

Chapter 3: Making Youth Homelessness a Priority

Calling for a Standalone National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Strategy

Trish Connolly, Chief Executive Officer, Yfoundations, Shorna Moore, Head of Policy, Advocacy and Government Relations, Melbourne City Mission, Dr Catherine Robinson, Associate Professor in Housing and Communities, School of Social Sciences UTAS



No child or young person deserves to be homeless. Nevertheless, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census data showed a 26 per cent increase in homelessness over a 10-year period for 12 to 24-year-olds.¹ This number is estimated to increase in the 2021 census data following the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and cost of living pressures. The most recent Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) data indicates that 41,700 young people aged 15 to 24 years presented alone to SHS in 2020-21.²

We are also seeing children as young as 12 years old coming into Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) on their own.

Concerningly, there is no overarching strategy to combat and respond to the ever-increasing issue of children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness *on their own*, not in the custody of a parent or guardian. It is important to clarify that this article is focused on children and young people who come into SHS on their own, without their families. It also focuses on children and young people who are on their own sleeping rough, couch surfing, living in severe overcrowded accommodation, and/or

swapping sex or engagement in criminal activity for shelter.

Governments must commit to the highest standards for our children and young people to give them every opportunity to be safe, free from abuse, trauma and violence, to live their best lives and be given opportunities to thrive and enter adulthood equipped with life skills. If we fail to take the issue of child and youth homelessness seriously and continue to overlook these cohorts, it will have devastating consequences for their futures.

The experiences that escalate children and young people into homelessness, and the harms that children and young people suffer while homeless, cause significant trauma. As a result of this cumulative harm, many children and young people without homes also carry family violence risk, poor mental health, and other significant health or disability needs. The longer they are homeless, the more likely they will experience homelessness over the course of their life.

Identifying children and young people as a priority cohort in the upcoming National Housing and Homelessness Plan is not enough. Ending child and youth homelessness will only be a reality if a clear, targeted and developmentally appropriate

housing and homelessness strategy is initiated. We must stop the 'adultification' of children and young people in our strategies and service responses whereby it is assumed that what works to address adult homelessness also works for children and young people. Moreover, for too long now the actions in previous strategies for children and young people have been piecemeal and fail to respond to their multiple pathways into homelessness as well as the complexity and vulnerability of their experiences, including:

- domestic and family violence
- abuse and neglect
- intergenerational poverty
- lack of access to or disrupted education
- mental health issues
- 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
- exiting out-of-home care or youth justice with insufficient support, and
- youth inequality and discrimination.

The result is that we see too many children and young people couch surfing, living in unsafe overcrowded accommodation, sleeping rough and/or staying in crisis accommodation.

Overwhelmingly, these children and young people end up in an already overstretched 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.

Yfoundations, Melbourne City Mission, Homelessness Australia and a growing coalition of key stakeholders (including researchers, other peak bodies and youth homelessness organisations) are calling on state and federal governments to commit to a standalone child and youth housing and homelessness plan. This plan should foreground what is needed to eradicate child and youth homelessness through meaningful, inclusive and best practice design that will see a future where:

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

The Government must extend beyond this to address the systemic issues that contribute to putting children and young people at risk of or escalating them into homelessness. The current policy and funding environment has been ineffective in reducing unaccompanied child and youth homelessness. Moreover, support systems are fragmented and there are gaps and deficits in service delivery for children and young people.

Currently, there is also a gaping lack of research to help us gain a deeper understanding of child and youth homelessness, particularly around lack



of effective guardianship, cumulative trauma, teen intimate partner violence, couch surfing and severe overcrowding. The Government must invest in research to explore these issues further, considering they are some of the most prevalent and dangerous forms of homelessness for young people. Concerningly, we know anecdotally that couch surfing and severe overcrowding can put children and young people at significant risk of violence, sexual assault, abuse and exploitation.

In our call for a standalone child and youth housing and homelessness strategy, we ask the government to ensure it embeds the following principles and understandings:

- Homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people is different to adult cohorts and their accompanying children.
- Children and young people have distinctive pathways into and experiences of homelessness and therefore require approaches that are distinctive and specialised.
- Children and young people do not have the same coping strategies and resources that are generally attributed to adults and therefore the service system response must be age appropriate to meet their developmental needs.
- Culturally-safe service provision is required to encourage First Nations and Culturally and

Linguistically Diverse children and young people to seek support and access services.

- We need to invest in critical early and effective intervention to prevent children and young people becoming entrenched in homelessness and disadvantage.
- A mechanism should be established that makes mainstream agencies accountable and responsive to the children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness that come into their service system.

• A child- and youth-specific lens should be embedded in all aspects of the strategy's development through meaningful engagement with those who have had a lived experience.

- A double investment should be provided to fund both 'upstream' and 'downstream' responses: prevention and early intervention, crisis responses, long-term responses and multidisciplinary responses.
- An explicit focus and commitment to increasing housing supply and outcomes for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness is required, with an understanding that they require a range of housing options, including crisis accommodation, medium-term accommodation, Youth Foyers and youth social housing.

This government has the perfect opportunity to bring child and youth homelessness — and most importantly, the voices of children and young people — to the fore in committing to a standalone child and youth housing and homelessness strategy. When it does, it will find a groundswell of support in imagining and implementing different futures, without homelessness, for Australia's children and young people.

Endnotes

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, *Census of Population*, Canberra.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2020-21*, Canberra.