National Strategy to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse Final Development Consultation Paper Yfoundations Submission

About us

For over 40 years, we have served as the NSW peak body representing children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, as well as the services that directly support them. Our membership and board are made up of primarily Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) and Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) providers, who have a wealth of knowledge about the issues facing homeless youth in our state.

Introduction

National and international research suggests many homeless young people are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse (Keeshin & Campbell, 2011; Morrison, 2009; Tyler & Cauce, 2002;). Given this, Yfoundations welcomes the development of a National Strategy to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse in Australia.

Considering our expertise, this submission will focus on homeless young people who have suffered from child sexual abuse, and how the National Strategy to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse may affect them.

Submission questions

Do the proposed vision and objectives reflect what our aim should be and what success should look like under the National Strategy?
Yfoundations supports the proposed vision and objective of the National Strategy. For added emphasis, we suggest adding the word 'all' to the sentence 'children and young people are protected.'

Do the proposed values reflect the values that should be guiding our work under the National Strategy?
Homeless young people are also more likely to face challenges in the future including higher levels of psychological distress, physical disability, repeat homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and repeat offending and imprisonment (Hall, et al., 2020; MacKenzie, et al, 2016). Those who have also experienced sexual abuse are even more vulnerable, and need ongoing, long-term support and case management. Without appropriate support, these traumatised children and young people may be unable to recover.

Yfoundations, therefore, suggests the addition of the following value focused on long-term care:
"We focus on providing long-term, therapeutic support to children and young people who have suffered from sexual abuse, to enable them to recover from their trauma and rebuild their lives."

Do these strategic priority themes reflect the areas of focus for Australia over the life of the First National Action Plan and First Commonwealth Action Plan under the National Strategy (i.e. 2021-2025)?
Sexual abuse often leads to children and young people becoming homeless or entering out-of-home care (OOHC). Those who cannot stay with their family need safe, supported and secure accommodation. Without it, a child or young person's wellbeing and continued social and educational involvement is at risk (Tiller at al., 2020).

Yfoundations suggests adding 'safe, supported housing for children who can't live with their families' as a strategic priority.

What are the best ways for Australian, state and territory governments to listen, engage and collaborate with these groups/individuals? Are there any groups you feel are missing?
We believe that the National Strategy should explicitly identify 'children and young people who are living away from their families' as a stakeholder group. These include:

1**. Homeless children and young people**
Sexual abuse can be both the cause and the consequence of youth homelessness. One study in the US found that 42% of 18 to 23-year-old homeless people were screened positive for a history of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse (Keeshin & Campbell, 2011). Another found that almost a third of the young people interviewed experienced sexual abuse while homeless (Tyler & Cauce, 2002).

In Australia, 70% of young homeless women and 20% of young homeless men were found to have been sexually assaulted (Alder, 1991). However, only 20% of these individuals disclosed it to a service provider.

2. Children and young people in OOHC
NSW has 16,884 children in OOHC (Equity Economics, 2021). It is well known that these children and young people are extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse (Royal Commission, 2017; Golding, 2018). Their vulnerability is heightened by their separation from their families, communities and peers, their unstable living arrangements and systematic failures (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

3. Young people in detention and exiting detention
A survey found that 11% of young people in custody experienced sexual abuse (Justice Health & Forensic Mental Health Network and Juvenile Justice NSW, 2017). This is likely an underestimate, as many young people do not disclose or report the abuse they've experienced.

Research also suggests there is a strong link between offending behaviour and experiencing sexual abuse. An Australian study found that child sexual abuse victims were more likely than other children in a control group to participate in criminal behaviours (Papalia et.al, 2018).

These groups are at greater risk of sexual abuse, because they often lack family and community support networks, suitable housing options, and may have complex needs or disabilities that render them vulnerable to exploitation. We recommend engaging with them through peak bodies such as Yfoundations, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and CREATE.

Do you belong to or represent one of these groups and wish to be involved in the design and implementation of individual actions under the National Strategy once it is launched?
Yfoundations is the peak body representing children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, as well as the services that directly support them. As discussed above, this is a highly vulnerable group who may have experienced sexual abuse prior to or after becoming homeless. They should be included in the design and implementation of the National Strategy once it is launched.

Are there best practice mechanisms, existing consultation mechanisms or comprehensive co-design approaches that Australian, state and territory governments should use to consult and partner with these groups/individuals?
It is vitally important to include the voices of young people and those who represent them and advocate for them (e.g., caseworkers and services) to ensure the right issues are dealt with and the right solutions and processes are found. The Youth Homelessness Representative Council (YHRC) is an advisory made up of 18 to 25-year-olds from across New South Wales who have lived experience of homelessness or housing instability. It is an important example of the types of groups that the Australian, state and territory governments should consult and partner with.

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