Report of the Reconnect Longitudinal Study:

Building Community Capacity for Early Intervention

April 2003

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1 Executive summary

The Reconnect Program is a Commonwealth initiative designed to address the problem of youth homelessness. The Reconnect service model resulted from the pilot program in which 26 services across Australia developed a range of early intervention and family relations approaches to youth homelessness. The program is aimed at improving the level of engagement of young people who are homeless or those at risk of homelessness, with family, work, education, training and the community. It currently funds 96 early intervention services nationally.

This final report outlines the conclusions of a two-year longitudinal study of Reconnect services' role in building capacity for early intervention into youth homelessness. An interim report was published in April 2002 which outlines the conceptual basis for the study, the methodology and the results of the first stage.

In addition to this longitudinal study on community capacity, the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) funded a second longitudinal study on the outcomes achieved for a sample of young people and adults who had used Reconnect services during 2001-2002 (this related study is reported separately). The two longitudinal studies are key components of a broader evaluation of the Reconnect program as a whole. *Making the Difference* (the interim evaluation report of the program) was published by FaCS in January 2002 and the final Reconnect evaluation report is anticipated later in 2003.

The community study consisted of an investigation of twelve Reconnect services over a one-year period. The first investigation was conducted during November and December 2001 with the second stage conducted in October to November 2002. The twelve services were selected to be reflective of the broader Reconnect program, were located in remote, rural and urban locations and included specifically targeted as well as generalist services.

Sources of information for the community study included phone interviews with Reconnect staff; 2-day site visits in November/December 2001 and again in October and November 2002; 144 interviews with other services providers who work closely with Reconnect services; meetings which were attended by 110 individual service providers; and focus groups with 57 young people, 57 parents/carers and 15 community members.

This final report of the study has concluded that the twelve Reconnect services investigated have had a significant impact, relative to their own capacity, on building community capacity for early intervention for youth homelessness in three key ways:

- by building community infrastructure for early intervention;
- by strengthening service networks and collaboration between agencies;
- through assisting other organisations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention.

1.1 Reconnect's contribution to building community capacity for early intervention

Reconnect's contribution to building community infrastructure for early intervention

The Reconnect services investigated had a major impact on building infrastructure for community capacity in early intervention in the following ways:

- By increasing access of young people and families to assistance that can flexibly address their needs and intervene early in the factors that contribute to youth homelessness. For most communities Reconnect provides the only service working in this way.

- By increasing the skill levels available within communities to respond to issues that lead to youth homelessness by providing training to parents, young people, other community members and service providers.

- Contributing to the resource base for early intervention approaches by sharing brokerage funds across a service network, providing Reconnect staff to extend or establish services that address identified gaps and by gaining other funding for new programs or services. Reconnect services play a bridging role in their community capacity building work, helping to link *within* and *between* communities.

In all but one of the Reconnect services investigated, there was a substantial increase in infrastructure initiatives from stage one of the study to stage two.

Reconnect's role in strengthening service networks and collaboration between agencies

All of the Reconnect services involved in this study have been found to have highly collaborative approaches to their work. Reconnect service providers were shown to be taking a leadership role in building collaboration between agencies. Further, there was a substantial increase in the level of collaborative projects over the two stages of the study.

It is notable that collaboration was identified by other service providers interviewed for this study as being an important component of Reconnect services practice. Effective collaboration requires a clear conceptual understanding of what is involved, commitment to working collaboratively, and the skills and time to do so. This study has found that the Good Practice Principles and program guidelines have assisted Reconnect services to be effective at collaboration.

Reconnect services have 'added value' to service networks through their collaborative efforts, helping to build networks that identify more systemic service delivery issues and better address needs through a more coordinated approach. Reconnect services have played strategic leadership roles in forging new networks and/or changing their focus towards greater integration.

Reconnect's role in assisting other organisations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention

The majority of Reconnect services investigated have been directly responsible for changes in other agencies' practices so that they have a greater capacity for effective early intervention in youth homelessness. Reconnect staff have been able, to a greater or lesser extent, both to model and to articulate effective early intervention approaches around working with young people and families to prevent homelessness.

In some cases, Reconnect services had influenced their own auspice agencies' practices, while in other cases, Reconnect services had impacted on the practices of external agencies. Improved practices adopted by other agencies included: adoption of more client-centred practice; use of action research; adoption of a greater 'whole of family' approach; stronger focus on early intervention; and greater responsiveness to the needs of specific groups such as young people/families from CALD backgrounds.

The findings of the second stage of the study indicate that the longer the Reconnect service is operating, the greater the chance is of impacting on other service providers. Improved practices identified in stage one of the study had generally been sustained in the second stage. Further, one practice change in an organisation often led to further changes within that organisation by stage two. This seems to occur where Reconnect has worked closely with another organisation over time and where there has been some continuity in staffing, both in Reconnect and in the other organisation. Conversely, however, radical changes within Reconnect and/or within the other organisation led to a discontinuation of changed practices.

Reconnect's contribution to building capacity within Indigenous communities

A major finding of the study is that the Reconnect model can be highly effective in achieving participation by Indigenous communities in approaches that support early intervention. However, the study found that successful participation by Indigenous communities in Reconnect services appears to be contingent on the following elements:

- Strong teams of Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers with relevant experience, knowledge and skills, including cultural competence to work respectfully with Indigenous communities.

- An emphasis on capacity building and on building comprehensive linkages to Indigenous organisations and community leaders.

- Capacity for adapting the Reconnect model to the context of Indigenous communities, including a strong focus on community development approaches and an emphasis on flexible casework and practical support approaches.

1.2 Factors affecting Reconnect's services work in building community capacity for early intervention

In the main, Reconnect's work in capacity building appears to be cumulative, with further examples of Reconnect services impacting on infrastructure, collaboration and practices of other agencies being identified in the second stage of the study. However, the study has also allowed greater insight into the factors that have worked against this progressive accumulation of capacity building. In particular, the effects of staff turnover, of restructuring and most importantly, of funding limitations, has been clearly identified as leading to a marked decline in capacity building.

This report explores a range of factors that impacted on the twelve Reconnect services' contribution to community capacity building:

Community characteristics

The study found that each community served by a Reconnect service both had strengths and experienced challenges when it came to Reconnect's capacity building work. Reconnect services may have a large number of services that are well linked, a pool of skilled staff to draw on and greater access to resources at the community level in some urban areas in comparison to rural and remote locations. However, rural and remote communities tend to have higher levels of connectedness and a less confused service system that make building relationships and encouraging collaboration easier.

The combination of an area's history, its population, level of economic capital available and existing service infrastructure could enhance or constrain the work of Reconnect. However, even in areas where enormous obstacles were faced by Reconnect services (or in contrast, where these factors seemed less daunting), these factors in themselves did not predict the impact of Reconnect services on capacity building.

Complexity of the target group and service networks

This study included five Reconnect services that targeted specific population groups — Indigenous young people, refugee and immigrant communities, and same-sex-attracted young people. In all of these Reconnect services, the reality and significance of specific cultures has impacted on how the services approach community capacity building. Usually it means that the services must work with two networks — a mainstream youth and/or family service network and any networks clustered around the specific population group. While this does not prevent these services being successful at capacity building, it does extend the number of agencies and groupings with whom the Reconnect service needs to work, and the number of relationships it must build and manage if capacity building is to be effective. This points to the particular importance of service and staff continuity, and the likelihood that success will take additional time.

The passage of time

The study results indicate that the passage of time contributes to a Reconnect service's effectiveness in building capacity. The study indicates that the capacity building effect may

accumulate, as effective collaboration and skills enhancement can in turn lead to changes in organisational practices and to the service system.

However, the results also indicate that while the passage of time allows Reconnect services to become well established and to impact on capacity building where the Reconnect model is working well, where there are difficulties the impact can reduce or not be realised.

Organisational supports and auspice arrangements

The first stage of the study raised issues concerning three of the Reconnect services in relation to the structural and/or management arrangements that were found to negatively impact on their capacity to work effectively.

These issues were different for each of the three Reconnect services and related to:

- appropriateness of the auspice body;
- structure and resource capacity of the auspice body;
- splitting the Reconnect service between agencies.

By the second stage of the study these issues had been addressed to some extent, in some cases partly in response to this study. Nonetheless, organisational issues have had a varying impact on capacity building. These findings point to the need for FaCS to take a greater role in assisting a Reconnect service to establish good management structures, where the tendering process has identified difficulties with auspice arrangements.

The role of teamwork and leadership in capacity building

This study has found that the key factors in an individual Reconnect service's ability to build community capacity are:

- a clear understanding of the Reconnect model and its role in building community capacity;
- ability to balance casework with other activities, and use their casework to strengthen inter-agency collaboration and identification of systemic issues;
- the capacity of staff to work well as a cohesive team;
- having strong leadership within the Reconnect team and within management of the auspice organisation.

The impact of this study in building capacity

This study had an effect on the community building work of the twelve Reconnect services that participated in it. Feedback was provided to the Reconnect services involved at the completion of the study visits. As a result of feedback from the first visit:

- two agencies attempted to address issues raised about their structural/management arrangements;
- three agencies introduced programs for parents.

In addition, the interim study report was provided to the services involved. It may be that this report has assisted in legitimising time spent on community capacity building activities

and that this in turn has impacted on the increase in these activities between the two study visits.

1.3 Policy and program issues arising from the study

Staffing of Reconnect services

This study has provided a picture of Reconnect services achieving remarkable outcomes, given their small size, in enhancing community capacity for early intervention. However, it has also sounded a strong warning about how much can be expected of these services if their funding base and staffing levels continue to erode from this minimum.

For Reconnect services to function well in balancing casework and community capacity building activities, they need at a minimum to have two full time skilled staff members, a coordinator/manager that is close enough to service delivery to be able to provide day-to-day leadership and flexible brokerage funds.

Many Reconnect services have found staff turnover to be a major problem, as recruitment of skilled staff involves competing with government agencies or state funded NGO's that generally offer higher salary levels. There was a very high level of staff turnover in the twelve Reconnect services during the course of this study. This is disturbing given the findings of this study which point to the importance of staff continuity in building community capacity.

It is likely that if the resourcing issues within Reconnect are not addressed, Reconnect services will not be able to continue to build community capacity and the effectiveness of Reconnect as a service model will be undermined.

National program design and infrastructure

An important finding of this study is that the design of the national program and the infrastructure put in place to support the program have been highly effective in contributing to the impact made by Reconnect services in building community capacity for early intervention.

The program design has continued to provide guidance to individual services in terms of the Good Practice Principles, with their emphasis on continued learning through the use of action research and program guidelines that encourage services to work flexibly and collaboratively. The bringing together of Reconnect staff to discuss practice and gain insight into new approaches has been important in building consistency in the Reconnect model. A strong indication is that the funds spent on national infrastructure have been a key factor in building the success of the program.

Data collection and evidence-based research

This study and the longitudinal client study have pointed to the need to upgrade the data collection system for Reconnect so that it can be a useful source of information about the ongoing effectiveness of the program. For example, inadequate data is recorded about parents, making it difficult to gauge the extent to which services are working with parents or what type of parents are using Reconnect Services. This study found that overall, parents were less positive about Reconnect than young people. Without adequate data to

analyse, it is hard for both services and the program as a whole to assess their work in relation to parents.

Similarly, there is a need for the Reconnect program to maintain an emphasis on evaluation and research if it is to remain 'cutting edge'. While there are mechanisms in place to undertake iterative research there are none to ensure that the program is informed by other evidence-based research. The study has identified two aspects of Reconnect practice that need to be informed by further evaluation and research. The first is the need for more research on what makes mediation effective and for whom. The second issue is the need for research on what is the most effective way of supporting parents and whether outcomes for young people are better if parents are worked with effectively.

Relationship of the Reconnect Program with state governments

A key issue, which has been reinforced through this study, is the relationship between Reconnect and the states. A number of states have developed or are now developing programs that touch on issues relating to early intervention in youth homelessness. There does not, however, seem to be any coordinated effort occurring that could help develop the work that Reconnect has been able to do to date and thereby maximise Commonwealth and state funding efforts. It would seem useful to have these related programs discussed at a joint meeting and attempt made to coordinate funding to agencies, exchange practice approaches and learn from program outcomes.

Extending the program

Finally, the report highlights a number of lessons to be learnt from the study if the program is expanded beyond the current number of services:

- Reconnect services targeting Indigenous communities need to be have been built on strong consultation with Indigenous communities prior to being established. Successful auspice organisations will need to demonstrate their genuine links to other Indigenous organisations and community leaders. Culturally appropriate employment policies/practices must also be established.

- Tenders need to be carefully scrutinised so as not to spread Reconnect too thinly across geographical areas or populations.

- Consortium arrangements need to be scrutinised carefully to ensure that Reconnect is delivered as an integrated service and that there are clear mechanisms for accountability and leadership.

2   Background

This final report outlines the conclusions reached by a two-year longitudinal study of Reconnect services' role in building community capacity for early intervention into youth homelessness.

An interim report, *Preliminary Findings: Reconnect Community Study (Stage One)* was published in 2002.[i] The interim report outlines the conceptual basis for the study, the methodology and results of the first stage of the study that was conducted in November to December 2001.

In addition to this longitudinal study on community capacity, the Department of Family and Community Services funded a second longitudinal study of the outcomes achieved for a sample of young people and adults who had used Reconnect services during 2000 and 2001. This related study is reported separately and will also be available on the Department's website.

Finally, the two longitudinal studies are key components of a broader evaluation of the Reconnect program as a whole. *Making the Difference — First Report of the Longitudinal Evaluation of Reconnect* (the interim evaluation report of the program) was published by the Department of Family and Community Services in January 2003 and the final Reconnect evaluation report is anticipated later in 2003.

2.1 The Reconnect Program

Reconnect was established by the Commonwealth Government in response to one of the principal recommendations of the final report of the Prime Ministerial Youth Homelessness Taskforce *Putting Families in the Picture.* The Reconnect service model emerged as a result of a pilot project in which 26 services across Australia developed a range of early intervention and family relations approaches to youth homelessness. The Reconnect program currently funds 96 services.

The objective of the Reconnect Program is:

> *to improve the level of engagement of homeless young people or those at the risk of homelessness with family, work, education, training, and the community.*

The objective is to be met through:

- using family focussed early intervention strategies to achieve family reconciliation;
- improving coordination of services delivered by government and the community sector;
- working with Centrelink, young people, and their parents to ensure that income support at the 'away from home' rate (where appropriate) is available to young people who are properly entitled to it.

The outcomes being sought from the Program are:

- Family reconciliation, wherever practicable, between homeless young people, or those at risk of homelessness, and their families.

- Engagement of young homeless people (or those at risk of homelessness) with employment, education, training and community.

- Involvement of funded services in assisting Centrelink, young people and their parents throughout the income support assessment process.

- Innovative approaches to service delivery through the application of the seven Good Practice Principles and action research.

- Management and administration that reflect the partnership relationship between community organisations and government.

- Target communities to build on their existing capacity to develop appropriate responses to their own needs.

- The participation of Indigenous communities.[1]

2.1.1 Organisational arrangements

Reconnect services are auspiced by a wide variety of non-government organisations. Some have been established around the provision of a Reconnect service as the primary service deliverer. Others are part of organisations delivering services to a particular population group, such as migrant resource services, youth services, homelessness services, while still others are part of a larger, generalist welfare service (often run by an established charity or church group).

The tender process requires agencies to demonstrate the collaborative relationships they have with other agencies within their community and how they will work together. Some Reconnect services have therefore been established by a consortium of agencies, with either a lead auspice agency responsible for day-to-day management or (in a minority of cases) the functions of the Reconnect service being split between a number of agencies (for example, to better cover a geographical area).

Reconnect services are located in areas of high need having regard to factors such as the size of the adolescent population, indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, particularly vulnerable population groups such as Indigenous people or newly arrived refugees or immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, the range of other services in a region and geographic location. As a result, there are Reconnect services located in major metropolitan centres, rural towns and remoter locations.

Reconnect services are small, typically employing two to three practitioners with some administrative support. Depending on the auspice structure and size, Reconnect services may have a practitioner who also takes a team leader/coordinator role or the service may consist only of practitioners reporting to a more generalist manager within the organisation.

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[1] Department of Family and Community Services, 2000, Reconnect Program Guidelines

2.1.2 Intervention approaches

Reconnect services are built around an early intervention model developed and evaluated in a two-year pilot period. The model typically includes:

- a capacity for early and flexible response. Most services aim to have contact with a young person or their family within 48 hours of a request being made and will offer services where the client is most comfortable, such as in homes, schools, and other sites in the community;

- intervention approaches that are built holistically around the young person and their family's needs. These often involve, but are not limited to, counselling, mediation, and practical support services;

- working closely with other agencies to identify young people at risk, address service barriers to young people and families, or develop new service approaches where gaps are identified;

- conducting some group education/support programs and/or community development projects to increase skills and link young people and parents with others in the community.

A key feature of the Reconnect program is the inclusion of 'action research' as a core evaluation methodology to support services in continually refining their service delivery approaches. All services received initial training and some support in the use of action research, though they vary considerably in how they actually apply and implement it. Some services have established formal action research committees consisting of other service providers interested in developing the service to meet local community needs, while others have used action research as an internal tool for reflection on their work.

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3 The Reconnect longitudinal community study

RPR Consulting was contracted to undertake both aspects of the longitudinal research study: community capacity building and client outcomes. An Evaluation Steering Committee for the Reconnect Program had oversight of the research. The committee consisted of representatives of program areas across the Department, an external academic adviser and a Reconnect service provider.

The longitudinal community study was commissioned to assist in the overall evaluation of the Reconnect program. Specifically, the community study was used as a primary source for understanding program outcomes and finding evidence to assess one of the key evaluation questions:

"Does the program contribute to an improvement in community capacity for early intervention regarding youth homelessness? To what extent? Over time, does the program assist communities to enhance local early intervention capacity?"[2]

Another of the key evaluation questions identified by the Reconnect Program Evaluation Strategy was "Has the program encouraged the participation of Indigenous communities? To what extent?" These questions informed the design of the study, including ensuring that the sample of services studied was inclusive of Reconnect services that were located in areas with significant Indigenous communities.

In order to investigate evidence of program contribution to improvement in community capacity for early intervention, the community study took a sample of Reconnect services that could be seen as reflective of the Reconnect program itself. Twelve services were selected to reflect the geographic clustering of the broader program, establishment of services across funding rounds and the service mix provided (including those services that targeted general versus specific population groups).

In April 2002 an interim report was prepared on the results of the first stage of the community study. The interim report outlines the background to the study in relation to an understanding of the concept of community capacity building and how this is relevant to the work of Reconnect services. This report points out that while 'community capacity building' has become a central objective in a wide range of public policies and programs in Australia, the concept is seldom precisely defined. Furthermore, few measures have been developed to indicate whether or not community capacity has been 'built'.

The interim report provides a brief discussion on the literature relating to both defining and measuring capacity, particularly in the Australian context.[3] The interim report also outlines

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[2] Department of Family and Community Services internal document, February 2001. Reconnect Program Evaluation Strategy, page 4

[3] See section 2.1 Understanding the concept of community capacity building, in Department of Family and Community Services, April 2002. Preliminary Findings: Reconnect Community Study (Stage One) pages 9-14

the key findings of two other studies of Reconnect services, both of which investigated the service network systems that a sample of Reconnect agencies were involved with and perceptions by network members of Reconnect within this context.[4]

The longitudinal community study attempted to build on these previous studies of Reconnect and on the work undertaken by other researchers in relation to community capacity building. In particular the study drew on the work of Hawe, King, Noort, Jordens and Lloyd (2000).[5] in applying concepts of community capacity to the work of health promotion practitioners.

This study hypothesised that, where successful, Reconnect services were likely to enhance community capacity in early intervention in youth homelessness in the following ways:

- by increasing the skills of young people and parents through education and support programs;

- by increasing collaborative work between organisations at an individual agency and/or network level to better meet the needs of young people and their families at an earlier stage;

- by modelling new approaches to early intervention and engaging other service providers in this process, so that other individual providers are more likely to increase their own focus on early intervention;

- by encouraging and engaging in joint service delivery, so that the service system as a whole is more likely to develop flexible, holistic and effective approaches to working with young people and their families.

Applying the Hawe et al. (2000) dimensions of community capacity, this study also sought data that, firstly, could identify the extent to which Reconnect services were associated with enhancing each dimension and, secondly, could identify some factors that impacted on an individual Reconnect service's ability to assist community capacity building.

The Reconnect community study did not attempt to measure enhanced community capacity at the community wide level. This was due to the more confined focus of Reconnect services in terms of their work in enhancing community capacity, namely a primary focus on delivering services to individual young people and families and on increasing the responsiveness of the service system to ensure a more holistic approach to meeting these needs.

The study therefore sought information on the impact of Reconnect's work in relation to:

- **Infrastructure or service development.** Have Reconnect services met an identified service gap and in doing so have they built the overall infrastructure of

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[4] Department of Family and Community Services, Unpublished report 2001. Evans, Ceri and Shaver, Sheila: Youth Homelessness: Case Studies of the Reconnect Program, Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW; Department of Family and Community Services, Unpublished report 2001. Kate Barnett and Associates, Investigation of the Impact and Effectiveness of Reconnect in Port Adelaide-Enfield and Southern Metropolitan Adelaide

[5] NSW Health Department, January 2000. Hawe, P., King, L., Noort, M., Jordens C., and Lloyd, B.: Indicators to Help with Capacity Building in Health Promotion

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the community; has Reconnect's work increased the level of skills and resources available to address youth homelessness in the community?

- **Building problem-solving capability in communities and organisations.** Have issues and/or service gaps been identified that if addressed would contribute to early intervention in youth homelessness; have new approaches, services or projects been developed to address these?

- **Program maintenance and sustainability.** Have agencies within the network become involved in the delivery of early intervention services to young people and their families utilising the overall Reconnect model; is this ongoing?

3.1 Overview of the methodology

Appendix 1 provides a detailed explanation of the methodology used in the study.

The sample

Twelve services were selected for the study, representing 17% of the 69 Reconnect services operating at the time the study began. The services included Reconnect services that:

- had been funded in different funding rounds, resulting in services that had been established for longer and shorter periods (seven from the first round of funding, five from the second);

- were located in different areas (two remote, three urban, five urban with semi rural areas, two rural);

- had different target groups (five mainstream targets, three with Indigenous primary or secondary targets, two CALD targets and one same-sex-attracted young people target).

All services in the study agreed to participate.

Conduct of the study

The study visited the 12 services sampled at two points of time — November/December 2001 and October/November 2002. In addition to in-depth interviews with Reconnect staff prior to the site visits, Reconnect staff were interviewed by phone three times over the course of the study.

The two-day site visits allowed the researchers to conduct the following:

- In-depth interviews with service providers that worked closely with Reconnect services. 73 providers were interviewed in the first round of the study, while 71 were interviewed in the second round. Slightly more than two thirds of those interviewed were the same in both rounds.

- Meetings with groups of service providers linked within Reconnect networks. 82 people participated in these meetings in the first round, while the second round had more targeted meetings and had 28 participants.

- Focus groups with young people and parents. 57 young people and 46 parents participated in the first round, 26 young people and parents participated in the second round.

The interviews, meetings and focus groups sought to gain a picture of:

- the communities the Reconnect services were located within, including the key issues contributing to youth homelessness in the area; the strengths of the community, including its history and culture; the service network, including the culture of collaboration, strengths and gaps;

- the way Reconnect services worked within their communities and how they were perceived;

- how early intervention in youth homelessness was understood and in what ways it could be strengthened.

3.2 The reports of this study

3.2.1 The Interim Report

The interim report *Preliminary Findings: Reconnect Community Study (Stage One)* outlines the conceptual framework for the study, findings in relation to issues faced within the communities where the Reconnect services were located and findings in relation to enhancing community capacity.

The report provides rich detail as to how these Reconnect services worked within their communities, how they went about building capacity and the challenges they faced in doing so. It also outlines the issues raised by parents and young people in relation to the issues that brought them to Reconnect, the service they received and how they view the difficulties faced by young people and families in their communities.

The report is a useful guide for those wishing to gain more information on the practices of Reconnect services and the strategies exploited in order to build better service system responses.

Appendix 2 of this report reproduces the findings from the interim Report in relation to the Reconnect services' communities. This Appendix provides a picture of what parents, young people and other service providers perceived as the important issues their communities faced.

3.2.2 The Final Report

This final report of the community study outlines the findings in relation to whether, and to what extent, Reconnect as a program contributes to an improvement in community capacity for early intervention regarding youth homelessness. Three aspects of capacity building are used to analyse the outcomes of the work of the sample of Reconnect services in the study:

1. The extent to which the Reconnect services studied have contributed to building infrastructure within communities to better assist young people and families. Contribution to infrastructure is examined in relation to the service delivery models of Reconnect: the contribution to skills enhancement of other workers, young people, parents and other community members; and the use of Reconnect services' resources to expand or develop current capacity.

2. The extent to which early intervention and more holistic service delivery has been taken up and used within other agencies practices as a direct result of working with these Reconnect services.

3. Reconnect services' role in assisting the building of more collaborative relationships between agencies and more integrated service delivery systems allowing a greater focus on early intervention. This area covers the Reconnect services' roles within their service systems, collaboration with other agencies and the way in which service networks are operating.

The report also considers the factors that made these Reconnect services more or less successful in building community capacity. An entire section has been devoted to the question of building capacity within Indigenous communities.

Finally, the report draws conclusions about the overall contribution of the Reconnect program to capacity building for early intervention and the implications of the study findings for policy makers and program administrators.

4   Building infrastructure to support community capacity for early intervention

The study has found that the Reconnect services investigated had a positive impact on building infrastructure for community capacity in early intervention. In each of the communities studied, the most easily identified dimension of 'building of community capacity for early intervention' was Reconnect's contribution to increasing infrastructure to support early intervention. This dimension was clearly articulated by other service providers, young people and parents interviewed. Capacity was identified as being built in three key ways:

- By increasing access of young people and families to assistance that can flexibly address their needs and intervene early in the factors that contribute to youth homelessness.

- By increasing the skill levels available within communities by providing training to other workers in the service system, to young people and parents and to other community members in order to increase the capacity of a community to respond to issues that lead to youth homelessness.

- By Reconnect services sharing resources with other service providers and community members to enable development of more flexible and proactive strategies to address youth homelessness.

The researchers also recorded the number of infrastructure-building initiatives undertaken by Reconnect services in each stage of the study, as identified by external service providers and the Reconnect service. Records were kept of the number and type of training programs initiated by and/or directly run by Reconnect; the number of new projects/services arising in the community as a direct result of Reconnect applying for and gaining additional funding; the number of formal partnerships arising in which Reconnect gave resources (staff or brokerage funds) to establish or extend a service. These are shown below in table 1.

Table 1: Infrastructure initiatives in Reconnect services, Stage One — Stage Two
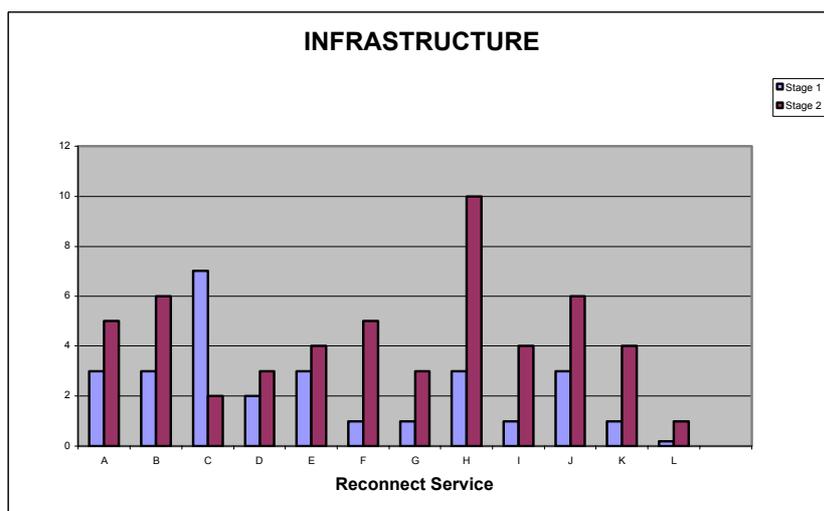
As can be seen from the above table, 11 of the Reconnect services showed an increase in the identified initiatives from stage one of the study to stage two. In some cases this was a substantial increase, largely explained by the timing of the establishment of the individual Reconnect service. Six of the seven services that showed a doubling of initiatives between the first and second stage of the study, were funded in round two of the Reconnect program. Consequently, these services were better established by the second year of the study.

Only one service, service C, showed a decrease in identified initiatives between stage one and two of the study. In the first year of the study service C was recorded as having a large number of infrastructure initiatives. This service had established a new after-hours service as a collaborative partnership with other agencies; had developed a system for sharing brokerage funds across the service network; was operating a casual youth worker pool for the service network; had shared resources to enable an alternate education school to operate; had trained a range of community members as mediators to form a casual mediator's pool; had provided training to other service providers in the Reconnect model of practice and action research; and had developed a student volunteer pool to operate across the service network. By the second stage of this study many of these initiatives had ceased to operate due to funding and administrative difficulties. This issue is explored further in section six in relation to integrated service networks.

4.1 Reconnect's casework model

A key finding of the study identified in the interim report is that Reconnect has had a major impact on community service infrastructure by providing for the first time, or increasing the amount of, holistic support to young people and their families in their communities. This positive outcome was acknowledged by 92% of the individual service providers interviewed in the first stage of the project. They often raised this issue spontaneously in the context of discussing Reconnect's role, emphasising the difference it had made to young people, families and service providers to have an accessible, free and flexible

service that could deal intensively with the full range of issues facing young people and families. The second stage of the project reinforced this finding.

In many of the communities, particularly those located in rural and remote areas, Reconnect remained the only service of its kind. In urban areas young people and families may have greater access to other counselling and mediation services; however, these do not usually have the flexible service delivery model of Reconnect, nor necessarily a strong early intervention focus. Only one Reconnect service has identified another organisation that offers a similar service model within the geographical area covered by Reconnect. However, this service was primarily (though not exclusively) directed to families with younger children and worked with adolescents only within the context of their being older siblings.

Even where individual service providers interviewed were unclear about the full Reconnect model, they still mentioned the addition of casework services for young people as having made a critical difference to capacity within the service system. However, the majority of providers interviewed (57, or 78%) noted that the community's increased capacity was not just the result of having another service to undertake casework, but related to the actual Reconnect service model. That is:

- its flexibility regarding where, when and how it engages with its clients;
- its holistic approach which develops individualised services rather than requiring young people or families to fit into a standard service model;
- its willingness and openness to working collaboratively with other providers.

In illustrating what they perceived as increased capacity within the community, service providers typically described the difference made by having a flexible service delivery model able to provide casework:

> *"Before Reconnect, we had nowhere to refer that we could rely on to provide good, flexible casework that would include families." (Centrelink officer)*

> *"[Reconnect] has been there for as long as I have done the job — and there is not another service like it. I have total faith in the specific people and their responsiveness to the school and family. [Another service] says it does the same thing but it doesn't. It came out to the school and offered to work with us in a similar area of work — counselling young people and families. But, in contrast to Reconnect, it won't visit in the home or in the school. Families must go to their office, which is actually very difficult as it's two hours by public transport and, even by car, it's expensive and time consuming. With Reconnect, I tell them what the situation is and they work to respond to the problem, not make the problem fit around them. [The other service] is a good agency but we just can't use them."* (School welfare officer)[6]

This is an important aspect of capacity building and should not be underestimated in its positive impact on both individual young people and their families and on the broader service system.

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[6] Quoted in Preliminary findings: Reconnect Community Study Stage One Page 37

In the second stage of the study the issue of being able to maintain the Reconnect model in the face of an inability to meet demand within existing resources became more apparent. A number of the services from the original pilot program raised the issue of demand and resource levels in the first stage of the study. By the second stage the issue of demand was emerging as a critical challenge to maintaining the service approach in three services and emerging as an issue in a further four. Of the three services facing the immediate challenge, all were original pilot services and had made substantial changes to the service model in order to cope with demand, including:

- Limiting assessment of young people and families to an initial interview while referring less obviously critical cases to parenting courses and mediation sessions. This approach was viewed negatively by parents interviewed by the researchers and reportedly had not met their needs or improved their situations. Only one parent out of seven interviewed felt that the service offered was sufficient, with the others reporting they felt it was 'one size fits all'.

- A second service has withdrawn from work on a range of other projects, including key involvement in the integrated network of agencies, two support groups for parents and young people and Reconnect workers being regularly placed in six schools in the area to increase early intervention capacity within the schools. The service had also developed a new approach to casework, by providing a single session and then placing the family on a waiting list depending on need. They are able to see 50% of families within one week. However, up to 50% of families might wait up to one month for the service.

- The third service has decreased capacity by 30 clients a year, and closed their books in the month of the second stage study visit, turning away 16 families in this period. In order to deal with demand the service has recently introduced a limit on the number of sessions and time period a family can be assisted.

The evaluation of the original pilot program identified the key success elements for the model, which were then articulated into the Good Practice Principles that underpin Reconnect. These were the capacity to respond within the first 24 hours of a young person being referred to the service, and the ability to work holistically with the young person and the family to provide interventions that matched their assessed needs. As the above cases show, the approaches adopted by these services to deal with limited capacity have the potential to undermine a service model that is regarded as highly effective.

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4.2 Reconnect services' work in skill development

4.2.1 Capacity building and skill development

Hawe et al. (2000) identified the enhancement of skills as a critical aspect of capacity building. While the issue of skills development has been dealt with within this discussion primarily on Reconnect's contribution to building infrastructure capacity for early intervention, reference to the literature on adult learning theory demonstrates that the process of learning can be viewed as essential to other areas of capacity building.

Watkins and Marswick (1990) have identified three ways in which learning occurs that have relevance for understanding the role of Reconnect in building community capacity:[7]

- **Incidental learning,** where the learner is not consciously aware that learning is taking place and the learning is not planned or intentional. Learning is a by-product of some other activity, such as task accomplishment or interpersonal interaction. Increasing the number of 'incidents' a person is exposed to enhances incidental learning.

  For example, this type of learning may occur when a youth worker works with a Reconnect service on a case that involves working with the broader family of the young person. If the youth worker is exposed to this kind of practice over a number of cases, incidental learning on how to work with both young people and parents may occur.

- **Informal learning,** where the worker is aware of being engaged in the learning process. Informal learning may by planned and intentional, and may occur through self-directed learning or help consciously sought from coaches or mentors. Informal learning is enhanced by three approaches:

  - proactively, such as encouraging people to take on new responsibilities;

  - creatively, such as encouraging people to break out of old patterns of thinking;

  - critical reflectivity, which involves taking the time to look deeply at one's practice to identify values, assumptions, and beliefs that govern actions.

  For example, service providers who had been involved in Reconnect reference groups or action research committees interviewed for this study identified this type of learning occurring as a result of their involvement. These committees had moved away from more typical project management groups to actively involve committee members in reflective thinking about the issues leading to youth homelessness and how Reconnect can intervene most effectively.

- **Formal learning** strategies, where the learner or their workplace has identified learning or training needs and develops strategies to meet these. Examples include mentoring schemes, training programs or longer-term continuing education. Participants may demonstrate that they have learned new knowledge and skills at

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[7] For a more detailed discussion of these approaches to learning and their implications for 'capacity building' see the work of Watkins, K.E. and Marsick, V., Towards a Theory of Informal and Incidental Learning, Informal and Incidental Learning in the Workplace, London: Routledge 1990, Pages 12-34

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the end of a training activity, but may find it difficult to transfer this learning into their normal environment.

For example, parenting programs (depending on structure) may not provide 'normal environment' practice opportunities for parents to try out knowledge and skills acquired in the program. Programs that do not provide opportunities for parents and children to interact have been found to be less successful in increasing parenting skills[8].

4.2.2   Reconnect services' work in formal skill development

In the first stage of the study, seven of the 12 services studied had run formal training programs to increase skills within the community in order to better address factors that lead to youth homelessness. By the second stage visit, all 12 services were running training programs to develop skills. Training programs tended to fall into four categories:

- **Mediation training,** offered to other service system workers, community members, young people and parents. Mediation training was linked to creating casual mediator pools to expand Reconnect services' capacity to offer mediation, particularly to allow co-mediation to occur.[9]

- **Parenting programs,** mostly targeted at parents who were clients of Reconnect. Programs varied from the use of existing parenting program packages, such as PACE, to tailor-made programs for a specific group of parents or a specific issue. Examples include a training program around violence issues and a training program for fathers.

- **Programs involving aspects of the Reconnect model**, such as action research, holistic casework approaches, working effectively with young people and families, working with young people and families that have experienced torture and trauma, supporting young people who are same-sex-attracted. These programs were offered to other workers such as teachers, school counsellors, youth workers and Centrelink staff. These programs also varied, with some training being offered directly to other agency workers who were on reference committees for Reconnect. The majority of programs were directed to groups of workers within a network, helping to disseminate Reconnect Good Practice models.

- **Programs to increase skills of young people** in areas such as conflict resolution, anger management and self-esteem. These programs were mainly offered through schools. Some of these programs were offered to schools that had a specific group of young people who had been identified as having a behavioural difficulty. However, training programs were also offered to young people as part of broader strategies that involved young people in community development projects.

The effectiveness of these training programs varied, depending on the capacity of participants to practice their new skills within their normal environment.

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[8] Department of Family and Community Services, 2001. Gauntlett, E., Hugman, R., Kenyon, P., and Logan, P., A meta-analysis of the impact of community based prevention and early intervention action. ACT. Policy Research Paper No.11

[9] Co-mediation models allow the young person and parent to each have a mediator present to assist in developing a workable agreement to an issue.

The second site visit allowed the researchers to meet with a range of community members, young people and parents who had attended mediation and parenting training.[10] A key question for these groups was the extent to which individual participants had applied the skills they learnt within their own lives, either within the workplace, family or community. Further questions sought insight into what made the difference for participants to allow them to extend any learning beyond the immediate context of the training program.

Two Reconnect services had run mediation courses. In one instance the newly trained mediators (both adults and young people) who were interviewed were unable to identify any extension of their learning to their everyday lives. This was the case whether or not they had run a formal mediation session as yet. These participants found it hard to conceive of how mediation skills were applicable to their own lives.

In contrast, the other group of mediation trainees were able to articulate instances of how the training had impacted on their lives, whether or not they had engaged in a formal mediation session. All of these mediators (young people) described the application of skills in their daily lives — within families, in school and at work — and were able to describe the difference in their approach to communication and conflict resolution.

These differences appeared to be related to the extent to which the Reconnect staff encouraged reflection on the mediation process and how it might be applied to participants' lives. This appears to be critical in increasing Reconnect contribution to capacity building.

One striking difference emerged between the approaches taken by the services in relation to skills enhancement related to the use of skills development within the context of community development approaches.

Five of the Reconnect services involved in the study targeted specific populations. One service targeted same-sex-attracted young people, two services targeted culturally and linguistically diverse communities and two services targeted Indigenous communities.

These services contrasted with the other seven services in their approach to developing the skills of young people in their communities. In each case these targeted services had embarked on major community development projects in which young people led and directed the project, gaining skills in the process of undertaking this work (see boxed case studies below). While the remaining seven services also conducted training programs that targeted young people, none had provided young people with the skills to direct a project themselves.

It is likely that the stark differences in approaches to skills development in the following case studies can be explained by the challenges organisations working with these specific communities face. In order to engage these specifically targeted young people, it may be that Reconnect workers have had to think more innovatively about the strategies that are most likely to overcome barriers to access.

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[10] In total 24 participants of parenting programs (9), mentor programs (3), and mediation programs (7 young people and 5 adults) from 5 Reconnect services attended focus groups to discuss their experiences in skill development.

Case study 1 : Same-sex-attracted Young People

The Reconnect service joined a network for gay and lesbian services and has highlighted issues relating to young people, families and early home leaving. One outcome has been an innovative community development initiative, which involved the collaboration of six key agencies and around 120 young people.

Young people took a leadership role, meeting in taskforces to plan health education workshops, production of a drug-free and safe dance party for under-18 year olds, and organisation of 'youth spaces' in events held as part of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. A video was produced by young people (with almost no worker input) documenting the process and challenges, to be presented as part of a national conference at the Gay Games.

Young people were also actively involved in the evaluation of the initiative, identifying what they wanted to find out and conducting the evaluation process. The evaluation found, for example, that the health education sessions were directly relevant because young people were involved in planning what was covered and they had opportunities to develop a wide range of skills such as decision-making and team work. By bringing this group of young people together, the project also helped to build a sense of belonging.

The Reconnect service gained separate state funding to undertake a joint project initiative on access and participation for CALD young women with the youth interagency. The first stage involved focus group consultations with young women and parents to identify issues for each cultural group. Consultation with parents was critical in gaining their support for the project. The young women were then trained in basic research principles and conducted service visits to local agencies. They interviewed services with prepared questions and a checklist to analyse the accessibility of the service to young women from CALD backgrounds. Recommendations on how local services can better target CALD young women were documented and feedback provided to the services. The service visits had the added benefit of increasing the young women's knowledge of their community.

The next stage involved around 80 young women participating in a 3-day social action workshop. Topics were chosen to provoke thought and action on a range of issues. Most were issues that were raised by participants in previous focus groups and included personal and community safety; cultural identity and racism; and women's health. There were also a variety of skills workshops that included, for example, lobbying, using the media, and knowing about discrimination and the law.

At the end of the project, participants identified a range of ways that they would use the skills they had acquired, such as involvement in school newspapers, participation in Council Youth Committees or the management committees of community agencies. Thirty of the young women also received training on video skills and produced a video, documenting the project and interviewing other young women in the local area. The video formed part of a resource kit, which was produced to assist other services to better access young CALD women.

A third project arose from young women suggesting the idea of a Young Women's Festival. The project was developed as a joint initiative of the Youth Interagency with five agencies, including Reconnect, taking primary responsibility. The event, held on International Women's Day, was highly successful attracting around 140 young women from diverse backgrounds, with many also bringing their mothers along on the day. A wide range of activities were available such as belly dancing, massage, henna painting and hair wraps, break-dancing, and self defence, as well as information on services.

Many of the young women who attended the Festival had not been in touch with services before and expressed interest in being involved in future activities and in helping to organise a similar event the following year. Some young women have since joined the school holiday program run by the Youth Centre, one of the key agencies involved in the projects. The project also reaffirmed the need for recreational activities specifically designed to address the needs of young CALD women, and in different parts of the area, in order to address concerns of parents about public transport.

4.3　Sharing Reconnect's resources to build capacity

The third aspect considered as part of infrastructure capacity building is the contribution that seven Reconnect services make by sharing their resources with other organisations so that young people and families can be better supported. Reconnect services typically assisted other organisations' capacities in the following ways:

- By providing 'secondary consultation' to less skilled workers, particularly in relation to counselling, family therapy and mediation. This was provided by two Reconnect services to school welfare officers and youth workers. However, another Reconnect service provided secondary consultation in relation to assisting mainstream services, to better engage and address issues affecting young people who are same-sex-attracted. Another five services provided secondary consultation on a more informal basis, particularly in relation to assisting mainstream services to better engage young people and families from CALD or Indigenous backgrounds.

- By providing other organisations with access to Reconnect brokerage funds to assist work with young people and families in order to prevent homelessness. This was provided by two Reconnect services.

- By providing Reconnect staff to directly assist another organisation's work in order to provide a specific service to young people and families in the Reconnect target group. This was done by five Reconnect services. Examples of this type of resource sharing included assisting alternate schools to operate, working with a Council to provide a school holiday program where no programs existed in the area, and staffing a night-time youth recreational service.

4.4　Discussion: Reconnect's role in building infrastructure

This study has found that in all twelve communities studied, Reconnect services have significantly impacted on increasing community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness. Not only do Reconnect services continue to fulfil an evident service gap in providing assistance to young people and families prior to homelessness, the actual model of service delivery encourages further development of community capacity infrastructure.

The Reconnect model of delivery emphasises development of services to meet individual young people's needs within a context of families, schools and local communities. The national Reconnect program encourages local Reconnect services to use action research to develop innovative strategies and to deliver services in collaboration with other services. These two features — the Reconnect practice model and the Reconnect program expectations — combine to provide an environment that encourages Reconnect services to identify strategies that could impact on youth homelessness beyond a focus on an individual client.

This study has found that despite increasing recognition by governments, researchers and service providers that early intervention and prevention approaches are critical to reducing a range of problems for young people, the service emphasis within the 12 communities studied remains largely on crisis intervention and post-crisis services. This was less true in the three Victorian Reconnect communities studied, where a range of state-wide programs have been funded to address some of the connected issues that impact on youth

homelessness, particularly in relation to schools and the transition to work and ongoing education. [11] At a basic level however, Reconnect continues to improve infrastructure capacity simply by providing a flexible, holistic service.

However, as the study has shown, the way that the Reconnect services operated within their different communities largely reflected the intended model of service delivery developed within the original pilot program as well as the overall objectives of the national program. This has resulted in all twelve Reconnect services contributing to increasing the resource base of their communities to address youth homelessness through enhancing skills, sharing Reconnect resources or developing new services to fulfil gaps.

Reconnect services can be seen to be undertaking a 'bridging' role within and across their communities. The 'bridging' role has been identified widely within the literature on building social capital, a closely related concept to that of building of community capacity.

Much of the literature on social capital has examined the social networks of individuals in terms of whether they encourage bonding (social connections that build on similarity, informality and intimacy), bridging (networks that link individuals on common interest) and linking (formal alliances between individuals and groups).[12] However, it is also possible to examine the role that non-government organisations (NGOs) have in building social capital through these same mechanisms. [13]

The Reconnect services in this study played a bridging role *within* their communities in building community capacity for early intervention. They connected groups of young people, parents, community members and other service providers through the provision of training programs and other informal approaches to learning. They bridged service gaps by sharing resources across communities, establishing or strengthening new service approaches to prevent youth homelessness.

This bridging role is also apparent when looking at the services that have targeted specific population groups such as Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and same-sex-attracted young people. The five Reconnect services targeting these groups have bridged connections between these population groups, organisations working with these groups and mainstream service providers. As can be seen in the two case studies provided, these connections were built by the Reconnect services assisting the young people to develop their own capacity to 'bridge social capital'.

Reconnect services also play a bridging role *between* communities as a result of their link to the national Reconnect program. All twelve Reconnect services have access to training on action research and have, to a lesser or greater extent, involved local community

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[11] Victoria has the Schools Youth Focussed Service and the Local Learning Education Networks programs.

[12] See Woolcock, M., and Narayan, D., August 2000. Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research and Policy. World Bank Research Observer, vol 15, No 2, pp 225-49

[13] Investigating the role of non-government organisations in building social capital has largely been undertaken within developing countries. See Rossing, T., Feldman and Assaf., January 1999. *Social Capital: Conceptual Frameworks and Empirical Evidence : An annotated bibliography*. World Bank

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members and workers in action research approaches to addressing youth homelessness. Similarly, the national program has provided Reconnect staff with access to other Reconnect services through the conduct of national Good Practice Forums. This has allowed Reconnect staff to exchange practice approaches, often resulting in the sharing of resources developed by an individual Reconnect service. The national program has also promoted the use of a website (ReconnectAR) to allow discussions of practice and action research to occur. While anecdotally it appears that take-up of this website is patchy, it nonetheless has provided Reconnect staff with formal links to other communities.

In the Reconnect services studied, all of the services have taken up the bridging opportunities presented by being part of a national Reconnect program. Strategies and resources developed by one Reconnect service are shared as a result of attending Good Practice Forums. News about other sources for funding or where to access resources has been shared via the forums and the website. Importantly, mentoring or buddy relationships have formed between Reconnect services across Australia. Regular telephone exchanges take place between services working on similar issues, such as how to better engage fathers with young people, how to support parents through parenting programs, how to work more effectively in Indigenous communities. Such relationships between Reconnect services have allowed, for example, one remote area Reconnect service to buy in training programs in mediation, parenting and mentoring to develop the skills of up to 40 community members who would otherwise not have had access to the training.

While this study has found that Reconnect services help to increase infrastructure for community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness, it cannot compare Reconnect activity in relation to other services' activities that may also achieve this end. In each of the communities studied other organisations and networks of providers also provided training and shared resources that can be seen to 'build community capacity'. However, the researchers were not provided with concrete examples of other training activities linked to capacity building in relation to early intervention in youth homelessness.

The study has also found that over time Reconnect services appear, on the whole, to be increasing infrastructure capacity as the service becomes more established in the community. However, the dramatic decrease in infrastructure activity by one service and the changing of three services' models of service delivery away from understood Reconnect Good Practice is of concern. All of these services were established under the original pilot program and all three of the services attributed their changes in practice to a lack of funding indexation that limited service provision. Newer services have benefited from higher levels of funding and may be under less pressure as they have been relatively newly established.

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5   Strengthening organisational capacity for early intervention

A central question for this study was to discover whether Reconnect services strengthened the capacity of other organisations for early intervention in factors contributing to youth homelessness. The researchers surmised that if Reconnect services had effectively improved community capacity for early intervention there should be evidence of other organisation's own practices showing awareness of the issues that lead to youth homelessness. The other organisations should also demonstrate service approaches that enable a greater focus on effective early intervention.

The study also investigated the extent to which the Good Practice approaches in working with young people and families that had been identified by the original pilot program evaluation were also being utilised by other organisations in their own work. The Good Practice approaches used within the Reconnect model of service delivery are closely linked to the issue of effective early intervention. For example, a key component of the Reconnect model involves providing immediacy of response to young people and their families, as this has been found to increase the effectiveness of the intervention. Similarly, the Reconnect model differs from other models in working with the young person in the context of their family, school and community. Reconnect's emphasis on working with the young person's family as well as the young person has been found to be effective in decreasing early home leaving in comparison to approaches that work with the young person alone.

5.1 Methodological difficulties

There were some significant methodological difficulties in examining this question.

An obvious problem relates to the number of factors that can affect whether an agency can provide a focus on early intervention on issues related to youth homelessness:

- the organisation's scope (target group, service offered, policy or funding conditions) may limit the extent to which an early intervention approach or the Good Practice Principles may apply;

- the organisation's existing practices may already be consistent with early intervention and with practices shown to be effective intervention within the scope of the service offered;

- the organisational culture and structure may limit the extent to which practices can be challenged.

Furthermore, the organisation may have changed its practices so that they align more closely to the Reconnect model, but this may have been the result of other factors such as new funder initiatives requiring different practice approaches, a change in leadership within the organisation, or the impact of non-Reconnect agencies on their work.

The researchers also anticipated other methodological difficulties in exploring this issue including:

- competitive tensions between agencies, which could reduce the extent to which other practitioners would acknowledge any influence by the Reconnect service;

- high rates of staff turnover within agencies, which could result in a loss of 'organisational memory' regarding its work with Reconnect or its own practice changes;

- poor selection of the individual practitioners to be interviewed, which could result in a failure to interview the most appropriate person who could provide an understanding of their organisation's development and its engagement with the Reconnect service.

The researchers sought to overcome these methodological difficulties through the following measures:

- Reconnect services were asked to identify the most appropriate people within other agencies, that is, people with sufficient knowledge of both the work with Reconnect and their own organisation.

- Prior to undertaking the interviews, the researchers developed some indicators of the types of practices that might be expected to exist within each service type if the service had adopted elements of the Reconnect model and had a greater focus on early intervention. For example, in a youth refuge setting, adoption of the Reconnect Good Practice Principles might lead to a greater emphasis on family reconciliation and working with families. A focus on early intervention in this context could lead a youth refuge to refer a young person who has only just left home to Reconnect rather than providing a place in the refuge. In a school setting, adoption of Reconnect Good Practice approaches might lead to a re-examination of discipline and suspension policies and practices. A focus on early intervention may result in teachers and counsellors using risk indicators to identify young people who may be in difficulty and may benefit from intervention.

- Those interviewed were assured of confidentiality; interviews were long enough to establish rapport; and questions were supplied in advance to assist accuracy in response.

- Questions included a focus on the organisation's work and the scope of its own services, explicitly including its early intervention and community capacity building work, and the nature and extent of its involvement with the Reconnect service.

As a result of the methodological difficulties involved, the researchers surmised that evidence of Reconnect's role in strengthening capacity of other organisations would be limited. Consequently, the researchers considered that where organisations reported changes in practice as being directly attributable to the work of Reconnect, this provided evidence of significant capacity building.

Therefore, each service provider interview was scored to record the organisation's capacity in relation to early intervention and effective practices around youth homelessness issues:

- the organisation already had practice approaches consistent with early intervention;
- the organisation has scope for further strengthening of early intervention;
- the organisation has little current scope for early intervention;
- the organisation has adopted enhanced practices as a direct result of the influence of Reconnect.

5.2 Scope for strengthening organisational capacity

Organisations working with Reconnect services were scored, as a result of information provided from the service provider interviews, in relation to their capacity to engage in practices that had an early intervention focus or their capacity to adopt service approaches that had been found to be effective in intervention around youth homelessness. Table 2 below provides an overview of how organisations were rated in stage one and in stage two.

Table 2 : Scope for Early Intervention in Organisations working with Reconnect services
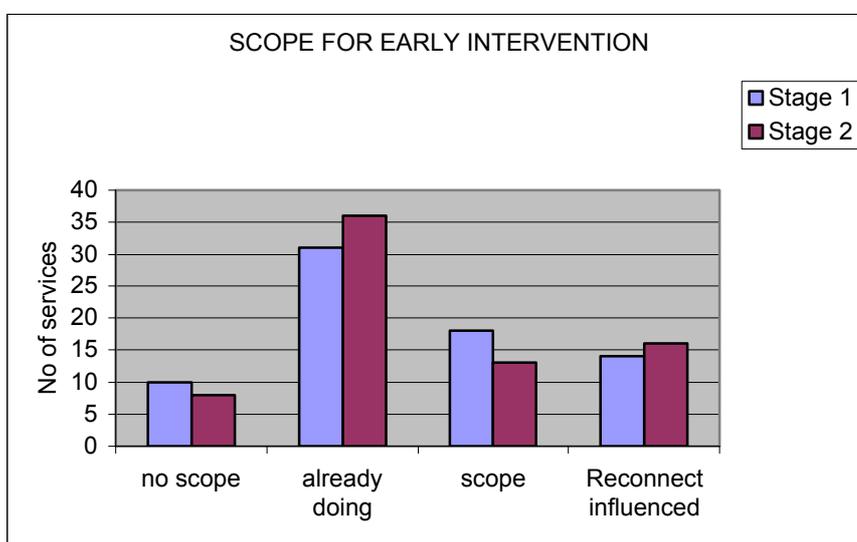
Note: the number of organisations in each category in the two stages does not indicate degree of change in individual organisations status from one period to the next, as some changeover in organisations interviewed occurred between stages.

A small number of organisations fall into the 'no scope' category in relation to early intervention. These tended to be either organisations whose scope and operation was focussed more on crisis services and/or individual service providers who reported that within the current management and operation of their organisations there was little scope for change in the foreseeable future. For example, many mental health services fell into this category. While at a theoretical level individuals working within the mental health service could see scope for a greater focus on early intervention and or the adoption of more effective practices for working with young people around mental health issues, the practical constraints of their organisations led them to see little scope for change. Mental health services are typically stretched to accepting only crisis cases relating to suicide or cases where a clear diagnosis of an illness has been made. Even where mental health

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services have an adolescent focus and have a greater capacity, the scope for greater early intervention/changed practices was regarded as slim. Waiting lists were so high that the most these providers could do was to give some secondary consultation to other services working with young people with mental health issues.

As can be seen in Table 2, the largest category involved organisations that already had practices consistent with effective early intervention approaches within the constraints of the service they were providing. Organisations in this category were not duplicating the role of Reconnect within their communities, but rather had a different target group, service goal or model from Reconnect. For example, a local Council provided opportunities for 'at risk' young people to run band events, an initiative that trained the young people in events organisation. The young people involved also worked with schools in the surrounding areas to encourage young people from these towns to perform in and attend the events. The project gained positive media and local business sponsorship to broaden community support and was linked to a health promotion campaign on drug use. Within the scope of this project then, a range of practices that were shown to be effective in increasing at risk young people's connection to community were already in place. While Reconnect services might be linked to this type of project (for example by providing further casework assistance to some young people and their families or by assisting with overall project management), there was no need to fundamentally change the overall approach of the project in relation to early intervention practices.

Services that were scored as having scope for more early intervention were almost equal in number to those whose practice was reported to have been influenced by Reconnect.

The category of 'having scope' ranged across a wide variety of organisations. Some providers interviewed identified this greater scope themselves but also typically reported time, skills or management approaches as being barriers for change. For example, many school counsellors or youth health nurses saw a potential for changes to policy and practices in schools to enable them to do far more in relation to early intervention, but cited the above issues as barriers.

In other cases those interviewed did not initially self-identify greater scope for early intervention until the researcher raised specific practice issues. For example a worker in a youth refuge was asked about the process of referral between Reconnect and themselves. This identified that while Reconnect referred an occasional young person to the refuge when it was clear that they were not safe to remain at home, the refuge never referred young people to Reconnect. The researcher explored this issue further with the worker, finding out about assessment processes used by the refuge and the length of time young people may have been out of home prior to referral. This led to a discussion on whether a greater focus on early intervention screening could occur that might lead a young person who had just left home to be referred to Reconnect prior to entry to the refuge.

Finally, organisations that had strengthened or introduced early intervention practices as a result of contact with Reconnect were identified. In some organisations a single change/practice was identified, while in other cases an organisation might have identified a number of different practices. In four cases, service providers who identified changes directly attributable to Reconnect were part of a larger agency that auspiced the Reconnect service. For example, the CEO and another service worker of a large auspice agency

reported that as a direct result of Reconnect, the agency had gained funding to develop an early intervention service for children aged six to twelve. The Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) services operated by the agency have moved towards a greater whole-of-family approach. A referral protocol has been developed and all young people and parents are now offered a referral to Reconnect at the first point of contact. This agency has adopted an action research strategy across the whole organisation, bringing about greater linkages between the various services and their work, including a greater focus on client outcomes. The strategic directions for the agency now include a stronger focus on helping clients to strengthen community connections through the development of collaborative approaches.

Five organisations that scored in this category of 'Reconnect influenced' were external to Reconnect or its auspice. For example, one Reconnect service working with Indigenous young people found that there was a range of other services also working with the same target group. The other services included a crisis youth refuge, Centrelink, the state welfare service, an Indigenous youth service, an Indigenous youth health service and an Indigenous hostel service. All of the services provided some casework, often to the same individuals, but with differing approaches, skill levels of workers and overall objectives. There was a high level of competition between some of the services, as clients were perceived as being 'owned' by one agency or another. The Reconnect service initiated a monthly meeting of the services, providing a forum for agencies to bring cases and discuss them. This has resulted in a marked improvement in casework practices for the young people involved. Young people's needs are being more comprehensively assessed, agencies are working more consistently within an early intervention framework and skill levels of individual workers have increased.

5.3 Reconnect services' impact on strengthening organisational capacity

The study found evidence of eight Reconnect services in the first stage of the study and ten services in the second stage of the study, impacting positively on other organisations' practices in relation to early intervention in youth homelessness.

Table 3 : Reconnect services impact on other organisations' practices
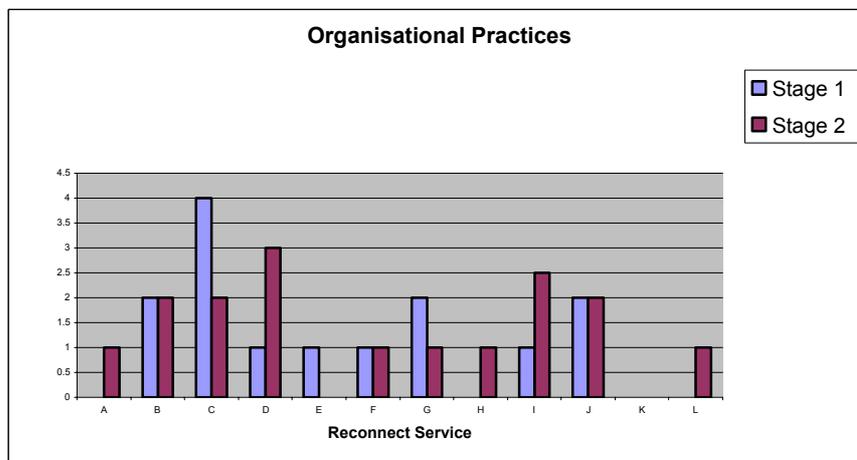
Table 3 illustrates the number of other organisations (elements) whose changed practices can be directly attributed to Reconnect.

Overall, there was either an increase in or maintenance of, the number of organisations identified as having increased capacity for effective early intervention practices as a result of Reconnect, between the two stages of the study. Eight organisations out of the twelve increased or maintained practices. It is likely that the longer the Reconnect service is operating the greater is the chance of it positively impacting on other service providers.

There were four Reconnect agencies for which this was not the case.

Only one Reconnect service, Agency K's case, had no impact on other organisations' practices in either stage. In this case, the Reconnect service had operated with only one continuous staff member and no manager for the majority of its operation. This was partially due to the difficulty of recruiting appropriate staff in a remote area. Additionally, the remote location of the service meant that it had a smaller service network system and these services did not easily work together. The one Reconnect worker tended to primarily provide casework services that did not necessarily involve joint casework with other providers.

In three of the Reconnect sites, organisations identified in the first stage visit had not maintained these practices in the second stage of the study.

In Agency C's case this could be attributed to two factors. The Reconnect agency itself had changed staff, was having financial difficulties and had made considerable changes to its service model. At the same time the two external organisations identified in the first stage as having changed practice had both had staff turnover in the positions that were responsible for implementing these changes. The combination of a lack of follow through by Reconnect (due to the internal pressures within the organisation) and the changes within the external organisations meant that two significant early intervention practices have been dropped.[14]

In Agency E's case, the Reconnect service had had a significant positive impact on its own auspice agency.[15] These changes had occurred over a period of years, as the Reconnect service had been an original pilot prior to receiving round one Reconnect funding. The

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[14] In the first stage Reconnect had negotiated a written protocol with the state welfare department to guide general relations and work between the two agencies. (This has led to similar protocols being developed between the department and a number of other youth agencies.) A more flexible use of funds to support specific young people resulted from the closer and more respectful working relationship, which included regular meetings to discuss case practices. As a result of the changes in casework practices more young people were reported as getting a service from the Department, rather than their needs being regarded as low priority. The second example of organisational change found in the first stage of the study resulted from Reconnect working with the local police to develop a referral card for police to hand to young people and/or their families when young people were cautioned or families were being seen in relation to conflict. This resulted in many referrals of young people and their families in early stages of conflict.

[15] The first stage of the study found that the broader auspice had changed significantly: its generalist counselling program gave priority to young people, reducing any waiting list that might deter young people from seeking help; the organisation had begun to work closely with primary schools and parents in the area; the drug and alcohol counsellor had begun to work with families and undertook more outreach and community development programs. As a result of the Reconnect service being based in the organisation, it had been successful in gaining funding for two additional prevention and early intervention programs for young people and families.

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reduction in practices identified at the second stage visit resulted from a complete changeover in senior management of the auspice organisation. This had resulted in restructuring of the organisation, severe financial cutbacks to address budget shortfalls and an overall change in focus of the organisation.

Finally in Agency G's case, one organisation that had recorded a change in the first visit had been defunded by the following visit due to other factors unrelated to their Reconnect work, thus accounting for the decrease in impact.

5.4 Discussion: Reconnect's role in strengthening organisational capacity

Despite the considerable methodological difficulties involved in identifying the impact of Reconnect services on other organisations' capacity for early intervention, there was clear evidence that other service providers could articulate the role Reconnect played.

It is likely that there was under-reporting rather than over-reporting of this impact, as only where direct evidence was provided was the impact scored. In some cases Reconnect staff reported their impact but other service providers did not attribute the initiative or change to Reconnect, rather seeing the change as part of their own organisation's general evolution. Often the service provider being interviewed was vague about the origins of change (often because they had not been involved directly) and consequently Reconnect staff may have had a more accurate understanding of the history.

Sustainability of change also seems to have been relatively stable. It also appears that one practice change in an organisation can lead to further changes. This seems to occur where Reconnect has worked closely with another organisation over time and where there has been some continuity in staffing, both within Reconnect and in the other organisation. Conversely, radical changes within Reconnect and/or within another agency led to a discontinuation of changed practice.

These findings have interesting implications for bringing about changes to service delivery practices to reflect emerging good practice and evidence-based research.

Despite significant differences in the communities they serve, the organisational arrangements they operate within and the skill and experience levels of Reconnect staff, there was remarkable consistency in positive capacity-building among the Reconnect services studied. This points to factors within the overall program design. The common elements operating between these Reconnect services is the articulation of the Reconnect model (based on evidence-based research), the Good Practice Principles and the ongoing use of action research to keep a focus on local level findings to inform practice.

The national program has actively reinforced these approaches, through bringing Reconnect staff together in various forums each year since the program began. Action research training has occurred in the first and third years of the program, Good Practice Forums in the second year). These forums have allowed a renewal of the Reconnect model to keep occurring, especially given the turnover of Reconnect staff. In turn, it appears that Reconnect staff at a local level have been able, to a lesser or greater extent, to both model and articulate early intervention approaches to working with young people and families to

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prevent homelessness. There is also a likelihood that staff leaving Reconnect to take up new positions in similar areas of work will adopt these practices in other agencies, thus assisting more sector-wide practice development.

6   Strengthening service networks and enhancing collaboration between agencies

The study explored two aspects of Reconnect's work with other agencies; Reconnect services' approach to collaboration with other organisations and the role played by Reconnect services in service system networks.

6.1 Collaboration with other agencies

Reconnect services work extensively with other agencies to increase collaboration around individual casework, group work, programs and projects. The extent of collaborative approaches within the Reconnect program has been well documented through the Good Practice Forums and through independent performance assessments of Reconnect services funded in the first two rounds of the program.

This study also found extensive evidence of collaboration occurring between Reconnect and other agencies, with 93% of service providers interviewed in both stages of the study reporting that Reconnect services worked highly collaboratively with their agency. This is not surprising given that service providers were chosen for interview on the basis that they had had some involvement with the Reconnect service.

Collaboration is increasingly a key objective of government and has been a tool of service provision for many years. As such, Reconnect approaches to collaboration mirror the same trend amongst many of the service providers within the communities studied. However, 78% of the service providers interviewed for this study were able to clearly describe the Reconnect model, including its emphasis on collaboration. This indicates that while other providers may or may not see collaboration as part of the way they do their work, Reconnect services are distinguished by others as having collaboration as a clear component of their practice.

The term 'collaboration', as used by service providers interviewed for the study, had a variety of meanings:

- the active sharing of casework;
- the sharing of ideas, rather than specific practice;
- the development of formal agreements.

Active sharing of casework

Collaboration was commonly taken to refer to the active sharing of casework. In this context, service providers described collaborative casework as involving some degree of joint planning and allocation of work, regular sharing of information on progress and having a capacity for joint problem solving. Typically this type of collaboration involved Reconnect working with either the young person or parent, while another agency worker continued to work with the other family member. Both workers would come together to discuss issues in the case as they arose. Service providers describing successful

experiences of collaborative casework emphasised the degree to which there was shared values, mutual respect, explicit expectations and shared responsibility as critical to a successful outcome.

Some service providers discussed instances where conflict between themselves and Reconnect staff had arisen in the course of casework and how this conflict had been dealt with. In only a small number of cases did service providers report a failure to overcome this conflict, with some interviewees expressing the view that some conflict was essential for ensuring that values and practices become explicit in the course of service delivery. This approach corresponds with Kingsley et al's (1997) work on community building, whereby the building of human capital involves staff learning new ways to communicate and collaborate over time, developing a partnership model of shared values, expectations and outcomes.[16]

Sharing of ideas

The second commonly used meaning of 'collaboration' refers to the sharing of ideas rather than specific practice [17]. In this context service providers talked about opportunities for meeting with Reconnect workers and others to discuss their work and reflect on issues. Again, service providers who talked about collaboration with Reconnect in this context often referred to a common value base as a component of successful collaboration. Collaboration in this meaning often occurred at a more informal level, with workers meeting over a shared meal or coffee. Frequently this type of ongoing informal contact developed into more tangible projects over time. This kind of collaboration was described in terms that implied an evolving building of trust between workers and agencies.

Formal agreements

Finally, collaboration was mentioned in the context of describing more formal agreements that had developed between agencies or a group of agencies in relation to a specific project or piece of work. In this sense, collaboration was viewed as a more formal partnership, often involving a greater number of people from the various agencies, for example managers and other workers, rather than the service provider and Reconnect worker alone.

Common to all of these meanings was the view that collaboration involved being prepared to be explicit about values, expectations and outcomes. Successful collaboration involved being able to resolve conflict as it arose, with all parties remaining respectful of each other.

The collaboration described by service providers in this context can be distinguished from 'marriages of convenience' approaches, where agencies apply for funding together or embark on joint service delivery without exploring the implications of actual collaboration. Two Reconnect services had experienced this type of 'collaboration'.

In the first instance, the tender to establish the Reconnect service had included a lead agency and a 'partner' agency that was to provide mediation services. Little work had been

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[16] Kingsley G.T., McNeely J.B., & Gibson J.O., 1997. Community Building: Coming of Age. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute

[17] Austin, M.J., March 2003. The Changing relationship between non-profit organisations and public Social Service Agencies in the era of welfare reform. Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, vol 32, no 1, pp 97-114

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done on the actual mechanisms for the partnership and as a result, by the end of the second stage study visit the relationship had ceased.

In the second instance, three services went into the Reconnect tender as essentially equal partners, each providing a specialised service: mediation, mentoring and intensive case support. At the first study visit this was identified as a major difficulty, with the Reconnect service itself failing to be an integrated service. By the second stage visit this had improved to some extent, with greater integration of practice occurring.

6.2 Growth in collaboration over time

The researchers recorded examples of more formalised collaboration occurring between the Reconnect services and other agencies. While there were numerous examples of collaborative casework on individual cases, these were not recorded. Nor were the more informal ideas exchange interactions between Reconnect and other workers recorded . Only more tangible, comprehensive activities that were described by service providers and Reconnect itself as examples of collaboration were scored at each visit, and are illustrated in table 4.

Table 4 : Reconnect services and collaborative projects in different stages
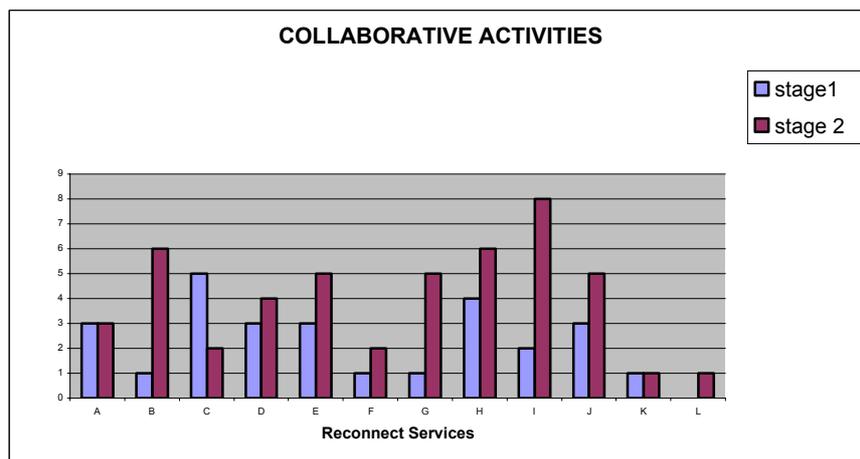
As can be seen in Table 4, collaborative projects/activity levels were maintained or grew over the two stages of the study in all Reconnect services except one. Agency C had noted a number of specific collaborative projects had ceased as a result of a lack of ongoing funding. The following case study describes the typical kinds of collaborative activity initiated by Reconnect services within the study.

Case study 4 : Collaborative activity initiated by Reconnect Agency I

Agency I is a newer service established under Round Two of the Reconnect Program. It is located in a rural town and serves surrounding areas, which have a large Indigenous population.

Over the past year, Reconnect has worked with a local high school to develop and pilot an innovative transition program. The project originated when the school counsellor was asked to run an anger management program. The counsellor was reluctant to run a program that only targeted young people with problems, having previously found it difficult to overcome the stigmatising nature of such programs.

The Reconnect worker collaborated over time with the school counsellor to develop a social skills program, modifying an existing program called "Rock and Water". The program uses the medium of martial arts (self defence) exercises to engage initial interest, encourage discipline and perseverance, and teach young people how to deal with conflicts without losing self control. Physical exercises are linked to group discussion to improve communication and social skills.

Having developed the program, some time was then spent by the Reconnect worker and the school counsellor informing others in the school of the value of trying this new approach. The program is being piloted with three classes of year seven boys at different academic levels, including some young people with significant behaviour and learning difficulties. A three-person team, which includes a teacher, the Reconnect worker and a martial arts instructor run each class. The pilot program is being evaluated, and in the future they hope to start the program in the last year of primary, with follow-up in the first year of high school. This is the first comprehensive collaborative program that the school as a whole has worked on with an external agency.

The second project arose when Reconnect observed that young people who come in contact with the service often become disengaged from education during a period of instability in their accommodation. The service felt there was a need for an accommodation option within the town to provide stable support for those young people wishing to complete their study but who are unable to live at home.

Reconnect organised an initial meeting of stakeholders in youth accommodation and support services to gauge the extent of the issue, present one possible model of supported student housing (which the auspice agency had previously developed in two other areas), and ascertain support for such a model. The model involves a volunteer lead tenant who provides a mentoring role for approximately three other student residents.

A further meeting was held with a wider group of stakeholders, including the Department of Housing and local Indigenous organisations. At this meeting commitment was gained from four agencies to work in partnership on the project. The commitments included a community housing provider to manage the house, supervise the lead tenant and hold regular house meetings; JPET to provide living skills support such as budgeting; Reconnect to provide case management of clients; and Council to collect rent and maintain premises.

The next challenge for the group is to obtain suitable housing stock. At this stage, there are positive prospects, with the partnership group engaged in consultations with the state housing department and the Indigenous Community Development Program. Both of these projects developed over the course of a year and both illustrate informal and formal approaches to collaboration.

6.3 The role of Reconnect in service networks

This study reinforces the conclusion reached in the Barnett and Associates study (2001)[18] that Reconnect agencies 'add value' to service and agency networks. Network activity can be measured in terms of frequency of contact, the range of service providers involved, the intensity of connection, and the range of functions and activities they support. This study did not examine networks *per se*. Rather, service providers at both group meetings and in individual interviews, were asked to comment on Reconnect's role in relation to the networks supporting families and young people in their area.

Depending on their location, each of the Reconnect services had very different service networks to relate to. In rural areas networks were smaller but were often harder to maintain if no agency was available to do the coordination work necessary for network maintenance. For Reconnect services targeting specific population groups there were multiple networks to link with — those that picked up the issues of the specific target group, such as ethnic networks, and those that form around service delivery type, for example, youth services and family support services. Reconnect services covering a wide range of specific geographical locations were also faced with developing links to networks in each of these locations. Finally, Reconnect services in large urban centres typically belonged to a youth network that could have upwards of 300 members.

In the majority of cases cited by the interviewees, networks that include Reconnect services have moved beyond the simple information sharing or basic coordination that still characterises many service networks and 'inter-agencies'. Instead, there is a real focus on identifying unmet needs and community issues, and on collaborative work to establish projects or services to address them. This probably demonstrates the gradual changes that are occurring across the service system, particularly as funding approaches increasingly demand evidence of collaboration with other agencies.

Regardless of these broader developments, and because of the emphasis within the Reconnect program on collaboration, many of the Reconnect services studied placed particular importance on active involvement in developing or participating in service system networks.

However, for a minority of Reconnect services this was not the case. For two Reconnect services in the study little emphasis was placed on developing or participating in a service system network. Instead, these services developed smaller scale collaborative relationships with a few other agencies rather than attempting to build a broader network. Both these services were located in rural or semirural areas and in both cases formal networks were barely functioning.

Four Reconnect services have played an active part in getting networks established, often initiating the network meetings, encouraging other providers to attend and providing some initial leadership to sustain the networks. Some examples of the range of networks initiated

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[18] Department of Family and Community Services, Unpublished report 2001. Kate Barnett and Associates, Investigation of the Impact and Effectiveness of Reconnect in Port Adelaide-Enfield and Southern Metropolitan Adelaide.

by Reconnect include an Indigenous workers' interagency, a multicultural youth issues network and a network of school welfare counsellors. In other cases, Reconnect services have helped change the focus or understanding of existing networks. One Reconnect service, for example, has joined a network of gay and lesbian services and has highlighted issues relating to young people, families and early home leaving.

Service providers interviewed for this study reported that, with the exception of four cases, Reconnect services have played important strategic roles in strengthening existing networks through one or more of the following:

- assisting them to go beyond simply being an interagency which meets to share information to becoming a more project/activity focused group;

- helping networks to identify common issues and to plan and implement more effective responses;

- taking a leadership role in providing formal support to keep networks functioning;

- assisting networks to receive funding to support joint activities;

- promoting broader participation in the network;

- facilitating linkages between several networks/interagencies, such as a youth network with an ethnic network.

6.4 The development of a more integrated service model

The general move towards increasing collaboration between agencies and improving the coordination of human services stems from a recognition of the limitations and problems that flow from delivering services within program 'silos' which do not meet the complex realities of peoples' lives. Integrated service delivery is increasingly a public policy goal shared by governments and community organisations, and many funding contracts now require collaborative work between agencies at the community level.

Yet there is a lack of clarity around what constitutes coordination, collaboration or integration. Integration of a service system is increasingly conceptualised as a continuum. Fine, Pancharatnam and Thompson (2000).[19], in their report on Coordinated and Integrated Human Service Delivery Models describe this continuum in the figure set out on the following page.

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[19] NSW Cabinet Office and Premier's Department, March 2000. Fine, M., Pancharatnam, K., and Thompson. C., *Coordinated and Integrated Human Service Delivery Models* – Final Report for NSW Cabinet Office and Premier's Department. University of NSW: Social Policy Research Centre

Figure 1.1   The Continuum of Integration: A Basic Schema

⇐**Autonomy**   **Integration**⇒

Autonomy	Cooperative Links	Coordination	Integration
Parties/agencies act without reference to each other, although the actions of one may affect the other(s).	Parties establish ongoing ties, but formal surrender of independence not required. A willingness to work together for some common goals. Communication emphasised. Requires good will and some mutual understanding.	Planned harmonisation of activities between the separate parties. Duplication of activities and resources is minimised. Requires agreed plans and protocols or appointment of an external coordinator or (case) manager.	Links between the separate parties draw them into a single system. Boundaries between parties begin to dissolve as they become effectively work units or sub-groups within a single, larger organisation.

Source: Fine, Thomson and Graham (1998); Leutz (1999).

Fine et al. have noted that "beyond autonomously operating agencies, the spectrum identifies three forms of collaboration:

- '*cooperative links*' refers to service 'linkages' or more simply 'links' — each party remains independent but communicates and cooperates with others in a voluntary way over specific activities which may involve common beneficiaries or goals;

- '*coordination*' represents a planned and deliberate meshing of the activities of the separate agencies in a more systematic way and implies the surrendering of a significant degree of autonomy by each of the agencies involved. Plans are fixed according to a plan or protocol, or decision making is vested in a third party (for example a case manager) with responsibility for coordination.

- '*full integration*' creates new programs (for example, managed care services) or units (such as hospitals) where resources are pooled. The fully integrated program gains control of resources to define new benefits and services that it controls directly, rather than to better coordinate existing services."[20]

The Reconnect services investigated in this study can be placed on this continuum in relation to the types of collaborative relationships developed with other agencies.

All Reconnect services were found in both stages of the study to be operating beyond the autonomy end of the continuum.

Cooperative links

These Reconnect services undertake joint activities with other agencies in relation to specific projects or in relation to specific clients. They may be involved in network initiated activities whereby agencies come together to undertake an activity or project.

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[20] Fine M. et al, 2000, page 4

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These Reconnect services are not currently moving to increase the level of coordination or integration with other agencies.

Eight of the Reconnect services were identified as operating in the 'cooperative links' part of the spectrum at the first stage study visit.

By the second stage visit this had reduced to six services, with two Reconnect services formerly classified in this category changing their role and helping to move their primary networks towards greater coordination. In one of these cases the Reconnect service is auspiced by the youth network, which has increasingly developed more coordination between network members, especially around joint funding submissions and projects. In the second case the broader auspice agency of the Reconnect service has been specifically funded to develop a stronger coordinated network across a regional area.

Networks moving from cooperative links to greater coordination

Two services were identified as moving towards coordination in some of their work at the stage one visit, increasing to four Reconnect services by the second stage.

Reconnect services operating in this part of the continuum have initiated greater levels of coordination within the network so that some degree of planning as a service system occurs and steps are taken to address issues within this planning context. This has resulted in protocols between agencies, formal partnerships in applying for funds or in the development of coordination plans. Reconnect services in this part of the continuum are taking a high degree of leadership in developing this level of collaboration.

Networks moving from coordination to greater integration

Two Reconnect services were identified in the first stage of the study as operating in the coordination part of the spectrum and having elements of their work that reflected movement towards greater integration of service delivery.

Both of these services were part of the original pilots and both are now operating within the context of highly functioning networks that are promoting early intervention approaches in work with young people and their families.

However, in the second stage visit, the role played by Reconnect within the Networks had diminished due to funding and management issues within the Reconnect services. The following case studies on these two Reconnect services in relation to their networks are useful in understanding the degree to which networks and individual agencies need to be resourced if greater integration is to be achieved.

The Reconnect service began developing this network (which is formed around agencies delivering services to potential Reconnect clients) during the pilot project period. At the time it began, the network was linked within a more traditional interagency model focused around information sharing.

The Reconnect network by the time of the first study visit

By the time the formal Reconnect Program had evolved from the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program (YHPP), a wide range of service providers were beginning to develop a formal commitment to the Reconnect framework, resulting in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between key agencies. Services included in the MOU participated in training in the Reconnect model, including action research and the Good Practice Principles.

Signing the MOU committed the agency to working with clients who fall within the Reconnect target group in a way that is consistent with the Reconnect Good Practice Principles. The network was driven by the coordinator of the Reconnect service, although there was a high level of participation and ownership of the network's activities by all the agencies involved. This understanding and commitment was confirmed at the first stage visit in both the service provider meeting and the individual interviews. At the time of the first study visit the network had achieved the following:

- Agreement on the use of brokerage funds across the network so that agencies could access the Reconnect and other brokerage funds against agreed criteria for clients falling within the Reconnect target group. This gave access for a much wider range of young people and their families to funds to support young people's connections to family, school and community.

- Network members had attended training on the Good Practice Principles and action research.

- An after-hours service developed as a network response to identified needs and was staffed by workers from the network (using separate funding to pay for the service). This allowed access to assistance on weekends and at nights when conflict was likely to erupt.

- A youth worker pool that provided access to relief youth workers across the network, coordinated by Reconnect on behalf of the state welfare department who had primary use of the youth workers.

- Some agreements between network members on practice issues and case coordination approaches, and a number of joint projects between members. For example, Reconnects clients could access a parenting training program run by another network member.

- Publication of a kit that contained material that promoted the whole network of agencies rather than simply the Reconnect service itself. The kit was named the "Reconnect early intervention agency network: community and government agencies working together" and provided the Reconnect service number as a central contact point.

- A pool of Reconnect trained and supervised mediators, along with a pool of private practitioners (counsellors, psychologists) who could be accessed on a fee for service basis or through the use of brokerage funds by all network members.

- A pool of volunteers trained and supervised by the Reconnect service but allocated across the agencies to support individual young people. The volunteers were mainly drawn from fourth year psychology/social work students who volunteered time, as opposed to being on placement. Many volunteers worked with an agency for a year or more, sometimes assisting individual young people and sometimes undertaking project work.

The Reconnect network at the time of the second study visit

In the intervening year the network moved to become incorporated so that it could receive other funds and take over the auspice of the Reconnect service.

Services that formed part of the new incorporated network agreed not to compete against the network for new funding targeted to the Reconnect client group. Rather, the network as a coordinated group was to decide where new funding should be allocated. Under the plan for incorporation, the Reconnect service was to increase its coordination role to act as a resource service to the other agencies in relation to training, assisting with funding applications and coordination of services.

By the second visit incorporation of the network had occurred, although the new network had not as yet taken over the auspice of Reconnect. The newly incorporated body had resulted in two types of members — full members (organisations who formally became members and agreed to abide by the goals of the network) and associate members (other members of the network that had not formally joined the incorporated body). Considerable turnover occurred between individual service providers who were active in the network between the two visits. Only one person, the Chairperson of the new network, had been previously involved. There were 10 full members at the time of the visit, of which seven had young people and/or families as their core target group. Four of the services were early intervention in focus, while the others provided crisis or post-crisis support services. One service was a victims support service that had neither a young people/families focus or an early intervention focus.

Discussion with some of the full members of the network highlighted the shift in understanding that had occurred between the two stages of the study. Where the network members had previously reported a clear understanding of the early intervention focus of Reconnect and the Good Practice Principles that guided service provision, the new members of the incorporated network were not clear on these. The victim support organisation representative, for example, was very confused as to why his organisation had joined the network, describing it essentially as an opportunity to share information.

It also became clear that while organisations had joined the network, the decision for membership had occurred at the worker/manager level, not at a Board or management committee level. This became a tension, for example, when the Department of Families announced a tender project for an early intervention project in the area. Membership of the network required agreement to not tender against each other. In this case the network put in a tender, but so did one of the full members of the network. While the tenders had a different focus, they were both competing for the same funding. When questioned about this, network members responded by saying that they hadn't really competed as the tenders were to do different things and the network could support either approach. In fact the agency that had tendered separately for the funds had done so at the instigation

of their Board who were not aware of the membership requirements of the network, so this agreement had not even been considered in the process.

By the time of the second visit, the Reconnect service itself was facing a funding crisis.

Reconnect's rapid expansion had been funded by accessing a number of one-off grants. Its base level funding had not been indexed since it had been funded initially as a Youth Homelessness Pilot (YHP) agency. Costs had increased substantially due to both award increases and the need for higher rental expenses to accommodate the range of projects operating under the Reconnect network.

A number of projects operating as activities of the network ceased as funding ended, while Reconnect itself could not continue to have staff time allocated to both maintaining the network *and* to the basic casework practice. Thus by the second visit the range of activities sponsored by the network had dwindled to one — the after hours service, which was kept going by volunteers.

Network members had assumed that the Reconnect coordinator would be free to take on the role of coordination of the network as the major part of her role. This could be sustained as long as the other projects provided some funds towards coordination. However, as funds decreased and Reconnect remained the only funded service, spending the bulk of time on coordination of the network became unsustainable for Reconnect. The Reconnect Coordinator left a few months before the second study visit and the other Reconnect staff also turned over within a month of the study being completed.

Case study 4 : Agency E — A coordinated youth network with high level Reconnect participation

The Reconnect service operating in this model was established prior to the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program (YHPP) to assist schools to develop early intervention approaches to working with young people and their families. The Reconnect service gained funding under the pilot program and extended its activities to incorporate more direct casework with young people and their families. The success of its work in the pilot led to two other related services being established by the same auspice body with money from the state government: a worker to foster systemic-level change in schools in the area, and a youth and family counsellor.

While the pilot program was operating, the local youth network was strengthened as a result of a range of 'drivers': the YHPP's work, a range of new funding programs directed towards early intervention, and the strong leadership and direction provided by the coordinator of the new youth team within one of the local Councils. The network now has 300 agencies as members and a 30-person Steering Committee (made up of representatives of different service groups) that meets regularly to oversee the network's activities. The Reconnect Coordinator plays a strategic role on the committee and holds the position of Deputy Chair.

The network at the time of the first study visit

The network executive at this time had the following roles:

- Identifying opportunities for funding and developing collaborative funding applications for community development activities as well as service provision. At the time of the first visit it had just received notice it had successfully gained funding for two community development projects to work with at risk young people on arts-based projects over a period of three years.

- Designing and delivering regular training programs to members on a range of practice issues, for example, mental health issues for young people.

- Consideration of more integrated service system approaches. For example, the network executive was beginning to discuss developing joint assessment models to operate across the service system in relation to assessing the needs of young people and identifying the most appropriate interventions and agencies to work with them.

- Identifying issues and developing collaborative responses to them. For example, the network had recently organised training around the issues of young people who were same-sex-attracted. Out of this training a small grant was gained to fund the facilitation of a same-sex-attracted support group for young people across the area. A range of schools and services were involved in assisting the development of the group that was facilitated by a Reconnect worker.

The Executive group provides leadership to the network as a whole. The Reconnect coordinator, in the role of Deputy Chair, was widely acknowledged to have played a strategic leadership role in the network, particularly in relation to collaborative practices. The coordination of the network was undertaken primarily by the youth team of one Council, including taking primary responsibility for administrative tasks of network coordination, information exchange and sourcing of funds. However, the Reconnect coordinator frequently worked on funding proposals with the Chair of the network, who was the youth team coordinator in Council.

The network at the time of the second visit

During the intervening year between visits, the network had continued to develop projects that coordinated agencies more closely. The second Council in the area had become more actively involved in the coordination of the network, sharing some of the tasks with the Chair of the network. Network initiatives during this period included:

▪ A mentoring project linking boys who had no males in their lives with older men in the area had been coordinated by the Council for the network. Reconnect and two school counsellors were involved in its operation.

▪ Funding had been gained to do a feasibility study into the development of the integrated assessment system and funding sources for implementation had been identified. The Reconnect coordinator was leading a small group of agencies in this work.

▪ A standardised induction training program for agencies in the network had been developed. To be run every second month, the induction program was for new workers in the area to gain an overview of agencies in the area, the range of activities being coordinated and how to utilise the network. By the time of the second study visit the training had been run twice and was considered to have been highly successful.

▪ A survey of network members had been undertaken on the potential use of electronic and internet communication for the network. An online newsletter, bulletin board and subscription list was being developed to increase ease of communication across network members. It is likely that the integrated assessment group will also utilise this electronic communication as the system is planned to provide ease of information exchange between participating agencies.

However, by the second visit the role of Reconnect within the network had begun to change. Reconnect's auspice service had a complete changeover in senior management and had restructured its operation. The auspice service had been subsidising the rising costs of Reconnect, as funding to the service had not been indexed since the original pilot program. The auspice's management had decided to cut this subsidy, effectively reducing the capacity of Reconnect from 3 staff to 1.8 staff. The Reconnect coordinator left the organisation a few months before the second stage visit, as did another long-term Reconnect staff member.

As a result of its decreased capacity, Reconnect has withdrawn from active membership of the network and any of its activities, instead maintaining all its resources for provision of casework. Other networking activities of Reconnect are also being withdrawn, including secondary consultation to the school welfare coordinators network, a project to work with six less-engaged schools, a parenting support group and the same-sex-attracted support group.

Executive members of the network interviewed for this study were very concerned at the long-term implications of this withdrawal. Reconnect had provided a core early intervention youth and family focus for the network. In addition, the collaborative relationships built by Reconnect through its casework and work with schools were seen as a key reason for engagement of a range of agencies in the network. While the turnover in the Reconnect coordinator's position had not previously resulted in a lessening of Reconnect's role in providing leadership within the network, this is now the case.

6.5 Discussion: The role of Reconnect services in strengthening collaboration and the service networks

All of the Reconnect services involved in this study have been found to have highly collaborative approaches to their work. This confirms the findings of other studies and documentation on Reconnect services.

Less clear was the extent to which Reconnect services differ from other organisations in relation to their collaborative work. The general trend towards increasing formal relationships between organisations builds on pre-existing practices within the non-government sector that have always found practitioners collaborating to assist individual clients and communities. In this sense, the work of Reconnect services is not new.

However, this study did find evidence that Reconnect services tended to be taking a leadership role in building collaboration between agencies. Service providers interviewed for this project acknowledged Reconnect as the primary initiators for many of the collaborative activities cited. In many cases service providers commented on the qualitative difference in how Reconnect services worked with other agencies, emphasising that Reconnect workers tended to be respectful of other practitioners and organisations, building trust within the collaboration. This was often seen as different to the approaches of other agency workers. It was also interesting that 78% of service providers interviewed described collaboration as a key component of the Reconnect role.

The strong leadership role of Reconnect within networks and in building a more integrated service system was also raised in many of the interviews and meetings with service providers. While other organisations are clearly also involved in leading collaboration, Reconnect staff have an expectation that they should work collaboratively, due to the explicit Good Practice Principle on this matter.

While collaboration takes time and resources, collaboration between agencies at a network level takes considerable coordination time if more than an exchange of information is to be achieved. The two case studies of the Reconnect services involved in developing more integrated networks are salutary. Both networks had considerable potential for delivering a more integrated service system that could positively impact on young people and their families' lives. Yet the lack of funding within Reconnect to resource these networks will negatively impact on the development of a more integrated approach.

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7   Building capacity within Indigenous communities

The evaluation framework for Reconnect sought to learn more about how Reconnect services can work most effectively with Indigenous communities. A key evaluation question was posed: "Has the program encouraged the participation of Indigenous communities? To what extent?" To assist in the overall evaluation, the community longitudinal study was designed so that it could gather some evidence to inform this question.

7.1 Reconnect services targeting Indigenous young people and their families

The Reconnect services chosen for the study included three Reconnect services that had received funding to specifically serve Indigenous communities. The three services differed in terms of location, auspice, target group and staffing, as outlined below.

Agency	Location	Target	Auspice	Staffing
Agency G	Remote, town based	Indigenous young people and families only	Indigenous youth organisation	Non-Indigenous coordinator, female youth worker, does not speak Indigenous language One full-time Indigenous woman with nursing background, speaks one Indigenous language One part-time Indigenous man, no formal qualification, speaks one Indigenous language
Agency K	Remote, serving main town and three surrounding towns with large Indigenous populations	Non-Indigenous and Indigenous	NGO providing family support	Non-Indigenous male worker for town based service Non-Indigenous male worker for outreach to 3 towns (position unfilled for most of the study)
Agency I	2 rural towns, one hour apart	Non-Indigenous and Indigenous	National mediation service three hours from Reconnect sites	Non-Indigenous coordinator (male) One full-time Indigenous woman from local community, Centrelink and social welfare background One full-time Indigenous man, mediation background

Of these three, only two became fully functioning in relation to their work in Indigenous communities.

Agency K: A failure to gain Indigenous participation

Agency K was to have provided an outreach service to three surrounding towns that had high levels of Indigenous young people and families, with the town-based worker servicing a predominantly non-Indigenous population. The service was not able to attract a suitable Indigenous staff member for the outreach position and finally employed a non-Indigenous worker who had little experience in a remote area. This worker stayed in the position for only a short time before taking stress leave and finally leaving. During the study Reconnect functionally had only one caseworker based in town. The management arrangement for the Reconnect service was identified as an issue at the first stage visit as there was no overall manager for the agency and its management committee was dysfunctional. As a result, the Reconnect staff had little management supervision, direction or support.

By the second stage visit these issues had been addressed. An overall manager for the service had been appointed and was providing management support for the worker, while the service was advertising for a new outreach worker and for a part-time Indigenous worker to be based in one of the towns . Few real connections to the Indigenous leaders within these communities existed however, so it was unclear that the new approach would succeed. In addition, few broader links had been made with the Indigenous community in the main town (although individual young people had been seen as clients). The lack of links to the Indigenous community within the service is a major impediment to successfully servicing this community.

Agency G: Successful participation

The remote area, Indigenous-specific service (Agency G) was auspiced by an Indigenous youth organisation. This auspice did present some difficulties for the Reconnect service in that it served a different section of the Indigenous community than the specific target of the Reconnect service. The youth organisation was also located some distance from its target group and there was conflict between the organisation and other organisations providing services to young people and families from the Reconnect target group. This had been a major difficulty during Reconnects' establishment as there was considerable resentment about the allocation of the Reconnect service to this organisation. Nevertheless, the Reconnect service has managed these issues well, systematically building relationships with the other key Indigenous organisations in the town.

By the completion of the study the Reconnect service had:

- helped to develop a collaborative partnership to provide a jointly staffed recreation service for young people;
- established regular casework meetings between the key agencies to discuss cases and coordinate approaches to supporting individual young people and families;
- developed regular 'out bush', back-to-country camps for particularly vulnerable young people, staffed jointly with another agency;
- provided Reconnect staff to help to train Indigenous mothers as part of a family skills leadership program run by another organisation; regularly staffed another organisation's community centre where young people congregate; regularly visited a adult/young people learning program run in a local Indigenous language;
- trained a group of young people as peer educators on sexual health issues.

The effects of the collaborative initiatives helped to overcome some of the problems associated with the location of the service. Service providers interviewed for the study were still concerned about the auspice arrangements, but acknowledged that the Reconnect team worked to actively build collaborative relationships that focused on assisting young people in the community.

Key to the success of Agency G's work was the team of workers employed. The coordinator is a highly skilled youth worker with experience working overseas, in urban Australian areas and within the town that the service is located. While she is non-Indigenous, she has sufficient skills and experience to work respectfully with the Indigenous staff and with the community. The Reconnect service was committed to employing Indigenous staff and was lucky to find an experienced nurse who was a member of the local community, and a young part-time male worker from the community who had been a professional footballer. The staff work together well as a team and have clearly articulated approaches to working within this community.

Agency I: Successful participation

The second Reconnect service working with a large Indigenous community, Agency I, was auspiced by a non-Indigenous mediation service based in a larger regional city some distance away from the Reconnect service itself. The Reconnect service was provided in two towns about one hour apart. Although the auspice organisation did not have a history in either town, considerable consultation with the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community had occurred prior to taking up the funding. The Reconnect services specifically recruited Indigenous staff, and were lucky to find an experienced Indigenous woman who had previously worked for Centrelink and was well respected within the community. The second worker was non-Indigenous, although by the second stage visit this worker had been replaced by another Indigenous male worker.

At the first stage study visit the service was coordinated by a manager located in the larger city. This had proved difficult, with the local workers feeling constrained to work within the auspice agency's mediation model, rather than to work more flexibly in response to the needs of local communities, particularly the Indigenous community. By the second stage this had changed. A specific Reconnect coordinator who had greater day-to-day contact with the workers was employed. The agency had also received second round funding for an additional Reconnect service in another regional town, with the new coordinator managing both services. The service had evolved over this year to work in a more flexible way, providing the Reconnect 'tool box' of approaches rather than just mediation. By the end of the second stage of the study the Reconnect service had:

- formed an Indigenous workers network and helped to maintain it;
- developed with a range of other agencies a planned response for meeting housing needs of young people unable to live at home;
- developed an innovative program for schools to address anger issues in young boys;
- trained a group of young mediators, with about half from an Indigenous background, that are now being used for peer education and mentoring of other young people;

- helped support in collaboration with a neighbourhood centre a group for Indigenous men which is re-establishing cultural links between boys and older men;

- participated in the overall design of a collaborative website project for Indigenous young people and the development of a component on mental health issues with the strong involvement of young people;

- supported an innovative living skills and recreational program for early school leavers;

- supported a number of the young mediators in developing broader leadership skills and supported their active involvement in local reconciliation activities;

- established a youth casework forum to provide a mechanism for promoting good practice;

- assisted in leading a change process in a local youth refuge to increase usage by Indigenous young people and to make it more culturally responsive to their needs;

- supported the development of a new Indigenous out-of-home care and family support service.

A number of other initiatives were also planned to address criminal justice issues and educational policies around suspension practices in local schools.

7.2 Emerging approaches to successful participation by Indigenous communities

The two Reconnect services that were successful in working with their communities have strong common approaches, despite the challenges posed by their differing contexts and communities:

- strong teams of Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers with relevant experience, knowledge and skills, including a gender mix within the staff;

- an emphasis on capacity building and on building comprehensive linkages to Indigenous organisations and community leaders;

- capacity for adapting the Reconnect model to the context of Indigenous communities, including a strong focus on community development approaches and an emphasis on flexible casework and practical support approaches.

The importance of Indigenous staff

While there has been wide acceptance of the need for Indigenous staff to build strong relationships with Indigenous communities, there are still many organisations that fail to attract and keep suitable Indigenous staff. Although this can be explained in terms of overall disadvantage resulting in fewer possible candidates for positions, other factors such as the 'cultural competence'[21] of organisations must also be considered. Agency G, for

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[21] Cultural competence has been adopted as a term within Wrap Around: Systems of Care in the USA. Wrap Around is an approach to provision of services to young people and families that has many common elements to Reconnect. Evaluation of Wrap Around found that cultural competence — the ability of an individual practitioner or organisations to provide

example, follows the "Malpa system" (a term used in Central Australia). The Malpa system requires any project or initiative in which a non-Indigenous worker is involved to have an Indigenous person as a co-worker. If there is no willing or appropriate person available, then the project simply does not proceed. This not only ensures that the Indigenous perspective is central to the work but is also an effective means of training and skilling Indigenous people. Both Agency G and I had found it possible to employ highly skilled and experienced Indigenous staff, and to keep them over the life of the study. Their knowledge of what was culturally appropriate and how to build trust with Indigenous people was valued highly in the development of the service model.

However, to have culturally competent employment practices requires that the non-Indigenous staff are able to work in genuinely respectful ways with Indigenous staff and the wider community. Agency G and I both had found non-Indigenous coordinators who were able to provide staff guidance that demonstrated strong respect for the skills and knowledge they brought to the work. Where strong mutually respectful relationships are built it is often useful to have a mix of non-Indigenous and Indigenous staff within a team. For many Indigenous people working within their own communities it is hard to escape family and cultural obligations and expectations about service delivery. Many Indigenous staff find it difficult to negotiate the tensions within communities and having a non-Indigenous coordinator can sometimes be useful in helping staff to sidestep these tensions.

An explicit role of building capacity and relationships with the community

Both Agency G and I Reconnect teams have seen capacity building as fundamental to developing successful outcomes for the service. Working collaboratively is also essential to working in a culturally competent way.

These agencies recognised the importance of 'delivering' on something the community or client has indicated is important to them, no matter how small. This builds confidence in the agency and provides the stepping stone to larger endeavours and outcomes. For example, Agency G provided staff one night per week on a night bus that was picking up young people after dark and taking them home. This wasn't directly Reconnect work, yet the service was needed and helped Reconnect build trust with both individual young people and the other organisations in the community.

The Good Practice Forums held during the course of the longitudinal study also found similar approaches being used by other services working with Indigenous communities, with many agencies reporting that, in their work with Indigenous communities, being a supporter or 'follower' was usually more important than being a 'leader'. They spoke of 'piggy-backing' on other programs or taking advantage of other agencies' work to make contacts.

Most of all, both Reconnect services had developed strong links to leaders within communities and with other Indigenous workers. This process had taken time, including a lot of social contact to allow knowledge and trust to develop. Again, having Indigenous staff can assist this process if contacts are already established. But equally, where there are

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services in a way that understands and respects the unique family and community culture the young person is part of — contributes to positive outcomes.

perceived family tensions within communities, having non-Indigenous staff can be essential in reaching all sections of the community.

Adapting the Reconnect model for Indigenous communities

Both Agency G and I had worked to interpret the Reconnect Good Practice Principles and Reconnect program guidelines to the context of their communities.

In the case of Indigenous young people, for example, the conventional definitions and understandings of key concepts such as 'early intervention' and 'homelessness' needed to be revised if the service was to be effective within an Indigenous context. Few Indigenous people are understood to be homeless within the Indigenous community, in terms of having no family or place to sleep. However, many young people can be understood to be homeless in terms of having inadequate or unsafe homes. Within the context of these communities very young children could be regarded as homeless in this definition, so that early intervention in youth homelessness takes on a very different meaning. Generally, Reconnect agencies have kept a focus on youth and attempted to interpret early intervention within this context.

Early intervention for Agency G was largely focused within the community development projects it was running. Work with individual young people, however, tended to have a high degree of crisis level casework and from these cases it often became clear what might be useful as an early intervention project. For example, Agency G has found that a high percentage of young people it sees have sexually transmitted diseases. Not only does the caseworker take the young person to the clinic to get treatment, they have set up a peer education project to train young people as sexual health educators.

Agency I found that the mediation model that the auspice organisation operated did not work flexibly enough to respond to needs within the community. They were able to argue for a more flexible approach in terms of providing a culturally appropriate service.

In reality, the Good Practice Principles and the Reconnect program guidelines did not impede the capacity of these agencies to develop an appropriate Reconnect service. In fact, the emphasis on action research within the program and on the flexible toolbox of approaches and collaboration as Good Practice Principles has fostered this development.

Both agencies have developed service approaches that involve:
- connecting young people to adults within culturally appropriate activities, for example, bush camps, fishing expeditions, separate women's and men's groups;
- an emphasis on empowerment models in working with young people so that they take leadership as they develop skills;
- a high level of practical support to address the immediate concerns of young people, for example housing, health, education, income;
- less use of clinically based counselling or formal mediation models.

7.3 Discussion: Developing participation by Indigenous communities

This study has found that in two out of the three services targeting Indigenous communities highly successful approaches have been adopted to gain participation of Indigenous communities and to build capacity for early intervention. In fact, these two Reconnect services were found to have high levels of capacity building in all of the dimensions scored for this study, despite the challenges faced by their communities.

The service where this has not occurred to date has not had the critical internal capacity to build these relationships, namely strategic leadership, Indigenous staffing and good relationships with key Indigenous leaders. Unless some of these factors change it is unlikely that this service will be able to successfully bridge this cultural divide.

The Reconnect program guidelines and Good Practice Principles have been able to be responsive to the needs of these communities. These agencies are recognisably "Reconnect" yet are also clearly developing specific approaches to fit the needs of their communities. However, it may be useful to look at how the program guidelines can be used to strengthen the likely success of Reconnect services targeting Indigenous communities in the future by:

- looking closely at the consultation process and connections of organisations with Indigenous communities prior to deciding on funding a specific auspice;

- ensuring that non-Indigenous auspice organisations can clearly articulate their approach to cultural competence — that is, how they will recruit, support and work with Indigenous staff — as part of the tendering process;

- ensuring that there is good management and coordination that can provide day to day guidance and leadership for the Reconnect staff;

- continuing to recognise community development approaches as essential within a Reconnect model for these communities.

8   Factors affecting Reconnect community capacity building for early intervention

The findings outlined in this report indicate that Reconnect services are enhancing the capacities of very diverse communities to reduce youth homelessness in their areas.

Despite the conceptual and measurement difficulties inherent in the Program's goal of 'enhancing community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness', it is clear that Reconnect services, utilising a service delivery model based on Good Practice Principles developed through a well-evaluated pilot program, have at a minimum:

- strengthened the service and skill infrastructure within communities capable of intervening early when problems arise in the lives of young people and families which, if unaddressed, could lead to youth homelessness;

- initiated a range of new approaches and projects with other service providers to address issues that may lead to youth homelessness;

- strengthened linkages and collaborative approaches between agencies and within networks.

It is also clear that, in some communities, Reconnect services have had more far-reaching effects in enhancing capacity as evidenced by the reported changes in other agencies' practices and by the emergence of greater coordination between, and integration of, service networks.

The study was designed to recognise the diversity of Reconnect services in terms of their specific community characteristics, their length of establishment, and their organisational structure and auspicing arrangements. At the conclusion of the first stage of the study there was evidence of Reconnect services contributing to enhancement of community capacity regardless of these differences, although some of these differences did appear to effect the extent to which Reconnect services are succeeding in their capacity building efforts.

At the completion of the first stage of the study, the researchers concluded that other, more elusive factors contribute to the extent to which a Reconnect service enhances community capacity, such as the degree to which the team culture of the service is change-orientated, how community capacity and casework is balanced, and whether there is strong leadership within the team. The significance of factors such as these is echoed in the literature on capacity building.

The second stage of the study has to a large extent confirmed these initial findings. The benefits of the study being conducted over two periods is also clear, allowing the sustainability of Reconnect services' work in capacity building to be examined. In the main, Reconnect services' work in capacity building appears to be cumulative, with further examples being found of Reconnect services impacting on infrastructure, collaboration and practice of other agencies.

However, the study has also allowed greater insight into the factors that have worked against this progressive accumulation of capacity building. The effects of staff turnover, of restructuring and most importantly, of funding limitations, have been clearly identified. In these cases capacity building has dropped, with the impact of the weakened Reconnect services as yet unclear.

The differences between Reconnect services in terms of their context and orientation are explored in this section of the report.

8.1 Pre-existing community characteristics

The Interim Report of this study outlined the differences found between the communities studied in terms of their strengths and the factors contributing to youth homelessness in their area. This picture emerged from the focus groups with young people and parents and from the meetings with service providers in the area.

The first stage of the study concluded that the communities under study had both differences and similarities in the issues presented to a Reconnect service attempting to build community capacity for early intervention. Each Reconnect service has been posed particular challenges by their particular communities in relation to building capacity.

Rural communities highlighted the problems, caused by a lack of resources in providing a comprehensive range of services and the economic strain facing many rural areas. However, there were also strengths to be found within these communities.

Many rural areas demonstrated a strong sense of 'connection' between community workers and other key players, and a willingness to share and think creatively when faced with difficult situations and issues. The defined geographic area of rural communities often also reinforced this sense of 'connectedness' and shared responsibility and so assisted the capacity building task. This confirms recent Australian research that found that intra-community ties were strongest in rural areas.[22]

In contrast, Reconnect services located in urban areas had the complexity of working across many competing agencies, a lack of a defined community, populations of young people and families that were harder to engage due to their transience, diversity and overall size. However, urban areas also allowed ease of access to skilled staff, training and support, greater social infrastructure and diversity of opportunity for young people and families.

The majority of Reconnect services are located in areas that have and/or can find some balance between these strengths and difficulties. Several, however, are located in communities that appear to have few strengths and many difficulties. Even where this balance is tipped towards the problem end of the spectrum, Reconnect services may still be able to work effectively in enhancing community capacity.

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[22] Healy, K., Ayres, L., and Hampshire, A., 2003. Social capital and quality of life in geographically diverse communities affected by rapid social and economic change. Conference Paper, Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, February 2003.

One remote service for example, appears to have an insurmountable challenge in terms of an entrenched history of a lack of collaboration between organisations, the extent and complexity of issues facing the Indigenous community it serves, and internal challenges within the auspice agency. Yet the Reconnect staff are acknowledged by other providers to be making progress in building the collaboration necessary to more effectively address the needs of Indigenous young people and their communities. This Reconnect service continued to build this capacity over the year of the study, although these external factors remained the same, or in some instances worsened.

In contrast, another Reconnect service was located in an area that has a more defined community, a well-functioning collaborative network, and a good range of services available that already have some orientation to early intervention work with young people. Yet this service has had a more limited impact to date on enhancing capacity. This service had fewer examples within each capacity building area (infrastructure, effect on other agency practices and collaboration) than any other Reconnect service.

Both these services fall into the newer-established category, and both have highly experienced and appropriate staff for the communities they serve. A major difference between them is the ability of their staff to act as a coordinated team, and the different emphasis they place on individual casework and other forms of work. The latter service has been structured essentially as three different services, and focuses on work with individual young people and their families. The focus on individual work, largely in separation from the other Reconnect staff, has limited the capacity of the Reconnect service to identify opportunities to work around broader, more structural issues. In the second visit some changes had been made to the way the service operated and as a result some other types of collaborative approaches were being explored.

That said, there does appear to be a continuum of community characteristics that enhance the work of Reconnect services in relation to community capacity building. The experience of the three Victorian communities included in this study are interesting in this regard. The Victorian services were located in an urban area, a regional city and an urban fringe area. All three communities had:

- a recent history of collaboration between agencies and coordinated networks;

- a significant number of state-funded programs and policies which specifically encourage and support early intervention approaches with young people and families;

- a greater range of generalist and specialist services available to support young people and families.

These characteristics may make the task of further developing a community's resources and capacities to prevent youth homelessness potentially easier.

8.2 The complexity of the target group and service networks

A related issue to pre-existing community characteristics is the extent to which the particular target group of individual Reconnect services, and their related service networks, impose additional complexity that impacts on the task of community capacity building.

This study included five services that targeted specific population groups — Indigenous young people, refugee and newly-arrived or established immigrant communities, and same-sex-attracted young people. All of these services were having a positive effect on community capacity building, but all were facing additional complexity in their work as a result of the special needs of their target groups.

In all of these Reconnect services, the reality and significance of specific cultures have affected how the services approach community capacity building. Usually it means the services must work with two networks — a mainstream youth and/or family service network and specific networks (both formal or informal) clustered around the population group. While this does not prevent these services being successful at capacity building, it does extend the number of agencies and groupings with whom the Reconnect service needs to work, and the number of relationships it must build and manage, if capacity building is to be effective. This points to the particular importance of service and staff continuity, and the likelihood that success will take additional time.

8.3 The passage of time

The first stage study report found that there was some evidence that more established Reconnect services were more consistently reported as having contributed to building community capacity. As tables one to four illustrated, it appears that for the majority of Reconnect services studied, capacity building increased over time as services became more established:

- All agencies showed an increase in capacity building within the infrastructure dimension with the exception of Agency C (one of the oldest services that suffered from funding difficulties).

- Nine services either maintained or increased their positive impact on other organisations' early intervention practices. Two agencies that had previously brought about increased early intervention practices were found to have decreased this affect by stage two (both were pilot agencies that had financial and staffing difficulties). A further two services were not identified as affecting other agencies early intervention practices in either round.

- Nine services had increased the level of positive collaboration, with one agency decreasing the affect on collaboration, and two maintaining the same levels.

These results are not conclusive but they tend to indicate that the passage of time contributes to a Reconnect service's effectiveness in building capacity. It also appears that time, rather than being part of the original pilot program, is the important factor. The first stage of the study hypothesised that involvement in the pilot program may have contributed to reported capacity building effects due to the service having a strong emphasis on evaluation and the development of the program model.

However, the results also indicate that while the passage of time allows Reconnect services to become well established and to enhance capacity building where the Reconnect model is operating well, where there are difficulties the effect of Reconnect agencies' work can reduce or not be realised.

8.4 Organisational supports for Reconnect services

The first stage findings of the study raised issues concerning three of the Reconnect services in relation to their structural and/or management arrangements that were found to negatively impact on their capacity to work effectively.

The issues were different for each of the three Reconnect services and related to:

- appropriateness of the auspice body
- structure and resource capacity of the auspice body
- splitting the Reconnect service between agencies.

By the second stage of the study these issues had been addressed to some degree, in some cases partly in response to this study. Nonetheless these issues are discussed here as it is likely that they are issues that will be present in other Reconnect services and thus effect the overall outcomes of the program.

8.4.1 Appropriateness of the auspice body

In one case, the auspice agency (not the Reconnect service itself) has poor relationships with both the target group for Reconnect and with other service providers servicing the target group (as outlined in the section on working with Indigenous communities). The placement of Reconnect with this agency was regarded at the first visit by the majority of service provider informants as a major impediment to its current and future effectiveness.

This perception was still strong by the second visit, although service providers interviewed acknowledged that Reconnect had made significant steps in building relationships with both the target group and other organisations.

Most interesting has been the development of changes within the auspice body itself. The CEO of the auspice organisation cited changes to practice within the organisation as a result of having Reconnect placed there. This included a greater focus on families, early intervention and casework approaches — the organisation traditionally ran more drop-in youth recreation services. There has also been some movement by the auspice body in relation to external relationships with other organisations. For example, having initially refused to cooperate with the other organisations to establish a jointly staffed drop-in service (although the Reconnect service was a key member of this project), the organisation has since retreated from outright opposition.

8.4.2 Structure and resource capacity of the auspice body

In the second case, the Reconnect service has been placed with an agency that had grown largely because it was able to become a conduit for funders rather than from any planned organisational decision to expand its work. As a result, at the first study visit there had been no manager to oversee its multiple programs and service types. A community

management committee was forced to function as the operational manager of the Reconnect service and the larger organisation, leaving the Reconnect staff without adequate day-to-day support and direction setting.

This Reconnect service is the second of the two remote services in the study (described in the section on Reconnect work with Indigenous communities). This has exacerbated staffing problems, and the service has had difficulty in attracting suitable staff and supporting them in their role. The original funding proposal was ambitious in terms of its proposed outreach to surrounding smaller communities and services, and the management committee has found it difficult to address the occupational health and safety issues involved, or to agree on a process to renegotiate the funding contract. The service employed an outreach worker who had considerable periods of stress leave prior to resigning. As a result, the Reconnect staff worked in relative isolation from management and from each other (when the two were employed), making it harder to be as effective in service delivery to individual clients or in enhancing community capacity.

After the first study visit, a coordinator was appointed to oversee the whole service, which comprised a family support service, Reconnect and a court support service. At the point of the second study visit, this appointment had resulted in more management systems being developed and supervision occurring. Advertising for the second Reconnect position was also underway.

8.4.3 Splitting the Reconnect service between agencies

The third Reconnect service to have organisational difficulties that limited work effectiveness is one that split the work of Reconnect between three separate organisations. At the time of the first study visit only one of these services offered a broader casework service. The other two services offered only specific intervention approaches — one offered only a mentoring service and the other offered only a mediation service.

The first study visit identified this structural arrangement as extremely problematic, as it made it difficult for the Reconnect service to:

- work as a team, as each staff member works within the framework of the agency where they are located and the specific type of service being provided;

- have a clear point of entry to the Reconnect service, where individual young people or their families can be jointly assessed and provided with a service to meet their needs;

- have sufficient staffing resources to meet the level of demand for intensive casework;

- promote Reconnect as an integrated service so that other providers are clear as to what can be provided and how to access it;

- work collaboratively with other agencies or within a network to identify broader issues facing young people and families that could be jointly addressed.

These issues were addressed to some extent following the first study visit. The managers of the three services met more frequently, as did the three Reconnect staff. An allocation meeting is now held each week to look at new referrals coming in and to discuss the types

of interventions that might be useful for the young person. The agency offering mediation has also begun to extend its work beyond offering one or two mediation sessions to doing home visiting and a more comprehensive assessment.

8.4.4 Issues arising from these organisational arrangements

Organisational issues in these three services have had a varying effect on capacity building.

In the first case example, the Reconnect service had still managed to significantly enhance capacity building largely because of the strategic approach taken by the staff, strong leadership within the Reconnect service and consistent teamwork.

In the other two examples, the Reconnect services did not have the same teamwork and strategic approach in place to overcome the structural difficulties at the time of Stage One of this study. However, by the stage two study visit some changes had occurred to address these difficulties, although it was too early to see the extent to which they would improve the Reconnect service's ability to enhance community capacity.

These organisational issues pose challenges for FaCS as the program funder. There are difficulties for funders in finding suitable auspices in remote areas, where it may be judged better to go with an unsuitable auspice rather than not fund a service at all.

Where the tendering process has identified difficulties with the auspice arrangement, it may be useful for FaCS to take a greater role in assisting a Reconnect service to establish good management structures. This might involve:

- providing a small amount of additional funds for a good planning process and/or training for the auspice body in both management skills and the objectives and modus operandi of the Reconnect program;

- finding an interim auspice that could provide a transition process for a different long-term arrangement;

- working through the structural arrangements in relation to service development with the tenderer(s) prior to the auspice arrangement being finalised.

8.5 The role of teamwork and leadership in capacity building

There appears to be some evidence that the effectiveness of community capacity building work is greater in Reconnect services that have:

- good teamwork;

- a strategic approach to working collaboratively with other services;

- strong leadership within the Reconnect service or its auspice body.

This finding mirrors other research on community capacity building that frequently identifies leadership as a key component of effective work in this area.[23]

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[23] See, for example, the paper by Howe and Cleary *Community Building; Policy Issues and Strategies for the Victorian Government*, Centre for Public Policy University of Melbourne and Anglicare Victoria, Januaty 2001, which was based on an extensive literature search both domestically and internationally.

In those Reconnect services that were found to have the most consistent positive impact on enhancing community capacity, a notable finding was the extent to which other service providers mentioned the leadership qualities of individual Reconnect staff or the strategic approach of the Reconnect service in their work with other organisations.

When service providers were asked to expand on these issues, they spoke of the Reconnect staff as people who:

- have a clear vision about what needs to happen for young people: that is, they articulate the 'big picture';

- model collaborative approaches and make explicit the principles that guide their practice;

- are good at facilitating discussion and assisting the development of a clear plan;

- are willing to do the work to get things happening;

- are respectful of others but also very persistent and future orientated.

The researchers' own observations are that the Reconnect services that are most cognisant of the importance of capacity building work and do most in this area are those that are:

- clear about the Reconnect model and early intervention approaches, and how this might apply beyond their own service in work with young people and families;

- able to balance casework with other activities, and use their casework to strengthen inter-agency collaboration and identification of systemic issues;

- confident and skilled in working collaboratively with other agencies and at a network level;

- conscious that they have a role within the community in terms of assisting systemic change.

These Reconnect services were more able to articulate their role in capacity building and look for opportunities to enhance capacity in all aspects of their work.

8.6 This study and Reconnect services responses

This study had an effect on the community building work of the twelve Reconnect services that participated in it.

Feedback was provided to the Reconnect services involved at the completion of the study visits. Feedback was based on what the researchers had heard in the service provider meetings, focus groups with young people and parents and interviews with individual service providers.

As a result of feedback from the first visit:

- two agencies attempted to address issues raised about their structural/management issues;

- three agencies introduced programs for parents (training and support).

In addition the interim study report was provided to the services involved. It may be that this report has assisted legitimising time spent on community capacity building activities and that this in turn has impacted on the increases seen in these activities between the two study visits.

It was also possible that the study may have had a negative impact in some communities. However, at the second study visit the researchers found no evidence of a negative impact.

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9   Conclusions of the study

9.1 Overall findings

The researchers have concluded that the 12 Reconnect services investigated have had a significant positive impact, relative to their own capacity, on building community capacity for early intervention for youth homelessness. In summary, the researchers have concluded the following :

Conclusion 1
Reconnect services increase community infrastructure for early intervention.

- Reconnect services are still uniquely adding to the service infrastructure within their own communities. In the 12 communities studied, only one community had a service that offered similar flexible and holistic approaches to intervening early in the factors that can lead to youth homelessness. For most communities Reconnect provides the only service working in this way.

- All 12 of the Reconnect services studied have increased infrastructure within the community in relation to skills development by providing training to one or all of the following — parents, young people, community members and other workers. Skills development takes place through structured courses, community development activities, secondary consultation, action research committees, casework and project work.

- Reconnect services have contributed to the resource base for early intervention approaches through sharing brokerage funds across a service network, providing Reconnect staff to extend or establish services that address identified gaps and by gaining other funding for new programs or services. Reconnect services play a bridging role in their community capacity building work, helping to link *within* and *between* communities.

Conclusion 2
Reconnect services build capacity through collaboration approaches and by strengthening service networks.

- Reconnect services are widely recognised by other service providers as 'collaborative players'. While recent trends in service delivery and program policy have emphasised collaboration between service providers as good practice, effective collaboration requires a clear conceptual understanding of what it involves, commitment to working in this way, and skills and time to do so. The study found that the Good Practice Principles and program guidelines have assisted Reconnect services to be effective at collaboration.

- Reconnect services have 'added value' to service networks through their collaborative efforts, helping to build networks that identify more systemic service delivery issues and better address needs through a more coordinated approach. Many Reconnect

services take a leadership role in networks, forging new networks and/or changing their focus towards greater integration.

Conclusion 3
Reconnect services build capacity by assisting other organisations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention.

- There is evidence that the majority of Reconnect services included in this study have been directly responsible for changes in other organisations' practices so that the other organisations have developed a greater capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness. This study only included evidence of changed organisational practices where service providers directly attributed them to the work of Reconnect. It is likely that the positive impact of Reconnect on other organisations practice is in fact greater than reported, due to the development of practice occurring through informal and incidental learning as other service providers working alongside of Reconnect staff.

Conclusion 4
Reconnect services' positive impact on capacity continues to build over time where these services have access to adequate resources and stable management.

- The study found evidence that Reconnect services continue to build capacity over time as they become more established. The study also indicates that the capacity building effect may accumulate, as effective collaboration and skills enhancement can in turn lead to changes in organisational practices and to the service system addressing systemic issues.

- A minority of Reconnect services did not demonstrate this accumulative effect. The study found that this was due to a failure in maintaining resourcing levels within the Reconnect service or problems arising from management issues. It is likely that if the resourcing issues within Reconnect are not addressed, Reconnect services will not continue to build community capacity and the effectiveness of Reconnect as a service model will be undermined.

Conclusion 5
The Reconnect model can be highly effective in achieving participation by Indigenous communities in approaches that support early intervention.

- The study found that two of the three Reconnect services targeting Indigenous communities were highly effective in engaging young people, families, Indigenous community members and organisations. The two successful services employed Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff that were culturally competent at working respectfully with Indigenous communities. Using a mixture of community development approaches and practical support these services are increasing capacity in these communities to address the long-term disadvantage faced by Indigenous people. The unsuccessful service had not been able to attract suitable staffing. This fact and other management issues meant that the model had not yet been fully tested with the Indigenous community.

Conclusion 6
Community characteristics, service infrastructure and location can enhance or constrain the ability of Reconnect services to build community capacity, but will not predict the level of capacity building possible.

- The study found that each community serviced by a Reconnect service had both strengths and challenges when it came to Reconnect's capacity building work. Reconnect services may have a large number of services that are well linked, a pool of skilled staff to draw on and greater access to resources at the community level in some urban areas in comparison to rural and remote locations. However, rural and remote communities tend to have higher levels of connectedness and a less confused service system that make building relationships and gaining collaboration easier.

- The combination of an area's history, its population, level of economic capital available and service infrastructure could enhance or constrain the work of Reconnect. However, even in areas where enormous obstacles were faced by Reconnect services (or, by contrast, where these factors seemed less daunting) these in themselves did not predict the outcomes of the Reconnect services' work in capacity building.

Conclusion 7
Key factors in an individual Reconnect service's ability to build community capacity appear to be a clear understanding of and commitment to the Reconnect model; teamwork and leadership.

- While all Reconnect services in the study were found to have positively increased community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness, there were six services that had impacted considerably more than the remaining six. The common factors between these high performing Reconnect services did not relate to location, target group or auspice arrangements. Rather the key factors were the capacity of the staff to work well as a cohesive team; having strong leadership within the Reconnect team or within management of the auspice organisation; and having a clear understanding of the Reconnect model and its role in building community capacity.

Conclusion 8
The national infrastructure that supports the Reconnect program has been highly effective in contributing to the level of impact made by Reconnect services in building community capacity for early intervention.

- A surprising finding of this study has been the consistency between the Reconnect services investigated in their building community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness. The researchers had anticipated that the considerable variations between services would show, at best, patchy outcomes in building community capacity. Similarly, the researchers anticipated that it would be hard to find evidence for Reconnects' work specifically in community capacity building as Reconnect services are small (around two to three staff) and are only one service in a large service system that supports young people and families.

- The study has found that a key contributor to the consistency of Reconnect services' outcomes in building capacity is the design of the national program and the national infrastructure put in place to support the program. The Reconnect program design was

evidence-based: the youth homelessness pilot used a combination of formal research, action research and practitioners' experiences to draw conclusions about what worked and did not work in early intervention into youth homelessness. The program design has continued to provide guidance to individual services in terms of the Good Practice Principles, the emphasis on continued learning through the use of action research and program guidelines that encourage services to work flexibly and collaboratively with communities.

▪ It is unlikely that these factors in themselves would ensure consistency between service providers, although having a clear funding framework is a precondition for good practice. In addition the national program has provided an opportunity each year for practitioners to meet to discuss action research and practice issues. This has allowed practitioners to test their own work against the work of their peers and to build relationships with others doing similar work outside of their own communities. The ReconnectAR website has enabled many practitioners to stay in touch with each other and to access information on the program. The independent assessments and focus on evaluation have indicated that the program itself is focused on assessing the outcomes of individual Reconnect services work.

9.2 Implications of the study for Reconnect services and the national program

9.2.1 Sustainability of Reconnect services

Staffing of Reconnect services

The study has provided a picture of Reconnect services achieving remarkable outcomes in enhancing community capacity given their small size. However, it has also sounded a warning about how much can continue to be expected of these services if their funding base erodes from this minimum. This study found that three services from the original pilots are now struggling and have begun to cut back on the service model that has been shown to this point to be effective. A further four indicated that resourcing was their largest challenge in the year to come.

Indeed, many Reconnect services have found staff turnover to be a major problem, as recruitment of skilled staff requires competing with government agencies or state funded NGO's that generally have higher salary levels. Out of the 12 Reconnect services in the study, five team leader positions changed in the course of the study, six caseworker positions changed and in only one service did staff remain stable. This level of turnover is disturbing given the relatively short time these services have been operating; three team leader positions were associated with pilot services that have been operating more than five years; however, five services had been operating for less than two years at the time of the study. It is likely that the issues of the resourcing of these 12 Reconnect services is mirrored across the program as a whole.

It appears that for Reconnect services to function well in balancing casework and community capacity building activities, they need at a minimum to have two full-time skilled staff members, a coordinator/manager that is close enough to service delivery to be able to provide day-to-day leadership and flexible brokerage funds.

The national program needs to re-examine the issue of funding levels to Reconnect services if these services are not to be undermined in their effectiveness.

Reconnect national infrastructure increases the effectiveness of local Reconnect services

The strong finding of this study is the overall effectiveness of the current approaches to infrastructure support for the program. In particular, the bringing together of Reconnect staff to discuss practice and gain insight into new approaches has been important in building consistency in the Reconnect model. It has also allowed Reconnect services to act as a bridge to other communities and other resources.

Secondly, the emphasis on and resourcing of, action research has signalled to Reconnect services that evaluation and reflection are key components of the program and that the views of stakeholders are crucial in building a service that meets local needs. While this study found that the way that action research was practiced varied considerably, action research nonetheless informed the practice approach of Reconnect services. At one end of the continuum, where services had a good understanding of action research and how to integrate it into everyday practice, it was used to formally examine an aspect of work and use the results to develop new approaches. At the other end of the continuum, Reconnect staff used action research more as a reflective tool in staff meetings, ensuring these meetings at least had a focus on what appeared to be working and what did not. The number of other service providers that also have taken up action research as a result of working with Reconnect is interesting.

Thirdly, the national program guidelines have reinforced to Reconnect workers and to auspice organisations that they need to report on their work in relation to the Good Practice Principles, action research, as well as more traditional requirements in relation to financial and other accountability indicators. This has been especially useful where the Reconnect model differs from the way an auspice organisation usually delivers services. While many of the services in the study felt the level of reporting to be onerous, there was also recognition that the Reconnect program accountability framework is useful in reinforcing the program model.

A strong implication from this study is that the funds spent on national infrastructure have been a key factor in building the success of the program

9.3 Continuing to build Reconnect as an effective program

If Reconnect is to continue as an effective program it will need to keep adapting to changed conditions and to utilise the most cost effective approaches in relation to early intervention for youth homelessness.

9.3.1 Data collection and evidence-based research

Two related issues became apparent during the course of this study that limit Reconnect's ongoing development.

The data collection system for Reconnect does not serve the program well. It was adapted from the SAAP data collection system and as such was not designed to collect data that is specific to Reconnect. A number of gaps were found in this and the client study relating to the data collection:

- Completely inadequate data is recorded about parents, making it difficult to gauge the extent to which services are working with parents, what they are doing or what type of parents are using Reconnect services. This study found that overall, parents were less positive about Reconnect than young people. Without adequate data to analyse, it is hard for both services and the program as a whole to look at their work in relation to parents.

- The current data records the length of time a young person is supported but does not highlight the intensity of this support. Nor does the data collection record anything about the complexity of the situation of the young person and their family. This makes it difficult to base decisions about caseload levels and about balancing casework and community capacity building work on actual evidence.

- A range of other parts of the Reconnect model are not recorded. For example, immediacy of response is a critical aspect of the model, yet no data item records how quickly families are seen and whether this makes a difference to outcomes. Similarly, community development work or provision of secondary consultation are not recorded, yet have been reported as critical aspects of Reconnect work.

- Other issues relating to the data collection include the use of the alpha code (low rates for some items); some standard data definitions not being used, thus making the data unable to be compared to other data sets; the difficulty of getting even basic reports from the system.

The study points to the need to upgrade the data collected so that it can be a useful source of information about the ongoing effectiveness of the program.

Similarly, there is a strong need for the Reconnect program to keep an emphasis on evaluation and research if it is to remain 'cutting edge'. Currently Reconnect workers are not routinely informed about new research emerging in the area and how this compares to Reconnect practice. While there are mechanisms in place to undertake iterative research (the Good Practice Forums, use of action research and the website), there are none to ensure that the program is informed by other evidence-based research or evaluation outcomes. This is a gap that could be addressed by linking the program to other clearinghouses (such as the Stronger Families Clearinghouse); using Australian Institute of Family Studies to undertake annual research updates; providing links to other research based websites on the Reconnect site.

In particular there are two aspects of Reconnect practice that this study has found need to be informed by further evaluation and research.

The study found that mediation was being practiced very differently across the Reconnect services. The study also found that, in the main, the young people and parents who were interviewed who had experienced mediation thought that it was largely ineffective. As this study was not setting out to evaluate approaches to mediation, this was a tangential finding

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and may be explained by other factors. However, it does point to the need for more research on what makes mediation effective, for whom and in what contexts.

The second issue that emerged is that relating to parents. Many Reconnect services were unsure about their work in relation to parents. Young people are the primary client in a Reconnect service and therefore how, and to what extent, parents are worked with is still an issue that services are grappling with. Our focus groups with parents resulted in a strong voice for greater assistance to be offered to parents. Frequently, parents simply wanted a support group with other parents facing the same difficulty. In other cases they wanted greater access to counselling and family work that would help them deal with the day-to-day issues of conflict with their children. Again, it would seem to be critical for Reconnect services to have access to what is the most effective way of supporting parents; what types of parenting programs are effective, for example, and whether outcomes for young people are better if parents are worked with effectively.

9.3.2 Extending the program

If the program is expanded beyond the current number of services, there are a number of lessons to be learnt from this study for how this expansion should occur:

- Reconnect services targeting Indigenous communities need to have been built on strong consultation with Indigenous communities prior to being established. In many cases this will require up to a year in preliminary community 'readiness' work, with small amounts of funds provided to assist agencies and community leaders to come together to decide on the usefulness of the service for their community and where it should be placed. Successful auspice organisations will need to demonstrate their genuine links to other Indigenous organisations and community leaders and have a clear "Malpa" employment policy (see 7.2 of this report).

- Tenders need to be carefully scrutinised so as not to spread Reconnect too thinly across geographical areas or populations. Many of the Reconnect services in this study faced unrealistic goals in relation to the complexity of populations they had to work with or the geographical communities they had to serve. This is ultimately counter-productive. While it can provide an appearance of Reconnect services being more widespread, if the service is spread too thinly the resourcing pressures will soon become apparent, leaving workers to change the model or become burnt out quickly in trying to manage demand.

- Consortium approaches need to be scrutinised carefully to check for the history of organisations working together previously, clarity of how the service will be delivered across the consortium and how the service will have clear accountability and leadership within the consortium.

9.3.3 Relationship of the Reconnect program with state governments

A key issue arising in all of the written documentation on Reconnect, including this study, is the relationship between Reconnect and the states. At the local level Reconnect services develop relationships with state funded and state delivered programs. However, at the national and state government levels there appears to be few links.

A number of states have, or are now, developing programs that touch on issues relating to early intervention in youth homelessness. NSW, for example, is introducing *Better Futures*, a program that appears to have some elements of Reconnect. There does not, however, seem to be any coordinated effort occurring that could help to strengthen the work that Reconnect has been able to do to date and to maximise Commonwealth and state funding efforts. At the very least it would seem useful to have these related programs discussed at a joint meeting and attempt made to coordinate funding to agencies, exchange practice approaches and learn from program outcomes.

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Appendix 1: Methodology of the study

1.1 The timeline and service sample

The community study consisted of an investigation of 12 Reconnect services over a one-year period. The first investigation was conducted during November and December 2001 with the second stage conducted in October to November 2002.

The community study was conducted using Reconnect services that were operating in May 2001 and agreed to participate. At this time 69 services were operating, and this study's sample represents 17% of the total. Services were chosen to ensure representation of:

- remote, rural and urban services;

- services that had been established in different phases of the program (as pilots, in the first and second rounds of funding), resulting in a mix of services from those that were well established to those that had been operating for less than one year;

- services that were targeting specific population groups (culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Indigenous, gay and lesbian young people);

- a range of organisational and auspice types.

Consideration was also given as to whether services had already been involved in a research study or were in a state of transition, for example, had recently changed staffing or auspice arrangements. It was decided to choose services that had not been previously involved in studies and ones that were relatively stable in terms of staffing and auspice arrangements. This resulted in a sample that included:

- two services located in remote areas, representing 20% of Reconnect services' location as of May 2001;

- three services located in urban areas, representing 12% of Reconnect services' location as of May 2001;

- two services located in rural areas, representing 13% of Reconnect services' location as of May 2001;

- five services located in areas that are urban with a semi-rural area surrounding, representing 31% of Reconnect services' location as of May 2001.

The sample also included:

- seven services established in the first funding round, including four of the original pilot services, and five services established in the second funding round of the Reconnect program;

- two services that target culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities;

- one service that targets only Indigenous young people and their families and two others that include Indigenous young people and their families within their target;

- one service that targets gay and lesbian young people.

The sample of services differs from the larger Reconnect program in two ways.

This sample had a disproportionate number of urban/semi-rural services. This was partially explained by deliberately selecting services that had not been previously involved in the two other studies on Reconnect. Five of the six services previously examined were urban services.

The sample also had a higher proportion of services funded in the first round of funding (24% of sample were round one funded) in comparison to those funded in the second round (12.5%). This difference was required in order to ensure the sample included services that had been part of the original pilot program and were subsequently funded in the first round of funding (only 4 of the original pilots were not provided with Reconnect funding) as well as ensuring round one services that were new agencies to the Reconnect program. The smaller number of round two services also resulted from the timing of the study — many round two services had been established for less than a few months and were not fully operating.

1.2 Sources of information

Reconnect services: Phone interviews

Once each Reconnect service agreed to participate, the coordinator or a Reconnect practitioner was interviewed in a semi-structured telephone interview. The interview covered:

- the context of the Reconnect service in terms of its auspice agency, including history of the agency, extent to which Reconnect is a departure or extension of existing services/activities;

- the community served and the service's target population — spread, characteristics, strengths and issues being faced;

- the service delivery approaches used — range of interventions used, organisations worked with, relationship with 'first to know' agencies[24];

- networks in the area and how Reconnect participates in them;

- understanding of 'early intervention', and activities undertaken by the service to intervene early;

- action research activities and who is involved;

- early intervention issues, opportunities and barriers within the community served by Reconnect.

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[24] 'First to know' agencies are those agencies identified within a community that are most likely to first notice a young person or their family is at risk of having the young person leave home early. Agencies may include schools, youth services, or specific services for particular groups such as a local community centre for newly arrived refugees.

Further telephone interviews were conducted during the course of the study at four monthly intervals. These interviews sought information on developments since last contact, so that the researchers could better understand the context at each site visit.

Reconnect services: Site visits

Arrangements were made for each service to be visited for a two-day period in November or December 2001 and again in October and November 2002. During these visits the researcher met with the Reconnect practitioners and, in most cases, the management group overseeing the service. A separate feedback meeting to the Reconnect service on issues arising during the visit was also held.

Feedback provided to the Reconnect services gave an overall outline of issues identified in the client focus groups and service provider meetings (described below) as well as any opportunities for further strengthening of approaches with other service providers. Overall confidentiality of service providers and clients who had provided information was maintained.

Interviews with other service providers

The Reconnect service was asked to identify, in consultation with the rest of the service and any advisory body, the names and contact details for six other service providers that they worked closely with or felt that they should be working closer with.

For the first stage of the study, each Reconnect practitioner was asked to include at least one school contact, given the overall importance of schools as 'first to know' agencies. In most cases, though not all, the Reconnect practitioner contacted the other service providers to request their agreement to the study. Service providers were then contacted by the researchers to gain agreement to be interviewed. Service providers were interviewed during the site visits wherever possible and, where this was not possible, phone interviews were held at another time. Interview questions were provided in advance of the interview.

Interviews were taped, except for phone interviews, and lasted up to 1.5 hours in length. Service providers were asked:

- background to their own organisation and their role within the organisation;
- contact with Reconnect — frequency, length of time, in what capacity, whether they had attended training;
- Reconnect's role — understanding of Reconnect's role and service delivery model, impact within the service delivery system, perception of collaborative relationships within the service delivery system;
- new practices emerging in the organisation that reflect either more holistic or early intervention approaches and the extent to which these had been influenced by work with Reconnect;
- casework — details of any experience of sharing cases;
- project work — details of any experience of working on projects together;

- culture and capacity of their own organisation — the degree to which further early intervention work is possible.

In the first stage of the study, a total of 73 interviews were conducted with other service providers.

The second stage of the study was conducted slightly differently.

Each Reconnect service provider was asked to consider the list of those interviewed previously and identify:

- whether the individual service provider interviewed was still in the position;

- whether the Reconnect service still worked with the organisation and if not, what had changed;

- whether there were other service providers that should now be included in the study to reflect the changes in activity over the past year.

Service providers were then contacted and were asked permission to be either re-interviewed or interviewed for the first time. In the second stage of the study a total of 71 service providers were interviewed, with 48 (67%) of these interviews being conducted with previously interviewed subjects.

Service Provider	Stage One	Stage Two
Schools (includes school counsellors, deputy principals, teachers with a welfare role)	16	15
Non-government organisations providing family or youth focussed services	15	18
Health services	13	10
SAAP services	7	7
State welfare departments	6	4
Centrelink	5	3
Councils	4	8
Other — including police, TAFE, specialist services	7	6
Total	**73**	**71**

Wherever possible interviews were held with replacement staff if a changeover had occurred. This was done to allow testing of the extent to which any changes in practices were sustainable when faced with individual staff turnover. However, this was not possible in many instances due to a range of factors including the person not being replaced and the agency changing its role or ceasing to exist. In a few cases the researchers were unable to arrange an interview due to reluctance on the replacement person's part, which was generally explained as the person being too busy.

In five cases the researchers made a deliberate choice not to re-interview a service provider. This was either because the person's previous interview had indicated that they

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had and would continue to have minimal contact with Reconnect or with issues related to early intervention with Reconnect's target group.

Second stage interviews either covered the same area as stage one (if the person was being interviewed for the first time) or sought information on any changes in relation to:

- their organisation, their role within the organisation and work in relation to early intervention;
- their contact with Reconnect and understanding of its role, including involvement in action research or reference groups;
- attendance at any training organised by or with Reconnect;
- casework approaches within their agency;
- project work that related to early intervention;
- barriers in their own organisation to increasing early intervention approaches;
- new practices emerging in the organisation that reflect either more holistic or early intervention approaches and the extent to which these had been influenced by work with Reconnect;
- collaboration and networking in the area — changes in participation, role of the network and role of Reconnect within the network;
- major issues emerging in the community over the past year.

Service provider meetings

In the first stage of the study, Reconnect services were asked to organise a meeting lasting 1.5 hours, involving the full range of services they work regularly with to discuss the following:

- What are the key issues in this community that contribute to early home leaving?
- What strengths exist within this community or communities in relation to history, culture, connections, participation and so on?
- What gaps and strengths exist within the current service system?
- What opportunities exist for strengthening early intervention approaches?
- What is Reconnect's role in enhancing community capacity?

The meetings were taped and whiteboard notes were also recorded. Reconnect services were asked not to attend the meeting.

In total, 82 individual service providers attended these meetings. Of these, 19 (23%) individuals participated in both the service provider meeting and individual interviews.

In stage one, a service provider meeting was not held for two Reconnect services communities visited. In one, the Reconnect service has a statewide focus and it was too difficult to arrange a single provider meeting. In the other, the Reconnect service advised that it would be difficult for service providers to talk openly in such a meeting due to the nature of relationships between them. In these two cases the individual interviews with

service providers also included some discussion of the areas normally covered in the service provider meeting.

In the second stage of the study a different approach to service providers meetings was taken. Instead, smaller meetings were held with targeted groups of providers that were working with Reconnect. These comprised meetings of providers involved in a joint project or in a management/steering committee role with Reconnect. This resulted in a smaller number of service providers attending meetings, with 28 in total.

Focus groups with young people, parents/carers and community members

In the first stage of the study, Reconnect services were asked to organise a focus group with either young people or parents/carers who had used the service. Participants were reimbursed for their time and travel expenses and provided with refreshments. The focus group format varied according to the group but generally covered the following:

- how participants had found out about/been referred to the service;

- their overall experience with the service — what had worked, what could have been improved;

- what they saw as the key issues facing young people/parents in that community that might lead to early home leaving;

- what strengths existed amongst young people/parents that might be built upon;

- what they would want changed in this community over the next year.

In total, 57 young people and 46 parents/carers attended focus groups. In the focus groups with young people, 61% of those attending were male; while in the parent focus groups, only 30% were male.

Indigenous representation in the young peoples' groups was high (35%) due to one service having only Indigenous clients, while in the parents' groups it was 4%. Culturally and linguistically diverse representation was 10.5% in the young people's groups, while it was 26% in the parents groups. Finally, four young people (7%) identified as being gay or lesbian.

In the second stage of the study, focus groups were more targeted. The researchers were interested in exploring the impact of Reconnect services which had run training programs in increasing the skills of clients and community members (non-service providers). The meetings sought information on the impact of the training on participants' own lives and the extent to which they felt that their training was being used in their everyday lives within the community. Services that had conducted training programs were asked to organise meetings of participants, who received a small payment for attendance. These groups had a total of 26 participants, including:

- 11 parents (six female, five male) who had attended parenting training programs in two Reconnect services;

- 12 community members (seven young people and five adults, three of whom were Indigenous) who had attended training in mediation at two Reconnect services;

- three community members who had been trained and receive ongoing supervision as mentors to young people in one Reconnect service.

1.3 Issues arising in conducting the study

1.3.3. Confidentiality

The Reconnect services that agreed to participate in the study were assured that the study did not represent an evaluation of their individual service. This posed some difficulties for the researchers in reporting the data if it was found that individual services were performing poorly in relation to their contracted work. The Department agreed that participating services would not be penalised if poor performance were found.

Other service providers that agreed to individual interviews were told that the interview was being taped for the researchers use only and that issues raised in the interview may be reported on to the Reconnect services concerned. If, however, at the end of the interview, the service provider was uncomfortable about anything that had been said in the course of the interview, this information could remain confidential. Researchers explained that individual providers would not be identified in the overall report of the study.

Young people and parents were assured that individuals would not be identified and that the study would only report the issues raised in the groups.

1.3.4 Methodological difficulties in exploring changes in practice

There were some methodological difficulties in examining the extent to which other services, as a result of working with Reconnect, changed their own practices in relation to young people and families. These difficulties are explored in depth in Section five.

1.3.5 Feedback from the researchers to the Reconnect services

At the completion of the site visit, the researchers provided feedback on what they had heard in the course of the two-day study in terms of both the Reconnect service's work in enhancing community capacity and the opportunities that had been identified by other service providers and clients to extend this work further.

The researchers decided to explicitly provide feedback to the services in order to make the effects of being studied more transparent. Providing feedback made the researchers' role in the study more transparent and was in keeping with the action research framework that the Reconnect program operates within.

The process of the study in itself will have had an effect on how the Reconnect service is perceived and how it operates. For example, the service provider meetings in the first stage of the study asked other providers to consider key factors in enhancing community capacity and the role of Reconnect in this process. This meeting of service providers is likely to affect how the Reconnect service was viewed and how the concept of capacity building is understood.

Appendix 2: Interim Report Findings in relation to issues faced in Reconnect communities

This appendix outlines the findings from the Interim Report concerning the issues identified in the course of the study within the Reconnect services' communities.

A key aspect of considering the impact of individual Reconnect services on enhancing community capacity is the community context within which Reconnect services are working. Reconnect services have been placed within areas of high need, but beyond this common factor, communities differ in relation to:

- perceived community strengths, history and culture;

- range of services available and their history of working together;

- leadership and direction provided within the community;

- issues facing the community, and its young people and families.

Information on each community was gained in three main ways:

- a workshop with service providers that considered issues, strengths and service provision;

- focus groups with young people and with parents/carers;

- interviews with Reconnect staff and management.

2.1 Communities are different

A self-evident but nonetheless important finding is that each community within which a Reconnect service works is significantly different from other communities. This fact is worth emphasising and reiterating, as these individual differences shape how a particular Reconnect program develops within an area, what approaches it adopts, and what impact it can have over time.

This study found that even issues commonly identified in each community as contributing factors to early home leaving had different emphases. For example, while most discussions in each area identified 'family breakdown' as an underlying factor, there were considerable differences as to the weight placed on this issue or how it manifested itself.

In one remote community, family breakdown was not a major problem. Rather the problem was intact families that were highly stressed and often violent, struggling within a broader context of high unemployment and a pervasive sense of hopelessness about the future.

In another area, the lure of a tourist centre offered young people and families an illusion of the 'good life' without the employment and social infrastructure to support family life. This area had disturbing levels of underage prostitution and high numbers of single mothers with few social supports.

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Similarly, the strengths identified within communities (excluding service provision) varied enormously. In some communities, the service provider meetings found it hard to identify strengths within the community itself. One meeting spoke of 'the lack of a heart' in their community, while another referred to 'the disintegration of institutions that provide moral leadership'.

In other communities, strengths were easier to identify. Meetings in these communities mentioned shared history around times of crisis, stability of residence within the community providing some continuity between generations, and particular sub-cultures that gave young people and families support and identity.

Each community's particular social, environmental, cultural and economic structures impacted on young people and families' capacity to deal with internal and external stressors that can result in young people leaving home early.

Communities also differed widely in the range of other services available to support young people and families. Not only did communities differ in the number of services available, there were also considerable differences in terms of:

- service types, for example, no family support services, few recreation programs for young people, and focus, for example, only crisis orientated services;

- funding and staffing, for example, one-off pilot programs, programs with less than a fulltime worker with an unrealistic goal, programs with poorly skilled workers;

- management and leadership available to guide services, for example, barely functioning community management committees, traditional conservative large agencies resistant to new models of delivery and new ways of working with the Reconnect client group;

- capacity and willingness to work together.

Depending on the mix, type and culture of services available within a community, Reconnect services have very different challenges to face in building its capacity. This issue is discussed further in the final section of this report). This study finding reinforces some key aspects of the Reconnect model, namely that:

- Flexibility of response and 'cultural competence'[25] within the service model is important if Reconnect is to successfully work with the particular young people, families and other service providers within a community.

- Understanding of both the specific strengths and issues within a particular community is important if services are to have an impact at a community level.

- Connecting young people and families to their communities through a holistic approach and working collaboratively with other agencies is an important aspect of capacity building.

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[25] 'Cultural competence' is a term being increasing adopted to describe an approach that requires the practitioner to gain an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the client/communities cultural context to be able to competently work with them. See for example: US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001. *Systems of Care — Promising Practices in Children's Mental Health*. Volume 1, Wraparound : Stories from the Field.

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- Flexibility in terms of use of resources is critical to capacity building.

2.2 Communities are similar

While the study reinforced the importance of acknowledging differences between communities in relation to the development of the Reconnect model, not surprisingly it also found considerable commonalities between communities.

2.2.1 Common issues raised by parents

Parents' focus groups held in rural, urban and semi-rural settings consistently raised two main issues despite the differences in their settings and composition:

- the lack of parent support services;
- parents' perceptions of underlying issues contributing to early home leaving.

Lack of parent support services

Parents were appreciative overall of the assistance they had gained from Reconnect services. Parents cited the assistance Reconnect workers had given them in developing strategies for dealing with the behaviour of their young person, in engaging the young person and in providing services outside the office as important in their experience with the service.

Parents in two communities talked about their perception that Reconnect was oriented to the young person's needs. While these parents generally acknowledged that the young person's needs were primary in the crisis situation that led them to Reconnect, many felt that they did not have their own needs as parents met sufficiently. When this issue was explored further, it appeared that parents felt that they had ongoing needs for support that went beyond the initial crisis that had led them to the service.

This perception was not true of parents in other focus groups, particularly in services that provided separate caseworkers for the parent and for the young person. In these services, parents reported feeling that their needs were well supported by the Reconnect service.

Parents reported that it was hard to gain any engagement with other organisations in the community. Many had tried to access other services prior to Reconnect including community health services, school counsellors and general practitioners. In general their experience was that their concerns were not taken seriously and that they were 'fobbed off' with 'it's just a stage they're going through'. They reported relief that Reconnect treated their concerns seriously and offered practical approaches to dealing with the situation.

In only a few of the focus groups did parents report having ever attended a parent education program or support service in the past. Parents commented that they would not have known how to access them or that they were unlikely to have used a service unless they felt they had an immediate reason to do so.

Yet this was overwhelmingly what parents stated they needed. Many attending their first group meeting with other parents in the context of this study asked for 'more meetings like this', stating that this was the sort of support they felt they needed in an ongoing way. A

few Reconnect services have established such groups and parents who had used them were supportive of this approach.

It became clear that, in some cases, Reconnect services are still finding it hard to balance the needs of young people and their parents and that offering support groups for parents who are their clients may be an effective way of addressing this tension. Given that parents expressed a desire for better support from other services, Reconnect could also contribute to community capacity building through focussing the attention of other agencies on this issue and working together with them on parent support initiatives.

Parent's perceptions of underlying issues

Parents in the focus groups, many of whom were single parents, acknowledged the contribution of family breakdown in communication difficulties with their child. Parents talked about the difficulties they had in balancing their own needs at the time of a divorce or separation with those of their children. Some had attempted to gain access to appropriate help for the young person via schools and general practitioners but had not managed to have the young person 'engage' with any help that was forthcoming through those sources. They contrasted this with the relative responsiveness of the Reconnect service.

Parents in all focus groups expressed concern at the disengagement of young people from school. Many believed that their children's failure to achieve within the school system had been the primary cause of flow-on problems in the family and community. The middle school years (Years 7 to 10) seemed most problematic, with many young people not connecting to the curriculum in this period. This resulted in them either 'acting out', so that there was overt conflict with school authorities, or withdrawing and shutting down. In the latter instance there was no obvious manifestation of them being 'in trouble'.

Parents lamented the loss of technical schools that provided a more hands-on curriculum, as well as what they perceived as a loss of respect for teachers. Their own experiences in attempting to engage with high schools had, in the main, been unsatisfactory. Parents reported that their concerns had been dismissed; that they had been told or made to feel they were 'bad' parents; and that the school said there was nothing it could do to help them. Parents also raised concerns about drug use within the context of the perceived failure of schools to adequately meet young people's needs. They were concerned about how young people could gain the necessary confidence and resilience to withstand peer pressure in relation to drug use.

When asked to identify what might make a difference to their young people's lives, most parents' groups spoke of the need for appropriate recreation opportunities for young people. They viewed boredom as a key component of the disengagement of young people and saw few positive public recreation activities available within their areas. If their children were not good enough for competitive sporting teams, there were few other affordable sporting options in adolescence. Equally there were few other affordable group cultural activities for young people not interested in sport. These problems, combined with a lack of youth-friendly public facilities and public transport, served to isolate young people from safer recreation activities.

2.2.2 Common issues raised by young people

Recreation

The key issue raised by young people in all groups was boredom and not having 'anything to do'. Young people talked about the lack of places to hang out and have fun. They were aware of what was available within their community and were able to analyse these possibilities in terms of what was fun, affordable and accessible to them transport-wise. In the main, public recreation opportunities for young people are limited to:

- skate parks, although only some areas had these and most lacked lighting for night skating;

- blue light discos. These were attended by 10 to 12 year olds and thus dismissed by the 13-18 year olds;

- cinemas and game parlours, that were viewed as too expensive for more than occasional use;

- highly structured youth centres such as the Police Citizens Youth Clubs, which, where they existed, were regarded as competitive and excluding;

- natural recreation such as beaches (in some areas).

Young people were able to offer suggestions as to what was needed, including:

- night time skate parks;

- safe areas to meet and 'hang out';

- transport options for young people to attend activities safely;

- music/party venues that were designed for the 14-18 age group;

- youth centres that were more inclusive;

- more culturally-based activities (music, performances);

- outdoor adventure activities.

For Indigenous young people, the same issues arose but the problems of cost and exclusion were magnified.

Schools

Young people talked about the issue of schools in all groups. As a general rule — to which there were the proverbial few exceptions — the young people's experience could be summarised in two words: disengagement and discouragement.

One focus group was held with young people attending an alternate school who spoke positively of this environment compared to the mainstream system. In this group, the majority of young people saw any problems with their family as being attributable to their previous schooling experience. Two of the boys in this group were functionally illiterate at the age of 16, having consistently failed within the school system. Both were now learning to read and were in active learning mode.

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Young people had similar explanations as their parents for their disengagement from school:

- The curriculum was irrelevant to their current and future lives.

- Teachers and other school staff did not treat them respectfully.

These two issues were linked and related to the structures of schools and teaching methods. Those that had left school to go to TAFE or to an alternative education setting commented on the difference between these places and schools. *"You're more independent. You can call the teachers by their name and they don't hassle you. It's up to you to get done what you said you'd do. I don't know, it's just more like they treat you with respect, like you're a real person. So it makes the work interesting somehow."* (Boy, aged 15)

Most young people in the focus groups had a history of school suspension and exclusion for behaviour problems related to anger, yet only two had attended a group to assist with anger management and only a few had received individual counselling.

Real responsibility

In the first focus group, a young woman who is now a teenage mother talked about what had made the difference to her capacity to stabilise her life and 'reconnect' with her mother. It was becoming a parent — an occurrence that, in her view, had given her real responsibility for the first time in her life. From her perspective, one of the main causes of her earlier problems was the fact that she didn't feel any sense of responsibility in any aspect of her life. An important component of her early home leaving was the lure of "*having to be responsible for myself*".

When this issue was explored in subsequent groups, young people echoed her analysis although it was not as coherently expressed. They most readily talked about a lack of meaningful responsibility in the school environment, and their desire for more adult respectful relationships with teachers or for a curriculum that was practically relevant to their lives.

Another important avenue by which young people can exercise responsibility is employment, but this is a blocked avenue for most young people in non-urban areas. Only a few of the young people in the focus groups held in non-urban areas had casual employment. Some had been forced to give up their part-time employment because of transport problems, especially when they were required to do shift work or to attend at short notice. The dearth of employment opportunities increased their sense of marginalisation and their feelings that they were denied chances to demonstrate that they could be responsible people.

Families

The extent to which young people saw family relationship problems as the main cause of difficulties in their lives varied from group to group. In one rural town, they identified this as a key issue. These young people talked at length about step-parents (primarily step-fathers) and the difficulties in developing relationships with them, particularly in relation to boundary setting. Issues around relating and communicating with step-parents were also raised by individual young people in some of the other focus groups.

In another rural town, none of the young people in the group saw communication issues within their families as a major issue, despite two of the young people having left home at 16. Their connection with their parents (mostly, but not exclusively, their mothers) was still good. The key difficulties in their lives revolved around problems at school, being in trouble with the police due to boredom, drug taking, or anger.

Drug use

Finally, most groups raised the issue of drugs, with alcohol and cannabis being the primary drugs used. Depending on their proximity to a larger town, other drugs were also available (mainly Speed and Ecstasy). Indigenous young people also reported on petrol/aerosol sniffing.

Attitudes expressed within the groups differed, with the older age group often arguing for venues to allow open drug use in order to create a 'safe environment'. One group of 14-17 year olds had organised a band night with a teacher, and of course this was a drug free event. In their view this had induced more risky binge-drinking as young people drank as much as possible prior to the event.

In other groups, young people talked about the ever-present access to drugs and the promotion of drug use as 'normal'. Younger participants, in particular, expressed concerns about the high levels of peer pressure around drug use.

Again most young people interviewed saw drug use as being an issue largely because of boredom and a lack of more interesting and enjoyable things to do.

Specific population groups

Groups were held with young people from Indigenous and refugee communities, and with same-sex-attracted young people. The former groups were more difficult to run due to language and cultural difficulties (despite interpreters and familiar adults being available), and the researchers were not able to explore underlying issues in much depth.

In the main, many of the issues raised were the same as in other groups, especially those relating to schools and recreation. However, some specific difficulties faced by these groups also emerged.

- *Indigenous young people* cited a lack of employment opportunities, violence in the home, racism within the town, and disconnection from 'culture' as their key concerns. Their suggested solutions focused on culturally-related activities that provided some relief from their lives, such as camps out bush with elders, dance and music.

- The main issues for *young refugees* revolved around resettlement and establishment within the Australian community. The most common and serious difficulty reported was the financial stress related to settling into a new country while also trying to gain English language skills.

- The main problem area for *young gay men and lesbians* was concerns around 'coming out' to their families and friends and within their community. While one of the young people had experienced strong family rejection, the others felt that the rejection and/or harassment from peers, schools and broader community had more seriously affected them.

2.3 The views of service providers

While service providers eventually identified the same range of underlying factors contributing to early home leaving, there were important differences in terms of the relative importance of each factor in their particular community or in the specific details of how some issues affected their community. The issues identified did not appear to be overtly affected by the specific mix of providers from different service types attending the provider meetings or interviews in each community.

2.3.1 Issues related to schools

School issues raised in service provider meetings

The one issue identified as very significant by all service provider meetings is the disengagement of a significant percentage of young people from middle years at school. Service providers echoed the views of young people and of parents, although they had a more detailed knowledge of practices in the school system.

In their view, if young people could be kept in school until year 10, then they could be assisted to make a successful transition through education to employment. Their concerns were for young people who disengaged earlier than this, but were largely hidden within the statistics.

The service providers were particularly concerned about what they saw as inappropriate discipline, suspension and exclusion policies in some schools. In some areas they cited examples of young people being forcibly excluded from upper primary school. Schools often excluded young people for failure to wear uniform or for truanting, as well as for disruptive behaviour in classrooms. Suspensions led to a spiralling of further suspensions as the young people involved became more disconnected and alienated and so 'acted out' on the days they did attend.

Schools were perceived to being too under-resourced to address behavioural problems amongst their students, while they were also seen as being contributors to these problems because of their rigid approach to curriculum, teaching and learning modes, and authority.

There was a significant difference in the response of service provider meetings in Victoria. While some schools were seen as problematic and the need for alternative education settings was also identified, service providers believed that the changes introduced in Victoria over the past five years to make schools more responsive appear to be having some effect . It is worth noting that this was not the view of parents or young people's groups in that state.

- Changes introduced within the Victorian school system identified in the course of this study include:
- a stronger emphasis on welfare and access to counselling via full time positions in schools;
- the introduction of youth health nurses within schools;
- the introduction of a tracking system that requires schools to track students for 6 years after they have left the school;

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- the establishment of the Schools Focused Youth Service program across the state to assist schools to tackle issues contributing to early school leaving;
- the establishment of a program to assist the transition of young people to vocational employment and learning.

Issues raised by school personnel

In eleven communities studied, representatives of the school system were interviewed, including Deputy Principals in charge of welfare and school counsellors/welfare coordinators. In one community, the school-based interview was cancelled.

School providers were asked extensively about welfare policies within the school, early intervention systems, their work with parents and young people identified as being at risk, and their relationships and work with external organisations.

Again, the contrast between the Victorian system and other states was identified in the three Victorian communities studied. Out of the six Victorian schools interviewed, five had put considerable effort into a 'whole-school' approach to supporting young people through providing access to counselling and group programs. Examples of support practices included:

- appointing a very experienced counsellor and paying them at a rate equivalent to a Deputy Principal's salary;
- creating youth-friendly spaces within the school and allowing drop-in to the counsellor's room;
- school endorsement of group programs for young people to learn about community agencies and engage in community activity;
- instituting a wide range of other group programs to address self esteem, challenging behaviours, bullying etc;
- programs to train teachers in basic counselling and assessment of risk.

While some individual schools interviewed in other states had undertaken some teacher training or provision of group programs, none demonstrated this consistency of practice occurring within the Victorian system.

2.3.2 Issues related to service provision and gaps

Service system gaps

Service providers raised common issues in relation to service gaps. While communities differed significantly in the number and range of services available to serve the population, similar service gaps were identified. These gaps are familiar to the Reconnect program, having been identified in the YHPP and in the Good Practice Forums held recently. They include:

- a lack of suitable time-out and crisis accommodation for young people (particularly those under 15 year olds), and of independent supported living options;

- a lack of appropriate services for young people with mental health problems and/or engaged in drug and alcohol abuse;

- difficulties with gaining income support and assistance from Centrelink, and other assistance from state welfare departments, for young people under 16;

- a lack of generalist youth services and facilities, particularly in rural areas.

Again, the Victorian service provider groups raised fewer concerns about access to appropriate health services for young people because that state provides greater access to generalist counselling services and to specialist adolescent positions in mental health and drug and alcohol services (although mental health service provision is still limited).

The role of local government

The role played by local government was limited in the majority of Reconnect communities studied. In the main, local governments provided only limited support to young people and their families, often in the form of funding (or contributing to the cost) of youth-related recreational services or infrastructure such as skate parks or events such as youth week.

In addition, local government youth workers, where they existed, often took some role in interagency activity. The level of their involvement was frequently determined by their job description or role (as set by their particular local Council), although in some cases it was also shaped by the worker's own preferences and skills.

Only one local government body stood out in its terms of its community capacity building role. This Victorian Council explicitly recognised that it had a responsibility to address the needs of young people in its municipality, just as it had a responsibility to meet the needs of other population groups. This recognition had led to the development of a clear policy framework for its work with young people and to the allocation of considerable resources to support young people.

The Council's role focused around two key areas — supporting young people's meaningful participation in the community generally, and supporting the work of individual agencies with young people. This meant that the Council, which employs eight youth workers:

- had undertaken a survey of 5000 young people in the area to assess their needs and to support service design around these needs;

- had introduced a range of innovative programs to support young people including: a recreation 'what's on' phone line on Friday and Saturday nights that also assists with crisis calls; an events program, recording studio and rehearsal space, and magazine — all managed by young people; and a program in schools to develop young people's skills in self-representation and advocacy;

- took a lead role in developing an integrated Youth Network of agencies working in its municipality.

It is perhaps not surprising that this instance of outstanding good practice occurred in Victoria, given that state's history of comparatively greater involvement by local government in community service provision.

The relationship of service providers with state welfare departments

As noted in other reports and forums, workers in Reconnect services have frequently found it difficult to cooperate effectively with state welfare departments. Other service providers seem to share the difficulties and concerns as Reconnect services. During this study, they raised:

- the strain experienced by workers in state welfare departments in trying to address the care and protection needs of children and young people when the available resources were inadequate;

- their frustration with the frequent turnover of departmental staff which made it difficult to provide any relationship continuity for the young person or for service providers;

- their concern that departmental staff did not always participate in local interagency forums which exacerbated communication and relationship problems.

Some had also experienced difficulty in gaining income support for young people under 16, with the result that state welfare departments had to take a young person into the care system even when this is not in the best interests of the young person involved.

These frustrations frequently lead to poor relationships between government and non-government workers, with a pervasive 'culture of blame' developing as a result. This relationship has been tackled more effectively in one Reconnect community under study, as described later Case Study 4 in Section 5.3.3.

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[i] The report is available on the Department's website at
http:www.facs.gov.au/internet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/youth-reconnect_commstudystgeone.htm.