



Homelessness and Young People



Young people experiencing homelessness face a hard time finding somewhere safe and secure to live. It is more difficult for them to maintain support, connect with their community and participate in education, training and employment. Academic research has found that young people frequently disengage from education and vocational training quickly after experiencing homelessness. Staying at school/TAFE/Uni is difficult, finding work is difficult, keeping a job is difficult, eating well (if at all) is difficult, mental and physical health suffer. Young people who experience homelessness are at increased risk of experiencing ongoing homelessness as adults. Young people exiting out of home care arrangements and young people who have had repeated contact with the juvenile justice system are at an increased risk of experiencing homelessness. In contrast to people in other age groups, there are more young women who are homeless than young men.

Why do young people experience homelessness?

Family breakdown and domestic and family violence are two of the primary reasons young women seek support from specialist homelessness services. Family breakdown is also one of the primary reasons young men report for seeking support from services. For some young people, parental separation and the arrival of a step-parent can cause conflict that makes home life seem untenable. For young people fleeing physical, sexual and emotional abuse, reconciliation with their families may not be possible. With adequate support and resources reconciliation may be possible for other young people and their families.

In addition, there are a number of structural factors that cause youth homelessness including; poverty, social inequality and youth unemployment. Intergenerational poverty is a reality for many families, and workers in homelessness services are now supporting second and third generations of young people whose families have had contact with the homelessness system. Poverty means missing out and going without. ABS data indicates that more than one in six Australians aged 15-24 is living in poverty. High housing costs in Australia mean that some families struggle to keep a roof over their heads. Intergenerational unemployment is a lived reality for many young people. Labour market marginalization is also a cause of youth homelessness identified in the landmark Burdekin Report in 1989 and again in the National Youth Commission report in 2008. Youth unemployment has remained consistently higher than the average across all age groups over the past thirty years. Young people reliant on inadequate income support payments may find themselves unable to meet the cost of living including rent.

Young people in out of home care are significantly more likely to experience homelessness than other young people. The CREATE foundation *Transitioning from Care* report cards have found that as many as forty percent of young people who are discharged from out of home care will experience homelessness within twelve months of exiting. Many young people exit care with no accommodation plan in place and with inadequate resources to access and maintain housing and meet other costs of living. Others are exited into accommodation that is tenuous and breaks down.

The link between mental 'illness' and the experience of homelessness is well established. According to the Mental Health Council of Australia, as many as 75% of people who meet the criteria for mental illness, first exhibit symptoms prior to the age of 25. Young people who are experiencing homelessness are significantly more likely to experience anxiety and depression than those who are stably housed. The longer a person experiences homelessness, the more likely it is that they will develop severe and persistent states of mental 'illness'. While prevention is better than cure, early intervention services that work to ensure that young people are re-housed and supported to maintain engagement with education and training and their families and communities are essential.

Services for young people who are experiencing homelessness in Australia

There are a wide range of services in Australia for young people who are experiencing homelessness. Centrelink is the key agency that provides income support to Australians with limited means. Youth Allowance is the most common form of income support payment received by young people accessing homelessness services. There are over 500 specialist homelessness services for young people across Australia as well as the Reconnect program, community housing and on-site accommodation and support services such as the FOYER models. In addition there are a range of services for "at risk" young people as well as early-intervention services funded by states and territories. Young people experiencing homelessness must also be supported to access Job Services Australia, TAFE, University and Vocational Training as these can lead to pathways out of homelessness. Equally important is the need for young people to have access to civic participation opportunities, community groups, music/performing arts and sporting clubs.

Homelessness services in Australia cannot meet the demand for accommodation. The majority of people turned away from specialist homelessness services every day are under 20. Services for young people experiencing homelessness funded under the National Partnership Agreement are also full. Young people also have difficulty securing long-term accommodation and are particularly affected by poverty and the shortage of affordable housing in Australia. The level of Youth Allowance payments makes it difficult for independent young people to meet the basic costs of living. People on youth allowance receive approximately twenty percent less than those on Newstart Allowance and more than 40 percent less than those on the aged pension. This makes accessing private rental difficult especially in a tight rental market characterised by low vacancy rates, strong demand and high median weekly rental prices. Young people with no rent references or an unstable housing history are disadvantaged in this environment. Young people face a long wait for social housing and often experience discrimination in the private rental market.



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Young people under 16

State and Territory governments are responsible for the care and protection of children and young people if their parent or guardian can't care for them for any reason. Family breakdown and the breakdown of foster care and out-of-home care arrangements means there are some young people under 16 in the homelessness delivery service system. Some States and Territories have developed service responses for young people aged 12-15 who are experiencing homelessness that are funded under the National Partnership Agreement.

What needs to happen?

- Young people experiencing homelessness have the same needs, hopes and aspirations as other young people. They also need access to affordable, safe and secure housing that is located close, to community centres, education, employment and training opportunities.
- Australia needs a housing strategy for young people. A generation faces the prospect of being locked out of home ownership. This is not acceptable.
- Australia needs to improve our efforts to seriously address poverty, social inequality and intergenerational unemployment. Some young people are now being born into the 4th generation of poverty and unemployment. The cycle must be broken.
- Assist with transition and exit plans to support the bridge between assisted and non-assisted accommodation from out of home care. Too many young people leave out of home care without an exit plan or are exited into tenuous accommodation that quickly breaks down.
- The Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) program must be included as a budget item with ongoing funding as needed so it doesn't run out part way through the year.
- Increase funding for services with a focus on early intervention and prevention such as the Reconnect Program which has been proven to successfully reconnect young people with community and family. Program funding must be doubled over the next four years.
- Increase funding for specialist youth homelessness services and FOYER models. Youth homelessness services are forced to turn away more than 1 in 2 young people on any given night due to inadequate resourcing. A 40% increase in funding is needed to meet demand for every person, every night.
- State and Territory welfare authorities must be sufficiently resourced to meet the needs of young people under 16 in state care and protection to ensure these young people do not become homeless. Too many young people end up in the homelessness service system after being in state care. They must be supported and resourced to acquire and keep independent housing.
- Implement the recommendations of the 2008 Report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness.

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