

Youth homelessness project finds internet is key to getting off the streets

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In a world where mobile phones are used to find accommodation, interact with government services and look for work, being on the streets presents a big problem for people who are homeless. Finding and gaining access to free wi-fi is tough, and dealing with the myriad of Centrelink forms and job applications while trying to find emergency accommodation is even tougher. To help develop solutions for people facing homelessness in the 21st century, researchers at Western Sydney University have joined with councils, charities, libraries and other agencies to find ways to provide emergency digital access to those who need it the most.

"If you're a person facing homelessness or in extreme poverty, being digitally connected can mean the difference between getting out of homelessness, or living on the street," says Dr Justine Humphry, from the Institute of Culture and Society. "The problem is that access to working devices is not simple, as it's a really big issue for someone who's homeless to pay their bills and keep their phones safe."

"When you're on the streets, not being digitally connected exposes you to increased harm, it means that you can't access emergency services, you can't stay in contact with your family members, and increasingly you can't access government support."

To address this problem, the [Making Connections](#) project, funded by the Young and Well Research Centre, met with [young people](#) from a range of youth-based homelessness services in the Sydney and Parramatta

CBDs. They brainstormed ideas with homeless youth on ways to address digital access gaps, and came up with ways to improve access to support services and social networks.

"Even though city centres have quite a lot of free wi-fi available, there are still serious limitations, which can actually put vulnerable people into situations of increased danger," says Dr Humphry. "For example, some young participants talked about how they would go to central station late at night to recharge their phone, meaning a lot of these places that young people rely on to stay connected are not safe."

In the second part of the study, the researchers joined with councils, telecommunication companies, support services and libraries to develop ways to financially support and implement the young people's ideas.

"One of the ideas is extending free public wi-fi in city centres and providing a lot more secure charging storing centres for people who are experiencing homelessness. Having a place where you can safely leave your phone while it charges is a key concern," she says. "Another idea is to work with youth homelessness services to develop a youth service directory, where people who have had experience of homelessness can upload and curate user reviews of services they used to help improve their lives."

In addition to these ideas, the research highlighted a need to reform the way that telecommunications assistance is provided to low income Australians to ensure a basic level of universal access to mobile voice and data services. Dr Humphry says the next key step is to gain the support of telecommunications companies to help provide access to voice and data services for homeless Australians in their times of need.

Provided by University of Western Sydney

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