

# Pam Barker

Chief Executive Officer, Yfoundations



## Calling on Governments for a National Youth Homelessness Strategy

Yfoundations is calling on the federal and state governments to put a sharp focus on children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. A national strategy to address child and youth homelessness would provide a roadmap to tackle this ever-increasing issue in Australia, and address the systemic issues that drive and exacerbate child and youth homelessness, such as:

- domestic and family violence
- abuse and neglect
- housing crisis fuelled by rising rents and lack of access to affordable housing
- youth unemployment and a lack of employment pathways for vulnerable young people
- low or irregular incomes and woefully low Youth Allowance payments

- entering the youth justice system and being placed on custody orders
- insufficient support for young people leaving out-of-home care, and
- lack of access to or disrupted education.

These and other factors combine to create a perfect storm in which children and young people are increasingly likely to fall into homelessness.

### The Problem

For too long, children and young people have slipped through the cracks of multiple service sectors only to land in youth specialist homelessness services (SHS). While these services are committed to supporting children and young people, they are often not adequately resourced nor is it within their power to respond in ways to ensure that:

- homelessness does not happen in the first place
- when it does, it is a once in a lifetime event, and
- there is a system to catch the child or young person, providing support as well as a pathway out of homelessness.

The evidence is compelling: children and young people who are impacted by abuse, domestic and family violence, couch surfing, living in unsafe overcrowded accommodation, exiting youth justice, and street sleeping, are too often ending up in the youth homelessness service system — a system that was never designed to be the end of the road for vulnerable children and young

people; a system that is not and has never been funded to respond in ways that give children and young people every opportunity to be safe and free from abuse, trauma and violence; a system that is not resourced to support children and young people to live their best lives and have opportunities to thrive and enter adulthood equipped with life skills.

Despite these limitations, our youth homelessness services continue to roll out the safety net for these children and young people who have nowhere else to turn. The youth homelessness sector continues to plug the gaps of service system failures without additional resources and often without any government commitment to ensure mainstream agencies to meet the responsibilities of their portfolios. All roads of service system failures must not end up in the youth homelessness sector.

Recent Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) data<sup>1</sup> paints a clear picture of the severity of the situation for children and young people in 2020-21 across Australia:

- Nearly 42,000 15- to 24-year-olds presented alone to an SHS — 59 per cent of these had previously been assisted by an SHS agency at some point since 2011.
- The main reasons young people aged 15 to 24 years presented alone were domestic and family violence, and housing crisis (both 17 per cent), followed by relationship/family breakdown (at nearly 13 per cent).
- Nearly 47 per cent of children and young people who sought SHS support had experienced family and domestic violence.

- One in three clients who experienced domestic and family violence were under 18 years old.
- 15- to 24-year-olds represented 23 per cent of unassisted (that is, turned away) requests for SHS support nationally.
- Around one-third of young people aged 15-to 24 years presenting alone identified as Indigenous.
- 71 per cent of young people presenting alone to SHS were not enrolled in any form of education at the start of the support.

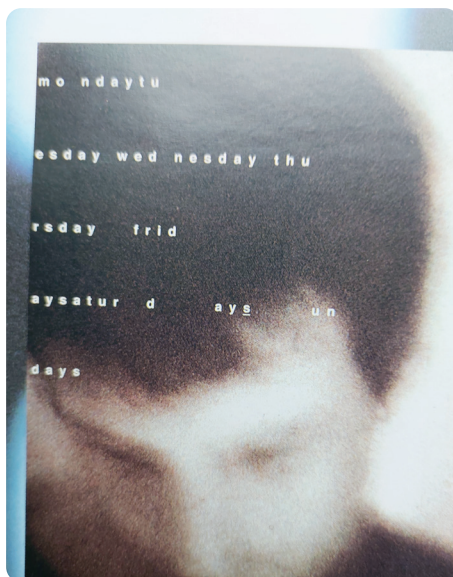
The 2016 Census<sup>2</sup> showed a 26 per cent increase over a 10-year period in 12-to 24-year-olds experiencing homelessness in Australia (ABS, 2016). We anticipate this figure will be significantly worse in data from the 2021 Census because of the COVID pandemic and the affordable housing crisis in Australia.

### Why do we need a dedicated homelessness strategy for children and young people?

Child and youth homelessness continues to escalate across Australia and yet there is no overarching national strategy to tackle it head on. Children and young people often have distinctly different pathways into homelessness and different experiences compared to adults. Therefore, it follows that distinct and different responses and approaches are necessary in order to address it effectively and in any longstanding, meaningful way.

Too often we see children and young people become lost in state-based housing and homelessness strategies, which tend to focus only on early intervention and prevention strategies for this cohort. The *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023* is one example of where children and young people are mentioned only in the context of early intervention and prevention and the only actions relating to children (in their own right) and young people are: for those exiting Out of Home Care (OOHC); Youth Foyers; and universal screening tools in schools.

- While Yfoundations welcomes efforts to target children and young people exiting OOHC



and those with connections to child protection, the breadth of homelessness experiences extends well beyond these issues. It is telling that we see too many children and young people:

- presenting alone to specialist homelessness services when they should be in out-of-home care or supported to safely return to their families
- cycling through or stuck in the crisis system because there are no exit options
- experiencing family breakdown and violence with nowhere to go
- unable to access the private rental market because it's unaffordable and out of reach
- facing long wait times to access social housing
- being forced to couch surf or live in overcrowded accommodation because they have no other options
- being detained in correctional facilities because they cannot return home or have no home to go back to.

### Why are the needs of children and young people different?

Yfoundations recently submitted our position to the Productivity Commission's review of the *National Housing and Homelessness Strategy*. Our key recommendation calls for a national child and youth homelessness strategy because the evidence shows

that what we're doing now isn't working and continues to worsen.

Children and young people's trajectories into homelessness are different, their issues are often complex and varied due to their age, and their most prevalent forms of homelessness are often hidden (that is, couch surfing and extreme overcrowding). Therefore, the strategies and responses for children and young people must be considered separately to the rest of the population.

Towards the end of 2021, AHURI and Melbourne City Mission released their *Final Report: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria*,<sup>3</sup> which provides an excellent account of why young people need a unique and robust response to accommodate their needs. Nationally, we need to replicate the effort and importance the Victorians are putting into to their call for a dedicated youth homelessness strategy.

We need to be mindful that children and young people are moving through the developmental stages of their lives and don't have the same coping strategies and resources that are generally attributed to adults. Therefore, the responses must consider the developmental phase of the child or young person.

In the same way, the responses we know work for young people vary according to their issues and complexity. For instance, Youth Foyers work well for young people who do not have complex needs and who want to study or embark on employment, whereas young people with more complex needs tend to do better in medium-term housing with only a couple of other residents and 24-hour onsite support. Housing First could work for those young people who want to live on their own and are supported up to the point they can live independently. Some young people simply need access to affordable housing to avoid couch surfing or living in severely overcrowded accommodation or sleeping rough. Others will benefit from supported transitional housing for a two-year period to give them time to stabilise before they are able to live independently. There will always be

a need for crisis accommodation for children and young people in situations where there are no other options or to keep them safe.

What most of children and young people need is a trauma-informed response that is centred on them and their needs. Similarly, they will likely need access to mainstream services such as mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drugs, education, training, youth justice, child protection and, in some instances, support to reunify with their families. And, just as importantly, they will need support to become familiar with and access these services. Therefore, any future strategy must articulate the involvement of other service sectors to allow children and young people to receive the full range of the interventions and supports they need to avoid homelessness in the first place or exit as quickly and as unscathed as possible.

A National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy would establish Australia as an international leader in addressing homelessness among children and young people. We know other countries are doing great work in this area, but Yfoundations has been unable to identify anywhere that has embarked on a national youth homelessness strategy other than Ireland, which is in the development process. We have the opportunity — right now — to develop a blueprint for a dedicated systemic approach involving all relevant stakeholders who must play a vital role and collaborate in addressing the fundamental issues that contribute to and exacerbate youth homelessness. We must put a sharp focus on what is a national shame and support the transition of children and young people in this country into a future of self-reliance and wellbeing thereby ensuring they are not consigned to a lifetime of homelessness.

#### Endnotes

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2020-21*, Canberra.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, *Census of Population*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
3. Alves T and Roggenbuck C 2021, *Final Report: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria*, prepared by AHURI, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne



Artwork by Christine Thirkell