

# Covid-19 Measures Needed to Protect Homelessness Services and Young People: Now and in the Future

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Youth homelessness is on the rise in New South Wales (NSW) as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Pam Barker, CEO of Yfoundations explained, 'We are already seeing a surge in the number of young people sleeping rough, as what has always been a largely hidden homelessness problem is becoming more visible'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, young people experiencing homelessness who were couch surfing or living in overcrowded dwellings, are being forced out onto the streets due to isolation and Covid-19 fears. This is exacerbated for young people who have lost casual jobs, placing upward pressure on Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) to support them.<sup>2</sup>

On the 27th March, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) announced an injection of \$34 million to the youth homelessness sector.<sup>3</sup> But this is not enough; it is impossible to have surge capacity when you've already been cut to the bone. Yfoundations spoke with 59 SHS across NSW as lockdown measures were announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison to hear from them what their biggest concerns were.

As the pandemic gathers pace, SHS are anxious about their ability to protect the health and wellbeing of both young people in their care as well as staff. Classed as an essential service, SHS who provide accommodation remaining open. But living conditions in refuges, often with shared bathrooms and common areas, make it challenging for staff to effectively control the transmission of such a highly infectious virus. While many SHS have implemented additional hygiene measures it is impossible to monitor every young person at all times. In addition, many we spoke to highlighted the challenge of communicating the

importance of staying home unless absolutely necessary and maintaining social distancing guidelines.

In order to stay as safe as possible, SHS have implemented a number of risk-mitigation strategies to reduce transmission, many of which have had an impact on their capacity to support young people. A number reported a moratorium on all new intakes, as well as reduced beds to decrease density and comply with distancing guidelines. This reduced capacity is compounded by staff shortages as SHS implement strategies to continue service delivery. For example, some SHS have limited staff to working from one refuge (where an SHS has a number of properties) so that, in the event of an infection at one property, they eliminate the risk of transmission at another.

Some SHS are fearful they may need to close their doors as a result of staff shortages and/or a positive infection. For some services, it's impossible for young people to self-isolate when they have to share bathrooms with other young people.

Many SHS are developing business continuity plans for reduction of capacity. Such plans are an urgent priority and DCJ needs to ensure that young people experiencing homelessness are not left without an alternative in the event that they cannot be supported by an SHS. In NSW a \$14.3 million government investment will help increase the supply and flexibility of Temporary Accommodation. A register for hotels to offer spare rooms for Temporary Accommodation was launched on 17th April in response, creating a centralised online forum of hotels to enable people experiencing homelessness to self-isolate and stay healthy during Covid-19.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond reducing the risk of transmission, panic buying has created shortages of staples. We heard that workers have to go to the supermarket on a daily basis to get adequate supplies, while others have to get to the supermarket at 7am. Lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is also an issue with a number of SHS unable to secure hand sanitiser and antibacterial cleaning products.

Everyone is feeling the impacts of Covid-19, but certain vulnerable groups are paying an especially high price during this pandemic. Homeless people, young people, and those engaged in precarious casual employment will bear the brunt of the pandemic, including not being able to secure food or support, placing them at risk of not having a safe place to live.

NSW Government website HSNNet and AskLzzy are online service directories which allow people to access food, housing, domestic violence (DV), legal, and other supports in their local area. The recent data provided shows an astonishing increase in the number of weekly searches since the Coronavirus pandemic emerged in Australia.

On average 766 people per week searched for food support in quarter three of 2018-19, which increased to 2,909 the week commencing 29th March 2020 (an increase of 279 per cent). Similar increases can be seen for housing (increase of 160 per cent) and DV (increase of 171 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

During the last week of March 2020, NSW Attorney-General Mark Speakman revealed that Google searches for 'Domestic Violence' had increased by 75 per cent since the first recorded Covid-19 case was detected in NSW.<sup>6</sup> However, DV hotlines (such

as 1800 RESPECT) have seen a decrease in calls, suggesting that victims in self-isolation are unable to contact services safely and privately.

As people isolate to prevent the spread of Covid-19, many DV victims (predominantly women and their children) are confined inside their homes with their abuser. Research tells us that family violence perpetrators often isolate victims from their family and friends, and under Covid-19 measures these victims may not be able to seek help, as they are unable to leave their home.<sup>7</sup> Further to this, young people often do not have access to their own personal computer or laptop, meaning that children and young people have to use family devices to access support. If they speak with a regular counsellor or psychologist, they may be unable to talk privately.

The 2019 Youth Mental Health report from Mission Australia and the Black Dog Institute found that one in four young Australian's experience mental health challenges.<sup>8</sup> But Australian mental health experts warn that young people are at higher risk for mental health issues in these unusual circumstances. Executive director of the youth mental health service Orygen, Professor Patrick McGorry, is calling for a national mental health strategy in response to Covid-19, and says the mental health crisis will be severe and prolonged.<sup>9</sup>

Yfoundations' own Youth Homelessness Representative Council (YHRC) members have weighed in on the impact of Covid-19 on young people's mental health, particularly for those experiencing homelessness. One member stated: 'We are told to stay inside and distance ourselves, but this has amplified mental health and historical trauma. The quiet and isolation gives you more time to think, and the lack of face-to-face contact makes you feel alone'.

The enforced Covid-19 isolation measures are having a detrimental impact on young people — financially, socially, and emotionally. The YHRC member went on to say: 'This is an age when young people should be out socialising, but instead we are confined indoors. And for who knows



*how long? It's really overwhelming. Add to this the uncertainty of school and work, and having no consistent income or savings. It's really easy to stew on the negative thoughts. You have to put a lot more effort into every day, even just to get out of bed'.*

A new report released by the Grattan Institute entitled *Shutdown: Estimating the Covid-19 Employment Shock* has calculated that up to 3.4 million Australians could be out of work in the coming weeks as a result of Covid-19.<sup>10</sup> Younger Australians are likely to be the hardest hit because they are more likely to be employed in jobs and industries most affected, such as hospitality. Grattan Institute estimates that about 40 per cent of employed teenagers will lose work. And people in their 20s will be the next most-likely to lose work with 30 per cent losing employment.<sup>11</sup> Young Australians are bearing the economic costs of the Covid-19 restrictions, and if the government fails to invest more stimulus money, young Australians will also bear the long-term costs of a lengthy recession. During the 1990-1991 recession, it took three years for the unemployment rate to reach its peak, but eight years to return to its pre-recession level. Young Australians felt the ongoing impact for many years through lower wage earnings.<sup>12</sup>

The lockdown restrictions put in place by the Federal Government are important to protect the health and wellbeing of all Australians as, in one way or another, all of us will feel the impact of Covid-19. But it is important to recognise that certain cohorts and essential services will be hit harder than most and it is important that they are cushioned from the worst of the impacts as we

recover from this pandemic. These include young people experiencing homelessness and services that provide direct support. As part of the stimulus package announced to support businesses, organisations and individuals impacted by Covid-19, the Government announced increased funding and payments to the youth homelessness sector and young people receiving Centrelink payments. These funding injections are welcome but the impacts of Covid-19

are going to be felt well beyond the lifting of current restrictions and it is essential that DCJ commit to providing long-term funding, to ensure that young people and services are properly supported to navigate the post-Covid-19 landscape.

#### Endnotes

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