Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia

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foundations

Creating a future without youth homelessness

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About Yfoundations

For over 40 years Yfoundations has been the NSW peak body representing young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, as well as the services that provide direct support to children and young people.

Our vision: Creating a future without youth homelessness. We believe that all children and young people have the right to safety and stability, home and place, health and wellness, connections and participation, and education and employment (together these are the foundations of our organisation). We know these are the foundations for the prevention of, and pathways out of, homelessness.

Our values underpin all the work we do. We value:

- Young people;
- Justice and human rights;
- Diversity and inclusion;
- Optimism and hope;
- Courage and Integrity.

We know that homelessness is an interrelated issue. It requires a whole of government and service response. We need to be innovative, collaborative, and determined if we are going to end homelessness.

Safety and Stability

It is vital that all young people not only feel safe, but also are actually protected from risk factors that may impede their developmental process. During childhood and adolescence young people must receive the necessary support to ensure they develop a strong safety system, both internally and within their external networks. A strong and stable foundation will foster confidence and independence within a young person, which will promote active participation in community life.

Home and Place

It is vital that all young people have access to a safe, non-judgemental home and place. A comfortable place that they identify with and feel a strong connection to. A Home and Place should be an environment that promotes growth and fosters positive development.

Health and Wellness

It is vital that all young people, particularly during the formative stages of their growth and development, are physically, socially and emotionally well. To ensure this, young people must have access to all the necessary prerequisites for achieving health and wellness. Being well and feeling healthy, will promote self-worth, and ensure young people feel competent to participate in their communities.

Connections and Participation

It is vital that all young people are given the opportunity to develop and nurture the connections in their lives. Connections to friends, family, community and society promote resilience and social inclusion. Young people must be listened to and have the opportunity to influence outcomes. Positive connections and genuine participation in community life during the formative stages of childhood and adolescence enables a young person to build a strong positive foundation and prepares them for adult life.

Education and Employment

It is vital that all young people are given the opportunity to pursue their educational and professional goals. Education and training is crucial to the growth and development of young people. Education and training, including formal tuition and practical life skills, promotes self-confidence and independence and provides young people with the skills and competencies.

Executive Summary

Safe and stable accommodation is essential to the health and wellbeing of all young people. It is also an internationally recognised human right. Yet, children and young people up to the age of 24 are among one of the largest cohorts experiencing homelessness, and rates are rising as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The causes of youth homelessness are many and complex. Often, young people who fall into homelessness are grappling with multiple, coinciding hurdles, the majority of which fall largely outside of their control. Many of the challenges young people face compound one another. For example, domestic and family violence at home can lead to a lack of stability in childhood, which is linked to disrupted education, which means young people experiencing homelessness are less likely to continue their education beyond the minimum school leaving age. Without formal educational achievement, securing a job is more difficult which in turn makes it harder to secure rental housing.

In this paper, we delve into the causes of youth homelessness and highlight programs and models that have shown localised or statewide successes in supporting young people to transition out of homelessness and through to independence.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government to invest in and incentivise greater cross-sector collaboration between government, NGOs and private businesses to create job opportunities for young people that are linked to education and training opportunities.

Recommendation 2: There needs to be equity between Job Seeker and Independent Youth Allowance. The rate of Independent Youth Allowance and the rate of Job Seeker should both be raised to $353 per week. Youth Allowance and Job Seeker should be indexed properly (to Average Weekly Earnings) to reflect the real cost of living and to ensure they maintain their real value over time to keep up with community living standards.

Recommendation 3: Invest in the building and provision of affordable homes for families and young people on low incomes. To meet current demand, 500,000 new social and affordable homes are required nationally.

Recommendation 4: All States and Territories should raise the leaving care age to 21, while at the same time improve transition planning and after-care support. It is crucial that young people leaving state care have access to integrated systems and services to help secure housing and appropriate support before, during, and after transitioning out of care.

Recommendation 5: Long-term investment in family-intervention models and programs that have proven positive outcomes for young people and their families.

Recommendation 6: Invest in supported medium-term Specialist Homelessness Services. These services should be trauma-informed with 24/7 staffing to help young people develop healthy routines, improve their living skills, reach their education and employment potential, and to feel happy, safe, and secure.

Recommendation 7: The Federal Government to invest in a range of evidence-based approaches that provide wrap around support for young people, including Youth Foyers.

Recommendation 8: More investment is needed into early intervention, including Communities of Schools and Services (COSS) models. Funding and expanding early intervention programs could save young people from the harmful effects of homelessness, school disengagement, and poor mental health.

Recommendation 9: The Australian Bureau of Statistics requires ongoing collaboration with Specialist Homelessness Services to gather reliable data, this includes making changes to the Census questions. In addition, there needs to be an up to date list of all homelessness accommodation providers, including Specialist Homelessness Services, Community Housing Providers, and registered and unregistered boarding houses.

Recommendation 10: The Federal Government to develop a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy, which integrates policy, programs and long-term funding to drive outcomes across the spectrum of housing needs.

The Incidence of Youth Homelessness in Australia

According to the 2016 ABS Census, on any given night in Australia 116,427 Australians are homeless, 27,680 (24%) of which are young people aged 12 to 24 years. Of those, 59% were living in severely overcrowded dwellings, 18% were in supported accommodation, 9% were living in boarding houses and 10% were staying temporarily with other households. The proportion of young people classified as homeless is consistent across the States and Territories.[1] It is important to highlight that these numbers likely underestimate the true extent of the issue, due to a usual address being reported for some young people experiencing homelessness, for example, those couch surfing, on Census night.[2]

Factors Affecting the Incidence of Youth Homelessness and Opportunities for Early Intervention

1) Addressing Intergenerational Disadvantage and Poverty

Poverty is a key driver of youth homelessness. It is detrimental to young people's development and it can contribute to high stress and family breakdown within the home.[3] Research by the Australian Council of Social Services found that, of the three million people living in poverty in Australia, 731,000 are children and 1.2 million are under the age of 24.[4]

Unemployment among young Australians is significantly higher than for the population as a whole and has been rising since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC).[5] As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, the youth unemployment rate currently sits at 13.8%, well in excess of rates prior to the GFC.[6] Research has also found that young people experiencing homelessness have significantly higher unemployment rates. Nearly one-quarter (22%) of homeless young people have never had a paid job in their lifetime, compared with only 6% of young jobseekers.[7] Young people are also more likely to be employed in casual roles with no job security. In August 2017, approximately 40% of Australia's casual workers were aged 15 to 24.[8] Underemployment (i.e. part-time work) is also highest among young workers.[9]

Social Ventures Australia undertook research concentrated on uncovering efforts that are most successful at moving young people who have been out of employment for 12 months of longer back into employment. From this research, they developed a Principles Framework that was designed with long-term unemployed young people aged 15 to 24. The principles were proven to be effective across many different at-risk groups and for those experiencing complex barriers.[10]

They found that business partnerships between education providers, social purpose organisations and employment services deliver better outcomes for employers and job seekers. For the employer, it improves recruitment and retention. For young people it offers experience and direct exposure to real jobs.[11]

For example, Real Futures Generation (RFG) is a place-based, collaborative initiative that brings employers into the classroom to motivate and inspire young people to prepare for their careers. RFG builds students' pre-employment capacity and work readiness skills to help them make a smooth transition from school to work by securing industry partners to introduce different career options to students in Years 10-12. All young people who engage in this one-year program have the opportunity to participate in a diverse range of business-led curriculum focused classroom lessons linking literacy and numeracy skills to tangible applications in the workplace, and to local and regional career and employment pathways. The students also have the opportunity to visit industry workplaces or shadow an employee as well as complete an employability skills development program acquiring transferrable skills which will be of benefit in their future studies or career progression pathways.

Industry partners, including Leighton Contractors, IKEA and Toll Holdings have pledged a number of jobs in communities where RFG operates, committing to provide a supportive pathway into the workplace for students. By creating a link between students and the workplace this collaborative effort improves employment outcomes for young people.[12]

Policy has to work to persuade and incentivise the private sector to take a more forward-facing approach to developing the young workforce and investing in their future and the Australian economy, and foster cross-sector partnerships between business, training institutions and NGOs. It's in the private sector's best interests to employ developed and trained young people; the problem is balancing the immediate, short-term costs of employing and training them, something that is time and money intensive, against the long-term benefits of doing so.

The impact of youth unemployment on the Australian economy is felt deeply in foregone tax, reduced productivity, welfare dependence, and increased demand on health, justice and community services. These costs have a compounding effect as children born into families with at least one unemployed parent have a higher chance of being welfare dependent as they move into adulthood, creating cycles of youth unemployment across generations. The loss of foregone tax revenue alone adds up to $3.15 billion annually. [13]

Welfare policies also have an impact on poverty. In 2018, most major income support payments were below the poverty line, so to escape poverty recipients needed to supplement or replace them with private income from other sources.[14] Without factoring in any supplements paid in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, Australia's unemployment payments are the lowest in the OECD, an intergovernmental organisation made up of mostly rich countries. Job Seeker payments are $282 a week while Youth Allowance payments are $228 a week, both drastically lower than the basic standard of living.

A young person aged 16-21 living away from home can (at most) expect to receive Youth Allowance plus Commonwealth Rent Assistance totalling $296 per week. Modelling undertaken by Yfoundations found that, living off of a modest weekly budget,

this leaves them in a deficit of at least $125 per week, which would need to be found through either the generosity of charities/homelessness services, going into rent arrears, skipping meals, or missing out on education/employment opportunities.[15]

Contributing to this disadvantage is the way Youth Allowance and Job Seeker are indexed. Job Seeker and Youth Allowance are adjusted each year according to the Consumer Price Index (CPI). This indexation method is flawed, as it is based on the prices of goods and services consumed by an average-income household, rather than a low-income household. Youth Allowance and Job Seeker recipients spend most of their income on essentials such as rent, energy, food, healthcare, education, and public transport, for which prices have consistently increased at a greater rate than CPI over the years.[16]

There is also a disparity in the total amount paid to those aged 16 to 21 and those aged 22 and older, despite identical circumstances and living costs. Single unemployed young people aged 16 to 21 are entitled to $228 per week under Youth Allowance. In contract, single unemployed people aged 22 and older are entitled to $282 per week under Job Seeker. This disparity of $54 per week is groundless and unjust given that housing and other essential living costs do not vary with age. The low level of Youth Allowance reflects an outdated policy view that young people can rely on financial support from their parents, even in circumstances where a young person has been assessed as financially independent.[17]

Research shows that countries with robust welfare states and embedded poverty reduction strategies report lower rates of child poverty and homelessness.[18] Raising Job Seeker and Youth Allowance by $71 and $125 respectively will have a positive impact on the wider community, leading to job creation, helping to raise wages, and boosting local economies. According to independent modelling by Deloitte Access Economics, raising Job Seeker by $71 would generate 12,000 new jobs in 2020-21, increase wages by 0.2%, and increase government revenue by $1.25 billion.[19]

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government to invest in and incentivise greater cross-sector collaboration between government, NGOs and private businesses to create job opportunities for young people that are linked to education and training opportunities.

Recommendation 2: There needs to be equity between Job Seeker and Independent Youth Allowance. The rate of Independent Youth Allowance and the rate of Job Seeker should both be raised to $353 per week. Youth Allowance and Job Seeker should be indexed properly (to Average Weekly Earnings) to reflect the real cost of living and to ensure they maintain their real value over time to keep up with community living standards.

2) Increasing the Availability of Affordable Housing

The housing landscape for young people in Australia today is bleak. It is characterised by a decline in home ownership and affordable and social housing, alongside increasing private rental costs, disadvantage accessing private rental properties, and low incomes. All of these have contributed to increasing youth homelessness, and numbers are continuing to rise year on year.[20]

According to the most recent Demographia Housing Affordability Survey, all of Australia's five major housing markets are severely unaffordable, and by a substantial margin in Sydney and Melbourne (the third and fourth least affordable markets, respectively).[21] Australia's high house prices have increased the cost and demand for affordable housing. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute estimated that current housing need in Australia to be 1.3 million households and expected the need to worsen.[22]

The most recent Rental Affordability Snapshot, which reports on the amount of private rental properties advertised on a given date across Australia across several major NSW regions (Central Coast, Newcastle/Lake Macquarie, Hunter New England and the Mid-Coast), highlights the current market's unaffordability. Of the 2,835 private rental properties advertised, none were affordable for young people on JobSeeker or Youth Allowance, even if they opted to live in a share house.[23]

In addition to contending with a severely unaffordable private rental market, young people also face significant barriers to joining the private rental market due to high upfront costs, a lack of rental history, discrimination, inadequate government support, limited savings, and low income or unemployment.

Young people accessing crisis accommodation from Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) also face significant barriers to transitioning toward independence. There is a significant lack of medium-to-long term supported accommodation in NSW, which means young people 'refuge-hop' between crisis accommodation, much of which is only available for three months.

Countries that have the lowest rates of homelessness in the world, such as Finland and Denmark, have invested heavily in affordable housing. Further, international evidence demonstrates that lower rates of homelessness are correlated with increased investments in affordable housing.[24] This should be a key priority for state and federal governments in any strategy or plan to curb the rising rate of youth homelessness. Finland has adopted a unique approach to this challenge, developing a youth-specific housing system (operated by the Finnish Youth Housing Association) that provides housing and counselling to young people aged 18-29 years transitioning to independence.

Youth homelessness prevention must involve increasing the availability of affordable housing options to young people and their families through a range of mechanisms, including:

- Build and maintain Australia's affordable housing stock (including rental housing, social housing and community housing). Australia's Everybody's Home Campaign estimates that Australia will need an additional 500,000 social and affordable homes by 2026.[25]

- Introduce mechanisms to increase the affordability of rental housing, for example get rid of 'no grounds' evictions and unfair rent rises so that millions of Australian renters have the security they need to create homes, build lives and raise families (e.g. rent subsidies and emergency housing funds). Further, increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) for the thousands of Australians who are struggling to pay the rent. Currently, 2 in 5 Australians are still in rental stress even after receiving CRA, with rent rising faster than CRA. Just an additional $20 per week would improve affordability for many households.[26]

- Preventing landlord discrimination within the housing market.

  A national report analysing people's experiences within the private rental market found that discrimination was widespread, particularly for young people. It was found that young renters under the age of 35 were the most likely to say they'd been discriminated against (55%), particularly in regard to their age (22%). In contrast, only 20% of renters over the age of 65 reported having experienced discrimination at all. Low-income households also reported being discriminated against, particularly those receiving government payments.[27]

  Foot in the Door is a NSW program that aims to increase access to private rental housing for young people, aged 18 to 24 years, who are accessing SHS, and for whom private rental would be suitable, by engaging with and providing training to real estate agents.

  An outcomes evaluation of the program found that it significantly improved attendee's understanding and competency around youth homelessness. The majority of real estate industry attendees reported improved:
  - Knowledge about youth homelessness (58%)
  - Knowledge about trauma (50%)
  - Ability to recognise behaviour associated with trauma (50%)
  - Confidence to connect a tenant with a youth worker (75%)
  - Knowledge of the subsidies and supports available to young tenants (67%).[28]

  Given the positive outcomes achieved for vulnerable young people through working with real estate agents, the Federal Government should look to invest in rolling-out the program nationally.

Recommendation 3: Invest in the building and provision of affordable homes for families and young people on low incomes. To meet current demand, 500,000 new social and affordable homes are required nationally.

3) Exiting State Care

In NSW, a survey of NSW care leavers found that within one year of leaving care around 35% had experienced homelessness. Indeed, evidence of the poor life outcomes experienced when young people are transitioned out of care at the age of 18 has been mounting for decades. A lack of appropriate supports in the crucial post-care years is leading young people leaving care to experience high rates of homelessness, mental health concerns, financial hardship and contact with the justice system.[29]

Under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020, Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments committed to improve support for young people leaving care as a priority, in recognition of the financial and social cost of poor outcomes.[30] Yet, of the 288,800 Australians who accessed SHS in 2018/18, 6,900 had left care settings (41% from OOHC, 19% from psychiatric hospitals, 18% from rehabilitation, and 15% from hospitals). A further 8,300 had left custodial settings, of which 2,800 came from youth detention.[31]

For many young people, turning 18 years of age does not mean that they are ready and capable to live independently. Some states have agreed to provide support for young people in out-of-home-care (OOHC) until the age of 21. Extended care supports have resulted in better engagement with education and employment, improved health and wellbeing, and reduced interaction within the justice system.[32]

While the problem of how best to support young people after leaving care has been widely recognised for some time, there is currently no single transition program in operation, either in Australia or internationally, which has demonstrated effectiveness in addressing the needs of all care leavers.[33]

There is strong evidence for the efficacy of interventions within child welfare, including family interventions that promote reconciliation, the adequate availability of post-care services, and robust post-care exit plans. Research also indicates that unsupported transitions from care, corrections, and in-patient healthcare institutions can lead directly to homelessness for many young people. Interventions that have been found to be effective to support young people transition out of care include:
- Youth-led exit planning that is initiated early on in the care process
- Family mediation and reunification prior to, during, and post-care
- Financial and housing supports
- Trauma-informed case management
- Youth justice diversion programs
- Improved access to mental health and AOD services for young people and their families.[34]

The poor outcomes experienced by young people leaving care have costs, not only for the individual in terms of lost life opportunities, but also for government and society in terms of ongoing use of government programs, poor employment outcomes, and increased rates of crime. A recent analysis found that, due to their higher use of government services, care leavers aged 18 to 21 years in NSW alone will cost NSW

taxpayers $222 million and Commonwealth taxpayers $667 million over the next 10 years.[35]

This research gives credence to the National Home Stretch Campaign, which is calling on governments around Australia to extend support for young people in care until the age of 21, much like what is happening in any other family setting in Australia. The termination of care by governments at 18 years is not consistent with parenting that is seeing most young people remain home well into their 20s.[36] In fact, the average 18-year-old would struggle if forced to fend for themselves in today's world of casualised work and high rental costs. And yet we ask this of young people struggling to overcome a past history of abuse, trauma and disrupted family attachments.[37]

The NSW Home Stretch Campaign Committee is arguing that all young people leaving care must be provided access to extended care arrangements until they are 21 years old. These reforms are comprised of three key strategies:

- Young people leaving care, in consultation with foster parents, are provided the option to voluntarily extend foster care supports until age 21
- A personal case worker/mentor to help link them with education, training and job opportunities and to support their health and well-being
- Safe, secure and supported independent living for young people leaving care, especially those exiting residential care, who cannot or choose not to take the voluntary extension of foster care supports.

Evidence from the United Kingdom, the United States and many other countries where initiatives similar to Home Stretch have been introduced, shows that extending care to 21 improves outcomes in education, employment and other life domains.[38] It is crucial that young people leaving state care have access to integrated systems and services to help secure housing and appropriate support before, during, and after transitioning out of care. Better exit planning tailored to the individual is key to reducing youth homelessness.[39]

Recommendation 4: All States and Territories should raise the leaving care age to 21, while at the same time improve transition planning and after-care support. It is crucial that young people leaving state care have access to integrated systems and services to help secure housing and appropriate support before, during, and after transitioning out of care.

4) Family-Led Interventions

Throughout Australia, much of our response to youth homelessness has been through the provision of emergency services once a young person reaches crisis point. By contrast, early intervention approaches identify and address the challenges that young people and their families face before they slip through the cracks and fall into homelessness. These interventions identify and address 'the physical, emotional, material, interpersonal, social, and educational needs of young people who are at imminent risk of, or who have just become, homeless.'[40]

Relationship breakdown is associated with youth homelessness, with research consistently showing links between family conflict, abuse, child welfare involvement, poverty, and homelessness. The importance of family and caring adults in the lives of young people demonstrates the need to invest in programs that strengthen family supports.

A pilot family-intervention program, Act Now Strong Together, trialed in the Western Region of NSW was so successful that it was expanded to Bourke. It involved offering a series of 6 to 10 structured family work sessions to young people and their families. An evaluation found that young people had lower rates of re-offending and were less likely to be sentenced to a control order than young people in the control group. Given the benefit of family work and the recognition of family as a key criminogenic need for young offenders, family work should sit alongside other interventions, such as AOD treatment, anger management, school or employment programs as routine offerings in youth justice.[41]

Multi-systemic Therapy for Child Abuse and Neglect® (MST-CAN) is an in-home early intervention program that aims to keep families together through working with families, to ensure their children are safe from abuse and neglect. It is a 24/7 home-based treatment model for families with substantiated cases of physical abuse and/or neglect of children and young people between the ages of 6 and 17 years. Services are provided to all family members. The model targets children where a report of physical abuse and/or neglect has been received within 180 days of the referral. Although referrals are received for children aged six years and over, all younger and older siblings in the referred child's family also receive the service.

Evaluations have shown MST-CAN effective at reducing youth mental health symptoms, parental emotional distress, parenting behaviours associated with maltreatment, and OOHC placement. Also, MST-CAN was effective at improving natural social support for parents.[42]

Recommendation 5: Long-term investment in family-intervention models and programs that have proven positive outcomes for young people and their families.

5) School-Based Interventions

Young people experiencing homelessness face profound difficulties finishing their studies. Research undertaken by Mission Australia found that only one third (31%) of homeless young people over the age of 18 had completed Year 12. In comparison, 57% of the job-seeking group over the age of 18 had finished Year 12.[43]

This is problematic. Evidence suggests that school attendance bolsters key protective factors for young people including resilience, social skills and positive social relationships. At the same time, low educational attainment is correlated with unemployment. As unemployment already hits younger generations the hardest, young people who miss out on opportunities for education and training become further disadvantaged in the labour market.[44]

Schools are optimal environments to address the unmet needs of young people experiencing homelessness and address any barriers to service delivery, particularly given that two-thirds of school-aged young people experiencing homelessness are enrolled at school or training institutions.[45] The objective of school-based early intervention programs is to identify those at-risk of homelessness, school disengagement, and other significant challenges in order to provide supports that will effectively reduce these risks, stabilise their housing, strengthen relationships with their families, and keep young people in their community.

Reconnect is an effective example of this approach. Based in schools and targeted to young people between the ages of 12 and 18 and their families, Reconnect aims to prevent homelessness by providing supports and services through a network of community-based, early intervention services. The Federal Government's comprehensive review indicated positive outcomes with respect to:
- Housing stability for young people
- Young people and parents' ability to manage family conflict
- Engagement in education and employment
- Community connection.[46]

Building on the successes of Reconnect is the community of schools and youth services (COSS), another school-based early intervention program. The COSS model offers place-based support for young people and families with the goal of reducing withdrawal from education, preventing entry into the criminal youth justice system, and addressing familial issues that contribute to homelessness.

Suitability of Mainstream Services for Young People Experiencing, or At-Risk of, Homelessness

In Australia, state and territory governments are responsible for the administration and operation of child protection service, and the care for all children under 18 who are deemed at risk of significant harm (ROSH). In NSW, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) is the lead agency for child protection. However, many children and young people who require DCJ intervention do not receive it - either because they are aged over 15 or because the ROSH threshold is too high and reports are therefore ineligible for a child protection response. As a result these children and young people often fall through the gaps and turn to youth SHS to provide accommodation, case management, and living skills support.

Many of these young people experiencing homelessness can present with a range of complex needs and traumas, which SHS aren't adequately funded or resourced to provide. One notable limitation of the homelessness sector is that the vast majority of youth SHS are funded to provide short-term crisis accommodation, with very few medium and long-term supported accommodation options available for young people.

1) Lack of Medium and Long Term SHS

Medium and long term SHS enable a young person to reside within a service for up to 2 years, developing their living skills while completing education or training in a supported home-like environment. Medium and long term services are especially critical for young people still engaged in education, or with limited maturity and living skills.

Since the Going Home Staying Home Reform (GHSH) in NSW, there has been a substantial decrease in the number of medium and long-term supported housing options for children and young people, increasing the demand on short-term crisis accommodation. Since GHSH, unmet need for medium and long term accommodation has increased from 25% in 2013/14 to approximately 50% in 2015/16, reflecting the gap in the supply and demand of medium-term accommodation.[47]

Due to the current lack of medium and long term supported SHS, children and young people are forced to rely on crisis accommodation support, which only permit them to reside for up to 3 months, resulting in them 'hopping' between various crisis services. Moving this frequently can have long-lasting negative effects, including disrupting education, and losing supportive community connections. As a result many disengage from school, and often lose connection with their community, leading to problematic coping strategies, and unhealthy social connections.[48]

For young people who are ageing out of crisis accommodation support (usually at 18 years of age) they will have no other option then to be rushed into semi-independent accommodation, usually through a Community Housing Provider (CHP). This model, whilst extremely valuable for those ready for independent living, can be overwhelming for some young people (especially those still engaged in education). In semi-independent accommodation, young people do not receive daily support. They are required to look after their own day plan, they are required to cook and clean for themselves, manage their own finances, and maintain a household, including budgeting, paying bills and managing the upkeep of the property.

This responsibility can be extremely overwhelming for a young person who has not developed the necessary skills and maturity. This is recognised by many workers in the sector who view this as "setting the young person up for failure", undermining their abilities, and causing anguish and mental health deterioration. For young people without the capacity to manage their mental health, this transition period can lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders. It can also see the young person disengage from support, and potentially lose their tenancy.

2) Mental Health Support

Homeless young people experience mental health issues at a higher rate than the general population. The research report 'The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia' (2016) found that more than half of homeless young people (53%) reported that they had been diagnosed, at some point in their lives, with at least one mental health condition.[49] The absence of safe, supportive, and secure accommodation,

compounded by poor health, financial limitations, and social isolation, have negative effects on a young persons mental health and general wellbeing. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for young people experiencing homelessness to develop unsafe coping strategies (for example drug and alcohol dependencies) in response to trauma and daily struggles.[50] The current health system, characterised by gaps in services and fragmented support, means young people with mental illness can inappropriately end up in the emergency department.[51]

The bright lights, noises, and high stress atmosphere of hospitals are not conducive with treatment of mental illness. Many in the sector recognise the need for non-hospital specialised community residential accommodation service options for young people with complex mental health needs to reduce the burden on expensive in-patient hospitals. Commonwealth, State, and Territory Governments should work cooperatively to change the current system to one based on evidence research and sustainable funding.[52]

Examining existing mainstream youth homelessness services illustrates that young people are distinctive to other homeless cohorts. Critically for young people they need age appropriate, holistic supports, which develop their skills and independence, recognising their age, maturity, trauma, and mental health needs. For homeless young people there are also a number of practical considerations, including proximity to public transport, and a youth friendly environment.[53]

Examples of Best Practice Approaches in Australia and Internationally for Preventing and Addressing Youth Homelessness

Australia does not have a sufficient support system for our most vulnerable, as a result homeless people often seek shelter in refuges, makeshift dwellings, or on the streets. While temporary accommodation and crisis intervention will always play a role in the homelessness support system, it should not be the main focus. To end homelessness we must invest in both early intervention and long-term housing solutions.

1) Housing First

For the adult homeless population, the Housing First model has emerged as the best practice approach for addressing chronic homelessness, particularly rough sleeping.[54] Housing First is an approach that offers permanent affordable housing quickly and without conditions and, once housing is secure, a multidisciplinary team of workers can address complex needs through community-based supports to help individuals maintain their housing. Before Housing First emerged in North America in the early 1990s, permanent housing was only offered to homeless people after they had "graduated" from a series of supports that began with services like drug and alcohol and mental health treatment. The model has since been embraced by several European countries

and in New Zealand where, in 2018, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a homelessness package that included NZ$63 million towards Housing First programs. [55] In NSW, the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services Gareth Ward has recently announced $36 million toward a new Together Home project, to rapidly secure homes for rough sleepers and wrapping essential support services around them. Together Home builds on the NSW Governments existing response to support rough sleepers during and after COVID-19.[56]

While there is evidence to support the effectiveness of Housing First in reducing homelessness among adults it may not do the same for young people, as their needs are vastly different. Any program to end youth homelessness must take into account that adolescence is a time of neurological development and social transition. The skills and responsibilities young people need to learn, combined with their stage of cognitive development, make it essential that they are supported and able to make mistakes without critical consequences as they transition into adulthood.[57] When it comes to accommodation young people require a broader range of services to meet their needs including trauma-informed care, education, living skills, and opportunities to develop support networks. Best practice models that have emerged for young people include Medium-Term Accommodation or Transitional Living Programs, and Youth Foyers.

2) Medium-Term Residential Programs and Transitional Living Programs

Medium-term residential programs are significantly absent from NSW and Australia's response to youth homelessness. Much like a crisis refuge, they are a residential program that provides 24/7 care in a home-like environment. However, unlike a crisis service they don't have the same time limitations. Medium-term residential programs are able to provide children and young people with the crucial time and stability necessary to recover from trauma, develop life skills, and complete education and employment goals prior to moving into semi-independent transitional accommodation.

Similar to Medium-term residential services, Transitional Living Programs (TLP) in the United States are programs that teach independent living skills to homeless young people to help them transition to independent living. In the US, the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) funded the first TLP in 1990, with the intent to provide a safety net and strong emotional support system for young people. TLP provides residential services for young people aged 16 to 22, for up to 18 months.

In a TLP, young people learn basic life skills, including money management, interpersonal skills, educational advancement, job attainment skills, mental and physical health care. Both medium-term and TLP programs focus on living skills building, developing emotional resilience and maturity, and achieving life goals to set young people on a positive path to independent living. When asked about their experience of TLP, young people reported many positive aspects including the sense of family, the connections, and community that looked out for them.[58]

Similarly, in NSW, the Education First Program, run by Platform Youth Service, aims to address the gap between crisis accommodation and achieving independent living by

providing an approach that combines housing with support services to increase a participant's ability to complete their education and find a path to independence. An interim impact analysis found that:

- All program participants were in stable accommodation
- 66% were undertaking education
- 50% were employed
- 66% reported an increase in 'job-ready' skills
- 50% were involved in volunteering
- 83% reported an increased sense of involvement relating to decision-making
- 83% reported an improvement in the quality of their sleep
- 33% reported an improvement to diet
- 100% reported an increase in feeling in control of their life.

Recommendation 6: Invest in supported medium-term Specialist Homelessness Services. These services should be trauma-informed with 24/7 staffing to help young people develop healthy routines, improve their living skills, reach their education and employment potential, and to feel happy, safe, and secure.

3) Youth Foyer Models

The Youth Foyer Model is similar to Medium-term SHS and TLPs in that they integrate accommodation with support and services. The Foyer model provides quality temporary housing, with on-site support to assist young people with access to training, education, employment, and transitioning into independent living.[59]

Young people exiting a Youth Foyer are much better equipped to be good employees and more likely to sustain employment. An example of a successful Youth Foyer in Australia is the Education First Youth Foyers in Victoria run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in partnership with Launch Housing. The Education First Youth Foyers provide young people aged 16-24 safe, secure, and affordable accommodation on TAFE campus for two years while they study towards a career. In 2019, KPMG released a financial evaluation of Victoria's Education Youth Foyers, assessing the costs and benefits attributed to young people exiting these Foyers over a three-year period. When compared to alternatives, KPMG found Foyers delivered significant long-term savings to the public through increased earnings, avoided incomes support payments, avoided housing support, and reduced emergency department admissions.[60]

Another example is that run by Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS) in NSW. SYFS' model was identified as an example of innovative practice in the Green Paper on homelessness. The SYFS Foyer has three residential sites – individual apartments and also provides some dispersed independent housing. It delivers specialist employment, education and training support services to enhance the opportunities for the young people. Of those supported in 2019, on exiting the service:

- 52% were employed either full or part-time
- 52% were involved in vocational training
- 26% were engaged in education
- 57% moved on to independent living
- 43% returned to live either at home or with relatives.

Recommendation 7: The Federal Government to invest in a range of evidence-based approaches that provide wrap around support for young people, including Youth Foyers.

Housing is a critical foundation for any young person, but it must be age-appropriate and support growth, resilience, and positive connections. It is important for housing to nurture the learning and developmental needs young people and support their future aspirations.

Further, family breakdown is a commonly cited cause of youth homelessness.[i] Any response to youth homelessness must provide specialised support not only to replace the lost support from family but also, to overcome the developmental impacts of childhood trauma, neglect, and abuse. Without adequate support young people who experience homelessness are at risk of becoming chronically homeless adults.

To truly address the issue of youth homelessness, we must turn off the tap through early intervention and prevention models, including implementing COSS models, extending care to 21, and after-care support.

4) Communities of Schools and Services (COSS) Models

The Community of Schools and Services (COSS) approach is a locally driven system-based response to young people showing early indicators of risk. The approach pulls together schools and services and proactively identifies young people requiring support before the risk factors escalate or a crisis occurs. One example of the COSS Model in Australia is the Geelong Project (the first COSS Model project in Australia). The Geelong Project is a collaboration of local services led by Barwon Child, Youth & Family, Swinburne University, the Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network, Northern Bay Secondary College, Geelong High School, and Newcomb Secondary College.

The COSS approach in Geelong screened all students from the participating schools, for early indicators known to correlate with a risk of homelessness, school disengagement or mental health – recognising that these issues are inherently linked. Participating schools and services became an integrated team, formally committing to respond to the young people identified (this involved interagency agreements and a governance group). The model is driven by a constant feedback loop of data and outcomes. The Geelong Project has seen a significant shift from unconnected services, to a unified, formalised collective.

The early evidence base generated by Swinburne University's evaluation of The Geelong Project has shown measurable progress in a short period of time. Within three years the Geelong Project has seen a 40% reduction in youth crisis presentation, 50% reduction in school disengagement, and a 20% reduction in early school leaving.[61] By focusing on prevention young people build resilience and better understand their support needs. The COSS approach has since been extended locally across several States and Territories, including The Albury Project in NSW.

Recommendation 8: More investment is needed into early intervention, including Communities of Schools and Services (COSS) models. Funding and expanding early intervention programs could save young people from the harmful effects of homelessness, school disengagement, and poor mental health.

5) Extending State Care

In Australia, state and territory governments have a statutory responsibility for ensuring children are protected from harm caused by abuse and neglect. In NSW, this responsibility is exercised by DCJ. A key function of DCJs child protection role is providing OOHC to children and adolescents in need. A vast body of literature highlights the inter-related, poor life outcomes experienced by a high proportion of care leavers – including history of abuse, neglect, ongoing poor health and mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, poverty, unemployment, and violence.

The disparity between children in OOHC and those in traditional family structures is highlighted by the abrupt end of formal state care at the age of 18 years old. The State, as the guardian, ceases to provide ongoing financial, social, and emotional support on or before the young persons 18th birthday. By contrast, young people in the general population who live in traditional family structure are more likely to continue to live with their parents well into their mid-20s, entering and exiting the family home several times as they pursue personal endeavours (e.g. attend university, travel, or save for a home). In Australia 43% of people aged between 20-24 are still living with one or both of their parents.[62] Unfortunately, there are few support options available through government to assist young people exiting OOHC beyond the age of 18. The lack of available supports sees a number of young people move straight from the child protection system directly to welfare, the justice system, or homelessness support.[63]

There are a number of international jurisdictions that have implemented policies and programs to extend care for young people aged 18 years and older. The United Kingdom has extended care provisions intended to model the role of a parent. These assist young people in care until they are 21, or 24 when engaged in school or training. The Children and Families Act 2014 legislates a duty for local authorities in the UK to support a 'Staying Put' arrangement, which is a voluntary opt-in model whereby a young person makes an agreement with their foster carer at the age of 18 to remain living with that person up to the age of 21.

In 2015, figures released by the UK Department for Education found that a quarter of young people in foster care who turned 18 since 'Staying Put' legislation was introduced remained with their foster carers.[64] Interview data revealed that the vast majority of young people who opted to stay put were positive about the support they received (90%), compared to those who did not stay put (73%).[65] A range of benefits to staying put were identified and the consensus was that it maximised the likelihood of young people making successful transitions to independence and mitigated the risk of a young persons circumstances deteriorating.

6) After-Care Support

There is a strong association between good preparation and planning in the transition process and positive post-care experiences. Effective preparation is particularly important for young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Effective transition planning includes the development of an individual plan, which actively involves the young person in decision-making.

Young people leaving the OOHC system have poorer educational, health, and employment outcomes than their peers.[66] Research has found that there is a significant lack of support for OOHC leavers. In 2009, the CREATE foundation conducted research and found that 50% of young people leaving care were leaving care before their 18th birthday, 40% of care leavers did not know where they were going to live, and almost 35% experienced homelessness in the first 12 months of leaving care. [67] More needs to be done to ensure that young people leaving OOHC are not exited into homelessness. This includes improved exit planning, availability of wrap around supports, the option to extend care placement, and adequate after care supports.

All states and territories require young people to have a 'leaving care' plan which includes a housing option. However, a 2013 survey showed that 64% of young people did not have such a plan.[68] Post-care programs for young people transitioning from OOHC are only available to a limited number of young people. Programs such as the Premier's Youth Initiative in NSW should be made more widely available in all states and territories, and extended to young people exiting care arrangements, including youth justice, hospital, and homelessness services.

In NSW, the Premier's Youth Initiative (PYI) is an initiative that identifies and targets young people leaving out-of-home care (OOHC) who are likely to be homeless or at risk of homelessness on exit from care and diverts them from entering the homelessness service system.[69] The program expands on the current aftercare service by offering a range of interventions aimed at bridging the gap between OOHC support and independent living. These interventions target and build the long-term capacity and resilience of young people with the aim to permanently divert them from the homelessness service system.[70]

The Adequacy of the Collection and Publication of Housing, Homelessness, and Housing Affordability Related Data

Measuring homelessness and housing affordability can be quite challenging due to the complex and personal nature of each homeless persons experience. Currently, there are many limitations to the accuracy of homelessness data.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) runs a Census of Population and Housing every 5 years, with 2016 the most recent. As experiencing "homelessness" is not explicitly asked, analytical techniques are used by the ABS to estimate the homeless population based on assumptions about the way people respond to the questions.[71]

Obtaining accurate data is crucial as the location and characteristics of homeless people across Australia can be used to report trends, as well as target and fund services. Unfortunately, many young people experiencing homelessness are 'couch surfing', and therefore it is difficult to accurately capture their homelessness experience, especially if they do not perceive themselves to be homeless. This creates a challenge for data collectors when determining whether a young person is a 'traveller', temporarily 'staying with friends', or experiencing homelessness. As a result it is likely that the Census, underestimates the rate of youth homelessness.

'Couch surfing' has become a prevalent form of homelessness, particularly for children and young people. Unfortunately they may not be counted as homeless due to the confusion over the 'usual address' question in the Census. One way around this would be to add an option, which asks, "What is the relationship of this person to Person 1?" Adding the responses "Person staying temporarily due to housing crisis/instability". This would allow for a clearer picture of those potentially couch surfing.[71]

According to the 2016 Census the largest single group of homeless people in Australia were people living in severely overcrowded dwellings (44% of the homeless population).[73] Again, the subjective nature of overcrowding means that many may not recognise their living arrangement as homeless. The ABS inclusion of people subject to 'severe overcrowding' has been a focus for debate, however residents enduring such conditions will be experiencing negative quality of life by absence of adequate housing. Currently, only 6 people per household can complete the paper version of the Census form, and up to 10 people can complete the online form. To capture overcrowding data there should be no limit on the online form, so to better capture overcrowded accommodation.

It is unclear if the ABS collates a list of boarding houses and institutional accommodation and exactly how that information is collected. While some homelessness service providers can easily identify boarding house dwellings there expertise has not necessarily been drawn upon to assist with the Census.

It is imperative that the Census data is accurate as it is primarily used as the baseline measure in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). It is also used to determine the distribution of funding for homeless services across States and Territories. Other uses include policy and service delivery purposes at State, Territory and Local Government level.

Recommendation 9: The Australian Bureau of Statistics requires ongoing collaboration with Specialist Homelessness Services to gather reliable data, this includes making changes to the Census questions. In addition, there needs to be an up to date list of all homelessness accommodation providers, including Specialist Homelessness Services, Community Housing Providers, and registered and unregistered boarding houses.

Governance and Funding Arrangements in Relation to Housing and Homelessness Particularly as they Relate to the Responsibility of Local, State, Territory and Federal Governments

Australian Government and state and territory government funding of SHS is a key means by which homelessness services are financed and resourced in Australia. Provision for Commonwealth Government support for state and territory homelessness services is incorporated within the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). In 2019-20 this amounted to $125 million. The justification for such a funding agreement is partly due to the financial imbalances of state and territories governments in relation to the size their homelessness population and service responsibilities.[74]

Unlike its predecessor (National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness), NHHA seeks to improve access to housing across the whole housing spectrum – from crisis housing to home ownership. This expanded coverage is welcome, but the housing and homelessness sector demand a national housing and homelessness strategy.

A National Housing and Homelessness Strategy would help integrate the financial and policy settings of difference states and territories to deliver affordable housing outcomes across the housing system (from affordable rentals to home ownership).[75] Researchers from the University of Sydney, Curtin University and the University of New South Wales investigated strategies governments have used and found that current affordable housing projects often rely on one-off funding arrangements that were largely non-replicable, which is ineffective compared to having clear long-term strategy. [76]

Recommendation 10: The Federal Government to develop a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy, which integrates policy, programs and long-term funding to drive outcomes across the spectrum of housing needs.

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