Positioning Paper: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria

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Executive summary

Current policy frameworks have not been effective in reducing youth homelessness in Victoria. Young people have distinctive pathways into, and experiences of homelessness compared to other cohorts. Youth-specific responses are required to best support the needs of Victorian young people and assist their transition to adulthood in a well-supported trajectory.

This Paper presents the findings of a review undertaken by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) for Melbourne City Mission (MCM). The focus of the review is on the existing Victorian youth homelessness system and policy environment that guides the delivery of support services available to young people experiencing homelessness. Findings of the Paper aim to inform discussion about the possible need for and potential focus of a youth homelessness strategy for Victoria, and the delivery of effective outcomes for Victoria's young people experiencing homelessness.

Findings

The current policy environment has been ineffective in reducing youth homelessness

- The number of young people experiencing homelessness has been increasing in Victoria, including young people who are couch surfing and living in overcrowded dwellings

- A growing number of young people fleeing domestic and family violence, and leaving care, are supported through the specialist homelessness system

- There is no strategic policy or framework to guide service delivery and coordinate outcomes in the youth homelessness system

- General homelessness and housing strategies mostly address the needs of young people within an early intervention and prevention context but lack a youth-specific focus otherwise

Support systems are fragmented

- Young people experiencing homelessness require access to a range of support services that are not necessarily well integrated, either across support systems or within the youth homelessness system

- Missing integration of services is particularly problematic for young people at transition points in service system

- Youth-specific housing and other support services are not necessarily available across all of Victoria

There are deficits in present service delivery

- Current support programs are often funded and designed to deliver crisis responses to assist young people experiencing homelessness. There is insufficient focus on early intervention and prevention approaches and limited resources to provide long-term support, enabling recovery orientated pathways

- Trauma-informed and intensive case management approaches could be embedded more extensively in service delivery to provide inclusive and culturally appropriate and sensitive support, based on long-term trusted relationships

Recommendations

Develop a stand-alone youth homelessness strategy

- Despite existing policies and homelessness strategies mentioning youth homelesssness, they are not tuned to the specific needs of young people

- The youth homelessness system operates differently and to some extent separately from the rest of the homelessness system and requires a strategic policy framework to ensure coordination of its particular components and consistent, equitable outcomes for homeless young people

Put young people at the centre

- Strategies guiding youth homelessness responses require a youth-specific focus that takes account of the development of a young person

- Support system should be coordinated to facilitate better transitions for young people

- The development of any youth-specific strategy needs to involve young people with lived experience of homelessness. This could include reflexive or codesign processes, which engage young people in designing service responses

Learn from Aboriginal-led models

- Aboriginal young people and communities could be better supported to improve outcomes for Aboriginal young people, who are significantly over-represented in the homelessness system

- In addition to Aboriginal-led policy frameworks providing guidance on culturally appropriate and sensitive approaches, they offer insights into the delivery of holistic supports that are trauma-informed

- Learnings apply not only to Aboriginal young people and Aboriginal-led organisations, but could also inform mainstream service delivery

Integrate best practice approaches

- An increasing evidence base on Victorian interventions to support young people experiencing homelessness provides valuable insights to draw upon

- Trauma-informed principles should be widely embedded in the homelessness system and the delivery of services assisting young people's recovery

- Support for young people should include intensive case management, enabling long-term trusting relationships with support workers

Implement coordinated and effective processes

- Components of a strategy to improve housing and non-housing outcomes for young people include clearly defined implementation processes that propose specific goals and provide sufficient resources

- Currently funded programs could be supported to adopt best practice approaches and ensure resources are utilised efficiently

Create better understanding of young people's experiences and pathways

- Young people's experiences of homelessness, such as overcrowding, and couch-surfing, and their pathways navigating the support systems are unique

- Further research could entail a review of current youth homelessness responses in Victoria, such as the refuge system and transitional housing

- More evidence is needed to understand the access to and quality of youth homelessness services across regional and metropolitan areas (both inner and outer urban) in Victoria

1. Introduction

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has been commissioned by Melbourne City Mission (MCM) to prepare this Positioning Paper.

The purpose of the Positioning Paper is to review the Victorian policy and system frameworks that affect the services, supports and housing options available to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Positioning Paper aims to support MCM, together with other providers in the sector, as they consider what strategic policy framework is required to support them most effectively to deliver outcomes for Victoria's young people experiencing homelessness.

1.1 Method

The following methodological approach was used to develop the Positioning Paper:

- Evidence review and synthesis: a review of published and grey literature on best approaches to support young people experiencing homelessness

- Analysis of homelessness data

- Policy and support system review and analysis: review of the elements of the existing Victorian youth homelessness system and policy environment

2. Supporting young people experiencing homelessness

Young people have distinctive issues, and their experience of homelessness follows different pathways compared to other homeless cohorts. This requires tailored responses to support their needs and assist their transition to adulthood. Being placed at risk of homelessness has the potential to disrupt the normal life trajectories of young people.

Best practice approaches include housing interventions that are integrated with a range of potential supports that are flexible and tailored to the young person's needs. A range of youth-specific programs and services in Victoria provide evidence of what works well to support young people who experience homelessness. These programs and services can be categorised as either housing, person centred, or place-based interventions.

2.1 How do we define youth homelessness?

The pathways and issues that homeless young people face are distinct from those of adults experiencing homelessness. Key contributors to young people becoming homelessness are leaving out of home care and other protection systems, family breakdown and domestic and family violence (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). Other factors that increase the risk of young people becoming homelessness include mental ill-health, substance abuse, gender and LGBTQI issues (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). Also, the experiences of homelessness differ for young people, including being at high risk of further trauma and having limited coping strategies and resources (Wang, Mott et al. 2019).

In Australia, different age ranges are applied to define young people. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) variously considers a young person to be aged 12 to 18 years, or 12 to 24 years (ABS 2012b). The *National Youth Information Framework* indicators refer to young people as between 12 and 24 years of age (AIHW 2020a). In contrast, eligibility for youth support programs or services, such as out of home care (AIHW 2019), are often restricted to lower age limits, e.g., to the age of 18. A young person is defined as homelessness when they are not in the care of their family or other care givers. For example, the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system records young people aged 15-24 years presenting alone as a distinctive cohort (AIHW 2018). The ABS acknowledges that current estimates of homelessness do not accurately capture youth homelessness, due to the prevalence of homeless young people 'couch surfing' and this not being reported through the Census (ABS 2012b).

Definitions of homelessness are culturally and historically contingent and there is no universally agreed definition. Most definitions recognise homelessness as a spectrum that includes rough sleeping, various forms of temporary accommodation and inappropriate housing. For example, the cultural definition of homelessness is based on cultural expectations of the degree to which housing needs are met within conventional expectations or community standards (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 1992; 2008). The most widely accepted definition of homelessness in Australia is provided by the ABS and is used to develop official homelessness statistics and official national homelessness estimates (ABS 2012a). These definitions are relevant to many young people, since they will experience a range of living arrangements, but may not be altogether helpful in understanding the concept of home, since many young people are in the process of defining it for themselves. Some may indeed be having short stays in their parental home while having stints outside it (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003).

2.2 What supports do young people need to transition to adulthood?

All young people experience several major life transitions in the years from 15 to 24, including moving from youth to adulthood, from study to work, navigating new relationships, and from living with family to independent living in the community. However, young people are often still in a process of developing independence and are reliant on support--both material and emotional—from parents and others.

UNICEF has articulated six domains for child wellbeing (which may extend to young people): material well-being, health and safety, education, family and peer relationships, subjective well-being, behaviours and lifestyles (Adamson 2007). In Australia, innovative service models to support vulnerable young people, such as that developed in the Barwon regional partnerships, emphasise a continuum of supports around five main domains: housing and living skills, health and well-being, education and learning, employment and economic participation, and connection to culture and community (Ryan 2019 as quoted in MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

It is important to recognise that needs extend beyond matters like adequate and quality shelter, decent and nutritious food, and quality education and health care. Young people also need to meet other needs around 'normalcy' in order to thrive, including accessing normative, age-appropriate activities and activities that facilitate transitions to adulthood. These might include:

- social activities (e.g., sporting activities, access to a phone, relationships, and outings)

- school and community activities (camps, community activities and volunteering)

- pathways to adult activities (getting a job, chores, reasonable curfews, learning to cook, establishing and maintaining good mental health)

- learning opportunities (e.g., financial literacy, education on alcohol and drugs, education about sexuality and healthy relationships, knowledge about the legal system, leadership development) (Jim Casey Young people Opportunities Initiative 2015).

Certain young people – such as those in out of home care -- can be at elevated risk of missing out in one or more of these life domains. In the absence of supports, there is evidence that many of those making the transition from out of home care can experience unemployment, poor quality accommodation or homelessness, early parenting, difficulties in 'making ends meet', difficulties establishing and maintaining relationships, mental and general health issues, engagement with the juvenile justice system, and loneliness and social isolation (Brackertz, Baldry et al. 2015). In addition to lower education attainment, lower incomes, higher financial stress, and difficulties in maintaining supportive social relationships, many young people whose developmental needs are not met struggle with mental health issues and suicidality. They often report poorer sense of self-mastery and satisfaction with life (Muir, Purtell et al. 2019).

2.3 Pathways into and out of homelessness

A range of factors are associated with becoming homeless and exiting from homelessness. Key precipitators of youth homelessness include trauma (such as abusive relationships), family problems, psychological issues and drug and alcohol issues (Martijn and Sharpe 2006). Youth homelessness is often linked to family conflict and domestic and family violence (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

Background factors associated with youth homelessness – as either a predictor or contributor to homelessness, include:

- low income and unemployment (McNamara 2015)

- children growing up with family homelessness (McNamara 2015; Flatau, Conroy et al. 2013)

- leaving out-of-home care (MacKenzie et al. 2016)

- being Aboriginal (McNamara 2015)

- being a refugee or asylum seeker (McNamara 2015)
- drug and alcohol issues (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020; McNamara 2015).
- mental health issues (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020; Duff, Hill et al. 2021).
- gender and LGBTQI identities (Oakley and Bletsas 2018; McNamara 2015, MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).
- involvement with the criminal justice system (McNamara 2015)
- overcrowding (Parkinson et al. 2019)
- history of abuse or neglect (including experiences of family violence, physical and sexual abuse) (McNamara 2015; Victorian Parliament 2020).

Other studies have demonstrated the significant impact on homelessness of structural factors like expensive housing markets and depressed labour markets (Johnson, Scutella et al. 2015; Bevitt, Chigavazira et al. 2015). Accessing suitable long term housing is a major issue for young people seeking to exit homelessness permanently (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

For many young people with a troubled home life, there is an 'in and out phase', in which young people move away from the family home to escape problems. While many return, this process poses high risks for homelessness (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003). Although young people leaving home are more likely to transition into homelessness, they are also more likely to exit homelessness. Nevertheless, the longer young people stay in homelessness, the higher the risk they will continue to experience it over the course of their life (Johnson, Scutella et al. 2015). This poses a risk for entering homelessness as an adult (Chamberlain and Johnson 2020). Young people who become homeless before the age of 18 can gravitate into homeless sub-cultures to gain a sense of belonging and peer support, but can adapt to this way of life, which can include engaging in using substances or rough sleeping (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008).

Young people are more likely to be experiencing critical formative experiences in life, and if they miss out on education this can have life-long ramifications. Experience of child homelessness has been found to have negative impacts on attaining employment later in life. This is thought to be due to lower educational attainment and higher welfare dependency in the case of women, and higher rates of school incompletion and incarceration for men within this cohort (Cobb-Clark and Zhu 2017).

The evidence to inform suitable policy responses has not changed significantly. Early intervention approaches, such as Reconnect, remain critical to restore family or kinship connections. While young people are in the 'in and out phase', crisis or transitional housing responses may be helpful, but need to consider how they articulate into long-term transitions to independence. Interventions also need to promote continued engagement in education and training to prevent longer term homelessness.

Strategies need to target those at elevated risk, such as young people in out-of-home care. The Homestretch campaign has been advocating that the age for leaving out-of-home care programs be extended from 18 until 21 years, and this is now the case in Victoria. Longer term support responses are also needed – especially for young people who have transitioned to adult homelessness and want to return to conventional accommodation (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008). While housing is important, social connections are also vital.

Strong and stable social relationships (from workers, former carers, partners, or friends) have been found to be critical in helping young people to 'move on' from out-of-home care and engage in employment or study. Those who engage in study or work also experience a greater sense of self-mastery and lower stress (Muir, Purtell et al. 2019).

2.4 What are current best practice approaches to support young people experiencing homelessness?

Service responses for young people should affirm principles of agency, self-determination, and beneficence. Services need to be responsive to what young people themselves need or want while not undermining their capacity to help themselves. A number of approaches are relevant to achieve best practice when working with young people.

- **Secure and stable housing** are important for achievement in other domains such as education. Other life issues (such as mental health or substance use) may worsen without it. Interventions can include rapid re-housing, provision of supported accommodation or support or skill development to manage tenancies (Duff, Hill et al. 2021).

- **Strengths based approaches** will draw on existing intrinsic strengths of young people as well as extrinsic strengths (such as social networks) (e.g., Quilton, Clarke et al. 2021).

- **Social inclusion and emotional support** interventions might involve supporting young people to reconnect with families or foster/kinship carers or helping young people through peer support. Good approaches will also seek to connect young people with wider peer and community supports like sporting teams (Duff, Hill et al. 2021).

- **Trauma-informed care and practice** recognises the prevalence of trauma and its impact on people's behaviour, relationships, physical and mental health. Support should aim to avoid re-traumatisation, restore choice and control, establish emotional and physical safety, and focus on building trust and connections (Sullivan and Olsen, 2016).

- **Care planning and service integration:** successful programs already effectively integrate a range of relevant supports (e.g., social and emotional support, drug and alcohol support, mentoring, and life skills education) that are flexible, voluntary and tailored to the individual's needs (Duff, Hill et al. 2021).

- **Appropriate duration of support** should flexibly adapt to the needs of the individual, potentially over extended time horizons. Duration of interventions should be needs based and 'individually negotiated' (Gronda 2009:11).

- **Good quality and active case-management** requires caseloads are manageable so that workers can develop meaningful relationships with clients. Successful case work depends on developing relationships with clients that are 'persistent, reliable, intimate and respectful'. Transactional 'short-term crisis responses, or high caseload, office-based brokerage and referral services' are to be avoided (Gronda 2009:11). Depending on need, case management can sometimes be intensive or use multi-disciplinary teams.

- **Addressing specific needs** includes service responses that are culturally sensitive to the needs of young people from particular cultures (e.g., Aboriginal or CALD young people), and sensitive to particular identities (e.g., LGBTQI+ young people) that are at higher risk of homelessness. This might entail specialised services that employ people trained to work with those client groups (McNair, Andrews et al. 2017).

- **Reflexive or codesign** processes that involve clients in designing and operating service responses increases their agency and buy-in (Mullins, Kelly et al. 2021; Kidd, Frederick et al. 2016).

At present, many of these best practice approaches are available through existing programs. While these programs have been shown to be successful, access to those programs is dependent upon fulfilling eligibility criteria and living in the geographic areas where a program is offered. Funding for some programs, such as pilots, can also be uncertain (Duff, Hill et al. 2021).

The following sections briefly discuss programs – from Australia and overseas – that have been successful in providing assistance for young people at risk of homelessness. The program principles, and the evaluative evidence supporting their effectiveness, are described. Ideas and principles from these programs are relevant for forming future policies and a strategy to address youth homelessness in Victoria.

Intervention types for young people can be distinguished by their primary focal point of intervention:

- **Housing based interventions** focus on the role of housing in stabilising young people at risk or with a history of homelessness – especially those with chronic homelessness – and can include supportive housing models like supported housing, Foyers or Housing First.

- **Person centred interventions** provide social and practical support to an individual, regardless of their location or housing circumstance. For example, in Victoria, the Better Futures program, previously known as Springboard, is oriented to support young people who are or have been in out of home care.

- **Place based interventions** focus on providing networked, 'cross-sectoral' support, centred on places where young people can be engaged, such as schools, or seek out disengaged young people via assertive outreach.

2.4.1 Housing based interventions

Housing based models of intervention involve attaching support to housing or accommodation, with the rationale that the housing is a foundational support necessary to prevent homelessness. These models are especially relevant for young people who are unable to return to their familial home and need support to establish independent housing. Supported housing involves placing a range of relevant supports around the person, which could include life skills to enable independent living and maintain affordable tenancies (Parsell and Moutou 2015).

- **Foyers** aim to stabilise housing and home life to increase participation in education and employment. Evaluations of Australian Foyers suggest that the monetised benefits outweigh costs compared to Transitional Housing (KPMG 2019). However, the high costs of these programs mean they mostly suit young people ready to engage in education and training (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

- **Private Rental Access Program** provides funding and support to assist people in Victoria to establish and maintain a tenancy in private rental accommodation and has a focus on people who experience family violence. This program is designed for those whose housing needs might best be suited to private rental (e.g., where they need a greater choice of housing stock or housing in a particular location). The evidence suggests that rental support programs need to be targeted appropriately, given the issues of affordability and tenure security in the private rental market (DHHS 2019; Watson, Johnson et al. 2020).

- **Housing First** is a model that emerged in the United States and was designed to address the needs of people experiencing chronic homelessness. Key features of this model are rapid re-housing in normalised independent accommodation, long-term support, low caseloads, social inclusion, and active case-management. The model has been adopted in Melbourne and local evaluations have shown positive results in reducing homelessness and improving other social and health outcomes (e.g., Flatau, Seivwright et al. 2018).

  Housing First has also been found to be effective in improving housing stability for young people in Canada (Kosloff, Adair et al. 2016). However, because some outcomes (including employment outcomes) were not as encouraging for young people (Kosloff, Adair et al. 2016), the model was adapted as Housing First for Youth (or 'HF4Y'). Rather than just facilitating independence, HF4Y is about enabling the transition to adulthood as well. The underlying principles and main features of HF4Y in Canada are a right to housing with no preconditions, choice and self-determination, development and wellness orientation, individualised client-driven support, and social and community integration (Gaetz and Scott 2012; Gaetz 2014). Australian researchers (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020; Duff, Hill et al. 2021) have argued for a Housing First model specially adapted for young people with mental health and substance issues.

- **Transition Housing Plus** is youth specific social housing model that provides support and scales up rents as young people progress through education and training into work (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). This is a pilot program run by the My Foundation Youth Housing Company in New South Wales. Young residents in social housing stock are prepared gradually, with the goal of eventual independent living in private rental properties. The program has expanded rapidly and has high engagement of participants in education and training and with support services (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

- **Sustaining Youth's tenancies (SYT)** is a social housing model, based in Queensland, that helps sustain tenancies for young people in social housing by building skills. It has been found to be effective and robust in achieving such goals (Brackertz 2018).

- **Extension of out-of-home care arrangements** for young people beyond age 18. Victoria has recently extended the availability of out-of-home care up until age 21. Given the good outcomes in terms of engagement with education and training for many of those in such arrangements (see Muir, Purtell et al. 2019), it is hoped this would reduce the likelihood of young people in care becoming homeless. Even so, there are 'limited examinations of the effectiveness of leaving care and after care programs' (Mendes 2012, as quoted in MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020:15).

2.4.2 Person and family centred interventions

Programs can seek to assist individual young people or families with young people in ways that address needs for practical, emotional, and social support regardless of their housing situation. Some are early intervention programs or are focused on those identified to be at risk of homelessness (e.g., they are in the out of home care system) while others seek to address those who have already been homeless.

- **Reconnect** is a longstanding federally funded early intervention program that seeks to improve a young person's relationships with family and involves counselling, group work, mediation, and practical support to the whole family. Evaluations of this program have found it to be effective in improving the capacity of young people and their families to manage conflict, improving communication and attitudes to school, and may have assisted in reducing youth homelessness at some points (FaHCSIA 2013; MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008).

- **Community-health based support** provides health-based supports for young people experiencing homelessness. For example, the Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSHY) program in Victoria seeks to improve access to mainstream health services for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in 18 community health centres around the state, including Aboriginal run centres.

- **Better Futures** (formerly Springboard) is a program that operates out of diverse community service agencies. Young people accessing the program have unique intensive support needs not met by other leaving-care models, and the program features longer periods of support and flexible enrolment times. Features of the support include that it is individualised, flexible, voluntary, youth-focused, solution-focused, strengths based, not time-limited, scalable to needs, and culturally sensitive to Aboriginal young people and those of culturally diverse backgrounds (Brackertz, Baldry et al. 2015). Springboard was found to be effective in assisting young people to access education, training, or employment. There was a low rate of drop out from the program and its benefits were shown to outweigh its costs (Brackertz, Baldry et al. 2015).

- **Living Independently for the First Time (or LIFT)** in Western Australia, and other similar programs, help young people from care to transition to independence by providing help with learning to cook and clean and manage finances, and providing priority assistance in key areas such as housing, education and employment (Indigo Junction 2021).

- Housing Outreach Program Collaborative (HOP-C) in Canada blends a range of supports for young people who have been homeless for six months or more and is responsive to the needs of consumers. Elements include mental health support, transitional case management, peer support and mentoring, collaborative design and reflexive design (Kidd, Frederick et al. 2016). An adapted form of this program has been found to be effective for Indigenous young people (Toombs, Mushquash et al. 2021).

2.4.3 Collaborative, place-based approaches

An issue with program-based approaches is that they can become 'siloed' and disconnected from each other. Although larger organisations can operate and integrate multiple services, smaller organisations can be separated from each other (Flatau, Seivwright et al. 2013). Sometimes service users can cycle between multiple service providers leading to inadequate service outcomes.

One way forward is to create multi-disciplinary services that connect different programs and organisations as part of a network at a local area level. Access could be through a visible 'entry point' or facilitated as part of assertive outreach. An example of the former is Frontyard, Victoria's only state-wide youth homelessness access point. The Opening Doors strategy in Victoria (Victorian Government 2008) sought to have a limited number of points of entry across each region of the state and requires good sharing of information between providers. This system has been advocated in AHURI research to be taken up in other jurisdictions (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

- **Community of Services and Schools (COSS) model** is place based and seeks to focus efforts at schools, where young people's community and peers are often located. The model emphasises 'collective impact', in which support is coordinated across a range of welfare providers in a locality. The COSS in Geelong is the most celebrated Victorian example, but similar arrangements have been implemented in other states and overseas (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). Evaluations of the Geelong model have shown significant reductions in youth homelessness in the local area over several years (MacKenzie 2018). Aspects of the model include a population screening tool and data intensive approaches to risk identification, a single entry-point to support, and local community leadership and formalised practices through community development processes.

  The model draws on existing programs, such as Reconnect, and requires good cooperation between providers and schools to work. By assessing the risk of individuals at the school and local area level, these models are well suited to identifying those at risk of homelessness and to addressing factors that are predictors for homelessness, such as early school leaving, mental health issues, or drug and alcohol issues, so that homelessness is more effectively prevented (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

- **Assertive Outreach approaches** and programs, such as Street to Home, seek to reach rough sleepers or other excluded young people who may not access services or are disengaged from schooling. Important aspects of the most common model include:

  - multidisciplinary teams to transition people out of rough sleeping

  - persistent and proactive street-based engagement of rough sleepers

  - targeting through a 'Vulnerability Index Tool'

  - client-centred practice

  - provision of long-term ongoing support to sustain housing (supported housing)

  - Housing First—immediate access to housing rather than transitioning through homeless accommodation (Phillips and Parsell 2012).

  Local assertive outreach programs like Street to Home were based on international models and have had encouraging early outcomes. Their success is dependent upon the collaboration, skills, capacities and involvement of policymakers, practitioners, and consumers (Phillips and Parsell 2012). However, outcomes for young people are not as encouraging as for older adult participants (Johnson and Chamberlain 2015). There is a need to avoid paternalistic approaches, affirm a young person's agency, and address those who don't identify as homeless and those not engaging in crisis services to improve success (Phillips and Parsell 2012).

2.5 Culturally appropriate support

Research affirms the importance of support that is personalised to the individual (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). However young people exist within a web of cultural relationships, which can be supportive. This is especially relevant for Aboriginal young people who may benefit from support from families, wider kinship groups and access to country. Best practice responses will seek to preserve and enhance connections to culture and leverage cultural strengths to assist the young person. However, culturally appropriate service provision and practice is not as widely available as needed. Aboriginal young people need a choice of Indigenous and non-Indigenous support options that too often are not available (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

The *Victorian Housing and Homelessness Strategy* envisages equipping Aboriginal communities to better support the needs of Aboriginal young people, especially those leaving home care and kinship care (Aboriginal Housing Victoria). Key elements for successful support for young Aboriginal Victorians might include:

- targeted and tailored support for those at high risk (including those leaving the justice system, those needing drug and alcohol support, and those leaving out of home care), with funding linked to projected demand and support models that are trauma informed.

- out of care plans starting from age 15-16, and care continuing until age 21.

- increased supply of social, crisis and transitional housing to address shortages, as well as Aboriginal specific youth foyers, supported by a well-resourced Aboriginal housing sector

- involvement of elders in strength-based approaches to assist young people make housing choices

- greater support for young families and single mothers

- connection of young people from out of home care to their community and family genealogy, and youth mentoring (Aboriginal Housing Victoria 2020).

There are some programs targeted specifically to the needs of Aboriginal young people. For example, the Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program, based in Morwell, assists Aboriginal young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to find long-term, affordable housing (Aboriginal Housing Victoria 2020).

3. What does youth homelessness look like in Victoria?

Youth homelessness remains a persistent issue in Victoria. Key drivers of youth homelessness include family violence, trauma, and transitions from out-of-home care. Service responses have improved outcomes but are not always optimal, with many young people transitioning back into homelessness. The following sections summarise evidence for Victoria (or for Australia where Victorian data is not available).

3.1 Level and type of homelessness

Contemporary research suggests that youth homelessness remains a significant problem in Australia (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020), and this is true also for Victoria.

Table 1 shows that young people are over-represented in homelessness in Victoria. According to the most recent available Census data (2016), there were around 6,370 children and young people (aged 12 to 24 years old) who were homeless, which was over a quarter of all homeless persons in the state (whereas only 16 per cent of all Victorians were aged 12-24). This represents around 65 persons per 10,000 in the 12–24-year-old population.

Table 1: Numbers of homeless persons and rate of homelessness, Victoria all persons and young persons aged 12-18 and 19-24, August 2016

|	All persons	Percent of all persons	Children and Young people (aged 12-18)	Young people (aged 19-24)	Percent Young (aged 12-24)	Percent of all children and young (12-24) homeless
Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out	1,119	4.5%	30	100	11.6%	2%
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	7,172	28.9%	841	815	23.1%	26.0%
Persons staying temporarily with other households	3,080	12.4%	134	408	17.6%	8.5%
Persons living in boarding houses	4,413	17.8%	78	772	19.3%	13.3%
Persons in other temporary lodgings	108	0.4%	3	5	7.4%	0.1%
Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings	8,930	36.0%	921	2,250	35.5%	49.8%
Total homeless persons	24,828	100%	2,010	4,360	25.7%	100%
Total Population (000s)	5,926.6		481.2	490.6	16.3%	
Incidence (per 10,000 population) Victoria	41.9		41.9	89.0		
Incidence Australia	49.8		51.0	95.3		

Source: ABS Census 2016.

Homeless young people are found especially in severely crowded dwellings (36% of all homeless persons in Victoria), supported accommodation (23%) and boarding houses (19%).[1]

According to the Census, homelessness was especially apparent amongst 19–24-year-olds in Victoria. The incidence of homelessness among this group was around 89 persons per 10,000 population (compared to around 42 persons per 10,000 population for all groups).

Homelessness has increased in Australia and Victoria as a proportion of the total population since 2006. The rate of homelessness is higher for those aged 12-24 compared to the general population and has also been increasing. The rate of homelessness has tended to be lower for Victoria than Australia, but the gap has narrowed since 2006 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Incidence of homelessness and youth homelessness in Victoria and Australia (per 10,000 persons) 2006 to 2016
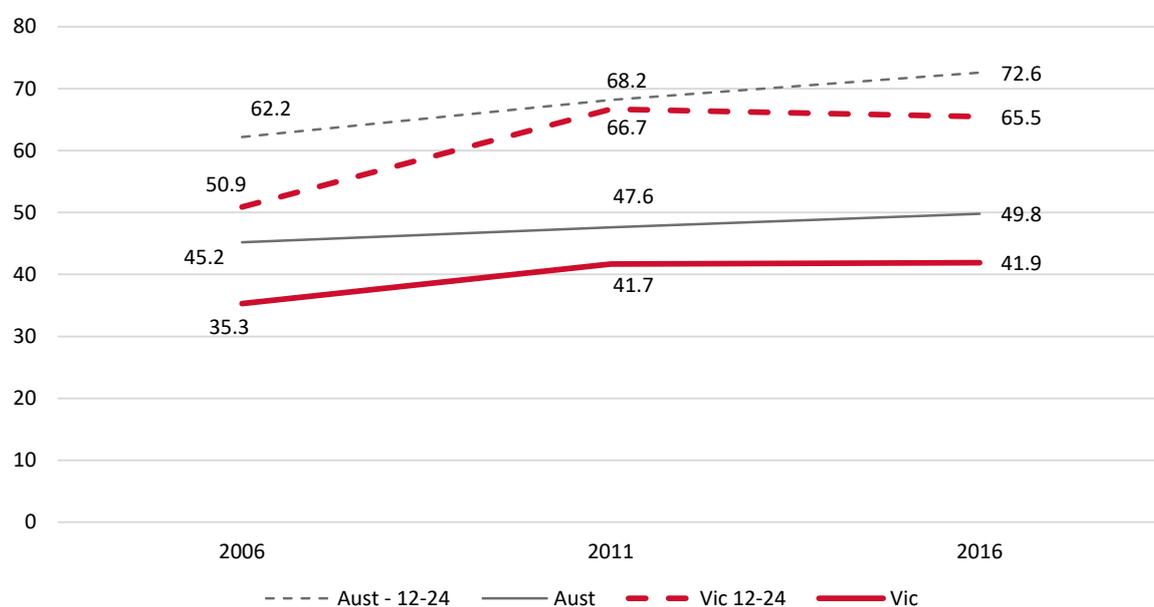
Source: ABS Census Estimating Homelessness 2011 and 2016 – calculations from various tables.

3.2 Service use and effectiveness

Young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are sometimes assisted by family homelessness or child protection services, but also present unaccompanied to youth specialist or adult homelessness services. Service usage is generally higher in Victoria compared to the Australian average (AIHW 2020c).

In 2019-20, Victorian specialist homelessness services served:

- 53,202 clients who have experienced domestic or family violence (almost half of all Australian clients in this category were aged under 25)

- 13,702 clients aged 15-24 presenting alone to services

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1   Some commentators on homelessness have argued that severe overcrowding should be excluded from estimates of homelessness because those householders are in a form of permanent accommodation. Meanwhile, they argue that the estimates of rough sleeping and those in boarding houses are underestimated. Their alternative estimate of the overall level of homelessness in Victoria (24,300) is similar to that provided in the Census (Chamberlain and Johnson 2020). However, using this alternative methodology might change the composition of youth homelessness in Victoria.

- 3,894 children with a care and protection order
- 2,393 clients leaving care
- 4,824 clients exiting custodial arrangements (not limited to, but including, juvenile justice) (AIHW 2020c).

The higher incidence of SHS clients as a proportion of the population in Victoria might reflect higher demand but is also an indicator of better service access or availability. Whereas unmet need for clients aged 15-24 (as a proportion of all clients that age) was 4.5 per cent in Victoria, it was 11 per cent Australia-wide (AIHW 2020c).

Over the 5 years since 2014-15, service usage (as a proportion of the relevant Victorian population) has declined for young people presenting alone, but there has been growth in numbers of persons presenting due to domestic and family and a moderate increase in persons leaving care (see Figure 2)[2].

Figure 2: Service usage (clients per 10,000 population) by young people, 2014-15 and 2019-20, Victoria
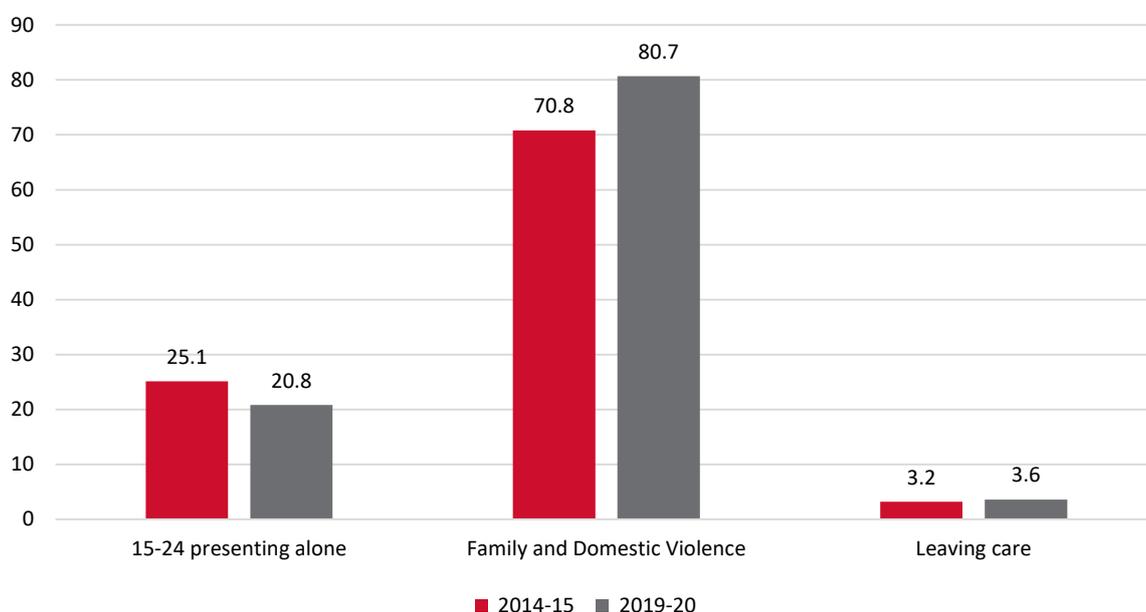
Source: AIHW (2020d) SHSC Victorian data.

Some groups are particularly high users of services – for example, around two thirds of all care leavers in Australia have accessed some assistance from an SHS agency since 2011-12. Around 36 per cent of all care leavers accessing services are in Victoria (AIHW 2020c).

Indigenous clients represent a smaller proportion of SHS clients in Victoria (10%) compared to Australia (27%). Nevertheless, Indigenous clients are over-represented as a proportion of the Victorian Indigenous population compared to the Victorian non-Indigenous population (1,679 clients per 10,000 in the population compared to 144 clients per 10,000) (AIHW 2020b). Over half of all Australian Indigenous clients accessing services are aged under 25. Service usage for Aboriginal persons has also increased over the last 5 years, with the number of clients increasing by over a third from 7,760 in 2014-15 to 10,400 in 2019-20 (AIHW 2020d).

2   The increased incidence of persons presenting due to Family and Domestic Violence may be attributable in part to a change in mid-2019 in the way this category was defined, to include all clients formally referred by a non-SHS FDV agency to SHS (AIHW 2020d).

Although not specific to Victoria, evidence from AIHW specialist homelessness service data (Table 2) shows that outcomes for young clients presenting alone are generally better after support than before. Housing support is effective in improving outcomes for 13.6 per cent of clients who moved from homelessness into public housing, private accommodation, or institutional settings. Even so, almost 40 per cent of clients accessing services either fell into or remained in homelessness after support.

Table 2: Young people (aged 15-24) presenting alone to services before and after closed housing support, Australia, 2019-20

		Australia	
		Percentage clients in housing situation	
Housing situation		at end of support	at beginning of support
Homeless	No shelter or improvised/inadequate dwelling	8.2	4.3
	Short term temporary accommodation	15.3	14.3
	House, townhouse or flat – couch surfer or with no tenure	29.3	20.6
	Total homeless	**52.8**	**39.2**
At Risk of homelessness	Public or community housing – renter or rent free or Institutional settings	9.9	13.8
	Private or other housing – renter, rent free or owner	33.3	43.7
	Institutional settings	4.0	3.2
Total clients		**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: AIHW (2020c) SHSC Supplementary Table Young 4.

Reliance on crisis-oriented specialist homeless services (SHS) poses limitations for assisting younger people:

- Across Australia, the effectiveness of SHS services was far from perfect. Around 40-50 per cent of clients accessing services transition to another situation of further homelessness (McKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

- Only 16 per cent of housing and homeless providers and 37 per cent of child, youth and family providers report always being able to meet demand (ACOSS 2019).

- Despite the importance of education and training for young people (Adamson 2007), SHS have only a small impact on clients' employment, education, and training status. In 2014–15, there was no change in the proportion (21%) of SHS clients (including adults) who were enrolled in education and training prior to and post receiving support. There was a modest change in the number of clients with identified employment related needs who were employed prior to receiving support (12%) and post support (21%) (Brackertz, Fotheringham et al. 2016).

- Clients often have multiple support periods. The average number of support periods SHS clients received increased between 2015-16 (1.8) and 2019-20 (1.9) (AIHW 2020d).

4. Understanding Victoria's youth homelessness system

In Victoria, there is currently no overarching strategy to address youth homelessness and coordinate support and interventions for young people who are homeless. General state-wide homelessness and housing policies, not specific to the needs of young people experiencing homelessness, are what presently provides any strategic guidance to address youth homelessness. Supports for young people experiencing homelessness are situated within a range of support systems, including education, health, mental health, justice, and out-of-home care. Despite some acknowledgement of needing to coordinate support services, there is limited integration between support systems in terms of implementation, delivery, and cross-service collaboration.

Figure 3 illustrates the components of the service system for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Victoria, and the relevant key policies. The experiences of young people accessing supports and their envisioned pathways are presented in section 4.3.2.

Figure 3: Design of Victorian homelessness policy and service system
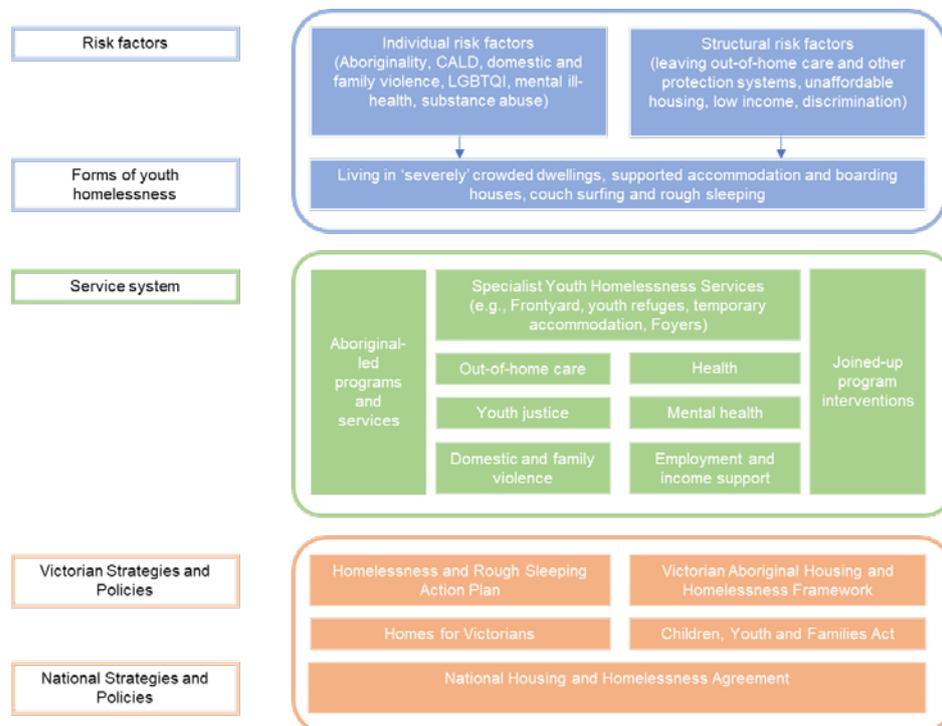
Source: Authors.

4.1 Housing and homelessness policy context

Primarily, youth homelessness is addressed through more general homelessness and housing policies in Victoria, such as Homes for Victorian (2017) and the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan (2018). A common focus of these strategies, insofar as they pertain to youth homelessness, is on early intervention and prevention and providing a support system responsive to the specific needs of young people. Beyond articulating directions for change, there are limited specified outcomes and targets identified for young people, and no specific funding commitments.

4.1.1 Strategic policy specific to youth homelessness

Currently, there is no strategic policy in Victoria specific to the issue of youth homelessness. The most recent previous policy to address youth homelessness in Victoria was the *Youth Homelessness Action Plan*. A first stage report was released in 2004, and the second stage report released in 2006 (DHS 2004; DHS 2006). The purpose of the first stage report was to better coordinate government and homelessness providers to improve young people's access to the service system (DHS 2004). The focus areas for improvement identified were:

- developing preventative approaches to break the cycle of homelessness, preventing young people becoming homeless

- strengthening pathways to independence for young people to have a positive future, including a focus on education, employment and training, leaving care, and long-term housing

- developing the homelessness system to provide more integrated and responsive services to young people

- responding effectively to young people's needs that are specific to their cohort (DHS 2004).

The second stage report builds on the learning from the first stage report and presents strategies for change across the youth homelessness sector (DHS 2006). The action plan articulated the following directions for service improvement:

- a strong focus on early intervention and interdependence: strengthening early intervention approaches, developing the capacity of young people to participate in and contribute to society, and supporting connections

- tailored accommodation and housing support options for each individual homeless young person: developing a wider range of service responses, improving access and initial assessment processes, and developing skills to access and sustain tenancies

- greater access to complementary services for homeless young people with complex needs: fostering cross-sector partnerships, improving out of home care responses, expanding service provision, and improving services for Indigenous young people

- enhanced youth homelessness service capacity: disseminate successful service models, enhance planning and coordination, providing training to homelessness workforce, and develop a workforce strategy supporting youth-focused practices (DHS 2006).

4.1.2 Homelessness and housing policies

Since the release of the *Youth Homelessness Action Plan* there have been no youth-specific homelessness strategies in Victoria to guide policy and service responses. Current support systems are based on more general homelessness and housing policies at both the Commonwealth level and within Victoria.

National housing and homelessness strategies

The Victorian policy system supporting youth homelessness is influenced by Commonwealth-level housing and homelessness strategies. Current and recent Australian policies are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: National policies shaping youth homelessness

Name	Year	Reference
The Road Home	2008	FaHCSIA (2008)
National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA)	2018-2023	CFFR (2018a)
National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA)	2009-2017	CFFR (2009a)
National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH)	2009-2013	CFFR (2009b)

Source: Authors.

The 2008 White Paper, *The Road Home* (FaHCSIA 2008), remains seminal in shaping Australia's homelessness policy (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). The report does not address youth homelessness specifically but acknowledges young people's pathways into and experiences of homelessness within its mains strategies. The report included the following strategies to address youth homelessness:

Turning off the tap:

- focus on early intervention and preventing pathways into homelessness, including family breakdowns and poor life transitions for young people

- 'no exits into homelessness', including young people leaving child protection

- provision of additional services to young people aged 12-18 to foster connection to family and support education, training, and employment outcomes

- enhancing Centrelink's role, including an increased focus on Youth Allowance

Improving and expanding services:

- more connected and responsive services, such as schools, juvenile systems, and child collaboration in collaboration with homelessness services

- provision of specialist workers and resources to adequately meet the needs of children.

Breaking the cycle:

- provision of specialist housing meeting young people's needs

- specialist support for young people experiencing homelessness, including dedicated workers and resources (FaHCSIA 2008).

Drawing on the strategic framework of *The Road Home*, the Commonwealth government established with the States and Territories the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA), which operated between 2009 and 2017. The NAHA commitment to reduce homelessness (CFFR 2009a) was specified through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) (CFFR 2009b). The agreement emphasised the key strategies outlined in *The Road Home*. In addition, the agreement recognised young people subject to and exiting care and protection as key target group. Assisting young people to re-engage with their family, where it is safe to do so, maintain stable housing, and engage with education and employment were priorities of NPAH (CFFR 2009b).

The NAHA was replaced by the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) in 2018, consolidating housing and homelessness policies (CFFR 2018a). The NHHA's main areas of reform include early intervention and prevention and commitment to service and design programs with a focus on children and young people (CFFR 2018a). The NHHA encompasses a bilateral agreement between the Commonwealth government and the Victorian government (CFFR 2018b). Under the agreement the Victorian government matches funding by the Australian Government, estimated to be at $122.8 million over NHHA's five-year period (CFFR 2018b). The agreement entails a range of support measures for children and young people, including:

- support for children and families, including case management, therapeutic group work and flexible brokerage to enhance education and social opportunities for children experiencing homelessness

- youth supports and services to prevent young people from becoming entrenched in homelessness

- crisis accommodation specialised in youth homelessness

- services to address drug and alcohol and mental health issues

- family reconciliation programs to work with young people to address conflict between young people and their families, with a focus on healing and restoring relationships

- employment, education, and training supports provided in youth foyers and foyer-like services (CFFR 2018b).

Victorian homelessness and housing strategies

Responses to youth homelessness in Victoria are directed by more general homelessness and housing strategies. Current policies and strategies are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Victorian policies shaping youth homelessness

Name	Year	Reference
Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan	2018	DHHS (2018a)
10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing	Forthcoming	DFFH (2021)
Homes for Victorians: Affordability, Access and Choice	2017	Victorian Government (2017)
The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework	2020	AHV (2020)

Source: Authors.

The most recent Victorian homelessness strategy is the 2018 *Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan* (DHHS 2018a). Youth homelessness is addressed directly within the theme of early intervention. The plan recommends that young people experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness:

- be supported leaving out of home care or the justice system

- have access to appropriate case management

- be provided with dedicated housing

- have pilot projects integrating housing with supports (DHHS 2018a).

The 2017 strategy *Homes for Victorians: Affordability, Access and Choice* (State of Victoria 2017) presents the initiatives by the Victorian State Government to assist people accessing housing. This includes 'improving housing services for Victorians in need', fostering early intervention preventing homelessness, improving responses to those entering crisis accommodation, and increasing the wrap-around services to support people in need (Victorian Government 2017). To facilitate this initiative, the strategy commits to provide:

- $10.9 million to support young people leaving out-of-home care, to get a job or study, and with housing through board payments, housing subsidies and leasing arrangements until they are 21

- $60.8 million for improvements to support services and additional accommodation through community sector led projects, such as the Wyndham H3 project. This project includes the construction of up to eight self-contained units for young people, including young parents at risk of homelessness

- $2.6 million to Kids Under Cover for prevention of youth homelessness as part of the Victorian Property Fund (Victorian Government 2017).

The Victorian government is in the process of preparing its 10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing, which it plans to launch in late 2021 (DFFH 2021). The Discussion Paper for consultation to inform the strategy emphasised the role of the affordable and social housing system in reducing homelessness (Homes Victoria 2021). The Discussion Paper did not address youth homelessness specifically, although it was built on the key principle of 'people at the centre', in which the affordable and social housing system responds to the requirements of people who need and use social and affordable housing (Homes Victoria 2021).

The *Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework* builds on the premise 'mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort' (every Aboriginal person has a home) (AHV 2020). The framework proposes a range of short- and medium-term actions to facilitate structural reform. These include integrating the homelessness system more closely with service and support systems, such as for young Aboriginal people leaving out-of-home care. Some of the proposed initiatives are identified as the responsibility of the Victorian Government, whereas others are to be led by the Aboriginal community and their partners (AHV 2020). One initiative proposed is implementing an Aboriginal focused homelessness system, in which Education First Youth Foyers for Aboriginal young people leaving care are established (AHV 2020).

4.2 Strategic frameworks that guide the service and support systems for young people

The Victorian government is in the process of developing a new youth strategy, which is scheduled to be launched in late 2021. The strategy is drawing on an engagement process informed by consultations based on the discussion paper 'What matters to young people in Victoria' (DPC 2020). The discussion paper commits to put young people at the centre of the strategy, aiming to provide strategic direction for young people, organisations and communities engaged in youth services (DPC 2020). The discussion paper proposes that outcomes for young people include good health and wellbeing, education and training, employment, connection to culture, community and civic life, and safety and equality (DPC 2020). In addition, the discussion paper outlines the outcome of young people having access to appropriate and coordinated services that are responsive to their needs. This includes homelessness and housing services being more inclusive of the needs of young people as well as providing housing that is appropriate, free from stigma and culturally safe (DPC 2020).

Young people experiencing homelessness are subject to a range of service and support systems (see table 5). This includes out-of-home care, employment and income support, health, mental health, youth justice, education and training, and domestic and family violence.

Table 5: Support system for homeless young people

Support Area	Policy	Reference
Children, Youth and Families Act 2005		
What matters to young people in Victoria		DPC (2020)
Out-of-home care	Keep caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out of home care	Commission for Children and Young People (2020)
	Care and transition planning for leaving care: Victorian practice framework	DHHS (2012)
Health and mental health	Victoria's 10-year mental health plan 2015-2025	DHHS (2015)
	Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System	Victorian Government (2021)
	Public health and wellbeing plan 2019-2023	DHHS (2019b)
	Youth health and wellbeing strategy 2017-19	VicHealth (2017)
	Korin Korin Balit-Djak Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017–2027	DHHS (2017)

Support Area	Policy	Reference
Youth justice system	Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020-2030	DCJS (2020)
Employment and income support	Youth allowance	Services Australia (2021)
	JobSeeker Payment	
	Private Rental Access Program	
Education and training	The State of Victoria's children report	DET (2018)
	Out of home Care Education Commitment	DET (2021)
	The Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026	DET (2016)
Domestic and family violence	Ending family violence: Victoria's plan for change	DCP (2016)
	Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2020-23	(DFFH 2020)
	Dhelk dja: safe our way – strong culture, strong peoples, strong families	DHHS (2018b)

Source: Authors.

4.3 How do young people experience the homelessness system?

Young people experiencing homelessness are recognised under the NHHA as a national priority cohort, with support provided through the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) system (CFFR 2018a). SHS organisations are funded by governments to provide housing and/or support services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (AIHW 2020b). Homelessness services are mostly funded through governments in Australia, with around 85 per cent of the funding received by SHS providers being from government sources and the remainder coming mainly from philanthropic sources, impact investment, and self-sourced funding, like rent (Flatau, Zaretsky et al. 2017).

Young people experiencing homelessness are supported through SHS providers that focus on assisting people who are homeless, or through organisations that specialise in certain services, such as youth services (AIHW 2020b). Support for young people through the SHS system in Victoria includes refuges, Youth Foyers, and Frontyard, which is the only access point to the SHS system designed specifically for young people.

The experiences of young people involved with SHS, and especially their pathways through the SHS system, have not been studied extensively. The components of the Victorian SHS system, and the pathways of young people experiencing homelessness that are implied by current policies and program provision are represented in Figure 4.

The actual interactions of young people with the SHS system, and the trajectories they follow, does not necessarily align with this idealised model. Further research would be required to gain a better understanding of young people's experiences of the youth homelessness system in Victoria, but a state-wide strategy could help to clarify and articulate its intended operation, and that the system functions as envisaged.

Figure 4: Intended pathways for young people interacting with the Victorian SHS system, inferred from existing policies and programs
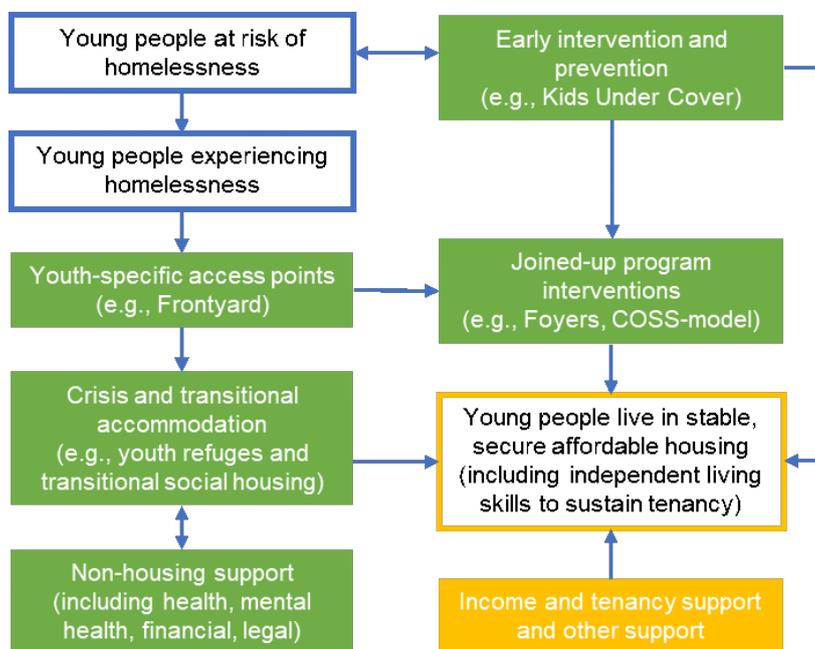
Source: Authors.

Early intervention and prevention approaches aim to identify young people at risk of homelessness and support their needs. For example, Kids Under Cover is a not-for-profit organisation operating in Victoria that aims to prevent young people from becoming homeless by providing relocatable studio accommodation, and support to access education and training.

A range of **joined-up program interventions** link housing with youth-specific supports (see section 2.4). This includes Youth Foyers, which aim to stabilise housing and home life to increase participation in education and employment. However, these programs and strategies are not always successful in preventing young people becoming homeless.

For young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, **youth-specific access points**, like Frontyard in Melbourne, provide support. For young people living in some parts of regional Victoria there are other specialist youth intake points, such as the Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program in Morwell. These access points commonly provide young people with access to health, mental health, and legal services, amongst other things, and link them to crisis accommodation as well as support to find longer-term housing.

In Victoria, youth refuges provide **short-term accommodation** for young people in crisis. At present, there are several youth refuges across metropolitan Melbourne and in regional centres, including Bairnsdale, Geelong, Morwell, and Wodonga. In addition to housing, youth refuges provide young people with case managers to address their needs and identify goals.

Support for young people is also provided through social housing, such as the Transitional Housing Management (THM) program, accommodating young people for up to 18 months (DFFH 2017). Besides housing, the THM program funds organisations to conduct referrals to other services, financial assistance, and support to find accommodation.

Ideally, these housing interventions and **non-housing supports**, including income and tenancy support, enable young people to access stable, secure, and affordable housing and achieve a pathway to live independently and sustain their tenancy.

Additional research would be required to understand properly how young people experience and engage with these different components of the youth homelessness system in Victoria, as well as the extent to which different programs and services are effective and able to address demand. Existing research does point to some potential barriers that impact upon young people's pathways within and out of the SHS system, including:

- Young people are not necessarily familiar with available supports and do not access SHS. Despite couch surfing, living in overcrowded dwellings or other forms of insecure housing, young people often do not 'identify' themselves as being homelessness and requiring support (Thielking, Flatau et al. 2015).

- Accessing support services can be stigmatising and young people may even experience services as being unsafe, such as services not being inclusive of LGBTQI clients or providing culturally appropriate support (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2021; McNair, Andrews et al. 2017).

- Crisis-driven responses are time-limited and do not necessarily ensure pathways into more secure housing. For example, the provision of accommodation by the THM program is limited to 18 months (DFFH 2017).

- For people experiencing mental ill-health, housing trajectories are known to be rarely linear—often contrary to pathways envisaged by policy (Brackertz, Borrowman et al. 2020).

- Exiting the SHS system is constrained by a range of structural factors, including expensive housing markets, limited access to social housing, discrimination in private rental markets, lack of available rental housing, and geographical inequities in terms of socio-economic disadvantage and the availability of services in Victoria (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2021).

Other recent research in Australia, although not always focused on young people exclusively, has provided some insights into the lived experience of people involved in related support areas. Examples of such research include:

- **Young People in Springboard:** The evaluation of the Springboard program (now replaced by the Better Futures program) demonstrates how case studies can illustrate the experiences of young people involved in support programs (Baldry, Trofimovs et al. 2015). The research analysed the pathways of assisted young people, including barriers they faced, and outcomes achieved through their involvement. Comparison with the expected trajectory of young people not supported by the Springboard program helped to estimate potential cost savings the program achieved (Baldry, Trofimovs et al. 2015).

- **Reimaging social housing pathways:** This research into tenants' social housing pathways highlights that there are inconsistencies between operational policies and the reality of people's lives as they traverse housing pathways (Muir, Powell et al. 2020).

- **Trajectories:** This research investigated the housing and mental health pathways of people with lived experience of mental ill-health. Rather than progressing through the support system in a linear way, the research identified five overarching trajectories: excluded from help required, stuck without adequate support, cycling, stabilising, and well supported (Brackertz, Borrowman et al. 2020).

5. How is the Victorian system working to support young people?

Young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria could be supported more effectively through youth-specific policies and coordinated support systems. Current strategies and policy frameworks have proven ineffective in reducing youth homelessness in Victoria and do not have a youth-specific focus.

The reviewed evidence shows young people benefit from early intervention and prevention approaches that are person centred and culturally appropriate, in order to navigate life transitions successfully and experience 'normalcy' (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative 2015). This requires that a range of support systems work together, including mental health, out-of-home care, youth justice, health, education, domestic and family violence, and housing and homelessness. However, the evidence demonstrates limited integration across these systems to provide pathways supported by trusted carers for young people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness (Flatau, Conroy et al. 2013). In addition, integration of housing and support services within the SHS system for young people may also be deficient.

In addition to the fragmentation of the support system, current best practice approaches to supporting young people are not applied consistently throughout support service delivery, leaving young people without adequate support. This includes housing interventions that rely on crisis and transitional accommodation, instead of permanent housing with integrated youth-specific support services, which could lead to higher levels of tenancy sustainment (Flatau, Conroy et al. 2013). Best practice approaches in the provision of support services include being person centred, trauma-informed, and providing longer term support using intensive case management approaches that emphasise trusting and respectful relationships.

5.1 Ineffectiveness in reducing youth homelessness

A focus of homelessness strategies in Australia and in Victoria has been on early intervention, preventing young people becoming homeless, and providing supports tailored to the needs of young people (FaHCSIA 2008, CFFR 2018b). Yet, current strategies and policies do not seem to have been effective in reducing youth homelessness.

5.1.1 Increasing youth homelessness

Young people represent a significant cohort of people experiencing homelessness. In Victoria, over a quarter of all people experiencing homelessness are young people (aged 12 to 24 years old) (ABS 2016). Despite strategies addressing youth homelessness, the number of young people experiencing homelessness has been increasing in Victoria. The rate of young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria has increased by around 28.7 per cent between 2006 and 2016 (in 2006, 50.9 young people experienced homelessness per 10,000 of the population in contrast to 65.5 in 2016) (ABS 2016). Also, a growing number of young people are supported through the specialist homelessness system, mainly due to escaping domestic and family violence or leaving care (AIHW 2020d).

Within the SHS system, Aboriginal young people are significantly over-represented (1,679 clients per 10,000 in the population compared to 144 clients per 10,000 for non-Indigenous clients) (AIHW 2020b). Across Australia over half of all Indigenous clients accessing services are aged under 25 (AIHW 2020b). Other cohorts more likely to experience homelessness include LGBTQI and CALD young people (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2021). Across Australia, almost 40 per cent of clients accessing SHS services either fell into or remained in homelessness after receiving support (AIHW 2020b). Not preventing and breaking the cycle for young people experiencing homelessness has a long-term impact, potentially causing on-going episodes of housing instability and leading to increasingly complex needs.

5.1.2 Strategic focus on youth homelessness is currently missing

The most recent youth homelessness strategy in Victoria was released in 2004 (DHS 2004). Significant changes to the housing and support systems impacting youth homelessness have occurred since that time, as have understandings of best practice in program design and service delivery.

General housing and homelessness policies and strategies are the main frameworks in Victoria that shape current services responses for young people. However, the very different situation and issues for young people experiencing homelessness, compared to other cohorts, requires distinctively tailored, contextually and culturally appropriate, and equity-focused interventions (Wang, Mott et al. 2019). Forms of homelessness that are more common for young people, such as 'couch surfing' or living in overcrowded dwellings, are not addressed effectively in current policy frameworks, which focus more on rough sleeping. There is a need for an updated, integrated strategy connecting young people-specific homelessness to support systems. Such a youth homelessness strategy would need to be resourced sufficiently to facilitate collaboration at a system level and provide guidance for services, including policies and contracts.

5.2 Young people experience disjointed support systems

Youth homelessness is situated within a range of support systems, including child protection, education, health, housing, and justice. These support systems often are not well integrated, and services are not necessarily accessible, leaving young people at risk of homelessness without required housing and other support to address their needs.

5.2.1 Support systems operate in siloes

Current Victorian strategies recognise the importance of young people having access to well-coordinated services across a range of domains. Likewise, policy frameworks within the different support systems emphasise the specific needs of young people. Despite these aspirations for greater cooperation, support systems mainly operate as separate human sector services (Flatau, Conroy et al. 2013). Missing integration between support systems, in addition to not having access to required support, can be particularly problematic for young peoples at transition points, these include:

- leaving out-of-home care (Martin, Cordier et al. 2021)

- dropping out of school (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2021)

- escaping family violence (McNamara 2015)

- involvement with the youth justice system, being on remand, or exiting custody (Brackertz, Baldry et al. 2015).

Even though policies aim to support young peoples in their transition, in practice, transition planning often does not happen, or transition plans are ineffective in preventing young people becoming homeless (Commission for Children and Young People 2020).

The coordination and integration of support systems shapes the way services operate. Considering some of the barriers and opportunities on the service level could enable youth homelessness strategies to facilitate connections between different services. Research in the Victorian context includes:

- support coordination between schools and a range of welfare providers, such as the COSS model, aims to prevent youth homelessness in a local area by identifying those at risk of homelessness and addressing underlying risk factors (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020)

- mental health and housing services collaborating, like the Doorways program, which demonstrates program level integration involving hospitals, SHS providers, landlords and mental health service providers (Brackertz 2018)

- between homelessness, mental health and drug and alcohol services (Flatau, Conroy et al. 2013)

- provision of supported housing integrated with education and training, such as Youth Foyers (Beer, Delfabbro et. al 2005; Randolph and Wood 2005).

5.2.2 Limited access to youth-specific housing and other support services in local areas

Social housing and other forms of supported accommodation are not easily accessible to young people. Social housing providers are reluctant to accept young people as principal tenants because of their low and insecure incomes as well as being regarded as high-risk to not sustain their tenancies (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). To enable young people to maintain their tenancies, additional youth-specific, often more intense, supports are required in addition to housing.

Strategies, such as Opening Doors, that seek to have a limited number of points of entry across each region require good sharing of information between providers (Victorian Government 2008). A range of collaborative, place-based approaches have been developed in Victoria to support young people experiencing homelessness through connecting different programs and organisations as part of a network at a local area level. Yet, these programs rely on key agencies setting-up and maintaining networks to deliver place-based approaches. For young people, access and the quality of homelessness and support services may differ between metropolitan, rural, and more remote areas in Victoria.

5.2.3 Limited consideration of pathway perspectives for young people experiencing homelessness

The present service system is not designed well to consider a young person's pathway out of homelessness with stable housing as a base. Although some young people are picked up through early intervention and return to their family of origin, other young people (e.g., those with mental health issues) can get stuck or cycle in and out of the system (Brackertz, Borrowman et al. 2020). Without housing or support, these young people can be forced to rely on a social network of other young people experiencing homelessness, become trapped in sub-standard accommodation, and acclimatise to a homelessness subculture (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008).

5.3 Deficits in present service delivery

The delivery of support services to assist young people experiencing homelessness is driven by crisis responses with insufficient focus on early intervention and prevention approaches. The reviewed evidence suggests that service delivery would benefit from a stronger focus on trauma-informed principles and intensive case management. A business-as-usual approach will have consequences for many young people, including inter-generational homelessness, poor employment outcomes, accumulation of disadvantage, and costs for society in areas such as health and justice.

5.3.1 Reliance on crisis responses

Presently, approaches to addressing youth homelessness centre on the specialist homelessness system. Housing approaches after crisis are focused on transitional housing, which envisage either private rental or social housing as potential exit points. However, many young people find it hard to access these tenures, especially if they have not been able to access income support or there is an expectation they might return to their family of origin. While in crisis, many are not able to obtain stable accommodation and cycle back into homelessness. Without stable housing, it can become harder to address other issues in the young person's life.

Effective models that might provide more stable accommodation in the short to medium term, together with support to help independence – like Youth Foyers, Transitional Housing Plus, or Housing First for Youth – are either in short supply or are not available in Victoria.

5.3.2 Insufficient early intervention and prevention approaches

While resourcing is still needed in crisis and recovery, investment in early intervention and prevention approaches that involve stable housing and other supports (e.g., around mental health) might yield significant benefits across the system and reduce higher costs in other areas of justice and health (McKenzie, Hand et al. 2021). A key principle of seeking to divert young people from experiencing homelessness is to ensure they are encouraged to engage with services and that the branding of services is not stigmatising. This might involve integrating homelessness services into normative activities or institutions such as schools, health services, or other youth services.

The *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria* recommends the Victorian government focus more on early intervention (LCLSIC 2021). Recommendations of the Inquiry that are targeted at young people specifically include:

- consider the barriers young people face in entering the private rental market
- investigate and provide additional funding for early intervention services for young people that seek to address family conflict issues
- assess the suitability to expand the Education First Youth Foyers program
- invest into innovative accommodation for young people at their family home
- expand the Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model
- increase funding for programs that assist young people to receive job readiness training and connect them to employment opportunities (LCLSIC 2021).

Programs utilising best practice approaches have demonstrated positive outcomes in Victoria. Historically, there has been higher service engagement and lower rates of homelessness in Victoria than in other parts of Australia (AIHW 2020c). However, there remains scope to expand these approaches and apply them in other parts of the system.

5.3.3 Embed trauma informed principles

By the time many young people become homeless, it is likely many have already faced experiences of trauma (Martijn and Sharpe 2006). This might have included abuse or family violence. Trauma can sometimes be compounded by subsequent experiences of homelessness and, sadly, their experiences of the homelessness service system (Pollock, Davis et al. 2020).

A better youth homelessness system would seek to ensure all services are conscious of trauma and take a trauma-informed approach. This can include engaging with specialist services to ensure inclusive and culturally appropriate and sensitive support for young people identifying as LGBTQI, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or from CALD backgrounds. Services (e.g., child protection, mental health and homelessness) should not seek to re-traumatise the young person or blame victims for their circumstance, but convey hope that recovery is possible. Trauma informed principles include:

- safety

- trust

- choice

- collaboration

- empowerment

- respect for diversity (NSW Health 2021).

There is now increased societal awareness of the issue of trauma and mental health, compared to when youth homelessness systems were originally designed (Victorian Government 2021). There is a need to update the homelessness system to adopt these principles into the design and funding of support programs.

5.3.4 Integrate best practice case management

Best practice case management involves building longer term and empathetic supports around a person to enable effective recovery, including culturally relevant, safe, consistent and reliable client-worker relationships that enable restoration of relationships of trust. At a systems level, programs would:

- offer longer periods of support to match the requirements around long term care

- seek to avoid re-traumatisation by ensuring timely responses to housing and other needs

- have a secure funding structure that is client based and not service based

- provide joined-up services including mental health and other holistic supports (Duff, Hill et al. 2021).

Case management in the present system is often based around provision of short-term periods of support to address short term needs. While this can often address short-term issues around accommodation, it can often be inappropriate for many young people who need longer term, stable and flexible supports to rebuild trust. There is precedent for services to have flexibility around the length of service provision (e.g., Homestretch or Better Futures). Approaches to case management might seek to build a range of supports that consider the young person's strengths, including supportive cultural and family relationships. Optimally, case management would involve a responsive, longer-term relationship of trust with a worker or agency that might follow the client through points of transition and crisis.

Best practice principles include that the support be:

- person-centred

- trauma-informed

- strengths-based

- flexible (stepping-up and stepping-down to meet need)

- culturally appropriate.

6. Developing a new youth homelessness strategy in Victoria

This Paper has presented evidence that young people are a significant cohort of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria and have distinctive support needs. Homelessness and support services are mostly government funded. The evidence of the Positioning Paper highlights that current policies have not been efficient in reducing youth homelessness, support systems are fragmented, and there are some deficiencies in service delivery approaches. A new youth homelessness strategy offers the opportunity to have a more efficient youth homelessness system in which funding is better targeted, service systems are more closely coordinated, and service delivery implements best practice approaches.

Following considerations could support the process towards a new youth homelessness strategy for Victoria:

- **Reconfigure existing policy frameworks**

  Many of the principles of existing policy frameworks and strategies, including a focus on early intervention and prevention, can be drawn-upon to develop a youth homelessness strategy. Elements of reform might include the provision of networked or joined-up support in places where young people are most likely to need them, such as in schools, and at key points of transition (e.g., leaving out-of-home care and exiting the justice system), and embracing proven, affordable, and socially sustainable models of accommodation for young people.

- **Put young people at the centre**

  Strategies and policy frameworks guiding youth homelessness responses would benefit from a youth-specific focus. A dedicated youth homelessness strategy in Victoria would enable the distinctive underlying causes of youth homelessness, and experiences of homeless young people to be addressed. A young people-centric strategy could provide a holistic framework of supporting young people's transition from adolescence to adulthood and between support systems. Putting young people at the centre during the development of a youth homelessness strategy entails involving young people with lived experience of homelessness in the design and operation of service responses.

- **Learn from Aboriginal-led models**

  Aboriginal-led frameworks across a range of support systems provide guidance for the delivery of culturally appropriate services and practices to support Aboriginal young people experiencing homelessness. In many cases, these frameworks provide holistic models based on trauma-informed and person-centred approaches to address the complex needs of Aboriginal young people. Learnings apply not only to guide support for Aboriginal young people within Aboriginal-led organisations, but also for mainstream service delivery across all support systems. In addition to strengthening Aboriginal-led organisations, learnings should also inform mainstream youth homelessness strategies.

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- **Integrate new thinking in design and funding of programs**

  Since Victoria's last youth homelessness strategy in 2004, new forms of thinking provide the opportunity to improve support services for young people experiencing homelessness. Current best-practice approaches highlight the importance of trauma-informed engagement with young people and providing intensive case-management built on person-centred and strengths-based approaches. This includes looking at ways to improve connections of young people to employment, education and training, and improving access to secure and stable housing. Early intervention and prevention strategies, in combination with housing interventions integrated with youth-specific support, enable young people to focus on recovery, reducing the reliance on crisis responses and temporary accommodation.

- **Implement more coordinated and effective processes**

  A new strategy would need to include an effective implementation process that proposes meaningful outcomes and clear goals. This could include a commitment to provide resources and adequate funding to ensure collaboration between supports systems improving housing, and support provision for homeless young people at the service level. Current funded programs could be supported to adapt current best practice approaches to ensure resources are utilised efficiently.

- **Create a better understanding of young people's experiences and pathways**

  A better understanding of young people's experiences of homelessness, such as overcrowding, and couch-surfing, and pathways navigating youth homelessness system, is needed to inform any new youth homelessness strategy. Further research could entail a review of current youth homelessness responses in Victoria, such as the refuge system and transitional accommodation, and outcomes achieved in preventing young people churning through the homelessness system and moving to a well-supported trajectory. More evidence is also needed to analyse the access to and quality of youth homelessness services across regional and metropolitan areas in Victoria.

The questions in Table 6 may guide further policy development.

Table 6: Questions to guide further policy development

Young people at risk
• Are there young people being missed by services (e.g., refugees, overcrowded households, LGBTIQ people, Aboriginal people)?
• What holistic outcomes are desirable for young people at risk, but which are not being addressed effectively (e.g., mental health, education, jobs, housing stability, transition planning)?
• What assistance do young people need but are not getting (e.g., timely and appropriate housing, person centred support)?
• What is young people's present experience of services and what needs to change to ensure they can still participate in normal activities and not be stigmatised (waiting lists, etc.)?
• What strengths of young people can be leveraged? (e.g., How can young people be involved in co-designing the system?)

Services
• What services might address the needs of young people at risk and who is best placed to provide them?
• What principles should guide their operation (e.g., trauma-informed, strengths-based, person-centred)?
• What best practice models (housing-based, person-based, place-based) need to be expanded and where?
• What should service integration look like at a local level and what does this mean for both large and small providers and information sharing (i.e., what changes to the Opening Doors framework may be required)?
• How do we ensure service providers are accountable to deliver outcomes?

Policy framework
• What elements of a youth homelessness strategy are needed to reduce homelessness?
• What role might government have in improving service integration (e.g., joint commissioning, outcomes based funding)?
• How might funding need to increase or be reoriented to leverage better outcomes (e.g., more into early intervention, housing options)?
• How might clients and services be involved in developing a new strategic framework?
• How might data collection and analysis need to change to evaluate and monitor outcomes so we know we have succeeded?

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