



Recommendations from the project “Resource landscapes for young people leaving residential drug and alcohol services”

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Why we did the research

We wanted to understand what young people need during the year after exiting residential alcohol and other drug (AOD) services. Our aim was to identify how resources might be designed to maximise positive outcomes for young people. We took a sociological approach to understand ‘resources’ as available through institutional systems, such as social, health and criminal justice services; accessible through personal networks and settings, such as bonds with family and peers; and as identities of worthiness, and ‘attitudes’ that reflect positive representations of self and future. The project provided innovative and detailed evidence about the resourcing needs of young people. We hope this will inform current models of care, reducing disparity and increasing the relevance of services to young people.

Our approach and method

We conducted two studies. The first was intended to understand young people’s needs over time. We spoke with 38 young people in NSW, ACT and Victoria, who were interviewed during treatment or at treatment exit (wave 1) and then again six (wave 2) and twelve months later (wave 3). In total we conducted 38 interviews at wave 1, 20 at wave 2, and 27 at wave 3, giving a total of 85 interviews. Twenty-eight (74%) of the initial 38 participants were interviewed two or three times.

Participants were 38 young people, including 18 men, 16 women, three non-binary young people, one trans man, and one non-binary and trans young person. They ranged in age from 16 to 23 years old. Fifteen participants identified as LGBTQ+. Eight identified as Aboriginal. Most participants had previous experience with residential AOD treatment prior to recruitment for our study, and some returned to treatment during the study.

The second study we conducted considered the Continuing Adolescent Life Management (CALM) program, one of the few AOD continuing care programs for young people in Australia. We interviewed 9 program practitioners and 11 service users to identify the main program mechanisms that supported young people’s successful management of their substance use after leaving residential rehabilitation.

This project was a collaboration between University of New South Wales, La Trobe University, Kings College London, Youth Support Advocacy Services (YSAS), and The Ted Noffs Foundation.

What the research tells us we need to do

Recommendations for policymakers and funding agencies

- **Prioritise holistic, person-centred care:** Shift from medicalised approaches to models that address social and structural factors influencing youth substance use, such as young people's unique values and identities, their histories with social and health care systems, and their desire for autonomy and self-determination.
- **Invest in long-term, relationship-based models:** Fund services that prioritise stable, long-term relationships between staff and clients, and support collaboration between services and reduce service fragmentation. This will enable delivery of cohesive, client-preferred care across AOD, mental health, housing, education, and employment services.
- **Promote inclusivity and diversity:** Ensure that funding supports the provision of culturally sensitive, safe, and diverse services for young people from all backgrounds. For example, young people from marginalised communities, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youths, LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, and those from other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, need inclusivity and safety the most. Support creating environments where all young people feel respected, understood, and supported in their journey.
- **Safeguard organisational memory:** Provide stable funding to minimise staff turnover, preserve knowledge, skills and experience developed within an organisation, and ensure continuity of care. This might be achieved by supporting organisational memory through training and mentoring programs for AOD workers.
- **Adopt the term 'Continuing Coordinated Care':** Emphasise the importance of sustained and integrated support for young people, particularly in AOD settings. By adopting this approach, the focus can shift towards ensuring that substance use, and care is not fragmented or limited to specific treatment phases but is an ongoing process, helping young people to build life skills and future goals.
- **Research and measure system-wide effectiveness:** Prioritise research on youth transitions to adult services and evaluate treatment effectiveness across the entire AOD system for comprehensive impact assessment.
- **Prioritise inclusive research design:** Support research that includes views and experiences of a diverse range of youths such as such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youths, LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, in the design process to ensure studies accurately reflect their lived experiences and needs.
- **Invest in skills for paid work:** Focus on skills and routines that support participation in paid work, as employment can be transformative for young people. It provides financial security, helps manage substance use, and improves their outlook on the future.

Recommendations for service providers

- **Adopt the term 'continuing coordinated care':** When working with young people emphasise the ongoing nature of substance use problems for some people, to ensure that they re-engage with integrated support that links mental health, housing, education, and employment services, as needed for long-term wellbeing. Participation in paid work is especially important in building positive outlooks for young people.
- **Inclusive and person-centred models:** Develop holistic models that consider social and environmental factors, and equip staff to address trauma, socioeconomic disadvantage, and mental health through person-centred training.
- **Future-oriented support:** Encourage young people to engage with long-term aspirations, not just short-term goals, and assist in planning within available resources.
- **Flexible and client-led counselling:** Provide empathetic, client-driven counselling through various methods (in-person, telephone, online) while acknowledging that young people are affected by their environments, culture and broader society.
- **Prioritise relationship stability:** Build strong, stable, mentorship-driven relationships between staff and clients, focusing on shared life experiences where possible, while also maintaining professional boundaries by encouraging workers to be honest about what the worker/young person relationship entails and the limits to their engagement.
- **Foster safety and inclusion:** Create safe, inclusive environments addressing stigma, trauma, and cultural diversity, while supporting collaborative, culturally relevant programs.
- **Client-led interventions:** Offer education, housing, and employment interventions that align with client autonomy, balancing advice with client-driven decision-making.
- **Maintain organisational memory:** Focus on organisational continuity by mentoring staff, preserving institutional knowledge, and addressing funding challenges for sustained quality care.
- **Prepare young people for transitions:** Assist with transitions from services by building young people's external support networks and providing warm, empathetic departures to ensure young people feel valued even when they are exited against their will. As much as possible, encourage continued connections between workers and young people, allowing them to return to services in times of need, ensuring ongoing support and trust.
- **Promote inclusivity and diversity:** Provide culturally sensitive, safe, and diverse services that cater to young people from all backgrounds. Ensure that staff are trained to recognise and address the unique needs of marginalised groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youths, LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Create environments where all young people feel respected, understood, and supported in their journey.
- **Address gender-based discrimination:** Actively eliminate gender-based discrimination within AOD services by adopting inclusive practices. Avoid gender binary perspectives and ensure that all gender identities are respected and affirmed, creating a supportive environment for all clients.

- **Support professional development:** Provide training on gender diversity, referral processes, feedback response, and advocacy to improve support and create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ clients.
- **Focus on relational service models:** Continue to provide relational modes of intervention that focus on improving the conditions of young people’s lives, not just their individual choices or behaviours around substance use, to maximise engagement and positive outcomes.

Recommendations for AOD service workers:

- **Develop practical plans with young people:** Pair positive narratives of hope with actionable plans, helping young people build routines, skills, and resources aligned with their goals.
- **Apply person-centred techniques:** Ensure person-centred counselling techniques that prioritise the young person’s goals, providing them with a safe space to explore their thoughts and challenges.
- **Reconnect young people with supportive adult relationships:** Help re-establish or maintain connections with positive adult family members, personal relationships, and other supportive networks to provide encouragement and practical support.
- **Assist with long-term support post-residential care:** Continue to work with young people after they leave residential services to ensure they have the support to sustain their substance use goals, as much as possible. Acknowledging the limits of both staff time and resources, focus on realistic and sustainable ways to provide ongoing support. For example, this may entail connecting young people to external services such as education, housing and employment and helping them to re-engage with services if needed.
- **Build and maintain strong relationships:** Focus on building rapport quickly and maintaining professional but supportive relationships, offering consistent guidance and modelling positive adult interactions.
- **Create inclusive, safe spaces:** Work actively to challenge harmful behaviours and create an environment where all young people, regardless of their background, feel welcomed and valued.
- **Tailor interventions to client needs:** When working with young people, tailor interventions to align with their life goals within the scope of broader program logics, giving them autonomy in deciding the order and pace of services while still providing necessary support.
- **Contribute to organisational knowledge:** Engage in mentoring and training within organisation to contribute to the retention of organisational knowledge, helping ensure continuity of care for clients over time.
- **Promote inclusivity and diversity:** In daily interactions, ensure culturally sensitive and safe support for young people from all backgrounds. Pay special attention to the unique needs of marginalised groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youths, LGBTQ+ individuals, refugees, and those from other culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Create environments where all young people feel respected, understood, and supported in their journey.

- **Purposely teach skills for managing personal relationships:** It can be helpful to teach young people strategies for navigating challenging relationships. This allows them to make choices about who is in their social network, continue valued relationships, and discontinue harmful ones.
- **Purposely teach routine-setting skills:** Support young people in developing daily and weekly routines, as many do not know how to structure their lives and need guidance.
- **Promote participation in group leisure activities:** For those young people who are ready, encourage involvement in structured community-based activities to diversify peer groups and connect with mentoring adults, which supports social mobility.
- **Acknowledge diversity in 'living well':** Recognise that what constitutes 'living well' differs across young people based on their backgrounds (class, gender, sexuality, indigeneity and migrant status). Tailor support to their specific life circumstances and values.
- **Address gender-based discrimination:** Actively eliminate gender-based discrimination within AOD services by adopting inclusive practices. Avoid gender binary perspectives and ensure that all gender identities are respected and affirmed, creating a supportive environment for all clients.

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For more information about this project, please visit:

<https://www.unsw.edu.au/arts-design-architecture/our-schools/social-sciences/our-research/engagement-impact/our-projects/resource-landscapes-young-people-leaving-residential-drug-alcohol-services>

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