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Homelessness and Young People: Support During Troubled Times

Contents

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Contributions to *Parity* are welcome. Each issue of *Parity* has a central focus or theme. However, prospective contributors should not feel restricted by this as *Parity* seeks to discuss the whole range of issues connected with homelessness and the provision of housing and services to people experiencing homelessness. Where necessary, contributions will be edited. Where possible this will be done in consultation with the contributor. Contributions can be emailed to ***parity@chp.org.au*** in Microsoft Word or rtf format. If this option is not possible, contributions can be mailed to CHP at the above address.

Proposed 2022 *Parity* Publication Schedule

May:	"Holding the Line": The Salvation Army Response to Homelessness
June:	Education and Homelessness
July:	Pregnancy and Homelessness
August:	Working Together: The Future of South Australian Homelessness and Domestic Violence Services
September:	The Victorian Response to Homelessness
October:	TBC
November:	The Role of Information Technology in Responding to Homelessness
December:	Homelessness and the Law Revisited

Cover image
Cover image courtesy of Kids Under Cover.

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Editorial

Jenny Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Council to Homeless Persons

That Much Harder

We have now come to anticipate having an annual edition of *Parity* with a focus on young people without a home. We are fortunate to have been supported in this endeavor for many years now by Victoria's Melbourne City Mission and Hope Street Youth and Family Services.

In recent years, the 'youth' edition has become truly national, this year with the support of Youth Off The Streets (NSW), Kids Under Cover, Queensland Youth Housing Coalition, Yfoundations (NSW), Gold Coast Youth Services, MyFoundations (NSW), Uniting Vic.Tas and Brisbane Youth Service.

This year's focus is particularly on how best to go about providing 'support', tailored to the needs of young people without a home.

We are all acutely aware of how the world has been different for everyone over the last two years.

This is the first edition of *Parity* to focus explicitly on best practice in providing support to youth. However, the focus is also on best practice in the context of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, homelessness and on service providers and provision.

The contributors to this edition concur that young people, and particularly young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness, have been significantly disadvantaged by the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have argued that we may see these impacts lead to the further entrenchment of intergenerational disadvantage.

The dimensions of this disadvantage can be seen across the whole spectrum of social relations. At a minimum, this includes the increasing economic marginalisation of young people through diminished access to employment opportunities, difficulties in gaining access to educational opportunities, reduced access to increasingly unaffordable housing, greater levels of family breakdown, decreased opportunities for participation in community, social and cultural life and, consistently, an increase in the prevalence of mental health issues among young people.

The two-way street that is the nexus between mental health and homelessness is a consistent thread throughout this edition.

Pre-COVID, we all understood that young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are at greater risk of having mental health issues.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

Consequently, they are also at greater risk of homelessness and housing insecurity, as they have greater difficulty having enough income to access and sustain housing they can afford. We understood that mental health issues intersect with and impact upon young people's exposure to violence and exploitation, exclusion from education and the increased prevalence of other poor health outcomes and substance abuse.

We know that the pandemic has only increased the number of young people experiencing a range of mental health issues. It has also exacerbated the challenges for young people already grappling with mental health issues. Most pointedly, the last two plus years of the pandemic have created even greater difficulties for many young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, in accessing the various support services that they need, in some cases just in order to survive.

All this has only increased the pressure on our already pressed youth homelessness services to maintain and frequently increase their levels of support for young people.

Youth support services that were already operating under pressure, have had to re-think, re-configure and sometimes re-invent aspects of their service delivery platforms and innovate so they can continue to provide access to those much-needed services.

The constraints on face-to-face and drop-in services has meant challenging work for all those providing support to young people. These constraints have seen increased outreach where safe and possible to do so, and the use of telephone and virtual appointments. For workers, it has meant the use of digital platforms like Zoom and Teams to organise and coordinate programs and services while working from home.

Our services have not only been flexible and adaptive in responding to these changes. Our services have also reflected upon, documented, co-designed, evaluated and researched what can be learned from the circumstances that have been forced upon us by external events. The lessons of this experience have then been incorporated and included in the development of our future service responses.

This edition of *Parity* provides a valuable record of our understanding of the complexity of the issues confronting young people and their related support needs, particularly in the context of the pandemic. It also shines a light on some of the issues facing services that are attempting to support young people who are without or at risk of being without a home.

Acknowledgements

CHP acknowledges and thanks all of our youth homelessness edition sponsors: Melbourne City Mission, Hope Street Youth and Family Services, Youth Off The Streets (NSW), Kids Under Cover, Queensland Youth Housing Coalition, Yfoundations (NSW), Gold Coast Youth Services, MyFoundations (NSW), Uniting Vic.Tas and Brisbane Youth Service.

Artwork courtesy Libby Crayton, Frontyard Youth Services

Chapter 1: COVID-19 and After: Issues and Consequences for Young People

When a Whole Lot of Young People Get a Whole Lot More Stressed: Mental Health, Young People, Homelessness and COVID-19

Rhianon Vichta-Ohlsen, Research and Evaluation Manager
and Catherine Mann, Research and Evaluation Coordinator, Brisbane Youth Service

Mental health concerns are consistently one of the most prevalent challenges facing young people who are at risk of homelessness, or homeless, when coming to Brisbane Youth Service for assistance. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic both the numbers of young people presenting for support and the percentage of those young people who are experiencing mental health issues have increased disproportionately. The concerning increase in mental health issues in the general Australian population has been well documented, with evidence that this impact has been stronger for young people[1] and that mental health is the third most common aspect of young peoples' lives to be adversely affected by COVID-19.[2]

In delivering a range of multi-disciplinary supports for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) has tracked the prevalence of mental health issues over the last six years through pre-post assessments with all young people accessing support. Young people are asked

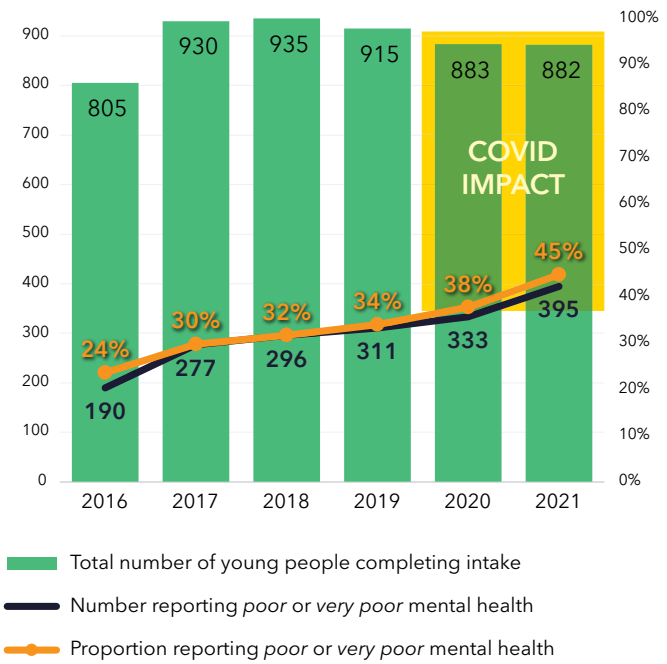
a) to self-rate their mental health on a scale from 1 (Very Poor) to 5 (Great)

b) indicate if they have diagnosed mental health issues.

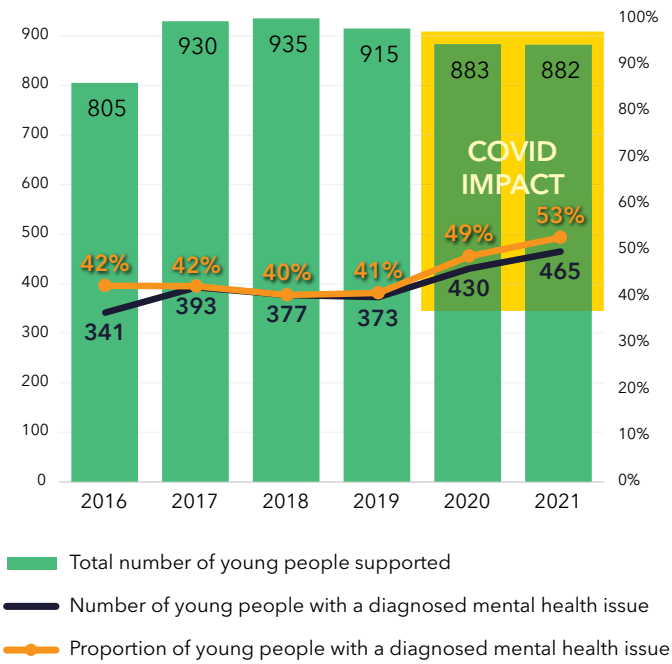
For the current analysis, the percentage of young people who self-rated their mental health as *Very Poor* or *Poor* and/or indicated they had a mental health diagnosis were tracked by calendar year and examined by age. This data excludes those who were diagnosed or experienced emergent mental health issues after intake to the service. It is common for young people to report or have increased awareness of their mental health concerns after immediate housing and financial concerns stabilise.

Young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are typically at increased risk of experiencing mental health issues. Mental health issues impact young people's housing situation in three key ways: they are a leading cause of homelessness; they exacerbate the risks associated with unstable housing and homelessness; and they become an ongoing barrier to accessing and sustaining housing. In addition, unstable or poor mental health intersects with a range of other challenges in young people's lives including exposure to violence/exploitation; financial disadvantage; disengagement from education/employment; substance use and overall health/wellbeing.

Young People Self-Rating their Mental Health as *Poor* or *Very Poor* – BYS Intake Data 2016–2021



Young People with a Diagnosed Mental Health Issue – BYS Intake Data 2016–2021



Brisbane Youth Services (BYS) supports a population where roughly half of the young people aged 12 to 25 years have already been diagnosed with a mental health issue prior to seeking support at BYS. Since the impact of COVID-19 started to be felt in early 2020, the proportion of young people experiencing mental health issues has risen at a rate that is disproportionate to previous increases.

Over the last six years there has been a shocking 87.5 per cent increase in the proportion of young people describing their mental health as *Very Poor* or *Poor* with rates rising from 24 per cent of young people supported to 45 per cent between 2016 and 2021. Within that trajectory, the annual rise had been steadily 6.7 per cent per year from 2017 to 2019, however between 2019 and 2020 rates increased by 12 per cent and from 2020 to 2021 rates jumped by 18 per cent to reach a record level of 45 per cent of young people reporting concerningly poor mental health at intake to BYS.

Rates of mental health diagnosis amongst young people presenting for support also tell a concerning story. While this data may be confounded by increased diagnosis for National Disability Insurance Scheme and Medicare-funded mental health plans, the trajectory of mental health diagnoses matches that of young people reporting poorer mental health. This is likely to be representative of an increased prevalence of concerns.

While the proportion of young people who reported that they had a mental health diagnosis remained relatively steady at 40 to 42 per cent between 2016 and 2019, this has increased by 30 per cent in the last two years to reach 53 per cent of all young people supported in 2021. It is notable that, in previous years, rates of diagnosis were much higher than the number who self-reported poor mental health when seeking BYS support — but that gap is narrowing.

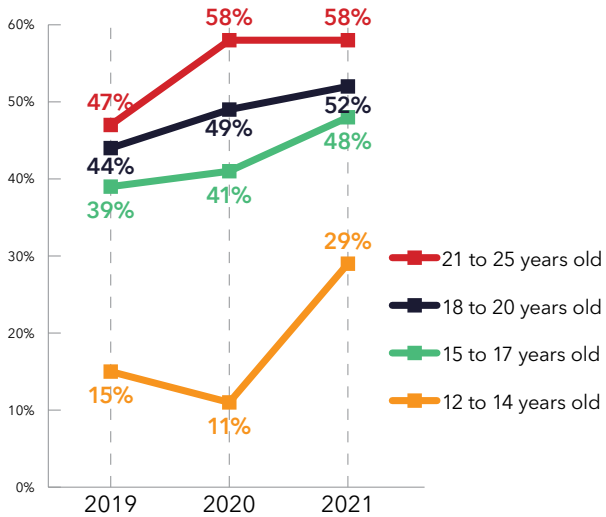
The largest increase in diagnosed mental health issues over the COVID-19 impact period was for the very young, with diagnosis rates for young people aged 12 to 14 years almost doubling between 2019 and 2021.

In parallel, those aged 12 to 14 years have also shown a disproportionate increase in likelihood of rating their mental health as *Very Poor* or *Poor*, increasing by more than double to 41 per cent of all young people in that age range in 2021 compared to one in five in 2019.

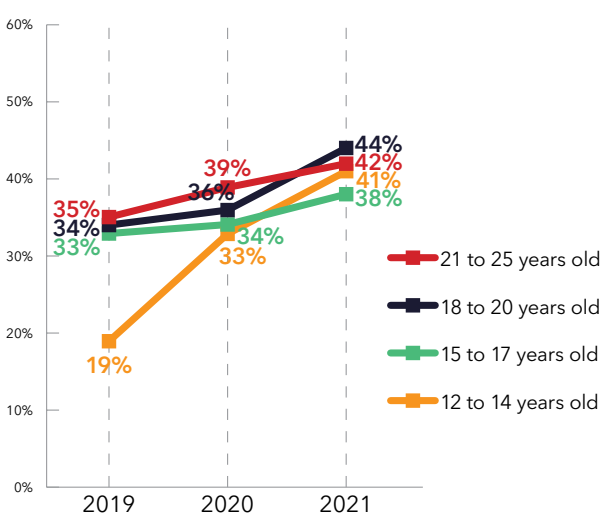
There are several factors creating the perfect storm of conditions for young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness in South-East Queensland. Globally, young people have been hit hard by the wide-reaching labour market and social impacts of COVID-19.[3] In Queensland, a sense of hope for stable sustainable housing has been hit by escalating housing shortages and rent prices as pandemic conditions have driven migration into lower population density cities and regional areas. Rental affordability in Brisbane and surrounding Sunshine Coast and Gold Coast areas has reached crisis levels with almost zero rental properties available. Rental vacancy rates in Brisbane have dropped from just under three per cent in early 2020 to 0.9 per cent in February 2022, the lowest rate in more than 15 years.[4]

COVID-19 restrictions have created significant losses of support options for young people through service closures, social distancing and lockdowns. Telehealth provided a solution for some but relied on young people having access to phone or internet and being able to engage without in-person support.

Young People with a Diagnosed Mental Health Issue by Age – BYS Intake Data 2019–2021



Self-rated *Poor* or *Very Poor* Mental Health by Age – BYS Intake Data 2019–2021



Alongside severe restrictions, loss of options for financial security through employment, disrupted educational engagement and loss of social and cultural connection opportunities, young people reported that social isolation has severely impacted their wellbeing. BYS workers describe disrupted engagement with adaption to COVID-19 restrictions:

> *'It's been very challenging since COVID. When we think about trauma-informed principles, we know that consistency is so important to managing trauma. When the routines and access to services are constantly changing, it created uncertainty and unpredictability, we had to keep shifting arrangements with young people in relation to what we could and could not do to support them. We had to be flexible and adaptable in a constantly changing space and environment, but it can be really stressful when no-one knows what is going to happen next, and it feels never-ending.'*

Social isolation and lack of mental health support has combined to negatively impact young people:

> *'Isolation has been a core theme of the increase in mental health issues. Not only the lockdowns but also changes to support relationships, with family members moving or less available, living situations changing, no longer going to work or school or to see friends. This not only creates isolation, but it triggers lack of sense of control of their own environment, and the loss of a sense of agency in their lives is a big trauma trigger for many young people, along with having to listen to governments that have not supported them well in the past. The changes to services and the lack of mental health support was a huge pressure — getting to see someone like a psychologist under a mental health plan was great in theory but, in reality, they were fully booked and most services had long wait lists or were closed for bookings.'*

> *'The lack of resources was really hard — expectations about what people could and could not access were constantly changing.'*

BYS frontline workers did comment, however, on the surprising resilience demonstrated by young people through COVID-19. This could explain why the older age ranges of young people, who may have more experience with crisis environments, reported a lower level of mental health impact.

> *'I found that, unlike workers, young people have been living with instability and risk for a really long time, and in some ways, they already had the skills to cope in an environment where threat is always around. Often, they were able to lean on the skills that they already had, persistently trying to find support even when it was hard to access. It didn't always feel like a new space for young people to enter into — they are survivors — true survivors — and their resilience shone through even when the workers were having to work hard to build their skills to adapt to new ways of working.'*

Overall, we need to be prepared to see long-term consequences of COVID-19 lasting well beyond the physical health symptoms. A generation of young people have experienced negative mental health impacts, but unsurprisingly this has disproportionately impacted those who are also dealing with homelessness or unstable and unsafe living situations, who are impacted by multiple other intersecting wellbeing concerns, and for whom 'staying home' can have serious implications. Young people are the most disadvantaged by the limited availability and cost of private rentals. They have been excluded from COVID-19 emergency housing responses due to their age, and continue to be a low proportion of social housing tenants. They are often invisible in most strategic housing responses.

The housing and homelessness sector needs to be equipped and resourced to respond to mental health issues and mental health system reforms need to consider and respond to the particular needs of vulnerable young people. The overreliance on one model of youth mental health service (headspace) needs to be balanced by funding diversification to where the critical needs are, including complex mental health responses embedded in frontline homelessness services. This need has never been more apparent, and critical, than in the current pandemic environment.

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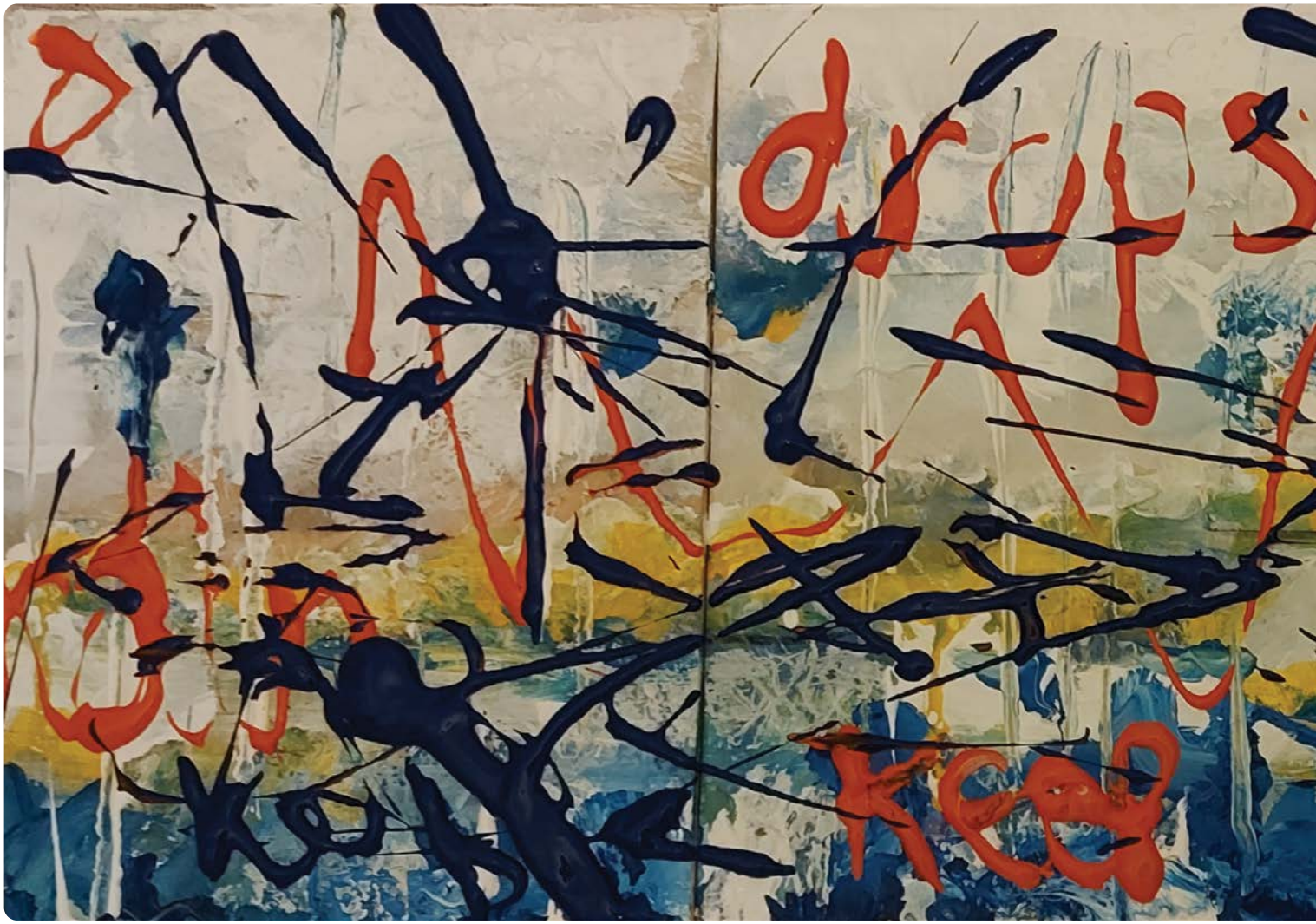
Youth Homelessness on the Frontline: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdowns on our Young People and Workers in Youth Early Intervention and How We Adapted

Marita Hagel, with contributions from Western Reconnect and Detour Western, Melbourne City Mission and, of course, our young people

Like for most people and services, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent public health measures had significant impacts not only for ourselves and our service but also for the young people we support. Our young people in the early intervention space already face several challenges including family conflict and breakdown, family violence, poor health and/or mental health, economic and social disadvantage, and trauma.

The lockdowns in Melbourne and Victoria exacerbated some of these existing challenges through restricted access to or closures of social supports. Considering the pandemic restrictions, we had to significantly reduce face-to-face contact with young people and within our team. Suddenly we were marooned in our living areas and bedrooms with only our computers and phones to keep the service running. Some young people adapted quickly, but for others it was challenging for them to engage and for us to support them.

One young person told me that for him the lockdowns made little difference to him as he rarely left home regardless and preferred to speak to me over the phone. I had a couple of other young people bravely trying to finish their Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) online who preferred studying online due to their social anxiety. Others were fine with using Zoom or Teams to speak with us whilst others simply did not have the access to technology that allowed them to use these platforms. Having access to telehealth meant that services were more accessible, as young people did not have the challenge of trying to physically get to appointments.



Unfortunately for others, who were particularly vulnerable to family violence for example, the lockdowns heightened their risk. Being in close confines with the perpetrator for days and weeks on end and having fewer options to flee these situations increased the risks they faced each day. There were incidents when young people were fined for travelling outside of their 5km because they could not safely stay at home any longer.

For staff, not being able to physically see young people who were in significant crisis heightened concern due to the difficulties of assessing risk. This increased the anxiety for staff who were also dealing with a new way of working and finding it a struggle to separate work from their home life, as suddenly work infiltrated our homes. This made it harder to leave the challenges behind once the laptops and phones were switched off. Working from home meant more free time, no commuting and eating whatever you wanted but it also meant feeling disconnected from colleagues and the organisation, and at times wondering if you were making a difference at all. Although we often felt we were restricted in our abilities to really support young people, some young people said the fact that someone would call them weekly to check in on how they were doing made a huge difference during the lockdowns.

Some of our staff and young people shared their insights into the pandemic's impact on them. One staff member said that the pandemic was tough on many like herself who were working in hospitality jobs and living in a share house. She was fortunate that the landlord was understanding and allowed her and her housemates a rent-free month without asking for them to pay it back later.
For others, the lockdowns and being forced to complete their schooling online was a real challenge, particularly in relation to motivation and changes in sleeping patterns. Some young people reported poor sleep, which was further impacted by increased gaming at night to pass the time and provide a distraction. The impact on young people's mental health was massive as they were unable to meet up with friends or other social supports. Others felt let down by the government's slow response to offer financial relief and the slow rolling out of the vaccines. For others the mandates caused significant stress due to losing their jobs in hospitality, retail, and other face-to-face roles because they were hesitant about these new vaccines and the impact on their health.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

While the pandemic was tough on so many levels, it did teach us to be flexible and adapt quickly to change. Suddenly we were all experts in Zoom, Teams and electronic signatures and advocating over the phone at court. Organisations and leadership had to think creatively to keep staff connected and keep up morale. At our workplace a wellbeing committee worked hard to come up with creative and fun ways to keep us engaged. We had photo competitions, baking competitions and lots of banter online. Our CEO held regular webcasts to keep us informed of what was happening across the organisation and what they were doing to provide us with support to keep the services running and to keep us and our service users safe. With all the constantly changing restrictions, our COVID-19 taskforce and management kept us informed which meant we felt empowered to provide the most up to date advice to our young people at any one time.

We saw so many examples of adaptability and gains for young people. During this time, we had several young people successfully find rentals which the extra payments from Centrelink assisted with. Other young people successfully found jobs during this time. The ongoing pandemic and lockdowns taught us much about resilience both in the workplace and for those we support.

Although the financial, health and societal impacts are still being felt and will be for some time, we have shown how capable we are of adapting during adversity and how people and services can evolve in an ever-changing world.

Confronting COVID in a Crowded House

Kids Under Cover

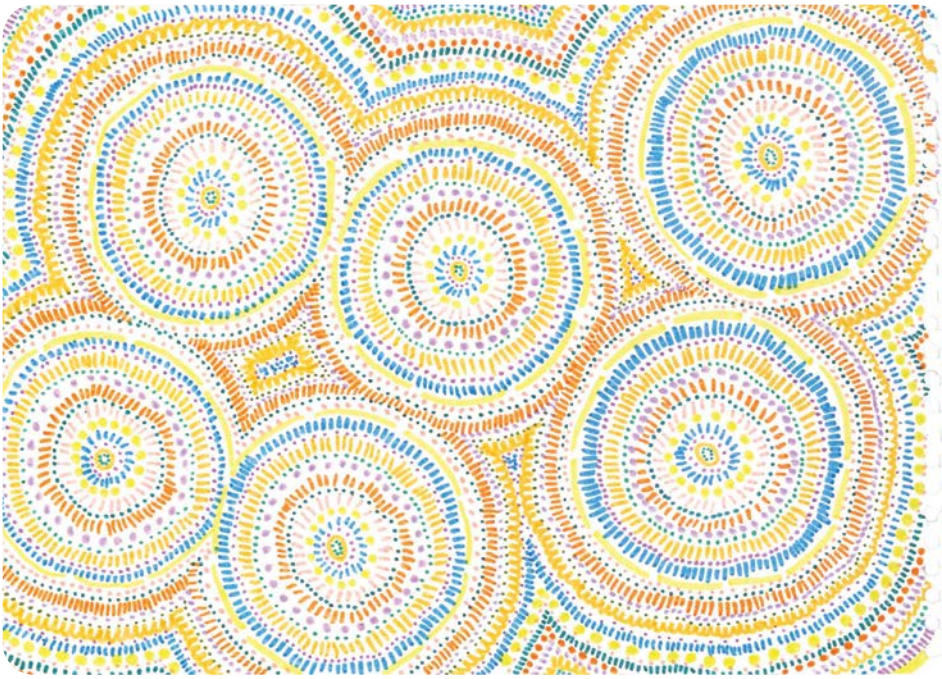
By and large, people's battles with the fallout from the pandemic have played out behind closed doors. And when those doors close on a house with too few rooms for too many people, the obvious response from a teenager is to want to get out.

An overcrowded home is an all-too-common starting place for a young person's lonely path to homelessness. In his thesis on Crowding, Risk and Homelessness, Dr. Paul Stolz explains how the 'rootlessness and lack of opportunity' inevitably associated with crowded households can bring rise to a risk of homelessness. He explains how being 'too tightly bound and constricted physically and socially can lead to a sense of loss of home'.[1]

It is not necessarily the crowded space alone that can fuel the urge for young people to leave, there are a great number of potential contributing factors — complications exacerbated by the presence of mental illness, the inability to enjoy proper sleep or the contribution of household chaos to name a few. But there are countless anecdotes that point to the tension, conflict and anxiety that can be triggered by lack of space in the home. Without a place for 'time-out' or privacy, frustration for a whole family can build to breaking point.

Most of us, particularly in the eastern states, now have some experience of the imposition of less space due to the lockdowns imposed by COVID. Imagine then, the imposition of being confined to a place with literally nowhere to be alone.

Space at home is crucial to young people. It helps them develop their own identity and provides the comfort of feeling 'at home'. Young people share a need for a sense of belonging, security and safety, and thus gravitate towards the place where those traits exist.[2] Thus, if the space at home does not accommodate those needs, the gravitational pull can be lost and replaced with a desire to find them somewhere else.



Artwork courtesy Libby Crayton, Frontyard Youth Services

Exacerbating Issues with Mental Health

Challenges with mental health are a concerning and compounding risk factor for young people living in a crowded home. While the impact of COVID on the physical health of young people has not been as sinister as it has for older folk, the psychological and social impact continues to be measured by a meteoric rise in calls for counselling, family support and crisis response services. Young people have been particularly affected by the associated restrictions on movement, social gatherings and the impacts on labour markets.[3]

As an indication of how the pandemic has driven a spike in demand for support, we can compare call volumes to three of Australia's major mental health support services. In September 2021:

- calls to Lifeline were up 14.1 per cent and 33.1 per cent from the same periods in 2020 and 2019 respectively
- Kids Helpline received 32,572 answerable contact attempts, up 4.6 per cent and 16.7 per cent from the same periods in 2020 and 2019 respectively
- calls to Beyond Blue were up 20.9 per cent from the same period in 2019.[4]

So clearly, the pandemic has had a major impact on the mental health of young people regardless of their circumstances. When we marry these numbers with the rise in overcrowded homes and a national housing affordability crisis, we are looking at a perfectly dangerous storm that is seeing community and government support services stretched beyond their limits.

Youth support service, Barwon Child, Youth and Family (BCYF), for example, says it has seen a 60 per cent spike in young people seeking homelessness support in the past year.[5] Youth homelessness prevention charity, Kids Under Cover, have had to stall applications to their Studio and Scholarship Programs due to an inability to fund an overwhelming increase in demand. These are just a couple of countless cases of a growing need for support for young people as we begin to emerge from the confinement of the past two years.

Getting in Early

It could be argued that a shift in focus to early intervention could help ease the pressure on crisis and emergency support services who are having to cast their net so far and wide.

Now in its 33rd year since foundation, Kids Under Cover enter the picture early by providing studio accommodation for young people before they feel compelled to leave home, underprepared for the transition to independent living. An overwhelmingly common reason listed in applications for a Kids Under Cover studio is overcrowding.

The addition of a studio to a family's living options shifts the human dynamic of the household in several ways. First and foremost, it provides the extra space a young person needs to breathe and settle outside a crowded family living space. Importantly, it offers this 'sanctuary' while keeping them connected to family — decreasing the risk of disconnection, couch surfing and drifting from one place to the next. The impact of a studio is also felt for family members in the main house, with extra sleeping space, less tendency for conflict and the flow on effect from a generally greater sense of well-being.

From the interviews conducted during the research for his thesis, Dr. Stolz found young people who had received a studio *'often spoke of a sense of maturation, renewed educational engagement and reduced family discord. The additional space provided a heightened sense of belonging and attachment to place and family.'*[6]

The benefits of the addition of a studio to a crowded household have been unsurprisingly magnified during COVID restrictions. The relief is well summarised by the mother of one of the studio recipients. *'With COVID it has … been essential for him,'* she says. *'I feel like if we didn't have the studio, and with lockdown causing so much stress for us, we'd not have coped. That space has been a blessing'*.

Class of 2021

Also noticeable during the past two school years dominated by online learning was the increased ability for young people living in a Kids Under Cover studio to maintain engagement with school.

While lockdowns exacerbated a feeling that the world had stopped, students were expected to carry on in an unfamiliar online format with teachers on edge and one-on-one interaction barely possible. For those lucky enough to have had an application for a studio approved and delivered, the many weeks in lockdown provided something of a control test of the benefits a studio and its quiet space can bring to a senior student.

18-year-old Marlon* presents an excellent case, having received a studio during his Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) years after previously living among six siblings in a crowded family setting.

'If I had to do VCE inside the house I probably would have had to repeat year 12. My house is so noisy. And my siblings were all on their computers at school as well. I'd be trying to understand the principles of accounting while my sister is screaming for food, one brother's annoying another brother… Even though the studio is for me, the whole family benefits. It has like a domino effect and reaches all the way through the whole family.' he says.

The need for these kind of early intervention solutions has been further exposed by imposed lockdowns and despite some considered input from state governments — South Australia's Homelessness Prevention Fund and Victoria's Big Build provide prime examples — funding limitations have forced Kids Under Cover to temporarily close applications for studios as demand has simply overwhelmed the ability to fund more builds.

Kids Under Cover CEO, Stephen Nash is pragmatic about funding limitations but remains determined to find a dependable solution. *'Closing applications at a time when they're most needed is nothing short of devastating really,'* he says. *'It's certainly had an impact on key people in our organisation having had to make such a tough call. The only solution I see is to create a consistent funding pipeline that our board is determined to pursue in partnership with state governments, to help bring a sense of certainty and the ability to plan and reach as many people as we can.'*

Lessons Learnt

If it was not already clear, the experience of the past two years has shown us how living in severely crowded circumstances is almost untenable for a young person. The impact crowding has on mental wellbeing, physical health, the ability to study, sleep and be social, and the ability to grow as a person has been accentuated by the experience of lockdowns and further highlighted by the increase in calls for support. Perhaps the most positive thing to have come from the experience is a broader understanding of what needs to be done, and an acknowledgement of the logic of early intervention strategies in protecting mental health, enabling educational growth and preventing a fast track to homelessness.

* Name changed to protect identity

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Young People in Housing Crisis: How We Can Utilise This in Future Research

Zenab Tewolde, Senior Worker, Frontyard Youth Access Point, Melbourne City Mission

As with all services providing face-to-face work, the Frontyard Youth Access Point had to significantly change service delivery during the pandemic. The service had to pivot overnight from a face-to-face service to providing a service predominantly over the phone and/or online.

There were young people that a telehealth assessment appointment did not suit. Some young people require face-to-face appointments due to mental health issues like anxiety or psychosis, alcohol and other drug use, or disabilities like hearing or cognitive impairment and other vulnerabilities resulting from escaping family violence.

Additionally, most young people did not have phones. This meant if they could not get a hold of a service, they did not get any housing, thus increasing the likelihood that they would have to sleep rough or stay in unsafe environments, for example, with their abusers.

While we prioritised tele-assessment appointments to reduce movement and decrease the risk to young people and staff of contracting COVID-19, we also provided appointment times at 19 King Street for who that needed an in-person response. These were provided in a COVID safe manner.

Young people are often employed in casual roles, with high rates in hospitality and retail. The pandemic impacted significantly on young people and meant that they had less money to pay rent and other expenses.

The pandemic also contributed to increasing costs for some young people who were already struggling financially. Young people engaged in education were suddenly required to have access to a computer and have reliable Wi-Fi. Young people at risk or experiencing homelessness did not have financial means to purchase laptops or pay for internet connection.

O'Keeffe et al. recognised the impact of pandemic lockdowns in relation to its devastating effects on business and industry. This impact on an already unstable casual labour market created further instability. Given that young people make up a significant proportion of the casual labour market, it is not surprising that young people are not afforded enough resources to fund mobile phone plans or prepaid credit for the purpose of engaging in the changing landscape in which services delivered support.[1] Not having access to a phone or not having enough money for credit meant that young people were not able to access a range of support systems.

The pandemic increased and changed the nature of youth homelessness. For example, we were seeing young people who normally do not attend an Access Point. This included more people engaged in full-time education who historically would have had other options — options that were not possible due to the restrictions enforced as part of managing the pandemic and also people's fear of having non-household members in their houses. 78 per cent of all young people who presented to Frontyard in housing crisis reported being unemployed.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

The financial impact of unemployment was more evident when the increased JobKeeper Centrelink payments ceased. We saw an increase in young people seeking support because they were unable to keep up with the cost of housing. Housing Establishment Fund expenditure in the last six months of 2021 was nearly three times more than in the same period of the previous year.

The pandemic provided strong research opportunities to address the difficulties for young people when they are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. A living wage for young people would increase their ability to access a broader range of housing options which meant that they would not need to access homelessness housing options like a refuge. The increased Centrelink payments provided the ability to access share housing as well as private rental options.

For young people who were at risk of homelessness, the pandemic presented even more challenges to maintaining their relationships. Young people were faced with being stuck in homes with the very people who posed a safety risk or negatively impacted their mental health. Family and relationship breakdown is the second highest reason for presentations at Frontyard — 11 per cent, followed by domestic and family violence at 7.66 per cent.

The social isolation measures implemented to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 forced young people living in unsafe situations to remain restricted to their homes. This, coupled with limiting access to support options, increased young people's vulnerability and the risk of harm. Australia, not unlike many countries around the world, saw an increase in demand for family violence services and, in turn, homelessness and housing services.[2] Given this, it is not surprising we saw an increase in young people accessing Frontyard Youth Services during the pandemic.

Frontyard saw young people who dropped out from high school because they were unable to cope with school while living in households that were unsafe and unstable. Usher et al. suggested that the intersecting impacts of the pandemic had a direct effect on young people engaging in school and ultimately dropping out.[3] Again, 78 per cent of young people who presented in housing crisis stated that they were unemployed and not engaged in education and training.

Being able to provide an emergency response to all young people at every presentation was a positive experience. It meant reducing the risks of rough sleeping or having young people return to unsafe accommodation. This was also positive for staff who were not left in the position of saying no to a young person in crisis who desperately needed an immediate safe crisis option. It is well known that reducing the exposure to trauma can have positive long-term outcomes.

Homelessness to a Home (H2H) has also been a positive. While not set up directly with young people in mind, we were successfully able to refer several young people into this program. The inadequate financial resources of young people due to low youth wages or Youth Allowance are two key factors contributing to the difficulty of young people exiting the homelessness service system.

It would be fantastic to review the positives and negatives that came about due to the pandemic and create a youth housing strategy that benefitted all young people and reduced their entry into the cycle of homelessness.

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Support for Frontline Staff in the Homelessness Sector: What We Have Learnt to Date During the Pandemic

Leanne Nicholson, Operations Manager, Frontyard Youth Services, Melbourne City Mission

A significant concern for managers and leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic has been how to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our staff. Our staff are our main resource — the one that makes sure we can fulfill our mission, vision, objectives and of course our contracts. Their hard work and dedication mean that, for us at Frontyard and more broadly across teams in Melbourne City Mission (MCM), we can disrupt the disadvantages people experience and end the cycle of homelessness. One of the main predictors of job performance is strong psychological wellbeing.[1]

It was relatively easy to ensure safety within the workplace for staff from exposure to the virus. Working with Department of Health and internal medically trained staff we were able to ensure we had strong COVID safety processes, resources and plans in place. Time and effort from a broad range of people were required to ensure that we were mitigating risks and being proactive and flexible due to the changing circumstances throughout the pandemic. Our biggest hurdle in creating a safe workplace was sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE) and rapid antigen tests (RATs).

Maintaining staff wellbeing was a much harder task. Due to the significant amount of time Melbourne spent in lockdown it was hard for people to be able to access their normal self-care activities. It didn't matter what you do for self-care — you can be sure that it was impacted in some way. This, coupled with the lack of ability to catch up with family and friends, meant that staff really found it hard to keep their energy levels high.

MCM provided several avenues to address staff wellbeing during this time. Among other actions, we:

- sent small gifts to staff via mail
- enlisted our Employee Access Program to provide online sessions like meditation and mindfulness and increase their presence to ensure staff felt comfortable and safe in reaching out to them
- provided increased catch-up sessions from CEO down to localised team meetings with a bit of fun thrown in to ensure that we were creating space for less formal content!
- ensured that as much as possible we had staff rotating through work from home and onsite to break up the tedium of working from home and create more time with colleagues
- created internal vaccination sites close to or within workplaces so that staff and young people could access these during work hours and without long wait times.

It has been noticed throughout the sector that while we have seen most of the restrictions lifted and we are well and truly out of lockdown, frontline staff are still feeling the impacts on their wellbeing. Research to date has been limited within Australia and there is a gap for those working within homelessness services across the world. No studies during this time were conducted that was focused on the wellbeing of staff within the homelessness sector.[2,3]

To try to understand how the pandemic impacted staff since the start of the pandemic in 2020 to now, I interviewed staff who worked on the frontline throughout the pandemic with young people experiencing homelessness, both in the Access Point at Frontyard and within the accommodation program. I thank them for providing me with their time, insights and recommendations.

Frontline Staff Insights

Overwhelmingly, staff were very glad that they had a job that meant that they could continue to go to work. They were grateful that they had a role that was recognised as essential, which gave them greater ability than most of the Melbourne population to leave their home and 5km zone and to see a broader variety of people.

Other positives listed by the frontline workers that created benefits for improved well-being were:

- Still able to do their role face-to-face and help the community and maintain connections with colleagues and young people.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

- It was comforting to know that we were all in this together and could share the ups and downs.
- Having the ability to go to work created a stable activity out of the home, creating positive wellbeing. The knowledge that this would not change was great as everything else felt uncertain and changeable.
- The slower pace of life meant that there was more time for reflection and exploration of new hobbies/activities, like running and these have now become new self-care activities.
- Getting to work on a bike was great with no other traffic on the roads and you could always get a seat on public transport!
- Telstra making pay phones free was helpful in ensuring that people could contact services and supports during the pandemic.
- Having access to the vaccination early was a strong positive as it made staff feel much safer and less concerned about contracting or passing on COVID-19.
- Encouraged us to remember and value the small things.

The downsides to the pandemic for frontline staff were:

- Coping mechanisms and self-care strategies were taken away or severely limited. This impacted on being able to keep energy levels high, both physically and psychologically.
- Increased risk being on public transport prior to vaccination being widespread.
- The first year saw resilience but, as the pandemic dragged on, staff felt depleted, particularly as work become the only activity out of the home — increasing the feeling that this was their whole life.
- Work/life balance was impacted by increased shifts due to illness/isolation of other staff and, for those working from home, having crisis work happening in your personal space.
- Limited discussions, as nothing is happening with any of us, so this impacted on staff energy, thinking about what to talk about in order to stay positive.
- Increased anxiety due to worry over giving COVID to immune compromised young people, your family, house mates and colleagues.
- The unknown, particularly at the start, and ongoing change was tiring and impacted wellbeing.
- The change in working with young people over a phone and needing to place people into hotels (was a positive as had increased options for crisis accommodation) felt like went from being a youth worker to a booking agent.

Concern is high now amongst staff that the reduction of COVID-19 related Housing Establishment Funding (HEF) will reduce options and they will need to let young people know there are no options for them at present — hard for them to know that we could as a society do something to keep people safe but that we are now going to reduce that option.

Staff sometimes felt that we were the forgotten essential services — media focused on emergency responders like nurses, police and ambulance officers.

Ideas for the Future

Research similarly found that lack of pandemic preparedness, shortages of PPE, challenges enforcing social distancing, government restrictions, wearing of face masks with service users, and assisting with others' anxiety and fears were significant factors adding to the pressures of working and living through the COVID-19 pandemic for essential workers.[4]

Moving forward it will be important for organisations and policy makers to ensure that we are working together to ensure the health and wellbeing of our frontline workers.

Ideas to assist in creating positive wellbeing for frontline staff during a pandemic or other extreme events:

- Ensure organisations provide access to self-care and mindfulness — individual efforts are more effective if combined with organisational approaches.[5] This could include creating informal times and spaces for engaging in wellness activities.

- Develop professional norms that workforce wellbeing is a requisite for those working within homelessness. Training should be provided to leaders and managers as well as frontline staff to further develop knowledge and skills of managing stressors.

- Have professional bodies and educational providers mandate integration of professional wellness into educational curriculums and placement learnings.

- Increase research into wellbeing, protective factors, and contributing factors to poor mental wellbeing and health for frontline workers in the housing and homelessness service sectors.

- State Government to consider options for free public parking throughout the pandemic, to assist in safety concerns for staff on their way to and from work. Increase times that protective service officers and transit police are on public transport.

- Access to vaccination for all essential workers should occur quicker as a major factor increasing anxiety in getting to and being at work was due to the risk of contracting and passing on COVID-19 to service users that often present with lowered immune defences and comorbid health issues.

- Federal Government to consider taxable deductions to staff in the housing and homelessness sector to ensure financial barriers to participating in self-care are reduced.

Thank you to Anna Hayes, Willow Blackwood, Joseph Carrodus, and Jorja Bentley for their time and great insights from the frontline.

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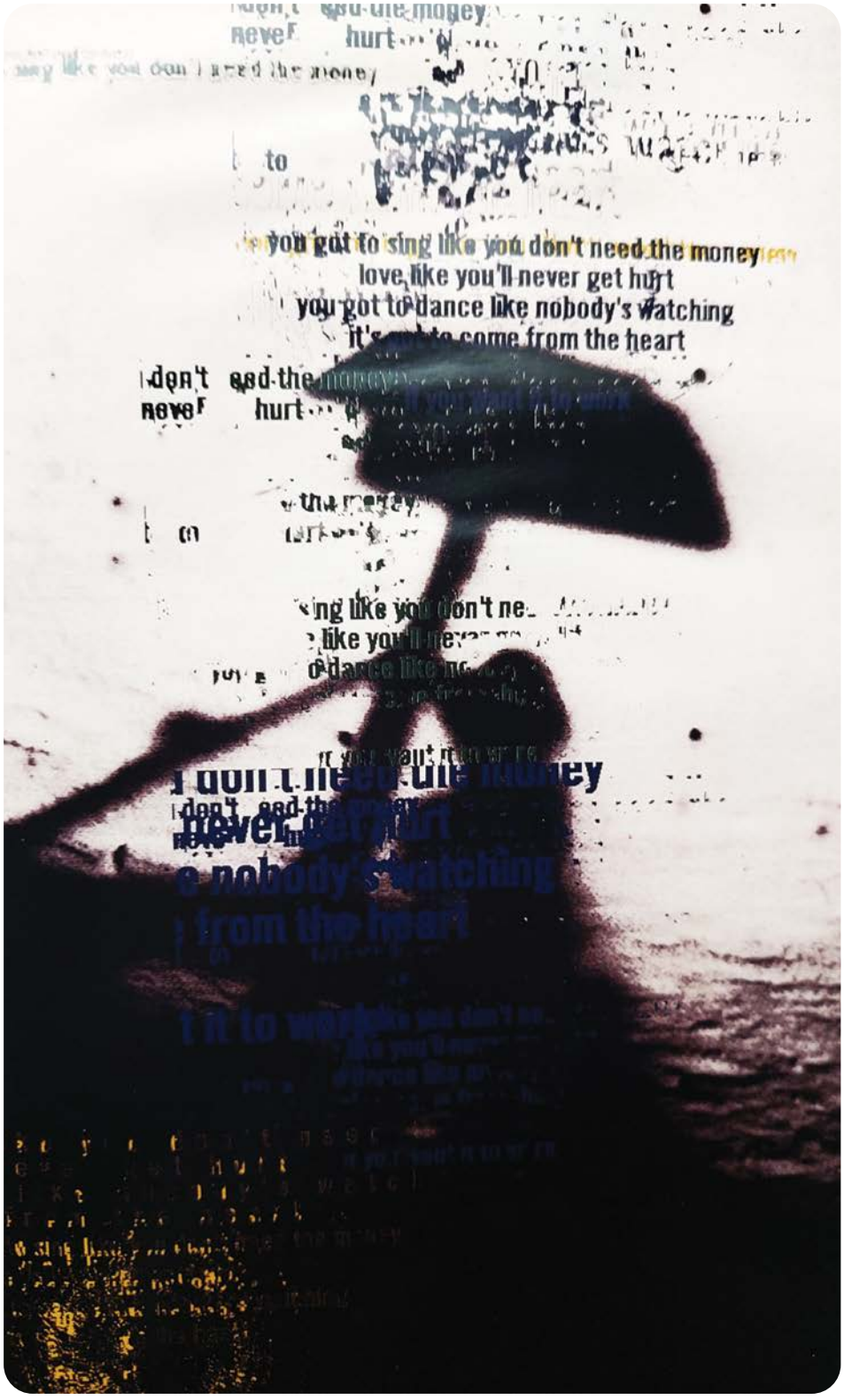


Working Together to Get Young People Back on Their Feet

Link Wentworth

Vulnerable 18- to 24-year-olds who do not have a safe place to live are dealing with broad-ranging impacts of the pandemic. Job loss or significantly reduced hours has taken its toll on self-esteem and confidence. Mental health issues, anxiety and depression are on the rise. Drug and alcohol abuse issues have increased, and important support networks and connections have been broken by long periods of lockdown and isolation.

For young people, especially those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, COVID-19 has exacerbated challenges in their lives. Young Australians have been more drastically impacted by negative outcomes of the pandemic, yet many of the government's responses have fallen short in addressing their unique needs.[1]

With young people expected to be disadvantaged for decades to come,[2] youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness need more encouragement and collaborative support than ever to rebuild their lives. Link Wentworth and its youth partners, The Burdekin Association, Platform Youth Services, Phoenix House and Taldumande, are working together to make sure young people, who slipped through the cracks during the pandemic, now have the support they need.

While it is too early to truly understand the long-term social impacts of the pandemic and government support initiatives on young people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, Link Wentworth and its partners are bracing for an increase in demand for housing and support services as society attempts to return to 'normal'.

Short-term Gain, Long-term Pain

At the start of the pandemic, government support provided some relief to people in our communities sleeping rough or at risk of homelessness. Some temporary and transitional accommodation options were extended and COVID supplements and JobSeeker/ JobKeeper payments gave those who were struggling or out of work extra income to put towards rent or other household contributions.

While these initiatives were beneficial for recipients to some degree, they did not always consider the unique needs of young people rough sleeping. For instance, boarding houses and hotel accommodation can be incredibly daunting and scary for a young person recently forced out of their family home. Add to that, restrictions on face-to--face meetings that meant limited contact with a case worker who could guide them through the system, and this sort of situation can offer more harm than good.

When used wisely, extra income from COVID supplements was certainly beneficial in the short term. However, when financial support was reduced and then withdrawn completely, young people without a safe, stable place to call home faced an uphill battle to get their lives back on track. Sadly, our teams were also aware of young people being

exploited for this extra income, falling back into drug and alcohol abuse or being taken advantage of when contributing rent or other costs.

For young people, the damaging impact of job loss, isolation, loss of connection to family and friends, and reduced access to support and services appears to have far outweighed any short-term benefits of government initiatives. Young people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness now face an even harder path ahead. Many have lost vital time and support — as well as confidence and self-worth — on their journey to rebuilding their lives.

Insights From Our Partner, The Burdekin Association[3]

The Burdekin Association (Burdekin) and Link Wentworth have partnered in Northern Sydney for more than 35 years to support young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

For Justene Gordon, CEO of Burdekin, the impacts of the past two years on her clients have been unlike anything she has ever seen previously. While she understands government policies and health orders aimed at preventing the spread of the virus were necessary, she fears that the loss of connections with family, friends, vital support networks and case workers during lockdown periods will have lingering and detrimental outcomes for the young people her organisation supports.

Ms Gordon cites young people accessing transitional housing as one cohort of her client base who have been severely impacted by the pandemic. When a young person enters transitional housing, Burdekin supports them to link with vital support services that aim to help them get back on their feet. This can mean helping them re-engage with their schooling or connecting them with employment or training opportunities that can lead to a more stable housing situation. During the pandemic however, the ability for a young person to access services was drastically compromised as everybody's lives were put on hold.

Young people lost their jobs and were unable to find other work, remote learning became the norm, face-to-face meetings between clients and case workers were reduced and moved online, and opportunities to spend time with family and friends ceased altogether or were extremely limited. Effectively, young people already in a crisis situation lost many of the important connections that are vital in helping them to overcome their challenges. With no job, lack of connections and no relationship restoration happening, Ms Gordon says her staff saw young clients living in transitional housing go backwards or stagnate. They also saw young people with increased anxiety, loss of self-worth and self-esteem, which further impeded their ability to move forward in their lives.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

Burdekin is now trying to re-engage young people back to education and employment. This means supporting them to feel confident in themselves again, so they are motivated to be part of the workforce and their community.

Insights From Our Partner, Platform Youth Services

For many years, Platform Youth Services (Platform) and Link Wentworth have worked together in Western Sydney to support young people facing homelessness or at risk of being homeless.

Emma Jordan, Manager at Platform says the lack of engagement with clients as a result of reduced face-to-face time, ongoing lockdowns and staffing issues has been one of the biggest impacts for her team and the young people they support.

Her Assertive Outreach service and case workers are working hard to re-engage with their young clients, many of whom are requesting to continue online or virtual meetings rather than more effective face-to-face meetings. Young people are reluctant to re-engage this way because they are now used to the online virtual world. Platform is also seeing a lot of young people with higher rates of anxiety and depression, because they've been in isolation and without those vital connections they need.

With society starting to open-up, Ms Jordan said more clients are starting to seek support. Platform is trying to re-engage with 'first to know' services such as schools or other housing services to let them know their homelessness services and supports are still up and running and available for young people. The goal is to ensure young people build the right relationships and have access to the support they need before their situation reaches a crisis point.

An exciting, new partnership launched late last year by Link Wentworth and Platform is aiming to do just this. Using funding from the New South Wales

Department of Communities and Justice Social Housing Innovation Fund, Link Wentworth and Platform are building seven studio apartments in Penrith to house vulnerable young people who are undertaking study and training. The project, which will offer affordable and independent, supported social housing in a Youth Foyer model, aims to help young people break the cycle of disadvantage. Currently in the early stages, the Australian Social Value Bank estimates the benefit of the project over 6 months to be $140,000.

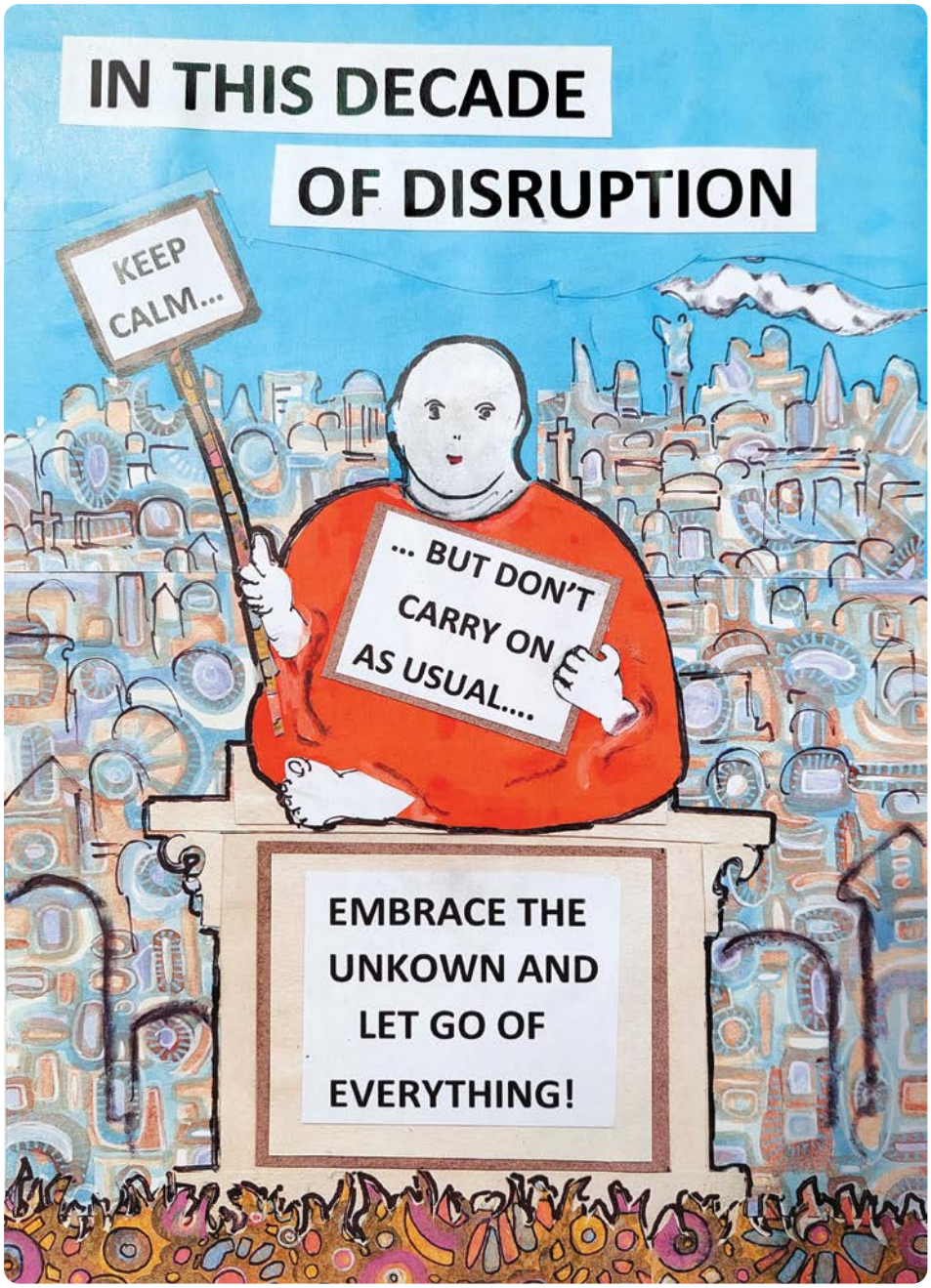
Work Rent Incentive Scheme for Young People in Transitional Housing

The Work Rent Incentive Scheme is a program developed by Link Wentworth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its aim is to better support young people living in Link Wentworth's transitional housing to attain and keep a job, as well as to save in preparation for moving out of transitional housing. Young people on the scheme pay a deemed rent based on what they would receive from Centrelink, rather than a subsidised rent based on their income.

Although the pandemic meant fewer young people signed up to the service (due to job losses and difficulties in finding work), the program has seen some good outcomes since its implementation in February 2020.

- 23 young people on the scheme received a reduction in rent due to the implementation of the scheme
- individual young people are estimated to have saved an average of $5,143 over the duration
- individual young people have used their savings to pay for expenses associated with moving into a private rental, education related expenses and to pay off debts.

Link Wentworth expects there to be more uptake of the scheme as life returns to normal, and is hoping to offer it in other areas. Programs like this will become more vital as the long-term impacts of the pandemic unfold and young people facing homelessness seek support.



Collaboration is The Way Forward

Partnerships have always been a key part of Link Wentworth's work, particularly with younger people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, who have unique support needs.

While there have been many successful and worthwhile responses to the pandemic in the past years, few initiatives have specifically targeted young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Many long-term impacts of the pandemic are only now being realised for this vulnerable cohort of our community.

Working collaboratively to support a young person who is homeless or at risk of homelessness is more crucial than ever. Link Wentworth stands with its partners, Burdekin, Platform, Phoenix House and Taldumande, to provide the housing and wrap-around support these young people need.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic in Albury: Weathering the Storm

Kate McGrath, Rebecca Glen, Elizabeth Cattell, Maggie Pain and Kelsea Brosolo, Yes Unlimited, with David MacKenzie and Tammy Hand, Upstream Australia

The COVID-19 pandemic immediately followed the terrible 2019–20 summer bushfires that burned around the Murrumbidgee and Albury. Albury-Wodonga was impacted significantly when the border between Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) was closed, and the states were locked down in 2020 as a response to the pandemic. Many people live on one side of the state border but work on the other side, and the pandemic was a major disruptor of school attendance, community life, and the practices of community agencies to support young people and families through direct human interaction in case work. Reports of increased mental health issues due to the bushfires were already a concern in Albury, and then came COVID-19!

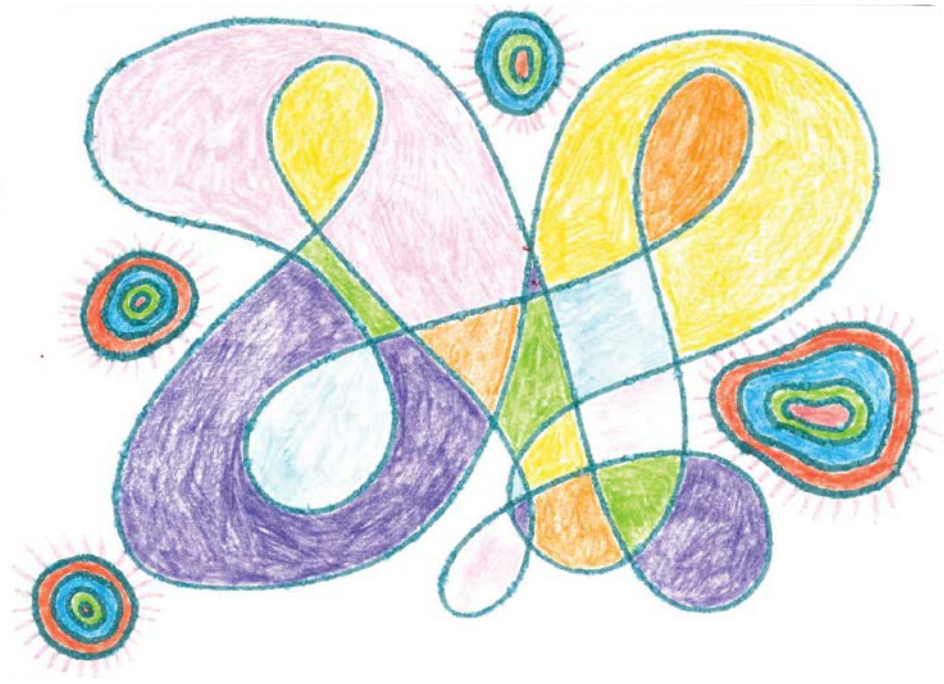
The Albury Project commenced in 2019 as one of two funded Community of Schools and Services (COSS) pilot sites under the NSW Homelessness Strategy. The other pilot was in Mt Druitt. Prior to receiving pilot funding, the Albury community had a history of questioning the effectiveness of the local youth, family, and homelessness services systems. A leader amongst this local discontent was Yes Unlimited, headed by CEO Di Glover, which is the major youth services organisation in Albury. In late 2017, constructive discontent crystallised into a positive initiative — Yes Unlimited rallied a group of local stakeholders to develop a COSS Model in Albury well before any funding was on the table. The story of how The Albury Project came to be was published in April 2020 in *Parity*.[1]

The Albury Project has been led by a strong collective comprising the three Albury public secondary schools, the lead COSS agency, Yes Unlimited, together with other partners, including Albury City Council, headspace, and Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Additionally, the project has benefited from strong support from senior officers in the local area offices of both the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and the Department of Education (DoE). Population screening, a core foundation of the COSS Model, has been successfully implemented annually for over three years, despite the pandemic. The Albury Project workers were designated as essential workers by the partner schools and were able, within the safety guidelines, to continue to operate, bringing an impressive degree of creativity to their work under difficult circumstances. This shows how the COSS work was valued in the schools and community. The recognition of community workers as 'essential workers' able to work with and in schools and with families in Albury has been a major achievement for The Albury Project.

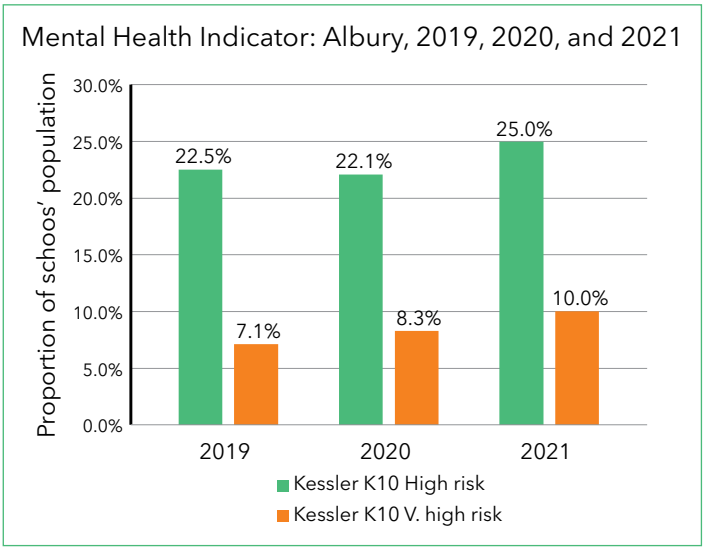
The annual population screening methodology provides for a longitudinal measure of risk but also a longitudinal measure of outcomes. In terms of current practice, three key indicators on the Australian Index of Adolescent Development (AIAD) Survey[2] are used routinely: At-risk of homelessness Indicator, Disengagement from school indicator; and the Kessler 10 scale for identifying psychological distress or mental health issues.

Adolescent Mental Health Issues

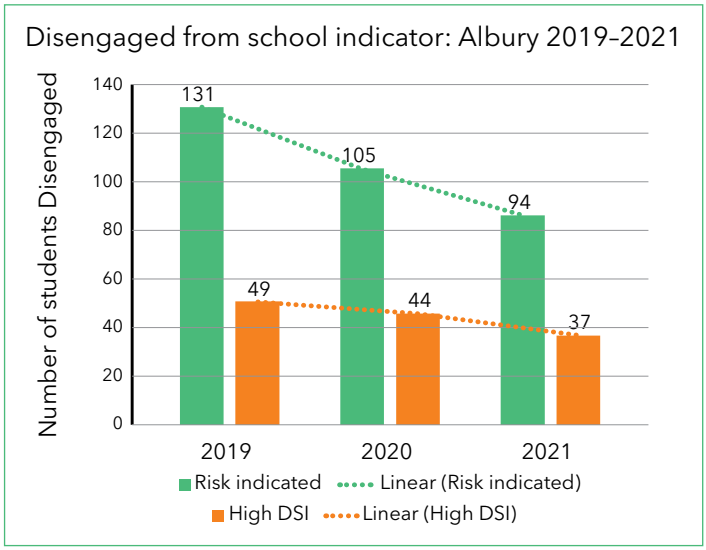
Older Australians are particularly vulnerable to serious health impacts from contracting COVID-19, which, depending on their state of health, can be life-threatening. For young Australians, the pandemic has been more likely to impact their mental health, disrupt their education, and contribute to educational disengagement, social isolation, and other adverse impacts on their pathways into employment. In terms of COVID-19, young



Artwork courtesy Libby Crayton, Frontyard Youth Services



Graph 1



Graph 2

people themselves identified mental wellbeing as a major concern,[3] and parents reported high rates of mental health impacts on their children.[4] Ian Hickie (University of Sydney) warned that COVID related lockdowns and isolation have adverse mental health consequences and that the mental health system needs to be able to respond.[5]

The Kessler 10 is a widely used, validated, self-report measure for psychological distress that can be used to identify those in need of further assessment for anxiety and depression, but the scale does not provide diagnostic information about specific mental health conditions. Mental health issues are known to exacerbate other adverse issues in the lives of young people. Graph 1 shows the population profile across the three participating Albury schools from 2019 to 2021 in relation to identified mental health risks.

The commonly stated clinical range of the K-10 is a score of 30 to 50, which, as shown in Graph 1, is between 25 and 30 per cent of the entire participating schools' populations. In practical terms, the more useful range is the very high-risk range of 40 to 50, which has increased from 2019 to 2021. This result is consistent with other findings of increased mental health issues due to COVID-19.

A troubling additional finding is that for this cohort of young people (K-10 range: 30–50), nearly one third had never sought or received any form of help for their mental health; and for the high-risk cohort (K-10 range: 30–39), about half (53.6 per cent) had not ever sought or received assistance.

School Disengagement

There is quite an extensive international literature that explores the effects of COVID-19 and other disasters on student engagement with learning.[6,7]

The Disengagement from School Indicator (DSI) used in the AIAD survey identifies students at-risk of disengaging from school. Student disengagement is usually evident from behaviours such as increasing absences from school without good reasons, challenging behaviours at school, or decreasing performance in various subjects. The DSI is useful in confirming known cases that require an immediate response, and also identifies hidden cases that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

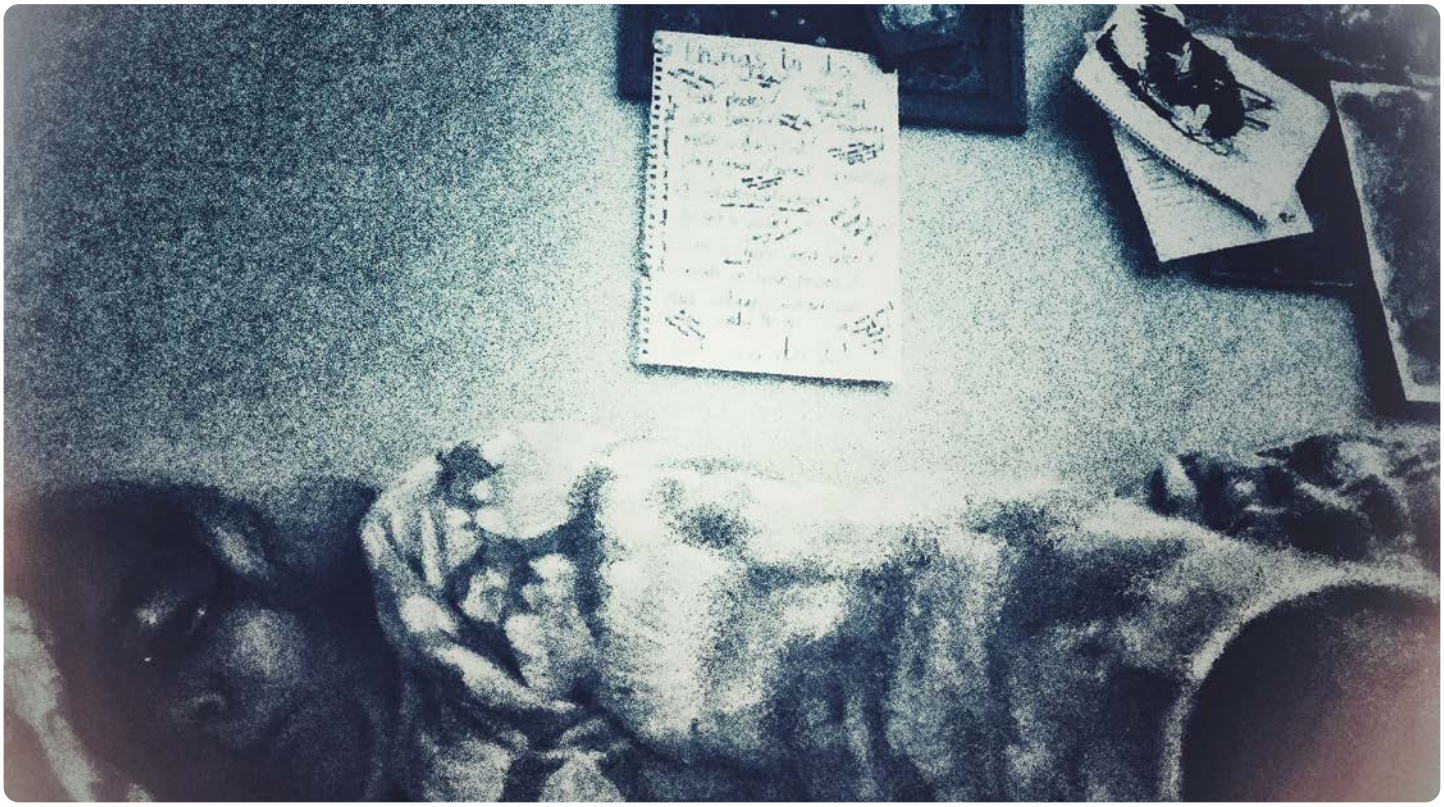
Graph 2 shows that, during the pandemic, the proportion of students identified as disengaged or disengaging from school has decreased from 2019 to 2021.

For both risk indicated and high-risk categories of DSI risk, the trend has been a linear decrease from 2019 to 2021. This trend has occurred despite the effects of the pandemic and the bushfires in and around Albury in the summer of 2019–2020, and during a time when improved response rates and implementation practices might be expected to find more disengaged students. While it does not necessarily indicate that fewer students were feeling disengaged, this finding is counter intuitive. The commitment by each of the participating schools to maintaining strong, connected wellbeing systems, of which the Albury Project is a part, and collective practical efforts within the schools appears to have yielded a positive outcome over this very difficult time. Many commentators have argued that disengagement from school has increased and that appears to be the case more generally.

The Dynamics of Early Intervention

Annual population screening not only identifies risk, but the indicators also provide some important measures of outcomes. Longitudinal AIAD data allows for comparisons across time and trend analysis. What happened for young people identified as at-risk of homelessness in 2019? Are they still at risk in 2020 or 2021? Diagram 1 provides some answers to these questions.

Using matched records of young people identified as at-risk, Diagram 1 shows the dynamics of risk for students screened through the Albury Project. For the young people identified as at-risk of homelessness in any year, after support through the Albury Project, about half of these young people are no longer at-risk 12 months later (downward green arrows, Diagram 1). This is a reassuring finding. The following inferences are suggestive of significant outcomes being achieved during a very difficult time.



Artwork by Christine Thirkell

Some Comments on the Data

Firstly, there is evidence that mental health issues in the community have increased, but school disengagement seems to have been held down and even reduced.

Secondly, the vast majority of students who completed the AIAD in 2019 and had a low/no risk of homelessness assessment remained at this low/no risk assessment level in 2020. Only about 4.5 per cent of those students' status had changed to indicate a risk of homelessness (upward red arrows, Diagram 1). The results for the 2020 cohort remained similar. Changes in family situations from year to year are not unexpected — 'life goes up and down'. Some students who do not show up one year as at-risk will show up with identifiable risk a year later. This is why an ongoing stream of data on risks and outcomes to inform practice is so important.

Lastly, for the students identified as at-risk of homelessness in any one year, after support, about half were not at-risk a year later (that is, under the risk of homelessness threshold). This is one measure of the outcome of reducing the risk of homelessness and suggests the likelihood of finding a reduced flow of young people into the Specialist Homelessness Services system which has yet to be confirmed.

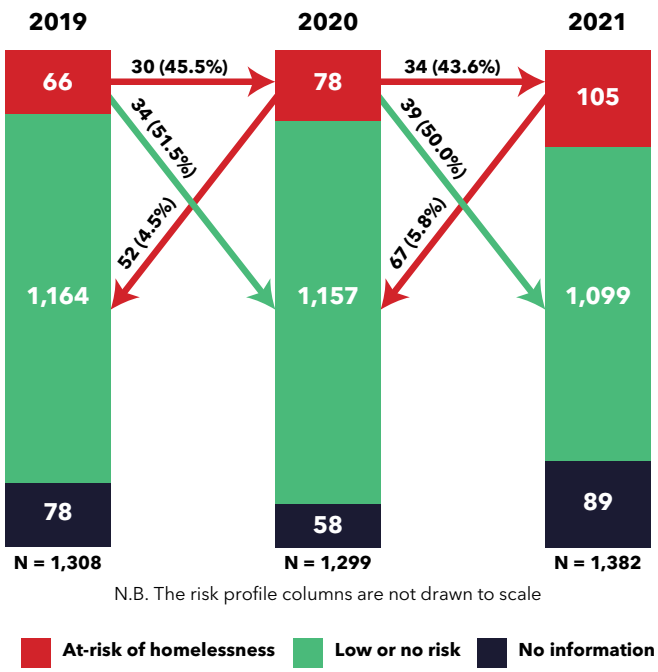


Diagram 1: Risk dynamics from 2019 to 2021, The Albury Project

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Accessing Private Rental Accommodation for Young People Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Robyn Hoult, Community Integration Facilitator in the 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program, Hope Street Youth and Family Services

The private rental market took a big hit during the pandemic. Real estate agents were unable to show people through properties, particularly with the five kilometre travel restriction in place. How could landlords successfully lease or rent properties and young people successfully find somewhere to live? My story sheds an interesting light about how we as a community worked together to forge positive relationships and demonstrate flexibility and agility to continue to assist vulnerable young people and young families reaching out to community and homelessness services desperately needing assistance.

It is a story about the services working even harder together, despite the challenges and obstacles from the pandemic, to continue to gain positive outcomes with clients in an otherwise catastrophic period. The first two years was a period of extended lockdowns, lingering and morphing, as well as restrictions prescribing lifestyles as essential protective measures against COVID-19 were implemented. The young people accessing Hope Street services were not only at significant risk due to being homeless, their risks were exacerbated due to their vulnerability, poverty and social isolation. Hope Street quickly adapted its community collaboration and practice to continue to be responsive to the situations and needs of young people and young families during this unprecedented period.

I am the Community Integration Facilitator in the 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program, a specialist youth focused private rental program. I support young people, aged 18 to 25 years old, including young people with children, who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, to secure, sustain and maintain private rental properties in the Whittlesea Local Government Area. Young people must either engage or be willing to engage in education or employment to enter the program. The program model includes: Hope Street co-signing the lease with the young person; providing a financial subsidy for a portion of the young person's rent for four months as the young tenant works toward independently maintaining full rental payments. Each young person identifies key goals and I utilise a youth focused case management framework to support young people to successfully continue in their private rental tenancies, preventing re-entry into homelessness.

Assisting and resourcing young people to secure private rental is always a challenge due to various structural factors. Add an unprecedented pandemic and the challenges escalate. The full brunt of the pandemic on young people was eased with the Victorian Government's swift response providing additional resources to Homelessness Access Points to purchase emergency accommodation. Due to significant shortages of affordable and secure housing and the need to accommodate people immediately, the primary option was to place people in hotels and motels throughout Victoria.

The 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program received a referral for a young woman and her partner who were placed in emergency accommodation in a motel in the Northern Region. The funding allowed for a three-week stay. The young person was informed by the Homelessness Access Point, that organised and purchased the motel accommodation, that she would be contacted prior to the end of the stay for further assessment.

The young couple were referred to the 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program. When conducting the assessment with the couple over the phone, the young woman stated that her and her partner had tested positive to COVID-19. I could hear the young woman's distress on the other end of the phone, *'we don't*

have any food or money, we don't have any family or friends that can help us, can you please help? … we don't know what to do'. The response was *'of course we can assist you'*. At that time, everybody seemed to be swimming in uncharted waters as the impact of the pandemic was unfolding, bringing different challenges on top of existing challenges. This required more agile practices to achieve positive solutions, assisting clients to secure private rental and some stability during this turbulent pandemic.

My requests for assistance to community services and groups was met with compassion and people keen to do the best they could to assist. However, repeated responses to my requests were that their services were also stretched with increased demand and lack of volunteers and resources. For example, basic items such as food involved much greater effort to attain. After advocating/ pleading with a food aid service, an offer of long-life food with delivery in approximately three days was made. Hours of phone calls later, I received a phone call back from a food aid worker who managed to contact a volunteer who was willing to go to the supermarket and shop for the young family and deliver a package to them that night. I was excited to immediately email a shopping list.

The young family were thrilled to receive the food package within two hours of emailing their shopping list. Without hesitation they rang me and, in between coughs and splutters, said, 'Thank you so much'. They received fresh vegetables, meat and more items than were requested, including Panadol which they forgot to order.

As the days rolled on, the program continued to support each need and request, as young people and young families presented. Together, we navigated the medical services available and organised medication with scripts being sent to pharmacies and payments made over the phone. Each action achieved was like breathing a sigh of relief. Everyone was stretching themselves to help one another in a time of need, even if they never offered the service prior to the pandemic.

Two weeks later, there was another frantic phone call from the young people, distress again resonating down the line, stating *'the manager of the motel just knocked on our door to tell us we had one hour to leave the motel or pay $150 for the night, we don't have anywhere to go and not enough money, can you help?'* Fortunately, Hope Street was able to utilise Housing Establishment Funds to purchase a night's accommodation.

Fortunately, the homelessness access point was contactable, and the young people were funded for a further 10 days in the motel accommodation.

While supporting these young people in the motel, both my clients and I had been searching through real estate websites and scanning for property rentals. There were plenty advertised but getting in contact with the real estate agents was difficult with phone lines ringing out, voice mail boxes being full, some businesses closed and 'open for inspections' not permitted due to restrictions. A local real estate agent, Ray White, who has always been very supportive of the 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program made contact. After informing him of the young people's situation the agent stated that they might have the perfect property and sent through the video of the inspection walk through. This property became the young family's home, which they still live in today.

Paperwork exchanged hands, Bond Loans approved, documents all signed electronically and before we knew it, the young people had a move in date for the following week. They had been able to save some money to pay their share of the rent for the month, topped up with the subsidies from Hope Street's Hope to Home in Whittlesea program. Hope Street also provided funds for setting up their new house with furniture and household items. Online shopping, click and collect, second-hand stores, donations from other organisations were accessed to furnish a whole house in such a short time, despite the restrictions.

This young family's situation is one example of many I have assisted or know about where communities have joined together stronger than ever to remain client focused and solution focused in responding to the needs of vulnerable members of our community, in crisis. It highlighted for me the resilience and fortitude of the workers and volunteers in the homelessness and community services sectors and a spirit of goodwill by the real estate agent as well as the high-level commitment and action to social safety by the Victorian Government, during this dangerous and turbulent pandemic.

Unfortunately, not all stories of young people experiencing homelessness end up as successful. This pandemic has highlighted the severe lack of affordable, safe, secure and stable housing as well as youth focused community support options for young people and young families. A significant percentage of young people who present to Hope Street programs do not have a private rental history which means they are pushed aside in the private rental market. It's undeniable that there is stigma attached to anybody experiencing homelessness. In supporting young people to apply for properties in the private rental market, there are so many rejections from real estate agents and landlords.

The 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program, now in its fifth year and funded in partnership with philanthropy is a model that works. Most young people maintain their private rental beyond the 12-month period of the program and are able to focus on education, employment, training, parenting, family and community relationships as well as other key areas of their life that will assist them to sustain independent living, preventing further experiences of homelessness. The goodwill and drive of the wider community during the pandemic is a demonstration of compassion, social commitment and drive to support vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community. The wider community response to the pandemic has shown that we are capable of making much greater, powerful and socially lasting change — let's apply this social vision, goodwill, drive and action to stemming and preventing youth homelessness and providing young people with a safe place to call home.

Reflections at the Intersections: Homelessness and Family Violence from Young People's Lived Perspectives

Shakira Branch, Y-Change Project Coordinator, Kirra, Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant, Morgan Lee Cataldo, Senior Manager Youth Engagement, Berry Street

'From the violence you put my mum, my siblings, and I through. To making us leave our home, having nowhere to go without you.

The physical scars have healed but my brain is really wounded. These thoughts inside my head are getting more and more intrusive.

In learning to cope with everything you left me, I have found my passion in advocating for how it should be.'

— Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Children and young people want to be involved and contribute to decisions being made about their lives.[1] Young people who have experienced disadvantage are some of the most skilled and creative problem solvers, organisers, thinkers and researchers.[2] Workers, teams and organisations need to be proactive in creating opportunities for young people to contribute to these decisions.[3] As young people, we are routinely left out of conversations and decisions made about our lives. There needs to be a fundamental shift on an individual, organisational and systemic level to ensure lived experience is at the forefront of change.[4]

Berry Street's Y-Change team recently partnered with Safe and Equal, the peak body for specialist family violence services supporting victim survivors in Victoria, to co-produce the *Learning from Lived Experience guide for professionals supporting children and young people experiencing family violence*. Our aim was to design a resource that supports practitioners to learn from young victim survivors of family violence. This guide was created for practitioners to use in partnership with children and young people, opening up conversations and learning from their lived wisdom.

About Y-Change

Berry Street's Y-Change initiative is a social and systemic change platform for young people aged 18 to 30 with lived experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage. As Lived Experience Consultants, we challenge the thinking and practices of wider social systems through advocacy and leadership.

Before you Read On — Reflections on Language

We acknowledge there are themes raised in this article which may be difficult and uncomfortable to sit with. This includes homelessness, family violence, mental ill-health, and other intersecting issues. If you choose to read on, please go gently and take care of yourself.

We also want to highlight that there isn't much (if any) research from the direct perspectives of children and young people. The language used in the following section reflects current research: we usually wouldn't speak about young people in this way. However, we believe it's important to include this research to back up the points we are raising throughout the article.

Children and Young People at the Intersection of Homelessness and Family Violence — the Statistics

For many young people, the reality of growing up in a safe, secure and predictable environment is far from their reality.[5] Children and young people are significantly over-represented in homelessness statistics, with 39 per cent of homeless Victorians under 25 years old.[5,6] The main reasons young people seek assistance are due to family and domestic violence, housing crisis and relationship/family breakdown.[7]

We can't look at homelessness without acknowledging the many intersecting experiences such as family violence, mental ill-health, poverty, trauma, substance misuse and social isolation.[8] We also know that young people leaving detention centres and out-of-home care face a higher risk of becoming homeless, with 40 per cent of those who transition from youth homelessness to adult homelessness having been in out-of-home care.[9] These issues have a compounding effect for young people who are trying to escape homelessness and result in cycles of housing instability and poverty.[10]

Research continuously highlights a significant gap in support options available for young people, especially at the intersection of homelessness and family violence.[11] Most family violence and homelessness services are not designed or resourced to work with young people over 15.[12] Increasing options for housing and family violence responses is a key factor in providing support, however it does not address the issue of inadequate accommodation and the supply of social and affordable housing.[13] Homelessness has ongoing, devastating consequences that ripple throughout a person's lifetime; *the impacts of homelessness don't simply end when we are housed.*

Homelessness and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Over the past two years, there has been a range of unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 pandemic that have made things extremely challenging for young people.[14] While COVID-19 affects people in different ways, the social and economic impacts on young

people have been substantial.[15] Education opportunities, employment prospects, housing security, mental health, connection to community, family and friends have all been significantly impacted due to the pandemic.[16] Young people who were already struggling due to intergenerational trauma and systemic and systematic neglect are now facing cumulative hardship.

There continues to be an increasing demand for homelessness services due to the extended Victorian lockdowns and resulting economic downturns.[17] Lockdown polices or 'stay at home' orders in response to the pandemic have also threatened children and young people's rights to protection from family violence.[18] Many children and young people have been left with little to no options, with temporary supports that were put in place at the height of the pandemic now receding and funding for emergency and temporary accommodation coming to a sharp halt.[19]

Learning from lived experience — a guide for professionals supporting children and young people experiencing family violence

Throughout 2021 and early into 2022, Berry Street's Y-Change team partnered with Safe and Equal to co-produce a resource that would provide guidance to practitioners to help them better support children and young people experiencing family violence.

The guide outlines 10 key points that reflect on the importance of working in partnership with young people and lists practical tips and tricks that workers can implement into their daily practice.

These tips come straight from the source — young victim survivors themselves.

1. Be curious — seek to understand why we are acting in certain ways

Children and young people who have grown up in unsafe environments have had to learn to do things that will help keep them protected. These things may not always make sense to adults or other people around them but in their own way they are taking care of themselves.

2. Use language we can understand, or even better — our own

To use our language doesn't mean to start using the slang words we use (unless it happens organically, of course). It's about matching where we're at and listening and taking note of the words we use to describe the people in our lives.

What works for children and young people may not always be words. Creative mediums might work better for some of us; such as drawing, poetry or play. Adults and other people who use violence towards us may use code words for violent experiences. It is important that people are conscious that this type of language may be used when we are trying to disclose experiences of violence.

3. See us as victim-survivors in our own right

We are not extensions of a parent victim-survivor, we are young people who have also experienced family violence ourselves. This means that children and young people have unique and individual experiences that are distinct, even from their siblings and others in their family or community.

4. Understand that we won't always love or be grateful for families who harm us

We do not have to 'work it out', forgive, or forget the violence and/or neglect from those who have hurt us. We may also still love the people who have hurt us; it's important to not make assumptions and to create space for complex feelings. Adult victim-survivors are often praised for leaving violent situations, but children and young people are often forced to go back to unsafe places or are court ordered to see perpetrators of violence — even when we don't want to.

5. Create a safe and inclusive space

Give us time and space to take things at our own pace and be led by the child or young person in front of you and not just your key performance indicators. Children and young people with lived experience must be involved in co-creating safe and inclusive spaces.

6. Give us chances to make choices and take back control

As young people who have experienced family violence, we have had a lot of our power and choice taken away. We shouldn't have decisions about our lives made without us. Workers need to be modelling informed consent and boundary setting and provide autonomy. A lot of children and young people haven't seen or experienced these things before and so we need to *experience* them first-hand rather than be told to simply imagine or conceptualise.

7. Help us navigate the system and understand our rights — be our advocate

Help us to understand our rights and what they look like in practice. If our rights aren't being upheld, we often won't have the knowledge or be in a position to advocate for ourselves alone. Advocate for and with us. *Be someone who has our backs in our world.*

8. Hold us with care even when we go backwards

We need space to make our own choices and we may make the wrong ones sometimes, but they are ours to make. Healing and recovery isn't linear, and it takes so much strength to fight addiction, mental ill-health, the impacts of family violence and the intersecting struggles we face. We need support, care and empathy *all* the time.

9. Critically reflect on your own, your organisations' and the system's actions

There may be great work happening within organisations or reform work happening in broader systems, but that is mostly invisible to children and young people who are currently inside the system. Create the space to hear our feedback and implement changes together.

10. Create opportunities for us to make a difference

Everything for and about children and young people should be done *with* us. Partnering with us to make change happen and understanding what we see as most important, not what workers or organisations see as the most important on behalf of us.

Artwork

The artwork featured throughout this article was created by Chadai Chamoun *https://chadai.pb.gallery/*

Reflective practice prompts

- Opening-up can be really scary for children and young people. What can you do as a worker, organisation or service to help make these processes safer and more inclusive for children and young people?
- Reflect on how power shows up when working with children and young people, especially those who have experienced family violence. How can you help to minimise power imbalances when working alongside us?
- In your organisation, could you let the child or young person decide where they would like your meetings to take place? This may be over the phone, outside, at a local café, McDonalds, a playground, or somewhere else entirely.

Resources

Here are some resources we recommend, including ours mentioned throughout the article.

- *Learning from lived experience — a guide for professionals supporting children and young people experiencing family violence. https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/support-for-children-and-young-people/*
- *Draft National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032: Consultation feedback centreing young victim-survivors of family violence. https://www.berrystreet.org.au/news/y-change-and-melbourne-city-missions-joint-response-centres-young-victim-survivors-of-family-violence*
- *Amplify: Turning up the Volume on Young People and Family Violence* Research Report. *www.mcm.org.au/-/media/mcm/content-repository-files/amplify_turning-up-the-volume-on-young-people-and-family-violence.pdf*

Connecting with Y-Change

To get in touch with us, contact Berry Street's Senior Manager Youth Engagement, Morgan Cataldo at *mcataldo@berrystreet.org.au*

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Experiences from Youth Refuge

Jeremy Weston, Stopover Youth Refuge Worker
and Sarah McDonald, Stopover Team Leader, Melbourne City Mission

Most importantly, how and in what ways has providing housing for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness changed as a result of the pandemic?

March 2020 presented us all with a once-in-a-100-year Pandemic and it seems the entire world went 'Pivot, PIVOT', with many of us wondering how we would get the couch up the stairs, like Ross in that episode of *Friends*. Adaptive change is a challenge at the best of times, it requires energy, resources, creativity, and resilience. It can bring out the best in us.

When you don't have a choice but to get onboard, the mission becomes shared, and the goal becomes unifying. Well, in our experience at Stopover (Melbourne City Mission Youth Refuge) this is what happened. We got on with it, we did our best. Our focus from the onset of COVID-19, was to continue to provide quality services to young people as safely as we could, and to provide a space that was stable and supportive in a world that felt like it was spinning off its axis.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact upon the lives of everyone, but for those who are most vulnerable, it compounded their ability to navigate systems and structures that normally function to support them. As a result of this, services such as ours in the Youth Homelessness Service Sector, have had to adapt our processes to adequately meet the needs of those who are, have been, or are at risk of experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.

An example of how this was practically applied at Stopover, was shifting our room that is usually reserved for a one-night crisis stay, into a 6-night crisis bed with 'rollover' stays during lockdown periods. This was a response implemented to minimise the risk of introducing COVID into the refuge by reducing movement of people through the space. It also recognised the level of fatigue, anxiety, and mental stress that young people were experiencing, alongside their homelessness. It was a strategy that further provided young people experiencing homelessness with a safe space to call home without the worry of transience in a world where a virus was rampant.

By providing those experiencing housing crisis a six-night stay that was rolled over during lockdowns and breaking the cycle of needing to find new housing each night, it gave young people the chance for 'respite' and to plan their next move with the support of staff. This is a model we have retained as we emerge from COVID restrictions, as it has demonstrated that we have the capacity to find better housing outcomes in those extra five days. Similarly with our usual short term stays of six to eight weeks, we made the decision that whilst operating in COVID-19 lockdowns, we would not end placements of young people, unless it was to transition into a more sustainable housing option.

Many organisations and services that work with young people were not functioning at usual capacity. A health and safety crisis had taken precedence of our community. Youth services, Outreach, Health, Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drug Services, Hospitals, everybody was under pressure. Programs were peeling back services, prioritising need, and operating online instead of face-to-face. We all know that engaging and building trust with young people, is a skill. Proactive face-to-face, regular and often informal opportunities are at the forefront of Youth Services. Extending our stays and not transitioning young people out of refuge when all services were experiencing significant pressure due to the ongoing restrictions and how this impacted their service provision, led to less time pressure for all.

While in some cases this allowed our young people to further stabilise, identify and achieve their goals it also increased the time frames in which our service was accommodating young people who experience multiple and complex needs. This was challenging particularly with reduced access to their usual support systems whether that be mental health, AOD or family and community. Youth refuge staff were often that one person that was there, face-to-face for young people. Day in, day out throughout the pandemic and what felt like 'never ending' lockdowns in Melbourne for young people.

Many services facing the challenges of having to peel back services and operate in unique ways was a different experience to youth refuge staff who continued to work on the frontline throughout all the lockdowns. The challenges this presented were significant. Solo staff managing complex and difficult behaviours from young people who were stuck inside, many with significant vulnerabilities, trauma experiences and health issues. Working with limited resources due to the above-mentioned sector and service capacity issues, and solo staff working onsite in the refuge without the usual day to day onsite support of their leadership, colleagues and visiting services were not easy times.

The government health regulations that have kept everyone safe including

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

our staff, and young people in the refuge certainly presented their challenges. They have led us to an increased focus on staff wellbeing and exploring a range of strategies to support and show staff on the ground their value, to show them how much we appreciate their hard-working professionalism then and now.

During the hardest of times, our staff managed to use collaboration, empathy, and resilience to remain united in their goal to continue to provide the best service possible. Some amazing outcomes have come to fruition for those staying with us during this time, with many moving into medium or long-term, sustainable housing, despite the adverse roadblocks to them achieving their goals.

One of the biggest shifts we experienced during the pandemic, was the increased focus on crisis and crisis management, which resulted due to a decrease in the availability of other supports. Safety planning and risk mitigation was prioritised and the capacity to provide active and creative case management was reduced. Staff started working reflexively in response to crisis, rather than being able to work pre-emptively on building capacity or resilience in our young people. Many of our usual therapeutic and livings skills-based programs such as our coffee and breakfast club, as well as our music therapy programs continued to operate but with limitations. Some activities ceased altogether.

Reflecting upon this impact, our team worked diligently to shift away from this crisis response and 'containment' focus that was brought about by the world health crisis. We are working towards getting back to setting and achieving identified goals with our young people collaboratively, as stability returns to the world. We are achieving this via brainstorming how to reinvigorate the physical environment to be more holistically therapeutic, as well as what programs could be developed to cater to the needs of our young people, such as physical exercise outdoors, living skills development or even just a make your own pizza night! Getting together face-to-face with young people as much as possible, working through the informal conversations that support and lead to case management plans and goals with young people. We are back in full swing, acknowledging those restrictions that remain, and forging forward with activities and engagement whilst still being COVID safe.

We recognize the extreme difficulty faced by both young people and staff working in the sector and we look forward to getting back into the swing of things and truly valuing our ability to work in person with everyone including external stakeholders. Retaining the changes which have benefited our young people, learning from those that did not, and celebrating the best in us that 'pivoting' and adapting to COVID brought out in our young people and staff.

Realising the Impact of the Pandemic

Jenna Hegedus, Youth Reconciliation Practitioner, Hope Street Youth and Family Services

Services' Youth Reconciliation Program provides one-to-one strengths-based and solutions-focused counselling and support to young people who are experiencing homelessness. Where this is desired by the young person, the program supports them to establish and maintain constructive relationships with family and broader support networks. The program also supports young people with referrals, mentoring, family counselling, mediation and facilitation of family meetings. In continuing to provide services during the pandemic, the program's processes and practices were honed, extending flexibility and creativity, with many interactions via online platforms. This article will provide an overview of the increased vulnerability and disadvantage experienced by young people and young families impacted by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that young people have experienced something beyond their imagination, having not previously faced such a global health crisis in their own lives. Statistics provide some insight into the impact of the pandemic on young people. However, it is important to remember that the dimensions of this impact may take some time to emerge. This becomes even more concerning when we consider its consequences for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

It is important to remember that young people who are homeless are not always visible. Many young people are moving between crowded-dwellings, couch surfing, both short and longer-term supported accommodation or staying temporarily with others. Homelessness and the threat of homelessness puts pressure on young people and their families.[1]

Homelessness disproportionately affects young people, with rates already rising before the pandemic. Statistics are telling us that, compared with older age groups, during the pandemic, young people have experienced higher rates of psychological distress, loneliness, educational disruption, unemployment, housing stress and domestic violence.[2]

Young people report that the pandemic and the government's response has negatively affected their social connectedness, especially for young people in Melbourne who experienced significantly longer lockdowns and public safety measures/restrictions. The shift to online learning removed the critical experience that young people gain from socialising together at school and in some cases resulted in a difficult return to class or school refusal. Remote learning has heightened the digital and social inequalities with significant educational consequences for those who were disengaged or disengaging from education and training pre-pandemic.[3]

Young people are generally limited in their financial resources, and this can lead to housing stress and may lead to homelessness. While the government put some unparalleled protective factors in place, such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments and a moratorium on rental evictions for those unable to meet their commitments, the pandemic still resulted in other ways for housing to become unstable or completely break down. Young people often cite family conflict as a major reason for leaving their home or experiencing homelessness. Some examples of this include the need to flee family violence, overcrowding, changes in household structures and relationship breakdowns. Family reunification and conflict resolution was challenging during the pandemic. In these types of situations, psychological distress emotions become heightened and resilience is lowered.

As the pandemic has resulted in even higher levels of psychological distress for people with pre-existing mental health disorders, homeless young people are likely to have been greatly affected as they already report higher rates of distress.[4] At times during the pandemic 50 per cent of Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) mental health services were delivered via telehealth.[5]

While the government responded to the needs to young people at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping with strategies, including the hotel emergency and temporary accommodation and the eviction moratorium, longer-term reform and support is required.

To address the needs of young people beyond these crisis interventions, our response needs to be evidence-based, involve early intervention, be well planned, and sustained.

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Chapter 2: COVID-19: Re-framing Services and Re-thinking Supports

Housing and Health: Easing Disruption with Collaboration

Belinda Tominc, Clinical Nurse Consultant, Youth Health
and Leanne Nicholson, Operations Manager, Frontyard Youth Services

Frontyard, a key Melbourne City Mission specialist youth service, provides a range of multidisciplinary programs to meet the holistic needs of young people aged between 12 and 25 who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Frontyard aims to support young people to meet their physical, emotional, and social needs and to develop pathways out of homelessness.

The Young People's Health Service (YPHS) is a nurse-led, primary health service co-located within the Frontyard integrated model. YPHS is a program of the Department of Adolescent Medicine at The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne and was established in 1991 following recommendations from the Burdekin Report, a National Inquiry into Homeless Children.

The COVID-19 pandemic declared in March 2020 disrupted the drop-in model of care that is crucial to the accessibility of Frontyard and YPHS. This article will detail how both services collaborated and responded to changing restrictions, so that support could be maximised for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Increased Outreach

Physical distancing and movement restrictions introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19 impacted on the accessibility of the YPHS drop-in clinic. In response to these restrictions, YPHS implemented a practice change by increasing the scope of clinical services offered to young people staying in refuges and attending flexible learning centres.

Pre-pandemic, YPHS outreach visits prioritised childhood and adolescent vaccine administration, brief nursing assessments, and urine sexual health tests. The revised outreach nursing clinics expanded on these clinical services by incorporating comprehensive psychosocial assessments, blood borne virus screening, and sexual health testing and treatment.

As well as expanding clinical services, YPHS worked with MCM and other services to increase the number of outreach visits offered to crisis accommodation sites. The outreach visits conducted by YPHS nurses increased from 39 in 2019 (pre-pandemic), to 120 visits in 2020, and 187 in 2021. The onsite visits were well received by young people with the numbers attending the YPHS outreach clinics increasing from 173 in 2019 (pre-pandemic), to 208 people in 2020, and 345 in 2021.

Co-ordinating Telephone and Online Appointments

Young people experiencing homelessness often have inequitable access to telehealth platforms. This health access issue was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic where many primary health clinics moved to telephone only appointments, and services provided limited face-to-face contact.

Recognising the vital need for young people to keep connected with their social networks and support services, YPHS received a Victorian Government grant to provide young people with mobile devices. In 2020–2021, as part of the Remaining Connected Project, YPHS provided 10 smart phones to young people who were experiencing homelessness and using alcohol and other drugs.

Extended Short-term Refuge Stays

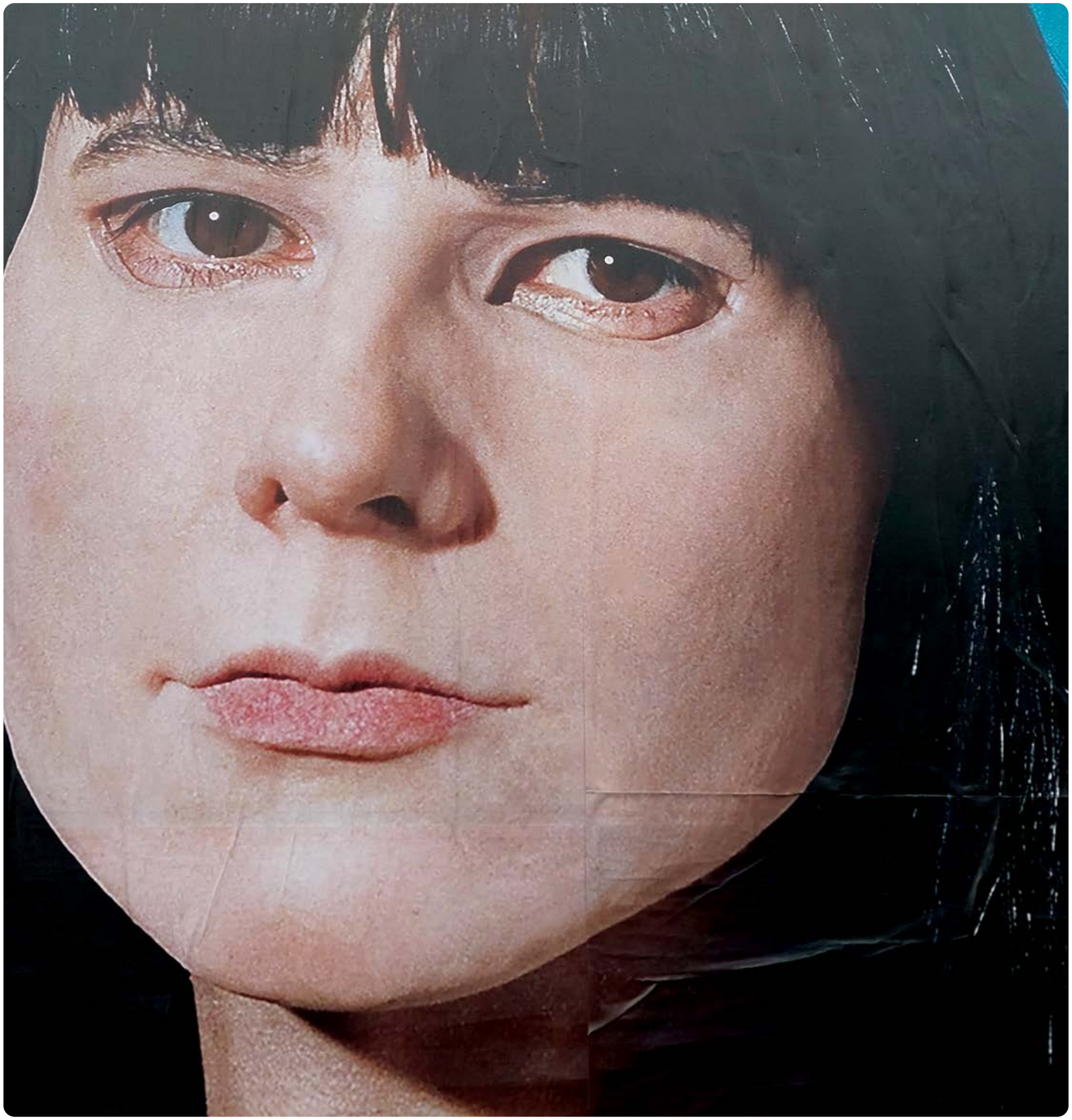
Pandemic movement restrictions and lockdowns impacted access to long term housing and disrupted rough sleeping and couch surfing arrangements. As a result of the pandemic, Melbourne City Mission provided longer term access to short-term beds. This was in response to the reduced access to longer-term housing options due to COVID-19 impacts. With longer-term stays, young people had more time and opportunities for engagement with services within the Frontyard integrated model.

Accommodation support staff play a valuable role in linking young people into YPHS, strengthening the professional working relationship, and providing increased opportunities during outreach visits for secondary consultation.

Providing and Promoting Vaccines

When young people are faced with homelessness, disruption in schooling and social ties, and medical and mental health issues, vaccination may be a low priority. The COVID-19 vaccine rollout provided an opportunity for YPHS and MCM to work together with a Commonwealth Contractor, Aspen Medical, to offer COVID-19 vaccines at Frontyard and other MCM sites. Over six weeks in August and September 2021, 79 young people received their first dose and 44 received their second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at Frontyard.

The YPHS administrative team sent over 300 reminder messages to young people who were eligible for the vaccine and, by November, 84 per cent of young people attending the service had received their first dose.



As well as COVID-19 vaccines, YPHS have found that young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness have often missed childhood and adolescent vaccines. The YPHS Catch-up Vaccinations Project, funded by the Victorian Department of Health, reached 880 young people across 16 sites from 19 February 2019 to 19 December 2021. Of this group, 91 per cent (n=735) were not up-to-date with the state-wide vaccination schedules, and as such were inadequately protected against vaccine-preventable diseases.

Most young people had missed secondary school vaccines, with a significant portion also missing important childhood vaccines.

Promisingly, 90 per cent (n=662) of young people who were not up-to-date with their childhood and/or adolescent vaccines were willing to discuss vaccine catch-up with a nurse. The percentage of young people who were up-to-date increased from 9 per cent (n=73) to 37 per cent (n=302) since the program's implementation. Co-location and outreach have meant that this innovative preventative health program has continued to operate despite pandemic restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted health and homelessness services. Important protective care was enabled by innovative changes and continued collaboration between Melbourne City Mission's Frontyard Youth Services and the Royal Children's Hospital Young People's Health Service. With continuous and changing restrictions, Frontyard and YPHS increased outreach, facilitated telehealth appointments and promoted vaccines.

Risky Disclosures: Sexual and Gender Identity, Culture and Homelessness

Fatina Elabd, Team Leader — Engagement and Support, Youth Off The Streets

Benny* was 16 when he and his sisters joined Youth Off The Streets' Future Australian Multicultural Leaders in Youth (FAMLiY) program for young leaders in Western Sydney. The group met twice a month to discuss community concerns and plan events, and Benny was a hardworking and thoughtful member — a talented cook, he would bring a homemade dessert to every meeting to share with his peers. One evening, Benny asked if he could speak to one of the youth workers in private. He wanted advice on how to tell his family that he is gay.

The youth worker had a deep understanding of Benny's cultural and religious background and expressed concern for his safety. Benny said he understood the risks but was tired of living with a secret and wanted to share his true self with his family. The next day, Benny arrived at our office with his school bag in one hand and a plastic bag of belongings in the other.

Benny's story may be distinct in its particulars, but across Australia it is hardly unique. Despite the increased acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning and other sexuality and gender diverse (LGBTQIA+) people, experiences of stigma, prejudice, discrimination and abuse continue to affect the LGBTQIA+ community.

LGBTQIA+ young people are at higher risk of bullying at school, poorer mental health, experiences of trauma and child abuse, problematic substance use and survival sex.[1] They are also more likely to have multiple experiences of longer periods of homelessness than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers.[2]

Observations During the Pandemic

Young people have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways, including increased experiences of poor mental health, reduced access to health and support services, and financial stress due to job losses. In the first month of COVID-19 restrictions in Australia, approximately 213,000 young people lost their jobs.[3] Financial insecurity was further compounded for young people who were ineligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper. Some were left with a choice of returning to an unsupportive family environment or risking homelessness.

For LGBTQIA+ young people, COVID-19 and associated closures of community groups and services — as well as remote learning and the inability to socialise with friends — had additional implications. Many of the LGBTQIA+ young people supported by Youth Off The Streets reported feeling 'stuck' in an unsupportive home environment, especially trans young people who were unable to express their gender at home without compromising their safety.

Cultural Dissonance and LGBTQIA+ Young People

Intergenerational cultural dissonance — also known as 'the acculturation gap' or 'acculturative dissonance' — refers to a difference in the degree of acculturation between immigrant parents and children. This gap often forms as a result of adolescents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds more readily adopting aspects of a country's culture than their parents. In Australia, this occurs 'so commonly among immigrant families that it is regarded as a normative experience.'[4,5]

Differences in cultural identity can cause increased miscommunication and misunderstanding between generations, resulting in familial conflict. The complexity of sexual or gender identity can exacerbate this conflict and create further acculturation gaps.

Having never been a particularly social person, Benny formed most of his friendships online. He was active on social media and posted frequently about his family breakdown after he came out. This had an immediate flow-on effect within Benny's close-knit family and community. His parents and siblings began receiving calls from extended family and community members about Benny's public disclosures. Benny's family interpreted his actions as intentionally provocative, believing that he was deliberately causing embarrassment to his family.

Service Responses

Benny was referred by Youth Off The Streets to a local refuge. He settled into a new routine comprising school, psychologist appointments and the daily activities of the refuge.

Like all young people experiencing homelessness, LGBTQIA+ young people from CALD backgrounds need access to safe and supportive housing. Individual responses should include safety planning, mapping the intersections between identity and culture, and building support structures to ensure continuity with cultural connections. It is vital that services understand not only the needs of the LGBTQIA+ community, but also the cultural and religious aspects of a young person's identity. Street work, refuges, transitional living programs and other services that support CALD young people should be free of bias and harassment and provide access to culturally competent services that welcome them and affirm their identity.

Disconnection from Family, Faith and Community

After Benny came out and was forced to leave home, his sisters stopped attending FAMLiY meetings. The disconnection from family, faith and community made Benny feel isolated and this took a significant toll on his mental health. He asked his Youth Off The Streets caseworker for advice and a mediation meeting was arranged.

The meeting was heated. Benny's parents chose not to attend and instead sent his sisters in their place. They conveyed that Benny would be welcome at home if he stopped identifying as gay and promised not to act on his feelings.

Benny couldn't agree to these conditions and, after his sisters left the meeting, asked to be referred to a refuge in the Inner West of Sydney. He felt he would be safer there, and less anxious about running into his siblings or other family members.

Finding the Balance

At Youth Off The Streets, we believe that family reunification should be the end goal, but we are realistic in our expectations around that. Experience has shown us that achieving a positive outcome is more likely when we work with young people through a strengths-based lens, helping them reconcile their sexual or gender identity and cultural traditions to find a balance.

In determining an outcome that will best support their mental health and wellbeing, young people may find a local 'underground' community of like-minded people and choose to remain in their home environment; others may find comfort in moving out of the family home and residing with a relative or member of the community. Some young people, like Benny, may find it more appropriate to find accommodation outside of their local area.

It is important for both young people and their parents to know where to seek culturally appropriate supports. Parents and caregivers with strong cultural values and religious views may not be open to taking guidance on 'taboo topics' from anyone other than cultural leaders known in the community. Recognising the level of complexity when working with culturally diverse young people and families, it is essential to know when to bring in additional supports and services. It is our responsibility to support the young person in the middle, connecting them to community groups that have a deep understanding of cultural and religious issues and a level of authority in the space.

It is also crucial that services determine the extent to which families and young people are able to compromise, and to acknowledge that family reunification may not always be a realistic outcome.

The Way Forward

There are known data limitations in reporting on sex-and gender-diverse populations in Australia. Developing a nationally agreed set of LGBTQIA+ data items for inclusion in relevant population-based surveys and administrative data sets is of the utmost importance.

International research has emphasised the importance of adopting an intersectional framework and acknowledging the complexity of narratives and factors.[6] It is crucial that culturally diverse LGBTQIA+ young people, especially those experiencing homelessness, receive inclusive and affirming healthcare and support to address pre-existing social and health issues, which may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Service responses that are not trauma-informed to ensure physical, psychological and emotional safety risk the inadvertent traumatisation of vulnerable young people.

Young people themselves must also be part of creating solutions to address the intersections between their LGBTQIA+ identity, homelessness and culture. A co-design approach is key to ensuring that programs for the service system and community are culturally safe and relevant.

Building Bridges

Benny went on to complete his HSC at one of Youth Off The Streets' independent high schools and enrolled in a pastry course. He formed strong friendships in the refuge, felt accepted by his new community and was excited about the future. But he still missed his family and reached out to our team for advice.

Benny had always had a good relationship with one of his uncles and thought that he might be able to bridge the gap between his family and himself. Benny's uncle was eager to help and, as a first step, offered to go to Benny's parents' house to collect some of his personal belongings. His parents were relieved to hear that Benny was safe and well — while they were unable to reconcile his identity with their cultural and religious beliefs, they still loved their son.

A second mediation meeting was facilitated, and Benny's parents expressed their desire to repair the relationship. Benny was relieved to hear this, however he recognised that he would need to keep his sexual identity hidden if he returned home.

The safety, stability and culturally appropriate supports Benny received from Youth Off The Streets' staff allowed him to see that, in order to protect his wellbeing, he would need to find a balance between his new life and the family he longed to reconnect with. Now firmly established and thriving in his new community, and with regular visits to his family, it's a balance Benny continues to work on today.

* Name changed for privacy reasons

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Making Co-design a Reality in Youth Services

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Unfortunately, young people's voices are still not being as fully represented or considered in the design of services that impact them. Service providers and policymakers are failing to drive change and translate lived expertise into practice.[1] This does not need to be the case. Co-design, where consumers, stakeholders, and service providers come together to plan and implement new service models is becoming increasingly accepted.[2]

Co-design speaks to a design-led process that create genuine and safe conditions for people with diverse backgrounds and lived/living experience to be involved in solving contemporary issues they have experienced or are experiencing.[3]

In its ideal form, co-design bridges the gap between young people, service providers and organisations, policy and decision makers by mediating power differentials that often prevent new ideas being considered. The process frames young people as the experts in the room, encouraging unique problem definitions and problem solving that considers all possibilities. New-innovations are identified, implemented and the 'actual problem' is solved.[4]

Co-design creates room for failure. It gives the youth sector time to try new ideas or rush into solutions and to learn from what has failed and to do better. Failure is often feared and co-design creates opportunities to channel failure, view it in a positive light and transform it into success.

Most importantly, co-design encourages change. At times, service providers, policymakers and decision makers are 'tunnel visioned' in their brainstorming and decision-making process, operating on funding guidelines, assumptions far beyond reality and instead of genuine human experiences. Co-design provides a facilitated environment for challenging assumptions, educating service providers, policy and decision makers on the reality of situations.

Co-design is not done well in the youth sector. This is due to three main reasons.

First, the term 'co-design' is mistakenly used to describe any form of youth participation activity.[5] Second, not much thought is given to access issues and the comfort of young people.[6,7] Finally, co-design is being normalised across the youth sector, yet service providers and the broader system have limited time and resources to invest in such a process and to engage into best practice co-design.[8]

To bring congruency and to ensure that co-design is made into a reality rather than an ambition of the youth sector, we suggest that:

1. Young people must be provided with opportunities for true and authentic co-design that prioritises their expertise, is easily accessible, and allows them to feel safe, comfortable and empowered.

2. Service providers must be upskilled in genuine co-design and encouraged to see broader benefits outside of service delivery. In addition, they must be allowed time, space and permission to be immersed and honest in co design efforts to ensure co designed insights and solution ideas are 'market ready'.

3. The broader system must invest and commit itself to co-design if it is attempting to normalise co-design as a necessary process for all service organisations. It must also allow for co-design to be done authentically, providing service organisations with a blank canvas to be creative and innovative without being influenced by the service delivery requirements dictated by funding bodies.

Everyone must be committed to work together to enact these ideas. This way, the voices and wisdom of young people can be amplified and translated into practice ensuring they are receiving the appropriate care they want, need and are entitled to receive.

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Seeking Out a Better Life: Homeless Young People in North West Tasmania

Dr. Morag MacSween, Consultant — Coach — Clinical Supervisor*

The Transitional Accommodation Support Service (TASS)[1] is delivered in Devonport and Burnie by Youth Family and Community Connections (YFCC),[2] and offers an integrated package of accommodation and support for young people experiencing homelessness as they learn the skills and acquire the confidence they need to live independently.

Between June and December 2021, I conducted an evaluation of the service, focusing on outcomes, quality, critical success factors and improvement opportunities. On all measures, and from each of these perspectives, TASS is an outstanding success. In this article, I share my observations of young people's support needs, based on what young people, youth coaches and key service partners told me. I also share the observations of the TASS team on how those needs changed and are changing during COVID.

What Young People Need

Young people come to TASS from the most challenging of circumstances. They bring with them tremendous resilience, real commitment to building a better life, and street smarts. Alongside these strengths, I saw seven core needs: stability; realising your value; identifying your own goals; working out connection with family; becoming a great tenant; becoming a great parent; and building the confidence and skills to move on.

Stability

> *I get to learn things, relearn things, be able to be stable.*

Stability was mentioned over and over again by young people. They talked about living on a knife edge before moving into TASS, never knowing when they would be told to leave or have to move on, and the difference it had made in their lives to have a secure, stable home.

Agency partners also talked about the importance of stability, as a platform for change. For many young people, their TASS unit was their first experience of stability:

> *She'd moved from place to place to place to place at least every six months in her life. The first time she was grounded was in a TASS unit for 12 months.* [The impact was] *huge, she got her licence, employment, financials sorted out. It all falls together once you've nailed that stability in life — getting out in the community, making friends, making money, the mental health side decreased because the stability came into play.*

Stability means more than a unit. Young people also experience stability of relationship, with their worker being that person who's there in a good week, and still there in a crappy week.

Realising Your Own Value

> [Some people] *think kids in my situation are ferals and drop kicks. TASS are very open minded, they know there's reasons why you're in here, they're very open to helping you, change your life and helping you switch it all up around, not judging you based off the decisions that you'd made. They know everyone has that moment in their life when they don't make the best decisions.*

Being stereotyped is a common experience for young people experiencing homelessness.

One agency partner told me that young people have been let down by multiple systems before they get to YFCC, and that TASS puts in the time to build a different kind of relationship:

> *She's great, she doesn't make me feel like she's looking down on me. It's boosting me up, making me feel good even though I'm a young mum, praising me.*

> *The encouragement — just cos it was like that then, it's not always going to feel shitty, you're not always going to be scared. I've got stability and security.*

Reflecting on this, youth coaches commented on how novel it can be for young people to fel worthy of notice:

> *Young people want to know that you've listened to them. I've been asked, how do you remember that? And I see the reaction, wow he took note of that, he can actually remember the conversation.*

Setting Goals That Are Genuinely Yours

Young people's goals often emerge through conversation, when they feel stable and begin to realise their own value. YFCC uses the Housing Outcome Star as starting point for young people and find it particularly helpful for young people who struggle to see a future, and young people who have come to TASS from circumstances where they have not been able to exercise agency. Workers talked about being very clear that goals are for the young person and that making mistakes is not just allowed, it's part of learning. Workers also talked about celebrating achievement, telling me that this is a novel experience for many young people.

Connection with Family

My mum is, I'm still your mum. But I keep up that clear line in the sand; the one time I needed you, you made it about you. My house is my house, my home, I'm in charge of it. I make two calls a week to update her and let her know I'm safe. She dumped her problems on me, adult issues. I've got it back in place now, she won't dump things on me, she won't expect me to fix it.

Education, employment and reconnection with family are core aims of work with young people experiencing homelessness. For most of the young people in TASS, connection with their families is complex and painful. Nine of the ten young people I spoke to had come to TASS when living with their family became unbearable, or when they were told to leave. TASS youth coaches support young people to work out what level of contact with their families is possible and healthy, and to develop boundaries for themselves and in their relationships:

I'm pretty much stage of contact where I'm able to go to family gatherings and catch up with mum weekly. It's sorted.

My mentality, my emotional state is much better, mum and I aren't at each other's throats, but it's never been great, and it will never be great. It was a bit of a drain being there. (Now) I accept my family is the way that they are, that's not going to change.

Young people's experiences with family, often they've been burnt too many times. They've been ripped off and abused, spoken down about. I get them to do pros and cons on paper: what do you bring to the table, what do they; what do you want to see in this relationship; what are you willing to offer, what are they willing to offer.

Becoming a Great Tenant

I've been doing it for years now. I was 16 when left home, I was pretty much independent by then, making my own money, paying my own bills, buying my own food.

Young people who come to TASS are used to fending for themselves. What they need is support to translate those skills into what's needed to manage a tenancy really well on your own. In a small and tightly networked place like North West Tasmania, relationships with partner services are critical, and those relationships depend on honesty:

I can't advocate for housing and say they maintain their property if it looks like a bomb's gone off. I tell the truth when I advocate.

The core of the support to young people is being honest and being in their corner. The tenancy officer does monthly property inspections, and youth coaches support young people to get their unit ready.

We're all on their side. Sometimes I have to put my dad hat on and have a hard conversation, but I always say, regardless of what I say next, I am on your side, but we need to discuss a few things that will make you a better tenant.

We do lots of advocacy around housing, pushing hard, making sure young people are ready so we can advocate. Being honest with young people, we need to get a whole pile of things squared away so they're ready.

Becoming a Great Parent

I'm the youngest of seven, so I'm a natural. But I am learning new stuff, there are opportunities they can give us.

I wasn't a parent in TASS; I was pregnant. I always looked after my little brothers and sisters, but this is different, harder. Your brothers and sisters aren't 100 per cent your responsibility.

All of the young parents I spoke to during the evaluation told me about their experience of caring for younger brothers and sisters. Some thought that this had taught them all they needed to know about parenting. Others recognised that parenting your own child was different and talked about the support they got from their youth coach, and from parenting programs. Agency partners told me about young women who, in their view, would not have kept their children if they had continued to live in the unstable and unsupportive circumstances they were in before coming to TASS.

Moving On

Young people can exit when they want. They identify when they don't need support anymore when they're good. We let them go when they're ready to go, we're not the kind of service that hangs on to people. They're not our stories, it's not our journey, we're just alongside them for a short period.

The young people I spoke to talked about the transformative impact of living in TASS:

The feeling of knowing that I'm going somewhere with my life. (Before) I felt really stuck, I didn't know what to do, know where to go.

It was pretty stressful before trying to figure things out. Now I feel great, I've got my head screwed on, I'm working forwards, working towards the future.

I'm progressing with my life, getting licenses and jobs and things.

The challenge for young people is the lack of affordable housing in Tasmania. This means that sometimes, young people stay in TASS after they are ready to go, playing a waiting game.

The Impact of the Pandemic

Tasmania has had a very different experience with COVID than other States and Territories, with lower numbers of infections and deaths, and only one short lockdown, where support was offered to young people by phone. In common with other parts of Australia, many Tasmanians are currently in 'shadow lockdown', self-isolating to avoid Omicron. YFCC has returned to meetings by Zoom only, but youth coaches are continuing face-to-face visits to young people. I met with the TASS team in January to ask them how young people's support needs had changed during COVID. They identified two key impacts: the different impacts of lockdown for young people; and the impact of more money and more services.

Young people with anxiety found lockdown a relief, lifting the pressure of having to interact with other people. The challenge came when lockdown ended, with the break from interaction having reinforced young people's anxiety. Youth coaches spent a lot of time with young people, supporting them to manage their anxiety and go back out into the world. But for other young people, the isolation of lockdown highlighted their already existing social isolation. Not having their weekly visit from their youth coach was a stark reminder that she or he was the only regular visitor some young people have.

Increased Centrelink payments and access to telehealth also had an impact. Youth coaches encouraged young people to keep front of mind that their extra $550 a fortnight was temporary. Unsurprisingly, many young people got used to having enough income to lift them out of absolute poverty, and the end of COVID payments has been very hard.

Mental health is a huge service gap in North West Tasmania. Additional funding and telehealth during COVID meant that young people had access to psychology and psychiatry services, often for the first time. Again, the challenge came when funding ended in January. Workers told me about calls from psychiatry rooms informing them that the next session would cost $600. What this means for young people living on benefits or low wages is, of course, an abrupt and unplanned end to treatment.

What Does This Tell Us?

COVID gave young people in TASS a short experience of an easier life, of the more liveable income and access to services that many of us can take for granted. Similarly, living in TASS gives young people an experience of adults in their lives who value, encourage, teach and support them.

As I wrote up the evaluation, it became starkly evident that young people in TASS have been forced into independence. Only one of the young people talked about being taught independent living skills by a parent. All the others described self-taught independence. Some explicitly described taking care of their parents. Many described taking care of younger siblings. TASS workers

describe young people who have not been supported, are unused to praise and to important information about them being considered memorable, and who have had to work hard to come to terms with what they can expect from family.

What young people and workers are describing is the social and emotional neglect of parentification:

> *…a functional and/or emotional role reversal in which the child sacrifices his or her own needs for attention, comfort, and guidance in order to accommodate and care for the logistical and emotional needs of a parent and/or sibling.*[4]

Youth coaches found this concept illuminating:

> *In some ways we're doing that to them too. Sometimes they say, I don't want to be an adult, it's too bloody hard. But realistically, you haven't got a choice. They really haven't been parented. They try super-super hard to have good relationships with their mothers, but it's so up and down, their mothers' moods, not answering messages or calls. No young person should be treated that way. Support is about helping them to manage that and accept that's not going to change no matter how hard they try.*

Youth coaches implicitly recognise the impact of parentification and describe sensitive, respectful and skilled supports that assist young people to recognise the skills and knowledge they have, to not feel any shame in needing to build the skills and knowledge they have not been taught, and to manage their damaged family relationships in the healthiest way possible.

Our Next Steps

YFCC has a continuous improvement culture. Our next step is to engage with the theory and evidence base around parentification, to add grounding and depth to existing good practice. Our hope is that, if done carefully, assisting young people to understand that their experience is unrelated to their own character or personality will introduce distance between their experience and their self-esteem. We will also consider and revisit the developmental tasks of adolescence, and the contribution of co-regulation in building social and emotional competence.

In their study of homeless young people in the Australian Capital Territory, Noble-Carr and Trew concluded:

> *The young people who took part in this study were determined to seek out a better life. This desire led most of them into homelessness. Their drive sustained and motivated them while they experienced the challenges of being homeless.*[5]

One of the outputs from the evaluation is an information sheet for new tenants, using the words of young people, youth coaches and agency partners. Its aim is to let young people know that, at TASS, they will get the support they have always deserved, to sit alongside their drive and determination to create a better life.

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Endnotes

1. *https://yfcc.com.au/what-we-do/accommodation-services/*
2. *https://yfcc.com.au/*
3. Engelhardt J A 2012, 'The developmental implications of parentification: Effects on childhood attachment', *Graduate Student Journal of Psychology*, vol. 14, pp. 45–52.
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5. Ibid.

Young Voices Leading Change on Ask Izzy

Ask Izzy is a website that connects people in need with housing, a meal, money help, family violence support, counselling and much more.

Community collaboration is essential to Ask Izzy's ongoing improvement and ability to connect people in need with over 400,000 support services across Australia.

This is why Infoxchange, the not-for-profit that powers Ask Izzy, established its first Product Advisory Group (PAG) in 2020. Members contribute their skills and lived experience to ensure Ask Izzy is the best it can be for people in need and those who support them.

PAG members represent the wider community and bring diverse backgrounds, knowledge and experience to the table. We are delighted to introduce you to Infoxchange PAG and former Frontyard Youth Advisory Committee member Tameika. If Tameika could give one piece of advice to social service policy and program makers, it would be to include help seekers in the decision-making process.

Tameika is only 23 and has already overcome more adversity than most of us will experience in our lifetime. She's been at risk of homelessness, witnessed domestic violence and has a disability. Now that she has a safe and permanent home, Tameika advocates for young people who are facing similar hardships.

'By using social services you become an expert and understand how the system impacts vulnerable people. No matter the person's age, disability or homelessness status — they deserve to have a voice,' she says.

After losing their family home a few years ago, Tameika, her mum and her two younger sisters could only find short stints of temporary accommodation. At the time, her mum had a disability and her two younger sisters were still in school, so Tameika became the help seeker for her whole family. She already knew where to find disability support, but she found herself confronted by many barriers while trying to secure housing support.

'It actually became more difficult [to find support] *because I wasn't just looking for myself. I would often get told I wasn't disabled enough, or we weren't homeless enough because we weren't physically living on the streets,'* Tameika says.

During her search for support Tameika discovered Frontyard Youth Services, which supports young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. She was later invited to join their lived experience advisory group to help drive positive change in the community.

'I joined the Frontyard Youth Advisory Committee (FYAC) because I'd used their services before. We consulted with different organisations to help change policies and improve services for young homeless people. It's also how I realised I wanted to study to become a primary school teacher,' she says.

Tameika heard about Ask Izzy through her consultation work at FYAC. She soon discovered what a valuable resource Ask Izzy is and how it could have helped her family connect with the support services they needed.

'I went on the website and just had a little browse. Then I got really angry and thought — why haven't I seen this before in my life? Why wasn't this website promoted in my high school and in universities?'

During her time at FYAC, Tameika was involved in three consultations for Ask Izzy before we established the PAG. She jumped at the chance to join the group to contribute to Ask Izzy service design and policy creation.

'I'm all for getting people with lived experience in positions that help influence things. I've been in the system for a bit and a lot of the policies are created by people with no idea how the system works or how insensitive it is,' Tameika says.

Tameika knows first-hand how Ask Izzy can be a great support to young people and their families, which is why she's excited to keep collaborating with Infoxchange to make the website easier to use.

'I'm very interested in helping Ask Izzy become more accessible for the disabled, people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and people going through domestic abuse. That's where my talents lie.'

To find out more about Ask Izzy, visit *about.askizzy.org.au*

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The Future of Support for Young People Experiencing or at Risk of Homelessness

Kate Waterworth, Team Leader Youth Support, Uniting Vic.Tas

It was timely when I was approached by a member of our Uniting team to see if I would be able to provide a contribution this April issue of *Parity*. It is not something I have done before, but I had just spent some time over the previous months considering… what can we do for our young people to support greater outcomes for their goals? What are the barriers our young people are experiencing? What are the barriers we face in supporting our young people?

One of the calls for contribution for the April edition was…

> *The future of support for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness…*
>
> *What new models of support for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness should be/ could be, developed and tested?*

This is exactly what I had been working to resolve for our programs and teams here at Uniting Wimmera. I am the Team Leader for the Youth Support Team in Horsham, Victoria. We offer a range of programs that all work with youth at risk of homelessness with the aim to support our young people to become independent. The programs we offer are:

- Youth Outreach — where the focus is on skills needed to live independently including support to find secure stable accommodation
- Youth and Family Reconciliation — support for individuals/families or significant support person/s where communication barriers or conflict may be a contributing factor to risk of homelessness
- One to one support/mentoring
- Reconnecting relationships
- Mediation
- Creating connections — where the focus is on links to education, training employment and community
- Finding solutions — flexible support for young people and their families who are experiencing difficulties to prevent family breakdown
- Adolescent Support Program — support for young people in crisis who may be experiencing challenging behaviours.

I have been considering our young people whose barriers prevented us from helping them to achieve their goals. The most common denominator I found was mental health. When I reflect on those consumers, they all had mental health experiences with anxiety or emotion regulation and impulse control. Most had strengths and strategies that they had drawn on and used that had served them well but were not now in the goals they were wanting to achieve. There were also a number of consumers who either didn't acknowledge these behaviours to be an issue or had accepted them to be a part of who they are. Given the two years of lockdowns, isolation, and restrictions, I felt that this would exacerbate these challenges we were already experiencing. I felt the need to explore what we could do in this area to greater support our young people to achieve their outcomes.

This is how I came across Emotional Regulation and Impulse Control (ERIC). ERIC is a program designed to support healthy social and emotional development for young people by cultivating emotional regulation and impulse control skills. ERIC was developed by Deakin University in partnership with Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) in 2015. It was a welcome relief to find a model that looked like it could seamlessly fit into our programs and have positive impacts for our young people and their goals.

The ERIC model focuses on eight key domains, each linked to three outcomes:[1]

- *Reducing vulnerability:* Targets the use of unhelpful emotion regulation strategies
- *Emotional Literacy:* Targets emotional clarity – the ability to identify and name emotions
- *Flexible thinking:* Targets strategies to develop skills. Learning how to look at situations from another person's perspective can help turn down the intensity of emotions
- *Allowing:* Emphasises the important role that non-judgemental thinking and accepting stance has in emotion regulation and wellbeing
- *Micro Mindfulness:* Builds habits to remain present in each moment
- *Tolerating discomfort:* Encourages the development of strategies to help get through difficult situations without adding to them
- *Decision making:* Draws together the concepts of values-based decision making and problem solving to reduce impulsive or avoidant behaviours

- *Identify and values:* Focuses on identifying and connecting with personal values and identifying strengths and increasing motivation for positive change.

Mental health challenges impact us all to some degree but for most young people we work with, these challenges emerge for extended periods of time with intersectional layers of vulnerabilities entwined, such as:

- disengagement from school, community, families and friends
- access to affordable housing, access to the private rental market due to no previous rental history
- social inequalities
- current or a history of trauma
- family violence, and
- a higher prevalence of drug and alcohol exposure or use.

These are just to name a few.

So, for me, a model like ERIC seemed like it could be an integral element in our services. Behaviour change takes time, practice and understanding to support healthy development and integration of new skills. Combining the one-to-one support of a youth support worker upskilled in ERIC with individual specialised supports seemed to be the logical step in creating an environment for positive behaviour change in our young participants.

I look at the future of the homelessness sector for young people and there are so many areas of need. The mind starts compiling endless lists. But if I was to put some of our young people in affordable housing, how successful would they be? We have houses being built and other positive changes in the sector happening. But with the challenges we already faced and with two years of the ramifications from COVID added to that, how will our young people cope?

Coping skills and strategies for me are the foundation to setting our young people up for independence and success. Our support services are generally connected in with young people longer than specialised services which coincides with the supports. We are excitedly collaborating with the ERIC team to upskill and embed the ERIC model into our practice. While the model can be used without training, I am grateful we are completing our training this month. The team are eagerly awaiting the training and have expressed that this would be the support that they need to better to complement their consumers who are stuck or ambivalent. The team are passionate about consumer outcomes and can at times feel helpless when a consumer is struggling so much due to challenging behaviours. These are hurdles they and we can overcome if we have the right tools and strategies.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

The changes I anticipate for our practice are:

- A specific language and framework for support workers to discuss with our young people.
- An evidence-based framework that complements specialised mental health services that some of our young people need.
- Workers being able to collaborate more effectively and cohesively to optimise positive outcomes for our young people.

What we hope to see change for our young people is:

- An easy-to-understand model to use for positive changes to barriers for the goals.
- A model that can be used with support and a model that can be used independently without supports.
- A model that will help support positive changes in all areas.
- A deeper understanding to emotional regulation and awareness of the importance for the skill in all young people.
- Tools and strategies that they can use daily or as needed that would benefit them in all aspects of their lives.

Most importantly, we are looking forward to implementing the ERIC approach as another opportunity to support our young people's independence and empowerment, as opposed to the powerlessness they can so often experience in their lives and service interactions.

Endnote

1. *https://eric.org.au/domains/*

Delivering Support Through the Complexities of COVID

A Q & A with Kids Under Cover Head of Programs, Pete Zwiers

Despite the upheaval we have all experienced as a backdrop to the pandemic, Kids Under Cover have maintained our provision of studios to families at a time when extra space is more critical than ever. Our Head of Programs, Pete Zwiers, explains the impact of COVID on overcrowded households, the benefit of space and what we can all learn about the way we offer support.

Q: *How did the pandemic — and the lockdowns that came with it — impact the families Kids Under Cover are working to support?*

A: A few things come to mind there. One is to do with the nature of secure work, all the shutdowns and the effect they had on employment. Especially the kind of work young people are involved in, like hospitality. For people who are already struggling with rental affordability, to then lose employment and having to move back home just increases pressure and increases the risk of homelessness due to rise in conflict and stress.

Unemployment is another complexity that adds to the dynamic of what's happening in a household.

There's also the impact on engaging with education. Imagine three or four kids only having a kitchen table to try and study at because their bedrooms just don't have the space. Issues with internet access, difficulties connecting with teachers, disengagement... Everyone's stress levels rose through trying to homeschool and when you're in a household that's already short on space and you can't leave — that's a recipe for a rise in conflict, an added complexity with bad results.

We also saw the heightened anxiety through our maintenance crews. Obviously, we put in a lot of safety protocols, but some carers were saying 'no that's just not enough'. How can they measure what the risk is? And it's totally valid for people to feel that way. A lot of these households are already dealing with anxiety or mental health issues or behavioural difficulties… and it all just compounded everything. We all felt the sense of desperation.

Particularly from carers who were on the waiting list to have a studio provided. Which is completely understandable. So, the waiting added to their anxiety, they were crying out for the extra space. What a terrible combination of circumstances.

Q: *Many of us experienced the challenges of a being confined to a busy household during lockdowns, how does living in an overcrowded space affect healthy development for a young person?*

A: Without adequate space, young people who are trying to guard their sense of self and develop into who they are, are really robbed of that opportunity. They simply can't achieve that. The chaos of an overcrowded home is extremely limiting for development.

If you put yourself in their shoes, how would you go if you had no privacy — at all? If there was nowhere you could retreat to, just to read a book or just to have time with your own thoughts. Or imagine you couldn't sit down and chill out in the loungeroom because the lounge is someone's bedroom — all of the things we all do just to switch off. And if you can't switch off, that level of stress builds and you can't really express yourself.

So, for a young person who's going through all those changes — growing physically and mentally — it can lead to a feeling of despair. It has been proven that if you do not feel safe within those four walls, you will have a very hard time working through your thoughts and being able to venture out from that family base into the world with confidence. You need that space to be able to do that. And that's all we want, just to give them that chance.

Q: *How did the restrictions imposed by COVID impact the construction of Kids Under Cover studios?*

A: Luckily, we are an essential service. So, we never had to stop. But there were certainly some restrictions that made life more difficult. There was a period where we could not leave Melbourne, or travel interstate. But all in all, we have been really fortunate that we could continue what we were doing. But it was tense. There were times we had to pull our maintenance crew off the road, partly due to restrictions and partly due to trying to look after their safety. And that is a really important part of the relationship we have with families, for them to see us and to touch base. So, while we have been able to continue, it has been under very different and sometimes difficult circumstances. Our whole relationship with the families we hope to help out had another layer of sensitivity. We have been very conscious of that.

Q: *Tell us about the difficulty you had in making the decision to close applications for studios due to overwhelming demand at a time when the extra space a studio provides was needed perhaps more than ever.*

A: It was certainly difficult when you look from an empathetic viewpoint. But it wasn't difficult in terms of the decision we were presented with.

Just the overwhelming demand meant we had no choice. We closed applications and then we started working through the waiting list that we had. And it took us 18 months just to service the waiting list with no extra applications.

The whole time we were taking more and more enquiries. Demand went from around 150 applications in a year to about 600. And usually, applications come from community service organisations, but the people who were calling us more than ever were the families — calling us directly. Just reaching out for help. And we just couldn't help them. There's a toll that takes on our staff too. Being on the front line, taking those enquiries and not being able to help. Everyone wants to do everything they can, but we can only do what we can do.

Q: *Why do you think there was such an increased urgency for support over the past two years?*

A: No-one's felt the effect of the lack of space more. Particularly when they had no choice but to stay there. The heightened anxiety to go along with that. Unemployment, mental health, conflict — all of the factors were exacerbated during lockdowns. And families become desperate. They need help.

It might take a while sometimes for families to understand that the circumstances they're in are actually untenable. And that there could be a risk that the young people in that household will want to leave. Often, they don't know that there's help available. But when those walls close in, because there's nowhere else to go, I guess you make the extra effort to reach out. To try to find a solution.

Q: *How did the benefits of providing a young person with a studio become more obvious in the context of the pandemic and lockdowns.*

A: When everybody's forced to stay home, everything's exacerbated. And that extra space just becomes more important. Everyone's struggling through home schooling, the threat to their jobs, the stress of… everything! To be able to step into your own retreat and close the door behind you and not have to listen

to the arguments or feel the tension in the air, that's just a blessing. It's actually alleviating a very real danger. The risk of that path to homelessness that we're trying to prevent.

Q: *What have we learnt about our community after the experience of the past two years? How might we change the way we provide support for families doing it tough?*

A: We've definitely seen a very sharp rise in households experiencing challenges with mental health. So that shows me there's a need for more support with mental health for young people. The Victorian Government's Royal Commission into the mental health system is a good start. And we look forward to seeing the positive outcomes that come from that.

So, from that enquiry and from our whole experience of the last two years, I think it just highlights the importance of what we're trying to do. We need a range of options. We need the government to continue to invest in future outcomes for our young people. We have some investment in social housing which is fantastic, but we need a range of other options to go with that. We have seen through the response to this crisis that when the political will is there, things get solved. Unfortunately, it's expensive. And someone's got to pay for it. But we've seen that there is a way, it's just about the will.

This experience also highlights the importance of prevention. If we focused more on prevention we wouldn't have to do so much down the track. Investing in those prevention dollars pays for itself, be it avoiding long-term homelessness or the costs of residential care for young people. And not only the dollar cost but the cost of opportunity for those young people. People who enter essential care or homelessness at a young age have a really high chance of poor outcomes. So, if we can prevent that, wouldn't that be fantastic. From a dollar sense but also from a social benefit sense. For everyone. For society.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy in Crisis: Adapting Practice in Pandemic Times

Rhianon Vichta-Ohlsen, Research and Evaluation Manager, Ricco Schadwill, Intake and Brief Intervention Manager, and Di Mahoney, Service Delivery Director, Brisbane Youth Service

With massive increases in the number of new requests for support, overstretched resources and reducing referral options, the Brisbane Youth Service Intake Team have needed courage to tackle the seemingly never-ending impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In surviving the diverse challenges of the last two years, the team has had to work hard to remain grounded amidst the frustrations that can come with trying to respond to the often seemingly unsolvable crises impacting young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Despite unsustainable workloads and, at times, overwhelming levels of need for housing and a range of health supports, the team have taken the opportunity to refine and evolve their use of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) as one aspect of their practice of crisis and brief intervention. This is very much an ongoing action learning process which has required a resilient commitment to holding the core SFBT principles while flexibly adapting elements of the approach to the unique, ongoing pandemic pressures on youth homelessness services. Working together to hold SFBT practice as a central theoretical framework in their work has been key in enabling the team to not only cope with the escalated complexity and demand but to continue to learn, be inspired and improve practice in their commitment to positive new futures for young people.

At the centre of a multi-disciplinary range of holistic support services for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) operates an intake service at its central inner-city hub delivered by a team of skilled youth workers (the team) who are usually the first point of contact for young people in crisis. The team has, for several years, been working on adapting a brief solutions-focused intake and assessment process for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The initial and ongoing impacts of COVID-19 prompted a rapid evolution of the team's use of this practice approach due to the sudden and sharp escalation (approximately 60 per cent initial increase) in the number of young people seeking support. Simultaneously, the team were adapting to a suite of COVID-19 requirements such as screening, cleaning, social distancing, room density limitations and working with masks and face shields. The significant challenges to normal service delivery provided a complex backdrop against which the team had to work harder than ever to hold their balance and sustain good practice responses to vulnerable young people.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy provided the team with a strong guiding framework that was more critical than ever in a dynamically changing and overwhelmingly complex and high demand service delivery environment. SFBT is differentiated from traditional case management and many social work/human services practice frameworks by shifting focus away from exploring and defining the problem with workers taking a lead role in identifying goals and driving actions to achieve the desired outcomes.[1] SFBT places the focus on the young person's competence and strengths, developing a collaborative partnership approach instead of workers taking the role of competent, knowledgeable leader. This approach uses targeted questions to draw on the young person's own language, experiences of success, exceptions to problem experiences and, in particular, vision of what they want their future to be.[2]

The team adapted the approach dynamically, refining critical elements that made the most difference in managing the level of crisis that has accompanied COVID-19. Changing perspective from seeking to deeply understand challenges to instead exploring alternatives, exceptions to the problem and opportunities that lie ahead was particularly useful in managing high numbers of young people with complex issues. Solving problems is approached by working alongside the young person, moving towards what is wanted, rather than spending time trying to unpack and resolve the unwanted problem.

Actively identifying and testing useful questions to ask young people in crisis was central to successfully implementing SFBT. A traditional SFBT framework takes active and thoughtful vigilance; a strong commitment to choosing the 'right' questions; and reflectively guarding against traditional forms of 'helping'.[3] Counterintuitively, SFBT moves away from being 'helpful', at least in the ways that are commonly expected, instead responding in a way which attunes to what the young person thinks is important in defining their own preferred future. This requires a broad level of practice wisdom, the tip of the iceberg of which is expressed through 'useful' questioning which assists the young person in identifying and mobilising their capacities to the fullest. This approach not only confronts many traditional human services models, it also requires workers to overthrow socio-cultural norms of asking 'what is wrong?' and then offering empathic advice and in-depth explorations of the problem.

In the early days of the pandemic there were strong systemic responses including significant increases in

government income support, a moratorium on rental evictions, an influx of emergency funding, and positive collaborative efforts to reduce community transmission by getting young people into housing. It was, remarkably, easier than usual to provide immediate, short-term solutions. As the first wave passed and COVID-19 became recognised as a longer-term issue, special funding and joint responses were reduced or dismantled but the demand for support did not abate. With the usual methods of addressing crisis needs no longer effective in the context of elevated scarcity of resources and referral pathways resulting from service disruptions and wide-scale increased demand, it became more critical than ever that the team were able to adapt approaches that did not attempt to replicate case-management styles of engagement in a crisis setting.

For the team, a critical, undermining challenge of SFBT in the pandemic was holding the approach while operating within a problem-focused, deficits-based systemic response with a scarcity of housing options accessible for young people. Contrary to Housing First principles, both workers and young people were forced to switch from a strengths and solutions-focus to being deficit-focused in competitively advocating for how 'deserving' young people were of accessing the limited housing options. Young people and their accompanying workers reported experiences of intrusive, traumatising assessments for emergency housing and allocation processes that were perceived as, at times, judgemental, merit-based and punitive and, at best, not congruent with strengths-based or solutions-focused principles.

Adaptations of some aspects of the SFBT approach have been necessitated by the context. While crisis work is, traditionally, a time-limited approach, the complexity of COVID-19 and the flow-on impact on housing and health service accessibility has meant that the 'brief' aspect of the model was somewhat redefined. While retaining an active focus on young people moving forward independently, and a scope-limited focus on immediate solutions to the current barriers, the team was forced to sustain support for longer than the intended 8 weeks of intake support before referral to case management. This became necessary as, while young people could strengthen their own capacity to access suitable solutions and supports, when they did not exist or had extensive waitlists there was little that the young person and worker could do to move forward. Young people had to navigate half a dozen or more solution pathways before one led to an outcome. Where an application for emergency or transitional housing may have had a one in five chance of success pre-COVID-19, this changed to a one in 20 or 30 chance as the number of referrals for every vacancy escalated rapidly.

There remains a severe and ongoing lack of housing options for young people under the age of 18. Young people's readiness to find solutions was increasingly not matched by the available opportunities, and reality-checking, risk-managing and safety planning for unsafe situations became the only option. This unavoidably increases stress for the team who, in lieu of referral pathways, became the only available support option. This in turn sees the team perform a complex juggling act between managing a constant inflow of new young people in crisis and maintaining high caseloads of young people for longer than intended with limited or no on-referral options. While the team are often unavoidably in a position of gate-keeping resources that young people require access to, the approach has nonetheless helped to facilitate a positive and future-oriented focus for young people's self-efficacy.

There were several challenges experienced in using SFBT in this type of crisis setting. A key barrier is the limitation of SFBT in working with young people who are experiencing acute mental health issues. BYS has seen a remarkable escalation in the proportion of young people presenting with mental health issues since COVID-19 began, with a 26 per cent increase in young people reporting diagnosed mental health issues at intake. This meant the team needed to work harder to match their approaches to the young person. In turn, this moving in and out of SBFT thinking impacted their capacity to consistently be immersed in the SFBT approach.

Other challenges impacted workflow management with workers being less able to schedule appointments regularly and consistently with young people across their caseloads, because meetings between the worker and young person were driven by when they were purposeful for reaching a solution, rather than a regular schedule. While crisis work is inherently chaotic, the worker's calm and stable presence is important. A flexible and responsive scheduling of meetings can positively reduce unnecessary appointments, but it can add an additional layer of unpredictability which highlights one of the differences between a planned case management approach and this style of solution-driven engagement. Further, with young people identifying solutions themselves at the heart of the model, it takes discipline for workers who are time-poor and under high demand to hold back from trying to hasten the process by providing their own 'good ideas' for what the young person most obviously 'should/could' do, and this less-directive approach does not work consistently with all highly vulnerable young people.

SFBT has not been the only useful practice framework and tool used, as the team balances and integrates a range of different worldviews and theoretical approaches in responding to the diversity of the work and the complexity of the crises that young people experience. Despite the challenges, the SFBT model has played a part in equipping the BYS intake team to manage unprecedented levels of crisis, navigating multiple and significant systemic barriers and sustaining a sense of optimism, camaraderie, inspiration and admiration for the resilience and strength of young people.

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Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program — Introduction of Telehealth Supports

Sally Richter, Manager, Family Services, Melbourne City Mission

Melbourne City Mission's Family Reconciliation Mediation Program (FRMP) is a state-wide service funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Through the provision of brokerage funding and other sector capacity building activities, the program enhances the capacity of the youth homelessness and other relevant services systems to support young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness due to family breakdown.

FRMP brokerage fully funds ten sessions of the following supports for eligible young people:

- Individual therapeutic support (counselling, psychotherapy and alternative therapies such as art therapy, music therapy, equine therapy)
- Family Therapy
- Family Mediation
- Group Work
- Group Therapy.

A young person is eligible for FRMP brokerage if they:

- are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness
- are aged 16 to 25 years
- have consented to and are ready to engage in the specified intervention
- have a Case Plan which is aligned with FRMP objectives. (see above)

Subsequent sets of 10 sessions may be funded when it can be demonstrated that the young person engaged well with the initial sessions.

The FRMP team maintains a register of Private Practitioners who meet the program's eligibility criteria and have committed to providing specialist assistance to vulnerable young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Young people and their Support Workers have the option of choosing an appropriate practitioner from this register. With the aim of ensuring that both parties are working together to support the young person to achieve their goals, Support Workers are asked to maintain contact with Private Practitioners throughout the intervention.

Along with other Victorian health care providers, many of the Private Practitioners listed on the FRMP register have adapted to using telehealth during the COVID-19 period and a significant proportion of the young people FRMP supports have taken up the option of meeting with their practitioner via video calling apps or telephone. Anecdotal feedback indicates that this continued therapeutic support has been greatly beneficial for many young people, most of whom were already experiencing multiple layers of disadvantage prior to the onset of the pandemic.

As face-to-face visits resume, the FRMP team have been pleased to note that many Private Practitioners are continuing to offer telehealth appointments. They can see that this will benefit young people who may be anxious about attending meetings in an unknown environment or have difficulty travelling to appointments due to the high cost/inconvenience of transportation options. This is particularly relevant for young people living in regional and remote settings. They also look forward to linking young people with Private Practitioners who have relevant specialised expertise or experience but are located too far away for the young person to travel to for face-to-face appointments.

However, FRMP does acknowledge that telehealth is not the best option for many of the young people we support. While some are more likely to open-up, others find it harder to connect with their practitioner via telehealth. Issues related to access to suitable technology, data and a private space to engage in sessions are also a factor as are the unique challenges posed by running alternative therapies such as art, music and animal assisted therapies online.

In short, the FRMP team believe that flexibility is vital if we are to effectively support young people's engagement with therapeutic supports. FRMP will continue to provide a system that allows for choice. As concluded in a recent study conducted by headspace, 'it is imperative that young people can access a health system that provides choice, so young people can access the full suite of services they need and that are suited to their circumstances'.[1]

For more information about FRMP please visit *www.mcm.org.au/homelessness/frontyard/our-services/family-support/family-reconciliation-mediation-program*

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Losing Mum, Graduating and Becoming Homeless During a Pandemic

Gary Humphrey, Program Manager Northwest, Hope Street Youth and Family Services

A story of a courageous young man who has faced his mother's death, graduating, and becoming homeless at the age of 18. He turned 18 in late October 2021, and all seemed to be going as planned. He was completing his final year at the local specialist school and was planning his graduation in the next few months.

What brought you to Hope Street?

'It was early December and mum's health was declining and on the 16th of December mum had a stroke and passed away the same day. Mum was trying to hang on for my graduation and she was a fighter and nearly made it.'

In early December 2021 the local specialist school contacted the Hope Street Youth and Family Services First Response Youth Mobile Outreach team. The school advised that he was graduating that night and would finish school the next week. The concerns they had were as follows:

- Has a place to stay now but not sure how long the rent has been paid for or what type of lease they have. Unsure if the rent is up to date or if any arrangements are in place.
- Disability Support Pension application has been made but unsure of progress.
- He does have family, but he doesn't know a lot about them, they are distant.
- NDIS funding should be coming through soon.
- The school suggested that supported accommodation would be the best option and stated that he wouldn't be able to live independently.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you?

'At first, I didn't mind being away from school, but I found myself just wanting a social life and if you went out you would just get in trouble.'

Hope Street First Response Mobile Outreach team met with the young man whose first concern was the pending funeral for his late mother. It appeared that there was no prepaid funeral/plan in place and that this courageous young man would need to pull it all together.

The team explored his ability to provide food for himself and his level of independence. The young man enjoyed takeaway food and used the services of Menulog and Uber Eats.

What would you have done without Hope Street?

'I might have ended up in an SRS.'

The Hope Street team commenced with initial focus on alternative accommodation, exploring referrals with local Supported Residential Services (SRS) providers and refuge accommodation. The team discussed the options with the young man who thought that refuge style accommodation with support of a case manager would be the best option. An appointment was made with a Hope Street case manager to discuss the refuge option further. Following this meeting he was advised of the process to access a placement at the First Response Youth Refuge and that staff would assist him to do this when the next vacancy was available.

The Hope Street First Response Mobile Outreach team contacted the real-estate agent who was managing the property and established that rent was paid up until the end of December 2021; it was now the 18th of December and the young man had less than two weeks of accommodation available.

He asked us to contact the funeral home to find out how long it would be until he was able to start arranging his mother's funeral. He was anxious about the fact that he had not heard anything. We contacted the funeral home together and were advised someone would be in touch with him next week.

How do you spend your time now?

'I am still a bit lazy, but I am trying to improve everyday but sometimes old habits take over. Some days or certain times of the day I don't feel up to the challenge. Hope Street does give me the reason and motivation to improve.'

The Hope Street First Response Mobile Outreach team assisted the young man to meet with the NDIS and a Plan was developed that covered the following:

- accommodation
- mental health
- managing funds
- funding for community events
- finding work or volunteering.

A place became available at the First Response Youth Service Refuge. After a few days the young man reported that he made a couple of friends and liked the staff that worked at the refuge. He advised

that he felt safe and that he would feel less anxious when the funeral for his late mother was over.

How did Hope Street help?

'I am so grateful that they were able to offer me a bed in a refuge, the staff here are very supportive and helpful and offer me good advice. They really care about you and want to help you. My case manager has been helpful in finding options for me. It's hard for me to verbalise the help that Hope Street has provided…, they have helped me improve on my life skills. I can now use a washing machine independently.'

Hope Street First Response and the Public Advocate worked together to bring the arrangements together and the young man agreed that the plans for the day would be what his mother would have wanted. The funeral service was held, and the young mans' mother was cremated.

What goals are you working towards?

'Living independently and trying to function independently. I believe I am getting there. I want to find a job and study as well and I hope to complete a novel.'

The young man is currently completing the final tasks for his Certificate II in community services before he will begin his Certificate III. He also volunteers at the local Specialist School two times a week and hopes to become an educational support worker.

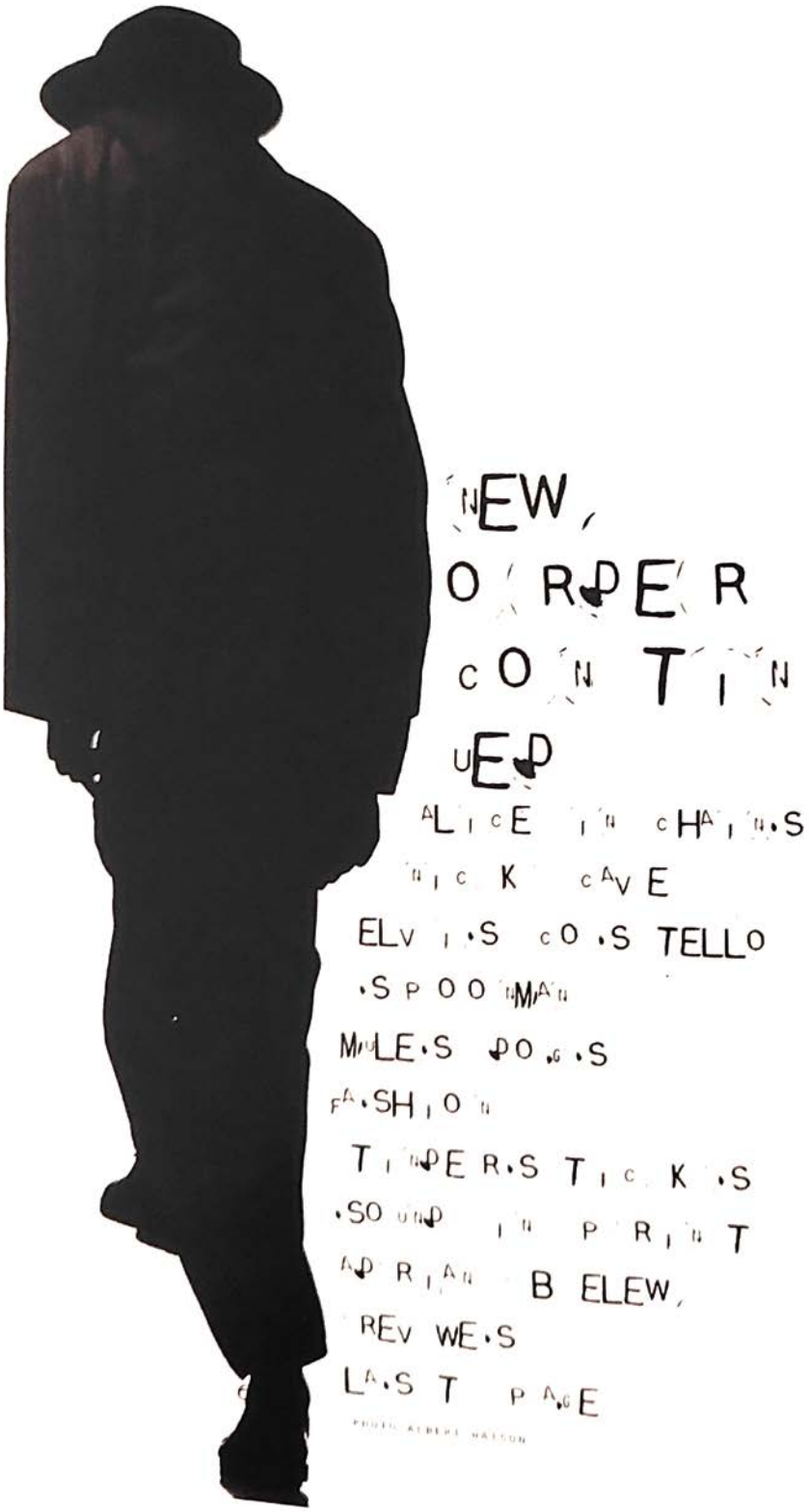
What would you be if you could be anything in the world?

'Mum saw great ability in my writing and drawing, I would like to make something out of my creative abilities for the nation to see.'

He has agreed to be referred to the Hope Street in Melton Program (Foyer-like model) for longer term accommodation and would benefit from learning new living skills and how to live interdependently.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

'Hopefully I will have long term accommodation, a job that pays right. I would also like to save some money and go on a holiday and have a nice social life as well.'



He has been linked in with a grief counsellor and support coordination is assisting in finding employment. He has grown in confidence and has engaged with other young people, First Response Youth Service case managers and support workers throughout his time as a client of the First Response Youth Service programs and is eager to achieve his goals.

What would you say to someone else who may go through losing a loved one, finishing school and moving out of home?

'You will be ok, what you feel is valid. Finishing school was nervous and I was a school captain. The refuge is a good place to stay as the staff are helpful and care about your wellbeing. You must do chores like cleaning your room. They are trying to help me create habits that will last me a lifetime.'

What Does it Mean to be Safe?: A Trauma-informed Approach to Accommodation Design

John Williams, Project Officer, Queensland Youth Housing Coalition

The young woman headed out of the room, muttering obscenities to anyone who was in earshot. The youth worker turned to face the young man who had just borne the brunt of a tirade over the previous minute. His eyes, red and teary, quickly turn to anger as he throws his meal across the floor before heading to his room. There was little chance for the worker to slow the events that unfolded. Attempts to call out the abuse were ignored until she conveyed, what she later insisted, 'that which needed to be said'. When the worker checked on the young man, they said, 'I want to make sure you're gonna be safe tonight'. Without a moment's hesitation the young man replied, 'I never feel safe'.

The situation described would be familiar to those who work in a specialist youth housing service or have filled a casual shift or two. Clashes and arguments are a regular occurrence in these settings and can sadly lead to a premature end to a placement where intimidating behaviours are challenging to manage, especially in one-worker models of support. Every practitioner trained in trauma-informed care knows what just took place. Youth workers in these situations are often focusing their energy on limiting, as best as possible, the degree to which one young person's trauma triggers another. It begs the question: How can young people experiencing homelessness who have experienced significant trauma in their lives be supported to thrive?

It starts with understanding.

The Prevalence of Mental Health and Trauma in Young People Experiencing Homelessness

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare[1] cites family and domestic violence (17 per cent), housing crisis (17 per cent) and relationship/family breakdown (12 per cent) as the main drivers of youth homelessness. As a result, young people present to homelessness services with complex mental health needs that can include symptoms of depression, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and psychosis.

These presentations are often intertwined with complex trauma histories that stem from exposure to abuse, neglect or violence (in many cases, perpetrated by primary care givers or trusted adults).[2] These findings support the documented high level of engagement by care leavers in homelessness services, hospital, and mental health services.[3] Studies of adults accessing homelessness services in Australia also report between 91 per cent and 100 per cent of service users have experienced at least one major trauma in their lives (in comparison, 57 per cent of the general population), and the majority of those surveyed (88 per cent) met criteria for at least one current mental health diagnosis.[4]

Further, it is critical to acknowledge the experience of homelessness itself can lead to further trauma. Research by Heerde and Pallotta-Chiarolli[5] highlights the lack of personal safety a significant proportion of young people experiencing homelessness face on a daily basis. Interviews conducted with young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria revealed frequent exposure to physical violence both as victims and as perpetrators. These encounters resulted in emotional detachment and pragmatism as coping mechanisms, and emotional reflections of shame, helplessness and stigma.

However, rather than recognising these socially deviant behaviours as normal responses to abnormal stress,[6] young people are often labelled as criminal. Offending behaviours and homelessness sit within a symptomatic continuum of poverty, structural imbalances and social disadvantage. This is reflected in the over-representation of young people who are known to child safety services within the Queensland youth justice system.[7]

Broadening our Appreciation of Trauma-Informed Care

In recent years trauma-informed care has developed into an integral component of youth work policy and practice. This approach is now evident in early intervention strategies, youth homelessness systems, improved training and practice guidelines, the basis for stronger clinical support for workers, and as a model for an integrated therapeutic continuum of care.[8] Yet, little attention has focused on the role accommodation design can play in strengthening trauma-informed practices to ensure young people's safety. As many communal dwellings have formed over time in a piecemeal fashion, there has been limited scope for services to review current arrangements. The experiences of COVID-19 demonstrated the complexities of congregate living commonly associated with 24/7 staffed specialist youth housing when additional physical space was required. There are many reasons for needing such space, a health response being just one.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

Keeping People Safe During COVID

Over the past two years state governments across Australia have sought to protect homeless people (and non-homeless people from homeless people),[9] by channelling these vulnerable people into motel and hotel facilities. In some instances, this strategy also included those housed in congregate accommodation settings. The implementation of motel and hotel accommodation acknowledged that social distancing on the streets, or in shelters, during a pandemic is virtually impossible.[10] The strategy also recognised that persons experiencing homelessness have a higher prevalence of chronic health conditions (that is, higher vulnerability) and would have limited access to infection prevention measures (for example, masks and sanitiser).[11]

In Queensland, the motel strategy did not focus on youth services in the initial stages of the pandemic. However, by early 2022 a wave of infections resulted in measures to move young people who had contracted COVID from their congregate dwelling to isolated health facilities to limit exposure to housemates and workers. This arrangement continued for a few weeks until infection rates plateaued — after which time cases were managed within the 24/7 setting with all young people quarantined in their rooms until such a time that all tested negative. While temporary, the basis for the motel strategy centred on providing individuals with access to safe, secure accommodation that encouraged better health outcomes.[12] Heerde et al.[13] argue the policy approach reflected 'an awareness and intent to respond to the health needs of this vulnerable group and the broader community', a policy approach that must extend to the psychological health of young people.

Trauma-Informed Care through Accommodation Design

Government responses to COVID have demonstrated that there is capacity to provide appropriate accommodation dwellings for vulnerable Australians where political will accompanies a

compelling case in the interest of safety. Public health responses to COVID demand that we ask: If persons in a homelessness setting are ideally separated for reasons of safety related to physical health (that is, threat of COVID) — why aren't accommodation design measures put in place to protect the emotional health of traumatised young people during their most defining stage of personal development?

A trauma-informed approach within communal dwellings that incorporates accommodation design acknowledges that young people often do not feel physically (or emotionally) safe. A trauma-informed approach not only seeks to reduce the triggering impact of conflict, violence, bullying, and substance use, but also must address factors related to lack of privacy, the sharing of intimate personal space such as bathrooms, while safeguarding against potential health and hygiene risks related to communal living (including infectious disease). At a minimum design must include consideration regarding access to ensuite and kitchenette facilities, private study and communal/ recreational engagement. Trauma-informed accommodation design compassionately seeks to respond to triggers of past trauma and current risk, for example, the young woman who is anxious to walk the length of the house late at night past the room of persons who are the same age as their historic abuser. Young people who have experienced the world as a place that is unsafe, unjust and unpredictable need stability to feel safe enough to start the therapeutic process.[14]

Partnering with Young People

When considering the diverse needs of young people, their complex trauma history, and unique developmental challenges, it is imperative that they be included in house design and have key advisory capacity within new developments.[15] Building design matters, and young people should have a right to input into projects that impact their transition into adulthood, including matters of communal spaces, spatiality, safety, privacy, location and eco-design.[16] These principles drive the 'Shelteristic 2025' housing initiative developed by Roseberry Queensland.[17] Approaches like this are needed now more than ever.

There are promising signs that young people's engagement in design is receiving greater significance. Projects are emerging that seek to increase the strength of co-location and links to services, trauma-informed care, environmental design, and spaces that recognise the need for connection while maintaining a young person's desire for autonomy and independence.[18] These design considerations will become increasingly important as services consider and assess the risks associated with communal living in light of challenges to limit the impact of outbreaks of infectious disease (for example, COVID-19). The field would benefit from further innovation and research in this area.

Conclusion

Australia's response to youth homelessness can progress in many different ways. As communal accommodation continues to be one of those pathways, more needs to be done to make these spaces safer (emotionally and physically), more conducive to healing and growth, and lead to more effective pathways to independence. Creative design must allow young people to have greater freedom to determine the degree to which they engage (or not) with other young people, while facilitating communal spaces that foster connection, recreation and the opportunity for communal gathering. In doing so we will take some major steps forward in protecting young people, and gain greater capacity to model respectful boundaries as well as safeguarding tenants from any future health crisis (local or global) that will inevitably emerge in the years to come.

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A Safe Haven in the Storm: Trauma, the Role of Schools and the Power of Flexible Learning

Joanna Nicholson, School Manager, Key College, Youth Off The Streets

For young people experiencing homelessness and other forms of disadvantage, the pandemic delivered an unexpected silver lining in terms of shifting our collective mindset towards remote and flexible learning.

Before the pandemic

Educator: *'What school were you at before this one?'*

Young person: *'Oh, I've been to so many schools. Like six, maybe seven.'*

Educator: *'When were you last at school?'*

Young person: *'Um, I think I went for one day in Year 8.'*

Educator: *'How many days did you go in Year 7?'*

Young person: *'I went for about a month, and then I stopped going.'*

This is a conversation from before the pandemic. A conversation I had many times, with many young people experiencing homelessness or out-of-home care, addiction, domestic and family violence, poor mental health and every possible combination of the above. Young people who spent months and sometimes years out of school without anyone noticing. The solutions to their problems were simplistic and empathy from the wider community was low.

I am an educator and School Manager at Youth Off The Streets' Key College in the inner city of Sydney, where we offer a flexible learning program for young people in Years 9 and 10.

The young people I work with have faced sleeping rough, housing instability, poverty, sick caregivers, incarcerated caregivers, lack of food and the impact of addiction. Before enrolling at Key College, some had been taken to court for refusing to attend school, even though school was not a safe place for them. Many others were suspended for truanting.

In all the years prior to the pandemic, these students were shown little understanding and offered even

less in the way of support. There were no media reports talking about how you cannot learn when you are stressed. There were no changes to HSC exams. After years of hearing students experiencing homelessness or out-of-home care tell me about a system that 'could not change' for them, COVID-19 changed everything.

Trauma, Learning and a Truly Flexible Program

Children and young people who have experienced trauma and toxic stress often experience difficulty at school. Their stress response system may have become dysregulated, with stress hormones flooding their brains at all the wrong times. Hyper-aware and vigilant, their bodies tell them to be on guard, slipping into fight, flight or freeze mode because of triggers or small incidents with their peers or teachers.[1]

At Youth Off The Streets, we know that schools can and should be the best place to interrupt the cycle of trauma.[2]

The first thing teachers learn at university is that students cannot learn if their basic needs are not met. At Key College, as with Youth Off The Streets' other independent high schools, we have a multi-disciplinary team of teachers, youth workers, psychologists and administrative workers. We also work with a wider network of caseworkers, healthcare workers and volunteers.

Being able to provide constant support to our students throughout the pandemic, and during lockdowns in particular, meant that we kept strong relationships with them and the community. Our small student-to-staff ratio meant that staff always had a good understanding of the individual needs of each student. We were able to provide food hampers, transport, tele-counselling or a friendly chat whenever needed.

During the first lockdown in 2020, we began experimenting with our timetable and took further steps towards flexibility in our already flexible program. We integrated Google classroom, separated students into learning groups, and introduced a drop-in day where students could work directly with youth workers and counsellors without the constraints of timetabled classes.

What we observed was that independent learning skills among our students increased. Young people who had never learned from home were completing all of their assigned tasks.

In 2021, we expanded our model to include a variety of online classes, including cooking and drama. We increased technology access assistance and 1:1 online tutoring. We offered daily online games and check-ins, and continued the daily drop-ins.

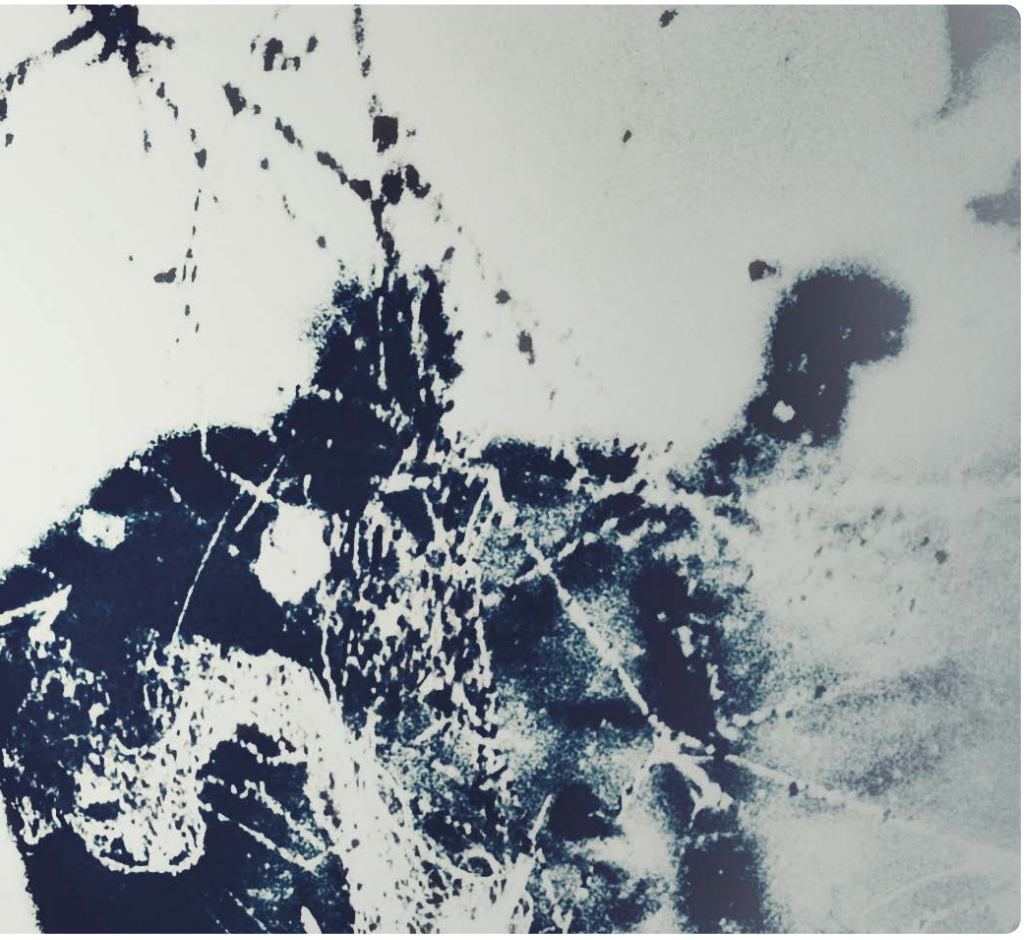
As with 2020, we saw our students' engagement with their learning increase.

This has led to a new model in 2022, with a greater focus on individualised learning and face-to-face programs that prioritise group discussion, teamwork, emotional regulation, art therapy, sport, excursions and recreation. Our team leans on the wisdom of trauma-informed care, which says a teacher should 'connect before they correct; regulate, relate and then reason'.[3]

After the Pandemic

The landscape of education has changed alongside our workplaces. There is now an expectation of flexibility, and approaches that better meet individual needs. Anecdotally, I hear about this expectation daily as I take referral phone call after referral phone call at Key College.

We have seen that young people who experience homelessness or housing instability, trauma or mental health challenges will become highly engaged with learning if they have flexibility and a team of supportive adults. Rigid, classroom-based approaches to learning are no longer appropriate models of education. For young people who have experienced trauma and sustained stress, we owe them a quality education program that meets their needs within a safe and nurturing community.



Artwork by Christine Thirkell

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Early Intervention: Out of Sight, Out of Mind?

Ainsley Bedggood, Operations Manager Youth Early Intervention and Homelessness, Melbourne City Mission

As we reflect on the last two years of COVID lockdowns and school closures, the drop in referrals for our early intervention programs at Melbourne City Mission (MCM) would suggest that the pandemic solved the need for our services. But what our educated hearts and minds are telling us is that the environment created by the pandemic — young people forced to stay at home with additional stress factors affecting the family unit on top of what may have already been happening prior to the pandemic — would likely increase family conflict, place additional pressure on already frayed relationships and, therefore, should have increased referrals to our programs.

So, what happened?

Unlike many homelessness support programs that receive referrals from Access Points, MCM's Detour and Reconnect programs rely on the referral pathways from those involved in the daily lives of young people, the foremost of these being schools, community youth hubs, and youth support services. Prior to the pandemic, we were over-delivering on targets, and it was commonplace to have young people on a waitlist. While we are still supporting large numbers of young people who benefit from early intervention, there has been a 32 per cent drop in referrals to our Detour program (the largest of our early intervention initiatives) since the first Stage 4 lockdown in March 2020.

But we have also seen a change in the point at which referrals are being made. Staff report that young people are being referred at the point where they are imminently homeless, or just newly homeless, rather than earlier in the piece when issues begin to emerge. Staff also report that the young people are presenting with increased multiple and complex needs. On a positive note, once young people are engaged, we are seeing an increase in contact and communication with the use of technologies for virtual meetings, or messaging apps. In some instances, young people are seeking connections to our youth coaches more frequently than they would have with face-to-face appointments.

Our young people were now locked inside, in what we knew to be volatile and at times dangerous situations. In a survey conducted by Orygen Youth Health relating to the impacts of COVID on young people's mental health, 45 per cent reported negative impacts on their homelife and a huge 77 per cent reported negative effects on their work, study, or university situation. In addition, they reported negative impacts on social and emotional wellbeing and relationships.[1]

Although lockdowns meant schools were not attended in person, schools were still in operation with young people provided education and regular contact with teachers online. The schooling community was still able to track students' engagement with education and those without the means or resources to do so — this was potentially a very powerful indicator of the marginalised young people missing in action. We believe that this was a missed opportunity for intervention.

Within this unique lockdown environment with its additional stress on family units, deterioration in overall wellbeing of young people and disengagement from school, we would expect that the need for early intervention programs, aimed at addressing the known risk factors contributing to youth homelessness, would increase.[2] But, in this case, and as our stats suggest, it may have been a situation of out of sight, out of mind. The lack of in-person contact with young people in schools and other community settings meant that the earlier indicators of risk were not observed or acted upon.

Conversely, Frontyard Youth Services reported that family breakdown was the number one reason for young people presenting needing homelessness support in 2020, and phone calls to their housing support line more than doubled. The increased inquiries for support clearly indicate the heightened need for youth crisis support during this time.

Where To from Here...

Detour's referrals have seen a steady increase in the months since school learning and client facing youth support services have increased their face-to-face contact. However, we have been left to review our true connection to school communities. In doing this we have a newfound determination to ensure educators, students and families are well aware what the risks of homelessness look like, when and what the triggers for referral might be, and finally, to build relationships that get our schools fully invested in and thinking about the incredible role that they can play in reducing youth homelessness.

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Support When Needed

Erin Wallis, Communications Officer, Bridge It

It is largely reported that COVID-19-exacerbated both mental health problems and the effects of homelessness for young people.

A paper from Melbourne University highlighted the additional pressure that COVID-19 has added to those experiencing homelessness and mental health issues.

The withdrawal of temporary crisis responses, coupled with the social and economic costs of the virus, bring with them the substantial risk for a new and larger wave of homelessness which increasingly affects adolescents and young adults. The economic impact of the pandemic is likely to drive high rates of youth unemployment. Family breakdown and changes in household structure are likely to result from economic strain and the pressure of extended state-wide lockdown. State-wide restrictions that mandated remote learning have heightened the digital and social inequalities experienced by our most vulnerable adolescents and young adults with significant educational consequences for those who were disengaged or disengaging from education and training pre-pandemic. Consequences for mental health challenges, psychological distress and social isolation remain as these social and economic impacts continue and change during and beyond the pandemic.[1]

Further, a recent survey conducted by *The Age*, found that mental health problems amongst youth were exacerbated by COVID-19, with 42 per cent of young people saying their mental health issues were worse since the pandemic, and 11 per cent saying it was caused by the impact of the pandemic.

Even prior to COVID-19, Australia's young homeless population was unacceptably large, at around 40 per cent or more than 40,000 people under 25 years of age. Further, this cohort have also experienced the greatest increase in rates of homelessness — three per cent over five years.

Australia desperately needs a better response for youth homelessness — one that considers its complexity, along with a compassionate understanding of intersectional issues such as continued education/employment, sense of identity, connection to others and self, and the impacts on mental health. COVID-19 has only increased the urgency of the need for such a response.

It was in this environment that Bridge It was born. Bridge It is a new charity that provides a unique response to homelessness, combining both housing and support in one model. Bridge It has two programs — The Sanctuary and The Cocoon — aimed at supporting women to exit homelessness. The Sanctuary focuses on women 25 plus, while The Cocoon focuses on women 17 to 24 years old. Both programs are in partnership with HousingFirst, who provided two beautifully renovated heritage-listed buildings fitted with self-contained units.

The Cocoon provides six self-contained units to female-identifying young people on 12-month leases while they stabilise and find long-term accommodation. What is unique about this model is that there is an onsite peer mentor living alongside the residents to provide friendship, connection, a positive role model, and emergency support if needed.

In addition, the residents have access to support services weekly — this includes informal counselling, life and living skills, education and employment services amongst others. There is a strong emphasis on community and connection in Bridge It's model — giving the women an anchor while they stabilise. To create this connection and community, Bridge It organise group activities such as walking groups, craft or music classes, or cooking nights. There is also a shared space — the butterfly room, which is a therapeutic space offered to the women that is meant to be a soothing environment.

Bridge It Founder and CEO, Carla Raynes, has been working in the sector, here and overseas, for over 18 years. From this experience, she has a deep understanding of what works and what doesn't and wanted to build something that was genuinely helpful and restorative.

'I've worked here and in the UK in all different parts of the system. I just wanted to take all the best bits from this experience and turn it into something that people actually want, and that actually works.

My dream for Bridge It is that people we support feel they have a home, are able to build meaningful relationships and realise their life goals.

This work is so important because we know that people who experience homelessness young, have higher rates of experiencing homelessness throughout their adult life. If we can break that cycle early, we can change the trajectory of their lives.'

Since its launch in June 2021, Bridge It has supported 10 women exit homelessness, and are hoping that that number will increase this year. While it is still early, Bridge It believes that with an integrated model that provides housing, support, connection and a sense of community and home, we can address multiple parts of the complex issue that is homelessness in order to break its cycle.

Early feedback from program residents suggests that there is already a sense of community forming with new friendships blossoming, self-initiated group activities, engagement in support services and expressed positive impact.

If you would like more information about Bridge It, our programs, or to get in touch as a potential partner — please visit our website: *https://bridgeit.org.au/* or email us: *hello@bridgeit.org.au*

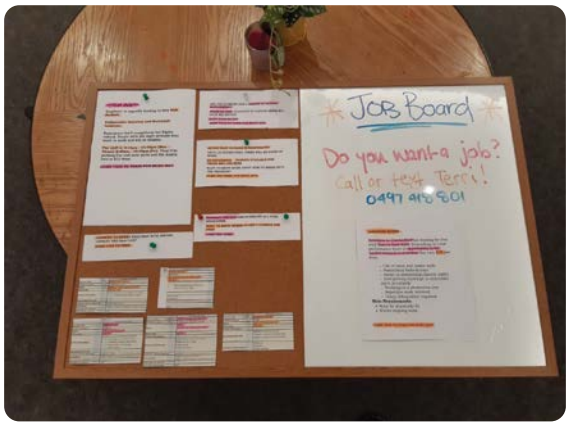
Endnote

1. Heerde J, Patton G, Borschmann R, Kinner S, and Young J 2021, 'Preventing a rebound in youth homelessness after COVID-19', *Pursuit*, University of Melbourne. <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/preventing-a-rebound-in-

Social Connection Through a Pandemic

Libby Crayton, Team Leader, Community and Youth Participation, Frontyard Youth Services

Melbourne City Mission's (MCM), Frontyard Youth Accommodation Program supports the Community and Youth Participation team in their shared vision of providing education, connection and support to young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.



Access to programs, activities, job search support at Frontyard Accommodation during COVID19 Pandemic

The team aims to support young people through a range of programs and activities including life and living skills, community, social and recreational activities and tailored therapeutic programs including arts and animal therapies. Offering pathways to employment through an individualised and supported approach, the program aims to support young people to achieve their goals and enhance the capacity of the individual, with the intention to support them out of homelessness and toward positive experiences, including confidence in living independently as they transition from Frontyard Youth Service supports.

Traditionally, we support young people to connect with relevant service providers and to connect with pro-social community supports such as community centres, libraries, art centres/studios, gyms and other recreational centres. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social connection and capacity building significantly changed: young people had to adapt to a life of lockdown. Within the Frontyard Accommodation activities, programs and daily connection looked toward building social and emotional connection through playing cards and Uno, board games like chess and Scrabble and facilitating online video game tournaments. Life and living skills focused on cooking and planning meals together — including kitchen hygiene, food preparation and budgeting for meals.

Penfolds Lane, Mural Project, Melbourne CBD 2022

Creative Play and Arts Sessions at Frontyard Accommodation, in lockdown 2021

Project Planning & Collaboration Session, Frontyard Accommodation in lockdown 2021

Working on training and employment goals saw young people look toward online schooling, short online courses to upskill themselves in things such as white cards, or practise their driving 'Learner' skills online. This time allowed for resume refreshers and adding new skills and knowledge learnt after participating in programs.

Participating in and supporting activities allowed for young people to connect, share, and plan toward their goals in a different way. Facilitated 'Creative Play' and Arts programs continued throughout the COVID-19 lockdown, as did collaboration with the City of Melbourne and a local Melbourne Muralist to work on various Graffiti Murals and laneway projects around Melbourne CBD.

Young people were the lead in the project design, learning arts design techniques along with soft skills such as working in a group, communication, collaboration, project planning and making plans to achieve shared goals.

As restrictions started to ease, and outdoor activities could commence in limited numbers, participation in external activities such walking, running, playing soccer at the park and going on bike rides became a highlight of the week for young people. Some young people expressed that they had never ridden a bike before and felt accomplished, proud and excited to be achieving something they never thought they would or could do — on top of the positive benefits of being outside amongst their peers and staff after months of lockdown.

Traditionally, Community and Youth Participation is achieved through attendance at daily programs and activities, engagement with case managers and support teams as well as attending weekly meetings — young people provide insight, feedback, and their voice as to what they would like to participate in and why. Coming up with a collaborative programs timetable which meets their needs sees that participation and engagement is successful.

Anecdotal feedback shows that our continued client centred approach within a Healing Orientated Framework, and the adaptability and transparent nature of how we engage, has been greatly beneficial for many young people — allowing them to participate in all facets of their journey.

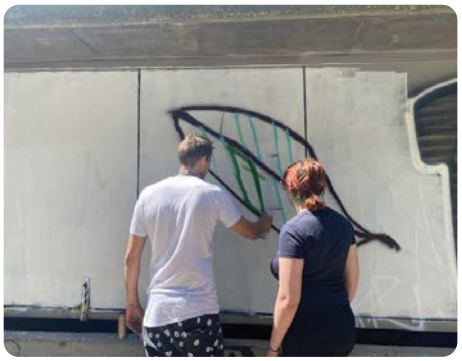
We acknowledge that face-to-face and alternative methods of achieving connection and delivering activities is the best option for many of the young people we support, as it harder to connect via phone or video.

However the Community & Youth Participation team believe that flexibility is vital if we are to effectively support young people's engagement and participation to achieve their goals.

For more information about Frontyard Youth Services, visit: *https://www.mcm.org.au/homelessness/frontyard*

A brief list of our programs and supports is available here: *https://www.mcm.org.au/homelessness/frontyard/our-services*

Healing Orientated Framework: *https://www.mcm.org.au/about/our-publications?publicationtype=Framework&topic=Trauma+and+healing#content-filters*



Mural Project, practice session on legal wall. Melbourne CBD 2021

Opinion 1

Vicki Sutton

Chief Executive Officer, Melbourne City Mission

Shorna Moore

Head of Public Policy and Government Relations, Melbourne City Mission

Ensuring that the Rebuilding of Victoria's Economy Sits on Just Foundations

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fault-lines running through society in Victoria, and around the country. As a public health crisis, the elderly and the immunocompromised have been the most vulnerable to the pandemic's dangers — but the swift and comprehensive changes it has brought to the way our world works, have seen other groups of people within our community, especially young people, hit the hardest.

The isolating effect of the pandemic has been felt acutely by Victoria's young people, with lockdown measures disrupting the routines and connections that keep young people safe and engaged. Many have been exposed to increased risk of family violence, mental health pressures and insecure housing due to escalating financial and health stress. For young people, who have less agency and fewer resources to protect themselves, especially in the context of increased social isolation, the impact has been severe.

Some of the most significant fault lines exposed by the pandemic have related to homelessness and housing. Rental and mortgage stress have increased, and the consequences of Victoria's long-standing lack of social housing, especially youth housing, has become more acute than ever.

Young people without a safe and secure home are at significant risk of being left behind as Australia enters the recovery period unless focused and concerted efforts are made by the Commonwealth and state governments to repair existing cracks in our social support system.

The COVID recovery must include proactive steps to strengthen the interventions that take and keep young people away from the homelessness system. Despite existing policies and homelessness strategies mentioning youth homelessness, they are not tuned to the specific needs of young people.

Thus, to effectively meet the needs of young people a youth-specific homelessness strategy is required in Victoria and at a national level.

However, a strategy in and of itself is not going to end youth homelessness. Sustained and meaningful investment in social housing for young people is an essential part of ensuring that the rebuilding of Victoria's economy sits on just foundations.

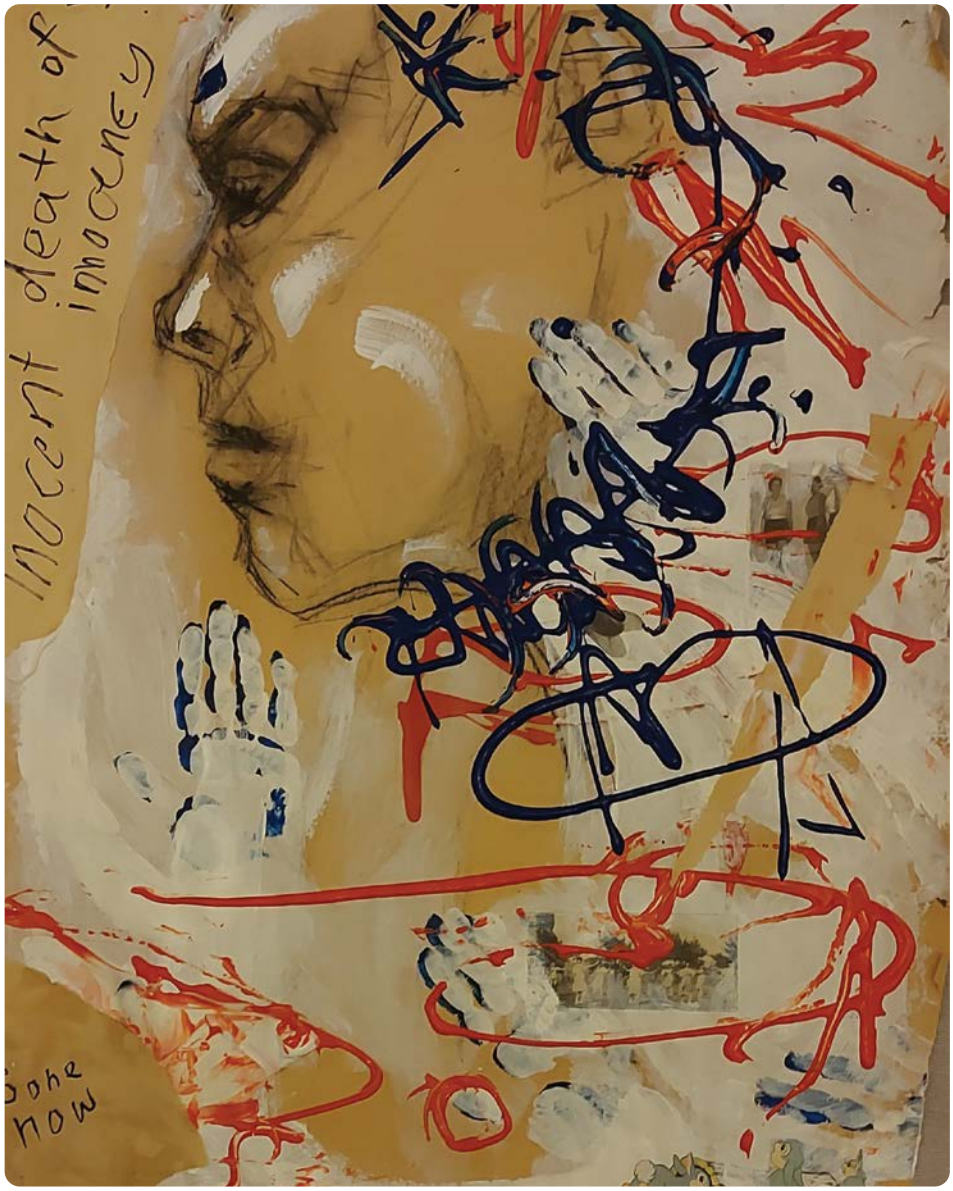
A Stand-alone Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria

A youth specific lens is an essential component of all service systems, including homelessness.

Young people are a significant group experiencing homelessness in Victoria and are at a particular developmental phase in their lives that requires support and service responses that are specific to their life stage. Compared to older cohorts, young people also have distinctive pathways into, and experiences of, homelessness and interact with government services in a completely different way.

To date, the current policy environment has been ineffective in reducing youth homelessness: support systems are fragmented and there are deficits in present service delivery.

In Victoria, there is currently no overarching strategy to address youth homelessness and coordinate support and interventions for young people who are experiencing or at risk of homeless. General state-wide homelessness and housing policies, not specific to the needs of young people experiencing homelessness, are what presently provides strategic guidance to address youth homelessness. Despite these policies



Artwork by Christine Thirkell

and homelessness strategies mentioning youth homelessness, 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 to ensure consistent, equitable outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness.

To effectively meet the needs of young people a stand-alone youth homelessness strategy is required in Victoria. A youth homelessness strategy needs to embrace all young people regardless of how they might self-identify, by applying an intersectional lens across populations and systems.

As the Victorian Government currently develops its 10 Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy and Youth Strategy, now is the opportunity to achieve the greatest synergies across the policy areas to have the most impact for young people.

Youth Housing Solutions are Fundamental

The lack of appropriate, secure and safe housing options affordable for young people is a key contributor to homelessness in Victoria. Housing solutions tailored to the needs of young people are fundamental for any effective service system response.[1]

Never has the need for a safe, comfortable and secure home been so pressing than during the pandemic. Our collective health has relied on finding appropriate housing for everyone, and the lack of permanent social housing has been acutely felt. We know that having a home is critical for young people's mental and physical health and safety, their education and employment opportunities, and their ability to fully participate in society.

Yet even before COVID hit, there were more than 80,000 people waiting for social housing in Victoria and almost 25,000 Victorians homeless on any one night. It is also estimated that there are currently 7,000 young people in Victoria experiencing or at risk of homelessness seeking medium to long-term housing, whose needs are not being met.

Nationally, young people experiencing homelessness are only 2.9 per cent of primary tenants in social housing, despite that they make up about half (54 per cent) of all single people who seek help from homelessness services. The current business model of mainstream social housing means that it is often unsustainable for providers to house young people because of their low and insecure incomes and the need for wrap-around support. Private rental in Australia is largely unaffordable for people on youth wages or Youth Allowance.

The economic recovery from COVID-19 provides the opportunity — and the clear need — to invest in social housing to keep young people safe and supported as they, and the entire community as a whole, rebuild in the wake of the pandemic. At the same time, it is important that Australia's economic recovery will be a time of significant government spending as we seek to rebuild and reactivate our regional economy — and it is crucial that governments take this opportunity to build a resilient affordable housing system.

The Commonwealth and state governments must increase the number of youth social housing properties across the country by making sure that all new social housing commitments and future growth mechanisms involve an allocation of stock for young people, otherwise they will miss out.

Endnote

1. Alves, T and Roggenbuck C 2021, *Final Report: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. *https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/professional-services/Towards-a-Youth-Homelessness-Strategy-for-Victoria*

Opinion 2

Lex Nadine Lutherborrow

Chief Executive Officer, Youth Off The Streets

We can't afford to ignore the impact of domestic and family violence on young people, or the urgent need for responses that reflect the intersectionality between domestic and family violence and youth homelessness.

By the time Marley* enrolled in one of Youth Off The Streets' high schools, she had been exposed to domestic and family violence (DFV) for more than a decade.

Her father left the family when Marley was eight years old. When she was 14, a violent drug-fuelled attack by her mother left her with third-degree burns and she was moved into crisis accommodation.

Marley told us: *'I was moved around different refuges. It was pretty annoying because every time I'd get used to the rules and people there, I'd be moved on again. None of the crisis refuges had workers with proper DFV training, so they didn't really know how to help me.'*

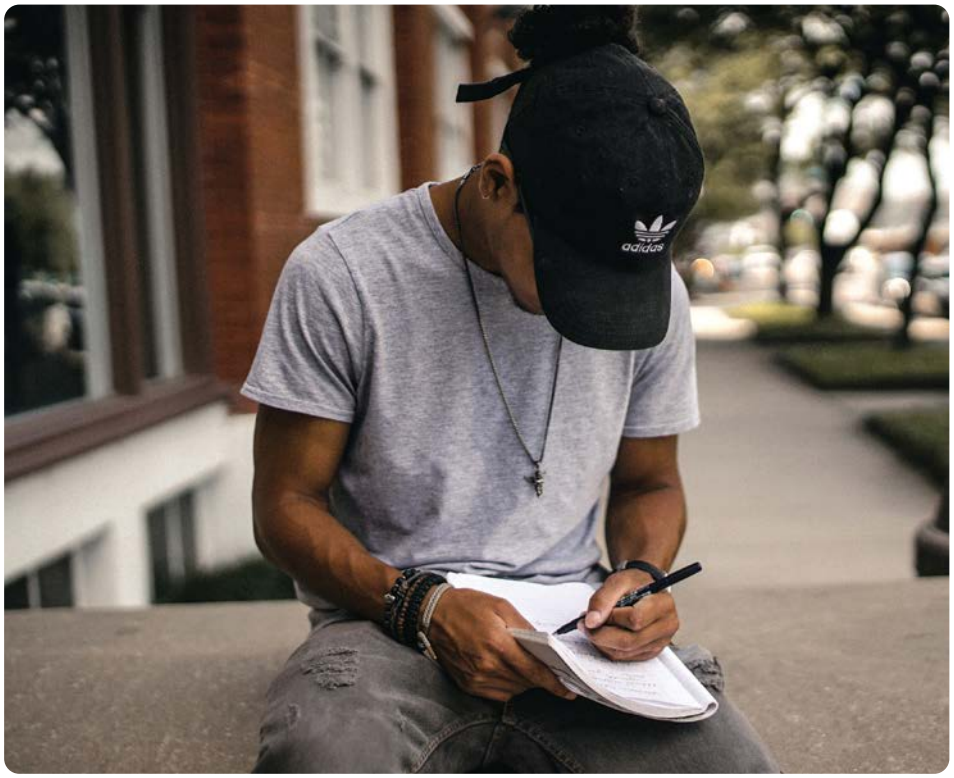
Although Marley didn't access Youth Off The Streets' homelessness services during this time, her situation is all too familiar. In 2021, 70 per cent of the young people accessing our Inner West Youth Homelessness Service (IWYHS) in Sydney had experienced DFV.

The surge in domestic and family violence during the pandemic has been well documented by researchers and the media alike. This 'shadow pandemic', as it has been called, has a dark edge when it comes to young people.

In addition to DFV being the main driver of youth homelessness — which, as we know, is an issue that continues to be largely invisible in the community — young people's experiences of DFV are continually overlooked by the broader service system. The national discourse and support services around domestic and family violence remain largely focused on women and children.

Young people with lived experience of DFV have very different needs to adults and younger children. The young people we work with at Youth Off The Streets often come to us feeling like they are to blame for domestic and family violence, rather than being victims of it. Some don't recognise that their situation is one of DFV. Even the language used in the domestic and family violence space — 'women and children' as the victim-survivors — excludes young people, creating further invisibility.

We have also found there are still misconceptions and a lack of understanding in some young people around behaviours that constitute DFV, and the early indicators that more serious and abusive behaviour is likely to occur. Furthermore, young people growing up with DFV tend to normalise these behaviours. Sometimes they are unable to identify



that they are living in an unhealthy environment; sometimes they will go on to repeat the patterns of behaviour they have experienced and use violence against others.

Marley's turning point came through education. Despite all the upheavals and challenges she experienced after leaving the family home, school was her focus. She says: *'During that time, I gave my education 100 per cent. I started doing Youth Off The Streets' Power Within program and I realised I was living through domestic and family violence. I started meeting with a DFV Prevention Worker to create a safety plan, because I knew that Mum and her boyfriend would be looking for me. Every conversation with the domestic and family violence worker and every Power Within class made me realise that DFV was not okay, and that I had a choice not to accept it.'*

Remarkably, Marley was able to start having conversations about DFV with her mum, with whom she had reconnected. Eventually, at Marley's urging and with the support of her DFV Prevention Worker, Marley's mum was able to acknowledge her own domestic and family violence behaviours. She also joined a DFV family program and left her abusive relationship.

Although we have seen firsthand the positive impact of early intervention, both as a protective factor and as a way to break the cycle of domestic and family violence, we also know we're just scratching the surface. It is deeply concerning that young people experiencing DFV often fall through the cracks of the child protection system, or they get directed towards DFV services developed with women and children in mind.

The gap is clear. We need to start treating teens and young adults as DFV victim–survivors in their own right, and this must be reflected in the next National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children. We need to listen to young people's voices as the experts in their own lives and experiences of DFV to ensure that government and service responses are evidence-based to meet their identified needs.

The ability to deliver this will require more funding — for youth-specific and specialised response services embedded within the system. It is unrealistic to expect the high level of service that government agencies rely on without the funding to support the growing number of DFV cases. Furthermore, youth-specific programs must be developed and funded to meet the needs of young people who are at risk of, or who are currently using, domestic and family violence within their home environment. It is vital that young people receive help and support specific to their social, emotional and practical needs.

As a nation, we can't afford to ignore the impact of domestic and family violence on young people. If we do, our efforts to tackle both DFV and youth homelessness risk becoming increasingly ineffective and unsustainable.

* Name changed for privacy reasons

Opinion 3

Lorraine Dupree

Executive Officer, Queensland Youth Housing Coalition

Young People Locked Out

'There are no random acts. We are all connected. You can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind.'

— Mitch Albom

We are unique because of our experiences.

We are similar because of our experiences.

We are often connected by our experiences.

Most importantly, we are all connected.

By blood, by culture, by home, by history, by experience, by law, by common interest, by care, by compassion, by emotion, by humanity. Connected in so many ways.

We all have trauma; we all have adverse experiences juxtaposed with positive ones.

Swings and roundabouts, or swings and roller coasters. Life happens to everyone.

How we as a people and society talk about experiences is central to healing and wellbeing for our young people. How we label young people's experiences can affirm or diminish them and, indeed, affirm or diminish us and our communities.

We hold enormous power.

It is often said that there are two guarantees in life — death and taxes. Arguably, there are three — death, taxes, and judgement. By judgement I mean the prejudicial judgement that harms another, not the sensible judgement that tells you not to walk onto the road whilst a bus is heading in your general direction. So, let us say our guarantees are death, taxes, and prejudicial judgement also known as bias and unhelpful assumptions.

On Youth Homelessness Matters Day (April 20), we are holding the first of our 2022 Platform 1225 Forums. Abuse of Power is the topic. It is an issue we have been concerned about for some time. The level to which young people are disempowered by a society and systems that mean well in the main yet often do not do so well in listening and responding to the varied needs of young people who seek support and assistance. This is especially pertinent for those who are marginalised, experience homelessness, and have needs that initiate a close association with our systems. How our systems respond is a reflection of our society — of our humanity, or lack thereof. The responsibility is ours. We have a long way to go in ensuring fairness and equity in our systems including the right to basic access.

Over the decades that I have worked in youth homelessness or associated systems the feedback from young people has remained consistent. Their concerns — being heard, being housed and supported and being prepared for their future — have not changed. Clear messages that we need to:

A. Listen,

B. Respond, and

C. Support young people,

in order that their holistic wellbeing needs are met — including education, health, employment and living skills. Yet over and over we hear of young people locked out of housing. Locked out of education. Locked out of employment. Locked out of life opportunities and the necessities of life to meet their wellbeing indicators. Then for too many — Locked up.

We have a long way to go in recognising that there is not yet equal access and opportunity for young people. There is barely access to youth housing and the homelessness system is bursting at the seams with unprecedented waiting lists that we are told are at least three times as long as they were pre COVID-19, floods, and the current housing crisis. Young people are literally locked out of our housing market across all regions.

Young people also talk about judgement, stigma and shame. The assumptions we hold about young people who are homeless, those who are in our out-of-home care system, those not engaged in school or struggling with school, those with disabilities, those who are First Nations, CALD, living in poverty, experiencing domestic and family violence. The list goes on.

Those who need the most compassion, understanding and support because the circumstances they find themselves in dictate that their needs are greater. That is where we direct our prejudicial judgement, layers of stigma and associated shame. According to the Oxford Dictionary, stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. Stigma, that perplexing social construct, rarely makes any sense yet is integral to how we abuse our power.

There is something pretty messed up about some of our perceptions — individually, collectively, systemically, and societally. Shame and stigma sits with children and young people who have been harmed, those who are in our care systems. First Nations people who have walked this country for millions of years, their lives and wellbeing interrupted 234 years ago with the catastrophic and ongoing impact of invasion, genocide, and devastation of culture, language, families, personal relationships, and community. We obliterated generations of First Nations people, we stole their children and imposed our will, our power, our laws. We committed crimes against First Nations people and now we lock them up, under our laws, at unconscionable rates. Yet it is First Nations people who talk about shame. Their shame. Not ours. Why? Why is the shame not ours?

It was our behaviour, our abuses that harmed. Yet, we continue to abuse our power at all levels of our society and systems. Shame and stigma. Senseless.

We 'learn' the bias and prejudice from which we make assumptions that impact much of what we do. Dare I say, even our assessments.

We know punishment does not work. We know that compassion, teaching, and reparation does. Yet we consistently call for punitive approaches when young people err. We loudly state that people learn from their experiences and from witnessing the behaviour and experiences of others, yet we role model poorly, take no responsibility for such and loudly denounce young people behaving badly. Then we vilify trauma-based behaviours in young people, further stigmatising and excluding them. Let us look at how our politicians behave in parliament. Any prep teacher witnessing such behaviour in their classroom would be quick to implement strategies to address then manage such behaviour. We accept this as a status quo and regularly talk about our society's issue with school bullies — as though schools are where this starts and where it needs to be addressed, devoid of conversations about modelling and our societal relationship with power abuses across the board. In every echelon — every social arrangement.

One of the first rules of teaching is you need to offer lessons that make sense. How much sense can be made of our double standards, myths, inconsistencies, and prejudices? We all have the power to change the status quo. Clarity in our collective intent and actions will go some way. So too will owning our own contribution and taking responsibility for what we can do. We need to regularly critique what we have been taught, know our own biases, collect solid information, use our own discernment, and listen intently.

Young people need a voice.
We need to hear them and respond.

We are all connected. What happens to one of us matters to us all, regardless of our consciousness.

Opinion 4

David MacKenzie and Tammy Hand

Upstream Australia

Why Don't We Have a Strategic Approach to Ending Homelessness?

Generally, when social issues are regarded as a high priority, Australian governments develop social policy strategies that report against progress milestones. Examples include the *National Suicide Prevention Implementation Strategy*, the *National Drug Strategy 2017–2026*, and the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. These strategies have had bipartisan support. It has to be asked: why no strategy has been advanced to address homelessness?

The 2008 Rudd Government's *White Paper, The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*[1] still stands as probably the most outstanding official policy document on homelessness yet advanced in Australia. The Rudd Government boldly declared that homelessness was a national priority.

By way of some pre-history, prior to the White Paper, the National Youth Commission's (NYC) report, *Australia's Homeless Youth*[2] argued for the first time that *'with the right policy settings and progressive investment the goal of eliminating homelessness is achievable'*.

The homelessness sector was so optimistic about the direction of the White Paper. While it was not a strategy as such, it clearly implied that the next step would be a strategy and a plan for how, by 2020, homelessness would be addressed, and measurably reduced.

However, no such strategy ever saw the light of day. Instead of a homelessness strategy, there was a major piece of administrative reform involving the consolidation of several Commonwealth/state/territory special purpose programs under a smaller number of broad Commonwealth/state/territory agreements that reformed and simplified the pre-existing Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) arrangements and operations.

Today, the tattered remnants of the White Paper are subsumed under the current Federal Government's *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (NHHA). Indeed, since the White Paper, homelessness has not been a high priority for governments of both political persuasions.

Is Government to Blame?

While government priorities and policies shape what is possible at any point in time, there are also other factors and other actors who bear some responsibility for the failure to address homelessness. If one is capable of reflexivity and self-criticism, culpability can be found closer to home in the homelessness and community sectors.

One issue is that the public tends to think of homelessness in terms of people sleeping rough on the street, and perhaps begging outside of supermarkets, simply because — although this is the smallest cohort of homeless people — it is the most visible. The vast majority of people experiencing homelessness are in some form of temporary shelter most of the time, but they are homeless, nonetheless. Media reporting on homelessness mostly serves to reproduce this problem. While there are periodic public awareness campaigns that attempt to change this public perception, the public is frequently assailed by some private charities that reinforce the notion that homeless is rough sleeping. Indeed, some advocates argue that responding to rough sleeping is the way to end homelessness.

There are also those who argue that solving homelessness is purely and simply an issue of housing — 'homelessness is a housing problem'. However, young people and families generally do not end up homeless because of a housing problem. If they do become homeless, then clearly

they have a housing problem. This line of advocacy makes a powerful claim because of the under-investment in social housing and the unaffordability of housing more generally. However, as a policy argument, it is a simplification of a more complex issue. Frame a problem simplistically and all you will get is a simplistic and therefore less than adequate response.

Finally, in the community sector there is a competition for scarce resources, where advocacy around the needs of young Australians must compete with those who seek to retain a focus on street homelessness, family homelessness, or vulnerable older women who are at risk of homelessness. Given scarce resources, this competitive marketplace is understandable and largely unavoidable. However, this has created an environment where special interest groups and some agencies indulge in excessive marketing and social media propaganda where glossy brochures and social media posts are splashed around that don't say much or report hard outcomes. Unfortunately, all this serves to misdirect government decision-making and undermine genuine efforts to develop an evidence-based homelessness strategy.

Calls for a Homelessness Strategy

For many communities, community service agencies and workers, the issue of homelessness has never ceased to be a high priority. After a long hiatus, the youth homelessness sector has begun to more assertively raise its collective voice. In early 2019, a *National Report Card on Youth Homelessness* was delivered, calling for a national youth strategy.[3] In March 2019, a National Youth Homelessness Conference, convened by Youth Development Australia in partnership with other youth sector leaders, issued a Communique that called for a Strategy Plan for Ending Youth Homelessness, and highlighted four key areas for strategic action — 'early intervention', 'rapid rehousing', 'engagement with education, training and employment opportunities' and 'extended state care'.[4]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in June 2021, a reconvened virtual National Youth Homelessness Conference revisited the same issues but with a focus on what to do next. There was a consensus from the attendees that a strategy and strategic action was needed to make a significant difference to youth homelessness. A proposal for a strategy to end youth homelessness was advanced as a joint project of all Australian governments with non-government stakeholders and partners that would map out the strategies that could actually begin to reduce youth homelessness. Despite some encouraging interest from state and territory jurisdictions to fund such a venture, and support from with the community sector, the proposal has yet to find a federal government minister responsible for housing and homelessness who sees $400,000 as a value for money contribution in leveraging a major $1.2 million strategic and collaborative initiative.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) reports on the redesign of the homelessness service system (2020) stand as the most recent research effort to rethink a homelessness response that could end homelessness in Australia. The main report, *Ending homelessness in Australia: a redesigned homelessness service system*[5] drew on three research sub-projects that examine the needs, issues and evidence relevant to young people,[6] older Australians[7] and families[8] becoming homeless. The main argument of this important research is for a radical rebalancing of the SHS — including:

- *'a focus on prevention and early intervention rather than a crisis response'*
- a *'duty to assist protocol'*
- a Housing First commitment for those experiencing homelessness
- *'an adequate supply of social and affordable housing'*
- a changed role for universal welfare services in relation to the SHS
- a reorganisation of services around place-based collaborations.

In addition, two major government reports have been tabled: the *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria* report[9] in March 2021 and the Federal Government's *The Inquiry into homelessness in Australia* report[10] in August 2021, which discuss many of the same policy ideas.

As mentioned above, there is growing interest in the community sector about having a guiding homelessness strategy. In Victoria, for example, Melbourne City Mission commissioned a report from AHURI, the *2021 Final Report: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria*[11] that recommended:

- *'a youth-specific lens'*
- *'an intersectional perspective … for both systems and populations'*
- a *'person-centred approach'*
- *'early and effective intervention … to mitigate longer term consequences'*
- that *'housing solutions are fundamental'*.

Most recently, as Australia heads to a federal election on 21 May 2022, Stephen Nash, a 30-year veteran of the homelessness and housing sector and the new CEO of Kids Under Cover penned a passionate but well-crafted and pointed argument in The *Canberra Times* (30 March 2022) that 'Australia needs a national strategy on youth homelessness'.[12]

Is Anyone Listening?

If homelessness became a high priority in social policy, then homelessness would be the issue that Australia used to have. Few Australians would actually experience homelessness due to an adequately funded, flexible, and outcomes-driven early intervention and prevention sector. Those that did become homeless would have crisis support and accommodation when they needed it but then be rapidly rehoused in a range of social and affordable housing options.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia did relatively well by shelving partisanship and undertaking quite innovative, if sometimes costly, measures while bringing

the Australian community along. One can only ponder the disaster that would have happened if we had responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in the same way we respond to homelessness?[13]

There is a developing consensus amongst key stakeholders of the need for a national homelessness strategy in Australia.

Is anyone in Canberra listening?

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Opinion 5

Stephen Nash

Chief Executive Officer, Kids Under Cover

A Call for a Collaborative Vision to Address Youth Homelessness

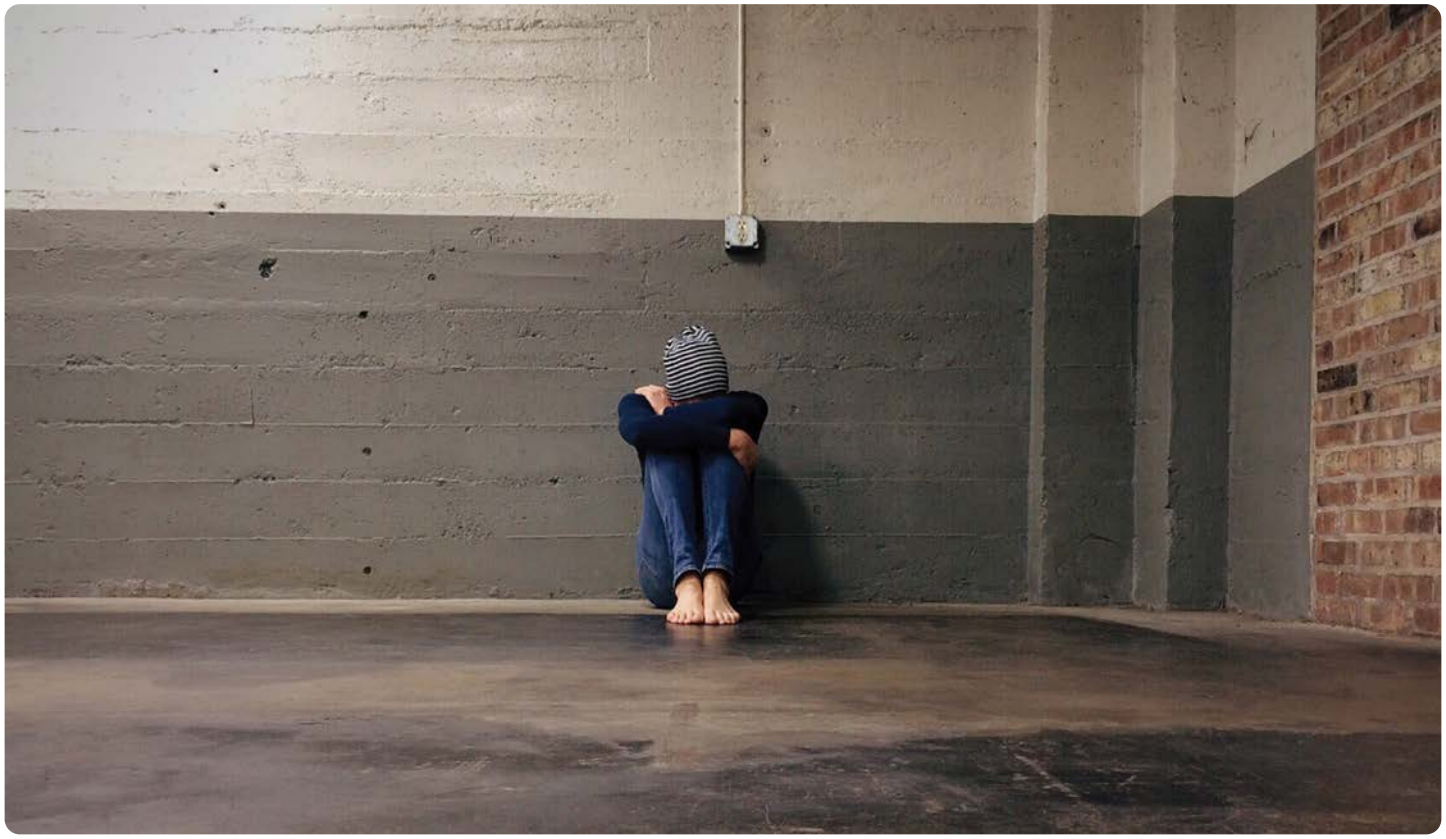
I am so pleased to be back working directly on homelessness solutions after almost a decade immersed in the community housing sector. I am amazed at the persistence and dedication of people working in the sector, in academia, philanthropy and government striving to find ways to end homelessness. I am equally astonished at the persistence of homelessness; that despite more visibility, public attention, research and funding injections for some targeted initiatives, we have still failed to turn off the tap to stem the flow of people who have nowhere stable to live.

The recent Federal and Victorian Parliamentary Committee inquiries into homelessness have seen no tangible outcomes to direct policy or new resources targeting prevention and early intervention. What is captured in these inquiries is already well known to people in the sector after decades of research, practice development, innovation and numerous inquiries.

We all understand definitions, numbers, causes of homelessness, pathways into homelessness, the damaging impact and the social and economic costs homelessness brings. We understand the reality that ending homelessness for individuals is possible and continue to highlight the range of successful interventions that continue to prove our point.

Demand from people who are homeless is placing great strain on the service system. Great resources have been allocated and fantastic work is being done to assist those who are homeless, especially dealing with the threat of COVID for those most vulnerable. However, this great work to end homelessness for individuals (including people entrenched in rough sleeping) is sadly undermined by the ongoing flow of people who find themselves on the same well-trodden path to homelessness.

The damage of homelessness to individuals and communities is well documented, as is the cost

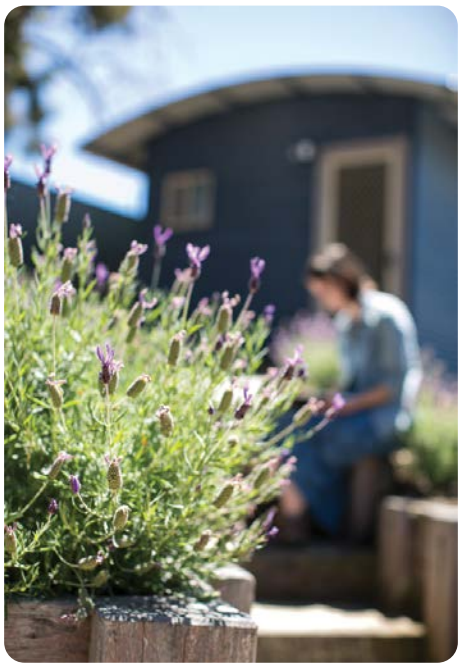


of engagement with expensive systems. So why isn't prevention and early intervention a political and budget priority?

Of course, we need to focus on ending homelessness for people who find themselves there. But at the same time, we should be heading upstream and turning off the tap to stop others falling into such a costly and damaging crisis. The vast majority of rough sleepers would have had their first experience while young. Therefore, preventing youth homelessness will have the most significant impact on reducing future rough sleeping.

With the right resourcing, the sector has shown it is not only capable of delivering both emergency and preventative support, we are also desperate to do so, in order to avoid unnecessary suffering. There are many great initiatives to maintain tenancies and help keep people housed, let's focus on preventing further homelessness too.

But what is being done to fundamentally ensure we stop the flow of young people into homelessness — be it via family violence, family breakdown, leaving out-of-home care, leaving justice or leaving other forms of care? The impact of more attention here will save lives for many and for others a lifetime of misery and lost potential. Usually, the solution advocated in homelessness is more funding. However, this time the focus needs to be specific about how the funds are allocated. We have all appreciated the Victorian Government investment of the unprecedented $5.3 billion into the *Big Housing Build* to bring Victoria back to the national average for social housing. Those of us working to tackle youth homelessness have been excited about the recent $50 million funding into housing models, helping divert young people from homelessness. Although this represents less than 1 per cent of the $5.3 billion of the *Big Housing Build*, it is a very welcome start. The $50 million funding round must surely be the first of many down payments for youth housing models.



Young people on the brink of homelessness deserve a collaborative vision for support from their community

I am so pleased to be at Kids Under Cover, created in 1989 during the Burdekin Inquiry into Youth Homelessness. Attending a forum at Prahran Town Hall during the same inquiry inspired me to focus my work over the next few decades on tackling homelessness. It is really pleasing to see how far we have come as a community and sector in understanding the dimensions and solutions to homelessness. With the *Big Housing Build* funding and ongoing innovation, Victoria is poised to return to our once proud place as leaders in this space. However, a key missing ingredient is a Homelessness Prevention Fund. This is something that has been implemented in South Australia, creating a pipeline of funding for us to deliver studios (in partnership with support agencies) into the backyards of families where there is imminent risk of young people becoming homeless. What more does the sector need to do in order for this to become a key plank of Victoria's Homelessness and Housing Strategies?

Opinion 6

Ros Atkinson

Chief Executive Officer, Youth Family and Community Connections (YFCC)

At YFCC, we run several programs that we expected to be strongly impacted by COVID-19 — in particular our youth housing programs and our Emergency Relief program. Clients who use these programs were some of the most impacted by isolation, insecure casual work and rising costs. We thought our services would be over-run.

But that wasn't the case.

What we noticed first was that Emergency Relief clients we were used to seeing every month were not coming in. It became somewhat quiet. We found out that, with that little top-up to their income from COVID-19 payments, they were able to cope, pay their phone bills, pay their vehicle registration and meet expenses that would normally tip families over.

For young people, given how low the Youth Allowance is, COVID supplements had a more significant impact. We saw our clients managing this really well, meeting their weekly expenses, but also putting a little bit away as savings. Our workers were educating them, saying, *'Remember, this is not forever, remember we will go back'*. Rather than have a debt with the energy supplier, Radio Rentals, one of the payday lenders or After Pay, young people were able to manage their weekly expenses and keep a little bit aside for a rainy day.

The view that people in poverty will just waste any extra money they get was simply not borne out.

The uplift in Centrelink benefits replaced the need for Emergency Relief as an ongoing top-up for people who simply did not have enough income to meet their basic living expenses. The additional income replaced getting into the worst possible kind of debt for those unpredictable expenses in life that any of us could incur. Unfortunately, we are now back to where we were pre-COVID for Emergency Relief clients. With the return to the basic Youth Allowance, young people are back in survival mode.

Living on Youth Allowance is not about managing your budget — it's about just managing to get through each and every day. As a result, what we see is young people in constant fight/flight mode, asking themselves: *'Am I going to be able to eat today? Am I going to be warm? Am I going to be able to pay my power bill?'* Clients are now back to constant sacrifice and compromise.

We learned many things during COVID — but most of that now seems to have been lost. Most significantly, we learned that if we give people a good basic income, they use it to pay off debt, to meet their living costs, to start to save, and to be able to lift their heads enough to look outward. If you are worried about where you are going to sleep and whether you are going to eat, how can you look for a job, or maintain a job? I also worry that we are losing some of our capacity for kindness and our sympathy for other people's circumstances.

For our young people, this sits in a broader context of what they see going on in the world around them. A whole generation has grown up with 9/11, terrorism, climate change, drought, tsunamis, COVID-19 and now the war in Ukraine. Today, young people are bombarded with all this, on the news, the internet, and their parents talking about it. I hear people ask why so many of our young people have mental health issues. Some people are wondering. I am certainly not. Today's teenagers and young adults form a different world-view, and have a very different picture of how the world operates than people of my generation.

In Community Services, we continue to work with our clients towards building better lives, in troubled times and in better times. However, I think that we as a society can do so much better, and I am glad to see discussion emerging about universal basis income. The resurfacing of 'Canada's forgotten universal basic income experiment' has much to teach us — about how increased income security produced dramatically improved health outcomes, made it possible for young people to finish high school, and saw people move into permanent employment.

Looking seriously at this would mean that we have not forgotten or ignored what the experience of COVID has taught us.

See: *https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200624-canadas-forgotten-universal-basic-income-experiment*

Opinion 7

Pam Barker

Chief Executive Officer, Yfoundations

Calling on Governments for a National Youth Homelessness Strategy

Yfoundations is calling on the federal and state governments to put a sharp focus on children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. A national strategy to address child and youth homelessness would provide a roadmap to tackle this ever-increasing issue in Australia, and address the systemic issues that drive and exacerbate child and youth homelessness, such as:

- domestic and family violence
- abuse and neglect
- housing crisis fuelled by rising rents and lack of access to affordable housing
- youth unemployment and a lack of employment pathways for vulnerable young people
- low or irregular incomes and woefully low Youth Allowance payments
- entering the youth justice system and being placed on custody orders
- insufficient support for young people leaving out-of-home care, and
- lack of access to or disrupted education.

These and other factors combine to create a perfect storm in which children and young people are increasingly likely to fall into homelessness.

The Problem

For too long, children and young people have slipped through the cracks of multiple service sectors only to land in youth specialist homelessness services (SHS). While these services are committed to supporting children and young people, they are often not adequately resourced nor is it within their power to respond in ways to ensure that:

- homelessness does not happen in the first place
- when it does, it is a once in a lifetime event, and
- there is a system to catch the child or young person, providing support as well as a pathway out of homelessness.

The evidence is compelling: children and young people who are impacted by abuse, domestic and family violence, couch surfing, living in unsafe overcrowded accommodation, exiting youth justice, and street sleeping, are too often ending up in the youth homelessness service system — a system that was never designed to be the end of the road for vulnerable children and young people; a system that is not and has never been funded to respond in ways that give children and young people every opportunity to be safe and free from abuse, trauma and violence; a system that is not resourced to support children and young people to live their best lives and have opportunities to thrive and enter adulthood equipped with life skills.

Despite these limitations, our youth homelessness services continue to roll out the safety net for these children and young people who have nowhere else to turn. The youth homelessness sector continues to plug the gaps of service system failures without additional resources and often without any government commitment to ensure mainstream agencies meet the responsibilities of their portfolios. All roads of service system failures must not end up in the youth homelessness sector.

Recent Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) data[1] paints a clear picture of the severity of the situation for children and young people in 2020–21 across Australia:

- Nearly 42,000 15- to 24-year-olds presented alone to an SHS — 59 per cent of these had previously been assisted by an SHS agency at some point since 2011.
- The main reasons young people aged 15 to 24 years presented alone were domestic and family violence, and housing crisis (both 17 per cent), followed by relationship/family breakdown (at nearly 13 per cent).
- Nearly 47 per cent of children and young people who sought SHS support had experienced family and domestic violence.

- One in three clients who experienced domestic and family violence were under 18 years old.
- 15- to 24-year-olds represented 23 per cent of unassisted (that is, turned away) requests for SHS support nationally.
- Around one-third of young people aged 15 to 24 years presenting alone identified as Indigenous.
- 71 per cent of young people presenting alone to SHS were not enrolled in any form of education at the start of the support.

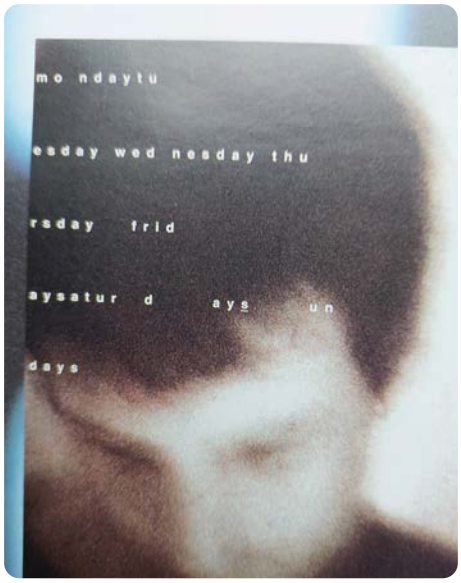
The 2016 Census[2] showed a 26 per cent increase over a 10-year period in 12- to 24-year-olds experiencing homelessness in Australia. We anticipate this figure will be significantly worse in data from the 2021 Census because of the COVID pandemic and the affordable housing crisis in Australia.

Why do we need a dedicated homelessness strategy for children and young people?

Child and youth homelessness continues to escalate across Australia and yet there is no overarching national strategy to tackle it head on. Children and young people often have distinctly different pathways into homelessness and different experiences compared to adults. Therefore, it follows that distinct and different responses and approaches are necessary in order to address it effectively and in any longstanding, meaningful way.

Too often we see children and young people become lost in state-based housing and homelessness strategies, which tend to focus only on early intervention and prevention strategies for this cohort. The *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023* is one example of where children and young people are mentioned only in the context of early intervention and prevention and the only actions relating to children (in their own right) and young people are: for those exiting Out of Home Care (OOHC); Youth Foyers; and universal screening tools in schools.

While Yfoundations welcomes efforts to target children and young people exiting OOHC



and those with connections to child protection, the breadth of homelessness experiences extends well beyond these issues. It is telling that we see too many children and young people:

- presenting alone to specialist homelessness services when they should be in out-of-home care or supported to safely return to their families
- cycling through or stuck in the crisis system because there are no exit options
- experiencing family breakdown and violence with nowhere to go
- unable to access the private rental market because it's unaffordable and out of reach
- facing long wait times to access social housing
- being forced to couch surf or live in overcrowded accommodation because they have no other options
- being detained in correctional facilities because they cannot return home or have no home to go back to.

Why are the needs of children and young people people different?

Yfoundations recently submitted our position to the Productivity Commission's review of the *National Housing and Homelessness Strategy*. Our key recommendation calls for a national child and youth homelessness strategy because the evidence shows that what we're doing now isn't working and continues to worsen.

Children and young people's trajectories into homelessness are different, their issues are often complex and varied due to their age, and their most prevalent forms of homelessness are often hidden (that is, couch surfing and extreme overcrowding). Therefore, the strategies and responses for children and young people must be considered separately to the rest of the population.

Towards the end of 2021, AHURI and Melbourne City Mission released their *Final Report: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria*,[3] which provides an excellent account of why young people need a unique and robust response to accommodate their needs. Nationally, we need to replicate the effort and importance the Victorians are putting into to their call for a dedicated youth homelessness strategy.

We need to be mindful that children and young people are moving through the developmental stages of their lives and don't have the same coping strategies and resources that are generally attributed to adults. Therefore, the responses must consider the developmental phase of the child or young person.

In the same way, the responses we know work for young people vary according to their issues and complexity. For instance, Youth Foyers work well for young people who do not have complex needs and who want to study or embark on employment, whereas young people with more complex needs tend to do better in medium-term housing with only a couple of other residents and 24-hour onsite support. Housing First could work for those young people who want to live on their own and are supported up to the point they can live independently. Some young people simply need access to affordable housing to avoid couch surfing or living in severely overcrowded accommodation or sleeping rough. Others will benefit from supported transitional housing for a two-year period to give them time to stabilise before they are able to live independently. There will always be

a need for crisis accommodation for children and young people in situations where there are no other options or to keep them safe.

What most children and young people need is a trauma-informed response that is centred on them and their needs. Similarly, they will likely need access to mainstream services such as mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drugs, education, training, youth justice, child protection and, in some instances, support to reunify with their families. And, just as importantly, they will need support to become familiar with and access these services. Therefore, any future strategy must articulate the involvement of other service sectors to allow children and young people to receive the full range of the interventions and supports they need to avoid homelessness in the first place or exit as quickly and as unscathed as possible.

A National Youth Homelessness and Housing Strategy would establish Australia as an international leader in addressing homelessness among children and young people. We know other countries are doing great work in this area, but Yfoundations has been unable to identify any that has embarked on a national youth homelessness strategy other than Ireland, which is in the development process. We have the opportunity — right now — to develop a blueprint for a dedicated systemic approach involving all relevant stakeholders who must play a vital role and collaborate in addressing the fundamental issues that contribute to and exacerbate youth homelessness. We must put a sharp focus on what is a national shame and support the transition of children and young people in this country into a future of self-reliance and wellbeing, thereby ensuring they are not consigned to a lifetime of homelessness.

Endnotes

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Artwork by Christine Thirkell

Opinion 8

Bronwyn Pike

Chief Executive Officer, Uniting Vic.Tas

When we think of social issues that people face, we tend to view them as distinct problems that require their own unique solutions.

However, the nature of human experience, especially disadvantage, is far more complex than that. We are not homeless one day, have a substance issue the next day and then deal with the challenges posed by mental illness the next week. We are all those things at the same time, with each issue compounding and complicating how we experience and deal with the other.

Unfortunately, our human service system has been slow to recognise and respond to this reality. The system is fragmented and often crisis oriented without much room for holistic solutions or wraparound services to address the multiple co-occurring challenges faced by our vulnerable communities.

We spend millions of dollars on costly specialist interventions that all too often fail when compounding disadvantages are not addressed. This is especially the case where people are in or face the risk of homelessness.

Similarly, homelessness and housing programs can be a revolving door when they are not paired with adequate health, social and economic support required for people to maintain tenancies. When the underlying issues are not addressed, people cycle back into homelessness.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen an explosion in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness and seeking emergency or crisis housing. Unfortunately, many of them are young people.

Being homeless dramatically changes a young person's life trajectory. It disrupts engagement in school or employment, impacts on mental health and risks their safety and wellbeing. The pandemic has been particularly hard for vulnerable and disadvantaged young people who did not have support mechanisms to fall back on when needed.

We know that, compared to older people, young people have distinct experience of homelessness and support needs. We also know that the existing youth homelessness system and support service for young people have been ineffective in reducing the incidence and experience of homelessness in this cohort.

I have already pointed out the crisis-oriented nature of our human services system. A telling example is child protection, where we simply do not have enough resources to provide the comprehensive family support measures needed and the focus is entirely on immediate protection needs.

It is far better to intervene early and prevent a child from ending up in the child protection system.

Equally, it is better to prevent a young person from finding themselves in a situation where they have to face the challenge of going out on their own and finding a place to live. It is incredibly tough for a young person of 15 or 16 to live on their own, even with the best of accommodation and support.

Sometimes families face poverty, disadvantage and other compounding challenges that force households into homelessness, or to live just one-step away from it. In these situations, when adequate support is provided the whole family can avoid breakdown of housing.

Intensive case management for the family, and ongoing social and emotional support for the young person, focused on keeping the family together is important and can have positive outcomes for everyone involved.

Young people leaving out-of-home care is another cohort where there is a clear failure of early intervention to prevent homelessness.

We have a special duty of care to young people for whom the state has been parent. It is not ethically right for the state to withdraw from these duties when a young person turns 18 and where they have no alternative but to enter a life of homelessness.

Instead of early intervention, we spend millions on costly, short-term specialist services focused on just one aspect of a young person's life. Young people in these programs who do not have a home to go to afterwards, more often than not bounce back into the costly end of the service system. For example, participants at one of

our youth drug and alcohol withdrawal services have a 70 per cent recidivism rate.

These services do not have the funding to ask the young person where they are leaving to — a stable home, an unstable home or to the street. When compared to the cost of these specialist crisis services, both early intervention and housing are relatively affordable interventions.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that safe and stable alternative accommodation options are essential for young people where family preservation or staying at home is simply not safe or an option.

Fundamentally, it is this lack of access to appropriate social housing and affordable rental properties that forces young people into homelessness.

Even where housing is available, it is too often not appropriate for the needs of young people or is too far out from where they need to be.

This situation is exacerbated by the low rates of income support payments that leave young people without a safety net and often just one incident away from homelessness.

We know that the demand for social housing in Australia is expected to increase over the coming years. Yet, investment by federal and state governments have been falling steadily. Where we have seen investment (for example the *Big Housing Build* in Victoria or the *Community Housing Growth Program* in Tasmania), commitments are short-term and do not include ongoing plans or investment to build and deliver social housing on an ongoing basis to keep up with the increasing demand.

Here again, we have to revisit the complex nature of issues young people face. Even the best housing solution can fail when not combined with the wraparound support services that address the compounding issues young people are forced to deal with.

Artwork courtesy Libby Crayton, Frontyard Youth Services

Too many times, we think that once we have found someone a house then that is the end of it. However, when you hand someone the key, that is the beginning of the journey, not the end of it.

Ongoing, flexible and integrated support is key to ensure we provide the next generation with a fighting chance. Currently, there is no mandate for provision of support services. The only way they get any additional support is if they are already connected to another service.

This is simply not good enough. There is a moral obligation on government, if they provide social, public or affordable housing, to provide access to the kind of services that are going to support retention of the tenancy.

We need to work alongside young people to understand what the key factors are that keep tenancies stable and long-term. This could be an adequate income support payment to pay rent, social support, access to mental health services or engagement in education and training.

Finding a home is one thing, but sustaining a home takes a lot more effort.

At Uniting, we are aware of the workforce and funding shortages that restrict service provision. We face this in a number of our programs, particularly in regional and rural areas where access to services like mental health are significantly underfunded, and long waiting lists apply, even when support is needed immediately.

We know that when housing is coupled with adequate support (similar to a Housing First approach), young people have a genuine chance of maintaining their tenancies, achieving positive outcomes and breaking the cycle of going in and out of homelessness. Additionally, it reduces the demand on crisis support service across the spectrum.

Safe and secure housing is a major factor in helping get a person's life on track. This is particularly critical for young people, who are only at the start of their journey. As a society, we should be doing all that we can to help the next generation lead healthy and productive lives.

Young people need governments across the country to step up and invest in social and affordable housing on an ongoing basis and at a rate to keep up with increasing demand.

They need fully funded early intervention and prevention programs to identify and adequately support families and young people at risk of homelessness.

They need housing to be integrated with wrap-around services to address other compounding vulnerabilities, to avoid cycling back into homelessness.

Most importantly, young people need an immediate safety net, that can only come through a permanent increase to the rates of youth allowance and income support payments that meet a minimum income floor across the working age payments system set at the pension payment.

We know the strategies and solutions — we now need commitment and investment.

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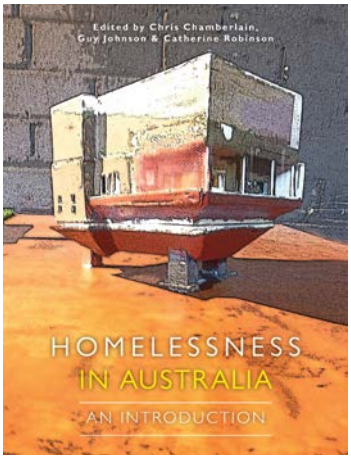
Homelessness in Australia: An Introduction



Homelessness in Australia: An Introduction provides thought-provoking, up-to-date information about the characteristics of the homeless population and contemporary policy debates.

Leading researchers and advocates from across Australia have come together to contribute their expertise and experience to produce a foundational resource that will set the benchmark for the future analysis of homelessness. Editors, Chris Chamberlain, Guy Johnson and Catherine Robinson are all recognised experts in the field.

Homelessness in Australia: An Introduction is published by New South Press in association with the Victorian Council to Homeless Persons, one of Australia's leading peak homelessness advocacy bodies.

Homelessness in Australia: An Introduction contains 14 chapters.

Part 1 includes: an essay on homelessness policy from the start of the nineteenth century to recent times; a chapter measuring mobility in and out of the homeless population and a piece on the causes of homelessness.

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