



APG PLANNING IDOL

Connecting Australia on the Issue of Youth Homelessness

SYNOPSIS

As a 24 year old Strategic Planner, this is a brief fraught with turmoil and emotion.

On the one hand, I belong to the most connected generation in history yet on the other, there are more of my young Australian peers than ever before who are disconnected from society through the pitfalls and shadows of homelessness.

This is a plan to put the greater effect of a disconnected youth on the public radar, hitting our audience where it hurts the most.



Connecting Australia on the Issue of Youth Homelessness

Before we get started

This is a brief fraught with emotion. As a 24 year old planner it is especially overwhelming to contrast my glossy media-led lifestyle against the very real life experiences of those that are my peers. Yet, this is also a brief loaded with opportunity to demonstrate the power of great planning to impact upon and affect change for the better.

In 1989 the scale and impact of homelessness amongst Australia's young people under the age of 24 was first brought to public attention in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Burdekin Report. Despite widespread media attention and encouraging attempts at developing new programs for improving support for young people, the shameful truth is, our homeless youth population has in fact doubled in the last 20 years.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

On any given night there are 32,000 homeless youth in Australia. For most of these young people, interpersonal relationship problems precipitates homelessness¹. This may be the result of a variety of causes including conflict in family life and/or sexual, physical or emotional abuse in the home.

Sadly, a break-down in relationships is both a cause and effect of homelessness for young Australians.

Homelessness exacerbates this by removing stability and connection in people's lives². Without access to fundamental shelter, food, clothing and economic support, it becomes more difficult for youth to retain supportive networks and participate in education, training or employment critical for their development.

Imagine trying to stay awake in school when you've spent the night sleeping rough, or trying to fit in with kids your own age when your mother is a drug addict and her boyfriend relentlessly beats you³.

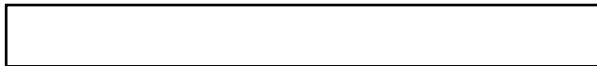
Moreover, homeless youth are frequently stigmatised as delinquents, criminals and addicts when often, their displacement is through no fault of their own. Rebounded to the fringes of society, this subtle yet very real discrimination fuels an even greater detachment from community, isolates them from opportunity and they become perpetually disconnected.

More than not having shelter or money in their pockets, homelessness disconnects youth from society.

¹ 49% of homeless youth who sought help from SAAP, 2008, NYC, *Australia's Homeless Youth Project Summary* p.20

² FAHCSIA, 2008, *The Road Home*, Homeless White Paper, ch1 pp1-8

³ Real examples as recorded in NYC, *Australia's Homeless Youth Project Summary*, 2008, p.17 & 27



This disconnection is even more greatly amplified, when aligned to what is essentially the most connected generation in history. Despite having multiple profiles, more 'friends' than ever, and unlimited access to knowledge, information and networks, young people aged 12 to 18 are the largest group of people experiencing homelessness in Australia⁴.

Yet even this is an understatement as most youth homelessness is hidden from the public eye because many homeless young people seek out makeshift accommodation or 'couch surf' with friends and relatives, until that is, they outstay their welcome. Feeling too embarrassed, vulnerable or scared to approach services and ask for help, they go by unaccounted for.

Australia is witnessing the greatest number of disconnected youth during an age when we are more connected than ever before.

WHERE COULD WE BE?

Ultimately, the goal of communications is to drastically reduce the number of homeless youth in Australia. However, there are several challenges in realising this.

Disparity of root causes: Communications alone can't tackle the numerous, varied and overwhelming causes of homelessness including family relationship breakdown, but also socio-economic disadvantage, mental health issues, addiction and substance abuse, and failing foster-care systems.

Inertia and apathy: Because the causes for displacement are so disparate, society's default response to youth homelessness is to place it in the 'too hard basket' and consider the enormity of the issue too much to bare. Without personal connection to the problems, it can be hard to emotionally invest in the cause.

Therefore the role of communications is to convert empathy into action and facilitate a more connected community.

For those that aren't personally connected, the objective is to:

- Put the issue on the radar, make youth homelessness no longer a hidden issue by challenging their understanding of what it means for youth to be homeless.
- Rather than talking predominantly to altruistic types as many charities already do, engage as our primary audience and as influencers, those for whom connection and community is fundamental to their existence - Gen Y and Gen Z⁵.

For those who have become disconnected from society through the effects of homelessness, the objective is to:

- Account for them as human beings by providing them with connection points and ultimately with beds. This requires money to fund initiatives for temporary and long-term solutions.
- Connect people, companies and charities with the common goal of prevention and early intervention by leveraging scale and expertise. For instance, The Caledonia Foundation, The Smith Family, Mission Australia, YMCA etc. working together.

⁴ FAHCSIA, 2008, *The Road Home*, Homeless White Paper, ch1 pp1-8

⁵ McCrindle, M, ABC of XYZ, 2009, McCrindle Research



HOW DO WE GET THERE?

There are a number of ways to position the issue of an alarmingly disconnected youth population in Australia.

One way is to multiply the ultimate effects of disconnection by exploding the impact to our criminal justice and healthcare systems, or exaggerating the economic pressures of lost labour potential on our welfare system. However, if we go down this road treating young people as an expense rather than an investment, we only serve to perpetuate discrimination of homeless youth and the very issues that isolate them from society. In solving one problem, we would fuel another.

Yet because dramatising the disconnection is effective in breaking through inertia and apathy, another more empathetic path, is to replicate the disconnection in a currency that is relevant to our audience.

Use the tools of connection to dramatise the atrocity of disconnection that 32,000 Australian youth feel every day.

Imagine a world without access to your bank account, the train timetable or your friends' status updates. A world where you feel out of control and all alone; where you are displaced and disconnected from your vital networks. Imagining this world lead to the core strategic thought:

Feel the disconnect.

Make disconnection a reality for our audience and in doing so, personally involve them in the issue.

Ideas for creative manifestation:

Engage the community:

- Dramatise the issue via stunt PR that disconnects people for a day of their lives.
- Partner with Facebook, Twitter and the like to assimilate a mass friend drop-out
- Develop an app that temporarily greys-out contacts/profiles on your iphone
- Sponsor the moments in life when people are involuntarily disconnected e.g. driving through tunnels, Youtube video exemptions or IM bounce backs. Use the medium as the message.
- Expose the reality: enlist homeless youth to 'tweet' about real moments of disconnection and exhibit these 'tweets' on big screens around cities

Drive people to act:

- Collaborate with communications companies/carriers to allow customers the option to donate a day of connection to the cause via phone bills e.g. donate 10% of cap to cause (not spending extra cash but rather sacrificing \$5 less per month to spend on connecting with people)
- Ensure troubled youth don't have to resort to the streets by enabling access to practical connections. We can reckon that whilst 'couch surfing' most youth still have



access to the internet, thereby use social networking platforms as the means for connecting those that need a bed with those that have one within their local community (online provides a level of anonymity, reduces instance of outstayed welcomes by opening new doors/places to go) e.g. yellow safety houses, couchsurfers.com

HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN WE GET THERE?

The ultimate measure of campaign effectiveness is a remarkable decrease in the number of homeless youth in Australia.

However, on the road to a more connected youth and community, there are a number of other significant measures aligned to our communications objectives by which we can define the success of our campaign:

Putting the issue on the radar and engaging an influential audience can be measured by:

- Using pre and post tracking to identify a shift in perception of homeless young people
- Evaluating PR coverage and value at local, national and global levels
- Using online monitoring to track share of conversation via sentiment reviews, number of disconnects on social networks etc.

Providing connection points for young people who are currently homeless can be measured by:

- An overall increase in donations towards the cause
- An increase in 'at risk' youth seeking support from existing services early on
- The number of people and organizations opting in to combine expertise, offer support and ultimately seeking to make a change for the better.

When we use the connections that we take individually for granted, and personally engage people to take action, we can facilitate a more connected community and help tackle the issue of youth homelessness in Australia.