



**MISSION
AUSTRALIA**

**Young people's
experiences of
homelessness**

Findings
from the
Youth Survey
2017



MISSION AUSTRALIA

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands throughout Australia, and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, the culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are the future leaders.

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CEO foreword

This is such an important report as it gives us not only an insight into the scale of youth homelessness in Australia but, perhaps most importantly, a better understanding of who these young people are and how they are impacted by homelessness.

It allows us to understand how their experiences differ from those young people who haven't experienced homelessness, giving us some clues as to what supports are most needed.

The numbers of young people who have experienced homelessness will be shocking to many of you. Yet, for those working in the sector the concerns, aspirations and experiences of these young people will be very familiar.

Ultimately, it should serve as a stark reminder to us all that we must take action.

To do nothing risks creating a generation of young people who carry the mental and physical scars of homelessness into their adult lives. Who miss schooling because of having to move from one temporary, inadequate dwelling to another. Who may be experiencing mental illness and living in

family conflict situations without any sense of sanctuary and safety. Who are losing hope about their future as they see the barriers mounting without a sense of control over their own lives.

For many years, the community sector has been putting forward evidence-based solutions to end youth homelessness, but sadly we see from the recent census that numbers are still growing.

It is our moral duty to say enough is enough. Things have to change.

Please read the report and hear the stories of these young people, and the solutions we put forward to address the rising numbers.

Let's commit to end youth homelessness in Australia.



A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'James Toomey', written over a dark background.

James Toomey
CEO, Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation that delivers evidence-based, client-centred community services. We work with families and children, young people and people experiencing homelessness and also provide specialist services for mental health, disability and alcohol and drug issues. In the 2016-17 financial year we supported over 140,000 people through 470 programs and services.



Executive summary

According to the 2016 Census, over 43,500 children and young people in Australia are homeless, although we know from our service experience that the reality is far worse, as many others are 'hidden homeless' and not counted in the official statistics.

Hidden homelessness includes people doubling up (that is one family moving in with another), or couch surfing which is used to describe those living in garages, at a friend's or relative's place, or sleeping in temporary shelter, perhaps intermittently, but without guarantee of continued residency or permanency. Hidden homelessness is particularly common for families, children and young people, increasing the precariousness of their situation and the likelihood of entrenched homelessness if supports are not accessed.

Importantly, those experiencing hidden homelessness frequently don't identify themselves as homeless

(and neither may those who are providing shelter for them). As such, they remain hidden not only from homelessness statistics but also from the service system, meaning that despite their inadequate housing circumstances they do not access supports or services needed.

While homelessness can be isolating, destabilising and traumatic for anyone experiencing it, its effects on children and young people whose development is not yet complete can be particularly devastating and long lasting. Homeless young people have been found to have much poorer physical and mental health than others their age. They have a notably higher incidence of reported self-injury and attempted suicide. They also have a greater likelihood of leaving school early, along with significantly higher unemployment rates than their peers.¹



There is a growing body of evidence being gathered about the true picture of child and youth homelessness. This report draws on our primary research, Mission Australia's *Youth Survey 2017*, to provide special insight into the housing experiences of young people across Australia, including details about their recent living arrangements, frequency of moving residence and experiences of homelessness over their lifetime – both with and without a parent/guardian present. Importantly, due to the breadth of information gathered about young people through the *Youth Survey* and its large sample size, the report is also able to examine similarities and differences in the values, concerns and aspirations of young people who have experienced homelessness compared with those who have not.

Mission Australia's *Youth Survey 2017* findings deepen our understanding of the issues faced by young people who have experienced homelessness and how these compare to the issues faced by young people who haven't experienced

homelessness. This research, which confirms other recent Australian studies, also serves to further the development of evidence based policy and best practice in service delivery.

A comprehensive response to youth homelessness requires early identification, prevention and intervention services, as well as suitable housing and wrap-around supports if and when homelessness does occur. With funding, commitment and shared effort Australia can end youth homelessness by 2030.

Mission Australia is a proud member of the Everybody's Home campaign which calls for a commitment to end homelessness by 2030 and we believe ending youth homelessness is an important part of this goal. We know what works, but it needs funding, leadership, continuous commitment and shared effort which will best be achieved through a national homelessness strategy.

Key findings

In total, 24,055 young people participated in the *Youth Survey 2017*, Mission Australia's 16th annual survey of young Australians aged 15-19 years. Of these, 21,812 responded to the survey's questions on experiences of homelessness, with **nearly 1 in 6 young people (15.6%) reporting having experienced a type of homelessness**, either time with no fixed address, living in a refuge or transitional accommodation or time spent couch surfing. Among those who reported couch surfing, these experiences were often not isolated, with only one in five (19.8%) indicating this had happened on just one occasion and with some young people having typically stayed away for periods longer than 6 months. Importantly, almost one in five of those who had couch surfed (19.5%) reported that they had first done so when they were less than 12 years old.

Other key findings of the survey included:

Young people who had experienced homelessness were notably more likely than young people who had never experienced homelessness to:

- Have moved in the past three years, with more than one fifth (21.7%) of young people who had experienced homelessness having moved 3 or more times in the past three years, compared with only one in twenty young people (5.1%) who had never experienced homelessness.
- Feel there would be barriers to the achievement of their study/work goals after leaving school (70.3% compared with 47.3%).
- Report not being in paid employment but looking for work (39.9% compared with 33.0%).
- Highly value *getting a job* (49.0% compared with 37.4%).
- Be highly concerned about *family conflict* (44.4% *extremely* or *very concerned* compared with 14.7%) and *depression* (43.8% *extremely* or *very concerned* compared with 18.9%).
- Report their family's ability to get along was only *fair* (22.2% compared with 9.6%) or *poor* (23.7% compared with 3.9%).
- Indicate low levels of happiness with their life as a whole (24.3% compared with 6.2% giving a rating between 0-30 out of 100).
- Meet the criteria for having a probable serious mental illness (47.9% compared with 18.8%).²
- Feel they had *no control* over their life (10.3% compared with 1.8%).
- Report the statement 'I have high self-esteem' was *not very true of me* (19.6% compared with 6.8%).
- Feel *negative/very negative* about the future (19.4% compared with 7.9%).

Despite the stark differences identified above, there were also a number of similarities between the two cohorts including:

- Over 9 in 10 of those who had or hadn't experienced homelessness were currently undertaking some type of study (94.6% compared with 97.6% respectively). Similarly, the vast majority of both cohorts intended to complete Year 12 (93.8% compared with 97.7% respectively).
- The most frequently cited plan after leaving school was to go to university, although this was at lower levels amongst those who had experienced homelessness (50.4% compared with 69.6%).
- Both groups rated *friendships* and *family relationships* as being among their top three most valued items.
- The top two concerns for both cohorts were *coping with stress* and *school or study problems*.
- The top three sources of help with important issues in their lives were consistently *friend/s*, *parent/s*, and a *relative/family friend*.
- Both identified *mental health*, *alcohol and drugs* and *equity and discrimination* as the top three issues facing Australia.
- The top three activities for both cohorts were *sports (as a participant)*, *sports (as a spectator)* and *volunteer work*, with young people indicating strong levels of participation across a range of activities regardless of whether or not they had experienced homelessness.

This report further draws comparisons between the responses of young people who have experienced youth homelessness and those who have experienced homelessness with their family. While results across both groups generally followed a similar pattern to the findings outlined above for all young people experiencing homelessness, those who had experienced youth homelessness were the most likely to express low levels of confidence in their ability to achieve their study/work goals after school, to indicate high levels of concern about *family conflict*, *depression* and *suicide*, to meet the criteria for having a probable serious mental illness

and to express negative feelings about the future.

Young people experiencing either youth or family homelessness gave less positive ratings of their family's ability to get along than those who had never experienced homelessness, however, those experiencing youth homelessness were the most likely to indicate only *fair* or *poor* family relationships, to express high levels of concern about *family conflict* and to cite *family responsibilities* and *lack of family support* as barriers to them achieving their study/work goals. They were also the least likely to say they had lived with their parent/s over the past three months and to turn to *parent/s* for help with important issues in their lives.

The *Youth Survey 2017* findings have important implications for how we understand and act to address the issues of youth and family homelessness. They point to the existence of a critical group of young people who are either couch surfing and/or have experienced other types of homelessness during their lifetime. This group is far more likely to perceive barriers to the achievement of their study/work goals, to indicate poor family relationships and family conflict, to be concerned about depression, to be showing indicators of probable serious mental illness and feeling negatively towards the future. Critically, some of these young people are lacking the important support families can offer as they navigate adolescence, a period of significant change and challenge and move towards independence.

As discussed below, the findings highlight the importance of an early identification mechanism for young people at risk of homelessness and timely interventions providing the support necessary to prevent these young people continuing down a pathway to entrenched homelessness. Given this research reveals that young people who have an experience of homelessness have poorer outcomes on a number of measures, such as family functioning and mental health (including self-esteem and sense of control) compared to their non-homeless counterparts, a universal assessment tool, which is sensitive to differences in such items could allow for an individual and immediate response and subsequently reduce youth homelessness.

Key policy recommendations:

Mission Australia is a proud member of the Everybody's Home campaign which calls for a commitment to end homelessness by 2030 and we believe ending youth homelessness is an important part of this goal. We know what works, but it needs funding, leadership, continuous commitment and shared effort which will best be achieved through a national homelessness strategy. Mission Australia's experience in the provision of services for young people and families, combined with our research and advocacy in this area, points to the following key recommendations.

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should:

1 Develop a national homelessness strategy:

- To end homelessness in Australia by 2030 including ending youth homelessness as a preliminary step to this goal; and
- That addresses the drivers of homelessness for young people, including poverty, family violence, mental illness and the lack of affordable housing.

2 Invest in prevention, early intervention and outreach:

- By funding and expanding proven early identification and intervention programs, such as the Reconnect Program and Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model; and
- Providing outreach services to reach children and young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness in the areas they frequent.

3 Increase the focus on educational engagement for young people at risk of homelessness:

- By building on re-engagement and alternative education programs that work effectively with vulnerable young people such as Flexible Learning Options, Navigator and Education Support Worker Models; and
- To improve outcomes across all domains of young people's lives including their prospects of employment and stable housing in the future.

4 Prevent young people exiting state care into homelessness:

- Through improved exit planning for young people leaving out-of-home-care, increased availability of wrap-around supports, the option to extend care placements and affordable and appropriate independent accommodation options; as well as
- Adopting whole of government approaches to prevent young people becoming homeless

when they exit all forms of state care including hospitals and drug and alcohol facilities, correction facilities, detention centres and mental health institutions.

5 Prevent young people becoming homeless with their families:

- By reducing domestic and family violence (DFV) and associated homelessness including through: education on healthy relationships in schools; family early intervention programs; improved training of first to know agencies; legal and policing reform; men's behaviour change programs and broader efforts to address underlying gender equality and rigid gender stereotypes; and
- Improving the affordability of housing for households on the lowest incomes, as well as providing tenancy and tailored supports to family members as needed.

6 Rapidly rehouse young people who experience homelessness and support them to maintain that housing:

- By investing in supported accommodation models that are linked to education and employment such as the Foyer model, as well as accommodation options with more intensive case management supports, as appropriate to

the young person's needs or circumstances;

- Investing in more social and affordable housing that is appropriate and available for young people to allow timely access to a stable home.
- Increasing Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments to relieve rental stress and prevent homelessness for young people renting independently; and
- Providing long-term sustainable funding to increase housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and address overcrowding.

7 Put young people at the centre of policy and practice:

- By providing holistic wrap-around services that also have capacity to engage young people's broader networks such as families, schools and peers where appropriate; and
- Ensuring young people are involved in the design and implementation of services intended to meet their needs and that services provided cater to the diverse experiences of young people.





"I think that my generation needs to know that we will be able to afford the daily needs and live in a decent house instead of on the street."

F, 16, VIC

"Youth need more support. You could have friends that are couch surfing and you won't even know. They need to be more honest so they can be safe at night and feel supported."

F, 17, NSW

"My biggest concern has been being able to have a house to stay in that's safe."

F, 15, VIC

"Need affordable housing for young people with no family, that is not a refuge."

M, 16, WA

"Need more support and financial aid for youth who are homeless."

F, 17, SA