



November 2024

# CHILDREN AND HOMELESSNESS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

---

As told by support workers and young  
people in Western Australia.



[www.endchildpoverty.com.au](http://www.endchildpoverty.com.au)

# Introduction

In April, 2024, The Valuing Children Initiative launched the End Child Poverty campaign, calling on the Australian Government to legislate an end to child poverty.

To understand what was happening for children, the VCI held a unique workshop for people who work daily with children experiencing housing instability and homelessness in Western Australia.

Held during Homelessness Week, 2024, with grant support from Shelter WA and Lotterywest, the workshop was an opportunity to understand child poverty in Western Australia from the very people who see it every day.

During the three-hour workshop, we spoke to 45 staff from 21 different organisations.

We wish to thank everyone for their time not just during the workshop, but every day working with our children.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

At the Valuing Children Initiative, we acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of this country and its waters, particularly the Whadjuk Noongar people who's boodja (country) we are founded on. We wish to pay respect to the Elders past, present and emerging, particularly our children and young people and future decision makers. The Valuing Children Initiative wishes to acknowledge the rights of all koolankas (children in Noongar) and we wholeheartedly endorse the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child.



We want to say to all  
children everywhere,  
you matter, and you are  
valued.

# The impacts of homelessness on children

We asked the group; what happens for children and young people when housing is not in place? The following summaries were taken directly from the workshop activities and conversations between service workers and people with lived experience on the day, and then transcribed into the outputs in this document. This is what **they see** as the impacts of poverty and housing instability on children and young people.

## Food and essential items

When housing is not in place, it can be difficult for children and young people to **access nutritional food and personal hygiene**. Malnutrition can have a range of serious impacts including impacts on physical health, concentration and the ability to learn, and mood regulation. Food also brings people together, particularly families, and a lack of food can result in increased social isolation. A lack of personal hygiene also has serious impacts on physical health and an increase in preventable medical conditions and well as social impacts of shame, low-self-esteem, exclusion, and potentially, bullying.

*"I was preparing a breakfast in a residential unit when a 16-year-old boy stood beside me, I opened the pantry cupboard and looked across to see him crying. I put my hand on his shoulder and he told me that he had never seen so much food in the cupboard."*

When children and young people don't have access to the essential items they need like shelter and clothing, they do not **feel safe and secure**. This feeling creates an overwhelming sense of anxiety that impacts their ability to function on a daily basis and puts them at greater risk of harm. The group also spoke about the impact that not being able to **keep personal belongings** such as documents, mementos and photographs, and other keepsakes has on the development of children and young people. For most, these are their most treasured possessions. But for children and young people experiencing poverty, these are a luxury they cannot afford.

Shame is an important impact that was mentioned multiple times in this focus area and is a common thread throughout the others - the shame of not having what your peers have and not being able to hide what you are experiencing from the rest of the world.

*"A young person was attending the engagement hub daily to access essential needs. Staff noticed the young person's weight decreasing, lack of eating in service. The young person denied any issues due to shame but eventually disclosed **that they no longer eat after 10am due to the lack of safe access to public toilets.**"*





## Education and Early Learning

School is the one constant in most children and young people's lives - a place to build knowledge, connections, and a sense of belonging. When housing is not in place for children and young people, it can cause serious **disruptions to their education** and have severe impacts on their learning outcomes and life trajectories. Children and young people have a harder time going to university and gaining employment and this may lead to a further cycle of poverty and homelessness.

The relationships that young people build with their peers during their early years is invaluable and encourages the development of strong social skills and a life-long support network. For children and young people experiencing poverty and homelessness, the disconnection, **social isolation**, and **decline in social and emotional wellbeing** that comes with dislocation and sporadic school attendance has serious and lasting effects.

*"A 13-year-old had to move schools due to escaping violence and **lost all her friendships**. She couldn't integrate into her new high school due to being bullied, and now refuses to go to school."*

Schools often act as community hubs, and when children and young people face barriers to accessing school, they subsequently face barriers to **accessing school-supported services** such as career advice and employment support, dental and other health services, and community connections.





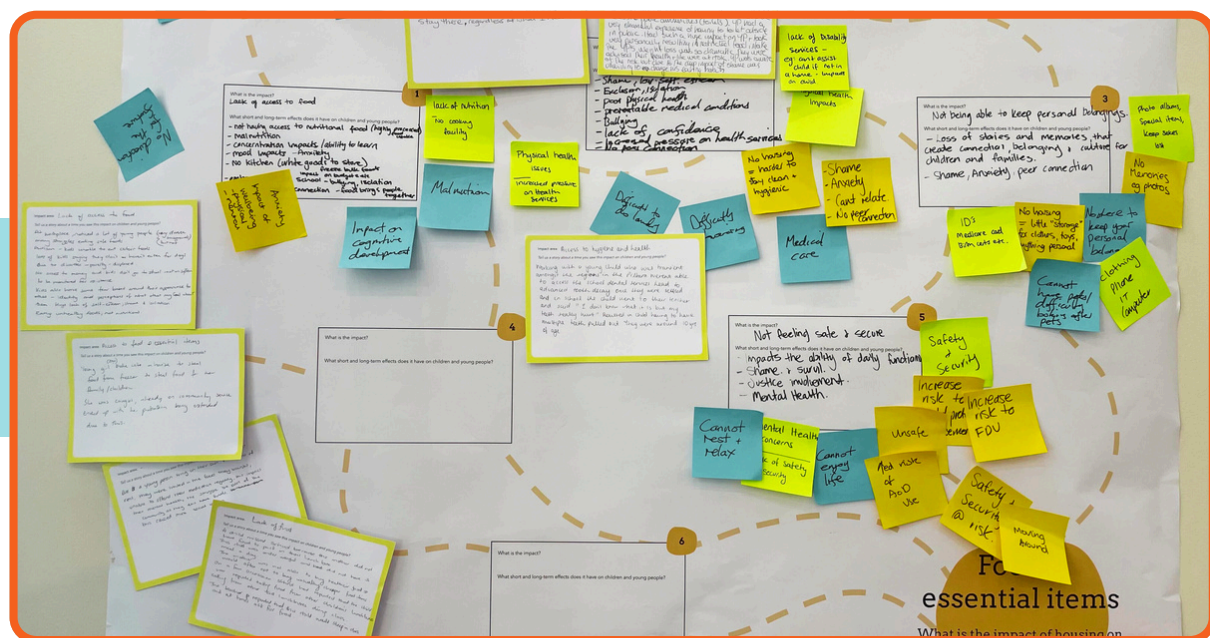
## Belonging and community

Having a sense of belonging and community is what unites us and is directly linked to better outcomes. When children and young people are experiencing poverty and housing insecurity, it can result in complete **social and community disconnection and isolation.**

Your childhood is when you begin to form your **identity - your sense of self** - and connect to a community. When your adolescence is disrupted, it can result in a loss of self, loss of culture, loss of identity, low self-esteem and goal setting, and an inability to connect to a community.

Poverty and housing instability seriously impacts children and young people's ability to form **strong relationships** and support networks, and can result in a **lack of supportive and safe role models**. There is nobody to look up to, nobody to ask for help, nobody to point them in the right direction, help regulate emotions and promote healthy decision-making. Relationships and the loss of connections were a consistent theme throughout all focus areas.

*“During the period I was homeless, I lost all of my friends. My social life was not my priority, but it meant that I lost my support network. **It was extremely isolating.**”*



## Justice and child protection

Children and young people experiencing homelessness or housing instability are more likely to be in contact with the justice and child protection systems, further compounding the vulnerability and trauma they experience.

Involvement in the justice and child protection systems can have serious emotional consequences for children and young people, and participants highlighted in particular: the **loss of safety** for children and families that comes with trauma and adverse childhood experiences; the **loss of identity** children and young people feel when their connections are broken and they are **separated from their families**; and the overwhelming weight of **negative public perception** that young people involved in these systems face.

When children and young people become involved with the justice and child protection systems early in their lives, statistics show that over half of them will be reconvicted in adulthood. This **entrapment in the system** is difficult for young people without stable housing and support networks to escape to - particularly when this entrapment is by design, and further strains an already strained system.

*“A young person who has had several interactions with the child protection system learned to engage in defensive behaviour - **due to continuously being let down**. This led to services banning the young person from accessing them, perceiving the young person as being aggressive, when the young person was only trying to advocate for himself. One service provider has to support other providers to understand trauma and how it impacts people.”*



## Family life

A home is a place for families to grow, love, laugh, and feel safe. When housing is not stable, the impact on families is profound. It places significant stress on kinship and family systems and can influence deep intergenerational trauma. **Children are often forced to take on parenting roles** in situations that require it, impacting their individual dreams and ambitions, education and employment opportunities, and mental health and behavioural challenges - **kids do not get to be kids**, robbing them of positive childhood experiences and the creation of family traditions. Often these situations are due to instances of addiction or **family and domestic violence** that can prompt **unwanted interventions by the justice and child protection systems**.

*“I had the role of taking on the parental responsibilities for my mothers’ mental health. I was made to feel responsible to care for her and stay there, **regardless of what I needed**.”*

Without a strong wrap-around family environment, it is easier for children and young people to miss core developmental milestones, such as identity and healthy relationship building, health diagnoses, and education and employment achievements.

## Utilities and access to services

When housing is not secure for children and young people, they often lose access to a range of crucial public services. Services like **internet broadband** - important in the 21st century for online learning and digital literacy - and **public and private transport** - providing freedom of movement and the ability to access other services - are no longer easily accessible.

Children and young people experiencing homelessness often **no longer meet the eligibility criteria of essential services** due to their lack of permanent address, further increasing the pressure on already overwhelmed community services. Additionally, it is **difficult to navigate complex service systems** without the ability to store paperwork, prove formal I.D. and present in person - all of which act as barriers for children and young people in poverty and housing crises. For families, these inaccessible services can be the deciding factor on whether or not their **children are taken into state care**.

*“When I went to a client’s home, the four year old said **he had never been in a car before**. We ended up spending 30 minutes of the hour session just looking in the car - opening doors, winding windows, moving chairs. All the things we “just know.””*



## Income and employment

Housing security and income and employment security are inherently linked and exist in a reciprocal cycle of cause and effect. When children and young people are in unstable housing situations, it significantly impacts their capacity to participate in employment and ultimately, dream of the future, due to an **inability to look beyond meeting their most basic and immediate needs**. This results in **unmet potential and missed opportunities** - young people being years behind their peers at school and in their careers, the economic impacts of an untapped workforce, and the intergenerational effects.

Children and young people experiencing poverty and housing insecurity sometimes **struggle to meet the mutual obligations for income support**. Without a stable income and employment or consistent financial support, service workers have experienced young people being **pushed into illegal activity** to make ends meet - increasing their likelihood of interacting with the justice system and become trapped in a cycle of poverty and incarceration.

*“A client grew marijuana in their shed to make money because **they couldn’t afford their rent**. The father was always concerned about being found out, causing him to get anxious and irritated, negatively impacting his relationship with his children. He was a single father and housing was always precarious, looking after three children.”*



# Storytelling

We asked the group to tell stories of what they are seeing on the ground - put a face to homelessness inaction. Here are some of their stories:

*"I was supporting a mother and child experiencing street present homelessness. They had been kicked out of a rental. The child was 11 and had significant health concerns. They had been waiting for an NDIS assessment - however, no services would assess him for support while homeless. His needs become more complex, his behaviours become unmanageable and were causing lots of stress for him and his mother."*

*"A child missed school because their mother did not have food to pack in their lunch box."*

Impact area:

Tell us a story about a time you saw this impact on children and young people?

Whilst I was working with young people I was preparing a breakfast in a residential unit a 16 year old boy stood beside me, and when I opened the pantry cupboard I looked across and saw him crying I put my hand on his shoulder he told me that he had never seen so much food in the cupboard.

*"I was working with a young child who was transient amongst the regions in the Pilbara, and weren't able to access the school dental services. This resulted in them developing advanced tooth decay. They were 10 years of age."*

*"A young mother I was supporting was a child in care, who became pregnant. CPFS opened a case for the unborn child, deciding that the young mother does not have the parenting or life skills to be a suitable parent. Due to the pressure from CPFS, she relinquished her parenting rights."*



Impact area: Utilities + Access to Services - Primary Health Care

Tell us a story about a time you saw this impact on children and young people? ACCESS

Family who was transient due to housing instability not receiving consistent or adequate medical care.

One of the children required NDIS supports, however due to inconsistent health care history, getting the required documentation completed was extremely difficult.

*"A mother did not want to enrol her kids into school because they constantly had to move from place to place. The kids did not attend school for approximately 9 months. DCP was called."*

*"A child missed swimming lesson as she had to move schools' multiple times. She failed the swimming class and now has to repeat level 2."*

*"During the period I was homeless, I lost all of my friends. My social life was not my priority, but it meant that I lost my support network. It was extremely isolating."*

*"There were children sleeping in a bed with a number of other people, some were family members and other were unknown to them. Drugs were being used and the young people was being sexually abused."*

*"Father has schizophrenia, mother has bipolar and their teenage child has undiagnosed mental health issues. Housing was unstable, they had problems paying bills, paying for food. Those living conditions kept the child from school, leading to severe social isolation. Parents didn't have friends and they were mistrustful of services, compounding the isolation on the child"*

Impact area: Identity - Justice + child protection

Tell us a story about a time you saw this impact on children and young people?

In Group home (OOHC) child from Broom brought to perth metro. children seeking belonging and connection due to their disconnection from their experiences, community, family ect. child began seeking family / connections in Perth this led to exposure to unsafe situations / AOD use. This led to child offending to meet AOD needs. Dept Communities then ~~sent~~<sup>Sent</sup> child back up north due to their complexity but these impacts resulted in child being incarcerated.





*"A young person was attending the engagement hub daily to access essential needs. Staff noticed the young person's weight decreasing, lack of eating in service. The young person denied any issues due to shame but eventually disclosed that they no longer eat after 10am due to the lack of safe access to public toilets. The young person's weight loss was so dramatic that they were advised their health and life were at risk."*

*"By becoming homeless, my plans to do ATAR and go to university were upended. I needed to focus on meeting my basic needs. It impacted my capacity to student in an ongoing way even though I'm out of the circumstances and not in stable housing."*

Impact area: **utilities and access to services**

Tell us a story about a time you saw this impact on children and young people?

Young person who was in care and multiple placements. She would always struggle managing her emotions. After building trust and relationship it was found that she had a huge tooth ache and needed a huge dentist work done. It was impacting her physical and mental health. She had no stable accommodation so



# Letters to the Prime Minister

We asked the group to write personal letters to the Minister and those in power continuing to perpetuate old entrenched structures of poverty in place; This is what people said.

We are hopeful

*"By strengthening legislation in public and private housing you can change the future of your state."*

*"We can be the hero in this story."*

*"The rate of children experiencing or at risk of homelessness will only increase unless we are a society brave enough to change in small ways."*

*"Be brave. People need more. Society deserves more."*

*"Every child deserves to be born into a loving, caring, tender, precious, and nurturing home."*

*"We need all parts of the community to come together to wrap around our children to put their wellbeing at the centre."*

*"There will be safety. There will be healing. There will be equity. Surviving will be a thing of the past and thriving is the way of the future."*

Dear Minister,

Our children are struggling and it affects us all. The numbers tell a dire story, and without immediate, broadscale action things will only get worse. Behind each number is a young person, their family + their community impacted by this crisis. We need all parts of the community to come together to wrap around our children + put their wellbeing at the centre. The benefits will be huge + vast.

## We are angry

"It is a fundamental human right to have safe, secure, and stable housing, and as the Minister in charge of the largest housing stock in the State, you are the holder of this human right. It is against the humanity of your constituents to deny them this right and then blame the victims of your poor policy decisions."

"You can choose to be the hero of thousands of children in WA, or you can continue to perpetuate the ongoing abuse and traumatising of children and young people."

"Housing is a human right and something we should take seriously - not just to win an election, but for the humanity of people living in our wealthy country."

"We have the research, we have the data, we have lived experience - you have everything at your fingertips, so enough delaying."

"What if we like this poverty hole, we have dug for ourselves. Do we really want to fill this hole and move onto what is next?"

"Homelessness is not due to individual failures."

"Children do not choose to be in poverty."

"Our children and young people will continue to suffer if we don't change our systems and invest in the solutions now."

"Our children are struggling, and it affects us all."

### Whats wrong?

We need more suitable, sustainable, accessible, affordable homes.

A home is so much more than a place to live. It's a connection to history, community, family + self.

### How can we fix it?

Provide access to multifaceted housing choices from crisis a/c to home ownership. This does not just mean more houses. It means:-

- Tiny homes - Co-ownership - affordable rentals
- Co-living - Social housing - home ownership

Housing must be provided for Children + young people.

Housing/<sup>DoCH/Private</sup>Rentals Should only be charged at 40% of people's income.

DoCH should not be allowed to evict anyone from public housing.

No Foreign Investments of WA property, or Interstate

"The numbers tell a dire story, and without immediate and broadscale actions, things will only get worse. Behind each number is a young person, their family, and their community impacted by this crisis."

"The veil of society is lifting, revealing the corruption that lies beneath. We see your attempts to trap us in a cycle of poverty that benefits your stakeholders."

"We will not be silent. We will rise together, make our voices heard and demand change. We will hold each and every one of you personally accountable for the suffering inflicted upon us."



## We demand better:

*"A whole-country approach to repairing the damage of colonising is required. Fund programs to pay Aboriginal community members to look after community."*

*"Housing instability must be addressed systemically, policy change must be enacted by listening to advocates for change. Transparent, open decision-making must be done in consultation with all members of society."*

*"Housing on its own without support is not the answer for all people in society. Invest in long-term support, advocate for better education and child protection systems. Ensure that there are pathways out of institutional care for children and young people; and for everyone."*



*"More funding needs to be delegated to non-for-profit organisations to help the younger generations to provide immediate early intervention before long term, unhealthy habits are formed."*

*"Providing housing is simply bringing up back to the starting point. The real job is then ensuring everyone lives free of abuse and dysfunction."*

*"In order to achieve systematic change; Listen to the people, the workers in hospitals, on streets, in programme services, schools, daycares and educational spaces."*

*"Be curious and interested in developing safety, not just in one silo [privilege] but all. Be brave to change spaces that are hard to access or complicated to tackle."*



## We want real, actionable change:

“Legislate that the Department of Housing cannot evict based on arrears under the cost of that family being homeless (approximately \$300k).”

“Unaccompanied children who are homeless need to be given housing as a right of law.”

“Fixed term tenancies with DoCH need to not have no reason to end tenancies.”

“Stop no grounds evictions in the public housing system. No evictions of children into homelessness.”

“All children in Department of Communities out-of-home care must be provided housing on exit. No child should ‘age out’ into homelessness.”

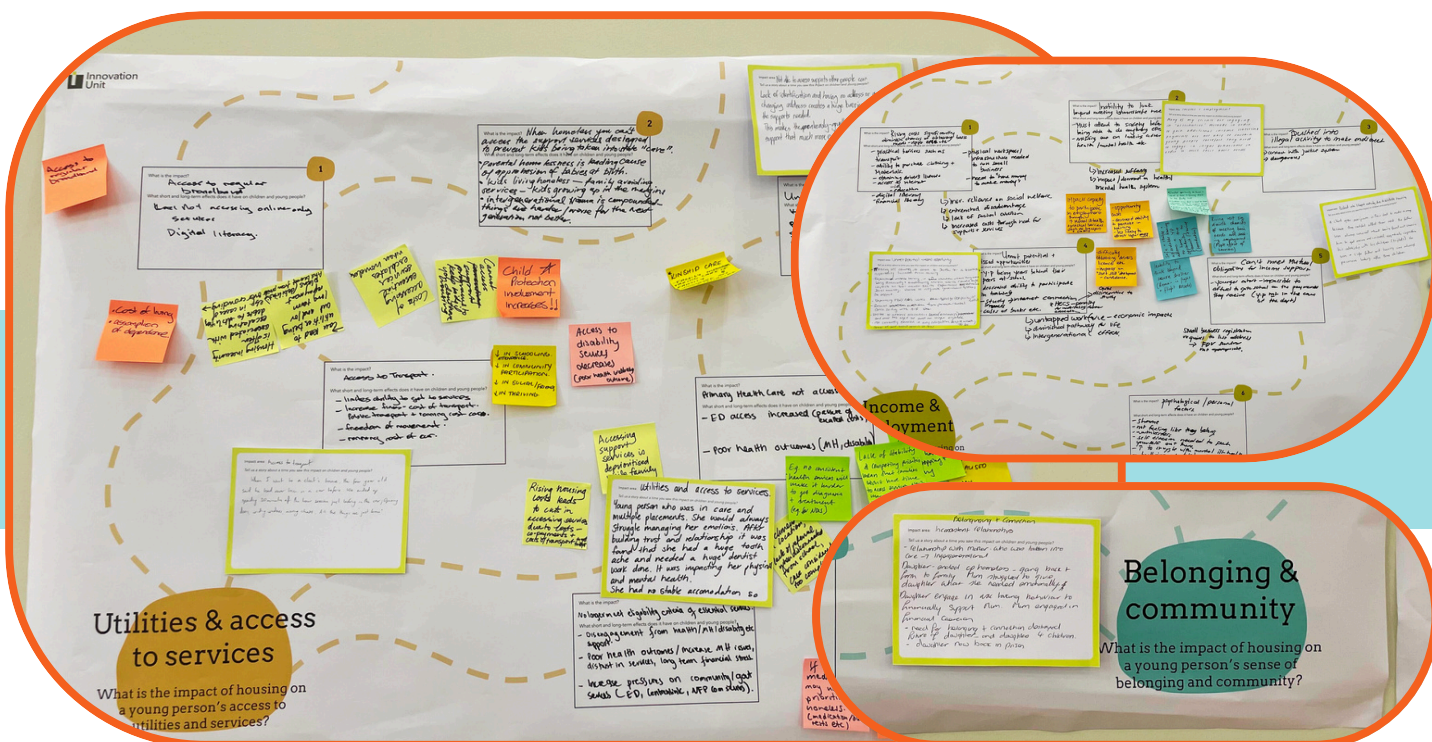
“We need a national and state framework for child poverty.”

“Raise the income and asset level for social housing as people are being kept in poverty.”

“We need a complete overhaul of the child and youth mental health system.”

“We need an increase in the supply of social housing, including a variety of options that suit all needs.”

“Increase rates of youth allowance and job seeker.”



## We want real, actionable change:

*"We need more low barrier services. Young people are falling through the cracks because they are not able to access help that doesn't exist or is at full capacity."*

*"Stop revoking funding for necessary services and supports. Be consistent with support for services supporting homelessness."*

*"Cap rent increases."*

*"Introduce a human rights act."*

*"All children are housed."*

*"Housing is a legally enforceable right."*

*"Families are housed and supported to stay housed."*

*"No foreign or interstate investments of WA property."*

*"Rentals should only be charged at 40% of people's income."*

## Letter to the Prime Minister

- 1) That all children in care need access to a placement (housing).
2. That support and early intervention is given to families.







This event was supported by:



[www.endchildpoverty.com.au](http://www.endchildpoverty.com.au)