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DEVELOPING THE NATIONAL
HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS
PLAN

ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper (“the Paper”). Orygen’s submission will address how the new plan can improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness.

ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world’s leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (including five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce, and provides policy advice relating to young people’s mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

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HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

There is a bi-directional relationship between homelessness and mental ill-health.(1, 2) Systematic studies of the risk factors for homelessness have consistently shown that mental ill-health is a significant contributor.(1, 3, 4) Equally, experiences of homelessness can contribute to the onset or exacerbation of mental health challenges and psychological distress.(1)

Many of the social-economic conditions that act as risk factors for mental ill-health also increase a person’s risk of homelessness. As illustrated in the Paper, these intersecting and compounding contributing factors can be both structural and systemic.(5) Primary risk factors for youth homelessness differ somewhat from adults, and include: family issues; mental ill-health; behavioural or substance-use problems; past trauma; education challenges; and a history of housing instability, including previous episodes of homelessness and running away from home.(3) Equally, the experience of homelessness also increases a person’s vulnerability to other mental health risks such as trauma, alcohol and other drug use, and unemployment.(1)

Orygen released a [policy report](#) examining the relationship between youth homelessness and mental health in 2020.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND HOMELESSNESS

- 70,754 specialist homelessness services (SHS) clients in 2021–2022 were aged 10–24 years (26%).(2)
- 37 per cent of young people (10–24 years) receiving SHS support also had a current mental health issue.(2)
- Young people aged 19–24 years have the highest rate of homelessness in Australia (91 people per 10,000), nearly double the national average.(6)

The statistics above are evidence of the overrepresentation of young people among those who experience homelessness. It is important to note that the accuracy of homelessness estimates made by both the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and SHS is limited by current data collection methods. It is also likely to underestimate the extent of youth homelessness because it is more likely to be invisible or hidden.(7) This is because the forms of homelessness young people tend to experience are severe overcrowding or couch-surfing which are not always captured accurately in official tallies.(8) Orygen supports the Australian Department of Social Services' focus on youth homelessness as a key priority for the National Housing and Homeless Plan. This approach also aligns with Australia's commitment to the United Nations' (UN) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and *Sustainable Development Goals*.(9, 10)

Orygen and Melbourne City Mission are currently undertaking a policy research project to understand what a fit-for-purpose youth mental health and wellbeing response could be for unaccompanied young people experiencing homelessness. This project will seek to understand the gaps and structural barriers in policy, services, and practice to develop a way forward with evidence-based recommendations.

INVESTING IN YOUNG PEOPLE TO SECURE AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE

Orygen endorses the Paper's recognition of the particular value of investing in prevention and early-intervention initiatives for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.(5) Previous episodes of homelessness increase a young person's risk of experiencing repeated or chronic homelessness later in life – particularly for those with mental ill-health, substance use issues, and those who have difficulty accessing services.(3)

The *Cost of Youth Homelessness* in Australia report estimated youth homelessness costs Australia \$626 million per in health and justice services alone.(8) It is worth noting the data for this report was collected between 2012 and 2015 and the amount is likely to be significantly higher now. In addition to the costs resulting from the impacts of homelessness, people experiencing homelessness are far more likely to disengage from education or employment.(3) Therefore, initiatives aimed at this cohort have the potential to reduce the individual economic and societal costs of chronic housing instability.(8)

Orygen welcomes the Paper's confirmation of the Australian Government's commitment to continuing to deliver the Reconnect Program to provide community-based prevention and early intervention for young people. Reconnect is well-established across Australia and, although its effectiveness is difficult to measure, it has been found to have had positive outcomes for the young people engaged in its services.(11)

At present, Reconnect is targeted at any young person experiencing or at risk of homelessness aged between 12 and 18 years, and at newly-arrived young people (for example, asylum seekers) between 12 and 21 years. There is some scope (up to 10 per cent of a provider's caseload) for service providers to include participants outside their target group. It is notable that the rate of homelessness increases from 53 people per 10,000 for young people aged 12–18 years to 91 people per 10,000 for those aged 18–24 years.(6) This is a substantial jump and is representative of a stage of life in which many young people transition from the safety nets provided by public and social structures – such as

the education system and family home. Some young people find these transitions challenging and there is a resulting negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing.(12) The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute suggests the case could be made that it may also reflect the effectiveness of Reconnect for the younger age bracket.(11) Alongside the established evidence base demonstrating some young people experience significant hardship when navigating life transitions, Orygen believes there is a strong argument for expanding the Reconnect Program to include support for young people aged up to 25 years.(12)

While individual Reconnect providers have undertaken more recent evaluations of their individual services, a program-wide departmental review has not been carried out for ten years.(13) The development of a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy provides an opportunity to reevaluate Reconnect to ensure it continues to deliver the best possible early intervention and prevention outcomes for young people (up to 25 years of age) experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and their families. In particular, Orygen considers Reconnect's current guidelines for brokerage costs, which indicate providers should reserve five percent of their annual funding for required external services – including mental health support – insufficient to manage the mental health and wellbeing needs of clients.(14) Many young people participating in both standard and specialist Reconnect programs would benefit from the permanent integration of mental health care into their continuum of support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Review and extend the Reconnect Program

The development of the National Housing and Homelessness Strategy should include a review of the Reconnect Program, including analysis of the benefit of extending the program up to 25 years of age. The review should include:

- If the expansion of Reconnect's target age group to include any young person experiencing or at risk of homelessness between the ages of 12–25 years would help address the significantly higher rates of housing instability occurring in early adulthood.
- If Standard and Specialist Reconnect Program providers should be allocated dedicated funding in addition to their annual budget to establish integrated mental health services in their permanent suite of support options, noting the high level of need for mental health care among clients.

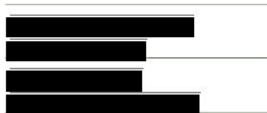
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Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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