

October 2023

Joint Submission to The National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper

PREPARED BY

The National Coalition to end Child and Youth Homelessness



Submission Partners

The following are brief overviews of the partners to this submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper. We, along with other individuals and organisations, are committed to the need for a national plan to address child and youth homelessness. We are available to provide further evidence for the need for such a plan and how it will achieve significantly greater outcomes for children and young people experiencing homelessness.





Youth Development Australia LTD

Youth Development Australia Ltd (YDA) is public benevolent institution created in 2005 by a group of leading thinkers and practitioners in the youth field as a platform for change for young people especially those most disadvantaged by family or community circumstances. YDA was formed as a way of exploring, developing, and implementing innovative youth development initiatives. YDA has a foundational commitment to disadvantaged young Australians by (a) creating and trialling innovative and pioneering projects for young people; (b) informing policy debate through think-tanks, conferences, and National Youth Commission Inquiries on youth issues of national significance; and (c) by providing opportunities for young people to develop creative ideas and achieve their full potential.

[Redacted]



Brisbane Youth Services

As a leading youth service in Queensland, Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) works with homeless and vulnerable young people (aged 12 to 25 years) and young families in Brisbane and surrounding areas providing housing, physical and mental health services and specialist programs for young women and young families, to assist them to overcome challenges of their crisis and achieve the goals of a sustainable independent life. Brisbane Youth Service is committed to pioneering early intervention in South-East Queensland.

[Redacted]



Yfoundations

Yfoundations is the NSW peak organisation representing young people at-risk, and experiencing homelessness, as well as the services that provide direct support to vulnerable young people. Yfoundations is committed to creating a future without youth homelessness by providing a voice for young people experiencing and at-risk of homelessness. To achieve this Yfoundations works collaboratively with service providers, NGOs, government departments and community members to provide research, sector development and policy advice, health projects and services for young people. Yfoundations activities are built on five pillars: Safety & Stability, Home & Place, Health & Wellness, Connections & Participation, and Education & Employment.

[Redacted]



The Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition is the peak youth affairs body in the ACT, responsible for representing and promoting the rights, interests and wellbeing of the estimated 78,000 young Canberra residents aged 12–25 years and those who work with them. The general activities of the Youth Coalition fall under four key themes: policy; sector development; advocacy and representation; and, projects that respond to ongoing and current issues. A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions that affect young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT. The Youth Coalition has been actively working with Capital Region Community Services to plan the development of a place-based COSS Model approach to early intervention in possibly two locations in Canberra.

[Redacted]



My Foundations Youth Housing

My Foundations Youth Housing Company is an Australian and world-first specialist youth community housing provider. The organisation exists to provide an increasing supply of affordable and social housing for young people in need and in a way that attends to the developmental needs and issues as well as aspirations. MFYH was established in 2014 and is registered and regulated by the NSW Registrar of Community Housing and is a charity registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) and thus receives GST concessions and income tax, duty and FBT exemptions. Over the first five years, MFYH has gone from three staff, an operating revenue of \$300,000, 74 properties and 100 tenants, to 15 staff, an operating revenue of \$4.8 million, 300 properties under management and 450 young tenants accommodated with a range of supports available for those young people who want and need such assistance.



Kids Under Cover (KUC)

Kids Under Cover is a charitable NGO organisation dedicated to preventing youth homelessness that was founded in 1989 by Ken Morgan OAM, a well-known Melbourne businessman who felt strongly about responding to the findings of the HREOC Inquiry into Youth Homelessness (the 'Burdekin Report'). KUC supports vulnerable young people between the ages of 12 and 25 years who are either already homeless or at risk of homelessness by delivering a unique combination of studio accommodation and educational scholarships as a practical and proven early intervention strategy for preventing homelessness. The agency has developed an innovative social enterprise for reclaiming old automobiles that operates around Australia that provides additional financial support for KUC operations. Early intervention and prevention are arguably the most cost effective way of addressing youth homelessness, and KUC contributes an important element of effective early intervention.



Salvation Army

The Salvation Army is an international Christian church and social services provider and is one of the largest providers of Specialist Homelessness Services in Australia. TSA provides a wide range of services across the country including family violence, youth services, alcohol and other drugs, homelessness, emergency relief and financial counselling.

Over the past 140 years, TSA has empowered young people and their families to address the various barriers that create economic disadvantage, marginalisation and lead to social isolation and discrimination. TSA provides specialist services to young people aged 12–25 including housing and homelessness, alcohol and other drug programs, youth justice, education, training and employment and leaving care services.



The Foyer Foundation

The Foyer Foundation was established in 2008. Our purpose is to unlock thriving futures for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness by growing the reach and impact of Youth Foyers. We do not do this alone. We catalyse momentum towards our common goal of 50 Foyers by 2030 by bringing together young people, organisations, and investors in communities across Australia. We connect and align activities, gather evidence and insights, ensure quality services, and advocate with young people and our growing network. We understand that to unlock thriving futures, we must work together.



Anglicare NT

Anglicare NT is a community service organisation that supports people, strengthens communities and advocates for social justice. We deliver flexible support, practical assistance, and community building activities across urban, regional, and remote communities in the Northern Territory. We put people and communities first respecting needs, abilities, priorities, and aspirations. Our services for young people include early intervention, accommodation, childbirth education, support, after-care assistance, youth diversion, emergency relief and after-school activities. Anglicare NT have a long history in providing early intervention support to young people and their families to prevent homelessness, along with youth homelessness and accommodation support to young people 15 – 25 years. Youth homelessness advocacy is a key priority for the organisation, with a couch surfing advocacy campaign run each year to coincide with Youth Homelessness Matters Day.

[Redacted]



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Melbourne City Mission

Melbourne City Mission (MCM) is a community service organisation with a purpose to contribute to fair and just communities where people have equitable access to opportunities and resources. MCM provides a range of homelessness supports to children and young people, adults, and families with more than 80 programs which span multiple service systems. MCM's Frontyard Youth Services operates the only State-wide specialist access point for young people aged 16–24 seeking specialist homelessness services support that includes an 18-bed accommodation program for complex young people experiencing recurring homelessness and operates alongside 8 other youth accommodation services supporting over 700 young people each year across Victoria. MCM early intervention programs both state and regionally support over 594 young people each year to remain housed and connected to family, school, and community. MCM Housing is a newly formed registered housing provider with a vision to bring secure housing to young people as a foundation by which they are able to develop the skills they need to build an aspirational life.



HACSU

HACSU is the *only* specialist union for workers in mental health, disability, and drug and alcohol services across Victoria and fights for better wages and conditions, secure work, and safe and inclusive workplaces.

HACSU know the only way to deliver quality services is by ensuring workers are treated fairly and paid appropriately. Alongside campaigning for industrial outcomes, they work to win improved funding, resourcing, and services for Victoria's disability, alcohol and other drugs, and mental health sectors.

Executive Summary

The coalition of organisations responsible for this submission is committed to the goal of ending child and youth homelessness in Australia. To achieve this goal, a standalone national plan to address child and youth homelessness is needed.

A plan focused specifically on children and young people is essential because the causes and experiences of homelessness for them are different than for adults, and the solutions are different.


Neglect, family dysfunction and breakdown, lack of effective care and guardianship by family or out-of-home care systems, homophobia, and transphobia are common causes of child and youth homelessness.

Children and young people do not have the same level of development, coping strategies, or resources as adults...

Children and young people do not have the same level of development, coping strategies, or resources as adults, which can make them more vulnerable and their experiences more dangerous. Children and young people need different services and support than adults experiencing homelessness. Unaccompanied children require appropriately staffed accommodation offering holistic care and family reunification services. Young people require a suite of housing options, in particular medium-term housing with support, links to health, education, training and employment.

The housing needs of young people are different from older people. Social housing is predicated on long-term needs. While this might be true for some young people, medium-term housing with support, and links to health, education, training and employment is better suited to the needs of many young people. A mix of both is needed.





A national plan to address child and youth homelessness should include:



Prevention strategies that address the pathways into homelessness.



Early intervention strategies focussed on children and young people at risk of homelessness or very early once homelessness occurs.



Effective crisis intervention that returns the child or young person to their family where possible and desirable or exits the young person from homelessness into secure, supported housing, including out-of-home care.



Increased housing options with support suitable for young people to prevent a return to homelessness.

The National Coalition to end Child and Youth Homelessness offers to work with the Australian Government to develop a dedicated plan to address child and youth homelessness in Australia.

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1. Introduction

This submission has been jointly prepared by a coalition of organisations who share a collective commitment in urging the Australian Government to lead the creation of a comprehensive national strategy aimed at tackling child and youth homelessness. For over 15 years, children and young people have been disproportionately represented in the homeless population – combined making up nearly 40 per cent on Census night 2021. The alarming fact that 3,200 unaccompanied 10–14-year-old children sought help from homelessness services in 2021–22 highlights the urgent need for change.

Addressing child and youth homelessness must be one of the key aims of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. For it not to be included would be a critical omission. The number of children and young people facing homelessness every night is deeply disconcerting. It is widely acknowledged that investing in strategic interventions to support children and young people at risk of homelessness can be instrumental in preventing the development

For over 15 years, children and young people have been disproportionately represented in the homeless population...

of a prolonged cycle of homelessness, through adolescence and into adulthood.

Our offer is to work with the Australian Government on developing a dedicated plan to address child and youth homelessness.

Much of the responsibility for the implementation of such a national plan we propose rests with the state and territory governments, but the Australian Government has a critical role to play in providing national leadership and holding state and territory governments accountable for the execution of a plan to address child and youth homelessness.



2.

The policy context

The problem of children and young people experiencing homelessness in significant numbers was first identified in Australia in the late 1970s. Since that time, a series of inquiries and reports have identified an ongoing problem.

Key reports include:

- the *Report on Youth Homelessness* by the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare in 1982.
- *Our Homeless Children* by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1989.
- *Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs in 1995.
- *Australia's Homeless Youth* by the National Youth Commission Australia in 2008.
- the *Final Report of the Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs in 2021.
- In need of repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Study Report by the Productivity Commission in 2021.

Key government responses have included:

- The pilot Youth Services Scheme (1979–1982) – the Scheme established youth refuges and other youth services throughout Australia.
- The Supported Accommodation & Assistance Program (1985–2009) – the mainstream response to homelessness, including youth homelessness.
- The Reconnect Program (1997–ongoing) – an early intervention for homeless young people.
- *The Road Home (2008)* – an Australian Government white paper that proposed a strategic framework linked to the long-term objective of halving homelessness by 2020.
- The National Affordable Housing Agreement and The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.



Despite the NHHA and associated funding, the number of people experiencing homelessness continues to rise in Australia.

Despite these numerous reports and government programs, a review of what has been done in response to child and youth homelessness comes up well short of what is needed to prevent, intervene early and respond to reduce and ultimately end child and youth homelessness.¹

The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) is currently the Australian Government's main vehicle to address housing affordability and homelessness issues. It is an agreement between the Australian Government and the state and territory governments to administer funding to improve access to secure and affordable housing and for homelessness services. Despite the NHHA and associated funding, the number of people experiencing homelessness continues to rise in Australia. While the Agreement includes children and young people as a priority cohort, this has not translated into comprehensive plans or actions by the state and territory governments to address child and youth homelessness. Further, unaccompanied homeless children are not identified separately as a priority cohort.

The existing state and territory housing and homelessness plans have limited responses for children and young people who are at risk of or experience homelessness and neglect the pathways into and experiences of children and young people. Other than out-of-home care exits, minimal early intervention approaches, and very limited supported youth housing places, the state and territory governments' policies and plans are geared mostly towards adults, which fails to respond adequately and appropriately to children and young people at risk of experiencing homelessness.

The lack of policy focus and comprehensive plans in the face of growing homelessness among children and young people shows Australia has not taken child and youth homelessness seriously. This Government has an opportunity to provide a clear direction to ensure this does not continue. A standalone National Housing and Homelessness Plan for children and young people should be the mechanism to achieve this outcome.

¹ Toumbourou, J & Heerde, J. (2022). *Evidence on programs to address youth homelessness: an Evidence Check rapid review*. Brokered by the Sax Institute for the New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice, NSW.

3.

The case for a standalone national child and youth homelessness and housing plan

The rationale for a dedicated, standalone focus on child and youth homelessness are:

- the negative, often lifelong and costly, impacts on health, wellbeing, educational and employment opportunity of young people facing homelessness. There are associated high degree of crossover into high-cost systems such as out of home care, Justice, mental health.
- the high likelihood that if young people become homeless, they are more likely to become entrenched in long-term homelessness and the lifelong negative impacts on them, their families, the community and taxpayers. Comprehensively addressing child and youth homelessness will turn off the tap to at least half of entrenched adult homelessness. This will save lives, reduce demand on homelessness services, and substantially reduce costs in crisis systems such as health and justice.

The factors that contribute to child and youth homelessness are broad and different to those that contribute to adult homelessness. Some of these include neglect, family dysfunction and breakdown, lack of effective care and guardianship by family or out-of-home care systems, homophobia, and transphobia.

Factors such as family violence, sexual violence, abuse, racism, and poverty are also key factors for adults, but children and young people do not have the same level of development, coping strategies, or resources (whether that is financial, support networks or life experience) as adults which can make them more vulnerable and their experiences more dangerous.

Unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness confront a unique set of obstacles and hurdles in their efforts to secure stable housing, support, engage in education, meet their daily needs, and ensure their safety, primarily due to their age and stage of development.

The most dominant forms of homelessness that children and young people experience differ from adults – couch surfing, severe overcrowding, living in crisis accommodation, and often refuge hopping every three months because there is nowhere else to go. It is also the case, however, that both unaccompanied children and young people also routinely sleep rough during experiences of homelessness.



Refuge hopping

Some youth homelessness services report that their clients 'refuge hop' for years because there are no exit options and the service model limits the length of stay. Other youth homelessness services have models based on the duration of need of the young person. Under either model, young people get stuck in the system because there are limited accommodation options to exit these young people where they can be guaranteed stability and support for a few years. Many of these young people are independent and do not need to be in crisis accommodation, they just need somewhere to live with access to support if required.



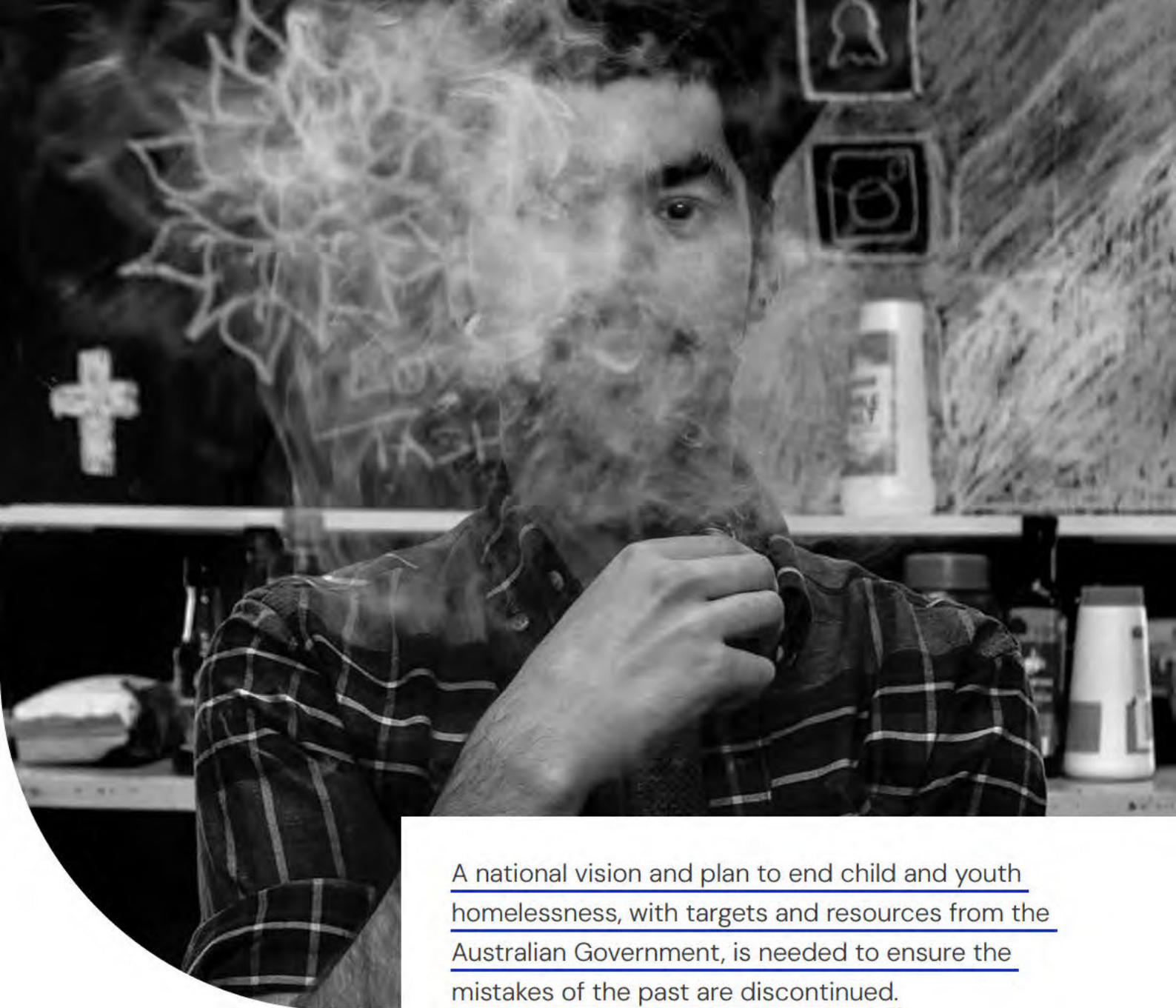
Couch surfing

Couch surfing, a common form of homelessness experienced by children and young people, is unsafe and can expose them to extreme forms of violence, sexual abuse, exploitation, criminality, servitude and higher levels of psychological distress. The extent and prevalence of children and young people who are couch surfing is not well understood, particularly with the Australian Bureau of Statistics conceding that capturing this form of homelessness in the Census is difficult because it is often masked or misreported.



Severe overcrowding

Severe overcrowding, a prevalent form of homelessness that children and young people experience, puts them at high risk of negative impacts on their physical and mental health, developmental and educational outcomes. It can also increase the likelihood of family conflict and tenancy dissolution, both drivers of youth homelessness.



A national vision and plan to end child and youth homelessness, with targets and resources from the Australian Government, is needed to ensure the mistakes of the past are discontinued.

Many of the current approaches for children and young people focus on those whose homelessness experience includes periods in specialist homelessness services, boarding housing, and/or sleeping out. Different approaches are needed to address the most prevalent forms of homelessness for children and young people, including couch surfing and severe overcrowding.

In addition, children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence on their own – not those accompanying their mothers or caregivers – are mostly absent in the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children. The vision of the Australian Government set out in this 10-year National Plan is to end gender-based violence in one generation. However, this vision is misguided

because it neglects children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence on their own. Children and young people are being left to fend for themselves or put themselves in even more vulnerable situations to escape the violence in their family homes or in their own personal, intimate partner relationships.

A standalone child and youth homelessness and housing plan will end the 'adultification' of responses for children and young people, whereby it is assumed that what works for adults will work for children and young people. A national vision and plan to end child and youth homelessness, with targets and resources from the Australian Government, is needed to ensure the mistakes of the past are discontinued.

4.

Understanding child and youth homelessness

The experiences of homelessness among children and young people differ greatly from the homelessness experiences of people aged over 25 years.

Children and young people experiencing homelessness have different needs from their older counterparts and require a service system responsive to those needs. This section aims to provide a better understanding of child and youth homelessness. It summarises the key data available, provides an understanding of the causes of homelessness and considers the diversity of children and young people who experience homelessness.

4.1

Defining child and youth homelessness

This submission covers the experience of children and young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Nationally, at a policy level, a child is defined as any person under 18 years old, while a young person is defined as any person 18 to 24 years old. At a state and territory government level, the definitions differ between jurisdictions. For example, in NSW, a definition of 16 years and under defines children, with young people defined as between the ages of 16 to 24 years old. As this is a national consultation process, the national definitions are used in this submission.

CHILD
<18 years old

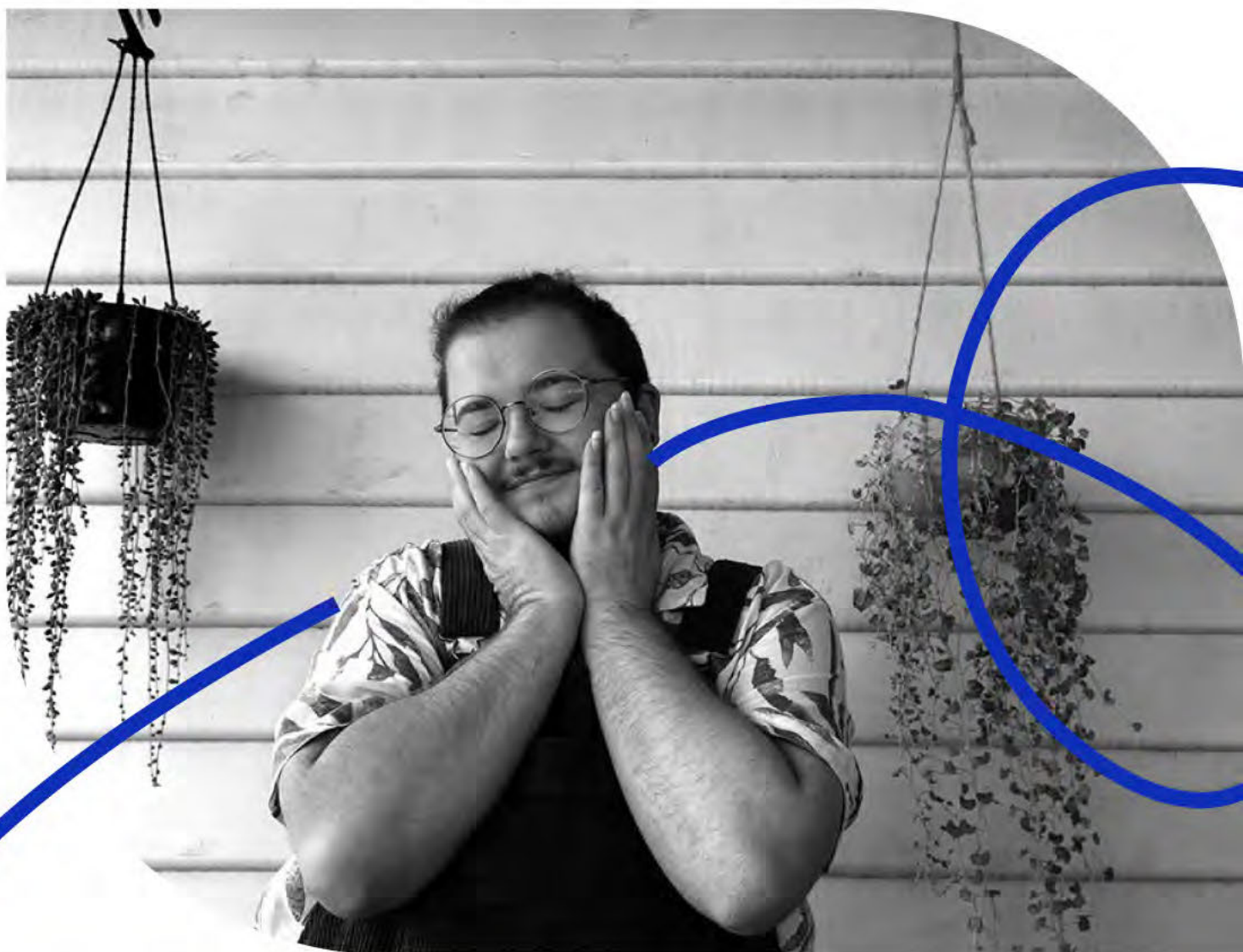
YOUNG PERSON
18–24 years old

This submission covers children and young people. The housing and homelessness systems need to provide different responses across the age ranges as those under 18 need care, guidance, and support like any child, with children aged 10 to 15 years old potentially needing a different solution to a 16 or 17-year-old. Whereas 18 to 24-year-olds mostly need support to transition into adulthood.

It should be noted that the number of unaccompanied children seeking assistance at specialist homelessness services is increasing. Their experience of homelessness is without the support of, and separate from, a parent or guardian, including where the guardian is the state government or Minister. Specific responses are needed for unaccompanied children, and this submission has a particular but not exclusive focus on these children.

Further, this submission affirms the current definition of homelessness used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and others. Specifically, the definition that includes people living in extremely overcrowded dwellings should be used because of the high numbers of children and young people experience homelessness this way with likely ongoing effects on their wellbeing.

The housing and homelessness systems need to provide different responses across the age ranges as those under 18 need care, guidance, and support like any child...



4.2

What the data tells us about child and youth homelessness

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that there were 122,494 people experiencing homelessness on census night in 2021 (up from 116,427 in 2016 or a 5.2 per cent increase). Of these, 45,850 were children and young people (i.e. aged 0 to 24).²

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), *Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>

ESTIMATED

45,850

children and young people experiencing homelessness on census night in 2021

Number of children and young people experiencing homelessness by census

YEAR	NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
2006	37,661
2011	42,964
2016	43,552
2021	45,850

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), *Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021*, ABS, Canberra

The number of children and young people experiencing homelessness has been increasing, albeit at a slower rate than overall homelessness.

Number and rate of children and young people experiencing homelessness by age group, 2021.

AGE GROUP	NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS	RATE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS (PER 10,000)
Under 12	17,646	48
12–18	11,302	53
19–24	16,902	91

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), *Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021*, ABS, Canberra

The largest group of children and young people experiencing homelessness on census night were aged under 12 years. The 19 to 24-year-old age group experienced the highest rate of homelessness among all age groups.³

* *ibid.*

Number and rate of children and young people experiencing homelessness by state and territory, 2021.

	NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS	RATE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS (PER 10,000)
NSW	11,912	49.1
VIC	11,763	60.5
QLD	8,291	51.7
WA	3,073	37.8
SA	3,251	63.6
TAS	911	59.3
ACT	662	46.1
NT	5,999	760.6

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), *Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021*, ABS, Canberra

The Northern Territory stands out as having a much higher rate of homelessness among children and young people.

First Nations children and young people experiencing homelessness.

Of the children and young people experiencing homelessness on census night in 2021, 16,538 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.⁴ This represents 36.1 per cent of all children and young people experiencing homelessness on census night.

³ *ibid.*



of all children and young people experiencing homelessness on census night identified as

**Aboriginal and/or
Torres Strait Islander**

Children and young people experiencing homelessness by homeless operational group.

HOMELESS OPERATIONAL GROUP	NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS
Living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out	808
In supported accommodation for the homeless	12,165
Staying temporarily with other households	4,271
Living in boarding houses	3,769
In other temporary lodgings	945
Living in severely crowded dwellings	23,901

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), *Estimating Homelessness: Census 2021*, ABS, Canberra

Living in severely crowded dwellings is the most common type of homelessness among children and young people.

Children and young people presenting alone at homelessness services 2021–22

AGE (YEARS)	NUMBER OF CLIENTS PRESENTING ALONE AT HOMELESSNESS SERVICES	PROPORTION OF ALL CLIENTS PRESENTING AT HOMELESSNESS SERVICES (%)
10–14	3,199	1.2
15–17	9,613	3.5
18–24	29,687	10.9
Total	42,499	15.6

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22*, AIHW

Children and young people presenting alone to homelessness services represent a significant proportion of people presenting to homelessness services. However, few services can appropriately meet their needs, especially those aged under 18 years.



4.3

Diversity among children and young people

Children and young people's needs and experiences are shaped by:

- where they live with substantial differences between urban, suburban, regional, rural, and remote locations
- cultural background, e.g. First Nations young people, young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- immigration status, e.g. asylum seekers, refugees, and recent immigrants
- socio-economic factors such as income level, occupation, and educational attainment of themselves and their family
- disability status
- sexuality and gender

These factors also interact and combine in ways that further shape young people's experiences. Housing and homelessness experiences are no exception. Any national plan to address housing and homelessness among children and young people needs to ensure that diverse needs and experiences can be accommodated.

First Nations young people are particularly overrepresented in the homelessness data. A national plan that addresses child and youth homelessness needs to acknowledge this fact and accept that the development of solutions is best driven by First Nations people.



4.4

Understanding the causes of child and youth homelessness

Child and youth homelessness has multiple and intersecting causes that can be categorised into⁵:



individual and interpersonal causes



structural causes



intersectional systemic failures

Individual and interpersonal factors include family conflict and family violence. Young people often cite family conflict when presenting to homeless services.⁶ Family conflict includes incidents of violence and abuse related to alcohol and drug use or mental illness. Young people who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community are over-represented in the homelessness data.⁷ For these young people, family conflicts often relate to their sexuality or gender.

Structural factors are economic and social issues that affect and constrain the circumstances in which people live. Structural factors that contribute to homelessness include poverty, unemployment, and housing costs. For example, people living in poverty or on low incomes are unable to afford rent in the private housing market and, unless they get into social housing, will be homeless.

Intersectional systemic failure occurs when service systems fail to work cohesively together to prevent homelessness, such as when young people transition from out-of-home care, hospitals, or the justice system into homelessness.

⁵ For example, see <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/causes-homelessness>

⁶ Fildes, J. Perrens, & B. Plummer, J (2018) *Young People's experiences of homelessness: findings from the youth survey 2017*, Mission Australia.

⁷ Dempsey, D., Parkinson, S., Andrews, C., & McNair, R. (2020). 'Family relationships and LGB first homelessness in Australia: What do we know and where should we go?' *Journal of Sociology*, 56(4), 516–534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783320927087>.

4.5

Understanding the barriers to young people exiting homelessness

Where it is possible and safe to do so, families should be supported to care for their child or young person back in the home. However, some children and young people will not be able to return home. Some of the younger cohort (under 16 years) should fall under the child protection system but are not a priority for that already overstretched system. New systems and services need to be in place for children who fall between the child protection system and homelessness services.

For the older cohort (aged 16 to 24) youth-specific housing is needed. The amount of youth-specific housing is nowhere near enough to cater for the number of children and young people who become homeless. Neither the private market nor the social housing sectors adequately cater for their needs.

Young people have the lowest and least secure incomes of any cohort. Even when fully employed, casualised work and youth wages create significant barriers to young people competing in the private market. Meanwhile, the social housing sector largely excludes young people, with only 2.5 per cent⁸ of all social housing tenancies going to young people because young people are seen as riskier tenants and their incomes are too low to cover the costs of the housing provider.

Youth homelessness cannot be solved without housing. However, youth homelessness cannot be solved with housing alone...

Youth homelessness cannot be solved without housing. However, youth homelessness cannot be solved with housing alone, as young people require specialised youth support services if they are to exit homelessness and have an opportunity to reach their full potential.

When children and young people cannot be at home, they need somewhere safe and supportive to live, a reliable home that enables them to feel safe, develop and mature, continue their studies, engage with their community, build relationships and work toward their goals.

While the Australian Government's investment in the Housing Australia Future Fund is welcome, it is likely to have zero impact on youth homelessness numbers. Most homeless young people are not on social housing waitlists, and those who are on the list are not considered a priority cohort. More youth-specific housing is needed to exit young people from homelessness.

⁸ Mackenzie, D & Hand, T, (2020) *Young People and Housing Supports in Australia: Income Support, Social Housing and Post-Homelessness Housing Outcomes*, University of South Australia, https://aad.unisa.edu.au/contentassets/c7cd69c367ef4d81a0107477a6dac704/handmackenzie_2020_young-people-and-housing-support-in-australia_final.pdf.

4.6

Unaccompanied children

In 2021–22, there were 12,812 children aged from 10 to 17 years presenting to specialist homelessness services alone.⁹ These children are a particularly vulnerable group that is not well supported by government-funded services, often falling between the homelessness services system and the child protection system.

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22*, AIHW

2021–22

12,812

children aged from 10 to 17 years
presenting to specialist homelessness services alone.

Given their age, many of these children:

- will not have an income source – eligibility for Youth Allowance commences at 16, and children under 16 have limited capacity to work due to (correct) legal limitations placed on child labour and their limited skills and knowledge.
- will struggle with their health, particularly mental health – many have also experienced family violence, neglect, or abuse. The compounding impacts of these factors mean that this group of children experience psychological distress and mental illness at higher rates than others in their age group.¹⁰ Mental health services for these children are woefully inadequate.¹¹
- are likely to leave school before completing year 12¹²– schools remain a place of safety for these children, but schools are not always well-equipped to identify and support homeless children.

¹⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022), *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011–12 to 2021–22*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/data-cubes>.

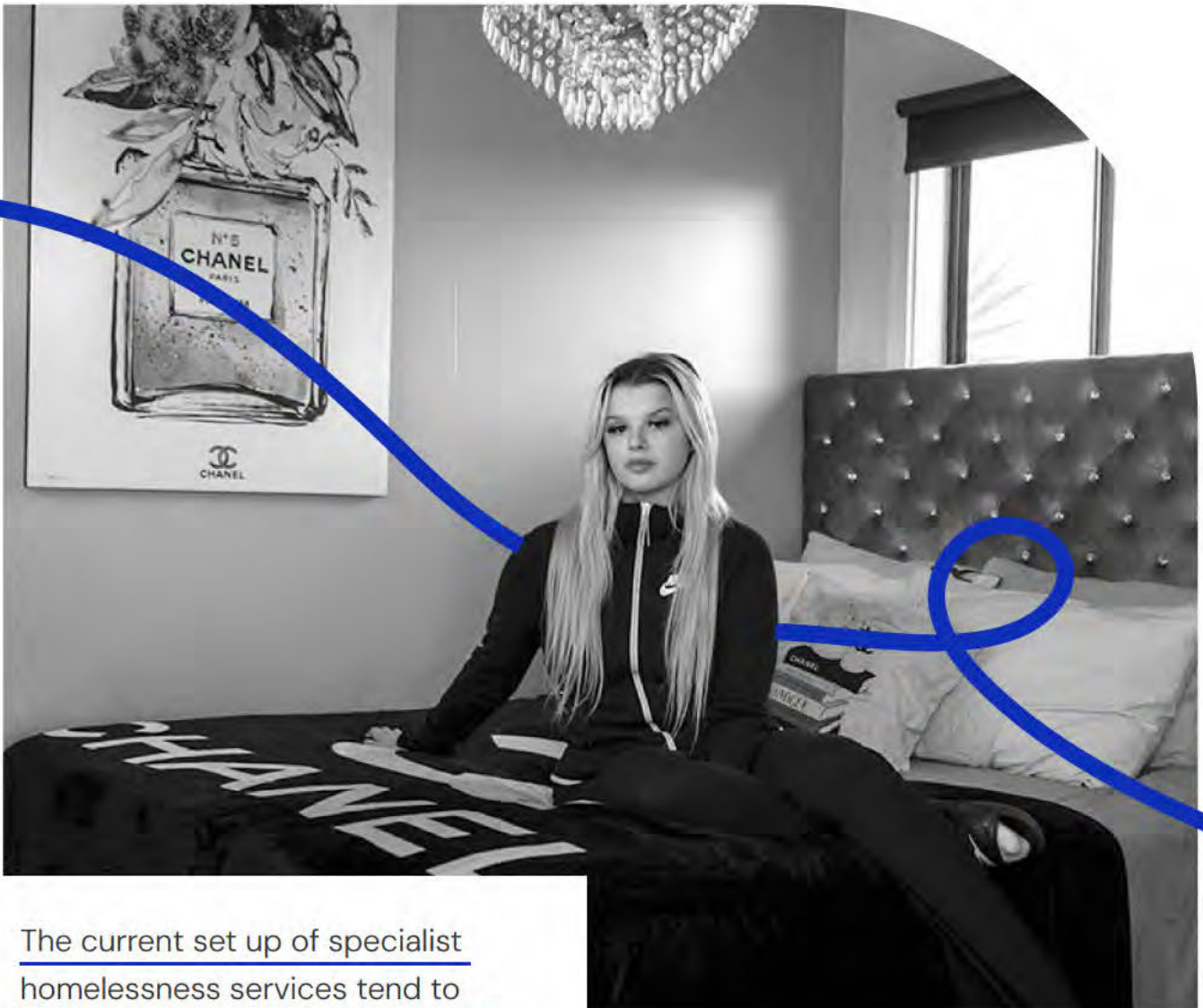
¹¹ Robinson C. (2022) *Better, Bigger, Stronger: Responding to the mental health care needs of unaccompanied homeless children in Tasmania*, Anglicare Tasmania.

¹² Flatau, P., Thielking, M., MacKenzie, D., & Steen, A. (2015) *The cost of youth homelessness in Australia study: snapshot report 1*, Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Salvation Army, Mission Australia, Anglicare Australia, and the Centre for Social Impact.

The existing services system is not well suited to assist these children, particularly the younger cohort (10 to 15 years). The current set up of specialist homelessness services tend to assume children will present with at least one parent. Youth-specific services tend to cater for young people aged over 16 years. Children experiencing homelessness may not meet the requirements for the child protection system to intervene i.e. they are not considered to be at significant risk of harm to warrant an intervention. Therefore, many of these children who cannot live at home and are not taken into protective care find themselves in limbo and unable to access many mainstream services, such as schools and health services, which often require parental consent for some services and activities, which these

children cannot provide. Accordingly, these children experience multiple layers of disadvantage because it is unlikely they can access specialist homelessness services because of their age or mainstream services because of the absence of a parent/guardian. Ultimately, these children often have no other option but to return to violent and abusive homes or couch surf, live in severely overcrowded accommodation or sleep rough.

Within a national plan to address child and youth homelessness, a particular focus should be on unaccompanied children. Without this focus, unaccompanied children will continue to receive inadequate support while being ignored by state and territory child protection services.



The current set up of specialist homelessness services tend to assume children will present with at least one parent.

4.7

Family and Domestic Violence

Children and young people supported by homelessness services experience violence from family and intimate partners at alarming high rates in comparison to their peers and the general adult population.

For example, in the 2022–23 financial year, 73 per cent of young people supported by Brisbane Youth Services reported experiencing past family violence, while 46 per cent reported experiencing past intimate partner violence (IPV). It is now well established by both research evidence and practice experience that domestic and family violence (DFV) is a primary driver of homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people.

Unfortunately, the violence doesn't stop once young people have left home.^{13,14} Many children and young people escaping violent home environments move into intimate partner relationships that are violent, coercive, or controlling. Children and young people with trauma are significantly more vulnerable to IPV and are more likely to have difficulty leaving violent relationships. For many young people who have experienced entrenched violence in their family of origin since childhood, violence in intimate relationships is normalised and often not recognised possible to escape.

Given DFV is the primary pathway to homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people and often typifies their experience of homelessness, significant investment is needed to create an integrated service response that reduces young people's exposure to violence while providing diverse safe and affordable housing options. These options should meet young people's immediate housing need as well as provide clear transition-to-independence plans. Young parents and gender diverse young people are significantly more likely to experience current IPV. An opportunity exists to develop and expand targeted and youth-focused prevention and early intervention services that meet the needs of all young people, including the most vulnerable in our community. Any such services need to incorporate the voices of young people and focus on both homelessness and DFV as intertwined barriers to young people's positive healthy futures.

¹³ Heerde, J & Pallotta-Chiarolli, M (2021). "I've seen my friend get chopped": The influence of peer networks on exposure to violence among homeless young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 36(3), pp247–273.

¹⁴ Watson, J. (2011) "Understanding survival sex: Young women, homelessness and intimate relationships." *Journal of youth studies* 14(6): pp639–655



5. Rethinking and redesigning homelessness support systems

A national plan for ending child and youth homelessness is urgently required – a long-term effort to prevent and end child and youth homelessness as is done in other high-priority areas of social policy.

Our current policy, system and funding priorities are inadequate and focused on adults entrenched in homelessness. Homelessness is increasing overall, and our approach is failing to stem the flow of children and young people into homelessness and failing to intervene to prevent them from becoming entrenched in adult homelessness. people who experience homelessness.

A national plan must bring multiple agencies and governments to the table to enable prevention and early intervention with coordinated investment across the child, adolescent, and youth service systems. National investment is needed to develop exits from homelessness through both enhanced family reunification services and youth-specific housing. At the same time, crisis services need to be maintained and enhanced to meet increasing demand.

5.1

Preventing children and young people from entering homelessness

Responding to homelessness, rather than preventing it, is costing exorbitant amounts of taxpayer funds and not stopping avoidable negative impacts on individuals, families and communities.

To prevent children and young people from becoming homeless, the national plan should focus on strategies that address the causes of homelessness, i.e. individual and interpersonal causes, structural causes, and intersectional systemic failures.

Since the main individual and interpersonal causes of child and youth homelessness are related to family conflict, then reducing family conflict should reduce the incidence of child and youth homelessness. However, strategies to reduce family conflict do not always consider the needs of children and young people. For example, Australia has a National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children that seeks to end violence against women and their children in one generation. However, unaccompanied children and young people experiencing family violence are mostly absent from the national plan. A national child and youth homelessness plan could fill this gap with the aim of preventing homelessness. interpersonal causes, structural causes, and intersectional systemic failures.



Addressing the structural causes of homelessness should also include strategies that reduce poverty, unemployment, and housing stress. Such strategies include raising the level of income support, reducing insecure employment, expanding job opportunities, and increasing the supply of social and affordable housing. Again, all these strategies need to consider the specific needs of children and young people. For example, increasing the supply of social housing needs youth-focused housing because the needs of young people are different to the needs of older people.

Addressing the structural causes of homelessness should also include strategies that reduce poverty, unemployment, and housing stress.

The failure of service systems to prevent homelessness upon exit has been well documented. Preventing the transition to homelessness should be built into systems such as out-of-home care and justice. While every **state and territory government has now agreed to provide young people in foster care with support to the age of 21 years** for those who opt-in, there is concern that some young people will still need housing and support after their 21st birthday. The justice system should ensure that no one leaves detention into homelessness, but young people should not be kept in detention because they have no home to go to.

5.2 Early intervention

Early Intervention means identifying and addressing a situation or problem before it worsens and cements.

In the context of homelessness, this means providing people who are at risk of, or who have recently become homeless, with support to prevent a journey into ongoing and entrenched homelessness. Early intervention must be a crucial component of a national plan to address child and youth homelessness.

The two components of early intervention require different approaches. The first involves identifying those at risk of homelessness, then providing support and services to prevent homelessness.

identifying those at risk of homelessness → providing support and services to prevent homelessness





For school-aged children and young people, schools can be critical in determining the pathways of young people who are at risk of homelessness. Schools have long been considered important sites for identifying children and young people at risk of homelessness.¹⁵ Schools and services can then provide the appropriate support to prevent homelessness and maintain the child's or young person's engagement with education. This might involve working with the child's family to maintain the family unit, addressing mental illness or providing support for other issues. The Community of Schools and Services (COSS) Model is an early intervention approach for at-risk young people that has had some success.¹⁶

¹⁵ Chamberlain, C. & MacKenzie, D. (1998) *Youth Homelessness: Early Intervention & Prevention*, Australian Centre for Equity through Education, Erskineville NSW.

¹⁶ See <https://upstreamaustralia.org.au/coss-model/>

¹⁷ Kids Under Cover Studio program, see <https://www.kuc.org.au/what-we-do/how-we-help/studio-program/>

¹⁸ See <https://www.unitingcommunities.org/service/rubys-reunification-program>.

Another approach is to install studios in backyards to alleviate overcrowding, or challenging family dynamics, provide young people a safe space to thrive and stay connected to family, school and their community. One such solution is housing 1,000 young people each night across Victoria.¹⁷

Family reunification, where possible, is another approach to early intervention for at-risk children and young people. Successful models exist but are not available in all places and are stretched to meet demand. One example is Ruby's Reunification Program.¹⁸



The second component involves intervening rapidly once a child or young person becomes homeless. For young people, this involves providing suitable housing with support as soon as possible. Linking housing to education, employment and life skills support guides young people through the transition from school to post-school education and training and to employment and economic security. Youth Foyers is an effective model that has expanded across Australia, with over 80 per cent of residents exiting into safe and stable housing.¹⁹

There is a critical need to build the evidence for early intervention programs, including those mentioned here. There is currently little available evidence for the effectiveness of early intervention programs in reducing youth homelessness. This is because many of these programs have not published pilot data, have not been rigorously evaluated, or have been implemented at one intervention site. These limitations mean that although some improvements in outcomes for young people have been reported following the implementation of these programs the effectiveness of them remains unclear. There are currently no evidence-based programs focused specifically on prevention or early intervention for unaccompanied homeless youth.²⁰

¹⁹ Accenture (2022), *Under One Roof: The Social and Economic Impact of Youth Foyers*, Foyer Foundation, https://foyer.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FoyerFoundation_UnderOneRoof_FULLReport2023.pdf

²⁰ Toumbourou, J & Heerde, J. (2022). Evidence on programs to address youth homelessness: an Evidence Check rapid review. Brokered by the Sax Institute for the New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice, NSW.

Early intervention prevents entrenched homelessness and the associated negative impacts on the child or young person. For this reason, early intervention should be an important component in a national plan to address child and youth homelessness.

5.3

Improving the experiences of children and young people accessing crisis accommodation


The crisis accommodation sector has significantly evolved over the decades, to now deliver responses using person-centred and trauma-informed practice approaches.

Crisis accommodation is an important support service response in providing young people a period of respite and safety from experiences of immediate homelessness, escaping violence, mental health episodes and family breakdown. However, we must be cognisant that crisis accommodation can be a detrimental and negative experience for unaccompanied children and young people, particularly when accommodation periods become extended or provide a transitional/longer-term response within an appropriate setting.

Unaccompanied children and young people experience extended periods in homelessness because their needs are complex, and specialist homelessness services are not adequately staffed to respond to the specific needs of children. For example, unaccompanied children and young people to access to family reunification services, support to travel to and engage in school, and support for appointments. Specialist homelessness services are not regulated like other child services—in terms of staff to child ratios (e.g. out-of-home care services).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identified the high incidence of mental health and family breakdown as leading to experiences of homelessness amongst children and young people's engagement with Specialist Homelessness Services.²¹ As a response to this, crisis accommodation services must continue to provide a place of immediate safety and stability for children and young people. This responsibility requires a clear imperative to provide immediate intervention responses, ensuring that young people have opportunities and are supported to maintain engagement with education or other important components of their lives. Services must also strongly focus on family reconciliation and reunification, as a pathway out of the homeless service system, if this is a viable option.

²¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/young-people-presenting-alone>.



The national plan to address child and youth homelessness should ensure crisis accommodation settings work to:



support young people for the duration of need, and not be limited to restrictive timeframes that result in maintained engagement in other crisis accommodation services, while aiming to exit clients when they are ready

establish immediate and ongoing safety of children and young people

provide safe environments that allow for stabilising of crisis (mental health, AOD, transience, school refusal, family conflict)

provide space for the creation of therapeutic relationships between young people and staff

develop and teach transferrable life and living skills to assist young people achieve independence

improve partnerships and access to ongoing safe and affordable housing options to ensure children and young people can exit crisis accommodation services and link to appropriate supported housing pathways.

5.4

Assisting children and young people in exiting homelessness

To exit homelessness and the homelessness system, young people require a continuum of youth housing types and tenures that meet their health and developmental needs and their aspirations. To achieve this, Australia needs the proposed national plan to address child and youth homelessness to be backed by a dedicated capital funding stream. The Australian Government must invest in such a plan for homeless children and young people.

This capital investment should be made through specialist youth providers with experience in developing and managing housing so that there would be general confidence in the sector that every dollar that can be leveraged from that initial investment would be reinvested into more youth housing. No mainstream provider can or will make that promise.

This submission does not advocate for any one type of youth housing response being “the answer”. The more important point to make is that a continuum of support, supported accommodation and housing options is required that includes rapid rehousing for children and young people who fall into homelessness. There needs to be a range of medium and longer-term housing and support options appropriate to their personal needs and which suit their stage of development.

Current options include medium-term housing, transitional housing, Youth Foyers and Transitional Housing Plus. All play an important role in assisting young people to exit homelessness, and young people across Australia would benefit from an increased investment in each of these responses.

Links to education and employment with integrated specialist supports are a feature of most of these models; however, they vary regarding entry requirements, tenure and rent models. Each has a role to play in supporting young people to exit homelessness and move on to a life of independence.

...youth homelessness cannot be solved without dedicated youth housing and support.

Further, if there were a stream of capital funding available for youth housing, as distinct from social and affordable housing, then the sector would be able to dream big, innovate and bring new options to the table that could strengthen our national response to children and young people who become homeless.

Simply put, youth homelessness cannot be solved without dedicated youth housing and support.

Australia needs the proposed national plan to address child and youth homelessness to be backed by a dedicated capital funding stream.

5.5

Engagement in education, training or employment

To exit homelessness and the homelessness system, young people Young people experiencing homelessness are less likely to complete Year 12 and are more likely to be unemployed.²² Due to structural barriers inhibiting access to education, training and employment, young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to depend on welfare, at an estimated \$123,638 lifetime cost to governments.²³

²² Flatau, P., Thielking, M., MacKenzie, D., & Steen, A. (2015) The cost of youth homelessness in Australia study: snapshot report 1, Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Salvation Army, Mission Australia, Anglicare Australia, and the Centre for Social Impact.

Young people experiencing homelessness are

Less likely
to complete Year 12

More likely
to be unemployed

Engagement in education, training, and employment is a protective factor against homelessness and a pathway out of homelessness. Staying connected to communities and schools helps prevent at-risk young people from becoming homeless.²⁴ For those who become homeless, secure housing linked to education, training, or employment is an effective way to achieve independence and housing stability.

A national plan to address child and youth homelessness must acknowledge and support the importance of education, training, and employment in reducing the incidence and impact of homelessness. A plan must include schools as important sites for early intervention and prevention of homelessness and early school leaving. The Community of Schools and Services Model is an example of how schools can play a central role in supporting at-risk children and young people. A national plan should develop and expand youth-specific housing located with or near education, training and/or industry sites, ensuring access to mainstream education and employment. Youth Foyers and the Transitional Housing Plus model are examples of youth-specific housing with strong links to education and training.

²³ Accenture (2022), *Under One Roof: The Social and Economic Impact of Youth Foyers*, Foyer Foundation, https://foyer.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FoyerFoundation_UnderOneRoof_FULLReport2023.pdf

²⁴ MacKenzie, D., Hand, T., & Dean, A. (2020) *Early intervention strategies to prevent youth homelessness*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/short-articles/early-intervention-strategies-prevent-youth-homelessness>.

5.6

Income support

The low level of income support payments (for a single adult maximum Youth Allowance is \$602.80 per fortnight and Jobseeker Payment is \$749.20 per fortnight) contributes to housing stress and homelessness. A recent analysis by Homelessness Australia showed that young people on Youth Allowance had only \$13 per day after rent to pay for food, utilities, transport etc.²⁵

The experience of the extra \$550 per fortnight Coronavirus Supplement showed that young people could manage better cover all their basic needs. Young people reported that the additional money was used to pay for food, rent, bills, medicines, and transport (including fuel and car insurance) and to pay down debts to friends, family, and utility companies.²⁶ Following the removal of the supplement, young people reliant on income support returned to struggling to pay for necessities despite a modest real increase in payments.

The Australian Government must immediately increase income support payments, such as Youth Allowance and Job Seeker Payments, to a sufficient level to cover the costs of living a modest life. Young homelessness and housing stress among young people will continue without this increase.

In the medium, the Australian Government should reform the income support system to create a simpler, fairer and more accessible youth payment such as the Youth Income Guarantee proposed by the National Youth Commission Australia.²⁷ The proposed Youth Income Guarantee is a single payment system for 16 to 24-year-olds that provides sufficient support for those who need short-term help between full-time jobs and those who need to rely on payments for several years or more while studying or unemployed/underemployed.

Young people on Youth Allowance had only

\$13 per day

after rent to pay for food, utilities, transport etc.

²⁵ Homelessness Australia (2023) *Youth Allowance too low to afford surging rents*, see <https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/youth-allowance-too-low-to-afford-surging-rents/>

²⁶ National Youth Commission Australia (2022) *The Youth Income Guarantee: a fair and accessible income support system for young people*, NYCA, Brunswick VIC. <https://nycinquiry.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-Youth-Income-Guarantee-Full-Report-14222.pdf>.

²⁷ *ibid.*

6.

Achieving a national plan to address child and youth homelessness

Homelessness among children and young people demands distinctive solutions. The knowledge, thinking, planning and practices that typically address the mainstream, adult housing crises fall well short of addressing these distinctive needs.

What is needed is a national standalone plan to address homelessness experienced by children and young people. This plan should outline clear mechanisms designed to compel states and territories to implement its vision effectively.

This plan should outline clear mechanisms designed to compel states and territories to implement its vision effectively.

These mechanisms involve:

- Explicitly designating unaccompanied children and young people as an additional priority cohort within the new National Housing and Homelessness Plan.
- Establishing the strategic vision and expectations for the multiple actors involved in implementing the plan.
- Mandating the development of stand-alone homelessness plans for homeless children and young people through the new NHHA agreement.
- By describing strategically what prevention and response should look like.
- Requiring the establishment of public targets, reporting mechanisms, and performance measures regarding homelessness among children and young people, with consequences tied to the provision of Australian Government funding.

The Australian Government has a responsibility to provide a national vision and leadership for ending child and youth homelessness and for setting national goals. The Australian Government may need to fund services directly if the state and territory governments do not embrace the range and extent of reform and evidence-based solutions required.

A new NHHA is due to be negotiated between the Australian Government and the state and territory governments by mid-2024. It is unclear what the relationship will be between the new NHHA and the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. This new NHHA could be the vehicle by which the Australian

Government is able to hold the state and territory governments accountable for achieving the national strategic goals it sets. Funding can be tied to outcomes to achieve a national vision and goals.

The design of a national plan to address homelessness for homeless children and young people should be led and facilitated by the Australian Government and the state and territory governments in partnership with non-government organisations and lived experience leadership of homelessness.

The Australian Government has a responsibility to provide a national vision and leadership for ending child and youth homelessness and for setting national goals.



The following principles should be used to design the strategy:



Co-design

Young people with experience of homelessness should be front and centre in the design and implementation of the strategy



Ownership

The strategy needs to be the responsibility of all agencies that work with and fund services for young people, including housing and homelessness services, education systems and schools, health, and youth services



Authoritative

The strategy should map the means to end youth homelessness; how that can be done; and how long it might take and at what cost, to governments, organisations and the community



Accountable

The strategy should include measurable goals and outcomes to which governments and agencies are held responsible for achieving.²⁸

²⁸ National Youth Commission Australia (2022) *A renewed commitment to address youth homelessness and housing*, NYCA, Brunswick, p.10.



7. Conclusion

This submission has highlighted the need for a national plan to address child and youth homelessness and the key components of such a plan. Without a specific and national focus on children and young people experiencing homelessness, the scourge of homelessness will continue to impact future generations of children and young people, who are likely to become entrenched in homelessness throughout their adult life.

The coalition of organisations making this submission collectively has the experience and knowledge to develop a national plan. We need the Australian Government to work with us to develop, fund and implement a national plan with the aim of ending child and youth homelessness in Australia.



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Photographs By Ilana Rose