

True stories debunk homeless youth stereotype

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Many young people experiencing homelessness are resilient, hopeful and not necessarily destined to a life of crime and drug abuse. These are just some of the conclusions of a research study exploring the experiences of young homeless people in Melbourne.

“Getting Out – Young People’s True Stories” which is being launched Thursday 31 March, is part of Project i, an international longitudinal study of young people in Melbourne and Los Angeles – the only research of its type ever done in Australia.

The joint University of Melbourne and University of California project has tracked nearly 400 newly homeless young people aged between 12 and 20, interviewing them up to eight times over a two-year period.

Getting Out presents stories of homelessness told by eight young people in Melbourne. These humbling stories challenge stereotypes and teach us all about courage in the face of adversity.

“We often think of homelessness as a negative experience, but for many young people it is a temporary situation; they are trying hard to rebuild their lives and are reflective about what’s happened to them,” says Dr Shelley Mallett, Melbourne Project i Research Director.

“Young people have told us stories about family life that are painful to hear, yet they survive. More than survive, many of those we spoke to are improving their lives despite their circumstances and the obstacles they face,” she said.

EXTRACTS FROM *GETTING OUT*

“I was eight when it happened. It started off as a normal blind date, but Mum didn’t come home. There was no food or money and I left school cos I couldn’t afford the fares anymore. No one knew. ... My grandparents came over about 3 months after Mum left and something just snapped inside of me. I just blurted out that Mum had left with a heroin addict... and she just never came home again.” (Imogen’s story)

“I’m surprised I never died and you know, now that I’m here and I’m alive and I’m off the drugs, my life’s a lot more positive and better – it’s worth living.” (Emma’s story)

“The reason I became homeless was because I was a little turd. Mum couldn’t put up with it. ... The hardest thing about leaving home was not seeing my mother every night. That killed me.” (Barry’s story)

“Everyone says I’m still on the streets but I’ve put myself into a different category. I’m in between...When I was twelve was actually the first time I got kicked out of home, my mum got pissed one night, threw a bottle at my head and that’s when I thought, ‘nuh its time to get out of here.’” (Jamie’s story)

The booklet containing these stories is aimed at both young people and all those who work with homeless young people. Resources are listed.

For more information please contact Dr Shelley Mallett, Project i Director and Research Fellow, Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, The University of Melbourne on (03)8344 0245 or mobile: 0419 110 183.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT PROJECT I

This unique project is the only longitudinal research to be undertaken with homeless young people in Australia. Researchers from The University of Melbourne, Key Centre for Womens Health in Society and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are collaborating to compare pathways in and out of homelessness and service provision.

The work is funded by the National Institute of the Mental Health in the United States, and looks at a range of issues including young people's experience of institutions and services, reasons for leaving home, living arrangements, sense of belonging, sexual experience, levels of violence experienced, drug and alcohol use, involvement in illegal activities, risks to health and well being, especially HIV and hepatitis.