



Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

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Executive summary

The challenge

Last year, over 15,000 young people in Victoria sought support from Specialist Homelessness Services (AIHW 2019). There are countless others who are couch surfing and are not yet known to services.

Finding secure housing is one of the many challenges faced by young people who are homeless. Trauma, family violence, and the development of mental health issues, are significant factors that contribute to a young person becoming homeless.

Homelessness during adolescence means disconnection from supportive and nurturing relationships with parents or caregivers that enable young people to build the confidence and capability to transition to adulthood. The absence of these supports in early adulthood creates a high-pressure environment in which young people are forced into survival mode, and don't have the luxury of years to develop coping strategies, emotional regulation and problem solving skills.

These challenges are further compounded by barriers to accessing mental health and wellbeing supports, education, training and stable incomes once they enter homelessness.

This submission

This submission brings together the perspectives of young people with lived experience of homelessness, with the insights of Melbourne City Mission (MCM) homelessness practitioners, and analysis of current data and research.

It aims to build a deeper understanding of young people's experiences of homelessness in Victoria, and address how Victoria's systems can better support young people experiencing homelessness to reach their full potential.

MCM welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. This submission focuses on youth homelessness, and the distinct set of challenges that vulnerable young people face that require a differentiated response to adult homelessness. This submission defines young people as aged 15 to 24¹.

Key findings

Young people identified a range of different pathways into homelessness

The breakdown of family relationships is at the centre of most cases of youth homelessness, however, the underlying causes of family conflict can be driven by a wide range of intersecting issues. Family violence, families being unable to cope with a young person's mental health or behavioural issues, conflict over a young person's identity including sexual preferences or gender

¹ Consistent with legislation and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) policy, children under 15 years of age who are experiencing homelessness are the responsibility of DHHS, not the Specialist Homelessness Service System.

identity, parental mental health or substance abuse issues, abuse or neglect that leads to a young person being in Out of Home Care are all contributing issues.

Young people reported being ‘trapped’ in the homelessness system

Consultations with young people revealed a strong sense of frustration with the homelessness system. Many of the young people had been staying in different refuges for months, with some spending years between refuges. Young people report a significant amount of transience between short-term stays and support from different services. Young people are being supported for extended periods of time in models of care that are designed for brief periods of crisis, and are unable to access the continuity of supports that they need to exit homelessness permanently. The collective resources of the Specialist Homelessness Service system are struggling to meet demand, and services are not always able to respond to the needs of young people with complex issues.

There are persistent structural barriers to young people being able to exit homelessness

The most significant barrier identified by practitioners is the lack of safe, affordable and appropriate housing options for young people to exit into – a factor that staff report has worsened in recent years. Young people experiencing homelessness are worse off in the housing market as a result of their lower income levels in terms of both Centrelink and entry level wages, barriers to accessing education and training, and challenges accessing the labour market where there are fewer entry opportunities for young people. They are further locked out from accessing supports in other service systems, including health, mental health, family violence, disability, Centrelink, as a result of being homeless.

A way forward

Despite ongoing investments in youth homelessness, the policy response over the last decade is failing to make significant inroads in ending youth homelessness and addressing the intersecting issues that cause youth homelessness.

This submission recommends five key priorities for change:

1. Coordinate a State-wide early intervention strategy to ensure that all young people across Victoria can access supports before their situations escalate to crisis and they are forced into homelessness.
2. Shift from a one-size-fits-all homelessness response, to develop a youth homelessness response that identifies and supports different levels of need and diversity within the youth homelessness cohort.
3. Develop a strategy to address the current inequity faced by young people in accessing various forms of housing.
4. Expand the range of mental health and wellbeing services available to young people experiencing homelessness and other co-occurring complexities, including trauma, Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) issues and disability.
5. Pilot new and innovative post-crisis housing and support models that have, as a clear objective, the aim of equipping young people with the capabilities and resources needed for independent living.

Introduction

Melbourne City Mission (MCM) is a community service organisation that provides a range of supports to people who are experiencing different forms of disadvantage across Melbourne.

Our vision is to contribute to a fair and just community where people have equal access to opportunities and resources. We work alongside people and communities to provide long-term, sustainable pathways away from disadvantage.

MCM has more than 90 programs which span multiple service systems, including homelessness, disability, early childhood education and care, health (home-based palliative care), mental health, justice, education and training, and employment services.

MCM provides a range of homelessness supports to young people, and adults and families, through a workforce of over 150 frontline case managers. Services provided by MCM include:

- Frontyard Youth Services – provides a range of integrated supports to young people aged 12 to 24 experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including support with housing, health, mental health, legal issues, Centrelink, employment and living skills. Frontyard operates the State-wide specialist access point for young people aged 16-24 seeking to access the Specialist Homelessness Services system, and an 18 bed CBD-based crisis accommodation service for complex young people experiencing rough sleeping.
- Four Youth Refuge programs across the Northern and Western suburbs of Melbourne which provide short-term accommodation to over 600 young people each year.
- Youth Foyer Programs that provide intensive case management and fully furnished medium-term accommodation to young people for up to 3 years.
- Early intervention programs in Sunshine, Frankston and Shepparton supporting over 200 young people to remain connected to family, school, and their community, and in housing.
- Short and long-term support to assist over 500 adults and family households to find and keep long-term housing.

Young people who are not supported to exit homelessness in their youth inevitably make their way into the adult system (Johnson & Chamberlain 2008). Addressing homelessness early in life is critical to ensure that all young people in Victoria are given the best opportunities to reach their full potential. Despite ongoing investments in youth homelessness, the policy response over the last decade is failing to make significant inroads in ending youth homelessness and addressing the intersecting issues that cause youth homelessness.

Aim of this submission

The aim of this submission is to provide the Legal and Social Issues Committee with an analysis of:

- The causes of youth homelessness as distinct from adult homelessness;

- The current state of youth homelessness in Victoria, including young people’s perspectives on pathways into homelessness and experiences of the homelessness system;
- The barriers young people face in exiting homelessness; and
- Priorities for ending youth homelessness in Victoria.

Approach

The information in this submission draws on consultation sessions with young people participating in MCM homelessness programs, staff consultation sessions and a staff survey, case studies prepared by homelessness practitioners, as well as MCM research and administrative data. Any names and identifiable details of clients have been changed to protect their privacy.

What is youth homelessness?

Youth homelessness is a complex social issue. It refers to young people aged around 12 to 24² who are without a secure place to live because their parents or caregivers are unable to provide a safe and nurturing environment. Youth homelessness is a lack of safe and secure housing and the absence of relationships of support during a critical period of development.

The causes and experiences of homelessness for young people are different from people who have their first experiences of homelessness as adults. Youth homelessness signifies:

- Disruption to healthy young adult development, and the development of independent living skills and the skills needed to navigate the labour market;
- Disruption to education and exclusion from mainstream institutions and community groups that support young people to navigate the transition to adulthood;
- Increased likelihood of having experienced traumatic adverse childhood experiences compared to adult homelessness; and
- Experiences of acute stress while homeless, including instability, poverty, exposure to violence and deprivation while young people are still developing (physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively) which can impact longer term trajectories.

Young people who experience the transience of homelessness face significant barriers to accessing supports that are flexible enough to meet their needs. As a result, young people experiencing homelessness face difficulties:

- Accessing supports to recover from early trauma and associated mental health issues;
- Developing the skills and capabilities to live as independent adults; and
- Participating in education and training and starting to explore future careers.

² There is a lack of an agreed definition on the age range of youth homelessness. Australian Census classifies youth homelessness as aged 12-24, and the Specialist Homelessness System Collection (SHSC) provides estimates of youth homelessness based on young people aged 15-24 ‘presenting alone’ to homelessness services (AIHW 2017-18).

A secure and stable home to live in is an essential step to get young people on track. Equally essential are supportive and nurturing relationships, opportunities to engage in inclusive education, access to sustainable sources of income as well as therapeutic supports. The youth homelessness sector provides and links young people in with some of these supports, however, the response falls considerably short of providing the combination, intensity and duration of support that all vulnerable young people in Victoria need to thrive.

The solution to youth homelessness is not as simple as fixes to the homelessness service sector, but about activating a range of interventions across traditionally siloed service and government portfolio areas so that the experiences of the most vulnerable young people mirror what the majority of young people experience in a secure and nurturing home environment.

The extent of youth homelessness in Victoria

Despite increased understanding of the issues facing young people, and increased investment in homelessness responses in recent years, the flow into youth homelessness in Victoria has not declined.

In Victoria, 6,373 young people were counted as homeless on 2016 Census night (ABS 2016). This represents 25% of the total 24,817 Victorian people counted as homelessness, making young people over-represented in homelessness rates compared to other age groups.

In Victoria, the rate of young people counted as homeless in the Census has remained relatively stable: 65.6 people per 10,000 of the population aged 12-24 were homeless in 2016, compared with 64.4 per 10,000 in the 2011 Census.

Census data provides a snapshot of the homelessness numbers on a given night but has its limitations. It may mask the number of couch surfers, as a young person couch surfing would look the same in the data as those who are not homeless but visiting another household on Census night (AIHW 2019).

In Victoria, 15,300 young people presented alone seeking assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services in 2017-2018 (AIHW 2019). This number has remained relatively stable since 2011-12. The rate of young people presenting to homelessness services in Victoria is 24.2 young people per 10,000 people, which is significantly higher than the national rate of 17.6 young people per 10,000. However, there's a practical limit in the number of clients that services have the capacity to support, in which case an increase in young people experiencing homelessness is not going to be identified where people are unable to access a service.

1. Understanding the drivers of youth homelessness

This section draws from young people's voices, practitioner knowledge as well as homelessness research to provide insights into the causes of youth homelessness in Victoria.

1.1 Family dysfunction and the breakdown of family relationships

“Mental illness, trauma and family violence create homelessness. Unaffordable housing maintains it.” – MCM practitioner observation.

Family dysfunction and the breakdown of family relationships is at the centre of most cases of youth homelessness, however the underlying causes of family conflict can be driven by a wide range of issues of varying severity, including (Johnson & Chamberlain 2014):

- Domineering attitudes of parents, or conflict about young people's behaviour, lifestyle, identity, including sexual preferences or gender identity;
- Parents and family members who are unable to cope with a young person's mental health or behavioural issues;
- Young people who are forced to leave as a result of parental mental health or substance abuse issues;
- Family violence – where young people are victims, witnesses, perpetrators of violence, or in some cases a combination; and
- A history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect in the home resulting in Child Protection interventions, and potentially periods of Out of Home Care.

Young people in consultations reported a mix of these issues:

- “Abuse. A large part of homelessness is just abuse from various different areas of life, whether it be home abuse or medical – physical health, mental health, because there's a lot of sh**.”
- “I was living with my family, and my family had some family problems and that's how I became homeless... My parents just pretty much kicked me out instantly, mostly my mother because she was going nuts at the time, and after I became homeless and got referred to Frontyard.”
- “DHS took my kid and I lost the plot, I got on drugs and now I'm here. I was referred here, yeah. I was homeless before that. I was living with my partner at the time, and that relationship broke down, and then it all started.”

Focus groups with young people conducted as part of a study commissioned by MCM in 2017 found that for young people, the decision to leave home was a highly considered one in response to

ongoing family conflict. Young people also came to a realisation of their own family's level of dysfunction and conflict through comparison with families of their peers (Roche & Baker 2017).

Evidence on the differences between youth and adult pathways into homelessness

An evaluation of the Melbourne Street to Home program found in the 71 participants who were experiencing chronic homelessness as adults, that half had had their first experience of homelessness when they were 18 or younger (Johnson & Chamberlain 2015). For people on this 'youth pathway', the average age they first became homeless was 13.1, whereas adults on average first became homeless at age 34.8 years.

The study identified that people on the youth pathway generally had less 'cultural capital' – including education, social skills, knowledge, self-confidence and other non-material assets – than people on the adult pathway. The two reasons given for the youth pathway participants having lower cultural capital were that:

- a higher proportion of people on the youth pathway came from 'dysfunctional' families, including 40% who had been in out of home care; and
- fewer had completed education and training – 57% did not complete year 10 or above, whereas 75% of those with their first experience of homelessness as adults completed year 10 or above.

1.2 The link between family violence, trauma and homelessness

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic experiences that can have a profound effect on a child's developing brain and body. Early, repeated abuse, neglect and adverse experiences can increase the likelihood of developmental delays, by impacting a child's ability to develop healthy attachments, regulate emotions, regulate behaviour, process information, make plans and solve problems.

ACEs have been shown to put people at increased risk of poorer lifelong outcomes in terms of mental health, health, early pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse and ability to engage with education and employment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

One in five Australian children have been exposed to three or more ACEs (Olesen et al. 2010). The Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI) study of people experiencing long-term homelessness in Melbourne found that 87% of participants had experienced childhood trauma (Johnson et al. 2011, p.9).

Family violence is a significant factor for young people entering homelessness:

- In 2018, 64% of young women and 40% of young men accessing Frontyard reported experiencing family violence (MCM 2018);
- In 2017-18, 15,800 young people who presented alone to specialist homelessness services nationally reported family violence (37%) (AIHW 2019);

- In a study of the cost of youth homelessness in Australia, nine out of ten of the homeless young people participating reported that they had seen violence at home, and more than half (56%) of the homeless young people in the sample had left home on at least one occasion because of violence between parents or guardians (Mackenzie, Flatau, Steen, & Thielking 2018).

Young people who witness or experience violence in the family home don't always get the support they need. Family violence supports are traditionally geared towards supporting women experiencing intimate partner violence. The report from Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence notes that experiences of family violence can impact on adolescence, young adulthood transitions and the establishment of independence and notes that adolescence is a life stage where there are high barriers to accessing family violence services (Victorian Government 2016). The Royal Commission found, there is a "lack of services for young people experiencing family violence" (Victorian Government 2016, p. 101).

A further significant gap identified in the Royal Commission into Family Violence was a lack of appropriate responses to adolescents who use violence. Adolescents who perpetrate family violence are usually responding to trauma or mirroring learned behaviours from home, and as such intervention programs need to be specifically designed to manage these behaviours. However, adolescents who perpetrate violence are also vulnerable to extended periods of homelessness when their behaviour targets family members, as they are removed from the home for the safety of others. These young people may then enter refuge or crisis accommodation, but without tailored behaviour change programs and targeted trauma-focused interventions, their behaviour may not de-escalate. If this occurs, the young person is likely to be exited from refuge accommodation, or – if in Out of Home Care – are more likely to lose their placements.

The impact of trauma is further compounded by difficulty accessing and receiving appropriate support (Solorio et al 2006). Therapeutic engagement is likely to improve stability and increase safety for young people, but engagement with these services is difficult due to high barriers to entry, funding and transience. As such, primary prevention opportunities are lost, as are opportunities to intervene before a young person becomes trapped in cycles of homelessness.

1.3 Prevalence of mental health issues in young people experiencing homelessness

As with Family Violence, young people experiencing homelessness experience higher rates of mental health issues compared to the general population:

- 48% of clients presenting at Frontyard self-reported having a mental health diagnosis³;
- 17,700 young people (41%) who presented alone to Specialist Homelessness Services nationally reported a mental health issue (AIHW 2019); and
- The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia research found that 53% of the homeless young people reported having been diagnosed with at least one mental health condition, whereas 34% of the comparison group (unemployed young people who were not experiencing

³ Sourced from MCM administrative data

homelessness) reported a mental health diagnosis (Mackenzie et al. 2018). Further, 57% of the homeless group were found to be experiencing very high or high psychological distress, as measured on the Kessler 10 (K10) scale. By comparison, 35% of the comparison group were experiencing high distress, and on average around 3.4% of the general Australian population fall into the category of very high psychological distress.

While poor mental health can act as a driver of homelessness, extended periods of homelessness has also been shown to erode people's mental health (Johnson, Gronda & Coutts 2008).

For many young people, mental health issues emerge as a result of, or are exacerbated by, experiences of homelessness, as well as being a cause of homelessness. The complexity of many young people's trauma and mental health presentations and how this impacts homelessness is detailed in case study 1 below which has been developed by MCM homelessness practitioners.

Case study 1: The challenge for young people with complex needs

Jason is a 24 year old client who has been known to Frontyard since the age of 17 when he exited Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) care into the homelessness system. He has cycled through the homelessness and prison systems for the past 7 years as services have struggled to support his complex presentations.

This young person would be considered as "high needs" due to complex behaviours including regular self-harm and suicidal ideation, aggression, drug use, a history of sexual offences and an intellectual disability.

Jason has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and other attachment disorders as a result of a complex history of childhood trauma. He had a brief history of incarceration in youth juvenile detention prior to referral to Frontyard and had been residing in multiple residential care homes after his long-term foster placement broke down.

Jason has been supported in multiple stays in Youth Refuge programs for extended periods of time beyond the normal 6-8 week period due to his complexities, however these have ended at times due to challenging behaviours and at times because no appropriate exit outcome has been sourced.

Homelessness services have encountered a range of barriers to getting Jason supports for:

- Frequent self-harm and suicidal behaviours – mental health services have been reluctant to engage with this young person due to deeming his emotional distress and dysregulation as "behavioural" or "situational" and as related to his inability to self-regulate or problem solve rather than being a mental health related issue.
- Disability supports – due to his limited capacity to engage in assessments designed to assess his cognitive function and therefore determine his eligibility for services.
- Significant drug use (including opiates, meth amphetamines, cannabis and alcohol) – homelessness services have received push back from drug and alcohol support services due to the young person's volatility around their mental health. Transience and

intellectual disability have also impacted on his ability to engage in drug and alcohol supports and interventions.

This young person has spent some periods of time incarcerated primarily due to family violence incidents and breaches of intervention orders. When medium to longer-term options have been sourced for him, they have broken down due to his lack of living skills, complex behaviours and relationship breakdowns.

Jason is now due to age out of Frontyard Youth Services.

Section 3 explores further the barriers that young people experiencing homelessness face in accessing mental health supports.

1.4 Young people coming from Out of Home Care are likely to have fewer protective factors and are over represented in youth homelessness

The over-representation of young people entering homelessness from the Out of Home Care system has been well documented. In the national Cost of Youth Homelessness Study, 63% of the homeless participants had been placed in Out of Home Care before the age of 18, compared with 18% of the non-homeless cohort and less than 1% of children Australia-wide (Mackenzie et al. 2018, p.11).

Data presented by DHHS in 2019 showed that in Victoria:⁴

- 32% of care leavers presented to homelessness access points (residential care 47%);
- 24% had involvement with youth justice; residential care 50%;
- Around one third of care leavers become parents within one year of leaving;
- 68% of (the above) children end up known to child protection;
- 25% reported self-harm in the previous 12 months; and
- 25% having seriously considered suicide.

A review of Frontyard intake data from 2014 to 2017 found the 18% of young people accessing Frontyard services had been in DHHS care (MCM 2019). The most vulnerable group of Frontyard clients are those who identify multiple needs at intake, including safety, drug use, mental health and legal issues. Young people who have experienced Out of Home Care are significantly over represented in this cohort, making up around 25 per cent of the 'multiple needs' cohort.

The Beyond 18 Longitudinal Study on leaving care in Victoria found that many care leavers had complex housing trajectories and high rates of mobility in the first 1–2 years after leaving care (Muir, Purtell & Hand 2019). The study found that there was variability within the leaving care population, with some finding relative stability in supported accommodation and living with former carers, while others experienced ongoing instability.

⁴ Data presented by DDHS at the Better Futures Northern Forum in November 2019.

The complexity of young people who have been in Out of Home Care is detailed in Beyond 18 (Muir et al. 2019, p.41):

“Interviews with care leavers also suggested that single variables such as placement stability were unlikely to be sufficient in themselves to explain care leavers’ life trajectories. Rather, their trajectories appeared to be the result of interactions between their pre-care life experiences, system-oriented indicators (such as the number of placements), the quality of care they received and the quality of their personal and professional relationships (see also Berridge, 2007; Rutter, 2000). For example, the interviews with young people who had experienced multiple placements indicated that this instability had severely hindered their ability to engage with school, build strong social networks or feel a sense of personal security. However, their accounts also made it clear that this instability was interconnected with past experiences of trauma, relationship breakdowns, feelings of stigma and shame, behavioural issues and involvement with youth justice.”

Traditionally a Victorian Child Protection order ends when a child or young person turns 18 (some extend to just beyond a young person’s 18th birthday). Young people often lose all support services, access to financial assistance through child protection and their housing placement when they ‘age out’ of the system.

There is a clear solution to the issue of young people exiting the Out of Home Care system into homelessness

In line with the Home Stretch Campaign, MCM supports extending the provision of care to ensure young people in state care have the support and housing they need. MCM supports that:

- young people should be able to remain in the Out of Home Care system, and in their homes, until the age of 21;
- young people should have the option to extend their care order to 21 years; and
- young people in care should have a housing entitlement until they are at least 21 years old.

To enable this, the Victorian Government should make changes to legislation – the relevant Act is Children, Youth and Families Act 2005. Specifically, the Act should be changed to allow care orders to be extended to 21 with the same entitlements including ongoing support.

1.5 Higher risk cohorts

“60% of LGBTIQ+ identifying young people also identified as ATSI or CALD.” – Clients accessing Frontyard in 2018 (in Pahor 2018, p.26).

Young people are more likely to be rejected from their families or communities when their identities or lifestyle choices are at odds with their cultural or family norms, or when they struggle to find a community that aligns with their identity. These young people are at greater risk of experiencing family conflict and are over-represented in homelessness:

- LGBTIQ+ young people
- Young mums/parents
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) young people
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) young people

Young people from these cohorts, particularly those with intersecting identities, are known to face additional layers of social exclusion and require targeted responses to ensure cultural safety and engagement with service responses:

- Indigenous respondents in the Journeys Home study spent longer homeless and were six times more likely to sleep rough or squat than non-indigenous respondents (Bevitt et al. 2015).
- Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are six to ten times more likely to be at risk of homelessness than Australian-born young people (Moore 2018).
- Lesbian, gay and bi-sexual identifying people are at least twice as likely to have experienced homelessness compared to heterosexual identifying people, and 22% of trans and gender diverse identifying young people in Australia had experienced homelessness (McNair et al. 2018).

In 2018, MCM undertook research on the rate of diverse genders and sexual orientations accessing MCM homelessness programs. Of young people being supported by the Youth Refuge and Youth Foyer programs over a two-week period, 32% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, asexual, or another diverse gender identity (Pahor 2018). The rate of trans and gender diverse young people was particularly high, with 16% of young people identifying as a gender other than male or female. In an analysis of two weeks of intake data at Frontyard, of the 53% young people who provided a response to the question on sexuality, 23% identified as a sexuality other than heterosexual, or gender diverse. Importantly, 60% of the LGBTIQ+ identifying young people also identified as ATSI or CALD.

1.6 Variation in levels of need within the youth homelessness cohort

There have been numerous attempts to develop typologies of youth homelessness that break down the different causes, pathways into and experiences of homelessness within the youth cohort. This approach enables services to develop more targeted responses to the different levels of needs of young people, moving away from one-size-fits-all solutions.

Canadian research found three categories that help to identify levels of need and appropriate interventions for young people experiencing homelessness (Gaetz 2014):

Sub-group	Characteristics and experiences	Recommended interventions
<i>Temporarily disconnected</i>	Represents a significant majority Are younger Have more stable family relations Less extensive history of homelessness Maintain some connection to school	The service response is prevention, early intervention and diversion from the homelessness system

<i>Unstably connected</i>	<p>More complicated housing history More likely to have experienced longer periods and more episodes of homelessness More likely to be disengaged from school, although are likely to still have some connection to family Unlikely to experience serious mental health or addiction issues compared to the chronically homeless group</p>	<p>Family reconnection or transitional housing programs are seen as viable responses for young people in this cohort</p>
<i>Chronically disconnected</i>	<p>Smallest group with the most complex needs More frequent homelessness service usage More likely to have experienced longer term and more frequent episodes of homelessness Have little or no connection to family More complexity in terms of mental health issues, addiction and/or diagnosed disability</p>	<p>The service response for this cohort includes comprehensive interventions and more supportive and longer-term housing programs</p>

Young people experiencing homelessness have a different set of needs to people who become homeless as adults, and within the youth cohort, different intersecting issues contribute to a young person’s individual experience of homelessness.

Building a better understanding of the diversity and different levels of need within the youth homelessness cohort in Victoria is necessary to enable supports to be targeted to young people’s needs. Understanding the causes of youth homelessness also presents an opportunity for policy-makers and practitioners to intervene early – before a young person enters into crisis.

2. The Victorian Youth Homelessness System

2.1 Structure of the Victorian Youth Homelessness Service System

The Specialist Homelessness Service System (SHSS) response incorporates four main 'arms':

1. Immediate response and entry to the system via a network of Access Points (including the provision of funding to purchase emergency accommodation when required);
2. Crisis accommodation via funded congregate facilities (Refuge programs) for a range of cohorts;
3. Support response via transitional support that offers short, medium and longer term case-management often in conjunction with transitional housing; and
4. Low cost temporary housing via transitional housing.

The system also includes a funding stream called the Private Rental Access Program that provides brokerage funding to support people financially to establish and maintain private rental.

Young people can access the system at any of the Access Points, but traditionally a separate youth system runs parallel to the mainstream system, with a youth specific Access Point operating from Frontyard in Melbourne's Central Business District (CBD), as well as separate youth specific responses being offered at different Access Points.

There is a network of crisis accommodation facilities or Youth Refuge programs, that are located across Victoria providing 184 crisis beds for young people aged 16-24 years. There is also a specific allocation of transitional support resources for young people. In addition to this, young people also have access to Youth Foyer programs, which are located in select areas across the state.

2.2 Client voice: what young people say about homelessness in Victoria

Consultations with young people revealed a strong sense of frustration with the homelessness system. Many of the young people had been staying in different refuges for months, with some spending years between refuges. Young people report a significant amount of transience between short-term stays and support from different services.

Some examples of young people's pathways through the homelessness system include:

- "I went to VincentCare they said go to Salvo's, they're better off. They went, ok, here's a hotel for the night and here's food. Come back in a couple of days and we'll see what we can get. Couple of days of doing that and going to Frontyard, they got a spot in a Refuge. I got a three day stay at a hotel, three different hotels, before I got to Refuge. I was by myself at the hotel. Salvation Army just went right, we've got this hotel for tonight go there, and then I got a week stay at a refuge. Just like 'come back when this stay finishes and we'll see what we can find you next.' It's very stressful. Especially that last day when you're leaving, because

it's usually three days that they'll do at a time, and that last day that you're leaving you don't really know where you're going after that, it's very, very stressful going back in.

- "I went to Frontyard. For me I had been living with my partner because my parents didn't want me back, but I wasn't able to get Centrelink so I wasn't able to help pay rent and eventually it went to sh** just because money kept getting used up, I went through all my savings. And I was studying full-time but I just couldn't prove my independence, even though I did when I was 16, and then it was four months of couch surfing before getting into the refuge. My sister told me about Frontyard, she was like 'hey there's this new service Frontyard. Go there.' And I was like yeah ok cool, I pretty much spent like every single day in Frontyard for four months, just being engaged in programs and speaking to workers just to give me something to do. And also getting looked at by doctors because being homeless you tend to injure yourself a lot. I had been couch surfing between all of my high school friends, but if I didn't have that I literally had no-one."
- "I went from Frontyard to Salvo's to Frontyard to here [MCM Youth Refuge program]. I just went to Frontyard because, like, someone had told me that it existed so I went there and waited for like, literal months for any help whatsoever whilst I was being very badly abused, and then all of a sudden things started happening when I just left there and I was couch surfing elsewhere again. I had already left home at this point because of abuse, where I was staying there was also a lot of abuse. That was with a friend and friend's family. We are no longer friends. Then I was with Frontyard for a while, and couch surfing at different places, and then things got really bad with abuse in both of those places, and I ended up being like well there's nowhere else so I went to Frontyard."
- "I've been homeless for 2 years and I'm still in a Refuge. So everything's pretty slow and no one's jumping in to help you."

Supporting young people for extended periods of time in models of care designed for brief periods of crisis is at odds with the continuity of supports, and goal planning that young people experiencing homelessness need. It is detrimental to young people who are seeking security and stability, and is a costly approach for governments (Northern and Western Homelessness Networks 2019).

Young people expressed significant frustration with the homelessness system:

- "It's a trap. It's not like people want to live this life."
- "It sucks. It's a trap"
- "Waiting lists and waiting lists. Just keeping you in the cycle doing nothing. It's very hard to get out of the homelessness system once you're in it."
- "We're just stuck here on waitlists. We've got nothing to do all day long because we're just sitting and waiting and waiting on lists. Plus living in Melbourne's f***ed up but living outside of Melbourne is too far away, so we just keep waiting and waiting. So the system needs something to cut that waiting period out, because then they get comfortable waiting, then they just get stuck in the loop of they don't want to make a decision because what could come next? If the next thing isn't better then you just don't want to make a decision, so you just go nowhere."

- “Getting stuck living in a refuge – because sometimes intense people stay overnight – it’s not a safe environment. Last time I had a proper weekend out, I can’t even remember. I want a home to go back to. I don’t want to sleep on a couch anymore. I don’t want to sleep on someone’s floor anymore. My back hurts.”
- “I just want to say before I came here I didn’t have a bed for two years. Because I was just going from place to place to place to place. I hadn’t slept on a mattress for two years.”
- “The system is way too complex for a homeless person to go through themselves. Why is it so complex that you need so much help, that people have to go to Uni, to know how to use these systems?”
- “Before I came to [Youth Refuge program] I’d go stay at some refuge and come back to there [Frontyard] always repeat the process again and again. Honestly it’s a lottery or something to win. You don’t know, you don’t know how long it’ll take, I’d be there for hours and hours and hours, maybe I’d be there until they close, I’d always be the very last one. It was not fun. I’m still here. Most the time it’s just really inefficient. I spend my time waiting and waiting and waiting. Being homeless the concept of time is different. Everything is very very very slow. It feels like eternity. A minute feels like forever to pass by. Sometimes I feel like I’m losing sanity because of that.”
- “Oh it’s damn slow. Half the time I’d be like what the hell am I going to do with my life, what’s next. I want to do something but right now I can’t because there’s somebody who kind of is controlling my future, trying to make my future better but you know lots of bureaucracy lots of paper, waiting lists and waiting lists.”

Young people report being in ‘survival mode’, underlying mental health issues being triggered, and alcohol and other drug issues developing in response to their situations:

- “As soon as you take away people’s food, take away their medication, take away all the things that make them happy and not stressed then yeah, they turn into stressed out, upset, angry, hurt creatures who don’t know what’s going on around them because their mental health has deteriorated as they’ve been dragged on by the systems and haven’t been given the right supports.”
- “If you’ve had alcohol and drug problems for a long time as well. There needs to be a system that’s helping people going through withdrawals and mental health issues while also experiencing homelessness. Lots of people on the streets take drugs to stay awake so that they don’t end up being killed. If you make a wrong move it’s like hey your placement’s cut, hey you’re Centrelink’s cut, you don’t get support anymore because you f***ed up. So, it’s like where are you going to go now? You’re a young person, of course you’re going back to the streets, of course you’re going to stay on drugs. If you’re on the street all day, you’re bored.”
- “Think about how detrimental it is mentally being forced to live in the situation where week to week you’re actually just surviving. Every fortnight your pantry is empty. Your bank account is zero.”

- “I’ve stolen soap so I can wash myself and my dishes because I want to be clean. I go to my cupboard and when I pull out a can of baked beans and some spaghetti I’m like, what do I do with this?”

This frustration can lead to heightened behaviours and high rates of use of emergency services. Young people report the stigma they experience as well as unwarranted punitive responses from law enforcement agencies:

- “People keep thinking that punishing people by removing their supports is going to stop their theft and drugs.”
- “The way the police are so aggressive, the entire youth generation looks at them like war criminals. It’s like you’re at war with the cops, that’s how you live life.”
- “PSO’s, ticket inspectors, from my experience I’ve seen young people who don’t have the vocab to describe their homelessness to some armed person harassing them...I’ve seen kids getting hit. I saw two homeless young people outside the train station a few months ago and there was about 12 ticket inspectors surrounding them, holding them down. Yeah ok so they are drunk 16-year-olds who are homeless, and there needs to be 12 of you? They called the cops and they got arrested.”
- “No wonder our youth are acting up like they are, which is why they’re in the situation that they’re in. Because the policing system is so aggressive towards them, that it’s forcing them to be aggressive back. Then they get stuck in the homeless system because they can’t work on themselves and better themselves and get out.”

2.3 Unpacking the issues identified in the youth homelessness system in Victoria

Issues identified by young people, staff as well as research and the broader homelessness sector are highlighted below.

- **The collective resources of the system are in no way adequate to meet demand.**

A report recently released by the Western Homelessness Network showed that the two Western Access Points saw a total of 13,000 households in 2017/18 (Western Local Area Service Network 2019). Of those, only 28%, or roughly 4,000 received a support response, and only 2% of those were able to access transitional housing (Western Local Area Service Network 2019). In the West, young people make up 24% of those presenting to the Access Points for assistance, but only 13% of transitional housing vacancies are earmarked for allocation to young people.

Regional areas and growth corridors are even less well-served, with few crisis accommodation options available to young people. For instance, in 2016-17 in the Bayside-Peninsula region, 4,060 young people aged 15-24 years requested assistance from specialist homelessness services (AIHW 2017). However, there is no crisis accommodation option for young people in the Frankston or Mornington Peninsula region. The closest crisis accommodation is in Dandenong, which caters to singles and families over the age of 18, but is not youth specific. The next closest Youth Refuge is in Moorabbin, with one other ‘low needs’ medium term youth

accommodation option in the surrounding region. There are long waiting periods for all of these beds.⁵

The lack of resourcing in the system means that young people are required to leave their communities in order to access homelessness services, which further disconnects them from their systems of support.

A client noted: “When I went to get into a refuge, they told me I’d have to go on a waitlist for a while and that it can take 6-8 weeks, but thank god I got a call sooner. And they tell you pretty much sleep wherever you can sleep until you get a call.”

- **There is a lack of flexibility in the Specialist Homelessness Services System funding guidelines to work with young people for longer periods of time**

Most Youth Refuge programs provide young people with support for 6-8 weeks, at which point the homelessness system requires that they leave even if they haven’t progressed with finding housing. This results in persistent cycling through different Youth Refuges and forms of crisis accommodation such as short stays in motels, which can lead to further trauma for young people (Northern and Western Homelessness Networks 2019).

Observations by clients support this:

“I think you need more time in a refuge, because it’s only six to eight weeks and it’s very scary for some people to be like, ‘oh, I’ve only got one day left here, where am I going to be tomorrow? I’m going to be back on the streets’. Then you have to start all over again. It’s happened to me a lot of the time where my time has been up and I’ve had to live in a hotel for a couple of days. That’s the worst thing that has happened, really bad stuff. They pay for it but its 100 dollars a night. When you’re going to the hotel you’re by yourself for a few days then you have all that trauma, all that, or something might have happened. You never know what could happen.”

“Workers could do a lot more if they were able just to focus on one client for a long period of time. It means they wouldn’t have this massive clogged up system and they would actually have the time to focus on the client and that client would be a lot more looked after.”

- **Services find creative ways within existing structures to support young people for longer periods, but there is no clear planning and allocation of these supports across different services, which can lead to reduced transparency and inequity across the system**

While all specialist homelessness services work within a common funding agreement, in practice, some services select to extend a young person’s support period where it’s in the best interest of the young person and means not exiting the young person into homelessness. Analysis from across MCM’s Youth Refuge programs found that the average length of a support period for a young person in a Youth Refuge increased from 41 days in 2014 to 59 days in 2019 – an increase of 31%.⁶ Average length of support period includes stays in a Youth Refuge that are overnight as well as longer term support periods. This increase may indicate a growing trend of

⁵ Local Service Data retrieved from the Frankston and Rosebud Access Points.

⁶ Internal MCM administrative data

young people being 'stuck' in a Youth Refuge as a result of a lack of suitable exit options, however, further research is needed to determine the underlying causes.

- **There is a lack of appropriate supports that meet the needs of young parents. Young parents are forced to choose between the youth homelessness system that primarily caters to young people presenting alone, or the adult and family system**

A young client who is a single mother with two children staying in a young women's refuge reported a number of challenges associated with being homeless with children, including:

- *The homelessness system requiring her to separate from her children until crisis accommodation becomes available:*

"I was on the list for like 2-3 weeks or something for like a refuge so the kids had to move to their dad's and then I had to like stay wherever I could stay. [Stayed at] my friend's and my step dad's, just wherever I could go really."

"You just don't know when you're going to be back out really, like on the streets. Like I've gotta be out of here [in 3 weeks] because they can't extend it any longer because they've already had to extend it, so I've gotta be back out and then I've gotta take the kids and re-present back at Frontyard. God knows what's going to happen. Like am I going to get a place straight away? Probably not. So like then they'll most likely have to be back at their dad's and then I'm just gonna have to be couch surfing again to wherever I can. So yeah it's just a bit hard."

- *The negative impact on her children's wellbeing:*

"She tells me she doesn't like it here and it scares her. And she's gone back to like bed-wetting, and since they've been a lot of changes, both of their behaviours have gotten really bad. She's got a really bad attitude and just been really naughty... She just like swears, tries to break things, hits, screams. Then she'll start hurting herself, like hitting herself in the face. She'll just go crazy."

- **Specialist homelessness services are not always able to respond to the needs of young people with complex issues**

Specialist homelessness services are supporting young people with complex issues and histories, who are unable to get the supports they need in other service systems, like the mental health and disability systems. This compounds the challenges they face in the homelessness system.

Client observations:

"I have ongoing mental and physical health problems and am on a CTO [community treatment order] and have been denied certain help with housing as apparently my case is 'too complex'."

"Just the sheer amount of things that are missing, particularly for disabled people in general, but especially in homelessness. The predominant issue amongst everything that has barred my access is not the fact that I'm disabled but that there's no accessibility. Or they think that they're accessible but then when presented to any challenge to that – like by me existing in front of them – I'm the thing that needs to be fixed."

- **There is a lack of transparency in the homelessness system, and receiving housing service is a 'lottery'**

Client observation:

“Waiting for supported independent living and office of public housing. Most likely I’ll get supported independent living. But it’s hard to get accepted because there’ll be a pool of applicants. You have to meet certain requirements but they don’t tell you what to do, you don’t know what the requirement is. They don’t tell you what they’re looking for in an applicant.”

- **The homelessness service system, although geared toward assisting people to access long term housing as the ultimate goal, is not funded to provide support to people once they achieve this goal. As a result, too many young people return to the homelessness system when their situations break down**

There is very little tracking of outcomes within the youth homelessness system, and except for the evaluation of some flagship programs like Youth Foyers, the extent to which young people cycle back into homelessness following support is not known. Homelessness practitioners report that it is common.

Further, a recent study released by Unison, one of the larger inner city Housing Associations, showed that “young people exit Unison Housing more quickly, more frequently and for less desirable reasons than do older people” (Johnson, McCallum & Watson 2019, p.36). The research demonstrated that over an 18-month period, 55% of youth tenancies that commenced in that period had also ended (Johnson et al. 2019). Feedback from stakeholders emphasised the importance of ongoing support for young people to maintain their housing, but also identified a lack of support available for young people once housed.

Case study 2: The episodic and cyclical nature of homelessness and mental health issues

Ana is a 23 year old young woman who was first referred to Melbourne Youth Support Services (MYSS) at Frontyard at age 17 by a youth mental health service due to experiencing conflict at home caused by parental mental health issues and family violence. She has cycled through the homelessness service for the past 5 years and has been unable to secure any sustainable long-term housing due to her own complex mental health issues.

Her caseworkers categorise Ana as “low-medium needs” as she engages well in supports that are offered, does not present with complex or aggressive behaviours and does not use any substances, but is vulnerable due to her fluctuating psychosis and mood disorder alongside a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

She identifies as Aboriginal and has had a long contact history with child protection over concerns for her and her sibling’s welfare in the family home, however was never removed. She has been placed in Youth Refuge on multiple occasions for extended periods of time beyond the normal 6 week period while awaiting medium-term supported accommodation.

Her case workers have identified that she is not suitable for mainstream private rental as her mental health impacts her ability to work and her ASD makes it difficult for her to form connections with other people. She has also voluntarily left refuge accommodation

prematurely on a number of occasions due to returning to family and then returning to MYSS for support following ongoing experiences of family violence. She has also stayed in backpacker accommodation for extended periods of time while awaiting other options.

The barriers Ana experiences to long term housing have been:

- lack of vacancies in supported accommodation;
- fluctuations in her mental health which mean she is not ready to transition into new vacancies when opportunities arise;
- significant periods of stability around her mental health which then results in her stopping medication and becoming significantly unwell again sometimes resulting in hospital stays.

Ana has exited some medium-term accommodation at the end of their time period and returned back to homelessness due to being unable to find longer term accommodation or stays have broken down prematurely due to her mental health impacting her stay.

The Specialist Homelessness Service System is not designed and funded to provide the level of continuous support that many young people need in order to recover and ultimately exit the homelessness system. Shifting the youth homelessness response from a one-size-fits-all approach to a targeted suite of responses that are matched to actual client needs must be a key priority.

3. Barriers to young people exiting homelessness in Victoria

Consultations with young people and staff identified a number of barriers to young people exiting homelessness, including:

- Lack of appropriate and affordable housing options for young people;
- ‘Structural factors’ such as housing markets, unemployment and welfare supports are getting worse, which puts young people at an increased disadvantage finding housing; and
- Young people experiencing homelessness face barriers to accessing support from other service systems, including health, mental health, family violence, disability and Centrelink. Access to these systems is essential for young people to be able to sustain their housing outcomes and live independently.

These barriers are explored in the sections below.

Box 1: What types of housing options are available to young people in Victoria?

Public housing

A financially viable housing option for young people that sets rents at 25-30% of an individual’s income. Public housing constitutes only 3.3% of housing stock in Victoria and is difficult to access, with extremely long waiting lists (VAGO 2017, p.18). The desirability of public or community housing as a long-term outcome for young people has also been questioned.

Social housing

Social housing, which is seen as distinct from public housing in Victoria, is owned and managed by Housing Associations and Housing Providers rather than by the State Government, and offer generally newer housing located on smaller sites. Social housing providers have reported that they struggle to house young people for financial reasons, as young people’s lower incomes make them less financially viable for providers, and as such only a small amount of this stock is made available to this cohort.

The financial model for social housing providers relies on taking a proportion of an individual’s income. When this is based on Centrelink payments, the lower payment rate for Youth Allowance (\$455.20 per fortnight for a young person aged 20) makes young people less financially feasible than adults on Newstart (\$559 per fortnight).

Youth Foyer programs

For young people who don’t experience complex mental health issues, or co-existing difficulties with substance use, and are able to engage in education and training, the Youth Foyer model is able to provide a housing and education focussed program that achieves positive outcomes.

A recent evaluation of the Education First Youth Foyer model in Victoria identified that the model contributes to a sustained improvement in young people’s education, employment, housing, and

health and wellbeing outcomes, however, 34% of young people exited the program involuntarily within a two-year period of the program (Coddou, Borlagdan & Mallett 2019, p.10).

There are estimated to be around 200 Youth Foyer and Foyer-like places available in Victoria, which falls short of meeting demand. While the implementation of the Foyer model across Australia is seen as one of the few positive developments in addressing the issue of youth homelessness over the last 10 years (Youth Development Australia 2019), the Youth Foyer model does not meet the needs of the more complex young people who are not yet ready to engage in education.

Transitional Housing and Support programs

Transitional Housing and Support programs provide short to medium-term housing and support to transition adults, families and young people into longer term or permanent housing. Young people can access up to 18 months of housing with 13 weeks of support from a case manager.

The program is not well defined and, as a result, is delivered differently across different agencies and there has been no independent evaluation of the transitional housing and support program. The model is seen by some in the sector as a proxy 'waiting room' for public or social housing, given long waitlists for public housing. As a result, transitional housing is no longer transitioning people within a timeframe that is short to medium-term.

Within the Transitional Housing and Management (THM) program, there is an allocation estimated at around 15% or 500 properties across Victoria for young people.⁷ Young people represent around 25% of people experiencing homelessness, and given that tenancies can last up to 18 months or longer, few new places become available to young people in a timely way.

Youth Private Rental Assistance Programs

Youth Private Rental Assistance Programs have been expanded in Victoria in recent years. Assistance packages provide up to \$2,000 to be used flexibly on rent or furniture, along with support from a worker to find and maintain private rental. There is good evidence to show that private rental brokerage programs have success in assisting households to access private rental, however, there is little evidence yet collected about the effectiveness of private rental or brokerage assistance in terms of sustaining housing (Tually et al. 2016).

NSW have developed a rental subsidy program for young people, 'Rent Choice Youth', that provides a rental subsidy with a more comprehensive range of supports tailored to the needs of young people. The rental subsidy works on a sliding scale for 3 years and support services include training and employment opportunities, and capacity building for independent living (FACS 2017).

3.1 Lack of housing exit options for young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria

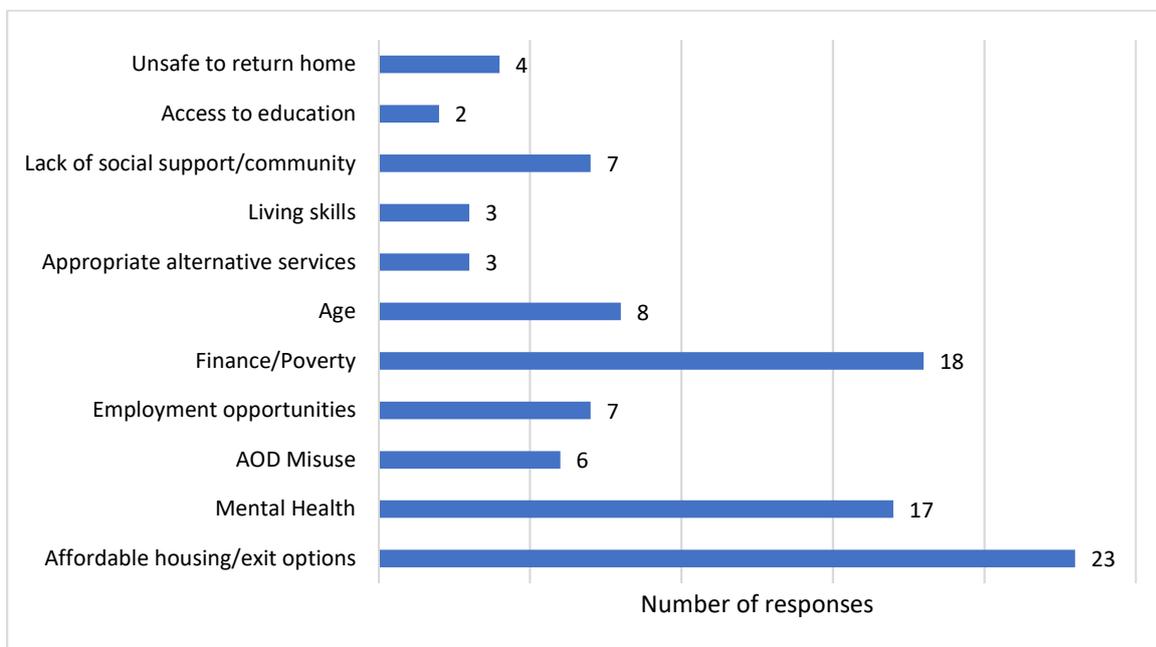
MCM homelessness practitioners consistently identified that the most significant barrier to young people being able to exit homelessness is the lack of safe, affordable and appropriate housing options for young people to exit into:

⁷ Estimate based on practice knowledge

- “A lack of realistic exit options”
- “Without a sustainable affordable housing solution there’s no point funding homelessness programs”

Staff were asked, since beginning working in the specialist homelessness sector, whether they had identified any key trends in presentations from young people. Staff identified that there was increasing scarcity of housing or accommodation options for young people, including entry to medium to long-term supported accommodation, and the ability to exit into affordable private rental. Staff in particular noted increasing waitlists for homelessness services, exacerbated by reduction in funding, and a lack of affordable private rental options for young people. Staff observed that the issue of housing affordability was becoming more frequent but also more severe. Staff identified waiting periods for housing as a critical issue, as were the quality of properties.

Figure 1: Barriers to young people being able to exit homelessness, identified by MCM homelessness practitioners



Source: MCM Homelessness Division staff survey

3.2 Structural factors are getting worse, which puts vulnerable young people at an increased disadvantage in the housing market

"Private rentals are hard to find, difficult to afford, hard to maintain and become quickly unaffordable when rental rise occurs." – staff observation

Young people who experience homelessness are more vulnerable to structural factors like housing markets becoming increasingly competitive, income support payments not increasing in line with the cost of living, and difficult labour markets with declining entry opportunities for young people.

Young people in consultations were able to articulate clearly how these factors impact them:

- “How are we supposed to keep up with the cost of living when our wages don’t rise with the cost of living. It’s just f***en ridiculous how expensive it is just to live these days.”
- “And what’s interesting is many of these jobs want you to have lots of experience but want to hire young people. So, it’s like ‘have ten years’ experience, but be under 25’. It’s just unrealistic.”
- “Keeping up work as a young person and studying. Like it’s hard to get a full-time job without education but it’s hard to return to education once you’re fully engaged in the work system.”
- “I dropped out in year 11 because my health was degrading very quickly. I couldn’t keep up because of course the education system also has no support. Intersectionality? What?”
- “My teachers yelled at me because I had to take Centrelink calls in class. And I had to take them, because Centrelink calls you and they never call you back if you don’t pick up.”
- “My whole life, I’ve been told that I was sh*t, or that I’m too dumb. I remember when I was really young, I got kicked out of high school. I got kicked out of everything, primary school, TAFE, university, I got kicked out of everything because I had trauma. I wanted to go to TAFE and I wanted to study law and was straight away told that I wasn’t smart enough and sent to the ‘dumb class’, because they knew I had problems. But they didn’t know how to fix those problems, so they sent me to do year seven again when I was 18 [years old].”

Practitioners, young people and broader research identify a strong link between low income levels, barriers to education and employment, and access to housing for young people.

Anglicare Australia’s Rental Affordability Snapshot 2018 identified that less than 1% of private rental properties in Melbourne were affordable for a single person with children in receipt of Parenting Payment. There were no properties available that would be affordable for a single person on Newstart (Anglicare Victoria 2018). This paints a particularly bleak picture for young people, whose income, whether it be from Centrelink payments or from wages, is considerably lower than that of an adult. For example, the Unreasonable to Live at Home Youth Allowance for a young person aged 20 years is \$455.20 per fortnight compared to the full rate of Newstart of \$559.00 per fortnight.

The private rental market is highly competitive, with historically low vacancy rates having dipped to 2% across Melbourne (Department of Health and Human Services 2019). Young people are often regarded as risky tenants due to their low incomes, lack of experience and rental history and an assumption that they will not care for the property and have consideration for their neighbours. Consultation with providers of private rental support programs report that young people face an exceptionally difficult task in applying for and being approved for private rental in the current environment.

Staff consultations also noted that the age of young people, especially those under 18, emerged as a key concern as this further compounds difficulty finding accommodation outside homelessness. For example, young people being too young to put their names on a lease face both legal and financial barriers to accessing private rental.

The MCM staff survey identified finances, including a low rate of Newstart for young people, as compounding the difficulties with finding affordable housing options.

This is further compounded by the difficulties young people experiencing homelessness have had in accessing education and training. The Cost of Youth Homelessness study found that (Mackenzie et al. 2018):

- More than two thirds of the homeless young people (69%) had not completed secondary school to Year 12, compared with 43% of the comparison group (unemployed young people), and 25% of the broader population of young people across Australia.
- 52% of the homeless group were looking for work (i.e. unemployed) and 38% were not in the labour force, compared to 65% of the comparison group that were seeking work. Further, 22% of the homeless group had never worked, whereas only 6% of the comparison group had no employment experience.

With Centrelink payment levels unchanged in real terms since March 1994, access to inclusive education, training and employment are critical for young people to be able to exit homelessness, as well as safeguarding them against returning to homelessness once housed.

The lack of appropriate housing for families puts a significant strain on vulnerable young parents who face additional layers of structural barriers to exiting homelessness. Practitioners report a number of cases where already vulnerable young parents fall into homelessness which exacerbates their risk of losing the care of their children. The case study below highlights the complexity of the barriers across multiple systems for families experiencing homelessness, poverty and vulnerability.

Case study 3: The complexity of structural and systemic barriers for vulnerable young parents

Karen is a 25 year old parent with 3 year old twins and an 8 month old.

Karen was 22 years old when she had her twins and was unable to reside in the family home due to family violence. She was allocated transitional housing, however, continued to experience family violence which impacted her ability to progress with her goals to find long-term, secure housing. Her transitional housing contract of a maximum stay of 18 months expired and her eviction was processed.

With a new born baby, she obtained an extension of 50 days through VCAT.

Karen proceeded with searching for private rental but faced barriers like not being able to get to property inspections with 3 children, as her support worker could not fit three car seats in a car. She faced mounting pressure from the need to attend multiple appointments, involvement of child protection, as well as the demands of raising 3 children.

She was evicted and went into crisis accommodation with her 3 children. Due to separate circumstances following the eviction, the children were removed by Child Protection.

Karen continued to work with a housing worker and was supported to find emergency accommodation in a rooming house for 5 weeks. Karen is yet to have 50% of her children's care, therefore is not eligible for parenting payments or 38% of their care to be entitled to family tax

benefit. Her Newstart income is inadequate to apply for private rental options, so she can only apply for shared accommodation options.

She has progressed from monitored access for two weeks moving to unsupervised access, but does not have a home for when she has access with her children for four hours a day. This means access occurs in the community which is safe, but harder to provide baby friendly routine, and prevents the twins from developing a sense of stability and continuity

Karen continues to go to the Access Point every week and with access to her children increased to overnights, she has been moved further up the priority list.

3.3 Young people experiencing homelessness face barriers to accessing support from other service systems, including health, mental health, family violence, disability and Centrelink. Access to these systems is essential for young people to be able to sustain their housing outcomes and live independently.

Specialist Homelessness Services are supporting young people with highly complex issues and histories. Young people report a range of challenges seeking support outside of the homelessness system:

- “Most services that I’ve tried to access have just been really sh**ty about disability in particular. Health services, family violence, Centrelink...basically everything.”
- “I had appendicitis for seven years, I went to the ER like three or five times a year, sent me home with a bottle of stress pills every single time. No one diagnosed me. And that was why I had to go back to my parents, because I had a lot of health issues and surgeries that I needed to get done that I knew I had to get done privately. So, I had to stay with them for a bit to get that sorted but my mental health deteriorated. I had to pick one. It was just really hard finding the evidence to prove those medical conditions. At the end of the day I went to a private doctor. He took literally five minutes, and he was like you’ve got appendicitis, you’re coming back in three days. I was like what? After being dragged through the system for seven years, that’s insane. Like I feel like the medical system, when we look at homelessness now, it’s the medical system failing on multiple levels...and mental health.”
- “High functioning is bulls**t segregation...it’s basically you’re either high functioning or low functioning. If you’re high functioning, you don’t need help...f*** ya. If you’re low functioning you do not have a say at all, ever.”
- “I got yelled at before for being non-compliant with my meds...because I couldn’t afford them. Doctors are so f***ing shit when it comes to medication. As well as like the whole thing of ‘not wanting help enough’ is rampant in disability areas as well.”
- “I asked for real help but couldn’t get help. I’m on anti-psychotic meds and they’re making me psychotic. It’s making me see things.”

- “[Headspace] has the longest waiting line then you get rejected. They have this thing where they pick you or don’t pick you. I got rejected, at this point I’m not going to Headspace. I’ll go to other places.”
- “I ended up in ER sitting there for about six hours, watching everyone go through, just to speak to someone from triage, and I had to sit there seeing all the horrific stuff in ER and that made me feel worse. They rejected me because their answer was ‘you’re too high functioning to benefit from the public system’, literally I quote from the psychiatrist. From the other end of things, I’ve had a lot of friends and I’ve been with partners who have been through the mental health system but are considered low functioning...they’ve had all their rights taken from them, y’know. The stories you hear aren’t pretty.”

The MCM staff survey asked staff to prioritise which social policy areas would need improvement in order to address youth homelessness overall. Staff indicated that mental health and family violence were their top priorities, along with transitions from Out of Home Care and financial support:

1. Mental Health
2. Family Violence
3. Transitions from Out of Home Care
4. Financial Support/Centrelink
5. Education
6. Drug and Alcohol
7. Health/Disability
8. Youth Justice

The Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health system interim report similarly identifies the intersect between homelessness and use of mental health services: “In 2017–18 about 17 per cent of adults using Victoria’s specialist mental health services were also using specialist homeless services” (State of Victoria 2019, p.621).

Most mental health issues emerge during adolescence, and young people experiencing homelessness are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues while also facing disproportionately higher barriers to accessing services. Mental health is a clear barrier to young people being able to engage with homelessness supports and exit homelessness. Improving the accessibility of mental health supports to young people experiencing homelessness is a critical piece of the solution to youth homelessness.

4. Factors that are critical in supporting young people to exit homelessness

To end youth homelessness, young people need to be provided with appropriate, long-term support which both enables them to exit homelessness and empowers them to sustain their independence.

MCM has undertaken a review of local and international evidence on effective practice for young people experiencing homelessness, which identified a number of key elements of support.

The solution is clear – young people experiencing homelessness need a foundation of housing stability while they are supported to build the capabilities and resources they need to live independently in the long-term.

To enable young people to exit homelessness, the following eight supports are found to be critical:

Key elements of support for young people

1. Stable housing
2. Goal-oriented case management
3. Access to therapeutic supports
4. Support to engage with education and training
5. Support to engage in employment
6. Facilitate community connections
7. Address health and wellbeing
8. Build living skills

1. Stable, appropriate housing

There are a number of housing characteristics that are key to effectively supporting young people to achieve long-term housing stability. Canadian research finds that for young people, “housing needs to be safe, affordable and appropriate, based on the needs and abilities of developing adolescents and young adults. There should also be a consideration of location and accessibility not becoming barriers to accessing services” (Gaetz 2017, p.4).

Housing that is provided to young people should be:

- **In accessible locations that are close to amenities, public transport and community connections.**
- **Affordable for a young person on Youth Allowance.** With young people’s lower income levels, the reality of providing housing to young people is that it requires a considerable level of subsidy. The nature and extent of these subsidies is important to consider. For example, in the Housing Blitz head lease program for single adults introduced in Victoria in 2017, stakeholders identified that the 12-month sliding scale of rental subsidy decreases did not work well, and participants were not in a financial position to take on the lease at the end of the program. The 12-month time period was observed to be too short, and participants’ incomes were too low.
- **Incorporate flexible lease or tenancy arrangements, based on need (including for extended periods where required).** The importance of no time limits in the provision of housing and support has also been identified: “Providing supports for one, two or even three years is

unlikely to be adequate for young people, especially those under 18 and/or those who have experienced trauma or who have more complicated developmental, mental health and disability challenges” (Gaetz 2017, p.9).

- **Designed around the specific needs of young people.** A recent study by Unison, found that social housing tenancy loss is highest among people aged 24 or younger compared to older cohorts, and that over an 18-month period, 55% of youth tenancies that commenced in that period had also ended (Johnson et al. 2019). Housing models that are linked with “wrap-around integrated support for young people to remain in education, training or employment, resembling the all-inclusive support that families provide” are considered essential for young people experiencing homelessness (Mackenzie et al. 2016, p.4).

2. Goal-oriented case management

Case Management is an integral part of any homelessness intervention, as it ensures that young people are able to achieve stability which both supports them while in supported accommodation, but also builds the skills to exit homelessness and live independently. Housing placements where insufficient or inappropriate case management is provided are found to be more likely to fail (Gronda 2009).

Goal-orientated case management should encompass:

- **The facilitation of positive, supportive and persistent relationships between clients and workers.** Evidence indicates that the quality of the relationship between the young person and case manager correlates to the outcome of interventions, with a positive, supportive and persistent relationship achieving the best outcomes for young people (Gronda 2009).
- **The ability for young people to choose their own goals and provide direction.** Goal-oriented case management, in which the young person can choose the direction of the intervention is also critical (Parsell & Moutou 2017). This approach signals to the young person that there is hope for their future and that they are able to have ambition for themselves; as the case manager demonstrates this optimism, the young person can begin to mirror it in themselves (Lind et al 2018).

3. Access to therapeutic supports

Young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience, or to have previously experienced, family violence, mental health concerns and co-occurring substance use issues (Mackenzie et al. 2016, p.2). Trauma is especially prevalent in young people affected by homelessness, and this is then compounded by difficulty accessing and receiving appropriate support (Solorio et al. 2006).

As such, support provided should include therapeutic elements:

- **Trauma informed and recovery-oriented practice.** Therapeutic support focussed on healing trauma is vital to assist young people in their transition to adulthood. Young people identified that mental health and homelessness services rarely collaborate, but that when this does occur it can be effective. A recent evaluation of the animal-assisted therapy

program based at Frontyard found that the program reduced young people's negative emotions, had a calming effect and that participation in the program improved young people's social relationships (Heerde 2019).

- **Integration of case management with mental health supports.** The bulk of therapeutic work in the homelessness sector in Australia focuses on linking young people to external mental health services via referrals. However, evidence demonstrates that the fewer outside referrals made, the better the quality of the relationship to their case worker, and therefore the better the outcomes for the young person (Gronda 2009).

4. Support to engage with education & training

Young people who become homeless are more likely to disengage with education, or experience disrupted education. This has long-term impacts on young people's income and employment opportunities (Mackenzie et al. 2016). Childhood homelessness significantly increases the likelihood of unemployment in adulthood, and disruption to education is the primary driver of this (Cobb-Clark & Zhu 2015).

Effective interventions should offer:

- **A pathway out of intergenerational poverty through a focus on education and training.** Education is key to preventing a young person cycling through homelessness, and is a primary determinant in their ability to exit homelessness in adulthood.
- **Integrated supports within homelessness services to improve access and reduce the long-term need for homelessness services.** Supports for young people experiencing homelessness should recognise the importance of education in supporting young people to exit homelessness. Specialist supports within homelessness programs should be provided to assist young people to understand the range of education and training options, enrol and manage studies, and connect with relevant supports within institutions, such as disability services or academic skills workshops.

5. Support to engage in employment

Stable employment which adequately supports independent living is critical for young people to exit homelessness. Lack of housing affordability, coupled with the low rate of Government allowances, risk entrenching young people in homelessness and poverty. There are concerns that mainstream employment services, such as Job Network providers for recipients of Newstart, are not able to deliver suitable services for young people, or for people experiencing considerable complexity (Kossen & Hammer 2010).

Supporting young people to secure sustainable employment should therefore encompass:

- **Practical skills to find employment.** There have been a number of programs developed to assist young people experiencing homelessness to find employment, which focus primarily on job-readiness and job seeking skills. Some studies find increased earnings for homeless young people who achieve stable employment, and other studies show a decrease in reliance on government support and welfare (Mawn et al. 2017).

- **Mentoring or coaching support in the workplace.** Employment supports for young people experiencing homelessness should incorporate job readiness preparation, including assisting with building and developing resumes and interview skills, as well as ongoing coaching or mentorship to help them succeed in the workplace.
- **Building employers' capability to support young people with complex barriers.** Given young people experiencing homelessness may have had limited exposure to professional settings, it's important that employers understand their unique needs and experiences and how this may impact on their work. Specialist employment programs should work with both the young person and liaise with industry to ensure employers have the guidance they need to support a young person with complex barriers.

6. Facilitate community connections

Young people experiencing homelessness easily become disconnected from family and friends, which often means losing connections to peer groups and supportive adults outside the home. When young people lose these connections they also lose valuable opportunities to learn from and become socialised with adults, which can have lasting impacts on psychosocial development.

Programs should provide community connections and pro-social support to young people by offering:

- **Mentoring, peer-mentoring and buddy programs.** These programs offer opportunities for young people experiencing homelessness to experience pro-social connections with supportive adults (Cullen 2006). Mentoring, including peer and buddy programs, have demonstrated capacity to improve social connectedness and autonomy in homeless youth, as well as the ability to maintain education and employment (Steve & Harrison 2013). The benefits are substantial, with one study of a peer mentoring program with young people experiencing homelessness in Canada finding that 'positive outcomes included an expanded social network, improved mental health, decreased loneliness, social skill development, and a decreased use of drugs and alcohol' (Kidd et al. 2019).
- **Connection to culture and community, in particular for young people from CALD or ATSI backgrounds.** It's important that programs recognise the link between the ability to freely express and engage in cultural activities and a sense of belonging and wellbeing. The connection between Country, spirit and wellbeing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, as well as the inherent trauma caused by the disconnection from Country, should also be considered and addressed where possible. Opportunities for young people to connect with specialist services and cultural groups should always be a priority.

7. Address health and wellbeing

Homelessness can be extremely damaging to a person's physical and mental health, with poor nutrition, sleep disruption, trauma, high levels of mental distress and anxiety and co-occurring substance use are among the many issues young people face. Young people may also be reluctant to seek help due to a perception of judgement or bias against them by a powerful adult in authority (Edidin et al. 2012).

Support should therefore encompass:

- **Support to access complex mainstream healthcare systems.** In consultations, several young people highlighted difficulty accessing health and wellbeing support, in particular for chronic health conditions or disability. Many had difficulty paying for their medication and so went without.
- **Sourcing and coordinating additional funds for healthcare costs not covered under Medicare.**

8. Build living skills

Young people experiencing homelessness often leave home before they are able to fully develop adult living skills (Aviles & Helfrich 2004). If the family home has been disruptive or violent, they also may not have had the opportunity to witness and model functional living skills in their parents or caregivers. Left unmanaged, this can become a significant impediment to being able to successfully live independently.

Supports for young people experiencing homelessness should consider supporting young people with a range of essential daily living skills, such as:

- **Budgeting:** ongoing skill-building around money management
- **Cooking and meal preparation:** making meal plans, shopping for groceries, and preparing food in a young person's home
- **Conflict management:** support to develop young people's responses to conflict
- **Tenancy and property skills:** support to understand tenancy obligations, and basic property maintenance.

These key elements of support are not currently delivered in a cohesive way to young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria. Drawing from evidence about what works, the Victorian Government should pilot and scale models of post-crisis housing and support for young people that have, as a clear objective, the aim of equipping young people with the capabilities and resources needed for independent living. This is further explored in the next section.

A way forward

“I don’t think anyone chooses to go through homelessness, like why would you choose to live a sub-par life in poverty? You’re only seeking help if you need it. So, when I think about homelessness, I’m always like...why would you do it unless you actually did need help? It doesn’t make any other sense. If you’re living comfortably why would you want to change?”
– Young person

It’s been 10 years since the Victorian Government last had a strategy in place to address youth homelessness – the *Creating Connections: Youth Homelessness Action Plan Stage 2: 2006-2010*.

Since then, the complex and intersecting issues that cause youth homelessness – family violence, trauma, and complex mental health issues – have not been effectively and systematically addressed. Recent and current Royal Commissions into Family Violence and Mental Health in Victoria demonstrate that there have been catastrophic policy failures, where the most vulnerable people are left without appropriate supports.

Young people and homelessness practitioners identify increasing pressure on the under-resourced Specialist Homelessness Service System, where young people are unable to get the support they need to progress with building their lives. Young people experiencing homelessness are further excluded from accessing mental health and wellbeing supports, as well as the housing market, adequate incomes, and meaningful employment opportunities.

Drawing from the insights shared by young people with lived experience of homelessness, and MCM’s homelessness practitioners, there are five key priority areas that require coherent State-wide planning and investment in order to accelerate the pace of change to end youth homelessness in Victoria.

PRIORITIES FOR A WAY FORWARD

- 1. The Victorian Government should lead the coordination of a State-wide early intervention into youth homelessness strategy to ensure that all young people across Victoria can access supports before their situations escalate to crisis and they are forced into homelessness.**

Effective early intervention into homelessness requires a range of integrated responses at the policy, program, local community and individual levels to identify ‘at risk’ young people and respond in the context of the young person’s environment. In Victoria, there are a number of place-based early intervention programs in select locations, such as Reconnect, the Geelong Project and Detour, however, these are not available to all young people across the state. Victoria’s recent Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan only provides support for early intervention for young people in the Out of Home Care system. Early intervention across the youth homelessness cohort has never been invested in as a policy setting in Victoria despite strong evidence of potential cost savings (Mackenzie et al. 2016).

2. The Victorian Government should shift from a one-size-fits-all homelessness response, to develop a youth homelessness response that identifies and supports different levels of need and diversity within the youth homelessness cohort.

The resourcing required to stabilise a young person with complex needs differs from a young person who has lower needs and is able to engage with supports, however the Specialist Homelessness Service System is limited to providing one-size-fits-all responses and is not funded to provide the level of continuous support that many young people need in order to recover and ultimately exit the homelessness system. Developing a targeted suite of responses that are matched to actual client needs requires improved tracking of current use of homelessness services by young people and building a better understanding of the appropriate responses for different needs. This would enable the government to allocate resources more effectively, as well as increase confidence that government expenditure is being targeted to demand for services.

3. The Victorian Government should lead the development of a strategy that addresses the current inequity faced by young people in accessing various forms of housing.

State and federal governments need to work together to ensure that young people don't face inequitable barriers to accessing various forms of housing. There are a number of strategies that could improve access to housing for young people in Victoria, including increasing income support to young people experiencing homelessness so that they can access social housing; adjusting the social housing subsidy model to give more access to young people; and increasing the rental subsidies available to young people and extending the duration of supports, in line with approaches such as the 'Rent Choice Youth' program available in NSW; and investing in innovative housing and support models that meet the diverse needs of young people seeking to exit homelessness.

4. The range of mental health and wellbeing services available to young people experiencing homelessness and other complexities including trauma, AOD issues and disability, must be expanded.

Stabilising mental health and co-occurring difficulties with substance use is essential for young people to be able to engage with homelessness supports, as well as sustain housing and engage in education and employment. Improving the accessibility of mental health supports to young people experiencing homelessness is necessary to achieve this. There are a range of reform ideas that have strong potential to improve young people's mental health and wellbeing outcomes, including:

- Embedding additional mental health clinicians in homelessness services;
- Building the homelessness sector's knowledge and skills on mental health, trauma-informed practice and family violence;
- Embedding creative therapeutic and recovery-oriented responses within homelessness services such as music therapy, art therapy and animal-assisted therapy;

New services should be co-designed with young people, to ensure young people with the most complex needs can engage with supports that address whole-of-person wellbeing needs.

5. The Victorian Government should pilot new and innovative housing and support models that have as a clear objective the aim of equipping young people with the capabilities and resources needed for independent living.

In Victoria, there is a significant gap in housing options for young people who are not 'Foyer-ready', but with the right supports, can build the capabilities and resources they need to live independently in the long-term. Delivering new models of housing and support that provide the key elements of effective practice for young people – stable housing, goal-oriented case management, access to therapeutic supports, support to engage with education & training, support to engage in employment, facilitated community connections, support to address health and wellbeing and build living skills – would be a Victorian and National first. The Victorian Government should pilot and scale new models of housing and support for young people that have, as a clear objective, the aim of equipping young people with the capabilities and resources needed for independent living.

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