

Blind Spot Related to Internet Use Among Australian Homeless Youth

Daniela Jukic*, Dr Tracey Dodd**, Ashleigh Russo*, Kai Karimizandi***

International research suggests that 80 per cent of young people who are homeless use the internet at least once per week.¹ However, Australian academics and policy makers do not have a comprehensive understanding of how people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, use the internet or social media in Australia to access service information. Despite some small-scale studies,² there is limited knowledge about how homeless youth in Australia use these mediums to identify and assess support options, including housing and health services.³ This gap in research may arise due a preconceived assumption that homeless young people in Australia lack digital resources. This assumption arises from a belief that they do not have the financial support or a source of income to make these additional purchases. This stereotype has service implications, as many organisations may not accommodate for this target audience, causing less availability and critical assessment of online resources.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics report that homeless young people (aged 12 to 24 years), make up 32 per cent of all people who are homeless living in severely crowded dwellings, 23 per cent of those in supported accommodation, and 16 per cent of those staying temporarily in other households.⁴ While homeless young people form a significant percentage of those experiencing homelessness, research is lacking about how they use the internet as a resource.

Specifically, studies have not as yet critically examined the search terms used (for example, what is being searched for), as well the accessibility of information, (for example, is the information comprehensible for the targeted audience who may have

limited literacy). The research that is available is primarily American and may not be applicable in the Australian context. The few Australian research papers that are available about this topic are either out-dated, or provide only basic information. Further, they do not consider how homeless young people use the internet to search for health services and information. Many of the resources are from the early 2000s when the internet was still being integrated into Australian society. Additionally, new health services and

issues have emerged since these research papers were published. For example, the suicide rates among adolescents has fluctuated since the early 2000s, being the second leading cause of death among Australian young people today.⁵ Questions thus remain on how the internet could aid or overcome barriers to service usage in Australia.

This gap in what we know is important because in Australia, young people experiencing homelessness are frequent users





of the internet.⁶ Furthermore, the internet is a crucial tool for homeless young people because it allows them access to a range of resources such as email, Google, Facebook, Skype and Messenger.⁷ These resources evoke a sense of inclusion, familiarity and safety, that ensure that social connections are maintained with families, caseworkers and potential employers and provide financial support.⁸ A recent American study found that young people experiencing homelessness there were actively using the internet to search for health information. In particular, they sought out information about acute illnesses, alternative medicine, remedies, exercise, nutrition, and hospital contact information.⁹ These young people admitted to not comprehending the results of their health searches because of terminology and the quantity of information. In contrast, research about adolescents searching for health information on the internet is currently missing in Australian homelessness research. Without this essential research, it is difficult to determine whether young people in Australia who are experiencing homelessness are searching for,

and comprehending, the health information that is available.

Addressing this critical research gap could help organisations better understand how to assist young people experiencing homelessness in Australia, improve policy development and remove preconceived assumptions about both young people experiencing homelessness and their use of the internet.

Future research may target questions such as:

- What resources and information are homeless young people in Australia looking for on the internet?
- Is this group successful when browsing for information?
- Do resources (for example, apps) for homeless young people in Australia contain the information that is needed to be useful?¹⁰

* University of Adelaide/Junction Interns

** University of Adelaide/Junction funded Research Fellow

*** University of Adelaide/Junction funded Research Assistant/Policy and Project Officer

Endnotes

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2. Humphry J 2014, *Homeless and Connected*, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, Sydney, P.78.
3. Rice E and Barman-Adhikari A 2014 'Internet and Social Media Use as a Resource Among Homeless Youth', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol.19, no.2, pp. 232-247.
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 <<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/ProductsbyCatalogue/ED457E1CF56EA15ECA257A7500148DB3?OpenDocument>>.
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6. Humphry J 2014, *Homeless and Connected*, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, Sydney, P.78.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Houdek VonHoltz L, Frasso R, Golinkoff J, Lozano A, Hanlon A and Dowshen N 2018 'Internet and Social Media Access Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Mixed-Methods Study', *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, vol.20, no.5, pp. 184-189.
10. Ibid.