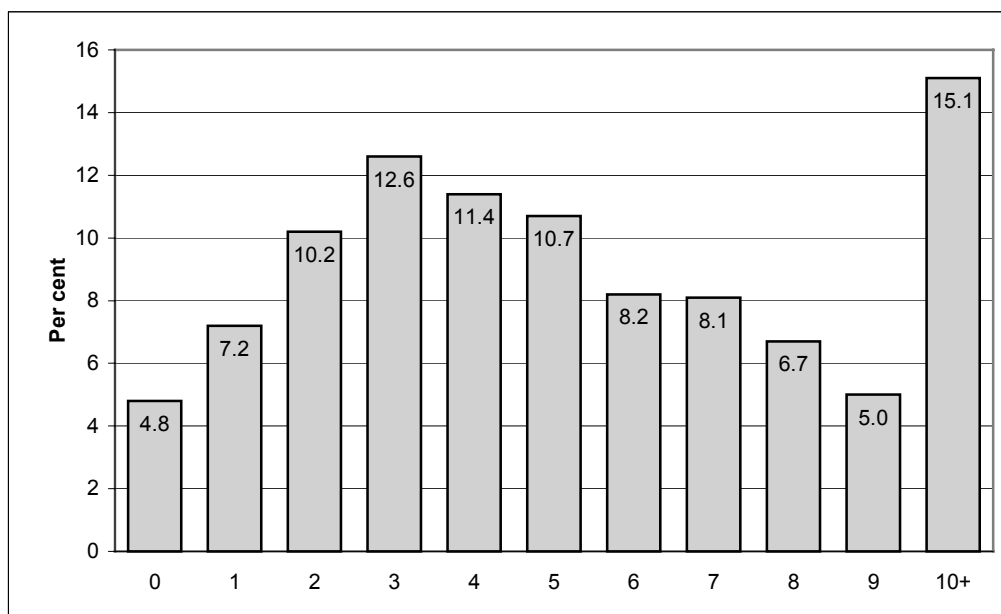
As shown in the figure below, Reconnect cases are skewed towards higher complexity.

In only 5% of the study's cases were no complexity factors assessed as being present.

Cases could score a maximum of 24 on the case complexity scale. The average number of factors affecting client's lives was six; more than half of all cases had five or more factors assessed; and 15% had more than 10.

Figure 1: Number of factors affecting management of case

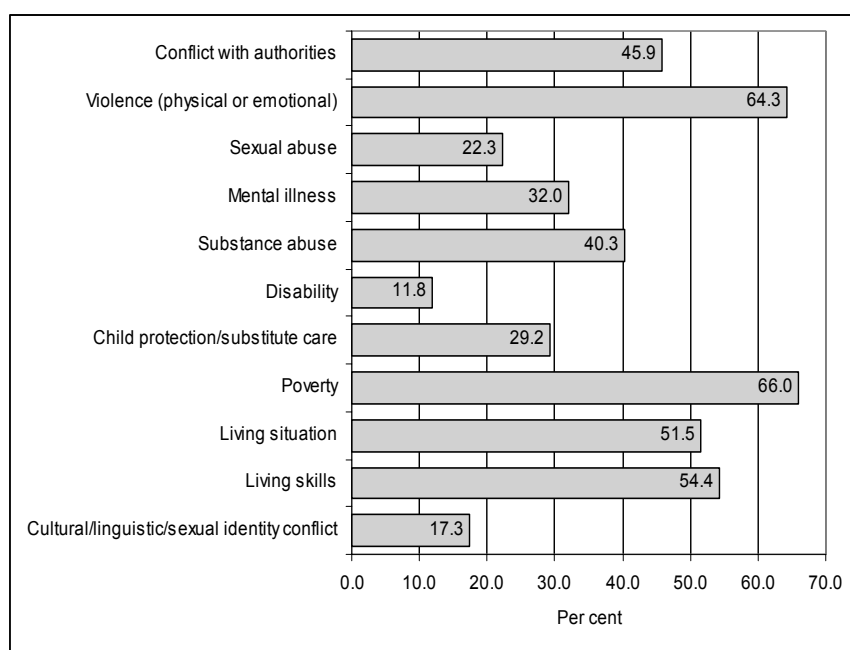




Case complexity was rated on completion of support for all clients, regardless of whether they participated in the survey or not. This practice allowed a valid comparison to be made between participating/non-participating and entering/exiting clients. This analysis confirmed high levels of case complexity amongst both exiting and entering clients (although there was a slightly higher incidence of higher complexity levels in exiting clients).

As can be seen in Figure 2 below, some factors such as poverty and violence had a high prevalence among cases seen by Reconnect ¹³.

Figure 2: Broad categories of case complexity issues



¹³ All data for these key findings has been taken from the Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients (2003: 17-29).

Poverty, the most common issue

Two thirds of cases (66%) were significantly impacted by poverty. In more than one third of cases (37%), families were solely reliant on social security payments. In 16% of cases (most likely to be young people alone) there was no income at all, while in 11% of cases families were reliant solely on part-time/casual employment and social security. These figures are not surprising given the low level of employment found amongst parents in the study. Approximately 11% of families had sought emergency financial assistance in the previous six months. Young people identified 'not enough money' as a contributing family problem in 57% of cases and parents identified this issue in 64% of cases.

A high incidence of violence

Almost two thirds (64%) of cases had been and/or were still significantly affected by physical or emotional violence. Of particular concern was the number of cases in which violence was acknowledged by clients (16%) or suspected by caseworkers (an additional 10%) to be a current issue. These figures were supported by clients' own assessments of current problems in their families—29% of young people and 25% of parents cited family violence as a problem.

Substance Abuse

Caseworkers estimated that in 40% of cases, substance abuse had significant impact: 19% of cases were rated as having a family member who used illicit drugs to a level that impaired everyday functioning; in 12% of cases alcohol consumption was judged to be at a level that impaired everyday functioning; and in 16% of cases substance abuse was suspected. Again, these findings are consistent with clients' own estimations: 33% of young people and 33% of parents considered that substance abuse issues contributed to family problems.

School suspension and expulsion

Almost one third (32% of cases) of young people had been suspended from school and in 9% of cases young people had been expelled from one or more schools. Within the cases identified as having high complexity, the figure for expulsion was 20%. The expulsion rate appears to be very high. Unfortunately, it is not possible to get accurate figures at a National or State level on expulsion rates from schools as the data is not publicly available or is not comparable across systems. However, the data available for Victorian schools in 2001 indicates that out of 217,557 students, 330 were expelled—a rate of 0.15%.

Mental illness

Almost one third of cases (32%) were affected by mental illness. In 8% of cases a family member was assessed as being at present risk of suicide; in 8% of cases there was a diagnosed mental illness that was not managed well, in contrast to 5% of cases where the diagnosed illness was managed well; and in 16% of cases a mental illness was suspected but not diagnosed. Again there was consistency between caseworkers' and clients' assessments: 26% of young people and 29% of parents considered mental health issues to be a contributing factor to the family's problems.

Child protection issues

Overall, 29% of cases were judged to be affected by child protection or substitute care issues. In 5% of cases, caseworkers noted that case management had been significantly

affected due to parents themselves having been removed as children from their families. In 11% of cases the family had had children removed in the past. In 6.5% of cases there were current confirmed child protection issues. In a further 9% of cases there were suspected child protection issues. In 10% of cases sexual abuse was suspected and in 13% of cases a family member's previous experience of sexual abuse had significant impact on the case.

Legal issues

In 17% of cases involvement with the legal system had impacted on the management of the case. Young people estimated legal problems affected their family in 15% of cases, while parents identified this as an issue in 10.5% of cases.

Case studies of complexity status

John's story (low complexity)

John is a 17 year old who self referred to Reconnect to gain assistance in getting income support from Centrelink. He had been recently excluded from his home after a fight with his adoptive mother over his growing independence. When his adoptive mother and father had recently separated, John had remained with his mother. She wanted him to remain at school and had set early curfews. John wanted to leave school and go to TAFE and have greater access to friends. The parental separation had increased tension in the family and this was also complicated by issues connected with adoption.

In this case the Reconnect service worked with both parents and John on managing conflict and acceptance of independence. In addition, after the parents accepted John's decision to live independently, Reconnect assisted John to gain income support and suitable housing. The case took two weeks of intense contact soon after referral, then a few counselling and mediation sessions over the next month.

Debbie's story (low complexity)

Debbie's mother contacted Reconnect after hearing about the service from a friend. Debbie's mother felt Debbie, aged 16, was uncontrollable and was afraid Debbie, who had had an abortion the previous year was likely to get pregnant again. Debbie's mother had taken to locking the windows to prevent her from getting out at night and had set an 8.30 pm curfew. Debbie's mother had been under financial stress since being made redundant from her job and was receiving income support. The Reconnect service used brokerage funds to allow Debbie and her mother to have a day out that was 'fun' so that they could begin to find out about each other, away from the daily conflict on curfews. Reconnect provided counselling and mediation and negotiated new arrangements for living together. The case involved about six weeks of weekly contact and two more follow-up sessions over the next month.

Melissa's story (medium complexity)

Melissa was 16 when she was referred to Reconnect by her school. She was staying at her boyfriend's house after a fight had broken out between her parents and her boyfriend. Her parents had taken out an apprehended violence order against the boyfriend and he had countered this by charging them with assault. There was some evidence that violence was used to solve conflict in both Melissa's family and in the family of her boyfriend. Melissa was threatening to leave school to get employment as her parents had refused to allow her to gain access to income support, stating that she

could live at home if she wished. However, she would only be allowed to return home on the condition that she did not see her boyfriend anymore and that her friends would be scrutinised by her parents.

Reconnect worked with Melissa, her boyfriend and Melissa's family on issues related to conflict and violence; worked with the school, Melissa and her parents on Melissa's education; and undertook mediation and counselling with Melissa's parents on her access to her boyfriend and other friends. After intensive work over a two-month period, Melissa returned home and the legal charges were dropped on both sides. Melissa has remained at school and Reconnect has recently assisted Melissa to apply for entry to the army.

Yousef's story (medium complexity)

Yousef had already left home previously when he was referred to Reconnect by Centrelink. He was 16 when Reconnect first saw him, living back at home but not attending school or engaged in employment. Yousef's mother, who is Iranian, and his father, who is American, were both unemployed. There was considerable conflict in the family, particularly between Yousef and his younger siblings. Yousef's parents had assets but no income and were struggling to pay the mortgage. Reconnect offered counselling support to Yousef and his parents and provided practical support with their financial debts by linking them with a financial counsellor. Reconnect talked to the parents about their expectation that Yousef would contribute to the family's income and assisted Yousef to obtain employment.

Ella's story (high complexity)

Ella was 14 when she was first referred to Reconnect by the school counsellor. Ella's mother was addicted to heroin. Ella and her sister had had a chaotic early childhood: since Ella had been eight years old, her mother had locked the children out of the house several times a month. Ella and her sister had learnt to survive those nights by arranging to stay at a friend's place or sheltering in the local park. There was no intervention by any agency at this point. The mother's behaviour became worse, and Ella finally left home at 13. She asked to live with her father (who had left when she was three) and moved in with him and his wife. The local high school accepted her despite her having been expelled twice from other schools. Within a few weeks of starting school she was caught smoking marijuana on the school grounds and was referred to the school counsellor. The counsellor worked with her for six months but she ran away from home and school to live on the streets. During this period she was taken in by an older man and was sexually abused. She finally rang the school counsellor for help when she saw another young girl being stabbed. The school counsellor found temporary accommodation for her with a family and referred her to Reconnect.

Reconnect worked to find her more permanent accommodation, which was difficult due to her age (14). She was finally accommodated at a SAAP crisis refuge for six months while Reconnect kept providing counselling and practical support to make her long-term living situation more secure. During this period Ella's drug use spiralled out of control. She began chomping on a daily basis, was using prescription drugs and marijuana and was bingeing on alcohol. She began to resort to crime to acquire drugs and also began to have psychotic symptoms. During this period the Reconnect worker, the accommodation agency and the school counsellor worked intensively to keep her connected to school, deal with her mental health issues and maintain her health.

A case team formed around Ella: the adolescent mental health service provided intensive counselling and eventually found a mental-health-supported half-way house for her; Reconnect worked with her on living skills and on her connection to her family; and the school counsellor concentrated on keeping a persistent connection with her, building on her trust in the relationship. The school counsellor called in at the refuge every morning to offer to take Ella to school, but would not insist if she refused to go. Ella twice tried to kill herself during this period. However, the case team held firm and at the age of 17 she finally stopped chroming. She has now reduced other drug use to a minimum, is completing Year 12, has applied to go to university and plans to become a teacher. She is still receiving intensive support from the school counsellor and the mental health team, as well as lower levels of support from Reconnect.

Darlene's story (high complexity)

Darlene is a 13 year old Aboriginal girl living in town with her extended family after growing up in a remote community. Darlene's extended family includes her mother, grandmother, three siblings, an aunt and two cousins. All are living in a four-bedroom house. Darlene met the Reconnect team when she attended a youth disco event. Darlene has not attended school since moving to town and there is considerable violence in the family home due to alcohol use and visits from other family members coming to town. Darlene's siblings and cousins also find it difficult to attend school because of late nights and violence in the family home. When Darlene got involved with one of Reconnect's group programs, a self-esteem program using goal setting and mentoring, she disclosed sexual abuse that she had suffered. Reconnect assisted her to obtain counselling and treatment for a sexually transmitted disease.

During this time a feud was erupting between her family and another. The feud escalated and death threats were made between the families. A girl from the other family came around at night and threatened Darlene's mother and older male cousin with a knife. Darlene's mother screamed at Darlene to grab the girl and to help stab her. Darlene did as she was told and the other girl died. As a result Darlene and her mother have been jailed for murder, while the whole family is under threat from 'payback' (reprisals from the other family). Reconnect has continued to assist Darlene, helping her to obtain legal representation and finding her an alternate placement while she awaits trial. Reconnect is continuing to work with the other young people in the family as well as Darlene.

Jeff's story (high complexity)

Jeff is 16 and has a mild intellectual disability. At the time Reconnect became involved with his family, Jeff, his older sister and younger twin brothers had all been living with their father, who was imprisoned pending trial. It was clear there were abuse issues in the family (not connected to the father's court case): Jeff's older sister had been referred to Reconnect from her school, and his twin brothers had been removed to a foster family in the previous year.

Reconnect has provided intensive support to Jeff and is working with a range of other agencies to find stable long-term accommodation for him. They have helped his older sister find independent accommodation, maintain her schooling and secure income support. They have also provided ongoing counselling for her in relation to sexual assault. Reconnect has also been providing support to the foster family of the twin

brothers, helping to stabilise their care and maintain connections with Jeff and their sister. Reconnect is the only agency to work with every member of the family, and Reconnect staff have become the daily case managers for all of the young people concerned.

2.1.5 Conclusions

The evaluation has found that Reconnect is assisting young people and families who are significantly disadvantaged and who have complex problems. As a greater proportion of young clients have left home at least once before contact with a Reconnect service, it appears that intervention by Reconnect is happening at a later stage in the homelessness continuum than was the case in the pilot program and the initial stages of Reconnect.

These two findings are interconnected. It is likely that as Reconnect services are targeted to communities in greater need, they will work with families with more complex problems. In these circumstances, 'early intervention' will be directed less towards the prevention end of intervention and more towards reduction of further harm.

Both of these findings have implications for Reconnect program design and for the intervention approaches used by Reconnect. The client base appears to have shifted towards the high complexity end of the scale since Reconnect has expanded. The findings indicate that for 34.9% of cases included in the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients, young people have seven or more complexity factors. The significant levels of family violence, child protection, mental health, drug and alcohol issues, school exclusion and legal system involvement provide some indication that Reconnect is currently supporting young people who can be described as having 'intensive support needs'.

This finding has considerable implications for Reconnect, as the level of resources needed to intervene successfully with more complex cases, particularly the size and skill level of Reconnect staff, is likely to be above the current level.

There are also implications for the apportioning of responsibilities between the Australian Government and State and Territory Governments in providing assistance for young people with intensive support needs. It is important for State and Territory Governments to develop better ways of identifying high risk young people, responding to their needs and coordinating their care. If a young person ends up coming into the care of the state (typically state juvenile justice or care and protection), States have found that the cost of care is frequently more than \$250,000 per year per young person, and in extreme cases may be up to \$1 million per year. The high cost of support is generally associated with a failure to identify early or to respond with appropriate intervention until the young person's situation has deteriorated markedly. The high-complexity case studies above illustrate the way, in the absence of early intervention by other agencies, young people come to Reconnect services at a later stage on their pathway towards homelessness.

The implications of this finding for Reconnect and other programs are explored further in Part Three: Future Directions for Reconnect.

2.2 Outcomes for young people and their families

2.2.1 Summary of outcome findings

The following section of the report looks at the impact Reconnect services have had on the young people and families they have assisted. Key findings have been summarised first to provide the reader with an initial overview. Sections 2.2.2 to 2.2.6 discuss the findings in detail.

Results are mixed: some findings showing significant and sustained positive changes, while in other areas no significant impact could be identified.

Summary of positive findings

Analysis of the RAD and the results of the Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients found the following significant and positive outcomes had resulted from Reconnect intervention:

- the proportion of young people living in temporary situations fell from 16.5% at the start of support to 5% after support.¹⁴ The proportion of young people living with parents increased from 57.5% at the start of support to 62% after support, increasing in all age categories;
- two thirds of young people and parents reported overall improvement in the young person's situation that led them to Reconnect. Much of this improvement was attributed by clients to the intervention of Reconnect;
- a dramatic improvement in young people's ability to manage family conflict was found, and this improvement appears to be sustained over time. The proportion of young people with good or very good skills in managing family conflict increased from 12% before Reconnect intervention to 44% after. Correspondingly, while two thirds of young people estimated their skills in managing conflict to be poor or very poor prior to Reconnect, this had dropped to 16% after intervention. This reported change was found to continue for the length of the study — up to a year after initial intervention;
- parents reported similar improvements in capacity to manage conflict: the proportion of parents reporting they had good or very good skills in the area increased from 8% to 38% from the time of entry into Reconnect and Wave Two of the survey;
- young people and parents both reported improvements in communication within the family. The proportion of young people who felt their family communicated well increased from 22% before Reconnect to 41% afterwards. Parents' reported improvement in family communication was more pronounced: the proportion of parents reporting their family communicated well or very well increased from 11% before Reconnect to 42% at the second survey;

¹⁴ In all 'after support' figures quoted there is a high component of missing data. However, the number of current cases—38%—usually explains the extent of missing data (as current cases have not as yet provided 'after' information). Where missing data is significantly higher than can be explained by the number of current cases, this is indicated.

- young people rated as having medium-complexity cases were found to have significantly improved feelings of *self-worth and coping* as measured over time on objective scales;
- parents were found to feel increased closeness with their children and less alienation after Reconnect intervention, but the effect was not sustained over time;
- there was a significant improvement over time in the extent to which young people felt liked and respected at school. This may have helped to counteract the negative school experiences found for the majority of young people using Reconnect;
- education participation levels remained the same before and after support from Reconnect. While participation rates did not increase, the lack of a drop in participation rates indicates that Reconnect intervention assists in maintaining school connectedness, despite the reported negative experiences of school; and
- the proportion of young people who were employed (full or part time) at the start of support increased by the completion of support, from 2% to 5%. The proportion of young people who were not in education, training or employment had dropped from 15% at program entry to 11% at program exit.

Less positive findings

However, analysis of the RAD and the Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients found that:

- while self-reported improvements were found in education and community engagement, no significant improvements were found over time on other objective measures used in the longitudinal study;
- there appears to be a decrease in Reconnect's capacity to intervene early over time. The proportion of young people who had left home at least once previously fell from 50% of cases for the period July 2001–May 2003, to 34% for December 1999–June 2001; and
- parents' reported levels of satisfaction with Reconnect services may be decreasing over time.

It appears that Reconnect services are particularly effective in improving the stability of a young person's living situation and in increasing families' capacities to manage conflict and communicate better. However, there is no evidence of similar improvements in engagement of young people in education and/or the community. This may be due to the following factors:

- there is a significant degree of school alienation among young people responding to the longitudinal survey, evidenced by high levels of reported bullying, hating school, suspension and expulsion (particularly amongst high-complexity cases), and parents' lower expectations in relation to their children's school outcomes;
- the Reconnect model is built primarily around short-term casework which addresses immediate issues relating to young people's living situations, family

conflict and communication. Such an approach may not provide the opportunity to increase young people's engagement with community; and

- Reconnect appears to be identifying young people and families at a later stage of the homelessness cycle: than previously—young people are now more likely to have left home on at least one occasion before reaching Reconnect. Reconnect now appears to be handling more clients with high levels of case complexity: clients for whom it may be harder to bring about engagement with schooling, employment and community.

The next five sections discuss these findings in detail.

2.2.2 Clients' views of overall outcomes

The following comments from young people responding to the longitudinal survey provide some insight into how young people viewed the assistance they received from Reconnect. Two thirds of the responses were very positive, citing real changes in themselves and/or their families. The other responses were split between young people who were positive towards Reconnect but did not think their family situation had changed and those who were negative towards Reconnect.

Young people using Reconnect describe the outcomes from intervention

My experience has helped me a lot, I've changed my attitude towards my family members and I have more confidence about myself and my future than what I did have when I didn't have a Reconnect worker.

They helped me tell my mum about how my stepfather abused me.

I think it's great that there is someone to turn to when young people feel like everything is going wrong and there is no one to turn to.

Reconnect helped by helping Mum break up with the loser. Me straightening up a lot and knuckling down, looking at the future more. Attempting to improve everything.

It helped me cool down a bit when arguing with my parents.

Mostly just being there when I needed to talk and reassuring me that things were not my fault.

Reconnect are not to blame for my family not being helped by them because my family is just too complicated. Heaps of professionals have tried and failed to help my family.

It helped but recently it came crashing down on top of me.

Didn't help me and Mum at all, she is still the same. Won't let me decide what I want to do with my life, always yells at me and calls me names. In fact I think the situation has worsened heaps. No offence but Reconnect sux.

2.2.2.1 Perceived effectiveness of Reconnect in improving young people's situation

At the end of support, young people, parents and caseworkers are asked to estimate the extent to which the young person's situation has improved, remained the same or worsened, with the assessment being recorded in the RAD. Overall, two thirds of those responding reported improvement: young people reported improvement in 78% of

cases, parents in 73% and caseworkers in 66% of cases. Caseworkers were more inclined to think that the situation had remained the same (31%) than were parents (21%) or young people (19%), and parents were more inclined than young people or caseworkers to report that the situation had worsened (parents 6%, young people 3%, caseworkers 3%).¹⁵

The Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients also asked clients to assess the impact of Reconnect on their lives. This assessment may be regarded as a more reliable indicator of client perception of effectiveness as it took place up to one year after the conclusion of support (for clients who were exiting the program at the time of the first survey), and asked the extent to which Reconnect was responsible for any change uncomplicated by other questions.

The clients' assessment of Reconnect's impact on their lives was positive, and reaffirmed the estimations given at cessation of support (78% of young people and parent respondents reported improvement). The extent to which Reconnect was responsible for such improvement was assessed as 'a lot' by the majority of young people and parents reporting positive change (55% of young people, 52% of parents), while a further one-third of clients reported 'a little' of the improvement was attributable to Reconnect (34% of young people, 39% of parents). Fewer than 10% of both young people and parents said that Reconnect intervention did little or not much to bring about improvements to their situation.¹⁶

Among both parents and young people, 57% rated the ability of Reconnect services to resolve family problems as either good or very good. Only 14% of clients felt Reconnect's ability in this regard was poor or very poor.

At least half of all young people responding to Wave Two of the survey¹⁷ said that Reconnect assistance had:

- improved their relationship with their mother;
- made them feel better about themselves and their future; and
- ensured they were better able to deal with their problems.

Parents also reported positive outcomes:

- more than half reported that Reconnect intervention had improved their relationship with their child and had made them feel better about their child's future; and
- fifty per cent of parents also agreed that there was less family conflict as a result of Reconnect assistance.¹⁸

¹⁵ Reconnect Outcome Report, 1/7/01 to 31/12/02, Overall Change in Young Person's Situation.

¹⁶ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients (2003: 110)

¹⁷ The Wave Two survey was completed by young people and parents who had already exited Reconnect at the time of Wave One, as well as by young people and parents who entered Reconnect at the time of Wave One. Thus any improvements found in Wave Two and attributed to Reconnect can be assumed to have been sustained over time for respondents that had already exited Reconnect when the study began.

2.2.2.2 Satisfaction levels with Reconnect services

The Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients explored levels of satisfaction with Reconnect services over time. Reconnect is highly regarded by the young people and parents who have used services. More than 75% of young people and more than 80% of parents are satisfied or very satisfied with each of: their relationship with the case worker; how much their views were taken into account by their case worker; how they were treated by Reconnect staff; the information they were given; and the ease of access to Reconnect services.

Parents' satisfaction

For parents, however, there was a significant difference between reported satisfaction levels of clients entering Reconnect services in 2001¹⁹ and those of exiting clients. This difference may indicate that service provision for parents is changing over time, and that parents entering the program more recently are receiving less assistance or a different type of assistance. If this hypothesis is correct, the decline may be a result of an increased demand on Reconnect caseworkers' time as Reconnect becomes more established, or, alternatively, because of the employment of less experienced staff. Another explanation may be that feelings of satisfaction change over time: parents making an assessment of Reconnect services as long as a year after exiting the program may respond more positively than if they had been asked immediately after service provision.

Focus groups for parents using Reconnect were held as a part of the longitudinal survey examining Reconnect's impact on building community capacity for early intervention. The focus groups included 46 parents and found results similar to those of the longitudinal survey. Overall, parents in the focus groups were appreciative of the assistance they had gained from Reconnect services. They cited as important elements in their experience with the service: the assistance Reconnect workers had given them in developing strategies for dealing with the behaviour of their young person; assistance in engaging the young person; and provision of services outside the office.

Parents in two communities talked about their perception that Reconnect was oriented to the young person's needs. While these parents generally acknowledged that it was most important for Reconnect to address the needs of the young person, many felt that their own needs as parents were not met sufficiently. When this issue was explored further, it appeared that parents felt that they had ongoing needs for support that went beyond the initial crisis that had led them to the service. This perception was not shared by parents in other focus groups, particularly in services that provided separate caseworkers for the parent and for the young person. In these services, parents reported feeling that their needs were well supported by the Reconnect service.

¹⁸ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients (2003: 117-8)

¹⁹ In 2001, the mean score of satisfaction of entering clients was 7.48 and amongst exiting clients was 8.01. The higher satisfaction level amongst clients exiting services prior to this date was not attributable to differences in sex, case complexity or agency location (although there appears to be some indication that parents in metropolitan areas were less satisfied than those in non-metropolitan areas).

Many parents attending their first group meeting with other parents in the context of this study asked for ‘more meetings like this’, stating that this was the sort of support they felt they needed in an ongoing way. A few Reconnect services have established such groups and parents who had attended them were supportive of this approach.

It became clear that, in some cases, Reconnect services are still finding it hard to balance the needs of young people and their parents and that offering support groups for parents who are their clients may be an effective way of addressing this tension.

2.2.3 Outcomes in relation to young people’s engagement with their families

2.2.3.1 Intervening early to stabilise young people’s living situations

At commencement of support Reconnect clients were living:

- with parent(s) and other family members in 57.5% of cases;
- with friends on a temporary or long term basis (14%);
- with other relatives or care givers, on a long term or temporary basis (14%);
- independently (11%); and
- in other arrangements (5%).

A clear indication of Reconnect’s impact in stabilising young people’s living situations is the change in the proportion of young people living in temporary situations before and after support. At program entry, 16.5% of young people were living in temporary situations, either with relatives or with friends. On completion of support, this figure had dropped to 5%.

Caseworkers were asked to judge the stability of young people’s living situations before and after receiving support. This item shows a considerable improvement: in stability after Reconnect intervention: the number of young people in unstable living situations dropping from 44% at the beginning of support to 16% on completion.²⁰

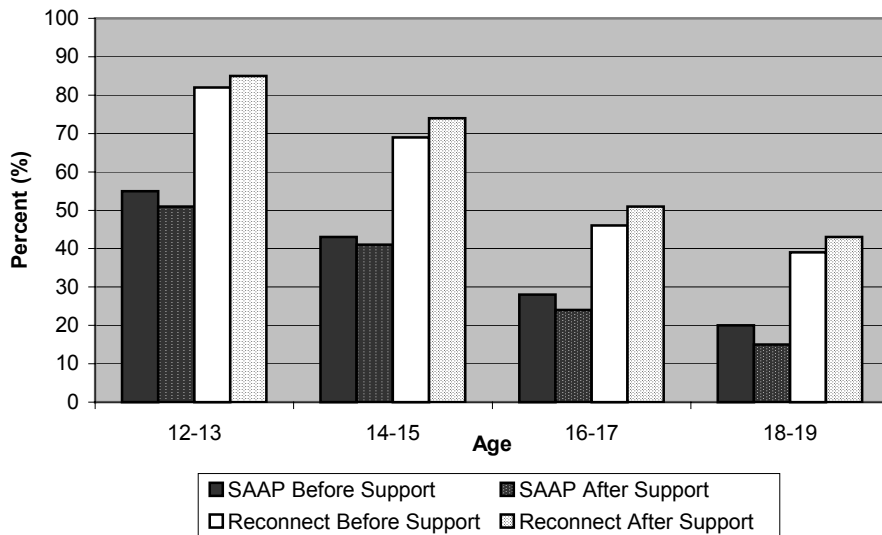
It is useful to compare Reconnect outcomes with data from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), which provides support and accommodation to homeless people. SAAP data on the numbers of young people living with parents before and after support provides some indication of the success of Reconnect as an early intervention program. The following table provides a comparison between Reconnect and SAAP clients’ living situation before and after support (arranged by age).²¹

²⁰ RAD 2003

²¹ Unpublished SAAP Data supplied from the National Data Collection Agency, February 2003. Note missing cases (16%) and no-response (35%) was high due to the number of short-stay clients for whom data was not gained. This may indicate that these cases came from and returned home quickly, leaving young people for whom home was not an option at the SAAP service. This may be particularly the case for those in the younger age groups.

As can be seen from the table, once a young person has reached a SAAP service, no matter what age, there is a small decline in the number of young people living at home after support. In contrast, Reconnect is more effective at keeping young people at home, with small increases in the number of young people returning home after support occurring across all age groups. This finding reinforces the importance of reaching young people early in the path to homelessness.

Reconnect and SAAP clients' living with parents before and after support



Previous experience of home leaving

At the start of support, 50% of young people had never previously left home. Of those that had left previously, almost half had left only once, 23% had left on two occasions, 10% on three and 18% on four or more occasions.²² Not surprisingly, leaving home was more likely to occur with increasing age. While 68% of 12–13 year olds and 53% of 14–15 year olds had never left home previously, among young people aged 18 and over this figure dropped to 11%.

Changes identified in Reconnect’s early intervention patterns

The statistics on leaving home confirm Reconnect’s overall success in reaching young people prior to leaving home, and prior to having homelessness become ‘a way of life’. However, a comparison of the figures from the first year of the Reconnect program and the subsequent two-year period indicates that, as Reconnect has expanded nationally, there has been a drop in the number of young people reached early, and prior to potential homelessness.

In the first 18 months of Reconnect (December 1999 to July 2001), 33.5% of young people residing with parents/family at the start of support had previously left home. By May 2003, the number of young people who had left home once previously made up 50% of Reconnect cases.

²² RAD 2003

There has been a significant change in the Reconnect client profile. While some key client characteristics (sex, age, referral patterns, and birthplace) remained largely the same, the following characteristics changed considerably between December 1999–July 2001 and July 2001–May 2003:

- the number of Indigenous clients increased by 175% to now make up 11% of all Reconnect clients;
- the duration of support provided to clients assisted in less than six months (two-thirds of the Reconnect population) changed only marginally. However, there was a change in duration of support for clients assisted for more than six months: median values among these clients increased from 372 days in July–September 2001 to 438 days in January–March 2002²³; and
- the number of previously seen clients has increased by 140% and now makes up 15% of all Reconnect clients.

The changes in client profile are consonant with the trends emerging in the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients, which found an increasingly high level of case complexity among clients responding to the survey.

A possible explanation for the changes in the client profile lies in the way Reconnect has grown. Services funded in later rounds of the program were established in particularly high need areas, especially Indigenous communities. It is likely that this expansion into communities of very high need has resulted in Reconnect reaching young people and families experiencing a greater degree of instability. Most of these services were not yet fully functioning in the period covered by the first data report, two thirds of the cases for which came from the round one services. By contrast, data from the new RAD pertains to the period July 2001–May 2003, during which the round two services and 18 third round services became fully operational.

This finding has important implications for the program in relation to early intervention. The issues are discussed further in later sections of the report.

2.2.3.2 Management of conflict

Conflict between parents and young people is the most common reason for seeking support from Reconnect and an immediate trigger for leaving home.²⁴ Improvement in young people's and families' capacity to manage conflict is a key contributor to preventing homelessness.

Parents' perceptions of conflict

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients asked parents about their perceptions of conflict in their households—who was involved in conflict and who was responsible for it. While the majority of parents were even-handed in assigning responsibility for conflict (61% citing themselves as responsible some of the time and 43% citing their child as responsible some of the time), a sizable minority held their children to blame

²³ At this stage, insufficient time has elapsed to enable more recent comparisons—cases commencing in April–June 2002 can as yet have a maximum support length of 385 days. For details on how this calculation has been made, see the Notes section of this report.

²⁴ RAD 2003: 48% of clients listed family conflict as the reason for seeking assistance, the highest category cited.

for family conflict. Many parents reported that their children were often (32%) or almost always (15%) responsible for conflict in the family, while only 4% felt that they themselves caused the conflict often or almost always.²⁵

The number of parents who considered that conflict was being caused by young people is interesting. It tallies with Reconnect caseworkers' discussions at the Good Practice Forums concerning the difficulty of working with some parents who have authoritarian or coercive parenting styles. Australian and British research has found that coercive parenting styles are more common in economically disadvantaged families, and have been associated with disturbance in development of children's self-regulation, increased risks of conduct disorder and later substance abuse (Sanson A ed, 2002: 24).

Significant improvements in managing conflict

Reconnect services appear to have had a dramatic and positive impact on the capacity of young people and families to manage conflict.

Almost two thirds of young people considered their ability to manage family conflict before Reconnect intervention to be poor or very poor, compared with just 16% after intervention. The proportion who felt they had good or very good skills in managing family conflict increased from 12% before Reconnect to 44% after Reconnect. Similarly, young people rated their family's ability to manage conflict as being two and a half times greater after Reconnect intervention (from 14% to 37%). The study found that, at Wave One, young people exiting Reconnect reported significantly greater ability to manage conflict both in themselves and in their families than did those who were entering Reconnect. This suggests that improvements in conflict management are lasting, and indeed increase over time.

Indigenous clients reported lower average levels of change in the young person's ability to manage family conflict than did non-Indigenous clients, possibly reflecting the higher conflict levels occurring within Indigenous communities.²⁶

Parents reported similar levels of improvement in conflict management. The proportion of parents who rated their family's conflict-management skills as either good or very good jumped from 8% in Wave One to 38% at the time of Wave Two.²⁷

2.2.3.3 Communication and closeness within families

A primary aim of the Reconnect program is to re-establish, where possible, positive relationships between young people and their families.

On cessation of support from Reconnect, young people, parents and caseworkers are asked to report their perceived level of family engagement. Considerable consistency was noted between the assessments of these three groups: approximately two thirds of

²⁵ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients (2003: Table 19).

²⁶ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients (2003: Table 20)

²⁷ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients (2003: Figures 37, 38, 39, 40).

each group reported improved engagement with family at the end of support, and almost one third reported engagement remaining at the same level.²⁸

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients enabled greater exploration of ‘engagement’—at both waves of the survey, young people and parents were asked to assess family closeness; in Wave Two they were asked to assess family communication before and after Reconnect intervention.

In general, communication between family members was found to have improved. The proportion of young people who felt their family communicated well increased from 22% before Reconnect to 41% at the time of the study. Even more positively, while 11% of parents reported that their family communicated well or very well before Reconnect, this figure increased to 42% at Wave Two.²⁹

On family closeness: 34% of young people reported feeling very close to their mothers, 24% were reportedly not close and only 2% had no contact with their mothers; in contrast, 16% of young people reported feeling very close to their fathers, 36% reported not being close to their fathers and 17% reported no contact with their fathers. Although not significant, a comparison of the assessments of family closeness by entering and exiting clients suggests that Reconnect intervention has some immediate, though not long-lasting, effect on improving closeness between young people and their parents.³⁰

Exiting parents were considerably more likely than entering parents to report being very close to their child or children (62% compared with 49%) and significantly less likely to report not being close (5% compared with 13%).³¹

In addition to eliciting young peoples’ and parents’ perceptions of closeness, the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients also used validated scales to measure aspects of family relationships, such as trust, communication and alienation. Among young people no changes could be found on these measures. At Wave One, parents who had been through the Reconnect program felt significantly less alienated from their child and more satisfied with their relationship with their child than did those who were just entering the program. However, when the study examined the sustainability of this change over time, it found that average assessments of communication with children decreased. Much of this change was found among entering clients and high complexity cases.

Overall, it would appear that Reconnect has some effect on improving communication between parents and young people but that this affect is not sustained over time. Given the findings on case complexity, this is not surprising. Sustained changes in family functioning may require interventions at an earlier stage, or require a longer (and potentially different) intervention approach.

²⁸ Reconnect Outcome reports 1/7/01 to 31/12/02.

²⁹ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: Figures 41 and 42)

³⁰ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: 69)

³¹ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: 69)

2.2.3.4 Self-worth and well-being

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients attempted to develop an understanding of the effect of Reconnect services on the overall sense of well-being and self-worth of the young people and their parents.

Young people were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about the effect of Reconnect on their lives. Self-reported change included:

- 54.9% agreed or strongly agreed that Reconnect had helped them feel better about themselves;
- 47.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they don't get as angry as they used to;
- 49.6% reported that they can deal with their problems better;
- 55% reported feeling more positive about the future; and
- 43.6% reported better control of anger.

General well-being of clients was measured using two scales, *Depression and anxiety* and *Self-worth and coping*. No conclusive statement can be made about the effect of Reconnect on these aspects of well-being as, although the data indicated differences between entering and exiting clients, these were not statistically significant. Females scored significantly higher on *Depression and anxiety* (that is, they were more likely to be on the depressed and anxious side of the scale), and lower on the *Self-worth and coping* scale. These gender differences are consistent with other research findings relating to self-esteem among girls (Emler, 2001). Scores on *Self-worth and coping* increased significantly with age.

Although there was no overall significant change in young people's scores on the *Depression and anxiety* or *Self-worth and coping* scales, those in cases of medium complexity experienced significantly higher scores on *Self-worth and coping* across the two survey waves. This suggests that Reconnect services have impacted more effectively for those in medium complexity cases in this area. It may be that for medium complexity cases, Reconnect staff work more intensively with young people and offer a greater range of intervention approaches than with low complexity cases. This is a particularly important finding, as self-worth and coping are identified as key components of greater resilience in adolescence.

Parents scored slightly higher than their children on both scales, indicating that they had, on average, slightly stronger feelings of depression and anxiety but simultaneously stronger feelings of self-worth and ability to cope with stressful situations. For parents, feelings of depression and anxiety were stronger among cases of higher complexity. Once again, it appeared that Reconnect service had little effect on parents' overall well-being as no significant difference was found between entering and exiting parents. This is not surprising, as young people were generally Reconnect's primary clients.

2.2.4 Engagement of young people with education

2.2.4.1 Young people's experiences of school

In general, young people responding to the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients did not have positive experiences with school. Negative school experiences, measured

using a number of indicators, were sometimes explained by case complexity or gender; however, other indicators of negative school experiences were independent of these factors.

Where possible, findings from the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients have been compared with those from the Australian Temperament Study (ATS), which is following Victorian families from birth to adulthood (Prior, Sanson, Smart & Oberklaid, 2000). The ATS sampled every mother giving birth in the selected areas of Victoria in 1982 (areas were selected to ensure representativeness of the Victorian population at the time). The sample group has been studied at regular intervals, retaining 67% of the original participants. The ATS sample differs considerably from the Reconnect survey families on two key indicators of socio-economic status: education and employment levels. Considerably higher levels of education and employment are found amongst the ATS population.³² The ATS sample has also had far lower rates of separation and divorce. For this reason the ATS provides a useful point of comparison between the experiences of young people attending Reconnect services and those in more economically privileged and stable families.

Unstable school experiences

The Reconnect study found that young people responding to the survey had very unstable experiences of school. At Wave One, 30% of clients said they had attended at least six schools since the age of five, and a further 32% had been enrolled in four or five schools. More than 50% of young people had been enrolled at their current school for less than two years. This level of instability appears independent of household mobility patterns, as parents reported relatively low levels of moving house in the previous year.

Over 20% of young people reported ‘wagging’ school at least three times in the month before the survey. In contrast, the ATS found that between 3% (of those aged 13 to 14) and 16% (of those young people aged 15 to 16) had wagged school twice or more times in the previous year.³³

Suspension and expulsion

High rates of suspension and expulsion were reported by young people responding to the Reconnect study. Suspension was most common—43% of all young people reported that they had been suspended at some point. A further 9% reported being previously expelled and suspended, and 1% said they had been expelled but not suspended. The ATS found that between 4% of 13–14 year olds and 7% of 15–16 year olds had been expelled *or* suspended (no differentiation was made between the two). This appears to further confirm that rates of suspension and expulsion amongst Reconnect clients are high.

³² ATS 2000: between 26% and 34% of parents had attended school to Year 10 or less; between 6 and 11% of parents were unemployed between 1992 and 1998; 11% of parents were separated or divorced by the time their children were 15-16. Reconnect sample: 51% of parents had attended school to Year 10 or less; 19% of parents were unemployed in the week prior to the survey; 34% of mothers and 24% of fathers were separated or divorced.

³³ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: Figure 34); ATS 2000: Table 4.

In the Reconnect study, significantly more boys than girls were suspended (69% and 43% respectively) and expelled (17% and 4% respectively).³⁴

Expulsion rates were also significantly higher amongst clients involved in highly complex cases: 19% of young people reported expulsion in high complexity cases, 5% in medium complexity cases and 7% in low complexity cases. Suspension rates also differed among the three groups, with 62% of high complexity cases, 48% of medium complexity cases, and 47% of low complexity cases having experienced suspension.

Enjoyment of school³⁵

The majority of young people (53%) reported often or almost always hating school, and more than 30% said they had regularly received detention in the previous year. Older clients were more likely to report enjoying school, but there were no gender or case complexity differences in young people's enjoyment of school or levels of detention.

Bullying was a significant problem for the young people responding to the survey. Just over a third reported being bullied by other students and 18% reported being bullied on most days. Bullying by teachers was also reported by 18% of students. Bullying was not associated with gender or case complexity; however, problems with bullying were reported less frequently by older clients. One interesting finding is that young people in Queensland were significantly less likely to report being bullied by other students than those in NSW or Victoria.

The indications are that school is a far less enjoyable experience for Reconnect clients than for the ATS sample. In the latter, just one third of children did not rate school as enjoyable in Year 10. Approximately 25% of teenagers reported being bullied between the ages of 12 and 14, and 5–6% noted that this was a serious problem for them. Interestingly, the ATS study found differences between girls and boys that were not found in the Reconnect study: boys were less likely than girls to enjoy school, and more likely to get into trouble with teachers and experience bullying.

Expectations of educational achievement

Reconnect clients, including those not studying at the time of the survey, were asked to indicate their expectation about the level of schooling they would ultimately attain—another indicator of the extent to which young people are engaged in the school system.

The majority of clients (56%) expected to achieve a post-secondary qualification, either at TAFE or at university. Fewer than one quarter did not expect to finish high school, while a further 6% indicated it was unlikely that they would return to education (it is not known whether these clients had completed high school).

Significant differences in expectations of educational achievement were found by sex, case complexity and age. Females were more likely than males to aspire to a university qualification (59% and 38%, respectively). Young people involved in high complexity cases were less likely to expect to achieve a post-school qualification, and were most

³⁴ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: Table 9)

³⁵ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: Figures 26, 27, 28 and 29); ATS 2000: P 53

likely to report they did not expect to finish high school. Educational aspirations increased with age—older clients more commonly expecting to complete a tertiary qualification.

It is interesting to note that parents were more pessimistic than the young people. Less than a third of parents (32%) expected their child to complete a tertiary qualification—considerably lower than the proportion of young people expecting to graduate from TAFE or university. A significant difference in expectations was found across case complexity groups. Parents in high complexity cases had very low expectations for their children’s academic futures: 41% expected their child would not finish high school and a further 11% believed their child would not return to study.

This discrepancy between parent and child expectations also existed over time. Using data from both survey waves, it was found that 37% of young people who did *not* have tertiary aspirations in Wave One, believed by Wave Two that they would eventually complete a tertiary qualification. The comparable figure among parents was just 26%. Similarly, the proportion of respondents who at Wave One expected a tertiary qualification, but had lowered their expectation in Wave Two was higher among parents (40% compared with 28% of young people).

2.2.4.2 Reconnect’s impact on engagement of young people in education and training

The majority of young people were studying full time at the commencement (66%) and on completion (65%) of support from Reconnect. There was a significant drop in the proportion of young people who were not in education, training or employment, from 15% at the start of support to 11% at its completion.³⁶

Young people, parents and caseworkers are asked to assess the young person’s engagement with education on completion of support. Just under half the young people reported ‘improved’ engagement and a similar number said it had not changed. Estimates from the other two groups are similar.

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients also attempted to measure engagement outcomes. Self-reported assessments of impact found that 44% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that they had more interest in school and 35% agreed or strongly agreed that they were better able to deal with teachers as a result of Reconnect.

In addition, there was a significant improvement across time in the extent to which young people felt liked and respected at school, which did not vary with sex, age or case complexity. Although it is difficult to attribute such change conclusively to Reconnect intervention, this finding is consistent with young clients’ reporting of Reconnect’s impact on how they feel about themselves, their school, and their ability to deal with their teachers.

There is some indication that Reconnect has also improved school connectedness on the part of parents. At Wave One, parents who were entering Reconnect services scored significantly lower on a scale of satisfaction with their child’s school than did parents

³⁶ RAD 2003: Labour Force and Education Status before and after support

who had ended their involvement with Reconnect (or whose child had ended their involvement).

However, other measures did not confirm this self-reported increase in engagement with education.

More than three quarters (76%) of Reconnect clients participating in the longitudinal survey were enrolled in school or further education, and 85% were engaged in either employment or education. After controlling for age, there was no difference in the extent to which entering and exiting clients were participating in employment or education. As entering clients are used as a *de facto* control group, this suggests that Reconnect intervention has little immediate impact on improving young people's participation in education or employment. Participation levels were found to be significantly different in relation to age (older clients being more likely to engage in school and work) and case complexity (for clients aged 18 years or older, the participation rate decreased significantly with increased case complexity).

For young people, self-reported school performance, interest in school, perceived importance of school subjects, expectations of educational attainment, and psychological sense of school membership did not vary significantly across entering and exiting client groups.

It is important to take into account, however, that families assisted by Reconnect show considerable levels of social disadvantage (such as poverty, poor literacy, mental health issues and experience of family violence and abuse), which compounds the difficulty of achieving immediate gains in areas such as employment and educational connectedness.

As reported earlier, case complexity is also significantly related to higher levels of school suspension or expulsion, and lower educational expectations on the part of young people and their parents. It may be argued that no change in education status is actually a positive result, given the characteristics of the Reconnect client group: 'no change' means that young people did not leave education during the period of intervention. The national census on homelessness amongst young people identified the maximum rate for education participation while homeless as 58% (this is the rate for the ACT—all other States and territories were lower). Young people assisted by the Reconnect program maintained a participation rate of 65%. Although the figures are not directly comparable, they may indicate that Reconnect's early intervention in the homelessness path has played a role in the continuing level of educational participation.

2.2.4.3 Young peoples' and parents' perceptions of school

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients conducted focus groups with 57 young people to examine Reconnect's impact on building capacity for early intervention. In each of the groups, young people talked about school. As a rule, young people's experience of school could be summarised in two words: disengagement and disillusionment.

In one focus group, an apparent exception, the young people attended an alternative school: these young people spoke positively of their school environment compared to the mainstream system. In this group, however, the majority of young people saw family problems as attributable to their previous schooling experience. Two of the boys

in this group were functionally illiterate at the age of 16, having consistently failed within the mainstream school system. Both were now learning to read and were in active learning mode.

Young people and their parents agreed that disengagement from school resulted from:

- a curriculum that was irrelevant to their current and future lives; and
- teachers and other school staff who did not treat students respectfully.

These two issues were linked and related to the structures of schools and teaching methods. Those who had left school to go to TAFE or to an alternative education setting commented on the difference between these institutions. One boy (aged 15) said:

You're more independent. You can call the teachers by their name and they don't hassle you. It's up to you to get done what you said you'd do. I don't know, it's just more like they treat you with respect, like you're a real person. So it makes the work interesting somehow.

Most young people in the focus groups had a history of school suspension and exclusion for anger-related behaviour problems, yet only two had attended a group to assist with anger management and only a few had received individual counselling.

Parents in all focus groups expressed concern at the disengagement of young people from school. Many believed that their children's failure to achieve within the school system had been the primary cause of flow-on problems in the family and community. The middle school years (Years 7 to 10) seemed most problematic—many young people reported not connecting to the curriculum in this period, with the result that they either 'acted out' so that there was overt conflict with school authorities, or withdrew and shut down. In the latter situation there was no obvious manifestation of the young people being 'in trouble'.

Parents lamented the loss of technical schools that provided a more *hands-on* curriculum, as well as what they perceived as a loss of respect for teachers within society and by their children in particular. Their own experiences in attempting to engage with their children's schools had, in the main, been unsatisfactory. Parents reported: that their concerns had been dismissed by school faculty; that they had been told or were made to feel they were 'bad parents'; and that the school said there was nothing it could do to help them. Parents also raised concerns about drug use in the context of the perceived failure of schools to meet young people's needs. They expressed concerns about how young people could gain the necessary confidence and resilience to withstand peer pressure in relation to drug use.

2.2.5 Engagement in employment

Not surprisingly, given the age of the target group, a majority (66%) of young people using Reconnect services are in full-time education at the start of support. Of the remaining 34%, approximately 5% of clients were employed (in full-time, part-time or casual work); 5% were in part-time education; 3% were in both education and work at

commencement of support; 8% were unemployed; and 15% were not in education or employment (and not seeking work).³⁷

The numbers of young people who were employed full or part time by the end of support increased from 2% at commencement to 5% on completion. This is a positive outcome, especially when linked to the numbers of young people who were not in any employment or education prior to support, which dropped from 15% to 11%.

The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients found a significant relationship for older clients between engagement in employment or education and case complexity. Among clients aged 18 years or older, more than 90% of clients in low complexity cases were either studying or working, compared with 69% of those in medium complexity cases and 61% of those in highly complex cases.³⁸

A comparison of outcomes for Reconnect and the Job Placement, Employment and Training Program (JPET), examined for the evaluation of JPET, concluded that JPET may have better outcomes than Reconnect in relation to employment. This finding should be regarded with caution, as, although both Reconnect and JPET programs appear to have similar levels of case complexity, JPET deals with an older target group (16–25 years) than Reconnect's (12–18 years). In the evaluation of the JPET program conducted in 2000, 28% of JPET clients were in employment at the completion of support in contrast to 2% at the beginning of support. The evaluation found that JPET was apparently less successful than Reconnect at engaging young people with their families and with education and training. However, due to the significant age differences between the two programs' target populations it is hard to validly compare outcomes.³⁹

2.2.6 Engagement with community

Assessing the extent to which Reconnect is successful in engaging young people with the community is difficult. There are few agreed or tested measures of engagement and it is also not clear how 'engagement with community' is to be defined, particularly in the context of a Reconnect service model of intervention (primarily a casework, individually-focussed model).

As part of the RAD, Reconnect clients, parents and caseworkers are asked to provide a self-reported assessment of 'level of engagement with the community' at completion of support. While results are positive (young people and caseworkers assessing improvement in engagement in approximately 57% of cases and parents in 50% of cases), the lack of clarity about what is being assessed makes it a problematic indicator.⁴⁰

³⁷ RAD 2003, Labour Force and Education Status before and after support

³⁸ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: 40)

³⁹ JPET-Keeping on Track (2000: 40)

⁴⁰ Reconnect Outcome Reports: Level of Engagement with Community

2.2.6.1 Young people's perception of community engagement

In an effort to better capture the level of community engagement among clients, The Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients asked a number of questions about clients' participation in community events, and their feelings and perceptions about their communities' strengths and weaknesses. For example, young people were asked to report their level of participation (in the year before support) in community events such as team sports, youth groups, drama, music, or dance activities, fundraising activities, other voluntary work or other community groups. This approach is in line with the research on promoting resilience amongst young people which places importance on building these social supports and engagement with community, particularly through involvement in activities that give young people real responsibility and social value such as sport, work and volunteer activity (Smedley and Syme 2001).⁴¹

A large proportion of the young people surveyed had had no participation in any of these activities: between 60 and 70% of respondents had not participated in team sports, performing activities, youth groups, fundraising or voluntary work, while over 80% had not participated in other community groups or religious activities.⁴² Barriers to participation identified in the Longitudinal Community Study include a lack of access to services, particularly in rural areas and a lack of money to enable full participation.

There are no directly comparable figures to indicate whether Reconnect clients' participation rates in community activities were similar to those of the general population. An ABS 2000 survey on children's participation in leisure and recreation found that between 62% of children aged 12–14 years were reported to have participated at least once in an organised sport outside of school hours in the previous 12-month period.⁴³ This appears to support the proposition that Reconnect clients have lower participation rates in sports than the general population.

No differences were found between exiting and entering clients or between the two waves of the study in measures of community participation. Similarly, no differences were found in participation in relation to age, sex or case complexity. This may point to an important area for intervention by Reconnect (and other similar programs) as studies of strategies associated with promoting resilience amongst young people have consistently found that involving young people in sport, work or in valued social roles such as volunteering, are effective (Newman, 2002). There appears to be considerable scope for Reconnect, in association with other organisations, to encourage young people's involvement in these types of activities.

Young people in the Reconnect study were also asked about access to youth/leisure centres, and their comfort levels in attending such centres. They were asked: how safe they felt in various public places; the extent to which they trusted police; and whether they felt harassed by police. Over two thirds of young people reported feeling comfortable in public places; 46% regarded police as 'there to help'; and 36% reported feeling harassed by police. No differences were found between entering and exiting

⁴¹ B Smedley and SL Syme (eds) Promoting health: intervention strategies from social and behavioural research. Washington University Press 2001

⁴² Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients: (2003: Figure 45)

⁴³ ABS: Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities 4901.0

clients, or across age or case complexity groups. However, boys, not surprisingly, were more likely to report harassment by police.

While the majority of young people seen by Reconnect are relatively comfortable within their communities, approximately one third feel unsafe and subject to police harassment. Again, this raises issues for intervention strategies that could be adopted by Reconnect. Reconnect is unlikely to change the perceptions individual young people may have, but it may assist in improving overall safety for groups of young people within a community through the use of community development approaches.

The key issue raised by young people in all focus groups was boredom and not having 'anything to do'. Young people talked about the lack of places to hang out and have fun. They were aware of what was available within their communities and were able to analyse these possibilities in terms of what was fun, affordable and accessible to them. In the main, public recreation opportunities for young people were limited to:

- skate parks, (only some areas had these and most lacked lighting for night skating);
- blue light discos (which were attended by 10–12 year olds and thus dismissed by the 13–18 year olds);
- cinemas and game parlours (that were viewed as too expensive for more than occasional use);
- highly-structured youth centres, such as the Police Citizens Youth Clubs (which, where they existed, were regarded as competitive and excluding); and
- natural recreation, such as beaches (in some areas).

Young people were able to offer suggestions as to what was needed, including:

- night-time skate parks;
- safe areas to meet and 'hang out';
- transport options for young people to attend activities safely;
- music/party venues that were designed for the 14–18 year age group;
- youth centres that were more inclusive;
- more culturally-based activities (music, performances); and
- outdoor adventure activities.

For Indigenous young people, the same issues arose but the problems of cost and exclusion were magnified.

The need for a valued role and opportunity for taking responsibility

One focus group participant who is now a teenage mother talked about what had made the difference to her capacity to stabilise her life and 'reconnect' with her own mother. Becoming a parent was an occurrence that, in her view, had given her real responsibility for the first time in her life. From her perspective, one of the main causes of her earlier

problems was the fact that she didn't feel any sense of responsibility in any aspect of her life. An important component of her early home leaving was the lure of *'having to be responsible for myself'*.

When this issue was explored in subsequent groups, young people echoed the teenage mother's analysis, although it was not as coherently expressed. They most readily talked about a lack of meaningful responsibility in the school environment, and their desire for more adult respectful relationships with teachers or for a curriculum that was practically relevant to their lives.

Another important avenue by which young people can exercise responsibility is employment, but employment opportunities are not evenly spread. Only a few of the young people in the non-urban focus groups had casual employment. Some had been forced to give up their part-time employment because of transport problems, especially when they were required to do shift work or to attend at short notice. The dearth of employment opportunities increased their sense of marginalisation and their sense that they were denied chances to demonstrate they could be responsible people.

The issues raised by young people are reinforced by the findings of other research on promoting resilience: 'for all young people the development of problem solving abilities, valued competencies and the opportunity to experience social responsibilities will have a resilience promoting effect' (Newman, 2002: 67).

2.2.6.2 The role of Reconnect in promoting engagement with community

The current lack of clarity about what constitutes 'engagement in the community' in the context of Reconnect's work has meant that this outcome has been hard to measure. Reconnect services have two main approaches to 'community engagement'. In the first approach, young people are linked at an individual level to activities and/or programs where they have identified an interest or a specific need. Some Reconnect services have established mentoring programs or used brokerage funds to facilitate access to a specific activity (such as an adventure therapy camp).

The second approach has been to develop group-based community-development projects that engage young people in decision-making and give them the opportunity to solve problems and take responsibility. It is discussed further in Section 2.3 in relation to Reconnect's role in capacity building.

However, these approaches to community engagement are not systematically offered to all Reconnect clients, as the issues with which young people present (such as family violence or school disengagement) often require intervention strategies aimed at more immediate outcomes than those promoting community engagement.

Research has established that building young people's social competencies is important in promoting resilience. The difficulty for Reconnect services is the amount of work which is entailed in community engagement, given the constant demand for immediate assistance.

Yet the importance of Reconnect continuing to utilise community capacity building approaches should not be underestimated. There is increasing evidence that broader

approaches to changing people's environments are potentially more effective than an individual focus. In particular, epidemiological studies on well-being and health of population groups have found that intervention focused on specific issues or diseases (such as drug use, violence, smoking, heart disease) are limited in efficacy.

James Gabarino (1995) offers a slightly different perspective to community capacity building. He argues that some social environments are 'toxic' in a way analogous to toxic physical environments, and that they are particularly toxic for children. Gabarino's toxic factors include: violence in all its forms, poverty, unemployment, poor housing and an under-resourced education system. He argues that the management of socially toxic environments needs to be similar to the management of a physically toxic environment—and should be regarded as having a similar, if not greater, level of urgency (Tomison 2002).

This research reinforces the need for Reconnect services to maintain a broader perspective and to continue using intervention strategies with individual young people and parents that increase a sense of control and connection to community.

2.2.7 Conclusions and further implications

The evaluation shows that Reconnect has had significant impact on the lives of young people and families it has assisted. Reconnect clients rate the interventions highly and attribute positive changes to the interventions they have received.

Reconnect has had a dramatic impact on the management of conflict in families, and these gains appear to be sustained over time for young people. It has increased the levels of communication and closeness felt by parents, improved young people's living situations, and improved the situation of young people who were unemployed or not engaged in education or paid work.

Although young people's participation in education remained the same, they reported feeling more positive about school, and parents reported more positive feelings about their children's schooling. Maintaining participation levels in education, given the reported experiences of young people's lack of enjoyment of school, bullying and unstable school experiences, may be viewed as a positive outcome.

The evaluation identified a number of areas that have implications for the Reconnect's program design and intervention strategies. It also identified areas in which more widespread changes, beyond Reconnect, need to occur.

2.2.7.1 Effective approaches to supporting parents

There are indications that over time parents are becoming less satisfied with the interventions they receive from Reconnect. This may be associated with changes in the way Reconnect services are being delivered (as a response to demand) or a reduction in the number of experienced staff they are employing. Although Reconnect has been designed to work with young people and their families, young people are still regarded as the core clients. This makes it difficult for Reconnect staff, faced with increasing demands, to provide more extensive support to parents.

Reconnect needs staff who are able to relate to parents as well as to young people, and who are aware of the needs that parents have support. Most importantly, Reconnect service providers need access to effective and time-efficient intervention strategies to provide individual and group-based support and education that can address parents' issues.

The evaluation has found that, in a significant proportion of cases, parenting styles can contribute to the conflict that occurs as young people's desire for independence increases during adolescence. While Reconnect does assist parents to modify these styles, a minority of parents have entrenched approaches that need to be addressed at an earlier stage in parenting. The findings from this evaluation support the need for more widespread parental education that is targeted towards modifying 'coercive' parenting styles before these styles become entrenched.

2.2.7.2 The importance of school engagement

The extent of school disengagement found among young people in this evaluation is significant. The reports of bullying, daily experience of hating school, suspension and expulsion levels and school turnover all point to a failure of school systems to deal effectively with young people facing other life disadvantages. For young people with high complexity factors, school disengagement is higher: they are more likely to be expelled and suspended, and to have unstable school experiences; and both they and their parents have lower expectations of educational achievement.

While Reconnect can make a difference to individual young people's perceptions of their school experience, the program itself cannot accomplish the broader educational changes that need to occur if young people, particularly those who are more vulnerable, are to gain access to the skills needed for independent adulthood. For young people with high complexity factors a different approach to schooling is called for.

Finally it may be useful for the Australian Government to consider the need for a Reconnect-style program linked to primary schools, particularly in highly disadvantaged communities. Targeting the transition from primary to secondary schools may help assist young people and families to engage more successfully in secondary education.

2.2.7.3 Early intervention and case complexity

The evaluation found that the Reconnect program caters for a significant proportion of young people who have intensive support needs. There appears to be a trend for Reconnect to reach young people at a point closer to homelessness. It is likely that these two findings are related. They pose challenges to the program.

It appears that while the overall model for Reconnect is flexible enough to assist young people with intensive support needs, Reconnect was not designed with resources sufficient to support such complex cases. Where Reconnect services are able to link young people with a broader service network that can respond adequately to their needs, the intensity of Reconnect involvement will not be as great. This was the case in Ella's story in Section 2.1.4, for instance. However, where this kind of linking is not possible (generally the case in rural areas), Reconnect assumes a greater case responsibility, with consequent strain on its resources.

In addition to casework time required by more complex cases, effective work in these cases also requires a high level of skill. The skill and time required for successful intervention are not easily found within the current Reconnect budget. There may be a strong argument for State and Territory Governments to contribute to resourcing Reconnect, given the involvement of Reconnect clients in State care and education systems.

In addition to the resourcing implications, the evaluation findings also highlight the need for more focused, effective strategies that can identify the opportunities for early intervention for young people with low, medium and high complexity needs.

2.3 Building community capacity for early intervention

The pilot program placed a major emphasis on working collaboratively with other agencies and building sustainability within communities to support early intervention into youth homelessness.

As a result, the evaluation strategy developed for Reconnect examined the extent to which Reconnect services impacted on 'building community capacity for early intervention'.

'Community capacity building' has become a central objective in a wide range of public policies and programs in Australia. Most analysts and practitioners in the human services field would count this as a positive development, despite the fact that the concept of 'community capacity' is seldom precisely defined and measures to indicate whether or not it has been 'built' are only in the developmental stage.

'Community capacity' is often used interchangeably with other terms (such as 'community development', 'community connectedness', and 'community resilience') and is often linked to the broader concept of social capital. While definitions of community capacity differ, there would be common agreement that it means something like 'the ability of individuals, organisations and communities to manage their own affairs and to work collectively to foster and sustain positive change' (Howe & Cleary, 2001).

The Longitudinal Community Study was the primary source of information for Reconnect's role in building community capacity for early intervention. The study examined 12 services, chosen to be representative in terms of locality, target group, and establishment period. Taking its lead from the literature on measuring community capacity building and social capital, the study focused on measuring three aspects of capacity building: building community infrastructure for early intervention; working collaboratively and strengthening service networks; and building organisational capacity for early intervention.

Building community infrastructure for early intervention. Measuring infrastructure for early intervention included examining: the relative resource a Reconnect service added to a community (for instance, was Reconnect a unique service or did it duplicate other services?); the degree to which a Reconnect service helped to build skills of other service providers, community members, parents and young people that could assist in early intervention; and the extent to which Reconnect services shared their resources (such as flexible brokerage funds or staff) with other services to build a greater focus on early intervention.

Building capacity through working collaboratively and strengthening service networks. The study explored Reconnect's role in working with other agencies and service networks, particularly the extent to which Reconnect services provided leadership in early intervention issues. It examined the extent of collaboration on individual casework and on a broader scale, where service networks sought to identify issues and address gaps or barriers to early intervention in youth homelessness.

Building organisational capacity for early intervention: The study explored the extent to which Reconnect services influenced the practices of other organisations so that they had a greater capacity for early intervention. It sought evidence of how other organisations had changed practices to allow them to better identify or more effectively intervene to prevent young people from becoming homeless. It examined the extent to which these changed practices could be attributed to Reconnect.

In addition to the Longitudinal Community Study, the evaluation drew on the Performance Assessments of Individual Reconnect Services that measured the effectiveness of each round one and round two Reconnect service in collaborating with other agencies.

The Longitudinal Community Study was informed by two smaller case study projects that examined the role of six Reconnect services in service networks.⁴⁴ Although they were directed at slightly different aspects of Reconnect work, these early case study projects confirmed that the Reconnect services they studied had worked collaboratively, had ‘added value’ to networks, and had contributed to the development of a greater focus on early intervention.

2.3.1 Reconnect’s contribution to building community infrastructure for early intervention

The Reconnect services included in the Longitudinal Community Study had a major impact on building infrastructure for community capacity for early intervention in several ways.

2.3.1.1 Uniqueness of the Reconnect service model

Simply by existing, Reconnect makes a significant contribution to capacity in community infrastructure for early intervention. In 11 of the 12 communities studied, Reconnect is the only service that provides accessible, flexible, holistic and free services to young people and families. (The one remaining community had an early intervention family service that worked with young people living at home as part of its broader family strategy.) Service providers in all communities interviewed for the Longitudinal Community Study confirmed that Reconnect was the primary early intervention service for young people in their community.

2.3.1.2 Increasing skills to support early intervention

Capacity is built by increasing a community’s level of skill to respond to issues that lead to youth homelessness by providing training to parents, young people, other community members and service providers.

The training programs offered by Reconnect include: training young people, parents and others to become mediators; training other service providers in the Good Practice Principles and action research; parenting training; education on anger management and conflict resolution for young people in school settings; training mentors for young people. All of the Reconnect services studied offered at least one of these sorts of

⁴⁴ Kate Barnett and Associates, 2001; Evans and Shaver 2001.

programs. The majority of service providers, young people and parents interviewed in the study who had attended training were able to articulate how training had been applied to their everyday lives at home and work or in a broader community setting.

2.3.1.3 Increasing resources for early intervention

Reconnect has also built capacity by contributing to the resource pool through: sharing brokerage funds across a service network; providing Reconnect staff to extend or establish services that address identified gaps; and by obtaining additional funding for new programs or services. More than half of the Reconnect services studied had helped to increase infrastructure by:

- providing ‘secondary consultation’ to less skilled workers in order to assist other services to work more effectively with young people and families;
- allowing other service providers access to flexible brokerage funds to help young people and families (for instance, providing funds to pay for equipment so a TAFE college could enrol a young person in training);
- providing Reconnect staff to assist another organisation’s work with young people in the Reconnect target population (such as working with a local council to provide a school holiday program where no programs existed in the area, or staffing a night-time recreational service for Indigenous young people that would not otherwise have been able to operate); *and*
- working with other service providers in their area to access funding aimed at extending intervention approaches to youth homelessness (an approach taken by three quarters of the Reconnect services studied).

In all but one of the Reconnect services studied, there was a substantial increase in such infrastructure initiatives from stage one of the study to stage two. Figure 3, in which the ‘elements’ measured are initiatives of the sort listed above, demonstrates this trend.

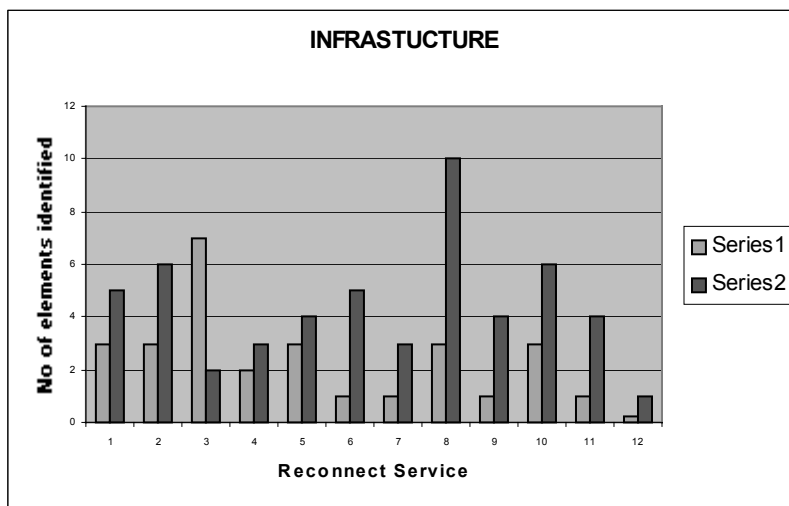


Figure 3: Infrastructure initiatives in Reconnect services, Stage One—Stage Two

Community Case Study One serves to illustrate the types of approaches used by Reconnect service providers to assist in building infrastructure for community capacity.

In this case Reconnect acted in a bridging role both *within* and *between* communities. 'Bridging' has been identified as a key concept in building social capital. In this case the Reconnect service helped to link young women from a CALD background with other similar groups of young women, while also building the links between CALD and mainstream communities.

The Reconnect service in Community Case Study One took a number of steps that are typical of good practice in building capacity: it identified gaps, developed a joint project with other service providers, obtained additional funding as needed and worked with young people in a way that built skills and ongoing links within communities.

Community Case Study One: Increasing young people's skills and participation in their community

The Reconnect service applied for and received separate State Government funding to undertake a joint project with other service providers with the goal of improving community participation for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) young women. The project:

- conducted consultations with young women and parents to identify issues for each cultural group (consultation with parents was critical in gaining their support for the project);
- trained the young women in basic research principles and conducted visits to local agencies investigating accessibility for young women from CALD backgrounds. This increased the young women's knowledge of other community organisations as well as giving information to service providers about how to make their services more accessible; and
- conducted a three-day social action workshop with 80 young women, on topics raised by young women, including: personal and community safety; cultural identity and racism; and women's health. A variety of skills workshops was also offered, including: lobbying, using the media, and discrimination and the law.

At the end of the project, participants identified a range of ways they would use the skills they had acquired, including involvement in school newspapers and participation in local council youth committees or the management committees of community agencies. Thirty of the young women received training on video skills and produced a video, documenting the project and interviewing other young women in the local area. The video formed part of a resource kit which was produced to assist other services become more accessible for young CALD women.

As a result of this project a Young Women's Festival was organised, attracting 140 young women from diverse backgrounds, many of whom brought their mothers along on the day. The festival reached many young women who had not had contact with services before.

2.3.2 Reconnect’s role in collaboration between agencies and strengthening service networks

The Longitudinal Community Study investigated the role of Reconnect services in improving collaboration between agencies and the extent to which collaboration was looser, or more tightly structured. The focus on collaboration and coordination reflects a recognition that services delivered within program ‘silos’ have great difficulty meeting the complex realities of people’s lives. Integrated service delivery is a public policy goal increasingly shared by governments and community organisations, and many funding contracts (including the contract for Reconnect services) require collaborative work between agencies at the community level.

All the Reconnect services involved in the study were found to have highly collaborative approaches to their work. Reconnect service providers were found to be taking a leadership role in building collaboration between agencies. Further, there was a substantial increase in the level of collaborative projects over the two stages of the study. Collaborative activity was only analysed in relation to collaboration on projects, not in relation to individual casework, and was recorded only where other service providers confirmed that Reconnect had played a substantial leadership role. In the one Reconnect service where a decline in collaborative activity had occurred between the two stages of the study, the decrease was attributable to staff turnover.

For detail on the ‘elements’ measured in Figure 4, see *Report of the Reconnect Longitudinal Study: Building Community Capacity for Early Intervention* (RPR 2003).

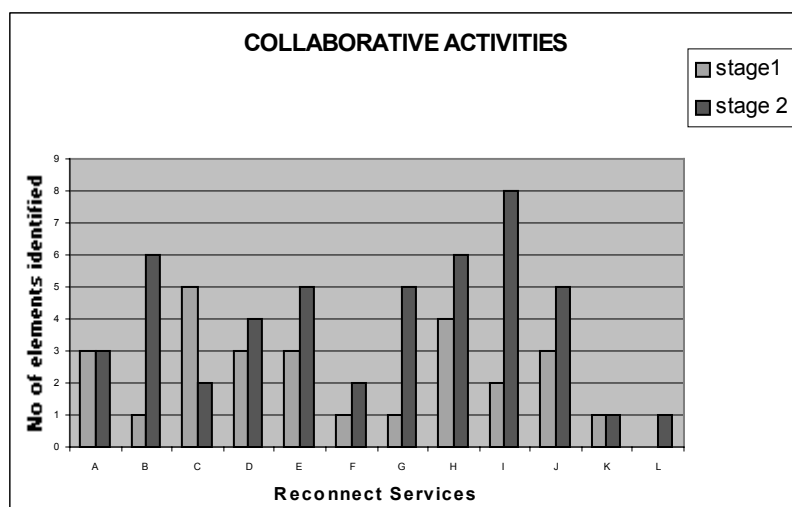


Figure 4: Reconnect services and collaborative projects in different stages

It is notable that 78% of non-Reconnect service providers interviewed named collaboration as a defining characteristic of Reconnect practice. Effective collaboration requires a clear conceptual understanding of what is involved, commitment to working collaboratively, and skills and time adequate to the task. The study found that the Good Practice Principles and program guidelines have assisted Reconnect services to be effective at collaboration.

The report of the Independent Assessments of Reconnect Services supports the Longitudinal Community Study findings. The assessments found that in relation to

‘improved coordination of services’ 76% of the round one Reconnect service assessments and 100% of round two Reconnect service assessments were rated as effective.⁴⁵

Reconnect services were all actively involved in networks of service providers. In some cases Reconnect had built new networks; in others they played a leadership role in existing networks.

The Longitudinal Community Study analysed the networks in the communities studied for operational integration according to a continuum of integration developed by Fine, Pancharatnam & Thompson (2000):

- *cooperative links*—each agency remains independent but communicates and cooperates with others in a voluntary way over specific activities which may involve common beneficiaries or goals;
- *coordination* represents a planned and deliberate meshing of the activities of separate agencies in a more systematic way and implies the surrendering of a significant degree of autonomy. Plans are fixed according to a plan or protocol, or decision-making is vested in a third party (such as a case manager) with responsibility for coordination; and
- *full integration* creates new programs where resources are pooled. The fully integrated program takes control of resources to define new benefits and services that it controls directly, rather than to better coordinate existing services.

The study found that over time there had been a slight shift in the modus operandi of service networks in which Reconnect was active towards greater levels of integration. Non-Reconnect service providers reported consistently that Reconnect had taken active leadership in driving the change.

The evaluation found that Reconnect services have ‘added value’ to service networks through their collaborative efforts, helping to build networks that identify more systemic service delivery issues and better address needs through a more coordinated approach. Reconnect services have played strategic leadership roles in forging new networks and/or influencing existing networks towards greater integration.

Community Case Study Two provides a picture of the ‘typical’ good practice approach taken by Reconnect services in relation to building greater collaboration for early intervention. The case study illustrates the range of ways such collaboration occurs—with one other agency such as a school, or with a number of agencies which have agreed to find a joint solution to an issue.

(The case of Ella, a high complexity case described in 2.1.4, also illustrates how strong collaboration between service providers can make a difference to outcomes for an individual young person.)

⁴⁵ ARTD (2003): Table 2.2 Effectiveness for each Service Requirement Round 2 and Table 2.3 Effectiveness for each Service Requirement Round 1

Community Case Study Two: Collaborative activity

Agency I is a relatively new service established under round two of Reconnect. It is located in a rural town and serves surrounding areas, which have a large Indigenous population. Over the past year, it has worked with a local high school to develop and pilot an innovative transition measure. The project originated when the school counsellor was asked to run an anger management program. The counsellor was reluctant to run a program that only targeted young people with problems, having previously found it difficult to overcome the stigmatising nature of such measures.

A Reconnect worker collaborated with the school counsellor to develop a social skills plan which modified an existing program called Rock and Water. The program used the medium of martial arts exercises to engage initial interest, encourage discipline and perseverance, and teach young people how to deal with conflict without losing self-control. Physical exercises were accompanied by group discussion to improve communication and social skills.

The project is being piloted with three classes of Year 7 boys at different academic levels, including some with significant behaviour and learning difficulties. A three-person team, comprising a teacher, the Reconnect worker and a martial arts instructor, runs each class. The pilot is being evaluated, and in the future they hope to start the program in the last year of primary, with follow-up in the first year of high school. This is the first project that the school as a whole has worked on with an external agency.

The second project arose when Reconnect staff observed that young people who came in contact with the service often become disengaged from education during a period of instability in their accommodation. The service felt there was a need for an accommodation option in the town to provide stable support for young people wishing to complete their study but unable to live at home.

Reconnect organised an initial meeting of stakeholders in youth accommodation and support services to gauge the extent of the issue, present one possible model of supported student housing (which the auspice agency had previously developed in two other areas), and ascertain support for such a model. The model involved a volunteer lead tenant filling a mentoring role for approximately three other student residents.

A further meeting was held with a wider group of stakeholders, including the Department of Housing and local Indigenous organisations. At this meeting, four agencies made a commitment to work in partnership on the project. Their commitments included: a community housing provider to manage the house, supervise the lead tenant and hold regular house meetings; JPET to provide living skills support such as training in budgeting; Reconnect to provide case management of clients; and local council to collect rent and maintain premises.

2.3.3 Reconnect's role in assisting other organisations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention

The Longitudinal Community Study surmised that if Reconnect services were increasing community capacity for early intervention, it should be possible to identify changes in other organisations' practices that indicate a greater focus on early intervention. For instance, after working with a Reconnect service, had any schools begun to examine their own practices in relation to identifying young people at risk of homelessness, or to change practices—such as approaches to discipline—that might increase the likelihood of a young person leaving home or school early? To gather

evidence of changed practices was not a simple matter, as it required other service providers both to remember any changed practices and to attribute them to Reconnect. An organisation could change its practice towards early intervention only where there was scope to do so within the organisation's culture or role. It is likely therefore that change was under-reported rather than over-reported.

The study found that the majority of Reconnect services investigated were directly responsible for other agencies' changing their practices to build greater capacity for effective early intervention in youth homelessness. Reconnect staff were able, to varying extents, to model and articulate effective early intervention approaches to working with young people and families to prevent homelessness. Figure 5 shows the number of other organisations' practices found to have changed under Reconnect's influence in the two stages of the study. For detail on the 'elements' measured in Figure 5, see *Report of the Reconnect Longitudinal Study: Building Community Capacity for Early Intervention* (RPR 2003). In only one community had no changes been found as a result of Reconnect's work.

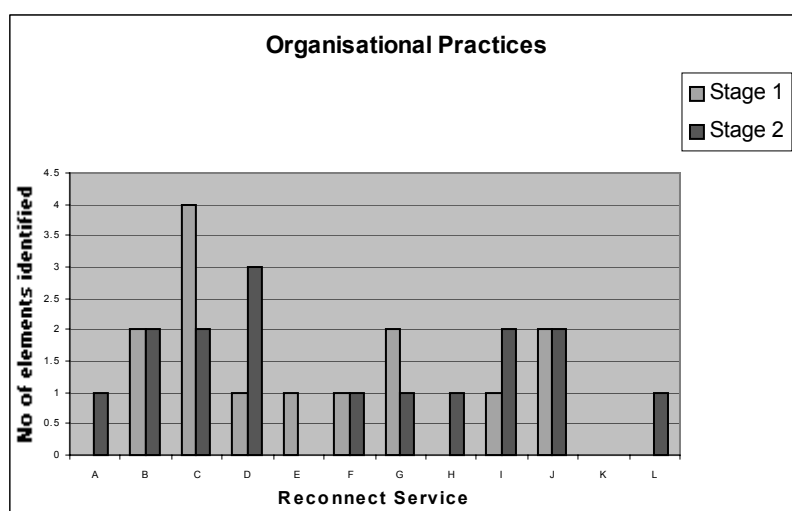


Figure 5: Reconnect services' impact on other organisations' practices

In some cases, Reconnect services influenced their own auspice agencies' practice; in others, they had an impact on the practice of external agencies. Improved practices adopted by other agencies included: adoption of more client-centred practice; use of action research; adoption of a greater 'whole of family' approach; stronger focus on early intervention; and greater responsiveness to the needs of specific groups such as young people/families from CALD backgrounds.

An example of change in an external agency involved Reconnect working with the local police to develop a referral card that police officers could hand to young people and/or their families when cautioning young people or visiting their families in relation to conflict. The use of this card led to many referrals of young people and their families in early stages of conflict.

The findings of the second stage of the study indicate that the longer the Reconnect service is operating, the greater its chance of having an impact on other service providers. Improved practices identified in stage one of the study had generally been sustained in the second stage. Further, a change in an organisation's practice in stage

one had often led to further changes by stage two. This seemed to occur where Reconnect worked with the other organisation for some time and where there was continuity in staffing in both Reconnect and the other organisation. Conversely, changes within Reconnect and/or the other organisation led to a discontinuation of changed practices.

In the following case study, a Reconnect service had an impact on the practice of other program areas within the larger organisation auspicing Reconnect.

Community Case Study Three: expanding early intervention approaches in another organisation

The CEO and another service worker of a large auspice agency reported that as a direct result of Reconnect, the agency had gained funding to develop an early intervention service for children aged six to twelve.

The Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) services operated by the agency have moved towards a greater whole-of-family approach. A referral protocol has been developed and all young people and parents are now offered a referral to Reconnect at the first point of contact.

The agency has adopted an action research strategy across the whole organisation, bringing about greater linkages between the various services and their work, including a greater focus on client outcomes. The strategic directions for the agency now include a stronger focus on helping clients to strengthen community connections through the development of collaborative approaches.

2.3.4 Reconnect's contribution to building capacity within Indigenous communities

A major finding of the Longitudinal Community Study is that the Reconnect model can be effective in having Indigenous communities participate in early intervention approaches. The Independent Assessment reports of round one and round two Reconnect services have made similar findings. The Independent Assessments found that 'services in quite different contexts had made significant progress in working with Indigenous people ... [S]uch services had creative and effective strategies for involving indigenous people.' However, the Independent Assessments also found that Reconnect services located in areas of lower Indigenous populations 'saw work with Indigenous clients as too hard or better left to specialist Indigenous services'.⁴⁶

The Longitudinal Community Study compared the approaches of three Reconnect services that had significant numbers of Indigenous clients. The first service, located in a remote area, was auspiced by an Indigenous agency and targeted exclusively to the Indigenous population. The second, located in a rural Eastern Australian town, was auspiced by a non-Indigenous agency and had a primary (but not exclusive) target of Indigenous young people. The third service, located in a remote area, was auspiced by a non-Indigenous agency and had a secondary target of Indigenous young people.

⁴⁶ ARTD (2003: 15)

The first two services were found to have been very successful at building capacity within Indigenous communities; the third less so, largely due to a combination of difficulties including problems in staff recruitment, a lack of management and leadership within the auspice agency and a lack of engagement with the Indigenous community in establishing the service.

The study found some emerging approaches that appeared to contribute to successful participation. Despite their different contexts and communities, the two Reconnect services that were successful in working with their communities had these features in common:

- strong teams including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers with relevant experience, knowledge and skills, including a gender mix;
- an emphasis on building capacity and on building comprehensive links to Indigenous organisations and community leaders; and
- capacity for adapting the Reconnect model to the context of Indigenous communities, including a strong focus on community development approaches and an emphasis on flexible casework and practical support approaches.

2.3.4.1 The importance of Indigenous staff

While it is widely accepted that an organisation needs to have Indigenous staff if it is to build strong relationships with Indigenous communities, many organisations still fail to attract and keep suitable Indigenous workers. While this can be explained in terms of overall disadvantage resulting in a small pool of potential employees, other factors such as the ‘cultural competence’⁴⁷ of organisations must also be considered. One successful Reconnect service, for example, follows the ‘Malpa system’. Developed in Central Australia, this system requires any Indigenous project or initiative in which a non-Indigenous worker is involved to have an Indigenous person as a co-worker. If there is no willing or appropriate person available, then the project simply does not proceed. This practice not only ensures that the Indigenous perspective is central to the work, but is also an effective means of training and skilling Indigenous people. Both successful Reconnect services had found it possible to employ skilled and experienced Indigenous staff, and to retain them over the life of the study. Their knowledge of what was culturally appropriate and how to build trust with Indigenous people was valued highly in the development of the service model.

However, to have culturally competent employment practices requires the non-Indigenous staff to work in genuinely respectful ways with Indigenous staff and the Indigenous community. Both Reconnect services had found non-Indigenous coordinators who were able to model strong respect for the skills and knowledge of Indigenous staff. Where strong, mutually respectful relationships are built it is often useful to have a mix of non-Indigenous and Indigenous staff within a team. For many Indigenous people working within their own communities, it is hard to escape family and cultural obligations and expectations about service delivery. Many Indigenous staff

⁴⁷ Cultural competence has been adopted as a term within Wrap Around: Systems of Care in the USA. Wrap Around is an approach to provision of services to young people and families that has many elements in common with Reconnect. Evaluation of Wrap Around found that cultural competence—the ability of an individual practitioner or organisation to provide services in a way that understands and respects the unique family and community culture of the young person—contributes to positive outcomes.

find it difficult to negotiate the tensions within communities and having a non-Indigenous staff member can sometimes be useful in helping staff to sidestep these tensions.

2.3.4.2 An explicit role of building capacity and relationships with the community

Both successful Reconnect teams have seen building capacity as fundamental to their practice. Working collaboratively is also essential to working in a culturally competent way. These services recognised the importance of ‘delivering’ on something the community or client has indicated is important to them, no matter how small that something is. It can build the community’s confidence in the service and provide the stepping-stone to larger endeavours and outcomes. For example, one Reconnect service provided staff (once a week) for a night bus that was picking up young people after dark and taking them home. This was not directly Reconnect work, but the service was needed. The gesture helped Reconnect build trust with individual young people and with other organisations in the community.

At the Reconnect Good Practice Forums, a number of services reported adopting approaches of this kind with Indigenous communities. Many reported that, in their work with Indigenous communities, being a supporter or ‘follower’ was usually more important than being a ‘leader’. They spoke of ‘piggy-backing’ on other programs or taking advantage of other agencies’ work to make contacts.

Most of all, both successful Reconnect services in the Longitudinal Community Study had developed strong links with Indigenous community leaders and with other Indigenous workers. This process had taken time and, included a good deal of social contact to allow knowledge and trust to develop. Having Indigenous staff clearly assisted this process where contacts were already established. But equally, where there were tensions and conflicts within communities, non-Indigenous staff played a significant role in reaching all sections of the community.

2.3.4.3 Adapting the Reconnect model for Indigenous communities

Both Reconnect services had worked to interpret the Reconnect Good Practice Principles and the Reconnect program guidelines in the context of their communities.

For example, the conventional definitions and understandings of such key concepts as ‘early intervention’ and ‘homelessness’ needed to be revised for a service to be effective in an Indigenous context. Few people within the Indigenous community are homeless in the sense of having no family or place to sleep. However, many young people, including very young children, can be described as homeless if the term includes having inadequate or unsafe homes. Early intervention in youth homelessness then takes on a very different meaning. This line of reasoning is consistent with the Chamberlain and MacKenzie definition of homelessness. Generally, Reconnect services have kept a focus on youth while attempting to interpret early intervention in this manner.

For one Reconnect service, community development projects carried the main burden of its early intervention activities. Work with individual young people, however, tended to involve a good deal of crisis level casework and useful early intervention projects emerged from these cases. For example, the Reconnect service found that a high percentage of its young clients had sexually transmitted diseases: as well as the

caseworker taking individual young people to the clinic for treatment, the service took the opportunity to set up a peer education project to train young people as sexual health educators.

The study found that the Reconnect service delivery model did not impede the capacity of these services to develop culturally appropriate practices. In fact, Reconnect's emphasis on reflection, and on the flexible toolbox and collaboration as Good Practice Principles has fostered this development.

Both agencies developed service approaches that involved:

- connecting young people to adults in culturally appropriate activities, such as bush camps, fishing expeditions, separate women's and men's groups;
- emphasising empowerment models in working with young people so that they take a leadership role as they develop skills;
- a high level of practical support to address the immediate concerns of young people in the areas of housing, health, education and income; *and*
- less use of clinically based counselling or formal mediation models.

The following case study provides a more detailed picture of the approach taken to build participation within one Indigenous community and to increase community capacity for early intervention.

Community Case study Four: working within an Indigenous community

The remote area, Indigenous-specific service was auspiced by an Indigenous youth organisation. This auspice presented some difficulties for the Reconnect service, as the section of the Indigenous community served by the auspicing organisation was not the specific target of the Reconnect service. The auspicing organisation was also located at some distance from the Reconnect target group and was in conflict with organisations providing services to young people and families from the Reconnect target group. This had been a major difficulty during Reconnect's establishment as there was considerable resentment about the allocation of the Reconnect service to this organisation. Nevertheless, the Reconnect service managed these issues well, systematically building relationships with the other key Indigenous organisations in the town.

By the completion of the Longitudinal Community Study the Reconnect service had:

- helped to develop a collaborative partnership with the key Indigenous agencies serving young people to provide a jointly staffed recreation service;
- established regular casework meetings among the key agencies to discuss cases and coordinate approaches to support individual young people and families;
- developed regular 'out bush', back-to-country camps for particularly vulnerable young people, staffed jointly with another main agency;
- provided an Indigenous Reconnect staff member to help to train Indigenous mothers as part of a family skills leadership program run by another organisation;

- regularly staffed another organisation’s community centre where young people congregate;
- regularly visited an adult/youth learning program conducted in a local Indigenous language; and
- trained a group of young people as peer educators on sexual health issues.

2.3.4.4 Discussion: Developing participation by Indigenous communities

The Longitudinal Community Study found that, in two out of the three services studied which targeted Indigenous communities, highly successful approaches have been adopted to gain the participation of Indigenous communities and to build capacity for early intervention. In fact, these two Reconnect services were found to have high levels of capacity building in all of the dimensions scored for this study, despite the challenges faced by their communities.

The less successful service did not have the critical internal capacity to build these relationships, namely strategic leadership, Indigenous staffing and good relationships with key Indigenous leaders.

This finding is consonant with the results of the Independent Assessments of individual Reconnect services, which found that some of the more ‘mainstream’ Reconnect services have failed to recognise the importance of developing more culturally appropriate approaches in order to engage Indigenous communities.

The Reconnect program guidelines and Good Practice Principles have enabled services to be responsive to the needs of their communities, while still being recognisably ‘Reconnect’. However, it may be useful to look at ways of using the program guidelines to strengthen the likely success of Reconnect services targeting Indigenous communities in the future by:

- examining the consultation process and connections of organisations with Indigenous communities prior to funding a specific auspice;
- requiring as part of the tender process that non-Indigenous auspice organisations clearly articulate their approach to cultural competence — that is, their approach to recruiting, supporting and working with Indigenous staff;
- ensuring that there is good management and coordination that can provide day to day guidance and leadership for the Reconnect staff; and
- continuing to recognise community development approaches as essential within a Reconnect model for these communities.

2.3.5 Factors affecting Reconnect services’ work in building community capacity for early intervention

Reconnect’s work in building capacity appears to be cumulative: the second stage of the Longitudinal Community Study regularly identified additional examples of Reconnect services having an impact on infrastructure, collaboration and the practices of other agencies. However, the study also identified factors that have worked against the

accumulation of capacity building. In particular, the effects of staff turnover, of restructuring and, most importantly, of funding limitations, were identified as leading to a marked decline in capacity building in two of the Reconnect services studied.

Eight factors were identified as affecting the twelve Reconnect services' contribution to building communities' capacity for early intervention:

2.3.5.1 Community characteristics

The strengths and challenges of the community served by a Reconnect service have an impact on the service's work in building capacity. Reconnect services located in urban areas, for example, are more likely to have access to a large number of well linked services, a pool of skilled potential staff to draw on, and greater access to resources at the community level than Reconnect services in rural and remote locations. However, rural and remote communities tend to have higher levels of connectedness and a less confused service system that make it easier to build relationships and encourage collaboration.

An area's history, its population, the level of economic capital available and existing service infrastructure can enhance or constrain the work of Reconnect. However, even in areas where these factors created enormous obstacles for Reconnect services (or where they seemed less daunting), they did not in themselves predict the Reconnect services' success in building capacity.

2.3.5.2 Complexity of the target group and service networks

The study included five Reconnect services that targeted specific population groups—Indigenous young people, refugee and immigrant communities, and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transsexual young people. In each of these services, the complexities of the target population affected the service's approach to building community capacity. Typically, the service was required to work with two networks—a mainstream youth and/or family service network and any networks clustered around the specific population group. While this did not prevent these specialist services successfully building community capacity, it did extend the number of agencies and groupings with whom the Reconnect service needed to work, and the number of relationships it had to build and manage in order for capacity building to be effective. Service and staff continuity are particularly important in such services, and success is likely to take longer.

2.3.5.3 The passage of time

The passage of time contributes to a Reconnect service's effectiveness in building capacity. The Longitudinal Community Study indicates that the capacity building effect is cumulative, as effective collaboration and skills enhancement typically lead in turn to changes in organisations' practices and to changes in the service system.

The study also found, however, that while the passage of time allows Reconnect services to become well established and to impact on capacity building where the Reconnect model is working well, the converse also applies: where there are difficulties within the Reconnect service, its impact can decrease or fail to be realised with the passage of time.

2.3.5.4 Organisational supports and auspice arrangements

The first stage of the study raised issues concerning three Reconnect services in relation to structural and/or management arrangements that were found to have negative impact on their capacity to work effectively, namely:

- appropriateness of the auspice body;
- structure and resource capacity of the auspice body; and
- splitting the Reconnect service between agencies.

By the second stage of the study these issues had been addressed to some extent, in some cases partly in response to the study. Nonetheless, organisational issues have continued to have an impact on capacity building. The Independent Assessments of Reconnect services also found that the major weakness in Reconnect services was in the area of effective management practices. Where Reconnect services are placed with community organisations that have limited infrastructure capacity (as is often the case in rural and remote areas), it may be even more important to put mechanisms in place to compensate for these structural difficulties.

2.3.5.5 The role of teamwork and leadership in capacity building

The key factors in a Reconnect service's ability to build community capacity are:

- a clear understanding of the Reconnect model and its role in building community capacity;
- ability to balance casework with other activities, and use casework to strengthen inter-agency collaboration and identify systemic issues;
- the capacity of staff to work well as a cohesive team; and
- strong leadership in the Reconnect team and in the management of the auspice organisation.

2.3.5.6 Balancing casework and community capacity building

Balancing casework and capacity building was often difficult to manage. The Longitudinal Community Study found that three services, all original pilots and therefore well established, were struggling to maintain their capacity building role in the face of increasing demand for casework. These services had also experienced significant financial constraints, as funding levels had not kept pace with substantial cost increases. The challenges posed by increased demand had resulted in an undermining of the Reconnect casework model (by the introduction of waiting lists, employment of less skilled staff, and a move away from holistic assessment) as well as a withdrawal from involvement in broader service system improvement.

Services targeting specific populations such as Indigenous or CALD communities had developed collaborative projects with other service providers that acted in part as a substitute for individual casework. These services tended not to see a choice between casework and community capacity building, but rather viewed the two approaches as an integrated response to working effectively with young people and their families.

2.3.5.7 Staffing of Reconnect services

For many of the Reconnect services in the Longitudinal Community Study, staff turnover was a major problem, as government agencies or State and Territory funded community organisations generally pay higher salaries for skilled staff. In the course of the study, five of the twelve services had a change of team leader, six caseworker positions changed and only one service's staffing remain stable. Three of the changing team leader positions were in services that had been operating more than five years. However, given that five of the twelve services in the study had been operating for less than two years, the overall level of turnover is noteworthy. It is reasonable to assume that this issue is mirrored across the program as a whole.

Staff turnover is likely to become increasingly significant in the future as Reconnect services continue to work with clients with high needs and in communities with scarce resources. Over time, many skilled workers are likely to be attracted to positions that pay higher salaries and have greater organisational resources to support their work. Yet without a skilled and relatively stable workforce, Reconnect will not be able to provide high quality interventions that can effectively support young people and reduce risk of homelessness.

The Longitudinal Community Study also found that the Reconnect services that were most effective in building community capacity were those that had strong teamwork and clear leadership, with a person available to actively coordinate and manage the service. Staffing levels of many Reconnect services do not allow for a staff position to fill this management and leadership function.

As the program matures, it will become increasingly important to develop a strategy to address staffing issues. A recent decision to index program funding will help existing services to close funding gaps that have arisen over the period of the program's development. However, while indexation is a positive and important step, it will not be sufficient to address the staffing issues emerging across the program as a whole.

2.3.5.8 Reconnect national infrastructure increases the effectiveness of local Reconnect services

A major finding of the Longitudinal Community Study is that the success of Reconnect in building community capacity has been supported by the national infrastructure provided to the program. In particular, bringing Reconnect staff together to discuss practice and gain insight into new approaches was important in building consistency in the Reconnect model. It also allowed Reconnect services to act as a bridge to other communities and other resources.

A second contribution from the national infrastructure has been the emphasis on and resourcing of action research. This has signalled to Reconnect services that evaluation and reflection are key components of the program and that the views of stakeholders are crucial in building a service that meets local needs. While action research approaches varied considerably, it nonetheless informed the practice of all Reconnect services. At one end of the continuum, where services had a good understanding of action research, it was regularly used to examine aspects of work and to develop new approaches. At the other end, Reconnect staff used action research more as a reflective tool in staff meetings, ensuring that these meetings at least had a focus on what appeared to be working and what did not. The Longitudinal Community Study found evidence that a

number of other service providers have taken up action research as a result of working with Reconnect.

2.3.6 Conclusions and implications

The Longitudinal Community Study, the Independent Assessments and the two case study reports on Reconnect's work in networking found widespread evidence that Reconnect services are effective in building capacity for early intervention within the communities where they are located.

The Longitudinal Community Study reached eight conclusions:

- Reconnect services are highly effective, relative to their small size, in increasing community infrastructure for early intervention;
- Reconnect services build capacity through collaborative approaches and by strengthening service networks;
- Reconnect services build capacity by assisting other organisations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention;
- Reconnect services' positive impact on capacity continues to build over time where these Reconnect services have access to adequate resources and stable management;
- the flexibility of the Reconnect model can be highly effective in achieving participation by Indigenous communities in approaches that support early intervention;
- community characteristics, service infrastructure and location can enhance or constrain the ability of Reconnect services to build community capacity, but will not predict the level of capacity building achieved;
- a clear understanding of and commitment to the Reconnect model, teamwork, and leadership are all key factors in an individual Reconnect service's ability to build community capacity; and
- the national infrastructure that supports the Reconnect program has been effective in contributing to the level of impact made by Reconnect services in building community capacity for early intervention.

The study provided a positive picture of Reconnect services achieving remarkable outcomes in enhancing community capacity given their small size. However, it raised serious questions about how much can continue to be expected of these services if their funding base erodes.

Part Three: Future Directions for Reconnect

3.1 Effectiveness of the overall program

The evaluation has found that Reconnect is an effective early intervention program in reducing the risk of youth homelessness. There is evidence that:

- the majority of young people assisted by the program were reached before they became homeless;
- Reconnect improved the stability of young people's living situations;
- Reconnect achieved family reconciliation, by improving young people's and families' capacity to manage conflict and to communicate effectively;
- Reconnect made improvements in young people's self-reported engagement with education, employment and community;
- a high level of satisfaction was reported by young people and families using Reconnect services;
- Reconnect improved the capacity of the service system to intervene effectively with young people and families on issues relating to youth homelessness in communities where Reconnect services are located;
- where Reconnect services targeted Indigenous communities, they worked effectively to gain the participation of those communities; and
- Reconnect has been effectively targeted and managed by FaCS at a National and State/Territory level.

These are substantial achievements in a program of this size. The significant and positive findings of the evaluation indicate that the Reconnect service delivery model developed by the original pilot program has served the program well.

The main challenge for the program is how to meet the increasing demand for the service at current resourcing levels. The effectiveness of the program in assisting young people and families in highly disadvantaged areas suggest that the program model could usefully be extended to other areas should funding become available.

Recommendation

R1 That the Reconnect program continue to be funded as an early intervention program for reducing the risk of youth homelessness. That, since the program has provided evidence that the Reconnect service delivery model is effective, consideration be given to expanding the program to other high need areas.

3.2 Reconnect service delivery design

The Reconnect service delivery design has been extensively articulated through:

- documentation of action research undertaken by individual Reconnect services;
- documentation of a national series of Good Practice Forums, which brought together all operating Reconnect services for two-day forums in December 2001. At the forums, service providers sought to articulate 'good practice', review the Good Practice Principles first developed in the pilot program, and identify new and emerging issues in service delivery;
- Independent Assessments of Performance of round one and round two Reconnect services, which allowed confirmation of each Reconnect service's work in relation to the Good Practice Principles and other program requirements; and
- the Reconnect Longitudinal Community Study and the two earlier case study projects, which provide a detailed picture of eighteen Reconnect services' work in relation to collaboration and capacity building activity.

These substantial sources of information about the program consistently confirm the soundness of key decisions and directions taken in the Reconnect Program's previous phases of piloting, establishment and development. These principles include:

- the need for a program, focused on early intervention, that is dedicated to young people at risk of early home leaving or homelessness;
- the importance of working, where possible, with the whole family;
- the need to respond to all of the concerns and problems of clients, not just one aspect of their lives;
- the emphasis on cooperation and collaboration with other agencies and institutions;
- the value of developing principles to guide the work, and of building in the capacity to learn from and improve on positive outcomes through action research; and
- the importance of encouraging sound management practices and governance that support and encourage the Good Practice Principles.

The evaluation also demonstrated that the Reconnect program has grown and developed as a result of its own learnings. As a whole, the program is now more confident in its core work and has made major gains during its first few years. There have been important advances in areas that the program's pilot stage identified as critical to its effectiveness.

Some of the most significant of these advances are:

- the establishment, in most regions, of smoother referral protocols and relationships with Centrelink, a significant stakeholder which provides

Reconnect with 12% of its referrals. (79% of round one and 97% of round two services were assessed as having effective relationships with Centrelink.)⁴⁸;

- more productive collaboration with schools. Reconnect is a critical service for many schools as it can provide a bridge to the broader welfare system;
- better engagement with young people through a greater and more innovative use of group work. (Some 10,000 clients have participated in Reconnect group programs) Services reported a range of innovative approaches including a greater use of peer-support programs and small-group counselling;
- the establishment of services specifically for Indigenous communities. These services are adapting Reconnect models of practice to ensure that they are culturally appropriate for working with young people in Indigenous communities;
- the wise use of brokerage funds to allow for flexible and cost-efficient responses to diverse client needs. The performance assessments found that ‘services tended to use brokerage funds with prudence, seeking free services where they are available and conscious of not being perceived as “handouts”’⁴⁹; and
- the development of collective knowledge of effective processes and mechanisms to encourage and sustain inter-agency collaboration.

The evaluation has also highlighted a number of issues for Reconnect that will only be resolved through careful and strategic consideration.

3.2.1 Exploring ‘early intervention’ issues in Reconnect

The experience of Reconnect services confirms both the need for, and the value of, an approach that seeks to ameliorate problems before they become compounded or entrenched. The services readily acknowledge, however, that there is an overarching tension in the practical application of such an ‘early intervention’ approach. The theoretically distinct modes of service delivery—prevention, early intervention, crisis work and long-term support—are often notoriously difficult to distinguish in practice. It is not uncommon for work with a particular individual or family to include elements of all these approaches, either simultaneously or at different times.

Services may find it difficult to maintain a strict early intervention focus for a number of reasons:

- the dearth of other services in some communities leads to pressure on the Reconnect service to take on general youth work or unplanned and responsive crisis work. In some situations, it is not merely difficult to resist this pressure—it may be unethical or counterproductive to do so; and
- Reconnect services often receive ‘last resort’ referrals from other agencies or concerned individuals—young people who have been through the service treadmill but are still experiencing major problems. Many of the young people have already disengaged from family, education and community prior to

⁴⁸ ARTD (2003: 17)

⁴⁹ ARTD (2003: 14)

Reconnect involvement. Many Reconnect services find it ethically difficult to refuse to work with these young people even though it would be inaccurate to describe this work as early intervention. Others are swayed by the pragmatic consideration that it is only by ‘taking them on’ that the Reconnect service will persuade the relevant agency (often the State welfare authority) to accept its rightful responsibility.

The two distinctions which are most difficult to keep ‘pure’ are:

- the distinction between prevention and early intervention work; and
- the distinction between early intervention and longer-term intensive support.

The line between prevention and early intervention can be very porous. Much group work with young people and parents, for example, contains elements of both. Furthermore, same activities or interactions (whether in casework or group work) which are ‘preventative’ for one client could be classed as ‘early intervention’ for another. From one point of view, these complexities matter little in real life and real practice. But from another, a better understanding of the distinction could lead to better service constructs and better client outcomes.

For many Reconnect services, particularly those working with Indigenous young people, it is hard to discern when an ‘early intervention’ point is possible, as in reality many young people’s lives are so difficult by the time they reach Reconnect that intensive long term support is required. The high levels of case complexity found among Reconnect clients and the gradual decrease in the ‘early intervention’ practice of the program indicate the extent to which Reconnect services are experiencing this tension.

It is difficult to expect one service in a local community to take primary responsibility for early intervention. Clearly, for youth homelessness to be substantially reduced, it is critical to employ strategies that build a focus on early intervention across the service system. The Longitudinal Community Study found evidence that Reconnect services were able to help build such a focus.

3.2.1.1 Case complexity and early intervention

The evaluation found that a third of Reconnect cases can be classified as highly complex while only a small percentage of cases have no complexity factors associated with them.

Highly complex cases appear to match the circumstances of young people whom other systems would classify as having intensive support needs that require extensive assistance over long periods of time. Reconnect appears to have positive impact on low and medium complexity cases, while it is unclear the extent to which the outcomes being sought by the program can be found in the short term for highly complex cases.

Reconnect services are being placed in a difficult situation by the number of highly complex cases they are encountering. The Reconnect model is well suited to have a positive impact, in the long term, on these cases, given its focus on holistic, client-driven approaches, yet current funding levels of Reconnect are insufficient for intensive support services. Other service systems indicate that for these young people, caseloads

of one caseworker to three or fewer young people may be appropriate, and access to a wide range of specialist services is needed.

Many Reconnect services have no choice about the complexity of cases they take on, particularly if the service is targeting CALD or Indigenous young people, or is located in areas of significant social disadvantage or in areas where few other relevant services exist. While Reconnect services are making good use of collaborative approaches to support young people (thus utilising the resources of other service providers), in many communities there are insufficient resources to address the issues underlying the risk of youth homelessness.

This presents a serious challenge for Reconnect services, as positive outcomes for young people are unlikely to be sustained in the long term without the provision of additional capacity within communities to deal with them. If Reconnect services direct greater resources to young people with high level needs, they may divert resources from those who require shorter term, less intensive intervention. There is a danger that less demanding cases may end up getting a one-size-fits-all package. This would seriously undermine the Reconnect model and jeopardise the program's positive outcomes. There is some evidence that this trend is already emerging in the program.

The evaluation does not support the adoption of stricter criteria that would prevent Reconnect services from assisting highly complex cases. This would deprive many young people in severely disadvantaged communities of assistance from a service model that may best meet their needs. Nonetheless, the evaluation indicates that Reconnect services, *as they are currently resourced*, may be most effective with young people with less intensive needs.

Ideally, State and Territory and Australian Governments should work together to identify the continuum of services required within a specific area of disadvantage and explore models for joint funding of aspects of Reconnect and other services needed to prevent youth homelessness. Reconnect services would then be able to focus on early intervention approaches for low to medium complex cases and have additional State or Territory funding to enable them to assist cases of high complexity. Such an approach could be usefully trialled in services that have significant numbers of high complexity cases and/or in areas recognised by both governments as having priority need.

Unless the issue of complexity is addressed, it is likely that Reconnect services will continue to struggle to maintain a focus on early intervention. The increase in the proportion of young people coming to Reconnect who have previously left home is a signal for the program that the focus on early intervention needs to be monitored and that support needs to be put in place to enable the primary early intervention focus to continue.

Recommendations

R 2 That the Australian Government initiate discussions with State and Territory Governments to investigate funding approaches that could increase the resources available to better support young people with intensive support needs. That funding approaches seek to build on the strengths of the service delivery model established by Reconnect.

R 3 That the Youth Bureau consider ways to increase highly disadvantaged communities' access to the range of programs it funds. In high needs areas where there is a Reconnect service, but no JPET, YAS or equivalent agency at the local level, that funding strategies be considered that can better support the full range of intervention approaches.

R 4 That the Youth Bureau initiate discussions with other sections of FaCS that fund programs supporting families to see whether joint funding strategies may increase the capacity of services to reach high need young people and their families.

3.2.2 Maintaining the ‘full toolbox’ of intervention approaches

Reconnect is still a ‘cutting edge’ service delivery model. The evaluation found that Reconnect services consistently utilised flexible, client-driven intervention approaches that are rarely seen in other services for young people. The range of interventions used is consistent with evidence-based research on promoting resilience in vulnerable young people.

A critical design feature of the Reconnect Program is the flexibility of the support it provides. Flexibility is grounded in the program’s determination to tailor services to fit the particular needs and circumstances of its clients. The term used in the program to describe this approach is ‘maintaining a toolbox of interventions’. The evaluation found that the ‘tool box’ approach is highly valued by Reconnect clients and other community service providers and has contributed to positive client outcomes and to an increase in capacity for early intervention within communities.

As the program develops, some external factors are emerging that affect the services’ capacity to maintain the full toolbox approach:

- increasing demand has led some services to develop strategies that are in conflict with the Reconnect model (such as introducing waiting lists, providing one standard intervention approach, or limiting support time to a set period). Increased demand may result from a lack of other services in the area, the high level of need in the area or recognition of Reconnect’s effectiveness;
- there is a danger that certain types of practices or interventions will be favoured over others. This tendency can develop because staff are comfortable and/or confident with a particular type of practice, or because other agencies, clients or the community generally expect Reconnect to deliver a particular type of service; and
- finally, in any system, there is a systemic tendency towards an increasing rigidity which can be successfully resisted only if deliberate countermeasures are set in place. As the Reconnect program ‘ages’, and as each service builds up its own history, the danger of narrowness or rigidity in service delivery will increase.

The continuing flexibility of the Reconnect model can be safeguarded at the *individual service* level by steps such as:

- Reconnect services allocating reasonable funds for training, and a sufficient amount of staff time for self-directed learning and to keep abreast of professional developments;
- ensuring that brokerage funds are being used effectively to extend the service’s toolbox when needed (but not solely for this purpose, which would indicate some structural problem); and
- periodically auditing work to ascertain the mix of interventions being used and how well the work tallies with client need and with the ‘service map’ of the community.

3.2.2.1 Demand and capacity constraints in using the full tool box

The evaluation found that demand for Reconnect services is increasing. The extent of this demand is difficult to measure, as caseloads vary across Reconnect services due to:

- the different methodologies that are being used for intervention (for instance, family or individual counselling may require smaller caseloads than the provision of mediation, while community development approaches may result in lower individual caseloads);
- the different needs of clients related to case complexity (for instance, more complex cases tend to require more intensive support, and support to CALD clients may require more time where interpreters are used);
- the different demands on time for travel or for developing collaborative relationships (for instance, in a number of rural areas, working with specific target populations requires the development of mainstream collaborative relationships as well as relationships with more specialised networks); and
- high staff turnover resulting in decreased caseloads, particularly in areas where it is difficult to recruit staff.

From 1999 to 2003, Reconnect funding was not indexed to keep pace with inflation. In that period there was a substantial pay increase for Reconnect staff in some States on the Social and Community Services award and even greater increases for staff employed under other awards such as those covering health workers. Many services reported that the lack of funding increases resulted in greater stress levels. In some instances, auspice bodies picked up the shortfall, but for the vast majority of community agencies this was not an option. Some services reportedly met the difficulty by replacing staff with younger and less experienced staff, who could be paid at a lower rate.

There is some evidence that staff turnover in Reconnect is high, although exact turnover rates cannot be verified through the available data. High levels of staff turnover are detrimental to Reconnect for a variety of reasons including loss of continuity in relationships with other services, loss of continuity for clients, potential loss of skills/mix of staff and the increased training costs associated with new staff.

There is also some indication that the program may be undermined if the skill level and capacity of Reconnect is not maintained—parents who entered Reconnect services more recently were significantly less satisfied than those who had received services a year to two years previously.⁵⁰

Staff resourcing is a serious issue for the program. The evaluation has found that for services to be effective Reconnect needs to have staff with a high level of skills, leadership and auspice support. The Longitudinal Community Study concluded that, for a Reconnect service to have an impact on building community capacity and on ensuring positive outcomes for individual young people, it needs to have the equivalent of a minimum of two skilled full-time caseworkers and a coordinator/manager who can undertake both internal management and leadership in building community capacity. For Reconnect services targeting specific population groups or covering wider

⁵⁰ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients; (2003: 109)

geographic and isolated areas, these minimum staffing levels may not be sufficient. As already noted, where individual Reconnect services have a large proportion of high complexity cases, higher caseworker-to client-ratios are needed.

Reconnect will benefit from the introduction of full indexation for the program which commenced in the 2003–4 financial year. In addition to indexation, Reconnect services have received increases to make up shortfalls created by the earlier absence of indexation. This will allow services to keep operating at original baseline levels.

Apart from attending to the issue of adequate resourcing, other possible responses to the increased demand might include:

- including a refined case complexity scale within the data system (as in the Family Homelessness Pilot Program) to help measure distribution within each service of high, medium and low complexity cases and to track movements in the distribution of these across the whole program. This may assist services to manage case loads better and enable evidence to be collected concerning needs for additional resources to cope with demand in specific areas; and
- developing annual agreements between FaCS staff in the State and Territory offices and each Reconnect service to determine what level and mix of services can be expected, thereby enabling service targets to be set and monitored. This could be useful for planning at the service level as well as at the program level.

To help maintain the skill level of Reconnect staff, FaCS could include a program-wide audit of staff strengths and deficits, and develop a ‘skills strengthening strategy’ for the program as a whole. Such a strategy might involve: broadening Reconnect services’ access to evidence-based research; examining options for ensuring that strong supervision and training are enforced within organisations auspicing Reconnect services; and examining the costs of employing differently skilled staff.

Recommendations

R 5 That the Youth Bureau investigate methods for measuring demand over time, with the aims of assisting Reconnect services to better manage demand and enabling the program to better link demand to appropriate funding levels.

R 6 That the Youth Bureau conduct an audit of strengths and deficits of staff across the Reconnect program in order to develop a ‘skills strengthening strategy’ for the program as a whole.

3.2.3 Working effectively with specific client groups

3.2.3.1 Indigenous communities

In the pilot period, various factors precluded the establishment of any Reconnect service specifically dedicated to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and families. The final report of the Prime Ministerial Youth Homeless Taskforce highlighted this as a critical gap to be filled as the program developed. That challenge was taken seriously, and there are now 14 Indigenous-specific Reconnect services in operation with another being developed. Indigenous services can be:

- auspiced by an Indigenous agency and serve Indigenous communities exclusively, or have a broader focus that also reaches non-Indigenous young people;
- auspiced by a non-Indigenous agency and serve Indigenous communities exclusively or as a primary target within a whole community.

In addition, many mainstream services are located in areas where there are significant numbers of Indigenous young people. While these services are not Indigenous-specific services, they have the potential to assist significant numbers of Indigenous clients.

Significant progress in developing a Reconnect model to meet the needs of Indigenous communities has been made since the start of the Reconnect program. As discussed above, the Reconnect Longitudinal Community Study found that two of the three Reconnect services studied that had an Indigenous target had been very effective at building collaborative and innovative approaches to engage Indigenous young people and families. Similarly, the Performance Assessments of individual Reconnect services found that many services had made significant progress in this arena.⁵¹

Key issues and continuing challenges for program managers in FaCS, Indigenous-specific Reconnect services, and other services already doing significant work with Indigenous clients and communities, include the following:

- the process by which services are established will inevitably be a critical determinant of outcomes. FaCS has recognised that competitive tendering is inappropriate to Indigenous services and has attempted to use a more collaborative, developmental approach. Further strategies might usefully be explored—such as creating regional funding sources pooled from different departments and programs, which might allow communities to move beyond the rigidity of set service models;
- the existence of tensions and competition within and between many Indigenous communities needs to be openly acknowledged. These can be deep-rooted and long-standing, often originating in colonial disruption to Indigenous social and political structures and dislocation from ‘country’. They also have a continuing impact on how and by whom services will be used, and on their effectiveness;
- the causal connections that exist in all communities between personal problems and broader social and economic issues are particularly strong in Indigenous communities. This inevitably means that Indigenous-specific services will need to place a greater emphasis on working for systemic change and community capacity building than is the norm in mainstream services;
- Indigenous services need to come together to identify emerging good practice and to develop more appropriate mechanisms for evaluation of their functioning. Existing methods of evaluation and data collection assume a different model of practice from that emerging in these services; and
- both the Good Practice Forum report and the report of the Independent Assessments of round two Reconnect services identified the need to ensure that

⁵¹ ARTD (2003: 15-16)

mainstream services better address the issue of supporting Indigenous clients. FaCS will need to develop strategies to encourage Reconnect services without large Indigenous communities to adopt culturally appropriate practices that ensure accessibility for local Indigenous clients. This is particularly important given the over-representation of Indigenous clients in the SAAP system.

As a way of assisting this shift in practice, it may be useful to strengthen more mainstream services' understanding of what constitutes culturally appropriate service delivery and how to self-evaluate progress on this front. One useful approach has been developed in New Zealand as part of evaluating culturally appropriate health promotion services. A list of principles based on this approach is being used in the evaluation of the Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot (Ratima, 2000).⁵²

3.2.3.2 Culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD)

Reconnect services targeting CALD young people are located primarily in three capital cities (Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane), reflecting the demographic spread of young people from these backgrounds.

The Independent Assessment report and the Reconnect Longitudinal Community Study both found that these services were very successful in their work, often having innovative practice in groupwork and approaches to building community capacity.

The number of Reconnect services targeting CALD communities is small and CALD clients represent only about 6% of clients overall. However, as the Reconnect database does not collect data on the CALD status of parents, this may be an underestimation of the numbers of CALD families assisted by the program.

There are significant numbers of young people and parents from CALD backgrounds in most urban and some rural areas of Australia. It appears that many Reconnect services have limited understanding of how to reach and work with these young people and families. According to the Independent Assessment report of round two Reconnect services, 'Some services acknowledged their limited understanding of working cross-culturally, and had links to specialised services. Others were not aware of their limitations and did not appreciate that culturally appropriate service delivery is a complex matter, and not just a matter of relying on translating promotional information or having access to interpreters.'⁵³

3.2.3.3 Supporting and working with parents

A key feature that distinguishes the Reconnect program from others that work with young people or address youth homelessness is its focus on the whole family of the young person at risk. This is an essential component of its early intervention strategy, and is part of the core work of all Reconnect services.

⁵² The principles include: links to Indigenous development; utilisation of Indigenous resources; cultural affirmation; leadership endorsement; clarity of goals, quality of service and adequate resources; operating in Indigenous domains; family and community focus of programs.

⁵³ ARTD (2003: 16)

While all Reconnect services undertake casework with parents, and many provide support groups or skills development programs, it is likely that this area of practice would benefit from more concerted attention by most services and across the program as a whole. This proposition is supported by the results of both longitudinal studies, which found that parents were generally less positive about the program than young people and that positive outcomes for parents were less sustainable than for young people in the areas of management of family conflict and communication.

This conclusion is also supported by the frequency with which Reconnect staff, when discussing the issue at the Good Practice Forums, expressed the feeling that they would like to ‘do better’ with parents. It seems that, when given the chance to reflect holistically on their work, many workers are not as comfortable or satisfied with their ‘parent practice’ as they are with their ‘youth practice’.

There are a number of possible explanations:

- the age profile or work backgrounds of staff may subtly undermine service capacity in this area—a reminder of the importance of diversity in staff selection practices;
- working with parents is a particularly difficult and challenging area of practice. There is evidence from other studies that a coercive parenting style is more prevalent among disadvantaged parents (Sanson, 2002: 22). Working with parents using these parenting styles requires skilled intervention;
- it is harder to access parents as a population group because there is no single common ‘site’ where they gather as an identifiable group (unlike, for example, the gathering of young people in schools); and
- young people are the primary clients of a Reconnect service. When time is limited, Reconnect caseworkers tend to place priority on working with young people and may not have thought of cost-effective methods to support parents. Parents interviewed for the Reconnect Longitudinal Community Study frequently stated they wanted more time with caseworkers and many expressed the need for facilitated support groups with other parents facing similar issues.

In addition to exploring ways to work effectively with parents in general, some Reconnect services have also investigated methods of better engaging fathers. More than half the young people responding to the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients stated they had little or no closeness to their fathers, and only 22% of Reconnect clients live in two-parent families. These figures indicate that for a significant proportion of cases fathers will be hard to engage, as they do not have extensive connections with their children. However, the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients found that 26% of parents responding to the survey were fathers, indicating a reasonably high level of response. There were also some indications from the same study that young people reported an increase in closeness with fathers following support from Reconnect.⁵⁴

While it will be important for Reconnect services to continue to examine ways to engage fathers across all groups, it should also be recognised that the loss of active fathers in young people’s lives has generally occurred prior to adolescence and reflects

⁵⁴ Longitudinal Study of Reconnect Clients (2003: 69)

the difficult life circumstances that have led young people to Reconnect. It is likely that Reconnect will only be able to increase young people's closeness with their fathers if the fathers are still actively present in the young people's lives.

Recommendations

R 7 That the Reconnect program support the development of good practice guides that provide Reconnect services with practical and evidence-based strategies for working with Indigenous communities, CALD communities and parents.

R 8 That the Reconnect program uses opportunities within the management of the program to assist Reconnect services to focus on increasing access to Indigenous and CALD young people, including: changes to the data collection and reporting requirements; strengthening information sharing and exchange between Reconnect services on working with these groups.

3.3 Reconnect Program Management

3.3.1 Ongoing development and evaluation

The Reconnect program has had a strong evaluative focus.

At the service level, action research is embedded in the practice model; independent assessments against the program requirements and the Good Practice Principles have been undertaken of individual services for the first two funding rounds and are currently being undertaken for the third round of services; services are required to submit self-evaluation reports and data to the RAD.

At the Departmental level, FaCS staff in some areas provide useful feedback to the services on their self-evaluation reports; the ReconnectAR website is supported and monitored; a Reconnect database has been established; significant funds have been expended on undertaking the longitudinal research and overall evaluation of the program.

However, there are gaps and shortcomings which need to be addressed if the program is to continue to have an evaluative focus.

3.3.1.1 Evidence-based research and evaluation

The Reconnect program needs to maintain an emphasis on evaluation and research if it is to remain 'cutting edge'.

While the use of action research at the service level ensures responsiveness and the identification of issues, it will not in itself assist in evaluating outcomes of different approaches across the program. Nor will the focus on action research ensure that the program is informed by research undertaken elsewhere on issues of relevance to Reconnect service delivery.

The Reconnect program should address the following questions in order to improve practice:

- What type of mediation practice is effective and for whom? The focus groups held with young people and parents for the Longitudinal Community Study found mixed satisfaction with mediation as a tool for intervention. It is also apparent that mediation approaches vary enormously across the program?
- What is the most effective way of supporting parents. Do outcomes for young people improve if parents are worked with effectively?
- Are better outcomes achieved for young people through the use of peer education models than through course delivery models?
- How should Reconnect services structure their intervention approaches to take account of gender differences? Can different intervention and promotion approaches engage more boys than are currently reached?

- What length and intensity of support produces the best outcomes? (Recent research on relationships counselling, for instance, indicates that a minimum of five sessions is needed to produce any change.)
- What intervention approaches work best for clients with different complexity levels.?

Some of these questions are currently being explored in research on similar programs or with similar groups of young people and parents, while some may require research undertaken specifically for Reconnect. Funds may need to be set aside for research purposes and for the Reconnect program to develop strategic alliances with other research efforts.

Currently, Reconnect is not well known in related research arenas, such as in adolescent health or child development research. If Reconnect is to be successful in the long term, it will need to be better informed about the precise strategies that are most likely to be effective. Reconnect also has much to offer the research field as there are few programs that have such a flexible early intervention focus.

3.3.1.2 Reconnect data collection

Two related issues need to be addressed in order to sharpen and strengthen Reconnect's evaluative focus: the nature of the data collection system and the lack of capacity for accurate analysis and reporting on program data.

Reconnect's data collection system is not optimal. It was adapted from the FaCSLINK and SAAP data collection system and as such was not designed to collect data that is specific to Reconnect. The evaluation process found the following deficiencies:

- data recorded about parents is inadequate, making it difficult to identify the characteristics of the parents using Reconnect services, or to gauge the extent and content of services' work with parents. Overall, parents were less positive than young people about Reconnect. Without adequate data, it is difficult for either individual services or the program as a whole to evaluate their work with parents;
- the current data records the length of time a young person is supported but not the intensity of this support. Nor does it record anything about the complexity of the situation of the young person and their family. (Some of the data collected can be used for approximate measures on some of these factors, such as information on reasons for seeking support, type of support provided and duration of support). This deficiency means there is no clear evidence on which to base decisions about caseload levels or about balancing casework and community capacity building;
- other parts of the Reconnect model are not recorded. For example, immediacy of response is a critical aspect of the model, yet no data item records how quickly families are seen and whether this makes a difference to outcomes. Similarly, neither community development work nor provision of secondary consultation is recorded, both critical aspects of Reconnect work; and
- information is not collected on case goals and the extent to which these are achieved. Such data may provide a better measure than 'engagement'. There is

limited opportunity for client feedback on the quality of service received and perceptions of outcomes, particularly in relation to case goals.

There are other issues related to the data collection:

- some data definitions are non-standard;
- there are difficulties with individual data items, such as the conflation of labour force status and participation in education categories, which render the data difficult to compare with other data sets; and
- basic reports on the data are difficult to retrieve.

The move to an electronic data collection system has had teething troubles. Even though a help desk has been provided to assist in transmission and data entry, services are still experiencing difficulty and some are still not providing consistent, reliable data.

Most importantly, the Reconnect program lacks the capacity to produce accurate reports on the data collected. No data has been published since December 2001, and services do not receive regular reports on their data. In addition, services cannot validate the data entered into the new system and refine their data recording practices which increases the likelihood of error and inconsistency in the system as a whole. Service providers have not been specifically trained in data collection, an omission which contributes to inconsistency in collection.

At the national level, the program lacks the technical capacity to produce regular, accurate reports that could allow the program to be monitored for emerging trends. This is a major concern for the future as the data collection system will be the Department's principal method for ongoing evaluation of the program.

3.3.1.3 Action research

Action research is a key component of the Reconnect model.

Action research has been utilised to ensure that Reconnect services are flexible and responsive to the needs of clients and the communities they work with. The value of action research lies in its capacity to present practice as dynamic and changing, where insights can be generated by a process of posing questions, seeking answers through practice, and improving practice on the basis of insights generated. More traditional point-in-time evaluations cannot achieve such insights.⁵⁵

Action research has been described as 'a spiral of cycles of planning, action (implementing plans), observing (systematically), reflecting ... and then replanning, further implementation, observing and reflecting' (McTaggart in Goff & Associates, 1998).

Considerable resources have been developed to enable Reconnect staff to undertake action research:

- an action research kit;

⁵⁵ Crane and Richardson, Reconnect Action Research Kit (2000: 1.4)

- ReconnectAR, a website to promote interaction between Reconnect services;
- two national training programs on action research; and
- meetings of the Action Research Steering Committee.

Approximately 58 Reconnect services submitted reports of their action research findings in response to questions that had been posed as 'questions of national significance'. These evaluation questions were developed to provide an opportunity for Reconnect services to contribute to the overall evaluation of the program. In addition, the Independent Assessments of individual services examined performance in relation to Reconnect services' use of action research.

While 81% of round two services demonstrated effective performance in relation to action research, the understanding and application of the methodology varied considerably. The Independent Assessment of round two Reconnect services found that Services which demonstrated effective work were characterised by action research which:

- *was integrated into practice, often with regular scheduling of action research sessions;*
- *was used to explore pressing service issues and/or questions of national significance;*
- *went beyond the comfort zone of internal staff meetings to risk involving a range of relevant stakeholders (including other services) in each question, using structured discussions or other participatory processes;*
- *drew on client data, quality assurance and client feedback systems;*
- *used the results of action research to refine service delivery and develop strategies, reflected in work plans;*
- *documented their processes and results (in work plans and self-evaluation reports) to provide a meaningful record for stakeholders (including new managers and staff) and to demonstrate accountability for service changes; and*
- *ultimately demonstrated a culture of self-reflection and evidence based practice.*

The Independent Assessment also found that all services expressed a commitment to action research but some demonstrated little progress. For these services, barriers to action research included:

- *not seeing action research as a tool to address service delivery problems;*
- *regarding lack of understanding and experience of action research as a barrier to action rather than a challenge to overcome;*
- *viewing action research as an add-on to service delivery and thus expendable when day to day pressures build up;*
- *not integrating action research into service planning and practice, so that momentum was lost when key staff left; and*

- *poor documentation and planning skills. For example, not demonstrating progress through documenting results, linking action research outcomes and future service planning.*⁵⁶

Overall, Reconnect services, the Reconnect program and other service providers have strongly supported the usefulness of undertaking effective action research. Services reporting on their action research were able to document issues identified, strategies developed and the results of their new approaches. Action research is perceived by program participants as being important in keeping Reconnect services responsive to changing needs of communities, maintaining the client focus and helping to build an evaluative culture within the program.

Recommendations:

R 9 That the Reconnect program, as a matter of urgency, addresses the shortcomings in the Reconnect data collection, including the data items collected, training in data collection, frequency and accuracy of data reports and monitoring of overall trends.

R 10 That the Reconnect program continues to support the use of action research within the program by providing training and resources to Reconnect services.

R 11 That the Reconnect program prioritise key research questions for the ongoing development of the program and develop alliances with other research into adolescent development to further this research agenda.

⁵⁶ ARTD (2003: 18)

3.3.2 Program implementation and support

Overall, the evaluation found that Reconnect has provided significant levels of program support that have helped to develop a consistent and effective approach to service delivery. Strengths and weaknesses of the management of the program have been identified and are outlined below.

3.3.2.1 Key program management strengths

National support for service delivery

As part of its role in program management, the national FaCS office has: undertaken this evaluation; conducted annual forums where practitioners can discuss either good practice or action research; supported the development of action research; and facilitated interaction between Reconnect services through the ReconnectAR website.

The level of program support has been high in comparison to other programs and appears to have been crucial to ensuring the consistency of the Reconnect service model. Evidence from across the program indicates that this infrastructure support has allowed Reconnect to be differentiated as a highly effective program.

Bringing Reconnect staff together at the Good Practice Forums has been important in building consistency in the Reconnect model, and protecting it against the erosive effects of the passage of time, and of staff turnover in particular. Reconnect staff also report that the clarity of expectations and the support provided to the program has been important in keeping clear the purpose of the service within larger auspice organisations. This in turn has had a broader impact, as found in the Longitudinal Community Study, of changing auspice organisations' own practices towards early intervention good practice.

Program support at the State and Territory level

State and Territory FaCS offices are responsible for contract management of the program. As a result each FaCS office has staff who are acquainted with the individual Reconnect services, and Reconnect service providers, overall, appear to have good working relationships with State level program staff. These relationships have helped to build the basis of a 'partnership' approach between the Department and community organisations. In some States, the FaCS office has provided backing for Reconnect services to meet on a regular basis to discuss emerging program and practice issues.

Program guidelines that encourage innovation and flexibility

The program guidelines and their implementation have generally encouraged innovation and flexibility rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. This has been particularly true in the newer Indigenous services and those that are orientated towards more community development approaches. The emphasis on action research may have benefits at the program administration level as it legitimises the practice of departmental staff working with local service providers to investigate different service delivery approaches.

Program approaches that are orientated towards outcomes

The program's use of action research, independent assessments and evaluation have all assisted the development of a program 'culture' that is orientated towards investigating outcomes rather than inputs. While, as noted above, the data collection has limitations in

this regard, there is nonetheless a focus within the collection towards measuring outcomes.

Development of Indigenous services

Reconnect has successfully established 14 Indigenous services. The majority of these have entailed lengthy consultations with communities to try to find suitable auspices and to see if the Indigenous community was willing to become involved with the service. In a minority of these services establishment has taken two to three years. However, it is clear that consultation of this sort is essential if long-term gains are to be made. The level of dysfunction in many Indigenous communities makes quick fixes impossible: time to build trust, establish effective understanding of the relationships within communities and to develop ownership of the program is essential.

3.3.2.2 Weaknesses identified in program management

Need for greater engagement by State and Territory Government central agencies

A key issue identified in the evaluation is the lack of knowledge about Reconnect at State and Territory Government central agency level. While individual Reconnect services collaborate with individual government agencies, there is little coordination with, or even awareness of, Reconnect within policy and program areas of State and Territory Governments. This is a key concern that was identified during the pilot program and is highlighted in this evaluation, particularly in relation to the high percentage of Reconnect clients with intensive support needs. Many State and Territory Governments are in the process of developing their own responses to young people who are at risk, by introducing initiatives such as early intervention programs. The national Reconnect program has not yet successfully engaged State and Territory Governments to avoid a duplication and dissipation of effort.

Monitoring of individual Reconnect services and trends in the program

The Independent Assessments of individual Reconnect services highlighted a number of problems relating to the timing and methods used for monitoring individual services. The summary report of the assessments recommended a better link in the timing between self-evaluation reports, work plans and the Independent Assessments. The report also identified the inadequacy of many Reconnect services' plans, even though these plans had been approved by local program staff. FaCS staff may require training to better assist and assess Reconnect services in planning and monitoring.

The limited usefulness to Reconnect services of the Reconnect data collection, (as discussed above) can affect the operation of the program as a whole. Reconnect FaCS staff have not been able to monitor individual services or the program as a whole to allow optimum program management and development of strategic policy advice for the government.

3.3.2.3 Sustaining the program

The strong support provided by the Australian and State FaCS offices has helped to build the program. For Reconnect to continue to have consistency and flexibility in service delivery, continued program support is needed at a national level. Resources continue to be needed for bringing together Reconnect service providers and fostering

development of new approaches. National infrastructure support of this kind will allow Reconnect to continue to be innovative, flexible and focused on early intervention.

A number of lessons can be learned from the program's implementation to date that will be useful if it is expanded beyond the current number of services:

- Reconnect services targeting Indigenous communities need to be built on strong consultation with Indigenous communities prior to being established. Successful auspice organisations need to demonstrate their genuine links to other Indigenous organisations and community leaders. Culturally appropriate employment policies/practices must also be established;
- tenders need to be carefully scrutinised to ensure that Reconnect resources are not spread too thinly across geographical areas or populations; and
- consortium arrangements need to be scrutinised carefully to ensure that Reconnect is delivered as an integrated service and that there are clear mechanisms for accountability and leadership.

Recommendations:

R 12 That the national Reconnect program continue to provide resources to support the infrastructure of the program, including encouragement of good practice approaches, action research and a culture of evaluation.

R 13 That a promotion strategy be developed to disseminate information about Reconnect more widely to other related programs at the Australian and State and Territory levels and to the research community.

3.4 Related policy Issues

This evaluation has identified a number of broader policy issues that go beyond the immediate scope of the Reconnect program, namely the need for:

- greater coordination of early intervention effort to enable youth homelessness to be reduced;
- a national approach to supporting parents, particularly parents of adolescents; and
- a strategy to address the disengagement of vulnerable young people from schooling.

3.4.1 Coordination of early intervention effort

Australian, State and Territory Governments have taken significant steps over the past decade to place a greater emphasis on early intervention and prevention in relation to supporting children and families.

Most States and Territories have introduced substantial programs designed to assist parents of infants and young children. Many of these programs have focused on high need areas and provided a mix of universal and more targeted intervention approaches to improve outcomes for children in the first years of life. Some, such as Families First in NSW, have recognised the need for greater coordination of effort between service providers, and as a consequence program designs have been developed to ensure greater integration.

At the national level, FaCS now has a wide range of programs that focus on early intervention to support vulnerable families. The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy has funded a raft of projects aimed at early intervention in disadvantaged communities with a similar emphasis on encouraging collaboration at the local level.

The newly announced National Agenda for Early Childhood seeks to further improve coordination of efforts between governments focusing on early childhood outcomes for all children aged 0–5 years in the key areas of early child and maternal health, early learning and care, and child-friendly communities. The consultation paper released to announce the Agenda recognised that, in the area of early intervention, there is some overlapping effort: ‘The combined provision for early childhood, though impressive, is not well coordinated. There is no integrated system of services for children and families. Interventions are scattered and not organised by an agreed ‘road map’ of what is needed most. In some instances there is duplication of effort, in other places there are gaps, and the lack of coordination means that children and families most in need of services can miss out.’⁵⁷

The National Agenda for Early Childhood also makes clear the links between early childhood and outcomes in later life: ‘There is no doubt that early childhood development and experiences have a direct impact on future educational, career and

⁵⁷ *Consultation Paper: Towards the Development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood*, (Commonwealth Task Force on Child Development Health and Wellbeing, 2003: 3)

health outcomes. There is also a strong case for getting it right in the early years to avoid reliance on welfare, substance misuse and becoming entangled in the criminal justice system.’

While the links between early childhood and later life outcomes have been recognised, almost all State-based early intervention programs have been directed exclusively towards early childhood. A focus on early intervention appears to have become synonymous with a link to early childhood, rather than to a point of intervention.

This is understandable, given the findings on the importance of early childhood and the responsibility of State and Territory Governments in relation to children. Nonetheless, it appears that there has been a systemic failure to remember that early intervention is still needed by children and young people as they mature. The research on child and adolescent development and on promoting resilience cited earlier in this evaluation indicates the importance of continuing to build protective factors for children throughout their adolescence and into early adulthood.

The service system’s focus shifts increasingly to crisis intervention as children become older. There is a dearth of early intervention programs for children in middle and later childhood and adolescence, as the bulk of State Government resources for young people (apart from education) go into crisis intervention services for young people in or coming out of, the care and protection, health and juvenile justice systems.

Similarly, while the importance of supporting parents and families is recognised as inextricably linked with early childhood interventions, by the time of adolescence there are few programs that ‘put families in the picture’. This is also understandable given that the service system is largely directed towards young people who have tenuous links, or no links, with their families.

For these reasons, Reconnect remains a rarity among programs for young people, in its focus both on early intervention *and* on working with young people and their families.

Reconnect services are increasingly struggling to maintain the early intervention focus. The struggle is due both to the lack of similar flexible service delivery models focused on intervening early in the pathway to homelessness and to a lack of early intervention programs operating for children in middle and late childhood.

There is a need for Australian, State and Territory Governments to develop a national early intervention strategy for ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people as they mature. Such a strategy would recognise the importance of having appropriate early intervention approaches for each phase of development including infancy, early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence. It would recognise the importance of families in each of these phases and the importance of changes in parenting approaches that need to accompany the growing maturity of young people. The National Agenda for Early Childhood is a model for developing a similar early intervention strategy for middle childhood and adolescence.

Such a strategy might also assist in defining the roles of the different levels of government in providing resources for early intervention at each phase of development.

R 14 That the Australian Government further develop its national early intervention approach that aims to ensure positive outcomes for children by extending the National Agenda for Early Childhood to similarly develop strategies for coordinating early intervention effort directed towards middle childhood and adolescence.

3.4.2 A national approach to supporting parents

The evaluation found that while Reconnect has shown a capacity to work with young people in the context of their families, the services have difficulty balancing the needs of the young people and parents they work with.

Parents using Reconnect services are appreciative of access to a service that works with them and their children at the same time. However, parents also want more assistance and support than Reconnect services can currently provide.

Strategies for supporting parents have to date consisted largely of parenting courses, parent help-lines and more intensive early intervention for families identified as at risk. In the main these approaches are directed towards parents of young children. There are few supports specifically designed to assist parents through their children's adolescence.

Adolescence is a particularly difficult time for parents with a 'coercive' parenting style, as this style of parenting frequently leads to conflict as a young person attempts to gain greater independence. Reconnect practitioners report that these are the parents that they find hardest to work with and make least progress with.

Parents interviewed for the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients had not attended parenting courses when their children were smaller and doubted if they would have attended unless they recognised there was a problem.⁵⁸ Parents indicated, however, that they wanted the opportunity to talk with other parents facing similar difficulties, a safe place to seek advice from someone with expertise on adolescence, and the opportunity to be 'coached' in their relationship with their child.

While Reconnect services can and do offer some of the assistance parents requested, the findings of the evaluation point to a broader need for a more coordinated strategy to support parents. This is related to the need for a broader early intervention strategy to support children and young people's growth. Whether a strategy to support parents is part of the early intervention agenda or is developed in tandem, a national approach is needed.

A national approach to supporting parenting should include a broad community awareness campaign about the importance of parenting in all phases of childhood and adolescence. Given the current lack of resources for parents of adolescence, a priority should be given to developing resources for this group of parents. This may be most usefully done through school settings, particularly in the first years of high school. The Victorian program Families and Schools Together (FAST) may be worth expanding nationally as it has been shown to be effective in assisting disadvantaged parents and young people to maintain school and family connections.

⁵⁸ An evaluation of the Family Skills Training Program found similar attitudes amongst parents interviewed for the evaluation.

As a first step, FaCS should examine the range of effective strategies that have been identified for supporting parents who use more coercive parenting styles. The Department could then consider strategies for increasing the support available to parents in all phases of children's development, with particular emphasis on adolescence. This approach would need to be developed in conjunction with the State and Territory Governments and with the broader early intervention agenda for increasing positive outcomes for children and adolescents.

R 15 That the Department investigate effective strategies to increase support available for parents of adolescents and develop a national approach as part of its goal to increase positive outcomes for children and adolescents.

3.4.3 Addressing the disengagement of young people from schooling

This evaluation found widespread and disturbing evidence of negative school experiences among young people using Reconnect services. As the complexity of young people's situations increases, they are more likely to disengage from school. For less vulnerable young people using Reconnect, school was still difficult, as indicated by the extensive bullying and suspensions reported.

While schools cannot be blamed for changes in the broader economic and social spheres, they are left as key agents in dealing (or failing to deal) with the effects of these changes on young people. Reconnect services report that schools are increasingly using suspension policies to deal with disengaged young people—a strategy which in turn increases disengagement and ultimately leads to young people dropping out of the education system. These observations appear to be supported by evidence arising from the Longitudinal Survey of Reconnect Clients.

Reconnect services have had some success working with individual schools to abandon policies of suspension as a principal response to behavioural difficulties. However, the broader systemic approaches that are needed are outside the scope of Reconnect services' intervention capacity.

Disengagement issues call for a range of strategies. Some of these will need to take place at a system level—changes to the curriculum for middle schooling, for instance: targeting disengagement of young people, particularly boys, in years 7 to 10 will require substantial rethinking of curriculum and teaching styles to regain many young people's interest in school.

Over the past decade, Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have recognised the importance of retention in education as a key to later success, particularly for young people in vulnerable circumstances. The declaration, *Stepping Forward* was recently endorsed by the Australian, State and Territory ministers responsible for education, employment, training, youth affairs and community services. It commits governments 'to develop practical ways to increase the social, educational and employment opportunities of Australian young people including those who are at

risk, disconnected or in vulnerable circumstances'.⁵⁹ *Stepping Forward* has brought about a number of policy initiatives at both State and National levels.

In concert with these broader changes, there are a number of approaches that could strengthen the engagement of vulnerable young people in education:

- developing alternate education paths for young people with complex needs and behavioural difficulties. Alternative educational approaches are needed for young people who have left school early or had very unstable schooling. These young people need more individualised, flexible and age appropriate educational environments that can redress gaps in education and link education to potential employment pathways. This approach would not establish separate alternate schools but rather link existing schools to other educational settings that can provide more individualised assistance. The Australian Government's Partnership Outreach Education Model (POEM) pilots are trial programs in this general area;
- resourcing schools to develop policies and practices that could foster young people's engagement with school. The Victorian School Youth Focused Service program is a good model for assisting schools to change practices that can assist young people to remain at school. The program funds a coordinator to work with a cluster of schools to identify issues to be addressed jointly; and
- development or extension of programs that engage parents with schools, particularly in the later years of primary school and early high school. An early intervention program similar to Reconnect, based in schools, could help to support young people and families in middle childhood in the transition to adolescence. Extending programs such as Families and Schools Together (FAST)⁶⁰ to disadvantaged areas would also be useful.

The development of a national strategy for early intervention for early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence would enable Australian, State and Territory Governments to identify how to share responsibility for the range of programs that can support young people's learning and family functioning. This would allow a greater focus on the inter-relationship of schools with family and community rather than consideration of schools as purely vehicles for pedagogy.

The Reconnect evaluation has identified possible areas for future action in increasing vulnerable young people's engagement with school:

- development of national common indicators for schools that go beyond measuring educational competencies of students. There is a need for national data that identifies suspension and expulsion rates, and for regular surveys of young people's experiences of school in relation to bullying and enjoyment of

⁵⁹ The text of this statement is available on the Web at <<<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mceetya/forward/index.htm>>>.

⁶⁰ FAST is a program that trains a group of parents to co-facilitate an eight week course for other parents and young people within a school and provides monthly follow-up for two years. FAST is a structured program that seeks to strengthen family cohesion; help the child succeed in school and the community; strengthen the parent; increase parent involvement; intervene in relation to substance abuse; reduce stress within families; reduce chronic family conflict. The program has been extensively evaluated with clear positive outcomes, especially for disadvantaged families. FAST is used by a range of schools in Victoria.

school. This national data could be used to monitor progress in addressing engagement issues;

- development of a national strategy of alternative education approaches for young people who are already disengaged from the school system; and
- development or expansion of comprehensive programs to support schools, particularly those located in disadvantaged areas, to address the needs of vulnerable young people.

R 16 That the Australian Government, as part of the implementation of the *Stepping Forward* declaration, works with the State and Territory Governments to: develop national indicators that help to monitor engagement of vulnerable young people in education; develop a national strategy for alternative education for young people who have become disengaged with the school system; and expand programs to support schools to address the needs of vulnerable young people.

Summary of Recommendations

R1 That the Reconnect program continue to be funded as an early intervention program for reducing the risk of youth homelessness. That, since the program has provided evidence that the Reconnect service delivery model is effective, consideration be given to expanding the program to other high need areas.

R2 That the Australian Government initiate discussions with State and Territory Governments to investigate funding approaches that could increase the resources available to better support young people with intensive support needs. That funding approaches seek to build on the strengths of the service delivery model established by Reconnect.

R3 That the Youth Bureau consider ways to increase highly disadvantaged communities' access to the range of programs it funds. In high needs areas where there is a Reconnect service, but no JPET, YAS, or equivalent agency at the local level, that funding strategies be considered that can better support the full range of intervention approaches.

R4 That the Youth Bureau initiate discussions with other sections of FaCS that fund programs supporting families to see whether joint funding strategies may increase the capacity of services to reach high need young people and their families.

R5 That the Youth Bureau investigate methods for measuring demand over time, with the aims of assisting Reconnect services to better manage demand and enabling the program to better link demand to appropriate funding levels.

R6 That the Youth Bureau conduct an audit of strengths and deficits of staff across the Reconnect program in order to develop a 'skills strengthening strategy' for the program as a whole.

R7 That the Reconnect program support the development of good practice guides that provide Reconnect services with practical and evidence-based strategies for working with Indigenous communities, CALD communities and parents.

R8 That the Reconnect program uses opportunities within the management of the program to assist Reconnect services to focus on increasing access to Indigenous and CALD young people, including: changes to the data collection and reporting requirements; strengthening information sharing and exchange between Reconnect services on working with these groups.

R9 That the Reconnect program, as a matter of urgency, addresses the shortcomings in the Reconnect data collection, including the data items collected, training in data collection, frequency and accuracy of data reports and monitoring of overall trends.

R 10 That the Reconnect program continues to support the use of action research within the program by providing training and resources to Reconnect services.

R 11 That the Reconnect program prioritise key research questions for the ongoing development of the program and develop alliances with other research into adolescent development to further this research agenda.

R 12 That the national Reconnect program continue to provide resources to support the infrastructure of the program, including encouragement of good practice approaches, action research and a culture of evaluation.

R 13 That a promotion strategy be developed to disseminate information about Reconnect more widely to other related programs at the Australian and State and Territory levels and to the research community.

R 14 That the Australian Government further develop its national early intervention approach that aims to ensure positive outcomes for children by extending the National Agenda for Early Childhood to similarly develop strategies for coordinating early intervention effort directed towards middle childhood and adolescence.

R 15 That the Department investigate effective strategies to increase support available for parents of adolescents and develop a national approach as part of its goal to increase positive outcomes for children and adolescents.

R 16 That the Australian Government, as part of the implementation of the *Stepping Forward* declaration, works with the State and Territory Governments to: develop national indicators that help to monitor engagement of vulnerable young people in education; develop a national strategy for alternative education for young people who have become disengaged with the school system; and expand programs to support schools to address the needs of vulnerable young people.

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Note: Length of Support

Analysis of changes in length of support is complicated by two facts:

1. the RAD is split into two databases which are not easily combined. The starting point for any time series analysis, which does not undertake the work required to accurately combine the two databases, is 1 July 2001 (the commencement date of the new RAD). The resulting analysis will necessarily ignore any changes in length of support prior to that date; and
2. active cases on any given day are ‘truncated’, so their true length of support is unknown. Such cases tend to be excluded from analyses of length of support. However, this may bias the resulting analysis, especially if these cases have been active for a considerable period.

To overcome these issues, the following analysis examines the length of support for all closed and active cases (as at RAD extraction date of 20 May 2003) that commenced support between 1 July 2001 and 30 September 2002. All active cases in this group would have had at least seven months of support (232 days to be exact) by the extraction date of 20 May 2003. As these cases may ultimately go on to receive support for more than one year, the highest length of support category that can reliably be presented is over 180 days (or approximately six months). The analysis excludes cases commencing on or after 1 October 2002 because the truncation issue is further complicated.

As can be seen from the table below, there is a slight decrease from Jul–Sep 2001 to Jul–Sep 2002 in the proportion of cases receiving support for 0–30, 31–60 and 61–90 days. To compensate, an increase in the proportion of cases receiving long-term support (over 180 days) is evident. This suggests that periods of support provided to Reconnect clients are lengthening, at least during the 15-month period to 30 September 2002.

Table 1: Reconnect clients commencing between 1 July 2001 and 30 September 2002, length of support by commencement quarter (percentage distribution)

Length of support (days)	Jul-Sep 2001	Oct-Dec 2001	Jan-Mar 2002	Apr-Jun 2001	Jul-Sep 2002
0-30	16.3	12.0	12.2	12.8	13.5
31-60	17.0	16.4	17.5	15.5	14.4
61-90	12.1	13.7	13.2	14.0	11.7
91-120	9.3	12.3	10.6	10.8	10.2
121-150	8.3	7.2	8.0	6.6	7.0
151-180	6.0	4.7	4.3	3.9	4.5
Over 180	31.0	33.8	34.2	36.4	38.7
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
N	1,374	1,312	1,542	1,412	1,344

Note: Cases still active as at the data extraction date of 20 May 2003 have been assigned an artificial support end date of 20 May 2003, placing all active cases in each the five quarters in the *Over 180 days* category.

However, on closer inspection, it appears that the Reconnect client population can be considered as two distinct groups. In general, the length of support provided to clients assisted in less than six months (two thirds of the Reconnect population) has changed

only marginally. Median⁶¹ lengths of support for this group of clients increase from 63 days in Jul–Sep 2001 to 66 days in Jul–Sep 2002 (a difference of just three days), peaking at 70 days in the Oct–Dec 2001 quarter. Thus the real change in support lengths occurs among those assisted for more than six months. Median values among these clients increase from 372 days in Jul–Sep 2001 to 438 days in Jan–Mar 2002. At this stage, insufficient time has elapsed to enable more recent comparisons—cases commencing in the fourth quarter under review (Apr–Jun 2002) can have a maximum support length of just 385 days. Ongoing monitoring of support length is needed to confirm whether this change is part of a long-term trend. However, it does appear that while the majority of Reconnect cases enjoy stability of support length, increasing length of support is a feature for one third of the program’s client base.

⁶¹ As the distribution of length of support is highly skewed, and as means (averages) are highly sensitive to extreme values, the median value (the point dividing the distribution in half) is the preferred measure of central tendency in this analysis.