

Preventing Youth Homelessness through Social Procurement in Construction

This is the fifth in a series of regular fact sheets about recent 'social procurement research undertaken in Australia.

This fact sheet summarises research which explored the potential of construction social procurement to reduce the risk of homelessness in young people from a care and/or ex-offending background who have suffered or are at risk of suffering homelessness

The full reference to the research is available at the bottom of this factsheet.

Why the study

- Homelessness or the risk of homelessness is a significant cause of social, health and economic disadvantage.
- It is estimated that more than 116,000 people in Australia currently experience homelessness in the form of sleeping rough on the streets (about 7% of the homeless population) to couch surfing, sleeping in a car or relying on temporary and other forms of insecure accommodation such as overcrowded housing, boarding houses and caravan parks, and housing that falls below healthy standards.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent 20% of all people experiencing homelessness. Women, children and young people living with a single parent or fleeing family and domestic violence are particularly at risk and about 20% of all people who received assistance from specialist homelessness services are under the age of 25.
- Homelessness can be the result of many social, economic and health-related factors. Individual factors, such as low educational attainment, whether someone is working, experience of family and domestic violence, ill health (including mental health issues) and disability, trauma, and substance misuse may make a person more at risk of becoming homeless.
- It is widely recognized that employment can play a role in reducing the risks of homelessness, although this is not automatic and depends on the quality and nature of the work involved.
- For young people, employment marks a key milestone in their transition into adulthood, helping to build self-confidence, self-esteem and financial independence.
- However, young people suffer higher levels of employment uncertainty and underemployment than the general population and that this can result in feelings of hopelessness and stress and higher incidences of depression and other chronic diseases, which can further reduce housing security.
- The construction industry has a large role to play in addressing this issue because it is one of the largest employers of young people in Australia.

Aim

- This research was undertaken in the UK in partnership with a homeless charity called Llamau and The Construction Youth Trust.
- The aim was to explore the role that construction employment can play in reducing the risk of homelessness.
- The research was based on an experimental program called the Symud Ymlean Moving Forward (SYMF) initiative which ran in Wales (UK) from 2013 until 2016, at a cost of £4.8 million through the Big Lottery Fund.
- The SYMF program was designed to provide employment opportunities in the construction industry for disadvantaged young people from a care or ex-offending background who have suffered or are at risk of suffering homelessness.

- The SYMF program did this by providing individualised packages of support and training alongside ongoing mentoring support, with the goal that participants will have the opportunity of completing 26 weeks paid work experience, with the aim of participants gaining further employment to help them reduce offending and promote a stable lifestyle.
- 1,116 young people referred to the SYMF program 212 young people (19%) were homeless or living in temporary accommodation at the time of referral. Work placements were provided in a number of industries, including construction, retail, administration, mechanics, catering and many more. In total 437 young people completed a 26-week work placement as part of the SYMF program. 52 young people undertook a construction placement.
- This study employed a Capability Empowerment Approach to study the impact of this program.
- The capability empowerment approach is a rights-based evaluative approach, which questions the notion of 'equality of opportunities' which has often underpinned government welfare policy.
- Rather than seeing homelessness as someone's fault, the capability empowerment approach argues that homelessness (and other forms of disadvantage) is the result of uncontrollable structural barriers which disadvantage some people more than others from an early age. These include: poverty; family breakup; racism and discrimination; mental and physical health; educational opportunities etc.
- The capability empowerment approach offers an alternative explanation based on peoples' empowerment (what opportunities are afforded to them) and capabilities (what people can feasibly achieve through the resources available to them).

What we did

- Using the Capability Empowerment Framework, we interviewed 10 young people who had undertaken a construction work placement (19.2% of the sample frame) and analyses a ranged of documents relating to 52 candidate backgrounds and periodic reviews of progress. These documents included: referral and risk assessment forms (these provide baseline information on the respondent's background history and capabilities across the capability empowerment framework); assessment packs (this included more details on eligibility and a skills check); soft outcomes monitoring (this consisted of supporting comments for young people to report on their progress throughout the program); personal development plans (PDPs) (documenting young people's aspirations, preferred learning styles and choice of occupation); PDP reviews (this was a review of progress towards goals and accreditations); participant pathway reviews (this recorded a change in pathway for participants); employment monitoring records (this included the details of the work placements including a risk assessment); and exit paperwork.

What we found

- Employment in construction provides a range of empowerments and capabilities which reduce homeless risk which are not as available by working in other sectors.
- The physical nature of construction work and the discipline of employment (including zero tolerance to drugs and alcohol) has potential to produce important bodily health benefits and improvements in mental health, substance abuse, emotional wellbeing and sleep patterns.
- The prospect of real employment opportunities, offered by an industry sector with high tolerance for employees with criminal justice backgrounds, and opportunities to learn outside a traditional classroom environment in an applied work-based environment enables the development of basic literacy and numeracy skills essential to sustainable employment.
- The high-risk nature of construction employment and intolerance of unsafe behaviours and need for emotional intelligence appears to moderate the emotional vulnerabilities and unpredictability which many homeless people can exhibit.
- The comradery and team-based nature of construction work can also help to develop missing relationship building skills, which can, in turn, help to reduce structural disadvantage for homeless people in industries like construction, which largely depend on informal social networks to secure work opportunities.

- While construction employment has less of an impact on empathy towards the environment, this depends largely on where construction occurs and the types of projects involved and there appears to be significant potential to use construction social procurement to also achieve a heightened sense of connection and belonging to through interactions with nature. This could be especially important in Indigenous communities which have strong connections to the land which are a target for many social procurement policies.
- When asked about the impact of the program on their lives, respondents described feeling more positive and optimistic about their future.
- 70% of participants also felt that working in construction brought about lifestyle changes, new opportunities for career progression into sustainable and meaningful employment and more positive social networks, which helped the respondents overcome common employment barriers associated with homelessness such as interactions with the justice system and previous failures in formal education.
- On joining the program, respondents described a number of barriers to gaining construction employment. These included generational unemployment, interactions with the criminal justice system and living in rural areas with poor access to transport. However, at the end of the program, seven of the ten participants secured themselves well-paid construction employment (including three apprenticeships) with the opportunity to progress into a career.
- 90% of participants indicated that they valued the opportunity to improve their literacy and numeracy by learning on a construction project rather than in a classroom environment.
- Results indicated that three respondents had improved how they managed their behaviours and emotions while participating in the SYMF program. This was linked to the nature of construction work, which required working calmly with other people in high-risk situations.
- Stronger friendships, family relationships and compassion for other people were evident as a result of participating in the SYMF program, highlighting the spill-over impacts of construction employment on family members and friends, as well as the participants themselves.
- Participants were paid minimum wage during their construction placement and 60% reported feeling more independent and being better at managing money than before the program.

What this means

- The findings indicate that social procurement in construction can reduce the risk of homelessness for young people with a care-experienced and criminal justice system background.
- However, these findings are based on one single UK case study.
- More research is needed to share insights from other programs.
- More research is needed into how construction social procurement can reduce the risk of homelessness for other groups.
- It is likely that some groups (such as women, people with a disability, refugees etc.) who are at high risk of homelessness but under-represented in the construction workforce do not have equal access to these potential benefits.