

Yfoundations Submission

National Housing & Homelessness Plan Issues Paper

October 2023

Hey, can I stay at your place tonight?

Can't tonight sorry. Can you go somewhere else?

Mike will want something in return if I sleep on his couch...

There's no bed at the youth refuge for me...

It's not safe for me at home...

No worries, I'll figure something out.

Role of Yfoundations

Yfoundations is the peak body for youth homelessness in NSW. For over 40 years, Yfoundations has served as the NSW peak body representing and advocating for children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, and the services that support them. Our members and board comprise highly experienced youth specialist homelessness service (SHS) providers who have direct knowledge of and experience with the issues homeless young people face.

Our approach focuses on five foundations:

- Safety and sustainability
- Home and place
- Health and wellbeing
- Connections and participation
- Education and participation

We believe all five foundations must be present for young people to live flourishing and meaningful lives.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Our approach has been firmly solution-focused in an attempt to ensure that in twenty years, another inquiry will not report that youth homelessness is still a disturbing problem in Australian society – **that would be admission of an extraordinary failure.**”

*Australia's Homeless Youth: a report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness, 2008.*¹

To effectively address and eliminate child and youth homelessness we need a standalone plan that responds to the diversity and complexity of the children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, to support their transition into a future of self-reliance and wellbeing. Ending child and youth homelessness will only be a possible if a clear, targeted and developmentally appropriate National Homelessness and Housing Plan (NHHP) is initiated.

Yfoundations is calling on the Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, to develop and fund a standalone **National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan** (standalone National C&Y Plan) that outlines the approaches and resources required to effectively prevent, intervene and respond to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

We recognise that the proposed NHHP is an important strategy to set out an overarching national approach in responding to housing supply shortages and the service system response to adult homelessness. However, it is critical that unaccompanied children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness do not get lost in a NHHP that, in the main, focuses on adults.

This is the case for all current state and territory homelessness strategies, where children and young people have a very limited focus, with planned responses not being comprehensive enough to address the multi-faceted causes of homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people.

Unaccompanied children and young people are also absent from other national plans such as the National Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Plan (National DFSVP). This oversight fails to recognise that domestic and family violence (DFV) is one of the main reasons for child and youth homelessness in the same way it is for adult women and their children.

Young people are more likely to experience homelessness upon leaving youth justice settings due to poorly plan exits, difficulty securing accommodation, and loss of family and/or social supports. This experience can often be mirrored for young people leaving Out of Home Care (OOHC).

We need to address the housing crisis and adequately fund social housing and affordable housing to provide long-term solutions for young people. Rarely is public and community housing quarantined for young people as other cohorts are often prioritised. For young people, having no income or the lowest form of income, and very likely no savings, can act as a barrier or disincentive for mainstream community housing providers to house them.

Contributing to this dire problem is the lack of exit options for young people exiting crisis, including a lack of medium, transitional and long-term supported accommodation options across the state, is a major problem for the SHS system. It creates blockages in the homelessness service system, with crisis accommodation beds taken up by people needing longer-term accommodation options.

Youth homelessness services are inappropriate environments for children due to the age difference between them and other clients in the service. However, unaccompanied children do present which is often the outcome of a lack of care and effective guardianship in their lives. Youth SHS are underfunded, overstretched and cannot meet demand but many Yfoundations' members and stakeholders report they often feel pressured to take in children because there is nowhere else for them to go.

Recognition of and action on preventing and responding to homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people has evolved unevenly across states and territories, meaning we have siloed policy, service system and practice development. A standalone National C&Y Plan with a dedicated focus on unaccompanied children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness provides an opportunity, through a national vision, to broaden a shared understanding of the issues and a shared commitment to responding to them.

¹ National Youth Commission (2008). *Australia's homeless Youth: a report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness*.

In this submission, Yfoundations is covering both children and young people as, increasingly, unaccompanied children who are not currently supported by state/territory child protection systems are turning up to SHS seeking assistance.

We are highlighting the need for different, age-appropriate responses across the age cohorts as those under 16 years need care, guidance and support like any child. This is likely to be similar for 16–17-year-olds, whereas 18–24-year-olds, mostly, need support to transition into adulthood.

We believe a standalone National C&Y Plan should be structured around the following headline indicators:

- child and youth homelessness doesn't happen in the first place
- and if it does happen, there are accessible and effective responses to catch them
- combined with a service system that provides a pathway out so it's a once in a lifetime occurrence.

Our current approach is not working. A clear direction from the Australian Government to develop a standalone National C&Y Plan is critical. This consultation and development of a NHHP is an opportunity for governments to target unaccompanied children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Up to now, nothing has changed for our children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In fact, it has only gotten worse, and we will continue to fail them if we don't take this opportunity when it's the first time the Australian Government is actioning a commitment to establishing a NHHP.



Recommendations

Yfoundations and its members make the following recommendations to the Australian Government as the first steps towards ending homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people:

1. The Australian Government in partnership with state and territory governments commit to a standalone **National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan** (standalone National C&Y Plan) in recognition of both the scale of the issue and the specialised responses that are required.
2. The standalone National C&Y Plan should be informed by the expertise of people who have a lived experience of homelessness as a child or young person and from the experienced teams in specialist homelessness services (SHS) and other social services that work directly with children and young people.
3. The standalone National C&Y Plan should include a commitment from all state and territory governments to ensure appropriate child protection responses are in place to support unaccompanied children who are experiencing homelessness.
4. The new National Housing and Homeless Agreement (NHHA) to be developed in 2024 needs to include clear commitments for funding targeted responses and services for unaccompanied children and young people who experience homelessness ensuring that funding for SHS is set an appropriate level to cover both increasing cost of service delivery and to attract a skilled and dedicated workforce. Funding should also be reinstated for flexible brokerage to support young people to re-establish their lives after homelessness.
5. The Australian Government review and align age groupings for children and young people in Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and other key data sets.
6. Together a standalone National C&Y Plan and new NHHA need to ensure consistent involvement of state and territory governments to implement the vision to end homelessness for children and young people and appropriate governance structures to ensure all commitments are delivered
7. Together a standalone National C&Y Plan and new NHHA need to support new service delivery and housing models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people delivered by specialist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness services to close the gap and significantly reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness.
8. The Australian Government should review income support payments for young people (Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance) to ensure payments provide a sufficient level of income for young people living independently to cover their housing and living costs. This review should also include prioritising faster processing times for young people who are homeless and need immediate access to income support.
9. The standalone National C&Y Plan should recognise that investment is required in a range of specialised youth supported housing and long-term housing models to respond flexibly to the housing and development needs of young people experiencing homelessness – a one size fits all approach will not be effective as 'Housing First' is not necessarily the best model for all young people.
10. That the new NHHA includes clear commitments for funding housing for children and young people who experience homelessness - 15% of new capital funding commitments should be allocated to youth specific supported housing models.
11. That the new NHHA set a target for 15% of social and affordable housing delivered by community housing providers and state housing agencies to be priority allocated to support young people exit from supported housing.

- 12.** State and territory governments should review existing policy settings (eligibility, tenure and rent) for social and affordable housing to remove barriers to access and provide long term housing options that are affordable to young people exiting supported accommodation.
- 13.** State and territory governments should review existing policy setting for private rental assistance products (i.e., rental bond support or rent subsidies) that support young people to live independently in the private rental market to ensure the product is fit for purpose and can be realistically implemented with private landlords.
- 14.** A collaborative, co-design approach at a regional level should be undertaken to develop an investment program for youth supported housing as part of the standalone National C&Y Plan that sets out the type of models required, best locations for investment and priorities for investment over time.
- 15.** A standalone National C&Y Plan should commit to improve Commonwealth-State program coordination by outlining how the Australian Government will contribute its full share to joint-funded programs.
- 16.** The new NHHA must ensure that all housing and homelessness programs funded by the Australian Government and state and territory governments, have provision for adequate indexation that accounts for the full increase in the cost of delivering services, including National Wage Case decisions and CPI.
- 17.** The new NHHA must take seriously the workforce challenges for the SHS industry through better funding, adequate indexation and longer contract terms enable better staff retention.

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Acronyms:

NHHP: National Housing and Homelessness Plan

Standalone National C&Y Plan: Standalone National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan

NHHA: National Housing and Homelessness Agreement

SHS: Specialist Homelessness Services

DFV: Domestic and Family Violence

National DFSVP: National Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Plan

OOHC: Out of Home Care

ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics

AIHW: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

1. Introduction

1.1 Call to action: develop a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan

Unaccompanied children and young people² are a significant group experiencing homelessness across Australia. Our submission covers the experiences of children and young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness on an unaccompanied basis – that is, their experience of homelessness is without the support of or separate to a parent or guardian, including where the guardian is the state government or minister.

In 2021/22, around 39,300 or 14% of all people seeking accommodation and assistance from SHS nationally were children and young people aged 15–24 years presenting alone³. In NSW, there were 12,911 15–24-year-olds and also 2,379 children aged 12–15 years presenting alone to an SHS (i.e., without a parent or guardian), with almost half needing housing assistance.⁴ The only response for children aged 12–15 years in NSW is the Homelessness Youth Assistance Program which can provide – depending on the youth SHS – a crisis bed for a few nights, respite, and family reunification services.

The 2021 Census data⁵ was a stark reminder that children and young people in Australia are experiencing homelessness in significant numbers. Of the 122,494 people experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2021 nearly:

- a quarter (23%) of all people experiencing homelessness were aged 12–24 years (28,204 people)
- 38% of people experiencing homelessness in the 2021 Census were under 24 years old.

See Appendix 1 for further detail about the data.

However, the problem of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness is much deeper than the data and research tells us. Homelessness for many unaccompanied children and young people is hidden.

The most dominant forms of homelessness that unaccompanied children and young people experience are: couch surfing; severe overcrowding; and living in crisis accommodation, often refuge hopping every three months due to time restrictions imposed by policies.

Compared to older cohorts, unaccompanied children and young people have distinctive pathways into homelessness and different experiences. The factors that escalate children and young people into homelessness are also often different – neglect, abuse, family dysfunction and breakdown, lack of effective care and guardianship by family or out-of-home care systems, homophobia and transphobia.

And while we know that factors such as family violence, sexual violence, abuse, racism and poverty are also key factors for adults, unaccompanied children and young people don't have the same level of development, coping strategies or resources (whether that's financial, support networks or life experience) as adults, which makes them more vulnerable and their experiences more dangerous.

It is important to note that this submission is not advocating or supporting the notion for unaccompanied children to be supported in the youth homelessness service system. Rather, the submission aims to articulate how failures of the child protection and other services systems that should be caring for and supporting children has significant impacts on the youth homelessness service system.

Sadly, however, many of our members and stakeholders report they often feel pressured to take in children because there is nowhere else for them to go. Youth SHS are underfunded, overstretched and cannot meet demand.

² Children and young people who present alone to specialist homelessness services without an accompanying parent or guardian.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2022). *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22*.

⁴ NSW Ombudsman (2023). *More Than Shelter – outstanding actions to improve the response to children presenting alone to homelessness services*. Data cited is a special data extract commissioned from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) SHS annual report 2021–22 cited above.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2023). *Estimating Homelessness: 2021 Census*.

Recommendations:

1. The Australian Government in partnership with state and territory governments commit to a standalone **National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan** (standalone National C&Y Plan) in recognition of both the scale of the issue and the specialised responses that are required.
2. The standalone National C&Y Plan should be informed by the expertise of people who have a lived experience of homelessness as a child or young person and from the experienced teams in SHS and other social services that work directly with children and young people.
3. The standalone National C&Y Plan should include a commitment from all state and territory governments to ensure appropriate child protection responses are in place to support unaccompanied children who are homelessness.
4. The new NHHA to be developed in 2024 needs to include clear commitments for funding targeted responses and services for unaccompanied children and young people who experience homelessness ensuring that funding for SHS is set an appropriate level to cover both increasing cost of service delivery and to attract a skilled and dedicated workforce. Funding should also be reinstated for flexible brokerage to support young people to re-establish their lives after homelessness.

1.2 Defining Children and Young People

Nationally at policy level, we define children as any person under 18 years old, with young people defined as any person 18–24 years old. However, at a state and territory government level, the definitions differ. For example, in NSW we use the definition of 16 years and under to define children, with young people defined as between the ages of 16–24 years.

As this is a NSW submission, it will refer to children as under 16 years and young people aged between 16–24 years. However, Yfoundations believes that those between the ages of 16–18 years need responses that are relatively consistent with those between the ages of 12–15 years.

In the context of developing a standalone plan that includes children, we must be mindful that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – which Australia has ratified – defines a child as ‘every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’.⁶

1.3 Previous reports about child and youth homelessness

Over the years, we have seen two significant inquiries conducted into youth homelessness and the issues raised in these documents are relevant to the issues this submission discusses.

1989 – Our Homeless Children: Report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children

In 1987, after consulting with a wide range of individuals and organisations attempting to assist homeless children, analysing current policy directions, and surveying available literature, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) decides there is a need for a national inquiry into homelessness as it affects children and young people.

It was clear to HREOC that a large number of Australian children were denied fundamental human rights under the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, specifically that ‘all children have a right to enjoy special protection, to receive adequate housing, and to be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.’

The Inquiry is chaired by ██████████, and the final report of the Inquiry, released in February 1989, contains 24 chapters on specific issues and 77 recommendations, many of which are still relevant today.

Decades later, ██████████ at the recent National Children and Youth Homelessness Conference 2023 in Melbourne, ██████████ gives a forensic account of missed opportunities, ignored reports and other failures to significantly improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable members of society, adding, ‘[M]any issues that we identified three decades ago... are not now being addressed.’

⁶ Refer Article 1 of United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child <https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child>

April 2008 – Australia’s Homeless Youth: a report of the National Youth Commission (NYC) Inquiry into Youth Homelessness

The NYC Inquiry into Youth Homelessness was an independent community inquiry funded by the Caledonia Foundation, a private philanthropic foundation focused on sustainable futures for young Australians. It was assisted by organisations affiliated to the National Youth Coalition for Housing, Homelessness Australia and the Council to Homeless Persons in Victoria.

The 400-page NYC Inquiry report draws on evidence from 319 individuals, including young people, who provide evidence during 21 public hearings held around Australia. The Inquiry receives 91 written submissions, including submissions from state and territory government departments around Australia.

The report advances a Roadmap highlighting the 10 ‘must do’ strategic areas for action, stating that, ‘Implementing the core 10 points of the Roadmap would change the face of youth homelessness in Australia.’ The first step is to ‘Develop and implement a National Framework and National Homelessness Action Plan’, which would include ‘a national aspirational horizon – the goal of eliminating youth homelessness by 2030’ and ‘a youth-centred focus for service provision and programs.’

‘Responding [to] youth homelessness will require a long-term strategy and action plan over 20 to 25 years, and the horizon needs to be the elimination of youth homelessness and homelessness...’

1.4 Constraints of the data

We would like to highlight an area of difficulty that Yfoundations and many researchers and service providers recognise and are frustrated by on a regular basis, particularly in our research and formulation of data-driven policy on youth homelessness: the lack of uniformity of age groupings in demographic data collection among government departments, and across the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data.

For example, key cohort age groupings for children and young people in the ABS 2021 Census homelessness data releases are: under 12 years, 12–18 years, and 19–24 years. The ABS Census Population data is more differentiated but related groupings are 10–14 years, 15–19 years and 20–24 years. The relevant AIHW SHS Annual Report data age groupings are 15–17 years and 18–24 years.

Given the collection and availability of data by age group breakdowns differ according to the definitions adopted by states and territories, and given this also impacts policies and practices addressing issues highlighted by this data, we flag the need for consistency in age group data collection/availability and definitions of children and young people across both national and state/territory data collection.

Recommendation:

- 5.** The Australian Government review and align age groupings for children and young people in Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and other key data sets.

2. States and territories must be accountable for unaccompanied children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness

A standalone National C&Y Plan needs to set out a consolidated vision of how to prevent and respond to homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people, to provide a unified, overarching strategic vision to guide the work of individual states and territories.

This overarching strategic vision should centre on a multi-jurisdictional collaborative response across agencies that share accountability for responding to the homelessness of unaccompanied children and young people, including agencies for children/young people/families, education, health, and housing/homelessness.

A standalone National C&Y Plan will need to set out clear mechanisms through which to require states and territories to implement this vision. This involves creating an authorising environment for the development of locally nuanced state/territory action plans on preventing and ending homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people by:

- explicitly naming unaccompanied children as priority cohorts in the new NHHA to be developed in 2024
- setting the strategic vision and expectation for multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional accountability
- requiring the states and territories to develop standalone housing and homelessness plans for unaccompanied children and young people, through the NHHA bilateral agreements
- developing key performance indicators, measures and targets in consultation with those sectors with a responsibility to children and young people
- ensuring that reporting by states and territories against these key performance indicators, measures and targets is tied to the provision of Australian Government funding.

Recommendation:

6. Together a standalone National C&Y Plan and new NHHA need to ensure consistent involvement of state and territory governments to implement the vision to end homelessness for children and young people and appropriate governance structures to ensure all commitments are delivered.

3. What should the continuum of need in a standalone child and youth housing and homelessness Plan look like?

This consultation and development of a NHHP is an opportunity for governments to target unaccompanied children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Up to now, nothing has changed for our children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In fact, it has only gotten worse, and we will continue to fail them if we don't take this opportunity when it's the first time the Australian Government is actioning a commitment to a NHHP. We believe a standalone National C&Y Plan should be structured around the following headline indicators:

- child and youth homelessness doesn't happen in the first place
- and if it does happen, there are accessible and effective responses to catch them
- combined with a service system that provides a pathway out so it's a once in a lifetime occurrence.

Ending child and youth homelessness looks different to ending adult homelessness or solving the housing crisis. The ideal service system to prevent, respond to and exit unaccompanied children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness is described in Table 1.

This ideal service system relies on services that sit with the youth homelessness sector and services/systems that are beyond the realm of the youth homelessness sector. Success will only be achieved if all sectors are playing their role to prevent, respond and exit children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Critical components of the work to develop a standalone National C&Y Plan would include consultations with relevant stakeholders to understand what could be included, such as: identified best practice; innovation; existing practice that achieves good outcomes; and the development of a research synthesis that explores best practice for unaccompanied children and young people.

The remainder of this submission examines the current situation for children and young people who are slipping through the gaps, why we should be looking at the problem through a different lens, and why it is critical to redesign our current response so we don't continue to fail children and young people in the future.

Table 1: The ideal service system

The ideal service system to prevent, respond to and exit unaccompanied children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness



At a minimum, the continuum requires a suite of responses to respond to a breadth of issues, age cohorts and needs such as:

- Family mediation and reunification services such as the Homelessness Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) which supports children 12-15 years old in NSW.
- An increase in crisis beds so children and young people know they have a place to sleep tonight when their situation is desperate and dangerous.
- Exit options from crisis accommodation such as transitional housing (for 2-5 years) and medium-term housing (a higher level of support for those with more complex needs for about two years). These exit options will also provide longer term options for young people who currently refuge hop every three months due to time restrictions imposed on service providers.
- Specialised responses and crisis accommodation for young people experiencing DFV.
- More affordable and social housing for young people. Rarely is public and community housing quarantined for young people as other cohorts are often prioritised.
- More social housing for young people to live in permanently if they are not suitable for the private rental market due to high and complex needs.
- Foyer models.
- Early intervention models such as the Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model that identifies children and young people at risk or experiencing homelessness in high schools.
- Improved OOHC responses particularly for children and young people who are older and often not considered a priority or at risk of significant harm.
- Improved supported exits for young people from OOHC and youth justice.
- Better access to mental health services where children and young people with serious issues such as suicide ideation are not having to wait for six months to get an appointment as we are hearing from regional areas.
- Better access to supported exits into the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) where appropriate.

Reconnect

The Australian Government places significant emphasis on the Reconnect program when they speak publicly about youth homelessness. Reconnect is a vital early intervention service, however, the response only caters to a small cohort of children and young people that this submission is advocating for:

- **Firstly**, it is an early intervention and prevention response which doesn't respond to those children and young people who are already experiencing homelessness i.e., couch surfing, returning to violence, living in crisis refuges, living in crisis refuges with no exit options, living in severe overcrowded housing, and sleeping rough.
- **Secondly**, it only caters to children and young people aged 12 to 18 years (or 12 to 21 years in the case of newly arrived youth) and neglects those aged 19-24 years who are also considered youth.
- **Thirdly**, it works with children/young people and their families. The children and young people we are advocating for are experiencing homelessness and DFV on their own. Not those who accompany their parents, caregivers or legal guardians.

4. A different lens must be used for unaccompanied child and youth homelessness

4.1- Stop the 'adultification' of children and young people



We must stop the 'adultification' of children and young people in strategies and service responses whereby it is assumed that what works to address adult homelessness works for children and young people.

Children and young people who leave their family home or guardianship are at real risk of 'early adultification', that is, assuming adult-like responsibilities above and beyond what is experienced by children and young people who are able to stay in their family or long-term stable home environment. This creates elevated levels of stress and mental strain as these responsibilities hit before they are fully mentally and emotionally prepared to take them on.⁷

When responses are not tailored to the developmental stage of children and young people, we see an 'adultification' of service delivery that cannot fully meet the needs of children and young people experiencing homelessness, and places children and young people under further stress and trauma.

⁷ Schmitz, R.M and Tyler, K.A (2016). *Growing up before their time: the early adultification experiences of homeless young people*, Children and Youth Services Review, Volume 64, pp 15–22.

4.2 - Why are the experiences of homelessness different for children and young people compared to adults?

Ending child and youth homelessness will only be a reality if a clear, targeted and developmentally appropriate NHHP is initiated. While we welcome the Australian Government's commitment to a NHHP, subsuming children and young people into generic adult housing and homelessness responses, or including them as a priority cohort, is not enough for the following reasons:

- Children and young people don't have the same coping strategies and resources generally attributed to adults (whether that's financial, support networks or life experience) to self-address their lack of access to housing and services. This means responses to children and young people presenting as homeless requires the service system to respond differently, particularly by adopting a trauma-informed, age and development-appropriate lens to any response.
- Children and young people need age and developmentally appropriate responses. Successful responses for adults such as Housing First are not going to be suitable for children and may not necessarily be suitable for young people who might need care first as opposed to housing first.
- We know the triggers that escalate children and young people into homelessness are different to those of adults: neglect; family breakdown and dysfunction; lack of effective care and guardianship by family or state governments; homophobia; and transphobia.
- While we know that other dominant triggers such as DFV and sexual violence, abuse, racism and poverty are also key triggers for adults, children and young people don't have the same experiences, coping strategies or resources as adults, which will most likely make them more vulnerable and their experiences possibly dangerous.
- We also need to recognise that these triggers – or precursors into homelessness – for children and young people will be traumatic. We know that trauma can have devastating impacts on children, which will carry into their adult lives. Specialised responses must be responsive to trauma and consider ways that children and young people can heal to reduce the long-term impacts in their adult lives.

Case Study: Children and some young people need care first and housing second

Lizzy* first presented to a crisis refuge at the age of ■ due to family breakdown. Lizzy was in a situation where the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) were unable to work with and support the family, and the family were not willing to relinquish their parental rights.

As a result, Lizzy has been moving from crisis refuge to crisis refuge and has moved four times in an eighteen-month period.

Lizzy is now ■ years old, does not have the emotional or practical skills at this stage to live independently, and will need to develop these quickly to secure transitional or long term accommodation.

If Lizzy had been able to remain in the first crisis service she accessed, her circumstances would have greatly improved. She would not have been at risk of re-traumatisation through changing services, having to retell her story over and over, or continually developing new relationships with staff and clients. This also can have negative impacts on family restoration, with the consistent changing of services and support staff, working not only with Lizzy but with her family.

Lizzy is a good example of why we need more supported medium to longer term accommodation options for under 16s. This case shows that continuum of care models are critical to enable soft transition from crisis services to transitional services and then on to longer term accommodation.

Source: Yfoundations Member case study, *name changed to protect privacy.

4.3 - Unaccompanied child and youth homelessness is often hidden



The problem of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness is much deeper than the data and research tells us. Homelessness for many unaccompanied children and young people is hidden.

4.3.1 Limitations of the Census and SHS data

While SHS data is an important source to understand the extent of people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, caution must be exercised in any analysis as it only identifies those children and young people who seek a service. These numbers do not tell us the whole story as there are multiple limitations for children and young people accessing an SHS service, including lack of services in relevant locations; fear of accessing the services; knowledge that services exist; and the capacity to contact a service.

Nationally, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has highlighted the difficulties in measuring the extent of couch surfing (one of the most prevalent forms of youth homelessness) because it is often masked and misreported.⁸ However, we know from the AIHW SHS 2021–22 data that over 28% of young people presenting alone to SHS reported they had been couch surfing at first presentation.⁹

A snapshot of the relevant data for children and young people is at Appendix 1.

⁸ ABS (2018). *Census of Population and Housing: estimating homelessness 2016*.

⁹ AIHW (2022).

4.3.2 The insidious nature of couch surfing for children and young people

Having a couch or room to stay in someone else's place does not always mean children or young people are safe. Couch surfing puts children and young people at risk of exploitation, servitude, violence and sexual violence. Sometimes, children and young people can be pressured into criminality to secure that couch to sleep on.

We also know that children and young people moving between houses without a stable home are a very vulnerable cohort. While the research is sparse, what does exist shows that young couch surfers have disproportionately poor mental health and less connection to professional and community support than children and young people in other homeless groups.¹⁰

4.3.3 Severe overcrowding

Severe overcrowding, another 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.

The 2021 Census data reveals that 50% of those experiencing severe overcrowding are aged under 25 years, up from 45% in the 2016 Census. Under 12-year-olds and 19–24-year-olds make up the second and third highest age brackets respectively, across all age groups, living in severely overcrowded dwellings.¹¹

4.3.4 Domestic and family violence is often hidden among unaccompanied children and young people

The lack of public discourse, service responses, and the absence of policy and funding to respond to DFV for unaccompanied children and young people only reinforces their belief that they are not victims/survivors.

Of the nearly 40,000 children and young people aged 15–24 years who presented alone to an SHS in 2021–22, DFV was the second highest main reason for presenting after housing crisis.¹² It is important to recognise here that this is the main reason only and generally children and young people have overlapping reasons for presenting. Over one in three of these children and young people identified they had experienced DFV, and that it was a vulnerability.

The AIHW data shows that 16% of unaccompanied young people identified DFV as the main reasons for seeking an SHS. However, the data doesn't tell the full story. This is also the case in NSW where youth SHSs have reported to Yfoundations that close to 80–90% of young people entering their services have experienced or are escaping DFV. Melbourne City Mission in Victoria has also reported that almost every single child and young person turning up to their refuges had experienced DFV in some way.

The exposure of children and young people to DFV is often seen as their experience witnessing violence from a male parent to female parent. However, the experience of young people experiencing DFV 'in their own right' as a victim survivor is often invisible to the DFV service system and the available support and responses. The impact of the trauma of these experiences can result in violent behaviour and responses from young people can also go unrecognised.¹³

This is clearly demonstrated by a situation that was recently described by one of Yfoundations' members. A ■-year-old with a ■-year-old baby sought crisis accommodation in their youth refuge because of DFV. However, they couldn't put her in the refuge because of the baby and they were unable to refer her to a women's refuge because of her age. The only option was to place her in a hotel and provide 24-hour support to ensure she and the baby were safe. Youth SHS are not funded anywhere near the required amount to provide these intensive responses but they do it because they know there is nowhere for a ■-year-old and her baby to go except for a violent home.

Children and young people who have experienced DFV are also not likely to seek out specifically funded DFV services. This is attributed to the lack of age appropriate services, not knowing about the adult services available, not being eligible for the adult services, and fear of the consequences and potential involvement of child protection services.¹⁴ This results in children and young people staying with friends – i.e. couch surfing – to avoid conflict at home or presenting to an SHS service reporting a range of issues, such as mental health as opposed to DFV.

¹⁰ Hail-Jares K, Vichta-Ohlsen R and Nash C (2020) *Safer inside? Comparing the experiences and risks faced by young people who couch-surf and sleep rough*, Journal of Youth Studies

¹¹ ABS (2023).

¹² AIHW (2022).

¹³ Corrie, T and Moore, S (2021). *Amplify: Turning up the volume on young people and family violence*, Research Report, Melbourne City Mission.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Dr Carmel Hobb's research, *Young, in love and in danger*, highlights that children and young people who are dependent on their abusive partners for housing and unable to live with family were unable to leave violent relationships. Without access to affordable housing options, they were facing homelessness and having to sleep rough. The combination of no family support, shortage of emergency housing, no or low incomes as they were not fully accessing Centrelink benefits, pushed them to remain in violent relationships.¹⁵

4.3.5 Turnaways or unmet need in crisis accommodation

Nearly half of the children and young people presenting alone to an SHS needing crisis accommodation did not receive it in 2021–22. They are being turned away because youth SHS are underfunded and overstretched and there is not an adequate supply of appropriate accommodation immediately available to respond.

Our current response to child and youth homelessness is inadequate given the scale of the problem. Nationally, nearly 50% of children and young people (aged 15–24 years) presenting alone to a SHS seeking a crisis bed in 2021–22 were turned away because youth SHS are underfunded and overstretched and there is not an adequate supply of appropriate accommodation immediately available to respond.¹⁶ While this turnaway rate is alarming, it does not factor in the unmet demand for services given the numbers of children and young people who don't access services and slip through gaps in the system while they are couch surfing or rough sleeping.

We must ask ourselves: Where did the one-in-two children and young people sleep that night who couldn't secure a bed? Did they return to a violent home? Did they couch surf or return to a severely overcrowded house? Or did they sleep on the street that night?



¹⁵ Hobbs, C (2022). *Young, in love and in danger: Teen domestic violence and abuse in Tasmania*, Research Report, Anglicare Tasmania and Social Action and Research Centre.

¹⁶ AIHW (2022).

5. The well-trodden pathway from child and youth homelessness to adult homelessness

5.1 Increasing numbers of unaccompanied children presenting to homelessness services

The recent NSW Ombudsman report, *More Than Shelter – outstanding actions to improve the response to children presenting alone to homelessness services* (29 May 2023) noted that in NSW between 2,300 and 2,600 children aged 12–15 years have sought services, without a parent or guardian, every year for the past five years. Commissioning a special data extract from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to understand this cohort of children, the Ombudsman report cited the most recent available data showing that 2,379 children aged 12–15 presented alone to SHS across NSW in 2021–22.¹⁷

According to publicly available AIHW SHS 2021–22 data, a further 3,947 children aged 15–17 years presented alone to SHS across NSW that same year, with an additional 8,786 young people aged 18–24 years presenting alone to SHS across NSW¹⁸. However, of particular concern to the Ombudsman was the lack of available information and reliable data on the number of children in statutory out-of-home care who present to and stay in SHS.



¹⁷ NSW Ombudsman (2023).

¹⁸ AIHW (2020). Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 201-12 to 2021-22. Canberra.

5.2 Disrupt the pathway from child and youth homelessness to adult homelessness

We know from research that people who experience homelessness as a child or young person are more likely to face homelessness again as an adult.¹⁹ The important 2013 Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) research, *Lifetime and intergenerational experiences of homelessness in Australia*, found that half of the adults experiencing homelessness who they surveyed had run away from home before they were 18 years old, experiencing a period of child or youth homelessness. For those who those who had experienced homelessness before the age of 18 years, it was not just one instance of homelessness, it was numerous.

We also know that of the 39,300 children and young people presenting alone to SHS across Australia in 2021–22 (9,613 aged 15–17 years, 29,687 aged 18–24 years) over 60% (23,991) were returning clients (data not publicly available for under 15-year-olds).²⁰ The cumulative effects of disruption to education, transition to employment, and social networks; and the trauma of harsh living conditions, exposure to sexual exploitation, violence and poverty can have far-reaching and long-lasting impacts.

The AHURI intergenerational homelessness research also confirms that people who have been placed in OOHC are much more likely to experience homelessness as an adult – aligning long-standing research that shows young people who have been in OOHC are at greater risk of youth homelessness than most young people with research showing that young people who have been in OOHC and experience homelessness as a young person, are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness as an adult.²¹

This is not just the experience in Australia; it is confirmed by research in the UK, Canada and the USA. Vulnerability to homelessness as an adult is much more likely to occur where there several childhood vulnerabilities such as poverty, living in social housing, family problems and youth homelessness, with people much more likely to experience homelessness as an adult, if they experienced an out-of-home placement and homelessness in childhood.²²

Preventing or reducing the impact of homelessness for children and young people will have life-long benefits to those individuals and alleviate the long-term demand pressures on the adult homelessness service system, as well as the health, mental health and social welfare systems.

¹⁹ Flatau, P., et al. (2013). *Lifetime and intergenerational experiences of homelessness in Australia*, AHURI Final Report No 200. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

²⁰ AIHW (2022).

²¹ Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie, D. (1998). *Youth homelessness: Early intervention and prevention*, Australian Centre for Equity through Education; Chamberlain, C. and Johnson, G. (2013). *Pathways into Adult Homelessness*, *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, Issue 1.

²² Anderson J. and Christian, J. (2003). *Causes of homelessness in the UK: a dynamic analysis*, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 13, Issue 2; Collins, S (2013) *From homeless teen to chronically homeless adult*, *Critical Social Work*, Volume 14, Issue 2; Koegel, P., et al. (2011). *Childhood risk factors for homelessness*, *American Journal of Public Health*.

6. First Nations children and young people continue to be over represented in homelessness system

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unaccompanied children and young people make up 33% of the total number of unaccompanied children and young people presenting at SHS in NSW. Australia wide, this figure drops only slightly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people comprising up 30% of presentations to SHS.²³ Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3% of the broader population, this is a stark statistic that highlights another key area of focus for closing the gap of disadvantage between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Furthermore, the research into intergenerational homelessness highlights that the rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 69%, much higher than the non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rate of 43% – that is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are much more likely to have periods of homelessness repeated across generations of the same family. This research also found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people surveyed were more likely to have experienced homelessness prior to the age of 18 years than non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, many before the ages of 12 years.²⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are also 2.9 times more likely to be overcrowded than non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households. Over 18% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were living in overcrowded conditions on Census night 2021. While these statistics have been improving over time, overcrowding can have significant health and wellbeing consequences.²⁵ It can also be a push factor for youth homelessness as young people leave overcrowded living conditions but are unable to afford or access alternative housing.

Given these challenges, we see very little investment in Aboriginal community-owned organisations being funded to respond to the issue. Greater investment is required in new housing and service delivery models designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

Recommendation:

7. Together a standalone National C&Y Plan and new NHHA need to support new service delivery and housing models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people delivered by specialist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness services to close the gap and significantly reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness.

²³ AIHW (2022).

²⁴ Flatau, P., et al. (2013).

²⁵ AIHW (2023). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework: Summary Report July 2023*.

7. Service system failures are pushing children and young people into homelessness



7.1 Youth homelessness services are no place for children

The failures of government policies see children and young people all too often end up in the youth homelessness service system – a system that has neither been designed nor resourced to respond to these failures. Often, the failures of the service systems responsible for keeping children and young people safely housed are the reason why they seek homelessness support. These systems fail children and young people who are impacted by child abuse and neglect; DFV; poverty; and poor exits from OOH and youth justice. Too often, the children and young people impacted are ending up in the youth homelessness service system.

This results in children and young people becoming trapped in the system with no clear pathways out of homelessness based on their individual circumstances. They become 'stuck' and identified as homeless when there are other issues that are of equal concern, such as mental health, violence, abuse, neglect, education problems or the need for family mediation.²⁶

The youth homelessness service system continues to plug the gaps of other service systems without additional resources and in the absence of a government commitment for mainstream agencies to meet the responsibilities of their portfolio. The youth homelessness service system was never designed to be the end of the road for the failures of other sectors. Table 2 provides a high level analysis of the gaps and insufficiencies in the sector which put unaccompanied children and young people at risk of homelessness or cause their homelessness.

Table 2: How the current service system fails or lacks resources to respond to unaccompanied children and young people

Gaps in the current service system that put unaccompanied children and young people at risk and cause homelessness



²⁶ MacKenzie, D et al (2020). *Redesign of homelessness service system for young people*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Final Report 327; Alves, T and Roggenbuck (2021) *Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

7.2 How does Out of Home Care (OOHC) and Child Protection fail children?

Despite there being broad legislation across Australia for the State to provide temporary or long-term care for children at risk of harm, children's experiences of unaccompanied homelessness often may not, in practice, meet the high threshold to trigger child protection involvement. Most often, these children have experienced significant trauma and neglect, and end up in the youth homelessness service system.

While each Australian state and territory has child protection services that are responsible for responding to children at risk, these services respond to children whose abuse or neglect is being investigated or legally evidenced and successfully prosecuted.²⁷ What this means is that, in reality, child protection services are not available for all children who experience abuse, neglect and family breakdown. A response may only be provided where child protection services have capacity or believe a good outcome is possible, and investigative effort is often focused on the youngest children at risk, with children aged over 10 years commonly falling through the gaps. (The insidious and secretive nature of child abuse may also delay child protection involvement until children develop skills to self-report, usually when they are much older.)

One of our member agencies that provides a range of services and accommodation options for children and young people experiencing homelessness across southern NSW reports that the relevant state government department is 'currently reluctant to place children in residential out-of-home care, even when it is the most appropriate option. This leads to a situation where children over the age of 12, who are difficult to place in foster care, may be unable to obtain an appropriate child protection response.'

Many children leave a home where they are unsafe but do not meet the practised (as opposed to legislative) threshold for child protection involvement. These children usually couch surf with extended family, friends and acquaintances, or access youth homelessness services. They may also sleep rough. According to Dr Catherine Robinson, University of Tasmania, 'These children consistently go to homelessness services because they're easier to access than child protection services.'²⁸

The consequence of this is that children who experience significant trauma and neglect and do not receive a child protection response are instead receiving a 'youth homelessness response' from a service system that is overstretched and 'has not historically been designed to support unaccompanied children to resolve family breakdown and guardianship issues, nor to provide the therapeutic residential care needed in both the short-term and long-term. As such, children flounder in this system and the issues they face are often entrenched and made more complex.'²⁹

The absence of effective guardianship provided by family or the State exacerbates the precarious situation of unaccompanied children and complicates effective responses.

What is also concerning is the number of children on a care and protection order (CPO) who are accessing SHS to flee unsafe situations in the child protection system. The AIHW SHS 2021–22 data reports that of the 7,873 children on a CPO who accessed SHS across Australia last year, almost 60% (4,602) were under 10 years of age, 20% (1,604) were 10–14 years, and 21% (1,667) were 15–17 years. More than one-third were Indigenous.³⁰

Pathways into homelessness for children on care and protection orders are complex. Children who present alone may have left their home due to family violence, abuse or neglect.³¹ Children may also seek support from SHS agencies with their carers.

The most common care arrangement for the majority (67%) of these children was parents. Most clients aged 0–9 years had parents as their care arrangement (77%). Compared with children who accessed only SHS, children who accessed both child protection and SHS were more likely to have experienced DFV (53%, compared with 44%).³²

²⁷ Robinson, C. (2023a). *Ending Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness in Australia*, Parity, Vol 36 No 2, pp 59–62.

²⁸ Robinson, C. (2023) *Yes, we see you. Why a national plan for homelessness must make thousands of children on their own a priority*, The Conversation.

²⁹ Robinson, C. (2023a).

³⁰ AIHW (2022).

³¹ Noble-Carr, D. & Trew S. (2018). *'Nowhere to go': investigating homelessness experiences of 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory*, Australian Catholic University.

³² AIHW (2022).

7.3 how does existing policy fail unaccompanied children and young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence?

The Australian Government has failed to respond to unaccompanied children and young people experiencing family and/or domestic violence in its National DFVP, and this has trickled down to the state and territory DFSVPs.

The Australian Government heralded this National DFSVP as a key mechanism to end gendered violence in one generation. However, on reading the document, it is clear there is a massive gap in responses for unaccompanied children and young people. Page 40 provides an infographic titled: (see here - [National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 \(dss.gov.au\)](#)) and the absence of young women is stark.

It also appears that the government rushed the inclusion of 'children and young people in their own right' into the plan given there is no context or nuance in the narrative about this cohort. Further, the SHS sector (at least in NSW) has always used the term 'children and young people in their own right' to indicate that children and young people who accompany their parents/caregivers into a service should not be seen as an appendage to them and should be provided a response and case plan 'in their own right'.

A child or young person seeking a service because of DFV needs a different response because of their age, experience and vulnerability than an older woman seeking a service with her children for the same reason. In addition, there are barriers for young women accessing DFV crisis accommodation and services, the main one being that their age makes them ineligible for the service.

Our youth SHS are also supporting young females who are being forced into marriages, a situation that is increasing and requiring a specialised response that is age and developmentally appropriate.

Case study: Specialised housing for young people experiencing DFV provides a safe place for Ali to choose her own path

Ali* was referred to a youth SHS and housing provider for assistance at [REDACTED] years old as she needed to leave her family home because of family violence and the threat of a forced marriage to an older man overseas who had perpetrated sexual and physical violence against her.

Ali left her family home with the help of the police and was allocated a place in specialist semi-independent transitional housing for young women who had experienced domestic and family violence, and forced marriages. Ali was supported by youth workers and with referrals to several external services such as counselling, Centrelink and employment services.

Ali suffered from [REDACTED], and was also using drugs. Due to the significant mental health stressors in her life, Ali dropped out of university. With counselling and the assistance of her youth worker, Ali set goals to work on her wellbeing, return to university and re-establish contact with her family. After two years of housing and support, Ali returned home to live with her family who had worked with her to recognise the trauma they had caused and create a safe place for her to live and return to her studies.

Source: Yfoundations Member case study, *name changed to protect privacy.

7.4 Mental health challenges for unaccompanied children and young people

The increasing prevalence of poor mental health among children and young people experiencing homelessness is a major concern.

In 2021–22, of the 85,200 clients with a current mental health issue who received support from SHS in Australia, just over 30% (26,016) were children and young people aged between 10–24 years: 16,321 were aged between 18–24 years, 6,157 between 15–17 years and 3,538 between 10–14 years.³³

In NSW, this proportion is higher with a staggering 39% (9,968) of all clients with a current mental health issue being children and young people aged between 10–24 years: 5,790 were aged between 18–24 years, 2,655 between 15–17 years, and 1,523 between 10–14 years.³⁴

Across Australia, of the 39,300 young people aged 15–24 years who presented alone to an SHS agency in 2021–22, 48% had a current mental health issue. In NSW, most disturbingly, that figure climbs to 54.4% (7,023) of the 12,911 young people aged 15–24 years who presented alone to an SHS agency.³⁵

The absence of safe and secure accommodation, compounded by poor health, financial limitations and social isolation, has ongoing negative effects on young people’s mental health and general wellbeing. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for young people experiencing homelessness to develop unsafe coping strategies (for example, drug and alcohol dependencies) in response to the trauma and daily struggles.

Nationally, of young people presenting to an SHS requiring mental health support, 33.5% did not receive that support or referral.³⁶

Yfoundations knows that mental health services are already stretched for children and young people who are housed and not at risk of homelessness. We have heard young people, particularly in the regions, saying they are having to wait for months before they can get a mental health assessment, let alone treatment and care, and these are young people who are experiencing suicidal ideation or self-harming.

Further, children who are experiencing homelessness and not picked up by child protection or are not in OOHC are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges. According to Dr Catherine Robinson, there is no research nationally that focuses in depth on the mental health experiences and needs of unaccompanied homeless children, but existing work points to extreme mental health challenges. Dr Robinson’s research focusing on unaccompanied children (aged 10–17 years) in Tasmania details the mental health struggles of children who experience unaccompanied homelessness. It also offers an account of the stress and frustration experienced by the dedicated professional workforce who are left holding this group of children in services not designed to meet their needs and who all report struggling to respond to the complex and competing needs presented by this cohort.³⁷

Dr Robinson found that the lack of moderate to severe and complex mental health service provision in Tasmania has particularly negative ramifications for unaccompanied homeless children who commonly experience mental ill-health in the context of a lack of effective guardianship or independent income, unstable accommodation, and cumulative trajectories of child and adolescent adversity, including poor physical health, abuse, neglect, bullying, grief, and sexual and physical violence.³⁸

Case study: Housing options and tailored mental health and social supports provide Sam a pathway to independence

Sam* was [REDACTED] years old when he was unable to return home because of domestic violence and was referred to a youth SHS and housing provider for support. Sam was already connected to the youth justice system for a string of criminal offences [REDACTED], and had no family to take him in. Sam had experienced a childhood of trauma as a result of domestic violence in his family home and abuse within a sports coaching environment. He was angry, distrustful and using a number of different drugs regularly.

³³ AIHW (2022).

³⁴ AIHW (2022) Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011–12 to 2021–22. Canberra.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ AIHW (2022).

³⁷ Robinson, C. (2022). *Better, Bigger, Stronger: Responding to the Mental Health Care Needs of Unaccompanied Homeless Children in Tasmania*. University Of Tasmania.

³⁸ Ibid.

Sam was initially supported for 28 days in intensive crisis accommodation, then transitioned into a semi-independent transitional housing program and then into an independent housing program. This wasn't a smooth ride or linear process, with the specialist homelessness service working with Sam through the ups and downs, including continuing drug use, criminal behaviour, time in youth detention, declining mental health and a suicide attempt.

The support Sam needed was tailored to his needs, including specialised therapy and counselling, independent living skills and mental health. Sam was supported over a ■■■-year period with the level and type of support changing to meet his needs, and type of supported housing changing to match his capacity for independent living.

Sam has now finished a TAFE course, is working and also living independently with his partner in affordable housing managed by a specialist youth community housing provider.

*Source: Yfoundations Member case study, *name changed to protect privacy.*

7.5 How does the youth justice system contribute to youth homelessness?

The relationship between young people experiencing homelessness and incarceration is bi-directional; homelessness can increase the risk of incarceration, and incarceration can increase the risk of homelessness.³⁹ This relationship is due to intersectional risk factors, namely experiences with DFV, mental ill-health, alcohol and other drug use, and negative peer associations. Any experience with these risk factors can increase a young person's likelihood of both experiencing homelessness and incarceration. Young people exiting youth justice settings are vulnerable to cycles of homelessness and detention, in 2021-22, 1,530 children and young people aged 10-23 exiting custodial arrangements received support from SHS.⁴⁰ Young people are more likely to experience homelessness upon leaving youth justice settings due to difficulty securing accommodation, and loss of family and/or social supports.

Following an arrest, young people additionally face unique barriers to accessing bail, namely lack of accommodation and/or the absence of a guardian. Section 28 of the Bail Act 2013 (NSW) was implemented to prevent youth from exiting detection into homelessness. The Bail Act stipulates that bail release is dependent on having suitable accommodation, which in turn means children and young people experiencing homelessness or unable to return home, end up in detention until their court date. This experience, even if brief, can increase their vulnerability to the factors mentioned previously, such as mental-ill health.

There is a dire need to address both the pathways in and out of youth justice in any plan to end youth homelessness in Australia. Addressing the relationships between youth homelessness and youth incarceration requires a holistic approach that addresses the available support services, social security, mental health and AOD services, affordable housing, youth DFV services and policy surrounding youth justice.

7.6 Serious and concerning service system gaps in regional areas

We often hear from our membership base that SHS in non-metropolitan areas face considerable barriers to providing specialised and integrated responses to young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This is due to significant gaps in local services systems: a lack or complete absence of youth-specific crisis and medium-term accommodation, limited and often inaccessible mainstream services, and transport difficulties, as well as staffing issues. As SHS have finite resources and capabilities to provide the required specialised responses, integrated responses are not possible without access to external mainstream services.

Yfoundations undertook regional youth homelessness forums in 2022 to hear from services in the Northern Rivers, Riverina and Orana regions respectively. Overstretched and at times frustrated service providers articulated their experiences of being unable to provide young people with the support they require.

The most common theme was the lack of appropriate mental health services for young people. Services reported an overall lack of psychologists for young people requiring mental health intervention, as well as crucial gaps between traditional mental health service providers and community child and adolescent mental health services

³⁹ MacKenzie D, Flatau P, Steen A and Thielking M (2016). *The cost of youth homelessness in Australia* — research briefing, Australia Policy Online.

⁴⁰ AIHW (2022).

due to them being tailored towards differing risk levels. This leaves medium-risk level young people without access to appropriate services.⁴¹

In addition, the importance of early intervention and access to preventative mental health services, intergenerational support and therapeutic interventions to prevent presentations of young people in crisis at emergency departments was highlighted by services. This discussion reveals that during a time when the pandemic, cost of living and housing crises have taken a toll on the mental health of young people in the regions, the most vulnerable are not able to access the specialised mental health support they require.⁴²

The issues and gaps explored above contribute to a critical situation that is disrupting the social fabric of our regions: vulnerable young people requiring accommodation or specialised support are unable to get it and instead are forced into transience, having to travel 'up to 9 hours' away from their community and support systems for temporary and crisis accommodation or services. This can often be traumatising, disrupting belonging and leading to further social isolation.

According to one of our member agencies that provides a range of services and accommodation options for children and young people experiencing homelessness across southern NSW, a major issue that follows on from the lack of regionally-based support services is that when young people who cannot access SHS where they live or who are couch surfing move around, they have difficulty maintaining connections with education and their community. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who need to maintain cultural links with country but are forced to move off country, affecting community kinship and mental health, and further exacerbating intergenerational trauma.

This highlights the need for greater support for youth SHS outside of major metropolitan areas to enable young people to maintain their connections.

7.7 Inadequate statutory support payments for young people

Currently, the primary statutory income payment for young people, Youth Allowance, is just a little over \$40 a day.⁴³ Despite some small recent increases in the rate of the Youth Allowance payment, it continues to be so low that it places young people who are solely reliant on a Youth Allowance payment \$187.60 per week below the poverty line.⁴⁴

Even with the latest increase for eligible recipients and yearly indexation, Youth Allowance combined with the Commonwealth Rent Assistance payment has not lifted to keep pace with the increasing cost of private rental properties. In the 2021 Census, over 131,000 young people aged 24 and under received Commonwealth Rent Assistance, and 60.2% of them were still under rental stress.

Recommendation:

8. The Australian Government should review income support payments for young people (Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance) to ensure payments provide a sufficient level of income for young people living independently to cover their housing and living costs. This review should also include prioritising faster processing times for young people who are homeless and need immediate access to income support.

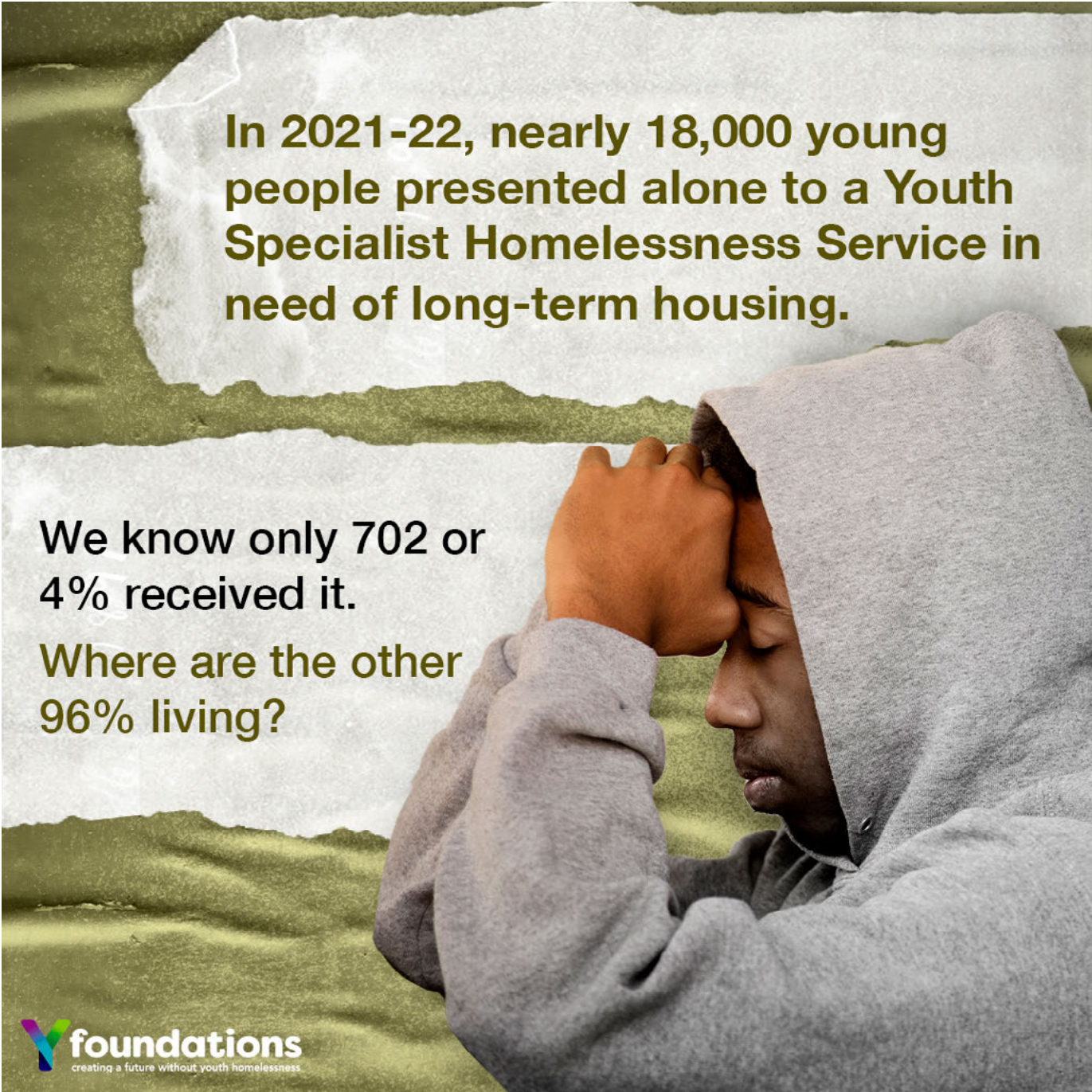
⁴¹ Yfoundations (2022). *Regional Youth Homelessness Forum Consultation Report*, p. 5

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Rate from 20 September 2023 for a single young person (no children) living away from home.

⁴⁴ Poverty line defined by the Australian Council of Social Services as \$489 per week for a single person in March 2023.

8. Housing for Young People



In 2021-22, nearly 18,000 young people presented alone to a Youth Specialist Homelessness Service in need of long-term housing.

We know only 702 or 4% received it.

Where are the other 96% living?



Access to appropriate housing is fundamental to an effective service system response to unaccompanied child and youth homelessness. There is not enough child-specific and young people specific supported housing to enable rapid rehousing responses when homelessness does occur. In addition, the inaccessible nature of the private rental market and limited supply of social and affordable housing impacts the longer-term success of young people who have experienced homelessness to transition sustainably to independence and not experience homelessness again later in life.

8.1 Priority is safety and access to appropriate child and youth specific housing and support

When children and young people find themselves homeless, we need a diverse range of supported housing models to draw on that enables us to rapidly house them safely with appropriate support.

Safety is the first priority when housing a child or young person. Then it's possible to focus on working with the child or young person to identify the best long-term housing solution they may seek to move to over time if required, appropriate to their age, level of development and capacity for independent living.

Often children and young people don't need long-term housing solutions. With time-limited housing and the right tailored support, they can move on to the right next step – whether that is returning to family or, for young people, moving into their own independent housing. However, given the inherent vulnerabilities of children and young people, this housing needs to be separate from housing for the adult homeless population.

A Housing First model – where allocating housing is the first response – combined with wrap around supports to assist the person to sustain their tenancy is a very effective adult homelessness response. However, this is not always the right response for young people.

For young people, we have well established youth specific housing models and support practice frameworks that work to set them up for independent living. We know these models work well where the housing provided is high quality and in the right location, and the support services are adequately funded to address the level and complexities of support required.

The right model at the initial point of being housed may be a short-term option with high levels of support, allowing for a transition to other forms of accommodation over time or a medium- to long-term option with lower levels of support. Responses should be focused on flexibility, so services are best able to respond to the individual needs of young people and ensure they are able to support a young person to have agency in setting and meeting their own housing goals.

The considerations for what type of model may be appropriate include:

- age
- level of development / skills for independent living
- health and mental health status
- type and availability of support services
- income level and capacity to participate in employment
- longer-term housing and independent living aims.

There are currently a number of youth specific housing models that operate on different policy settings to support young people with a diverse range of housing and support needs. The following table sets out the key models operating in NSW.

Housing model	Crisis		Medium term	Transitional		
Subset	Refuge	Self-contained units	(or semi-independent)	Standard	Transitional Housing Plus	Youth Foyers
Eligibility	At risk of homelessness or homeless	At risk of homelessness or homeless	Homeless + need for additional support (life skills) and/or development (maturity) to develop capacity to sustain tenancy	Homeless + capacity to sustain tenancy with support	Homeless + capacity to sustain tenancy with support + commitment to education, training & employment	Homeless + capacity to sustain tenancy with support + commitment to education, training & employment + sign up to 'Foyer Deal'
Age	Varies	16-25 years	Varies, priority for 16-18 years	16-25 years	16-25 years	Varies
Length of tenure	0-3 months*	0-3 months*	12-24 months	Up to 18 months	Up to 5 years	12-24 months
Property type	Rooms with shared living e.g. kitchen	Units with some shared living spaces	Rooms or units with shared living	Self-contained dwellings, includes some share housing	Self-contained dwellings, includes some share housing	Self-contained units with shared living spaces
SHS support type	24/7 staffing or daily on-site with nights on-call	Daily on-site with nights on-call	24/7 staffing or daily on-site with nights on-call	Independent living with outreach support	Independent living with outreach support	Can be 24/7 staffing or daily on-site with nights on-call
Support practice (person centred, trauma informed)	Supporting young people to stabilise and dealing with immediate crisis of homelessness and other matters that may be presenting for them.	Supporting young people to stabilise and dealing with immediate crisis of homelessness and other matters that may be presenting for them.	Building basic living skills to sustain a tenancy and move towards independent living.	Developing independent living capacity and planning a sustainable exit to long term housing.	Pathways to independence through training, education and employment.	Pathways to independence through training, education and employment. Specialised accreditation through the Foyer Foundation.

* Can be longer when there are limited exit options

While these models provide a range of options to meet young people's needs, there is not enough overall supply to meet demand, and not a diversity of options in all locations in NSW where there is a need.

Recommendation:

9. The standalone National C&Y Plan should recognise that investment is required in a range of specialised youth supported housing and long-term housing models to respond flexibly to the housing and development needs of young people experiencing homelessness – a one size fits all approach will not be effective as 'Housing First' is not necessarily the best model for all young people.

8.2 Significant investment is required in youth specific supported housing models

The *NHHP Issues Paper* identifies that in '2021, 37% of all homeless people were aged 24 or younger'. This signifies the scale of the issue that needs to be addressed. To tackle the issue, we are advocating for a minimum 15% of the Australian Government's total housing investment funds to be dedicated to a diverse range of supported housing options for unaccompanied children and young people who experience homelessness.

We estimate that nationally, as a minimum, we have a shortfall of at least 12,750 units⁴⁵ of supported housing for young people. This is based on the number of young people who present at SHS needing housing and are not able to access a safe place to stay. To address this, an investment of \$4.5 billion⁴⁶ would be required to ensure a rapid housing response is available for homeless young people in need.

Recommendation:

10. That the new NHHA includes clear commitments for funding housing for children and young people who experience homelessness - 15% of new capital funding commitments should be allocated to youth specific supported housing models.

Case study: Access to stable housing options is key to successful transitions to independence

Charlie* is [REDACTED] years old and lives in [REDACTED]. This year they stayed in a crisis accommodation refuge for three months as it was the only housing choice they could find, other than sleeping rough. While they were living in the refuge, they looked for private rental accommodation but kept being rejected because of the overall high market demand for rental properties. Charlie was also at a disadvantage as they were unemployed with no rental history and most likely discriminated due to their age.

Charlie has a childhood history of trauma and abuse and struggled with mental health issues – the ongoing rejection from private real estate agents and housing instability took a toll on their mental health. Their depression deepened, thoughts of self-harm increased and self-motivation towards work and study declined. Charlie was supported by youth workers at an SHS to learn independent living skills and to consider the housing options best for them.

Youth Workers discussed with Charlie the potential to move into transitional housing. The possibility of living independently in transitional housing was a real motivation for Charlie and they quickly re-engaged with employment and found a job. Before a transitional housing property became vacant, Charlie was successful in moving into a private rental property with another young person. Since moving in, Charlie has retained their employment and is looking for new job opportunities that better suit their goals, is considering studying and is much less socially isolated.

*Source: Yfoundations Member case study, *name changed to protect privacy.*

⁴⁵ AIHW SHS Annual Report 2021–22 data identifies that 8,516 young people presenting alone at an SHS seeking short-term or emergency accommodation were not housed immediately by that SHS service. While 1,924 were referred on to another service and 6,592 were not immediately housed or referred, we don't know what happened regarding their housing. If we assume they need supported housing for an 18-month period to get them back on track, this equates to needing 12,774 additional rooms in shared accommodation or dwellings. While this is an imperfect estimation of demand levels, we do know other figures, such as young people couch surfing, are seriously under reported.

⁴⁶ Assuming \$350K cost per new dwelling, assuming smaller studio dwellings to meet needs of mostly single people and some shared accommodation models.

8.3 Housing exit options for young people are needed for successful transitions to independent living

A key issue for the success of supported housing models is having a sufficient supply of housing that is appropriate and affordable for young people to move to at the end of their tenure. The lack of supply is a significant issue and results in an inefficient homelessness response system as young people remain in higher cost, supported models longer than they need and youth SHS spend more of their time trying to support young people to find affordable rental options to exit to.

Traditionally, social housing has not been a housing option for young people exiting supported accommodation due to the priority focus on housing older people with long-term housing needs. In 2022, only 2.7% of social housing (across public and community housing) head tenants were aged 15–24 years⁴⁷. SHS providers know they will only rarely, and with much advocacy, be able to support a young person to access a social housing home.

Many young people who are supported through the homelessness system do not require social housing as a long-term housing option as they have been supported to enter the workforce and have capacity to cover private rental market costs in shared housing and, in some circumstances, affordable rental housing (although they are often under housing stress). These young people would benefit from access to social housing for a medium-term period while they study or finish an apprenticeship as they are unable to rely on their families to support them during this period.

There are also young people who would significantly benefit from access to long-term social housing, including young people managing a long-term mental health diagnosis or living with disability. These groups of young people should be given a priority housing allocation category for social housing with a partnership arrangement put in place to support smooth transitions from SHS support to living in social housing.

Recommendation:

11. That the new NHHA set a target for 15% of social and affordable housing delivered by community housing providers and state housing agencies to be priority allocated to support young people exit from supported housing.

8.4 Housing providers are disincentivised to house young people in social and affordable housing

Young people experiencing homelessness and presenting for housing assistance at an SHS, community housing provider or public housing agency generally have no current form of income or are receiving the lowest statutory benefit payment from the Australian Government, i.e. Youth Allowance.

For young people, having no income or the lowest form of income, and very likely no savings, can act as a barrier or disincentive for mainstream community housing providers to house them for the following reasons:

- Operational policies/practice that do not allow for housing someone with a free rent period or alternatively do not offer a rent payback program when a person has no income. This also applies when a community housing provider requires an upfront rental bond and does not offer a payback scheme.
- Concern that the young person will not be able to sustain the tenancy because they do not have an income, even if it is only for a short period (being able to 'sustain a tenancy' is a key requirement for allocation to social housing).
- Operational policies/practices that aim to fill vacancies within the shortest timeframe and will not keep a vacancy free while a young person resolves their income status with Centrelink, even if they are the highest priority allocation.
- Income based social housing rents (25–30% of income plus 100% of any Commonwealth Rent Assistance payment) that are paid by young people are very low due to the nature of the low value of Youth Allowance payments. In most cases, the rent paid by a young person on Youth Allowance would not cover the operational costs of providing the housing (e.g. tenancy management, maintenance, insurance costs, etc.).
- Discount to market affordable housing rent setting (74.9% of 80% of market rent) is generally unaffordable to young people. The starting market rent is so high that a discount of 20% or 25% is not sufficient to generate rents affordable to young people on Youth Allowance, working in apprenticeships, or in the early stages of their career.

⁴⁷ AIHW (2023). *Housing assistance in Australia*.

In addition, government housing programs that prioritise funding to community housing providers that leverage the highest level of equity or debt finance also act as a disincentive to housing young people. It is understandable why governments have been prioritising this approach for the last 15 years as it enables them to deliver more social and affordable housing for less money. However, as young people do not have sufficient incomes to generate an operating surplus in both social and affordable housing, they cannot be sustainably housed long term in this model by community housing providers without additional financial support to cover the required debt repayments.

8.5 The existing social and affordable housing system can be redesigned to better support young people

A review of current policy settings for social housing to determine how policy changes could better support young people who have experienced homelessness to sustainably transition to living independently would be beneficial to determine what is possible within the current system to better meet the needs of young people. This will be a key factor in reducing the number of young people who experience homelessness who then go on to experience homelessness as an adult, often multiple times.

A review of policy settings for affordable rental housing would also be beneficial to determine if there is capacity to adopt an adjusted rent setting approach to a rate affordable to young people on low incomes, such as those who are studying, on apprenticeships or in early career roles. This would open an increased supply of rental options to young people struggling to access rental accommodation that they can afford.

In addition, the policy settings for a range of private rental products and supports provided at a state or territory government level would also benefit from review. This is to ensure the level of subsidy or funding are sufficient to cover the cost of private rental market tenancies given significant price increases, and the program design is attractive to private landlords. This is particularly important for products that aim to support young people to access the private rental market as young people are often discriminated against because of their lack of rental history.

Recommendations:

- 12.** State and territory governments should review existing policy settings (eligibility, tenure and rent) for social and affordable housing to remove barriers to access and provide long term housing options that are affordable to young people exiting supported accommodation.
- 13.** State and territory governments should review existing policy setting for private rental assistance products (i.e. rental bond support or rent subsidies) that support young people to live independently in the private rental market to ensure the product is fit for purpose and can be realistically implemented with private landlords.

8.6 Approach to planning and delivering more youth housing

The development of a standalone National C&Y Plan can provide the appropriate framework for reviewing the need for different supported housing models at a local and regional level to inform a national investment program. This would allow for input from the lived experiences of young people who have experienced homelessness, the knowledge of youth SHS, and the perspectives of community housing providers, other support services and government agencies to inform what type and level of investment are required.

This approach would allow for the comprehensive development of a national investment program for youth supported housing that covers:

- analysis of need
- type of supported housing models required
- best location/s
- priorities for investment over time.

Recommendation:

- 14.** A collaborative, co-design approach at a regional level should be undertaken to develop an investment program for youth supported housing as part of the standalone National C&Y Plan that sets out the type of models required, best locations for investment and priorities for investment over time.

9. Industrial and funding issues that government must consider in any future policies and plans

9.1 Specialist homelessness services (SHS) funding and indexation

A standalone National C&Y Plan will provide an opportunity for an overhaul of the funding model for homelessness services. In NSW, youth SHS have undertaken substantial work with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice on the funding base for crisis and medium-term homelessness services, and this could be used as the basis for developing better funding formulas.

Indexation is also a major issue within the SHS industry that needs to be addressed in a standalone National C&Y Plan. Over a long period of time, the Australian Government has not provided a reasonable level of indexation for homelessness services and programs. Most staff in the SHS industry are paid under award conditions, which appropriately sets a minimum rate staff must get paid. Therefore, indexation needs to be provided at a level that fully covers national wage case indexation decisions, award changes, superannuation and workers compensation insurance costs. For the wage components of the grant (usually based on approx. 70% to 80% of service delivery grants) an adequate amount for indexation based on movement in the consumer price index is also required.

Another significant issue posing challenges for the administration of homelessness services is the ever-expanding demands to collect more data. While high-quality data is important for program evaluation, it needs to be recognised that data collection takes time and can divert organisational resources away from providing direct care. A standalone National C&Y Plan could establish a meaningful minimum data set for use across the sector, reducing the need for multiple overlapping data collection systems.

Recommendations:

- 15.** A standalone National C&Y Plan should commit to improve Commonwealth-State program coordination by outlining how the Australian Government will contribute its full share to joint-funded programs.
- 16.** The new NHHA must ensure that all housing and homelessness programs funded by the Australian Government and state and territory governments, have provision for adequate indexation that accounts for the full increase in the cost of delivering services, including National Wage Case decisions and CPI.

9.2 Investment in a skilled and well paid SHS industry workforce

The homelessness services sector makes significant demands on its workforce that works with people who are experiencing trauma and negotiate challenging situations on a daily basis. Workers use their skills and experience to assist clients to make potentially traumatising disclosures about what has happened to them and to de-escalate situations when tensions are running high. Despite the essential and demanding nature of the job, wages are low and this contributes to difficulty in attracting and retaining staff.

SHS across Australia are having difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. The sector needs stable funding arrangements and funding arrangements that reflect the true cost of delivering services. The recent National Wage Case decision provided a welcome boost to staff wages in the sector but without adequate indexation to cover these increased costs, the result is further pressure on services.

Red tape and onerous requirements to secure employment in what is a low-paid industry are further barriers to recruiting enough staff. In NSW, for example, employment in a statutory out-of-home care setting now requires registration with a Carers Register. This is in addition to existing Working With Children and Police Checks, and compliance with organisational employment policies.

Though a well-intentioned policy intended to protect children in statutory care from abuse, the need for staff to be registered prior to employment adds yet another regulatory burden to what is already a difficult recruitment environment. As part of their registration, staff in statutory care in NSW are expected to have diploma-level qualifications but the pay is not commensurate with this and no additional pay is available based on these higher qualifications.

While professionalisation is one mechanism for recognising the high-level skills required to work in youth homelessness and statutory care, there needs to be some incentive for staff and/or a system to support them to achieve these qualifications. Currently, SHS cover the cost for training staff to this higher level without any guarantee that the staff will remain with the employer.

Recommendation:

- 17.** The new NHHA must take seriously the workforce challenges for the SHS industry through better funding, adequate indexation and longer contract terms enable better staff retention.

Appendix 1 – the Data

The 2021 Census

Nearly 38% of people experiencing homelessness in the 2021 Census were under 24 years old.

Of the 122,494 people experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2021:

- nearly a quarter (23%) of all people experiencing homelessness were aged 12–24 years (28,204 people)
- 17,646 (14.4%) were aged under 12 years.
- 47,871 children and young people (0-24) experience homelessness on any given night.
- Homelessness numbers have increased by 1.9% (521 people) for 12-24 year olds since the 2016 census.
- The highest rates of homelessness was for those in the 19-24 cohort (91 people per 10,000).
- Of the 24,930 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness, over one-quarter (26.3%) or 6545 were 12-24 years old.
- Just over half (50.6%) were in severely overcrowded dwellings – this represents 30% of the total population experiencing homelessness in severely crowded dwellings.
- Almost one-quarter (23.4%) were in supported accommodation for people experiencing homelessness.
- Approximately 1 in 11 (or 9%), were staying temporarily in other households (i.e. couch surfing).
- Almost 13% were in boarding houses.
- Just over 2% were living in improvised dwellings or tents, or sleeping out.⁴⁸

The ABS has previously identified that youth homelessness is underestimated in the Census due to the difficulties of counting those who are couch surfing, a dominant form of homelessness for young people (ABS 2012).

Specialist Homelessness Service Data

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) – Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) 2022 Report

- In Australia 2021-22, there were almost 40,000 (39,900) children and young people (15-24) presenting alone to SHS.
- A further 3,260 children aged 10–14 years also came to homelessness services unaccompanied.
- Housing affordability was the most common reason for young people seeking assistance (19%), closely followed by DFV (16%).
- 48% of young people (15-24) presenting alone to SHS had a current mental health issue, and 35% had experienced DFV. However, anecdotally we know that those experiencing DFV is more likely to be in the range of 80-100%.
- 28% of young people presenting alone to SHS were couch surfing at the beginning of their support.

⁴⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness 2021