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Home & Away

**Child and Youth
Homelessness Report**

February 2016

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Executive summary

According to the 2011 Census, some 44,000 children and young people in Australia are homeless. The reality is worse; many others are 'hidden homeless' who are not counted in the official statistics.

There is a growing body of evidence being developed about the true picture of child and youth homelessness. Our own primary research, the Mission Australia Youth Survey, gives a special insight into the housing experiences of young people across Australia and from different socio-economic backgrounds, which is rare in the youth homelessness literature.

What does child and youth homelessness look like?

The Youth Survey uncovered a substantial number of young people experiencing housing instability, frequently as a result of family breakdown or conflict, which may impact negatively on their schooling, support networks, community connections and familial bonds.

It also revealed that nearly one in seven young Australians responding to the survey had spent time away from home because they couldn't return, a proxy indicator for couch surfing. The vast majority of these young people had done so on more than one occasion and some had typically stayed away for periods longer than six months.

The Youth Survey's findings point to the existence of a critical group of young couch surfers with poor family relationships, experiencing family conflict, not feeling confident about the future, unsure of their ability to cope with stress, concerned about

depression and suicide, who leave home repeatedly, often for extended periods, because they feel they can't stay with their families at home.

The Youth Survey's finding of the prevalence of family conflict and couch surfing is also reflected in other recent Australian research. Family conflict affects 1.9 million Australian children in their early to middle years. Over 85% of homeless young people had spent time couch surfing before they were 18. Even amongst non-homeless young people, 38% had couch surfed at some point.

These young people are on a pathway to entrenched homelessness unless action is taken.

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Executive summary (cont)

New insights from the Youth Survey 2015

For the last 14 years, Mission Australia has conducted an annual survey of young people aged 15 to 19 across Australia. The Youth Survey 2015 had 18,994 respondents.

The survey collects socio-demographic information and asks young Australians about their current circumstances, values, concerns and aspirations. The special focus topic for 2015 was respondents' views about aspects of their home life and housing. Key findings were as follows:

- Over one third of respondents reported having moved house in the last three years, with almost one in five having moved more than once. Family breakdown or conflict was identified as one of the major reasons for moving.
- A minority of young people, around one in ten, said they did not feel safe in their neighbourhood, with a similar proportion not feeling comfortable inviting friends over to spend time in their home. These figures were much higher among young people who reported frequent moves.
- Nearly one in seven young people have spent time away from home in the last three years because they felt that they couldn't go back, a proxy indicator for couch surfing.
- The vast majority of these young people (84%) reported they had done so on more than one occasion, and over a quarter had stayed away more than 10 times in the past three years.
- The proportion of those staying away from home because of inability to return increased with age, rising to over a quarter of 19 year olds.
- Among those who reported spending time away from home, a small but important minority (8%) indicated typically staying away for longer than six months, placing them at an increased risk of normalising their experiences away from home and falling into homelessness.



What are the effects of homelessness?

Homelessness can be an isolating, destabilising and often traumatic experience.

But for children and young people, whose development is not yet complete, homelessness can be particularly devastating and its effects long-lasting.

Homeless young people have much worse health and mental health than others their age. For example, 61% of homeless young women in one study experienced very high or high levels of psychological distress, compared with 19% of young women in the general population. They have much higher incidence of reported self-injury and attempted suicide.

With education disrupted and no stable home address, homeless young people have a greater likelihood of leaving school early and significantly higher unemployment rates than their peers.

The personal and community costs of our youth homelessness rates are unacceptably high in an advanced society like Australia.



Mission Australia calls for youth homelessness to be halved by 2020. This is an important step on the path to halving total homelessness by 2025. While this is an ambitious target, we believe it is feasible.

Executive summary (cont)

To stem the tide of young people falling into patterns of entrenched homelessness, those at risk need to be identified early, as soon as they begin experiencing family conflict or other stressors, are starting to couch surf or beginning to disengage from school. Following this, the right supports need to be quickly put in place.

How can at-risk children and young people be prevented from falling into homelessness?

All young people experience life stressors. Some arise as a normal part of adolescence, such as shifting reliance from family to friends, or developing their own identity. Other stressors are particular to the young person or their family, such as addictions, poverty or domestic and family violence. Some are particularly vulnerable, such as those leaving out-of-home care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Some families have resilience factors - such as parental self-efficacy or good support networks - which enable them to adapt well to these challenges. Others need external assistance from services which specialise in homelessness interventions, family reconciliation, substance abuse, mental health and other risks.

With early identification and the design and delivery of appropriate services, young people at risk can be assisted to remain with their family (if safe), at school and within existing social networks. It can prevent them adopting a transient lifestyle, becoming involved in the homeless sub-culture, identifying as homeless and making the transition to chronic homelessness.

The good news is that early identification and quick intervention works to 'turn off the tap' of youth homelessness. We see this in the many youth-focused specialist homelessness services around the country and in innovative models such as the schools-based collective impact youth homelessness Projects at Geelong, Ryde and Sydney's Northern Beaches.

Unfortunately, these services are swamped by growing demand for their help. Further, many are threatened by closure, as the key national funding agreement is due to cease next year. Responsibility for homelessness is under review through the Federation reform process.

Where do at-risk children and young people end up?

For most children and young people at risk of homelessness, returning to or staying at home with their family is in their best interests, supported by specialist help if needed.

For others, this is not safe or desirable, and other options must be made available.

Children and young people who cannot live independently, due to their age or support needs, may enter the out-of-home care system or will need another form of supportive accommodation. An increasingly common model is foyer-like approaches, which assist young people to engage in education and employment and progress to more independent living.

Some homeless or at-risk young people aged over 18 can live independently, with help to find a home, training on how to maintain their tenancy and any other needed supports they require. Options for them include social housing or private rental housing.

However, a lack of supportive housing (such as foyer-like models), social housing and affordable private rental means that many children and young people stay longer than necessary in crisis or transitional accommodation, which increases the rate of homeless people turned away from those services. This means that, when leaving specialist homelessness services, many young people return to couch surfing, or move into rough sleeping or more entrenched homelessness.

What needs to be done?

Mission Australia calls for youth homelessness to be halved by 2020. This is an important step on the path to halving total homelessness by 2025. While this is an ambitious target, we believe it is feasible. We know what works, but it needs funding, leadership, continuous commitment and shared effort. The following diagram sets out our approach which is further explained throughout the document.

How to halve child & youth homelessness by 2020

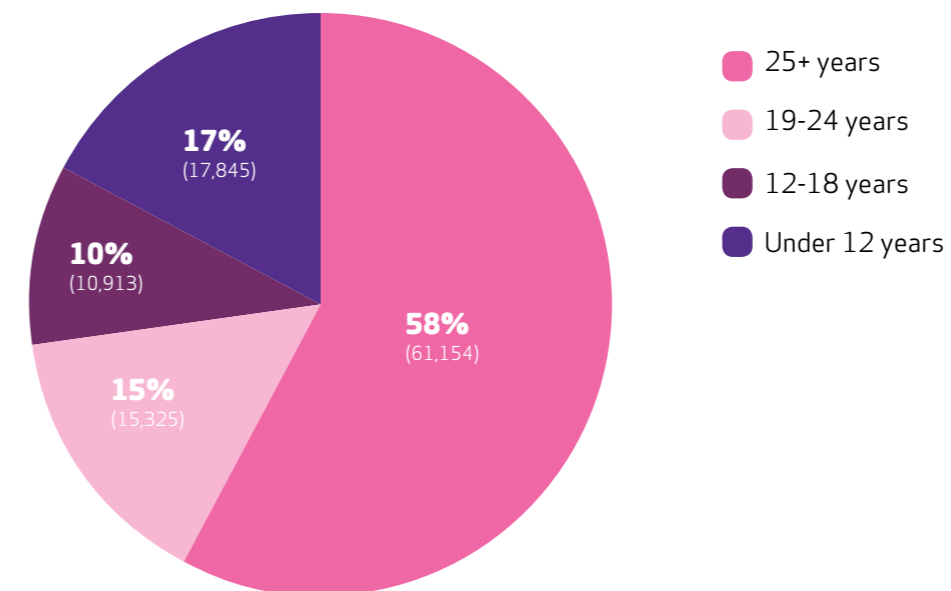
Identify problems early	Quickly intervene with services	Suitable housing with support as needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify children and young people at risk of homelessness early Those leaving out-of-home care have unacceptably high risks of homelessness 	<p>Specialist homelessness services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth specialists in SHS can help before children and young people become homeless by linking into other supports and by finding housing <p>Family reconciliation services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and young people can often be reconnected with their family (where safe) with expert help <p>Other specialist services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help may be needed from specialist services such (mental health, DFV and drug) 	<p>Supportive housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under 18 year olds who can't live with their family may be placed in out-of-home care Some over 16 are better suited to foyer-like models <p>Social housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For young people who can live independently, social housing should be an option <p>Affordable private rental housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people, living independently, find it very hard to find affordable and suitable accommodation
What's needed?	What's needed?	What's needed?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roll out to high-risk communities the schools-based youth homelessness identification and intervention model, as pioneered in The Geelong Project Youth outreach programs to all high-risk communities 'Zero tolerance' approach to young people leaving the out-of-home care system becoming homeless 	<p>Specialist homelessness services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide crisis accommodation for children and young people escaping DFV A national multi-year housing and homelessness agreement Commitment to increased funding for housing and homelessness, for 5 years <p>Family reconciliation services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extend the Reconnect program for five years <p>Other specialist services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure access to specialist services, especially youth-specific services in regional, rural and remote areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate foyer-like supportive models, through new facilities and 'top ups' of current youth SHS Address severe overcrowding as a key priority A target of 200,000 net new social homes by 2025 A net year-on-year increase in social and affordable housing in each state and territory Adequate levels of welfare payments, increasing the Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance Reform tax settings National mechanisms to facilitate institutional investment Inclusionary zoning to require supportive, social and affordable housing in key development sites

Child and youth homelessness: the evidence

About 44,000 children and young people in Australia are homeless.¹ The 2011 Census reported that one quarter of Australia's homeless population were aged between 12

and 24 with a further 17% (17,845) being children under 12 years old. Children and young people therefore account for over 40% of all homeless Australians.²

Figure 1: Total homeless population in Australia³

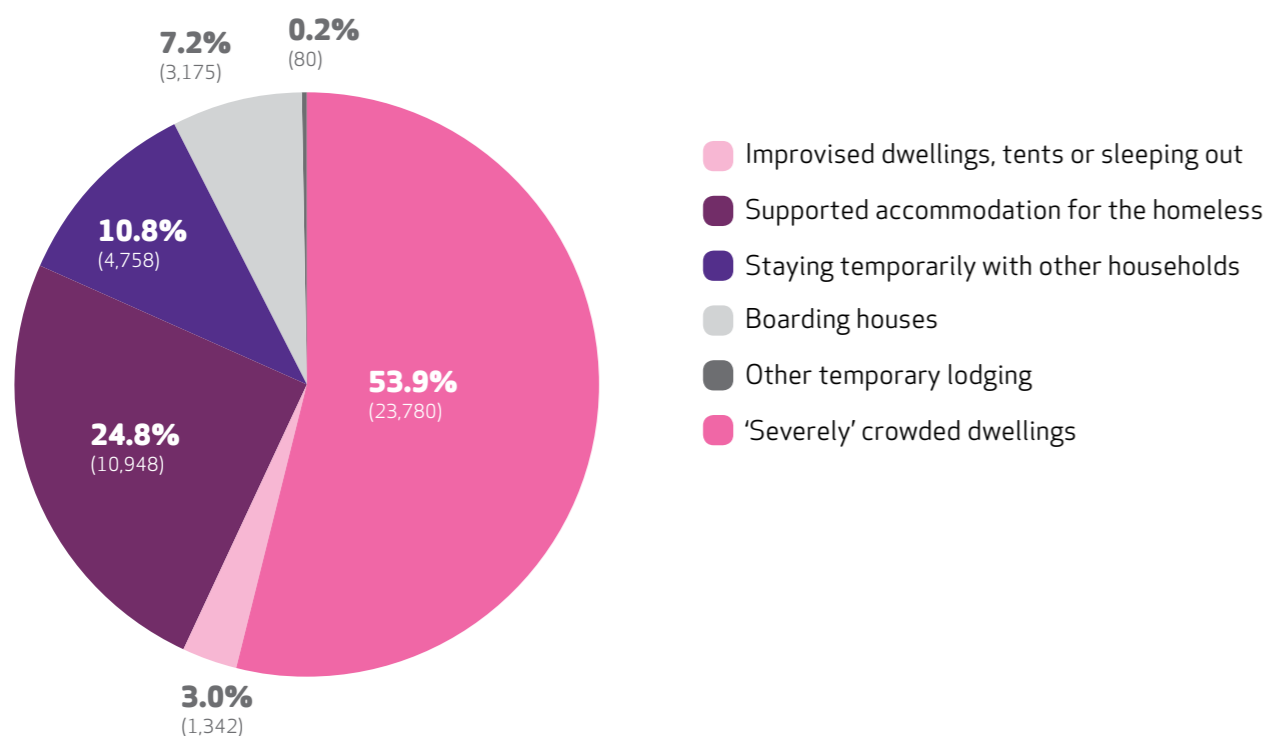


Young people are over represented in the homeless population. For example, the rate of homelessness for young people aged 19-24 years is 88 per 10,000, compared to 49 per 10,000 for the general population.⁴ It is generally accepted that these figures underestimate the extent of youth homelessness, primarily because young people who are couch surfing are often recorded as having a usual address, although in fact they may be unable to return there. Also, analysis of the Journeys Home data notes that young people are more likely than older people to cycle in and out of homelessness.⁵

The 2011 Census shows that there are many different types of homelessness. Figure 2 provides a point of time snapshot of child and youth homelessness in Australia on Census night in 2011, however it is important to note that, as mentioned above, some young people may cycle in and out of homelessness or transition through different types of homelessness over any given time period.⁶

Child and youth homelessness: the evidence (cont)

Figure 2: Children and young people aged 24 and under in different forms of homelessness⁷



Another approach to estimating the prevalence of child and youth homelessness is provided by looking at the people who seek assistance from specialist homelessness services (SHS). Over 112,000 people aged under 25 years sought assistance in 2014-15 from this type of service.⁸ Of these, about 42,000 were children under the age of 10. Again, this data also underestimates youth homelessness; many couch surfers and those with transient living arrangements do not use these services.⁹

Most children under 15 years old who access SHS do so as part of a family, usually with their mother. A third of those accessing SHS are sole parents with one or more accompanying children.¹⁰ Over half of all women with children seeking assistance from SHS do so in order to escape domestic and family violence (DFV).¹¹

But among the 15-24 age group, a higher proportion of young people present to SHS unaccompanied. Almost three quarters of those young people presenting to such a service were alone, being 41,780 people. Of those, most (79%) were 18-24 year olds, and most were female (63%).¹²

Young people's experiences of homelessness in Australia, including isolation, fear and trauma, have many similarities to those of other groups, but there are different patterns and causes of child and youth homelessness, in part due to its hidden nature, and different ways of preventing and responding to it. To add to the evidence base, Mission Australia presents here our primary research findings, gained from young people themselves, as well as our understanding of the causes, patterns, system responses and policy context of child and youth homelessness, deepened by the experiences of our clients and workers.

Definitional points

Child and youth homelessness applies to those under 25 years of age who experience or are at risk of homelessness. For those under 12, this mainly (but not exclusively) takes the form of 'family homelessness' where the child is accompanied by a parent or carer, and which is addressed by different responses.

This report covers unaccompanied children and young people, but focuses on the experiences of those aged between 12 to 24, because this represents the majority of lone presenters and is when early intervention can prevent entrenched homelessness. The Youth Survey involved young people aged between 15-19.

All statistics in this report are from Australia, unless otherwise stated.



Insights from the Youth Survey

For the last 14 years, Mission Australia has conducted an annual survey of young people aged 15 to 19 across Australia. The Youth Survey 2015 had 18,994 respondents.

The survey collects socio-demographic information and asks young Australians about their current circumstances, values, concerns and aspirations. Each year a special focus topic is also included. In 2015, we asked respondents about various aspects of their home life and housing, including frequency of moving residence, perceived safety within their neighbourhood, level of comfort in inviting friends over and any time spent away from home due to feeling unable



to return. The results to these questions give a special insight into the housing experiences of young people across Australia and from different socio-economic backgrounds, which is rare in the youth homelessness literature.

Importantly, as detailed below, the Youth Survey uncovered a substantial number of young people experiencing housing instability (frequently as a result of family breakdown or conflict) which may impact negatively on their support networks, education and familial bonds. It also revealed that nearly one in seven young Australians responding to the survey had spent time away from home due to feeling that they couldn't return, a proxy indicator for couch surfing. The vast majority of these young people had done so on more than one occasion and some had typically stayed away for periods longer than six months.

The prevalence of couch surfing behaviour among the general population of Australian young people responding to the survey has important implications on how we understand and act to address the issue of youth homelessness. As discussed further below, it highlights the importance of an early identification of at risk young people and quick intervention to provide the support necessary to prevent them continuing down a pathway into homelessness.

Housing stability

Housing stability arises from parents or carers who provide children and young people with a place to live. Moving house can have consequences that are considerably more far-reaching than the move itself; it can change schooling and a wide range of supportive networks and community connections, such as friendship circles, sport clubs and music groups. Having a stable place to live with support from family, friends and neighbours is important in young people's development. Children who move house and/or school frequently have been found to have poorer educational outcomes. Similarly, high housing mobility has been connected to leaving school early.¹³ Frequent moving may weaken familial bonds, which in turn may be harmful to young people. This is particularly important when housing instability is accompanied by family or household instability.¹⁴

Over a third of the young respondents to Mission Australia's 2015 Youth Survey (35.5%) reported having moved house in the last three years, with almost one in five (17.8%) having moved more than once. When asked the reason for their last move, common reasons from young people included:

- Family breakdown or conflict;
- Moving from renting to owning;
- Issues with the landlord, including being forced to move; and
- Work reasons, including parents' work.

Around one fifth (19.4%) of those who cited 'family breakdown or conflict' as a reason for moving said they had moved four or more times during the past three years, compared to 10.0% of respondents who did not cite this as a reason.

These findings paint a picture of a group of young people who move house frequently, which is often associated with family

breakdown or conflict. This could include, for example, a mother and her children moving to a new dwelling after a divorce, or as a result of domestic and family violence. In such situations, not only would these young people be trying to cope with the stress of the family conflict, they would also be dealing with the stress of changing location, possibly entailing a new school and separation from friends, making them especially vulnerable. This emphasises the importance of identifying as soon as possible a young person in such a situation and acting quickly to support them.

Home life

In adolescence, the influence of peers (as opposed to adults) increases significantly, as young people look to assert their independence from both their immediate family and other adults in their schools and communities.¹⁵ The home can be an important platform to support young people's social development, especially if they feel comfortable inviting peers to visit. This is particularly important where there may not be other places they can spend time with their friends, for example if the neighbourhood is unsafe, transport is poor or young people are discouraged from using public spaces.

The Youth Survey results further reveal an inverse relationship between the number of times a young person has moved in the past three years and their feelings of neighbourhood safety and comfort inviting friends over. As the number of moves increases, there is a decrease in the proportion of young people feeling safe and comfortable. As can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, almost one third (32.6%) of young people who had moved 5 or more times in the past three years indicated that they do not feel safe in their neighbourhood, while over a quarter (27.7%) said they do not feel comfortable inviting friends over to spend time in their home.

The Youth Survey asked young people if they were comfortable inviting their friends over, so as to better understand their thoughts on their home environment, their neighbourhood and also as a measure of their participation in social life.

Importantly, we found that most young respondents felt safe in their neighbourhood (90.8%) and were comfortable inviting friends over to spend time in their home (89.1%).¹⁶ The findings show that young people are generally able to access supports in their local community. However, they also reveal that around one in ten young people do not feel safe or comfortable in their local or home environments.

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Insights from the Youth Survey (cont)

Figure 3: Young people who do not feel safe in their neighbourhood, by number of moves in the last three years

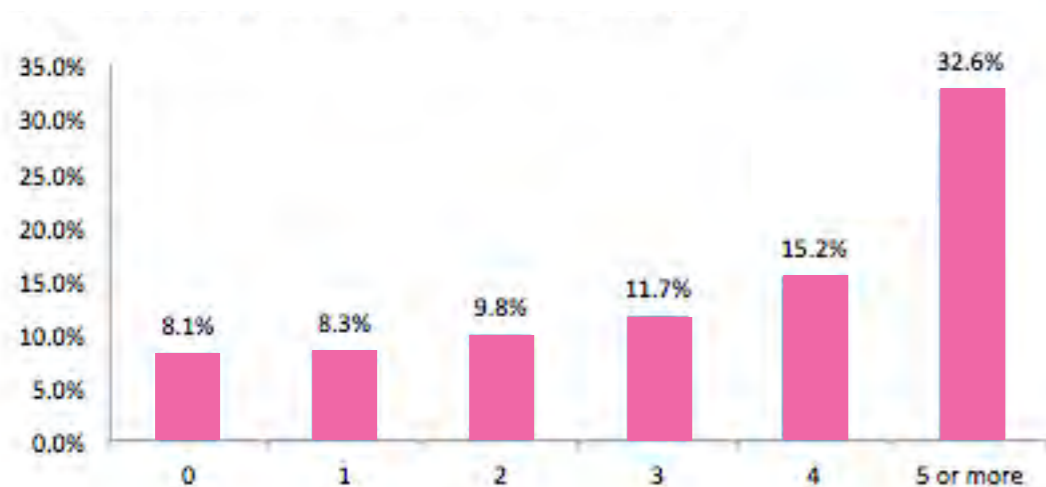
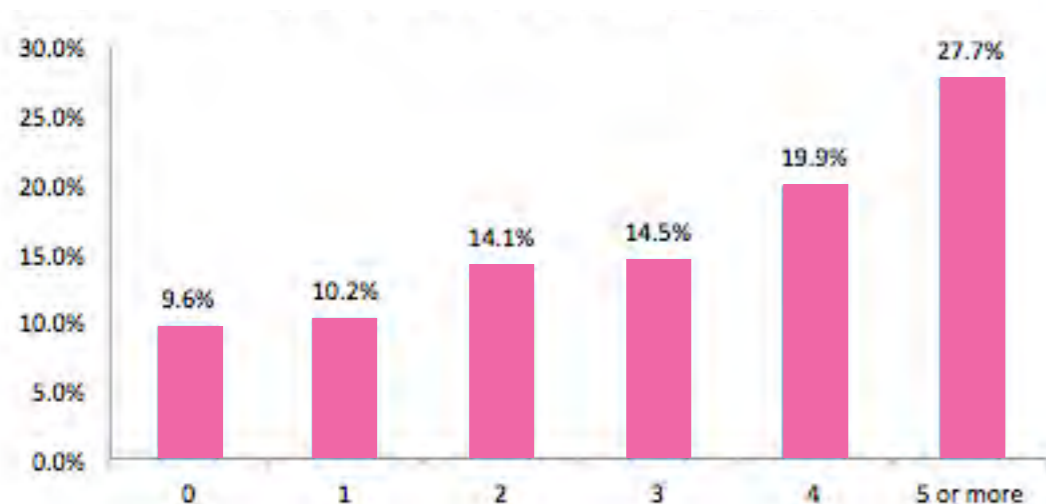


Figure 4: Young people not comfortable inviting friends over to spend time in their home, by number of moves in the last three years¹⁷

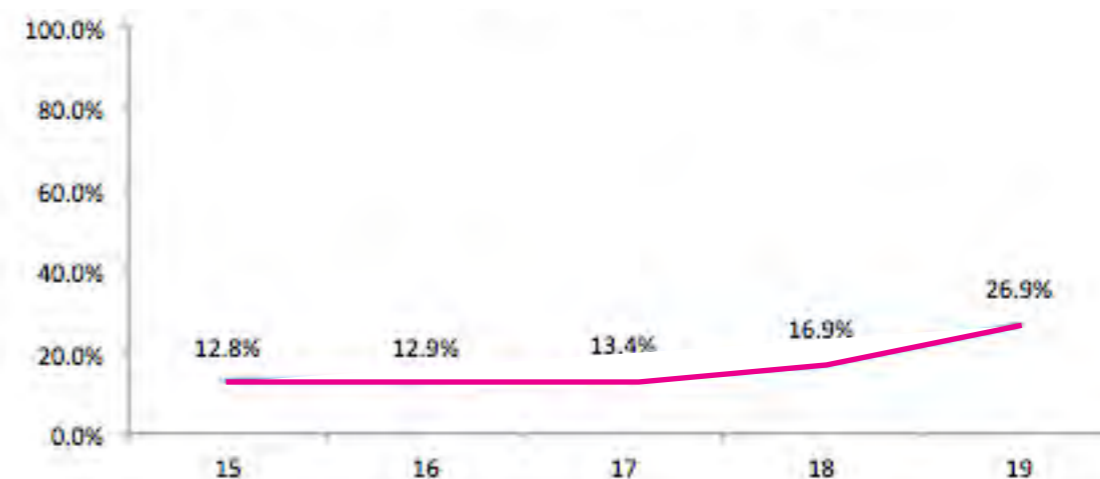


Significantly, the proportion of those who said they were **not** comfortable inviting friends over to spend time in their home was higher among those who cited 'family breakdown or conflict' as the reason for their last move (21.7%), compared to 11.2% of respondents who did not cite that reason.

Time away from home

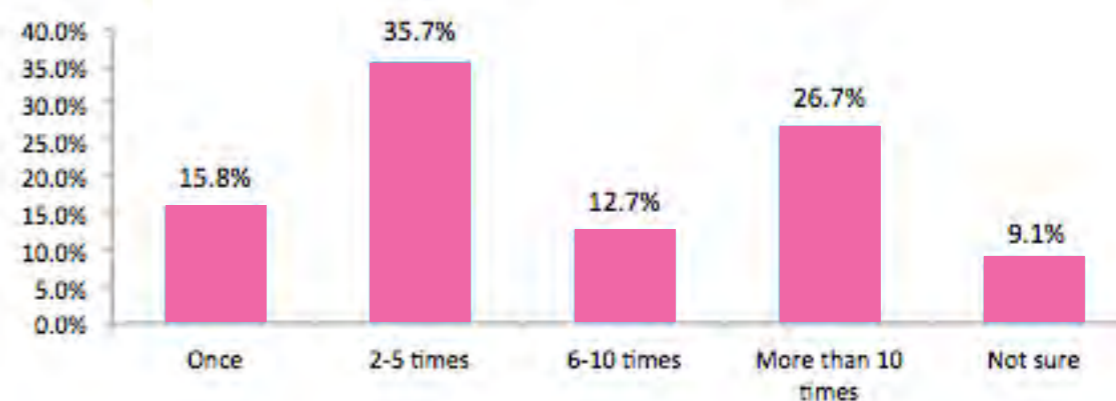
The results of Mission Australia's Youth Survey show that nearly one in seven young people (13.5%) have spent time away from home in the last three years because they felt that they couldn't go back.¹⁸ The likelihood of this occurring increased with age, rising to over a quarter of 19 year olds (26.9%).¹⁹ This means that interventions targeting those aged 15 years or younger may be an effective means of preventing an increase in the proportion of those who feel unable to return home as they grow older.

Figure 5: Young people who spent time away from home, by age²⁰



Importantly, this was generally not a one off experience for these young people, with 84.2% of those spending time away from home because they felt they couldn't return reporting having done so on more than one occasion (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Young people who spent time away from home, by the number of times they spent away from home in the last three years²¹



Insights from the Youth Survey (cont)

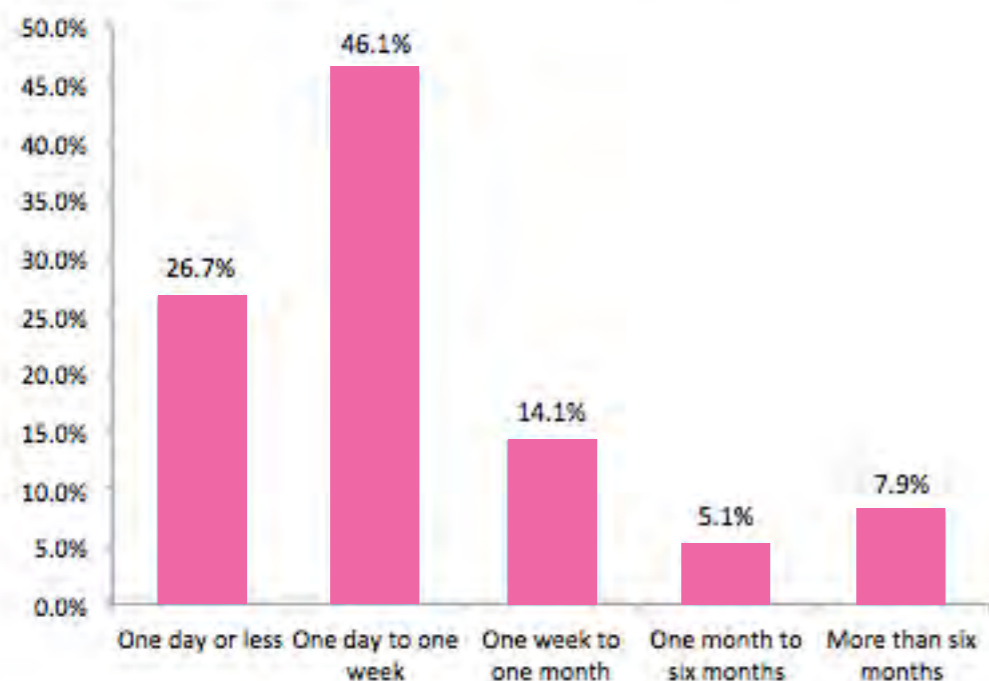
Over a quarter (26.7%) of those who had spent time away from home had stayed away more than 10 times in the past three years. Interestingly, no clear age related differences were found among respondents who had spent time away from home in terms of the frequency of this occurring, with similar proportions of 15 year olds to 19 year olds having spent frequent periods away from home (27.6% of 15 year olds compared to 34.1% of 19 year olds).

Moreover, 7.9% of those who had spent time away from home reported typically staying away for longer

than six months, as revealed in Figure 7. Notable differences were found across age groups in this instance, with only 6.7% of 15 year olds remaining away from home for longer than six months, compared to 21.0% of 19 year olds who reported spending this period away from home.

These young people spending frequent and lengthy periods of time away from home because they felt unable to return may be at an increased risk of normalising their experiences away from home and falling into more entrenched homelessness.

Figure 7: Young people who spent time away from home, by typical time spent away²²



Why do young people spend time away from home?

The results show that over half (52.0%) of the young people who spent time away from home reported that they had either a 'poor' or 'fair' relationship with their family, compared to 13.8% for those that had never spent time away. Conversely, only

24.1% of those who had spent time away reported an 'excellent' or a 'very good' ability to get along with their family, compared to 65.1% who had never spent time away.

Among those who had spent time away from home more than ten times during the past three years, and who reported typically spending more than six months away, over six in ten reported either a 'poor' or 'fair' family relationship.

Table 1: Family's ability to get along²³

	Young people who spent time away from home %	Young people who did not spend time away from home %
Excellent	9.4	30.5
Very good	14.7	34.6
Good	23.9	21.1
Fair	25.8	10.0
Poor	26.2	3.8



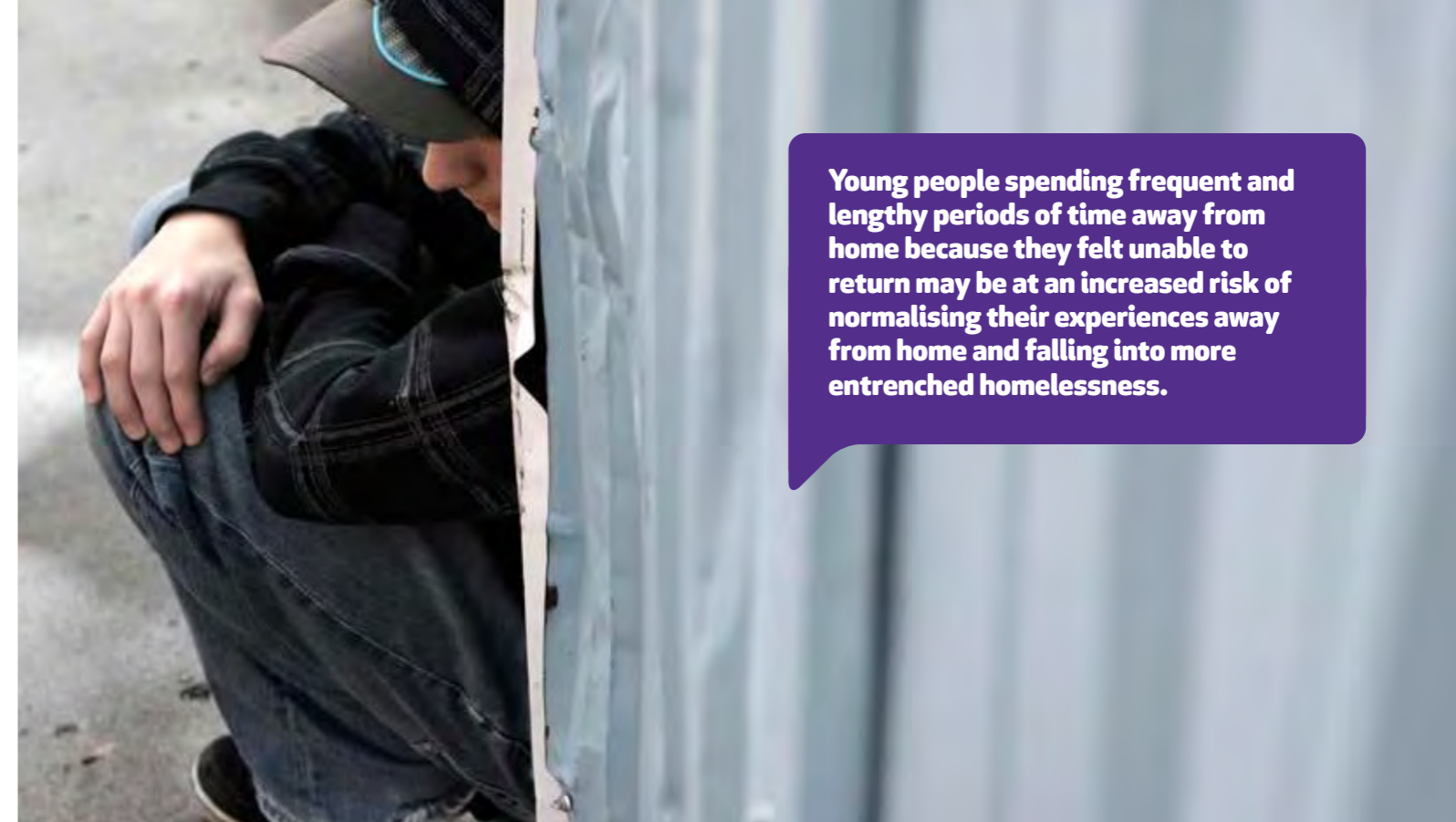
Insights from the Youth Survey (cont)

Young people who reported spending time away from home were also more likely to report having high concern levels about multiple issues. They were extremely or very concerned about several, many or all topics listed in the survey: alcohol, body image, bullying/emotional abuse, coping with stress, depression, discrimination, drugs, family conflict, gambling, personal safety, school or study problems and suicide. Importantly, compared to young people who had not spent time away from home, many more of them reported high levels of concern about:

- Family conflict (48.9% 'extremely' or 'very' concerned compared to 12.8%);
- Depression (46.0% 'extremely' or 'very' concerned compared to 15.3%);
- Coping with stress (58.6% 'extremely' or 'very' concerned compared to 35.2%); and
- Suicide (28.8% 'extremely' or 'very' concerned compared to 8.1%).

Table 2: Issues of concern to young people²⁴

Young people who spent time away from home	Extremely concerned %	Very concerned %	Somewhat concerned %	Slightly concerned %	Not at all concerned %
Coping with stress	31.7	26.9	19.4	10.0	12.0
Family conflict	25.9	23.0	21.0	13.7	16.4
School or study problems	24.0	23.1	23.0	14.3	15.5
Depression	25.2	20.8	18.7	13.8	21.5
Body image	20.7	23.3	22.2	16.3	17.6
Suicide	16.4	12.4	13.5	14.3	43.4
Bullying/emotional abuse	13.6	15.1	20.4	20.1	30.9
Personal safety	9.5	10.8	19.5	22.3	37.8
Discrimination	9.8	10.0	17.0	17.3	45.9
Drugs	8.7	7.0	11.3	12.3	60.8
Alcohol	5.1	5.2	13.9	15.0	60.8
Gambling	3.9	2.4	5.2	8.2	80.3
Young people who did not spend time away from home	Extremely concerned %	Very concerned %	Somewhat concerned %	Slightly concerned %	Not at all concerned %
Coping with stress	13.2	22.0	26.0	19.5	19.3
School or study problems	11.7	19.5	26.7	22.4	19.7
Body image	8.5	15.1	25.1	24.6	26.7
Depression	5.9	9.4	14.8	18.8	51.0
Family conflict	4.1	8.7	15.3	21.6	50.3
Bullying/emotional abuse	3.8	6.8	14.0	20.8	54.7
Personal safety	3.7	5.6	13.9	21.1	55.8
Discrimination	3.6	5.4	10.8	16.6	63.6
Suicide	4.2	3.9	6.4	9.3	76.3
Drugs	2.9	3.2	6.3	9.5	78.1
Alcohol	1.6	2.2	8.9	13.8	73.4
Gambling	1.4	1.2	3.5	5.4	88.5



Young people spending frequent and lengthy periods of time away from home because they felt unable to return may be at an increased risk of normalising their experiences away from home and falling into more entrenched homelessness.

Perhaps reflecting their level of concerns, when asked how positive they felt about the future, young people who had spent time away from home again displayed a more pessimistic outlook than those who had not spent time away, as indicated in Table 3. Over one in five of those who had spent time away from home reported feeling either

'negative' or 'very negative' about the future (20.8%), compared to fewer than one in twelve of those who had not spent time away (8.0%). Conversely, only around four in ten indicated feeling 'positive' or 'very positive' about the future (44.6%), compared to two thirds of those who had not spent time away (65.4%).

Table 3: Feelings about the future²⁵

	Young people who spent time away from home %	Young people who did not spend time away from home %
Very positive	10.4	15.7
Positive	34.2	49.7
Neither positive nor negative	34.6	26.7
Negative	13.9	6.4
Very negative	6.9	1.6

Negative feelings about the future were particularly prominent among those who reported typically spending more than six months away from home, with over one third of these young people (34.6%) stating they felt either 'negative' or 'very negative' about the future.

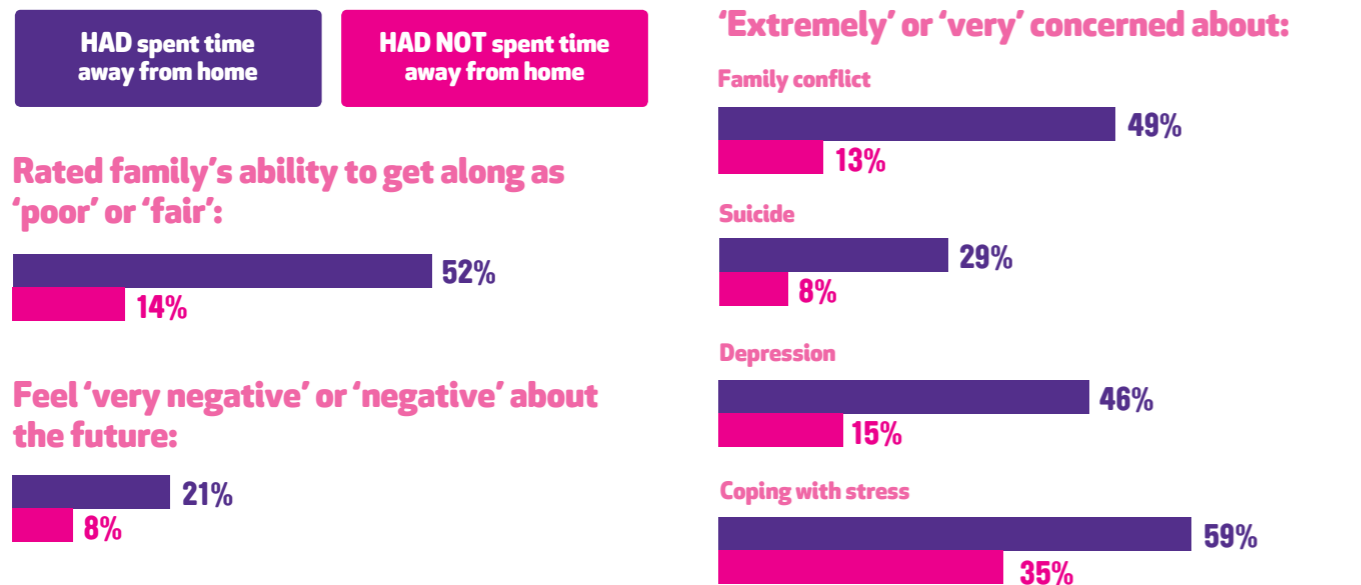
These findings suggest the existence of a critical group of young people with poor family relationships, who are experiencing family conflict, are not feeling confident

about the future or their ability to cope with stress, are concerned about a number of issues including depression and suicide and who leave home repeatedly, often for extended periods to couch surf with friends, because they feel they can't stay with their families at home. These young people are clearly on a pathway into homelessness unless early detection and targeted intervention occur.

Youth Survey 2015 insights



Differences between young people



Moving house in the last 3 years among 15-19 year olds:



1 in 10 young people do not:

-  feel safe in their neighbourhood 
-  feel comfortable inviting friends over 

Patterns of child and youth homelessness

Mission Australia's 2015 Youth Survey findings deepen our understanding of the experiences of young people, and highlight some of the patterns that are typically associated with the risks of youth homelessness. This research, which confirms other recent Australian studies, raises awareness of the contributing issues and furthers the development of evidence-based policy and best practice in service delivery.

Stressors on young people and their families

The Youth Survey asked young people to rank how concerned they had been about a number of issues in the past year. Nationally, the issues of concern were as follows:

- Around four in ten respondents indicated that they were either 'extremely concerned' or 'very concerned' about **coping with stress**.
- One third indicated they were either 'extremely concerned' or 'very concerned' about **school or study problems**.
- Around one quarter were highly concerned about **body image**.
- Around one in five respondents were either 'extremely concerned' or 'very concerned' about **depression and family conflict**.

While stresses and concerns like these are commonplace, what is important is for the child or young person to feel supported as they learn to handle these issues. Without good support, children and young people can feel isolated and unable to cope; if this is not addressed, it can lead to disengagement from family and school and the risk of homelessness.

Family conflict

Family conflict affects 1.9 million children in their early to middle years.²⁶ As noted above, some young people responding to the Youth Survey do not report a positive experience of family relationships, rating their family's ability to get along as either 'fair' (12.5%) or 'poor' (7.0%). Poor family relationships are strongly associated with youth

homelessness. Many studies note that 'the overriding theme of difficult family relationships and home lives – punctuated by personal issues of trauma – is widely recognised as one important aspect of the story of youth homelessness.'²⁷ In the Youth Survey, young people commonly reported divorce, conflict and separation of parents, and stressful relationships at home as a reason for spending time away from home due to feeling they couldn't return (a proxy indicator for couch surfing).

Couch surfing

Couch surfing refers to homeless children and young people who stay away from their families, living temporarily with other households, because they feel unable to return home. They might be sleeping on friends' sofas, spare rooms or garages; they may be away for days, weeks or months; and this may happen in intermittent periods or more consistently.

The Youth Survey's finding that couch surfing is common is also reflected in other recent Australian research.²⁸ Among young people aged 15-24 presenting alone to SHS, 29% were couch surfing or staying in housing with no tenure when they first sought assistance.²⁹ The Cost of Youth Homelessness study³⁰ found that 86% of young people who had become homeless had spent time couch surfing prior to the age of 18 (often across multiple periods) because they had nowhere else to go. It found that, even amongst the non-homeless young people in the study, 38% had couch surfed at some point.

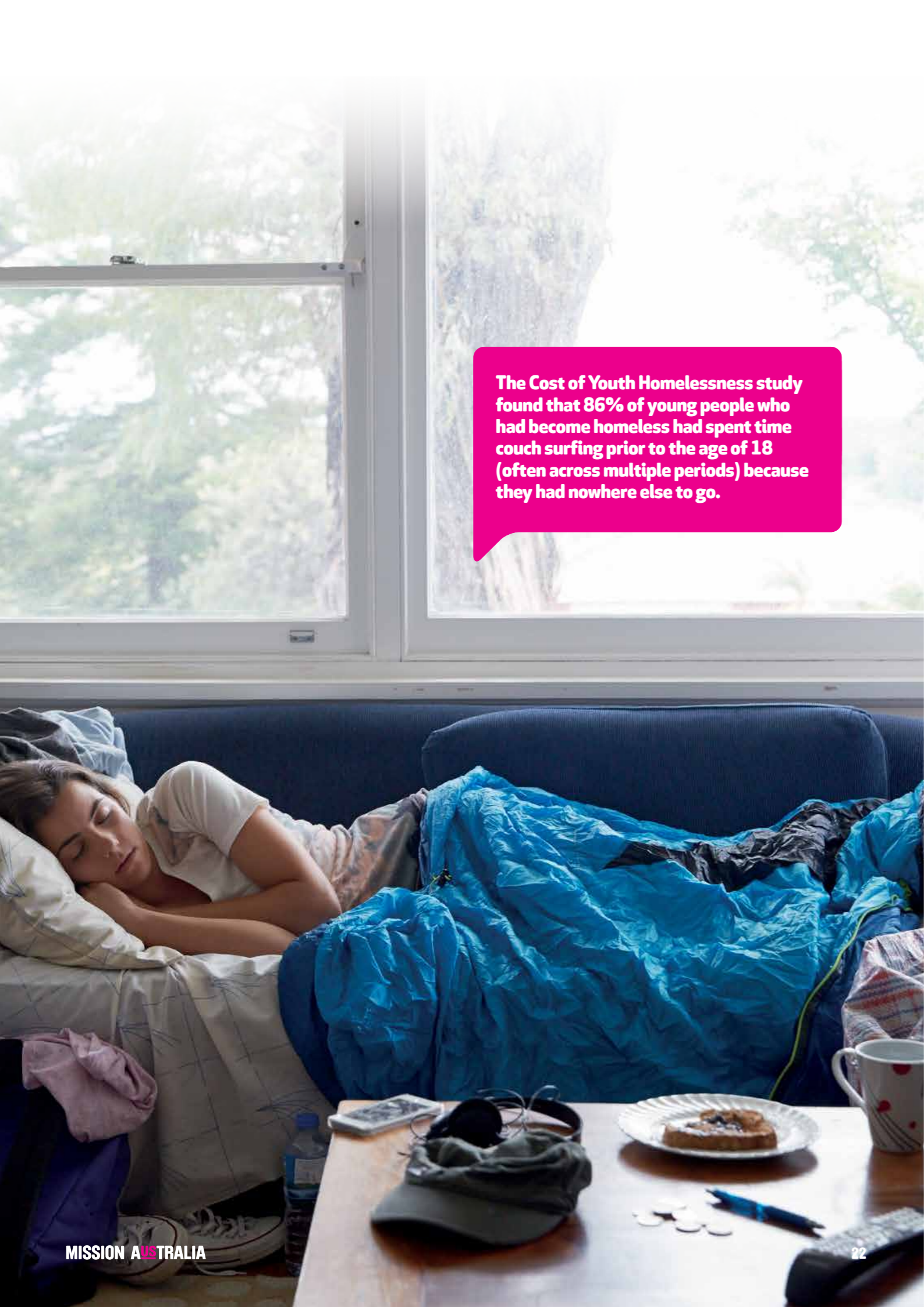
Young people in severely crowded conditions

The 2011 Census tells us that the largest proportion of homeless children and young people were those living in severely crowded dwellings (54%).³¹ Close to half (48%) of all people living in those conditions were Indigenous, and another third (33%) were born in a country outside Australia.³² There are 23,780 children and young people living in poor housing conditions including severely crowded homes, which can cause health, safety and child protection risks.

Domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is particularly important in any discussion of child and youth homelessness. DFV and relationship/family breakdown are two of the three main reasons that young people aged 15-24 access SHS.³³

Across Australia, many children and young people are affected by DFV. One in 12 people have experienced physical abuse by a family member as a child; one in every 28 people had also experienced



The Cost of Youth Homelessness study found that 86% of young people who had become homeless had spent time couch surfing prior to the age of 18 (often across multiple periods) because they had nowhere else to go.

sexual abuse by a family member as a child.³⁴ Additionally, children's 'witnessing' or exposure to domestic violence has been increasingly recognised as a form of child abuse, both in Australia and internationally. Although it is difficult to accurately assess the scope of the problem, research has demonstrated that a substantial amount of domestic violence is witnessed by children.³⁵

In the Cost of Youth Homelessness study, more than half (56%) of the homeless youth surveyed had to leave home on at least one occasion because of violence between parents or guardians. Of those who ran away from home for that reason, the median age of their first experience leaving home was only 10. Additionally, over a third (39%) of the homeless young people reported police coming to their home because of violence between parents on one or more occasions, with 14% experiencing police coming to their home more than 10 times.³⁶

A more complicated picture is presented by the longitudinal Journeys Home study.³⁷ The study found that 'family background and events that occurred to respondents **during their childhood** (including family violence) do not appear to be significantly associated with more persistent homelessness over the survey period (except experience of custody). But respondents' current circumstances on the other hand appear to matter a lot. The average prevalence of homelessness is much higher for those **recently** experiencing family breakdown. Factors such as family violence make homelessness more likely at a particular point in time.

This highlights that a history of family violence need not condemn a child or young person to homelessness. In some cases, families and support agencies can work together to stop the violence at home, keep everyone safe and prevent the child or young person leaving home. Governments are also increasingly recognising the need for men's behaviour change programs, where perpetrators are taught to change their behaviour and other family members are supported during the process, with the aim of keeping the family together, if safe to do so. These programs will need to be monitored and evaluated to understand their effectiveness over time.

Indigenous youth homelessness

Within any discussion of youth homelessness in Australia, attention needs to be paid to the high incidence of youth homelessness within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) population. Homelessness in the general Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is statistically a larger problem than in the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and incorporates both spiritual and physical dimensions.³⁸

Of those accessing specialist homelessness services in 2014-15, 23% identified as being of either Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin, equating to 53,301 clients.³⁹

The drivers of homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and children are generally the same as for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait people, but the prevalence of homelessness is higher due to socioeconomic disadvantage, a severe shortage of appropriate housing in remote locations and history of dispossession.

However, overcrowding is a particular issue in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as noted above, and is often overlooked both statistically and in terms of support services. Cultural obligations such as kin responsibilities and mobility for funerals and other cultural events influence overcrowding. Tackling this depends on adequate and culturally-appropriate housing, including in rural towns and remote communities, and improving the physical living conditions of children and young people growing up in overcrowded housing, while ensuring that they can receive the benefit of strong support from family and extended family.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are also over-represented in out-of-home care and juvenile justice, adding to their risks of homelessness once leaving those systems. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be genuine partners in solving the complex problems around homelessness including poverty, disadvantage and the lack of appropriate housing.⁴⁰

Investment should be directed as a priority to address overcrowding, particularly in remote communities. Case management is required to address underlying and intersecting issues including family disconnection, contact with the justice system, exits from out-of-home care, mental health issues and domestic and family violence which are all heightened risks for ATSI children and young people who face multiple disadvantages.

Mission Australia calls on all governments, individuals and business to work in partnership with community organisations and service providers to:



- Address severe overcrowding as a key priority through housing, indigenous and settlement policies;
- Improve the physical living conditions of children and young people growing up in overcrowded housing;
- Provide adequate crisis accommodation and support for children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence.

Note: A total of 1,147 respondents to Mission Australia's Youth Survey 2015 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. An in-depth report including analysis of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander responses to the questions on housing, time spent away from home etc. compared to responses of non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young people is planned for release later in 2016.



Impacts of homelessness on children and young people

A supportive home environment is a particularly important aspect of a child's or young person's life

This environment supports their development, as:

- Safe housing is essential for good health. Unsafe conditions including severe overcrowding can lead to infectious illness (such as respiratory illnesses) which can reduce time and/or performance at school and have long term consequences on health outcomes.⁴¹
- Stable housing tenure has been found to impact positively on the mental health of parents and on family stability.⁴²
- Continuity is important to support educational and social development, including through a consistent school and a stable social network. Evidence shows that higher rates of residential mobility (except where a new school is chosen as a positive) are associated with lower educational outcomes.⁴³
- Stable housing is also a platform for other supports around the family, such as social services and having someone you can turn to in a crisis. Evidence shows that the longer a person lives in a neighbourhood or attends a school, the more support networks they have.⁴⁴

The personal benefits which are gained from stable housing are complemented by benefits gained by society as a whole. A workforce that is stably and affordably housed is a pool of people able to save for retirement and invest in the future, including education for their children. Conversely, where a child or young person is without a home and/or

family support, the consequences can be devastating for their future. Homelessness brings enormous personal costs for individuals and economic costs to society – and this is magnified when we look exclusively at youth homelessness.

Mission Australia is a partner in the major study The Cost of Youth Homelessness, with researchers from Swinburne University, the University of Western Australia and Charles Sturt University.⁴⁵ The study looks at the experiences of young people who were homeless and at risk of homelessness. When interviewed, the homeless young people were receiving support from a SHS or a Reconnect service.

This study found that young people who are homeless have:

- **Higher levels of psychological distress.** 61% of the homeless young women participating in the study (and 51% of the men) experienced very high or high distress, compared with 19% of female (and 12% of male) young Australians in the general population.
- **Much higher incidence of reported non-suicidal self-injury and attempted suicide.** One in five (20%) homeless young women (and 12% of young men) had attempted suicide in the previous six months. More than one in four (28%) young homeless women (and 17% of young men) had engaged in non-suicidal self-injury

behaviours. Just over half (55%) of homeless youth who had attempted suicide in the past six months had not received any counselling or professional support for this.

- **Significantly higher unemployment rates.** Nearly one-quarter (22%) of homeless young people have never had a paid job in their lifetime, compared with only 6% of young jobseekers.
- **Greater likelihood of leaving school early.** Only one third (31%) of homeless young people had completed Year 12, compared with 57% of young job seekers.
- **Poorer health outcomes.** Around a third of homeless respondents reported having a long-standing physical health condition.
- **Higher prevalence of mental health conditions.** Over half (53%) of homeless young people reported that they had been diagnosed with at least one mental health condition in their lifetime, compared to 26% of young people in the general population (who met the criteria for diagnosis of a lifetime prevalence of a mental health disorder and experiencing symptoms in the previous year).

The study's authors concluded:

Homelessness is one of the most severe forms of disadvantage and social exclusion that any person

can experience. It is also a frightening and traumatic experience, particularly for children and young people just beginning to make their own way in life. It makes everyday activities like attending secondary school, engaging in further training, or getting a job, difficult in the extreme. Homeless young people often experience mental and physical health problems and experience much higher rates of disconnection from family and friends. The personal and community costs of homelessness are very high.

The absence of safe and secure accommodation, compounded in many cases by poor health, difficult financial circumstances and social isolation, has direct adverse effects on young people's health and wellbeing. The choices many young homeless people make, in order to cope or survive the homeless experience, put them at further risk of harm.

In addition to the personal costs to young people caused by homelessness, youth homelessness imposes an economic burden on society. The final report of the Cost of Youth Homelessness Study, when released will provide an analysis of the economic costs of homelessness, both in terms of the costs of providing accommodation and support services as well as health and justice costs borne by government and the community as a result of homelessness.

What should be done?

Given the prevalence of family conflict and of young people spending periods away from home couch surfing, it is important to understand why some children and young people move from intermittent arrangements, such as couch surfing, to falling into more entrenched homelessness, and what interventions can be put in place to prevent that journey.

Mission Australia's experience in the provision of services for children and young people, combined with our research and understanding in this area, highlights the following as key in the prevention of, and response to, child and youth homelessness:

- 1. Identifying problems early** and using schools as a universal platform for understanding youth homelessness and tailoring suitable programs.
- 2. Intervening quickly** with help from:
 - specialist homelessness services
 - family reconciliation services
 - specialist services for risk factors such as mental health, substance abuse and domestic and family violence
- 3. Ensuring suitable housing**, with support as needed through:
 - supportive accommodation for children and young people who can't live at home but need ongoing support, such as out-of-home care or Foyer-like models
 - social or affordable private rental housing for young people who can live independently

Identify problems early

For children and young people at risk of homelessness, early identification of their issues and quick interventions can help resolve problems, with the child/young person being reconciled with family if safe, or established in a supported living situation, or living independently. It is crucial that interventions happen early, ideally before a crisis eventuates but certainly before behaviours get entrenched and homelessness becomes the norm.

Early identification and intervention is also cost effective, as costs increase as problems worsen and become more difficult to resolve. One key study concluded 'intervening early to stop children and young people becoming homeless could save taxpayers millions of dollars in health, legal and custodial services'.⁴⁶ It cited the case of one young woman who first came into contact with criminal justice and human services agencies at the age of 12; she had cost more than \$5.5 million in police, juvenile justice, welfare, housing, health and legal aid services by the time she turned 21.

Early intervention can assist young people to remain with their family (if safe), at school and within existing social networks, and can prevent them adopting a transient lifestyle, becoming involved in the homeless sub-culture and making the transition to more entrenched forms of homelessness.⁴⁷

Schools-based youth homelessness identification and intervention

A very promising model of early identification and intervention is the creation of place-based coalitions of schools and services, aiming to identify young people at risk

of homelessness and disengagement in school and intervene quickly to divert them from those journeys. Three such models now operate, under the banner: 'By providing support early, we keep young people at home, in school, and linked to the community'.

This approach was first trialled in The Geelong Project (TGP) supported by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments and led by Time for Youth in partnership with other service providers and Swinburne University.⁴⁸ TGP costs its model at \$3,653 per family, with a massive saving to the community when compared to the cost of homelessness and early school leaving. TGP reports that during its pilot phase, the project identified and intervened with 95 young people and 43 family members, where homelessness and school disengagement were identified at high risk (a total of 4318 were screened). As a result of TGP's intervention:

- 100% of the young people remained engaged in school, increased engagement or returned to school; and
- 100% of the young people supported retained or obtained safe sustainable accommodation, including:
 - 86% remained in or returned home (after leaving or regularly couch surfing)
 - 14% supported into alternative accommodation when home was not appropriate.

Two other projects have now commenced, at Ryde and the Northern Beaches in Sydney, using this schools-based youth homelessness identification and intervention model, but adapted to suit the local community's circumstances.

The Ryde Project

Ryde Project is a joint initiative between schools, government agencies and local youth services, led by Mission Australia and funded by the NSW Government, that identifies and supports young people who are at risk of homelessness and need help to better engage with school or cope with difficulties in their lives.

Each year, every student in the three participating secondary schools is encouraged to complete a voluntary survey to identify any homelessness and/or school disengagement risks. For each student identified as needing support, a tailored support plan containing specific goals is developed. The school and a local agency offer the required support to each identified student and their family.

The Ryde Project recognises that the best outcomes for young people can be achieved if difficulties are identified, and support provided, as soon as possible.

Although only recently commenced, The Ryde Project has already made a difference to students who otherwise have fallen through the cracks. In the first survey, 3.6% of students surveyed were identified as being at risk, including some students whose difficulties had not been noticed by the school, and the Project is putting in place support plans and providing assistance to students and families.⁴⁹



What should be done? (cont)

Outreach services to identify at risk youth

Outreach services are particularly useful in reaching children and young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, as they are able to go to the areas they frequent. Outreach services aim to

develop rapport, care for immediate needs, and provide linkages to services and resources to help young people navigate the services system.⁵⁰ Outreach programs can build connections with local communities and develop relationships with children and young people due their more informal service delivery model.

Youth Beat

Youth Beat is a Mission Australia safety and early intervention program supporting young people on the streets of South East Tasmania and Perth's metro area.

The Youth Beat van and foot patrols comb the streets and skate parks engaging young people some of whom are homeless, intoxicated and drug affected, have physical and mental health issues or are displaying anti-social behaviour.

Youth Beat has the ability to quickly assess the needs of each individual we meet and assist them in accessing services that will meet their immediate needs. This includes referral to accommodation, medical care, meals, showers, harm minimisation and advice on sexual, physical and mental health. This support is often ongoing and reoccurring.

Youth Beat aims to be a constant, accessible and non-threatening source of information and support for young people in need.

We offer a wide range of services and approaches such as:

- Support for young people and their families, including referrals to counsellors
- Interactive activities based on the young person's needs and interests
- Identifying and addressing anti-social behaviour
- Support, referral and intervention for young people in crisis
- Access to other services and social support networks

Youth Beat works hard to build trust and confidence with youth in our care. We work collaboratively with other agencies that support young people in need. We foster strong relationships with police, community groups and local support services.

The service offered by Youth Beat in Perth metro area is shown in the short video at <http://sd.missionaustralia.com.au/293-youthbeat-wa>



Out-of-home care leavers at risk of homelessness

Where children or young people under 18 years are at immediate risk of serious harm, they may be removed from their home and placed in out-of-home care, which may be foster care, kinship care (where the caregiver is a family member or a person with a pre-existing relationship with the child) or residential care (in a residential building with paid staff). Australian out-of-home care systems are managed by state and territory government agencies and usually delivered through non-government organisations.

Young people leaving the out-of-home care system have poorer educational, health and employment outcomes than their peers. They are more likely to experience mental health issues, associated emotional and behavioural problems, drug and alcohol problems and physical and sexual abuse.⁵¹

These young people may also have higher prospects of becoming homeless. Most studies estimate that between 20-40% of young homeless people had been in state care.⁵² The recent Cost of Youth Homelessness report found that 63% of the homeless young participants had been placed in some form of out-of-home care before the age of 18, a significantly higher proportion than a comparable group of young disadvantaged job-seekers (18%).⁵³ However, recent analysis of the longitudinal Journeys Home study has found that those who had experienced State care may be more liable to experience homeless, but not necessarily spend a longer period of time homeless than those who did not experience out-of-home care.⁵⁴

We recommend improving data collection and proper monitoring, to generate information on post-care rates of homelessness, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and enable governments to be held accountable.

Mission Australia believes that out-of-home care systems must do better to ensure that, when a young person leaves out-of-home care, he or she is well-equipped to maintain stable independent accommodation and avoid homelessness.

All states and territories require young people to have a 'leaving care' plan, which includes a housing option. However, a 2013 survey showed that 64% of young people did not have such a plan.⁵⁵ When transition planning is done, often it is too late or inadequate in terms of finding housing for the care leavers. Post-care programs for young people transitioning from out-of-home care are only available to a limited number of young people and, for the rest, support is limited. Programs such as Springboard (see below) should be made more widely available.

For many people, simply reaching 18 years of age does not mean that they do not need ongoing support. The Queensland Government has already agreed to provide a coordinated program of post-care support for young people until at least the age of 21, and to fund non-government services to provide a continuum of transition to independence services, including transition planning and post-care management and support. We support these initiatives and encourage all governments to adopt them.

Springboard

In Victoria, Mission Australia delivers the Springboard program which provides intensive youth focussed assistance to those aged 16 to 18 in residential out-of-home care, or up to 21 years who have left residential care.

It is intended to support both these groups to gain secure long-term employment by re-engaging with appropriate education, training and/or supported employment opportunities.

Whilst young people who fit the above criteria are the priority group, the program is also available for those who are currently in or have been in foster care or kinship care and are disengaged from education, training or employment.

The program provides young people with flexible one-on-one case work support that helps them identify and negotiate access to appropriate re-engagement, education, training or employment opportunities. The young people in the program tend to have complex needs and multiple barriers and are likely to have experienced childhood trauma as well as multiple disruptions to their education. It is a culturally sensitive service with expertise in working with Aboriginal young people and refugees.

Springboard is funded by the Victorian Department of Human Services. The program is delivered across the entire Southern Metropolitan Region by Southern Metropolitan Region Springboard Consortium which is led by Mission Australia.

What should be done? (cont)

To identify young people at risk of homelessness early, before a crisis develops, these successful programs should be expanded to all schools, with a staged roll out commencing with high-risk communities across Australia:



- The schools-based youth homelessness identification and intervention model pioneered in The Geelong Project;

- Youth outreach programs.

In recognition of the particular risk of homelessness for out-of-home-care leavers, Mission Australia calls on State and Territory governments to:

- Adopt a 'zero tolerance' approach to young people leaving the out-of-home care system becoming homeless; and
- Implement effective leaving care planning and post-care support, including assistance with finding and retaining housing.

Intervene quickly with support services

Specialist homelessness services

Specialist homelessness services (SHS) are generally run by non-government organisations and are fully or part funded by government. They offer support to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including children and young people staying away from home because of family conflict. This support is provided by trained staff who work with clients directly and/or refer them on to other specialist services (such as for drug and alcohol treatment or mental health support), as discussed in the next section.

Some SHS provide crisis (short-term), transitional (medium-term) and/or long term housing. Others help their clients to find such accommodation through connections with housing providers. Some SHS provide services to a range of clients, including single men, women experiencing domestic and family violence and young people, usually with staff who have been specially

trained in assisting certain client groups and issues (such as youth). Other SHS only assist one cohort (such as homeless youth).

Of the lone young people aged 15-24 years who go to SHS for help, more than half were homeless on presentation (52%).⁵⁶ Most of these young people identified the need for short-term or emergency accommodation (39%), medium-term/transitional housing (35%) or long-term accommodation (37%).⁵⁷ As expected for young people without family support, many also needed help with living skills, personal development, education, employment and training.⁵⁸

There has been a general trend in Australia, more advanced in some states and territories than others, for SHS to provide both services for people who are already homeless and early intervention support to people at risk of homelessness to help them before they reach housing crisis. Mission Australia supports this trend, as it increases the support available to families and young people to address stressors at home in order to increase the prospects of keeping the child/young person at home if safe. For children and young people couch surfing, staying away from home because of family conflict or even living on the street, working with a SHS address homelessness through family reconciliation, enabling the child/young person to stay at home and at school, or if that's not possible, establishing them in safe alternative accommodation.

It is clear what works in terms of best practice service delivery in SHS, including:

- Services tailored to young people's specific needs and experiences, including specially-trained youth workers and ways of working that respect young people's preferences;
- Where possible working with the young person's family and school to strengthen the support received there;
- The inclusion of clients' perspectives to inform service design and implementation processes;
- Multi-disciplinary approaches within the same team – such as education officers, recreation officers, counsellors, psychologists, outreach workers and residential workers;
- Integrated 'wrap-around' service delivery - accessing specialised services to support the clients and meeting their multiple and complex needs through various services;
- Sensitivity to the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) and other at risk groups;



- Trauma informed care - practice which requires practitioners to be knowledgeable about trauma and also takes the likely concentration of complex trauma as the starting point for service delivery; and
- Collaborative partnerships between SHS, service providers (such as headspace or migrant resource centres), mainstream 'first to know' agencies (such as Centrelink) and others working with the client, recognising the often complex and multidimensional nature of young people's needs.

Unfortunately, demand outstrips supply in the SHS sector nationally. The most substantial unmet need for young people presenting alone to SHS was for long-term accommodation, with only a very small amount (6%) of the young clients who needed this actually receiving it. More broadly, half (50%) of all incidences of unassisted requests for services were among children and young people aged under 25.⁵⁹ While this data is known to be patchy, it is clear from the sector that there is a need for more services for youth and especially for staff with specialist youth training.

One of our Youth Survey respondents, a 18 year old Victorian, wrote: "I've been homeless for a long time. I need to find a house to live in, or a refuge place to stay in until I find somewhere, for a long time."

Further, ongoing funding for SHS and other homelessness assistance programs is uncertain. Housing and homelessness is one of the three areas being considered in the Reform of Federation process. The Commonwealth Government has committed to

produce, sometime in 2016, a White Paper which seeks to clarify roles and responsibilities of the various levels of government in these areas. In the meantime, the future of recurrent funding arrangements is unclear.

A major funding contribution to homelessness is made by Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH). After a series of short-term extensions, the NPAH is now due to expire in June 2017. It is very challenging for non-government organisations such as Mission Australia to deliver programs – especially recruiting, training and retaining specialist staff - with short-term and uncertain funding.

Mission Australia calls on the Federal, State and Territory Governments to provide certainty and adequacy of funding for homelessness services.



The Governments should commit to a new national multi-year housing and homelessness agreement which should include a commitment to increased funding for housing and homelessness, guaranteed for the next 5 years - to avoid the churn and disruption that has been a feature of recent short-term funding extensions.

What should be done? (cont)

Family reconciliation services

The vast majority of children live as part of a family and receive support as they mature towards independence. All young people and families experience stressors, which can include family conflict, mental health or substance abuse issues with the child/young person or another family member, parental or self-imposed expectations of academic or work performance, or domestic and family violence. Families with low incomes more frequently experience other stressors, including unemployment, poverty and unstable housing.

Stressors can change and intensify as children go through the challenges of adolescence, which is a time of individual growth and change.⁶⁰ Often a young person at this time will develop their role and identity, seek greater independence, and explore their sexual orientation or identity. For adolescents, social and peer relationships become increasingly important, displacing reliance on family interactions. If the family is not skilled at coping with such normal adolescent behaviour, and/or if it coincides with family conflict, this increases the risk of entering a trajectory towards homelessness.

When the stressors are bad, this may be enough to cause the child or young person to leave their family and home for periods of time, usually to couch surf for intermittent periods with friends or non-immediate family. As we have seen from the Youth Survey and the Cost of Youth Homelessness report as well as other research, this is a common occurrence for many young people.

In many cases, the young person will move back home. Where this is not safe or possible, some may transition to independent living, while others will fall into a pathway of more entrenched homelessness. Often this happens as the young person finds a sense of belonging in the homeless subculture, starts to form friendships there, loses connections to school and old social networks, becomes immersed in the subculture and comes to accept homelessness as a way of life.⁶¹

The Journeys Home study⁶² found that homeless people with no contact with family are the least likely to exit homelessness, suggesting that not only are families important in preventing homelessness but they also appear to be important in assisting individuals out of homelessness. It found that families play an important role in reducing the duration of homelessness and assisting individuals out of and sustaining their exits from homelessness.

Special services can assist young people and their families with reconciliation and reconnection. They can teach skills

such as conflict resolution and resilience, to enable the family to get along better so that the young person can return or stay at home (where safe).

Reconnect

The Federally-funded Reconnect program uses community-based early intervention services to assist young people aged 12 to 18 years (and those aged 12-21 years who have recently arrived in Australia) who are experiencing or at risk of homeless and their families. It assists young people stabilise their living situation and improve their level of engagement with family, work, education, training and their local community.

Reconnect provides counselling, group work, mediation and practical support to the whole family. Reconnect providers also 'buy in' services to target individual needs of clients, such as specialised mental health services.

Reconnect has been found to achieve significant positive outcomes for young people and their families, particularly in terms of housing stability and family reconciliation.⁶³

The 102 Reconnect services around Australia have been placed in a vulnerable position by the Reform of Federation process, which is considering the respective roles of the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments in housing and homelessness.⁶⁴ Time frames for this process are unclear.

Reconnect is the only homelessness program where the Commonwealth Government directly funds service providers (rather than going through State Governments). Accordingly, it is uncertain which level of government will be responsible for its ongoing operation and indeed whether it will continue beyond its current funding period, which ends in June 2017. This program is too valuable for its fate to be left uncertain.

Mission Australia calls on the Federal Governments to extend and guarantee the continuation of the Reconnect program for another five years.



Case study

Rosie* was a pregnant 16 year old, living with her mother and younger sister, who was referred to one of our Reconnect services. Her mother had an extensive history of substance abuse and was under a child protection investigation.

When Rosie came to us, her case manager liaised with the Child Adolescent Mental Health Services, Centrelink, the housing provider and education agencies to build a cohesive picture. It became evident that these agencies were not aware of the severity of her living conditions or the potential harm to a newborn.

Reconnect helped Rosie to explore family and social supports, in the course of which she identified that her grandparents were able to help. Her case manager met with Grandma on several occasions to discuss the home environment and explain

the likelihood of Rosie's baby being removed if significant changes were not made.

Rosie moved in with her Grandma. Her case manager gathered support letters from the agencies involved and advocated with Centrelink for Independent Living Allowance. The Reconnect service also arranged for Rosie to continue her studies and gave further assistance to Grandma to have frank and open discussions with Rosie's mum through role play and rehearsing scripts.

After three months, Rosie became eligible for emergency housing and moved to live nearer her mother. Reconnect staff at Mission Australia helped set up her new home and worked with her to create safe boundaries for interacting with her mother. Rosie has since had her baby who she cares for, has gone back to attending school and is beginning to improve her relationship with her mother.

*This is a true story, but the name has been changed.

What should be done? (cont)

Other specialist services

As noted, a wide range of issues and stressors can put pressure on family dynamics. The family may be capable of dealing with such stressors, perhaps with help from their support networks. But not all families can cope and many seek external assistance, especially when the needs are complex, long-term or intense, or where there is family breakdown, under-developed parenting skills, social stigma or isolation. Specialist support services can give assistance towards the progressive realisation of goals and the achievement of milestones, while empowering and building family members' resilience. Identifying the stressors early on and quickly acting to address them can keep the child or young person as part of the family and safe at home.

Best practice specialist support for young people is delivered by specially trained staff and in a tailored context, such as headspace for young people with mental health issues and Mission Australia's Triple Care Farm for young people recovering from substance abuse. SHS which specialise in youth homelessness or have specially-trained youth workers can provide referrals on to services to address particular specialist needs.

One of our Youth Survey respondents, a 19 year old Queenslander, when asked what needs to be done about their concerns, replied: "more programs for teenagers with mental health issues, more facilities for rehabilitation and places where kids can go to be safe ..."

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to access such specialist services, especially ones with a specific youth focus and/or if it is the young person themselves seeking assistance. There are often long waiting lists for community mental health services, substance abuse programs, gambling counselling and other such supports. Access in regional, rural and remote areas is especially problematic.

Mission Australia calls on all governments to ensure young people have access to specialist services including mental health and substance abuse programs, especially youth-specific services and services in regional, rural and remote areas.



Alternatives to family reconciliation

For many children and young people, living with immediate or extended family is not a safe option or in their best interests. Unfortunately, a lack of supportive housing, social housing and affordable private rental means that many children and young people stay longer than necessary in crisis or transitional accommodation in SHS, which increases the rate of homeless people turned away from those services. This means that, when leaving SHS, many young people return to couch surfing, or move into rough sleeping or more entrenched homelessness.

Supportive accommodation

Those who cannot live independently, due to their age or need for support may enter the out-of-home care system or will need another form of supportive accommodation.

An increasingly common model internationally and in Australia is Foyer-like approaches. This assists young people, usually aged between 16-24, to engage in education and employment, and gradually to reduce their dependence on social services. Youth Foyers generally have self-contained accommodation, on-site support workers, education programs, variable levels of support where a young person can progress to more independent living, onsite facilities (for example health services) and social enterprises (such as a café). Participation in education, training and employment is a condition of the accommodation. In these ways and because of their focus on independence, Foyers are different from traditional supported accommodation models.⁶⁵ Youth Foyer models are yet to be fully evaluated in the Australian context but offer great prospects in helping young people transition to independence.

Development or redevelopment of new facilities for Foyer-like models is part of the solution to respond to unmet demand. Nevertheless, current youth homelessness facilities run by SHS can achieve best-practice outcomes for this cohort by integrating the essential elements of the Foyer approach - including strong links to education and employment, a focus on building independence and a 'contract' with clients - into their current practice. Many youth SHS already build aspects of these into their operations, but to be truly transformative extra program elements are required (such as deep partnerships with education providers and employers) which are not possible within current SHS funding levels. In addition to accelerating the construction of new Foyer-like facilities, Mission Australia advocates a systemic 'Foyer top up' of existing youth SHS.

Youth Foyer approaches do not suit every young person experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Supportive accommodation is also needed for the most marginalised young people, particularly those with alcohol and drug problems, mental health issues, criminal convictions and those who live in rural and remote communities. Such young people, who have experienced trauma and hardship in their past, need intensive case management supports.

Social housing

Some homeless or at-risk young people aged over 18 (who are able to enter into a lease) can live independently, with help to find a home, training on how to maintain their tenancy and any other needed supports.

Social housing is one option, but is increasingly difficult to secure. Across Australia, more than 220,000 people are on social housing waiting lists.⁶⁶ There is a particular shortage of properties suited to young people - one-bedroom apartments located close to employment prospects and transport.

Social housing has been in a difficult position for decades. Governments delivering public housing operate within an out-dated and unviable business model, face supply shortages, and have ageing stock which does not meet current demographic needs. Community housing is a more flexible and viable model, enabling a greater focus on tenants' needs and facilitating innovative delivery through partnerships with private investors and developers.

Some governments are attempting to address the severe shortage of social and affordable housing, such as the NSW Government's \$1 billion Social and Affordable Housing Fund and its Strategy, which will transfer more public housing to community housing, attract private investment in new supply and facilitate more tenant-centered services.

However, the failure of social housing to keep up with demand is a national problem. Mission Australia looks to the Commonwealth Government to take leadership and build on local examples of best practice to develop nation-wide solutions.

Young people in private rental

Many homeless young people over 18 years seek a home in the private rental market. However, they face a severe shortage of private rental properties in many locations. Australia has a shortfall of over 500,000 rental dwellings which are both affordable and available to the lowest income households.⁶⁷ Private rental properties are especially scarce in areas with employment opportunities; housing is unaffordable for jobseekers in all of the 40 regions across the country

What should be done? (cont)

where they are most likely to find employment.⁶⁸ On top of that, young people face further challenges when competing with other potential renters, including lack of a rental history, assumptions about unstable incomes and prejudice against youth.

If they are lucky enough to secure a lease, often the rent is so high that it pushes them into rental stress, where they pay over 30% of their income in housing costs. Some 657,000 low income households live in rental stress which puts them at risk of becoming homeless.⁶⁹ Young people's lower incomes and welfare benefit levels mean that they would be over-represented in these figures.

One of our Youth Survey respondents, a 19 year old young woman from Victoria, wrote: "I was homeless and didn't have anywhere to sleep. My life was so hard to live. I was looking for someone to help me. I don't have a job, the rent is expensive, life is hard to live by yourself."

Subsidies are sometimes offered to counteract the difficulties of private rental. The NSW Government has recently announced a new medium term rental subsidy, Rent Choice, including for young people transitioning to independent living, which would also include those leaving out-of-home care. This subsidy, when introduced, will be available for up to three years and will require clients to engage with education and/or employment and relevant supports.

Unless levels of Commonwealth Rent Assistance are increased to take account of variable rental markets throughout Australia, which are increasingly necessary for young people and other low income earners, to rent privately more will be falling into housing stress and thus risking homelessness.

How to provide more accommodation for young people

As shown above, there is simply not enough affordable and available supportive housing (such as Foyer-like facilities), social housing or private rental accommodation for young people in Australia, which increases youth homelessness rates.

Addressing this requires a coordinated approach across all governments encompassing housing policy including tax, welfare and planning settings.

The most significant barrier to greater supply of supportive, social and affordable private rental

housing is its lack of financial viability without subsidy. Housing young people is more costly for housing providers than other population groups, because youth incomes are so low.

Youth welfare payments - the lowest of all welfare payments - are inadequate to enable young people to maintain an adequate standard of living:

- The maximum rate of Youth Allowance for young people who need to live away from the parental home is \$433.20, which is insufficient to meet basic needs.
- Young people who rent community housing or in the private market are also eligible for Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA). However, this payment has not kept up with rising rents. 59% of young people who need rental assistance were still in rental stress after receiving CRA in 2014 (up from 55% in 2009).⁷⁰

The rent paid to a social housing provider from a young person receiving Youth Allowance and CRA falls far short of the cost of renting to them, not even covering half the average operating cost of the property. In comparison, the provider would be paid almost three times the rent from a single aged pensioner, which is more than sufficient to cover operating costs.

Even for young people engaged in education, training or employment, incomes are usually very low. Further, the level of support required for young people is often intensive (especially 24/7 support for under 16 year olds and education or employment assistance) and imposes additional operating costs.

Lower rents and higher costs make housing models for young people difficult to operate on a financially sustainable basis. Accordingly, to meet initial capital costs, recurrent operating costs and the costs of providing support services to young tenants, social housing providers and organisations seeking to provide supportive housing (such as Foyer-like models) rely on government subsidies, philanthropic contributions and/or private investment.

To make youth housing models viable; and indeed to provide more social and affordable housing for all low income Australians; all levels of government need to come together, with housing experts, the investment industry, the community housing sector, service providers and tenant groups to develop a comprehensive housing strategy, concentrating on:

Reform of taxation and welfare. Fundamental and comprehensive reform of the current tax and transfer

system is needed to: remove distortions which are perversely affecting housing outcomes; stimulate investment in of below-market housing; and provide an adequate level of support to those not in the labour market.

Harnessing private and institutional investment.

There is appetite from individual private and institutional investors including superannuation funds to invest in below-market residential property in Australia. There is extensive research on how institutional funds in the United Kingdom and America have created significant numbers of new below-market properties. The Council on Federal Financial Relations

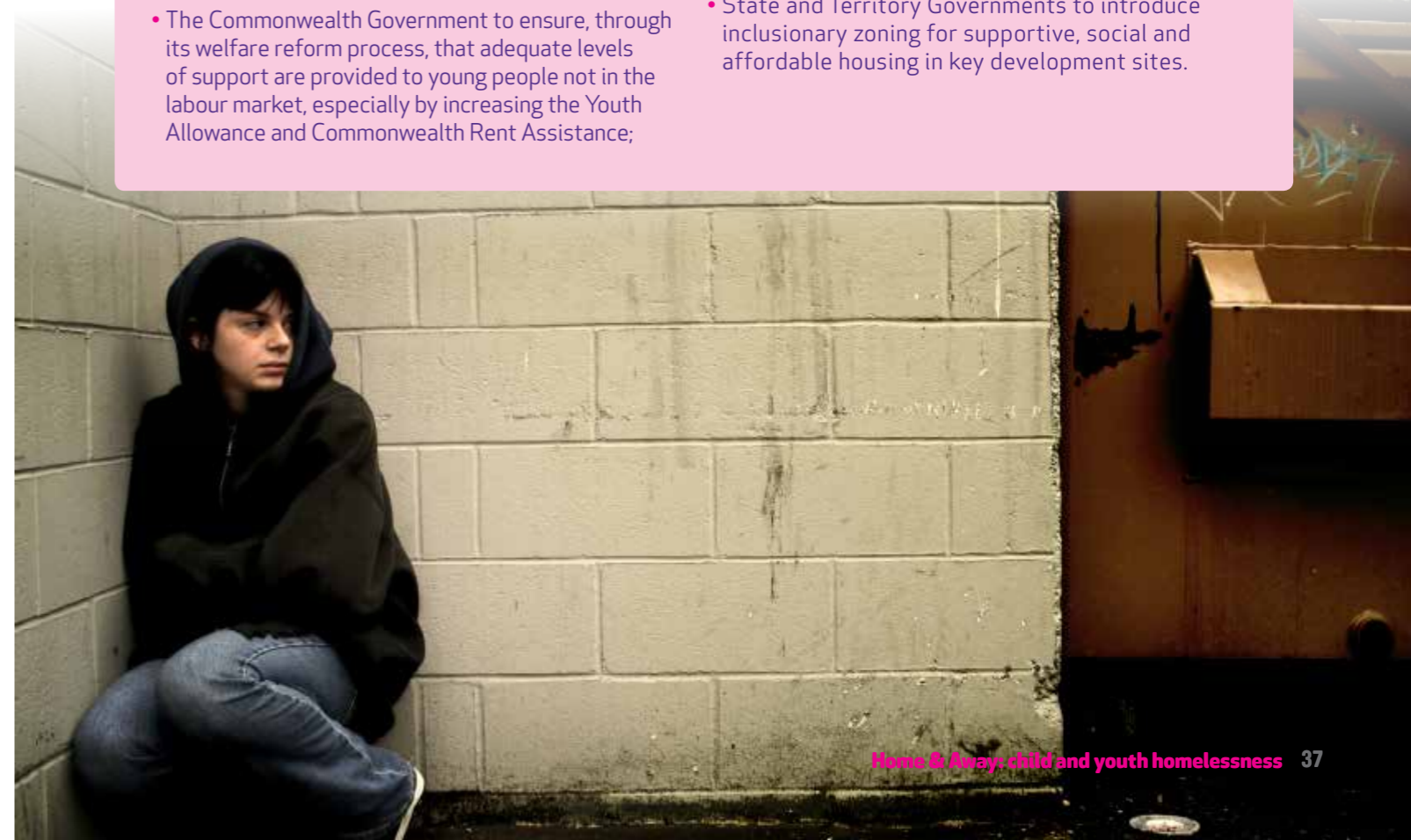
has recently established an Affordable Housing Working Group which is consulting on innovative financing models to harness investment, which is a welcome and important step in progressing this matter.

Reform of planning laws. Using planning instruments to require a component of below-market housing in specified areas (called 'inclusionary zoning') is an effective and proven way to stimulate new supply of below-market housing. Well-designed schemes can balance enough developer profit to incentivize activity with capture of a social return from the private value uplift provided to developers and land owners.

As an essential element of preventing and responding to youth homelessness, to provide enough supportive, social and affordable housing for young people, Mission Australia calls on:



- All governments and the broader community to address the urgent need for more supported youth accommodation, by facilitating Foyer-like supportive models, through new facilities and systemic 'top ups' of current youth SHS;
- All governments to commit to a net year-on-year increase in social and affordable housing in each state and territory, a common target of 200,000 net new social homes by 2025, and a capital works programs to update existing social housing infrastructure;
- The Commonwealth Government to ensure, through its welfare reform process, that adequate levels of support are provided to young people not in the labour market, especially by increasing the Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance;
- All Australian Governments through COAG to use the tax reform process and the Reform of Federation process to stimulate supply of supportive, social and affordable housing;
- The Commonwealth Government to implement mechanisms to facilitate and kick start investment by other partners – including institutional investors, the not-for-profit sector and the community;
- State and Territory Governments to introduce inclusionary zoning for supportive, social and affordable housing in key development sites.



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About Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation that delivers evidence-based, client-centred community services. Our goal is to reduce homelessness and strengthen communities across Australia. In the 2014-15 financial year we supported over 307,000 Australians through 589 programs and services. We work with families and children, youth and people experiencing homelessness and also provide specialist services for mental health, disability and alcohol and drug issues.

We walk alongside thousands of young people each year until they achieve independence. The youth we support have complex and challenging lives. We believe that with the right support at the right time, a young person can choose a different pathway, whatever their circumstances.

**MISSION
AUSTRALIA** | together
we stand

Mission Australia helps people regain their independence - by standing together with Australians in need, until they can stand for themselves.

Contact us

For further information please contact our **Research & Social Policy** team on:



02 9219 2041



researchandpolicy@missionaustralia.com.au



missionaustralia.com.au



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