



Regional Youth Homelessness Forum Consultation Report

Yfoundations

in partnership with **Mission Australia** and **Social Futures**

About Yfoundations

For over 40 years, Yfoundations has served as the NSW peak body advocating for children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, and the services that support them. Our members and board are made up of highly experienced youth specialist homelessness services (SHS) providers who have direct knowledge of and experience with the issues young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness face across NSW.

About Mission Australia

Mission Australia supports people nationwide by combatting homelessness, assisting disadvantaged families and children, addressing mental health issues, fighting substance dependencies and much more. We stand together with Australians in need until they can stand for themselves.

We offer a wide range of youth programs in the Riverina and Western NSW that support young people with mental health issues, those experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, and provide support to juvenile offenders in partnership with Youth Justice.

About Social Futures

Social Futures is a community service organisation with 46 years' experience working to create positive social change in regional Australia. We work directly with individuals, families and communities across our focus areas of homelessness and housing, youth and family, mental health and wellbeing, and disability inclusion, to support communities to thrive and people to live well.

Social Futures delivers several programs in the youth space – The Clubhouse, headspace, Reconnect, Getting it Together, Connecting Home Youth and Elements around the Northern Rivers and the Grafton region.

About the NSW Regional Youth Homelessness Forums

Child and youth homelessness in NSW regions has continued to emerge as a critical issue during the last few years. The issue of housing insecurity in regional NSW in the face of bushfires, COVID-19 and floods has attracted considerable media attention. However, what we don't see in the media is the enormous impact these natural disasters and the pandemic have had on young people who are continually missing from the conversation.

Representatives from Yfoundations, Mission Australia and Social Futures decided it was timely to shine a spotlight on this issue and worked together to facilitate a series of forums during Homelessness Week 2022. The Regional Youth Homelessness Forums sought to gain a deeper understanding of child and youth homelessness in our regions, as well as the issues, barriers and challenges experienced by the youth homelessness sector.

Two forums were held: one with Yfoundations in partnership with Social Futures in Ballina in the Northern Rivers, and one with Yfoundations in partnership with Mission Australia in Wagga Wagga and Dubbo in the Riverina and Orana regions respectively.

This report was authored by Yfoundations, with input and review by Social Futures and Mission Australia.

Context

We already know that living outside a major urban centre means a young person is more likely to experience poverty and unemployment, poorer health outcomes and early school leaving than their counterparts in the city. (AIHW, 2022; NSW Government, 2018). This is compounded by issues currently facing our regions of skyrocketing rental prices, record-low vacancy rates and a severe lack of social housing stock, leading to an unprecedented housing crisis that was further exacerbated by COVID-19 and natural disasters. As a consequence, young people have been shut out of the rental market completely as they are unable to compete within such a scarce, unaffordable housing environment.

In addition, critical gaps in local service systems and service delivery mean children and young people are often not able to receive the support they require when they are at risk of or fall into homelessness.

Methodology

Each forum lasted 1.5 hours and was designed to be an open, informal discussion prompted by a series of questions centred around the following topics:

- key challenges or issues in regional NSW
- what are the most dominant forms of youth homelessness
- impacts and limitations of policies and programs affecting children and young people experiencing homelessness
- key barriers confronting regional SHS providers when supporting clients
- what is needed to resolve key issues discussed, both urgently and long term.

Snapshot: Regional NSW

- According to the latest National Homelessness Monitor, areas classified as ‘inner regional’ tended to witness disproportionately rapid increases in homelessness, with such areas collectively recording a 30% increase in service users assisted during 2019–2020 – more than double the comparable national figure (14%). (Pawson et al, 2020)
- More than a third (36%) of 12 to 25-year-olds who accessed homelessness services in NSW in 2019–20 lived in rural or regional areas. (AIHW, 2019–20)
- Anglicare’s Rental Affordability Snapshot regional reports found that a person over 18 years on Jobseeker or Youth Allowance looking for a share house can afford zero per cent of rentals in the North Coast, Riverina Murray and Western NSW areas. (Anglicare, 2022)

Deeper Dive: Northern Rivers

- Weekly rental prices in the Byron Bay (\$1,072) and Ballina (\$728) suburbs have outstripped Sydney’s median rent price of \$657 a week. (SQM Research, 2022)
- The current private rental vacancy rate in Northern NSW is 0.9%. (SQM Research, 2022)
- Flooding has rendered more than 2,000 homes and businesses in Northern NSW uninhabitable, with experts saying that the Northern Rivers was already 2,300 homes short of what would be considered a healthy rental vacancy rate before the floods hit. (The Guardian, 2022)
- In Richmond Tweed, 53.2% of SHS clients are children and young people aged 0–24 years. (AIHW, 2021)

Deeper Dive: Riverina

- Current average weekly rent in the region is \$429, up 17.4% over the last 12 months. (SQM Research, 2022)
- The current private rental vacancy rate in the Riverina is 0.4%. (SQM Research, 2022)
- The Riverina Murray region’s low-income households comprise the largest proportion of all households (40%). (DCJ, 2020)
- 49.4% of SHS clients in the Riverina region are aged 0–24 years. (AIHW, 2021)

Deeper Dive: Orana

- Current average weekly rent in the region is \$427, up 10.4% over the last 12 months. (SQM Research, 2022)
- The current private rental vacancy rate in the Dubbo–Broken Hill area is 0.5%. (SQM Research, 2022)
- Low-income households predominate in the Central West and Orana, comprising 47.9% of all households. There is not a single LGA in the region that does not have a majority of low-income households. (DCJ, 2020)
- 57% of SHS clients in the Orana region are children and young people aged 0–24 years. (AIHW, 2021)

What we heard

The following section categorises discussions from the Regional Youth Homelessness Forums into four high-level themes. For a more detailed insight into what was discussed throughout the forums, you can view the Dubbo / Wagga Wagga Forum Miro Board [here](#) and the Ballina Forum Miro Board [here](#).

1) Regional Housing Crisis

Unsurprisingly, much of the discussion throughout both forums centred around the current housing crisis in the regions, which disproportionately affects young people. Services spoke of their clients being completely locked out of the current rental market due to high rental prices and non-existent vacancy rates. The migration of people from metropolitan areas and the rapid growth in online holiday rental platforms, such as AirBnB, have severely reduced the number of properties available for young people on low incomes. We heard the impact of 'fly in fly out' (FIFO) workers from NSW Health during COVID-19 taking away head leasing stock from clients and service staff in Dubbo, as well as how the influx of construction workers moving to Coffs Harbour to work on the bypass are being 'prioritised for housing'. Services reported that local clients with attractive rental records and full-time work are still unable to enter the rental market.

The non-existent rental vacancy rates are affecting staff as well as the young people they are supporting. A number of staff in the Northern Rivers lost their homes in the floods.

The insufficient levels of Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments to support low-income young renters to enter the rental market was also discussed. In consultations with youth SHS providers and in previous reports and submissions, Yfoundations has consistently heard about and highlighted the inadequacy of the current rate of income support for young renters. This is particularly true in regional areas due to sharp annual increases of rental prices. Yfoundations endorses the Raise the Rate campaign, which calls for an increase of Youth Allowance to \$65/day (with ongoing indexation to wages) and a 50% increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance. Government-funded programs such as [Rent Choice Youth](#) and [Rent it Keep It](#) are seeing limited take-up and outcomes in the regions due to unattainable rental prices disincentivising participation in these programs.

The severe lack of social housing stock in the three regions was also identified as a key ongoing issue. Discussion revolved around the lack of stock generally, long wait lists, as well as the notion that young people are not being prioritised for existing stock. Services reported losing transitional housing properties due to floods, as well as real estate agents or owners requesting them back and wanting to sell or list their property in the extremely competitive rental market.

Another program discussed was the Together Home Program, delivered in partnership with Community Housing Providers (CHPs). Services reported that a considerable amount of both capital and leasehold stock is being allocated to participants in the program who are older and have a long history of rough sleeping. Although Together Home is recognised as an important and successful program, it is relevant that young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness are not the target cohort for this program as they are more likely to be couch surfing, or living in overcrowded dwellings or a crisis refuge.

The housing crisis has meant that an increasing number of children and young people are couch-surfing, living in unsafe or overcrowded dwellings, and fronting up to homelessness services.

The unattainable rental market and lack of social housing stock contribute to the lack of appropriate exit options for young people, meaning they often get stuck in a cycle of homelessness where they are forced to 'refuge hop' between youth SHS services or return to inadequate or unsafe housing situations.

2) Service system gaps

We often hear that specialist homelessness services in non-metropolitan areas face considerable barriers to providing specialised and integrated responses to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. (Evans et al, 2011). This is due to gaps in local services systems: a lack or complete absence of youth-specific crisis and medium-term accommodation, limited and often inaccessible mainstream services, and transport difficulties, as well as staffing issues. This was echoed throughout the forums by overstretched and at times frustrated service providers who were unable to provide children and young people with the support they required.

A significant service system gap in the regions is the lack of youth-specific accommodation. We know that children and young people require a range of specialised housing options depending on their needs, developmental stage and level of independence, including crisis accommodation, medium-term accommodation, Youth Foyers and youth social housing. However, we heard in both forums that there is a severe lack of youth-specific accommodation across this continuum. Most pressing was the shortage of crisis refuges, which was the most consistently raised issue across the board. This was often coupled with discussion of a lack of available temporary accommodation. We heard heartbreaking stories in the Northern Rivers where the only options were to provide young people with a tent or refer them to refuges considerable distances away from their community.

Another trend in the discussions was the apparent gaps between interventions for children and young people in particular age cohorts. This included:

- the 12 to 15-year-old cohort presenting with Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) who are not a priority for child protection intervention by the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and are also not eligible for income support or accommodation via Link2home. The Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) works with this cohort but is often not funded to provide accommodation assistance
- the 16 to 17-year-old cohort 'challenging to house anywhere but a refuge' and needing to relocate to cities, often disrupting their education
- the 18 to 24-year-old cohort who are often 'overlooked' and not prioritised for placement in crisis refuges.

The consistent rhetoric used by both forum participants and the wider sector surrounding gaps and siloes in responses for particular age cohorts reinforces the need to move towards client-centred responses for children and young people that go beyond age and towards specialised responses according to needs, developmental stages and independence. This should be front and centre in any state or national strategy to address child and youth homelessness. This is, of course, harder to develop and implement in regional areas due to the service system gaps discussed throughout this report; thus, targeted and additional investment is required to bolster the youth homelessness services system to move towards client-centred service delivery.

Another key gap is the limited nature of mainstream services in the regions, which youth SHS report as often being difficult to access. Integrated responses are not possible without access to external mainstream services as SHSs have finite resources and capabilities to provide the required specialised response.

The most common theme was the lack of appropriate mental health services for young people. Services report an overall lack of psychologists for young people requiring mental health intervention, as well as crucial gaps between traditional mental health service providers and community child and adolescent mental health services due to them being tailored towards differing risk levels. This leaves medium-risk level children and young people without access to appropriate services. In addition, the importance of early intervention and access to preventative mental health services, intergenerational support and therapeutic interventions to prevent presentations of children and young people in crisis at emergency departments was highlighted by services. This discussion reveals that during a time when the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of children and young people in the regions, the most vulnerable children are not able to access the specialised mental health support they require.

Difficulty accessing services is further exacerbated by a shortage in SHS staff. Services report being increasingly exhausted over the past few years due to heightened caseloads in the face of COVID-19 and natural disasters, and that valued and experienced staff have left due to burnout. They also report considerable difficulties in recruitment to fill vacancies. Unfortunately, due to the nature of contracting arrangements, staff vacancies are often short term and it is difficult to attract quality, skilled staff into these roles due to job instability and the lack of available housing. Staffing shortages, existing staff burnout and instability due to short-term contracts have further revealed and contributed to the significant gaps in the regional youth homelessness services system.

The issues and gaps explored above contribute to a critical situation that is disrupting the social fabric of our regions: vulnerable children and young people requiring accommodation or specialised support are unable to get it and instead are forced into transience and have to travel 'up to 9 hours' away from their community and support systems for temporary and crisis accommodation or services. This can often be traumatising, disrupting belonging and leading to further social isolation. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are forced to move off country, affecting community kinship and mental health, and exacerbating intergenerational trauma.

We heard stories detailing unmet demand and a need to turn away clients or make multiple and regular ROSH reports to prompt intervention. It is clear the regional youth homelessness services system is stifled by significant gaps and is overstretched and under-resourced.

3) Domestic, Family & Sexual Violence (DFSV)

Yfoundations is committed to bringing the issue of domestic, family and sexual violence into sharp focus as an insidious issue for unaccompanied children and young people. In NSW, around 13,507 people aged 15–24 years presented alone to SHS agencies. Of this, over two in five clients (around 42%) who experienced domestic and family violence were under 18 years. (AIHW, 2021). An effective youth homelessness services system is one where these staggering numbers of unaccompanied children and young people experiencing DFSV can be supported within the system with age-appropriate and specialised responses. However, for many years now, we have continued to hear from our members about how the youth SHS sector is largely overlooked when opportunities and DFSV funding arise. Without this additional funding, these specialised responses are not possible.

Unfortunately, this rang true throughout both forums and it is therefore appropriate that DFSV be given separate attention. One service recounted that up to 90% of presenting clients are experiencing DFSV, and a lack of both accommodation and access to support for this cohort is a significant barrier. We heard that fractured relationships with police often means these issues are not identified and dealt with appropriately, and that family violence is often the most common type of violence experienced but is often not recognised in the same way as domestic and intimate partner violence, with limited support available.

It is important to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experiencing DFSV are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, and seeking support often means breaking ties with their family and community. The misidentification of perpetrators is also rife in these communities with women who retaliate against violent partners often being reported and reprimanded by police.

4) Couch surfing

According to the 2016 Census, the two most prevalent forms of homelessness that children and young people experience are couch surfing and overcrowding. The ABS has acknowledged the difficulty of counting instances of overcrowding and we also know it is difficult to capture the number of those who are couch surfing. Across both forums, couch surfing was identified as the most dominant form of homelessness experienced by children and young people presenting to youth SHS. Anecdotally, Yfoundations has heard stories of children and young people being forced into trading sexual favours, drug dealing or servitude in exchange for accommodation and, unfortunately, these patterns of exploitation were confirmed during the forums.

To date, there has been a dearth of research and targeted funding to explore the issue of couch surfing among young people. This must be tackled in any future state or national homelessness plan in order to measure and explore the extent of the issue for this cohort and how it can be appropriately addressed.



Recommendations

1) That the NSW Government commit to the investment in a needs analysis of and funding for the specialist homelessness services system to deliver additional youth crisis refuges in regional NSW. Furthermore, we support Homelessness NSW in its call to increase baseline SHS Program funding by 20% or approximately \$156 million over three years so that services can meet current demand.

2) That the NSW Government commit to allocating \$5,740,000 for seven new medium-term accommodation sites across regional, country and remote NSW. This should include a needs analysis to determine the exact location of these services.

3) That the NSW Government also commit to the investment in a needs analysis of and funding for the specialist homelessness services system to deliver additional Foyer models in regional NSW to provide stable accommodation and support for vulnerable young people (particularly those exiting OOHC) to divert them away from homelessness and break cycles of disadvantage.

4) That future tranches of the Core & Cluster program quarantine a number of refuges for unaccompanied young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. Refuges in regional areas for this cohort should be prioritised.

5) That any state or national strategy geared towards responding to homelessness or DFSV give considerable attention to the experiences and needs of unaccompanied children and young people to ensure that integrated, client-centred responses are available for this cohort. These strategies should include a commitment to fund research to better understand the causes and consequences of youth homelessness. The unique needs of regional children and young people, and the services that support them, should be given particular attention in these strategies.

6) That the NSW Government commit to commissioning additional research into young people's experiences of couch surfing, particularly those in regional areas, to better understand the extent of the issue and how to tackle it.

Supplementary recommendations

The NSW Government implement the recommendations set out in the Regional Housing Taskforce. This includes recommendations to increase supply, promote affordable and diverse housing, and better monitor housing outcomes.

The NSW Government support the sector call to build at least 5,000 new social housing properties per year for the next 10 years, including new youth-specific social housing in regional areas.

Yfoundations joins the Home Stretch Campaign in calling on the NSW Government to raise the age of Out of Home Care (OOHC) placements to 21 years. This will give those vulnerable young people more time to acquire the skills and confidence they need to live independently, and reduce the risk of homelessness for care leavers.

Yfoundations also endorses the Raise the Rate call to increase Youth Allowance to \$65/day (with ongoing indexation to wages), and a 50% increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance. Current rates of Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance are insufficient to meet the needs of low-income renters in our regions.



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