



**MISSION  
AUSTRALIA**

# **The unfair divide**

**Disadvantage faced  
by young people  
who are homeless**

**A Mission Australia  
Youth Survey Report**



## Acknowledgements

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 our future leaders.**

**A special thank you to the young people who participated in the 2023 Youth Survey.** We appreciate the views they shared on current issues and personal concerns, as well as their responses to questions relating to housing and finance, education and employment, community and supports, and mental health and wellbeing. We would also like to thank Orygen for their valuable contribution to this report and the Mission Australia front line service staff who provided their expertise.

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# A Message from our CEO

Welcome to Mission Australia's 2024 youth homelessness report. Every two years, Mission Australia delves into our most recent Youth Survey data to glean insights into the perspectives and experiences of young people aged 15-19 who have faced homelessness.

In a country as wealthy as Australia, it's unacceptable that any young person should lack a safe, stable home as they navigate their path to adulthood. Yet youth homelessness remains persistently high. Some receive effective assistance from community services and housing providers like Mission Australia, but funding does not stretch to cover all who seek help. This, coupled with a lack of affordable housing across Australia, means that all too often young people are forced to try to find refuge with friends, relatives or strangers, or to live in unpredictable, uncomfortable or unsafe settings.

**To every young person who has been homeless but has taken the courageous step of asking for help, such as engaging with a housing and community service, you inspire us with your resilience, drive, grit and achievements.**

This report sheds light on the stark realities faced by young people who experienced homelessness in the past year and compares this to their peers who had stable housing. This comparison reveals an unfair divide. Our 2023 Youth Survey revealed that close to one in 10 respondents experienced homelessness in the previous year. This underscores the pervasive nature of youth homelessness in our communities, where young people grapple with the challenges of education, employment and wellbeing without the security of a home.

Youth Survey respondents who were homeless in the past year were more likely than their peers with stable housing to suffer from a mental health condition, experience loneliness, struggle to fit in socially and face financial hardship. They were also seven times as likely to have strained or poor family relationships.

Homelessness can impact a young person's development and its effects are often long-lasting. More must be done to help them.

Although young people who have been homeless face challenges, our Youth Survey highlighted their resilience and determination, as they persist in pursuing education, extracurricular activities and building connections.

Empowering young people to start their journey to adulthood on a solid footing can transform lives. Skilled and caring frontline staff at Mission Australia and other organisations provide wrap-around support to young people and their families, helping them to find and keep safe housing and build brighter futures. It's a testament to the effectiveness of Mission Australia's approach that most young people who were at risk of homelessness remained living in their home and avoided homelessness after receiving our help.

When things go wrong for young people, it's clear the right supports and housing must be quickly put in place. However, amidst Australia's housing and homelessness emergency, the demand for safe, affordable housing far exceeds supply. Too many young people are slipping through the cracks of the system and are pushed into homelessness.

The housing needs of children and young people are met in few cases. Among young people who presented alone to a homelessness service last year, a small proportion of those who needed long-term housing received it, and only around half of those who needed short-term or emergency accommodation received it.

We and our sector colleagues cannot help everyone find a suitable home because of Australia's housing emergency – as we see more and more young people returning to homelessness after leaving our services. This would be avoided, simply by building more homes.

Ending youth homelessness is possible. It requires a comprehensive approach, including the concrete solutions outlined in this report such as investing in housing supply, ensuring adequate rental subsidies, implementing prevention measures and expanding youth housing options like Youth Foyers.

As one of Australia's largest community services and community housing providers, Mission Australia is ready to work with all levels of government, our sector, communities, philanthropists, donors, the public and private sector to end youth homelessness in Australia.

I urge everyone to engage with the solutions outlined in this report and join us in creating a future where every young person has a safe, secure place to call home and the support and care they need to thrive. The wellbeing and future success of our nation's young people depend on it.



*Sharon Callister*

**Sharon Callister**

Mission Australia CEO

## When young people experience homelessness, it makes everything harder

We continue to see persistently high and rising rates of youth homelessness in Australia.

**Young people are over-represented in the homeless population.**



Across different areas of their life, **young people with experience of homelessness have more challenges to overcome** compared to their peers who have not faced homelessness.

Stable, affordable and suitable housing is essential for the development and wellbeing of young people. **The effects of homelessness are often long-lasting.**



**We want to see an Australia where homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.** But currently, for young people, it is none of these.


*I was forced out of my childhood home with my mum after my father made terrible financial decisions, this led to us becoming homeless...* Female, 18-year-old, Victoria

# Key findings

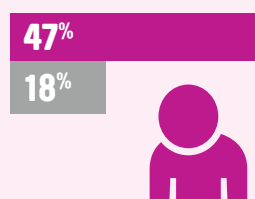
The Mission Australia Youth Survey seeks to understand the perspectives of young people aged 15-19 years regarding current issues, concerns and experiences.

The findings allow us to develop informed initiatives to address issues and advocate for the needs of young people and their families.

As highlighted below, young people who have experienced homelessness face extra challenges compared with those who have stable housing.

In 2023, close to  
**1 in 10**  
  
**Youth Survey respondents**  
experienced homelessness  
in the previous year

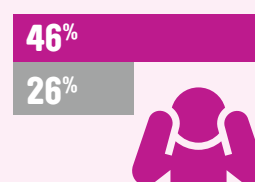
## LONELINESS



**Almost half experienced loneliness *all or most of the time* (47% compared to 18% with stable housing)**

Feelings of loneliness were high for young people with experience of homelessness. Compared with their peers with stable housing, they were more likely to show pessimism about their future and report a lack control over their lives.

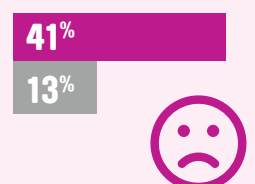
## SOCIALISING



**Close to half found it hard to fit in and socialise with other people (46% compared to 26%)**



It can be harder for young people with experience of homelessness to fit in and socialise, undertake everyday activities like others do, and feel as though the community meets their needs.

## MENTAL HEALTH



**2 in 5 identified as having a mental health condition (41% compared to 13%)**

Mental health issues were a significant challenge for young people with experience of homelessness. They rated their mental health and wellbeing lower, and psychological distress was more prevalent for them.

-  Experienced homelessness in the last year
-  Never experienced homelessness



**2 in 5 sought financial help or could not afford essentials like food, housing, school or transport (42% compared to 10%)**

Young people or their families with experience of homelessness were more likely to have faced monetary difficulties, like seeking financial help or not being able to afford the essentials.

**1 in 3 changed schools at least twice in the past three years (34% compared to 14%)**

A greater proportion of young people with experience of homelessness changed schools multiple times and faced more barriers to achieve their goals. Positively, most young people with experience of homelessness were engaged in study, but on average, satisfaction with their studies was lower.



**Experience of strained or poor family relationships was seven times higher (34% compared to 5%)**

Strained family relationships were more prevalent among young people experiencing homelessness. They were also less likely to turn to parents/guardians and other family members as sources of support.

**Moving homes more often was much more likely (41% compared to 13%)**

Young people who experienced homelessness in the last year were significantly more likely to have had the disruption of moving house at least twice in the last three years, and/or live in a home that does not sufficiently meet their needs.



There are significant disparities between young people who have experienced homelessness and those who have not, which exacerbate their vulnerability. **More must be done to help them.**



# We know what works. However, without enough appropriate housing, we cannot help all these young people

**Mission Australia has a positive impact in the lives of many young people. Most leave our services with an improved housing situation and outlook on life.**

Through holistic, goal-based support to address the issues impacting their housing stability, most of the young people we helped made wellbeing improvements.

Overall, subjective wellbeing improved after they engaged with Mission Australia. They also improved in their level of satisfaction with their:

- standard of living
- future security
- feelings of safety
- personal relationships
- control over their life

## SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

65.3 at service entry

74.0 at service exit

Pleasingly, the average wellbeing scores after leaving our services met the normal range for Australian adults (74 to 77).

Measured using Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), a validated measure of subjective wellbeing.

**Many young people who Mission Australia assists have positive outcomes.**



**96% of young people at risk of homelessness maintained their housing, avoiding homelessness.**

**But for some, the housing emergency means that they did not achieve a safe, stable home.**



**77% of young people who were homeless at entry left our services with an insufficient outcome.** Of those, close to seven in ten were in crisis accommodation, which is safe but only short-term. The remaining young people (31%) did not even have this; the inadequate housing and support system meant that they had to return to insecure arrangements (e.g. couch surfing) or rough sleeping.

**Young people leaving services into anything other than a proper home should not be acceptable.** But in the current housing emergency, we cannot help everyone find a suitable home.

**Young people affected by homelessness across Australia are far too often unable to access the housing and support they need**

**Most efforts to reduce homelessness are crisis measures that target people who have already lost stable housing.**

These can have positive outcomes, but they do not prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place.

**But this is what can be done**

**Ending homelessness for young people will require a range of approaches to make sure that experiences of homelessness are rare, brief and non-recurring.**

Much more investment is needed in measures that address the spectrum of its causes, from universal prevention responses, such as ensuring sufficient affordable housing, through to responses that address system failures and target young people and families in circumstances of high homelessness risk.

**Responses need to be flexible and person-centred,** reflecting the circumstances, needs and preferences of young people who are experiencing homelessness.



# Policy recommendations

**Our policy recommendations are made across six domains, encompassing a range of solutions needed to end youth homelessness:**

## **1 PUT YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE OF HOMELESSNESS RESPONSES**

- Recognise young people as a priority cohort in future national homelessness and housing strategies and funding agreements
- Integrate homelessness and other elements of the human services system at policy and service delivery levels
- Engage young people with lived experience of homelessness in the design and delivery of policy and programs

## **2 CREATE MORE LONG-TERM HOUSING PLUS SUPPORT**

- Increase youth housing options in social housing and private rental, including:
  - Develop and maintain a national pool of at least 15,000 dedicated social housing youth tenancies
  - Construct ten 40-unit Youth Foyers over the next three years

## **3 IMPLEMENT UNIVERSAL HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION MEASURES**

- Increase income support and improve rental subsidies, including:
  - Increase JobSeeker and Youth Allowance to \$80/day
  - Increase the maximum threshold of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 60% and review it together with other rental subsidies, including specific new measures to address the rental gap to remove disincentives for landlords to grow youth-specific housing
- Screen early for homelessness risk through schools
- End gender-based violence by fully funding the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children
- Ensure adequate funding for mental health care

**Our policy recommendations are made across six domains, encompassing a range of solutions needed to end youth homelessness:**

## **4**

### **ADOPT FURTHER PREVENTION MEASURES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH ELEVATED RISKS OF HOMELESSNESS**

- Instigate a \$500 million Homelessness Prevention Transformation Fund, delivering targeted prevention programs and policy reform for groups of young people with elevated or immediate risk of homelessness
- Support at-risk families, through evidence-based early intervention support programs
- Keep at-risk young people engaged in education

## **5**

### **ADOPT FURTHER PREVENTION MEASURES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AT IMMEDIATE RISK OF HOMELESSNESS**

- Rebuild family relationships and households if safe, including by expanding the Reconnect program
- Support youth tenancies through early intervention tenancy support programs

## **6**

### **IMPLEMENT MORE CRISIS RESPONSES**

- Implement more crisis support and accommodation responses for young people that are adequately-funded, person-centred and located according to demand

# At Mission Australia, we believe every person across the country should have access to safe and secure housing

## Here is some advice for different groups:

### YOUNG PEOPLE

Seek help in ways that best suit you.

Know that there are people ready to help.

Get involved to improve youth housing and supports.

### FAMILIES

Sometimes other members of the family are struggling just as much as the young person.

There are services that can support the whole family unit, helping them thrive in safe, stable housing.

### SCHOOLS

Schools, teachers and other staff play a vital role in helping a young person at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Create the conditions where students feel safe to seek help and are supported when they do.

### POLICYMAKERS

Develop and implement a framework of responses that spans permanent housing, homelessness prevention and crisis responses.

### SERVICE WORKERS

See young people as the experts in their own lives.

Involve them in service delivery and design.

Think innovatively about how to support young people's housing needs.

### BUSINESSES

Make workplaces safe for young people.

Provide them with support while they try to find housing.

### MEDIA

Provide compassionate platforms for young people to share their stories.

Hold politicians and government to account for the role they play in ending youth homelessness in Australia.

### RESEARCHERS

Involve young people in the design and evaluation of homelessness solutions.

Champion the voices of young people to understand their experiences and to identify gaps in the current system.

**Reach out.** It is the best thing that you can do in a situation where you are facing struggles with your housing situation, and it is better to seek help rather than keeping things to yourself as it is likely that this will do more harm than good.

**Female, 17-year-old, New South Wales, Advice from a young person with experience of homelessness**

# 1

## Understanding youth homelessness in Australia

Each year, the *Mission Australia Youth Survey* seeks to understand the perspectives of young people aged 15-19 regarding current issues, concerns and experiences. The findings help us to develop evidence-based initiatives informed by what young people tell us, and to advocate for their needs. Every day at Mission Australia, we deliver homelessness prevention and crisis services, provide social and affordable housing, and assist struggling children and young people and their families. Using the data from nearly 20,000 responses to the *Youth Survey* in 2023, this report highlights the experiences of young people who have experienced homelessness, so that all of us – policy decision-makers, teachers, parents and support workers – can better understand the additional challenges they face, compared to their peers who live in safe, stable homes.

This report aims to highlight:

- key areas of disparity between those who have experienced homelessness compared to those with stable housing,
- Mission Australia's impact in this space, and
- what more can be done to end youth homelessness in Australia.

**It should be unacceptable in Australia for any young person on the cusp of adulthood to be forced to experience homelessness.** But the reality is that young people are over-represented in the homeless population. Last year, over 52,000 young people aged 15-24 sought help from a homelessness service [1].

Almost all young people that Mission Australia assists who are at risk of becoming homeless stay safely housed. For most, their wellbeing increases through their engagement with our homelessness services. But of those who are already homeless when they engage with our services, resourcing and affordable housing shortfalls mean that some young people do not achieve a safe and stable home.

Over 31,000 children and young people who seek help are turned away from homelessness services each year because those services are at capacity, including around 17,000 young people aged 15-24 [1]. At Mission Australia, we want to help, but organisations like ours simply do not have access to enough appropriate housing options for them. **We want to see an Australia where homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring. But currently, for young people, it is neither.**

## We will not rest until every child and young person has a safe, stable home

## What is homelessness?

Homelessness is defined in Australia as a person not having suitable accommodation alternatives and where they: are living in an inadequate dwelling; or have no or short and not extendable tenure; or do not have control of, and access to, space for social relations [2] [3].

People are considered to be homeless if they are living in:

- improvised dwellings, tents, cars, on the streets or otherwise sleeping rough;
- temporary, short-term or emergency accommodation – such as living temporarily with friends and relatives, or staying in refuges or shelters;
- severely over-crowded dwellings; or
- staying temporarily with other households – including couch surfing.

This definition has been used to inform the questions in the *Youth Survey* relating to a young person's housing situation. In our analysis of *Youth Survey* data, young people are considered to be homeless if they experienced having no fixed address, have lived in a refuge or transitional accommodation, or have spent time away from home because they felt they could not go back.



## How many young people in Australia are homeless?

### Youth homelessness is not rare

On Census night 2021, over 28,000 young people in Australia were homeless: around 11,000 were 12- to 18-year-olds and 17,000 were 19- to 24-year-olds. This represents close to one in four (23%) of all people experiencing homelessness [4], which is an over-representation of the general population as only 16% of Australians are in that age bracket [5].

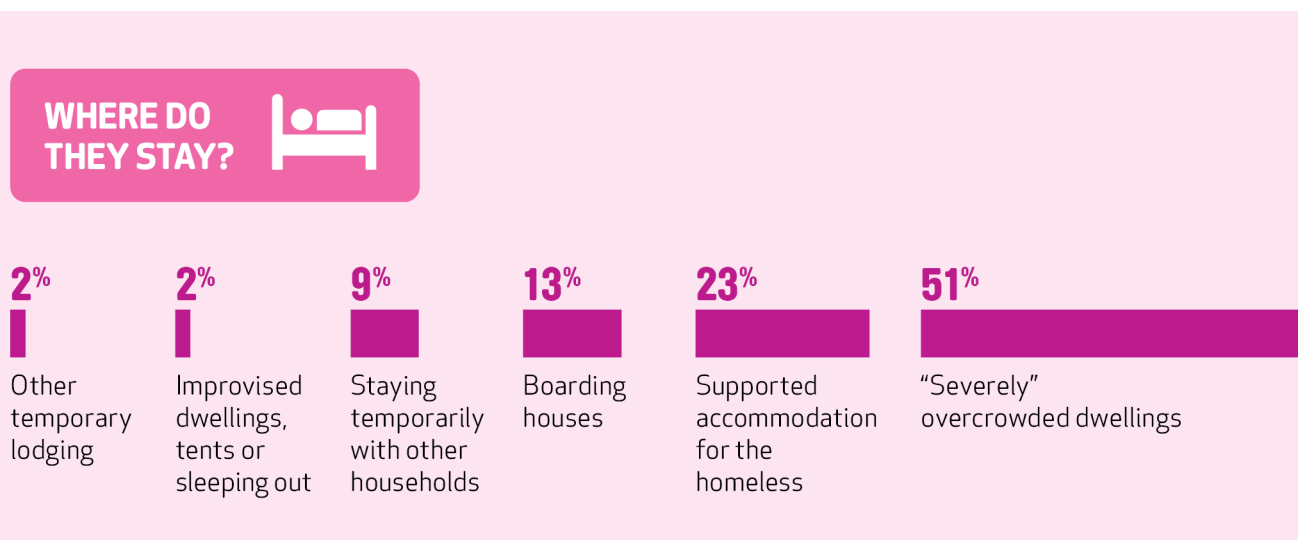
Of all the age groups in the Australian population, the highest rate of homelessness was for young people aged 19-24 (91 people per 10,000). Children aged 12-18 were among the few age groups to increase their homelessness rate since the previous Census in 2016 (from 51 to 53 people per 10,000) [4].

Over 52,000 young people sought support from homelessness services last year: close to 15,500 were 15- to 17-year-olds; and 37,000 were 18- to 24-year-olds [1].\*

These figures are likely to be a significant under-representation of the true number of young people experiencing homelessness. Some forms – especially couch surfing – are hard to count in the Census [6], and many young people do not seek help from homelessness services because they do not know how to, feel uncomfortable doing so, or think that help will be difficult to find due to capacity constraints.

## What does youth homelessness look like?

### Youth homelessness is often not brief or non-recurring



(ABS 2021, young people experiencing homelessness aged 12-24)

\* National data from the Census and the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Collection are not available for the same age range covered by the *Youth Survey*, that is, 15- to 19-year-olds. Comparisons are made here with the closest available age range. For Census data, that is 12- to 18-year-olds and 19- to 24-year-olds; and for SHS data it is 15- to 17-year-olds and 18- to 24-year-olds.



Of the 52,000 young people (aged 15-24) who sought help from a homelessness service last year:

- over 38,000 presented alone. Of those, 55% were already homeless and 45% were at risk of homelessness, and close to two-thirds (61%) had previously been assisted by a homelessness service [1].
  - of young people who presented alone, over 9,000 were unaccompanied minors aged 15-17 [1].
- over 18,000 had experienced family and domestic violence and of those, 76% were female [1]. Family and domestic violence is the main reason women and children leave their homes in Australia [7].

At least 31,000 children and young people are turned away from homelessness services each year because those services are at capacity. This includes around 14,000 children aged 0-14 and 17,000 young people aged 15-24. This is an undercount as some people are not included due to missing data [1].

The housing needs of children and young people are met in a small number of cases. Among young people who presented alone to a service, only 4.3% of those who needed long-term housing received it, and only 49% of those who needed short-term or emergency accommodation received it [1].

The amount of support provided to young people who present alone has increased over time. Over the past five years, the median number of nights that young people spent in accommodation through a Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) agency has increased from 45 to 50, while the length of support has increased from 49 to 60 days [1].

## What are the causes of youth homelessness?

The causes of youth homelessness can be thought of as [8]:

- Structural: including poverty, lack of affordable housing, discrimination and violence;
- Systemic: including inadequate policy and services, barriers to accessing the right help, silos between systems, absence of transitional supports from institutional care to housing;
- Individual/relational factors: including family conflict, unmanaged mental illness or addictions, childhood abuse and/or neglect, and trauma.

Importantly, individual and relational factors are themselves underpinned by structural and system failures. For example, a young person experiencing mental illness may not be at risk of homelessness if they have adequate support from their family and friends, can access mental health services, are socially connected, and are safely and affordably housed. In comparison, another young person with the same mental illness may be at high risk of homelessness if the mental health system and/or the housing market and/or the welfare system has failed.

Youth homelessness is frequently intergenerational. In one study, nearly half of all people experiencing homelessness reported that their parents had also experienced homelessness [9].

Challenging family relationships, including family conflict, breakdown, violence and abuse, are often identified as a major pathway into homelessness for young people [1] [8] [10]. Unaccompanied child homelessness has been characterised as *the presenting outcome of a lack of care and effective guardianship in people's lives* [11]. Again, structural and system failures underpin these factors. A lack of effective gender equity measures, violence prevention, parenting support, family mediation and poverty alleviation all contribute to family conflict and violence.

## What are the impacts of youth homelessness?

Early experiences of homelessness are typically associated with ongoing homelessness. A large proportion of people who become chronically homeless had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 18 years [12].

The development and wellbeing of young people is at significant risk from homelessness, as its effects are often long-lasting. Stable, affordable and suitable housing is an essential underpinning for every young person's economic, mental, physical and social wellbeing and for their transition to adulthood. It is also connected to a positive sense of self, good health, social cohesion and educational completion [13].

The experience of homelessness for young people is fraught. There are strong established links between youth homelessness and mental health conditions, high rates of self-harm and attempted suicide, exposure to drugs and alcohol, contact with the criminal justice system (both as a victim of crime as well as an offender), and placement in out-of-home care [10].

We see the early evidence of these impacts in *Youth Survey* data, with young people who have experienced homelessness demonstrating persistently poorer outcomes across different aspects of life than their peers with stable housing.

Beyond the human costs, there are also substantial costs to government. The total cost of one young person going through the existing SHS system is an average of \$386,000 over their lifetime, taking into account poorer than average housing outcomes, educational attainment and employment compared to the general population [14].

## What housing is available for young people?

There is not enough age-appropriate, affordable housing available for young people. As detailed in the *Housing and financial circumstances* chapter, young people are excluded from housing for several reasons. For those who are able to live independently, Youth Allowance is inadequate for covering most rental properties and therefore rents are unaffordable for many young people in the private market.

Young people should have access to financial assistance products if they need it to access housing, including, for example, the Federal Government's Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) payment or the NSW Government's Youth Choice Rent Subsidy. However, in practice CRA is inadequate to avoid rental stress (across all age groups, 43% of recipients still experience rental stress, that is, are low-income households paying more than 30% of their income on housing) [15] and many young people are unable to take up the Youth Choice Rent Subsidy because it is inadequate for the very high rents currently seen across NSW.

In theory, young people have access – whether as an independent person or with their family – to social housing. However, the across-the-board shortage of social housing is particularly acute for young people seeking to live independently, as their low welfare payment rates mean that their rent contribution does not cover the costs of providing the property. This means that there is little incentive for social housing providers to provide and develop youth-specific social housing.

There are also inadequate options for young people who cannot live independently, whether because of their age or complexity of circumstances. Supportive housing options, such as Youth Foyers, provide long-term housing coupled with on-site support and are an important piece of the youth housing puzzle. However, there are very few facilities providing this type of housing and support.

## What supports are available for young people who are homeless or at risk?

Some young people are well able to live independently; they just need a safe, stable home and the option to access mainstream community services if they need it. Others may need more specialist support to maintain their tenancy and address other issues that could threaten their housing stability.

Governments across Australia fund a range of services to provide support to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These are largely Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) that are commissioned by State/Territory governments and funded jointly by the Federal and State/Territory Governments under the National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness. Some of these offer general services to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness (which may include young people with or without their families); others focus on a particular cohort, including services dedicated to young people.

SHS agencies can provide a range of services, from basic, short-term assistance such as advice and information, meals and shower or laundry facilities, through to more specialised and time-intensive assistance such as financial advice, counselling and professional legal services, alongside crisis or transitional accommodation [1].

There are a number of other youth-specialist homelessness service models that are available to some young people in certain areas. This includes the Reconnect program, a community-based early intervention and prevention program for young people aged 12-18 and their families, which the Federal Government funds in 101 locations across Australia.

**Despite these offerings, young people affected by homelessness across Australia are far too often unable to access the housing and support they need.** Far too few young people who approach an SHS agency seeking accommodation actually receive it: at last count, among young people presenting alone, only half of those needing emergency or short-term accommodation, one quarter of those needing transitional or medium-term accommodation, and only 4% of those needing long-term accommodation. Housing was not the only support that could not be provided to young people who needed it. Only half of young people needing mental health services were provided with them; two-fifths who needed disability support, financial advice or legal services were provided with them [1]. Specialist models of housing and homelessness support for young people, including Reconnect and Youth Foyers, have inadequate coverage across Australia with demand far exceeding supply.

## How does Mission Australia help young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness?

Mission Australia provides a range of homelessness and housing support services across Australia. These services help young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness by providing them with:

- long-term social homes (where rent is 25% of the young person's income);
- long-term affordable homes (where rent is 75-80% of the market rate);
- supports for young people to find and keep a home (called rapid rehousing and tenancy sustainment services);
- short-term accommodation while young people are waiting for a long-term home (called youth refuges or crisis or transitional accommodation"); and/or
- supports for young people who are street present (called "assertive outreach services").

Around 2,000 young people aged 15-19 used one or more of Mission Australia's 55 homelessness and housing support services during the time period captured by the 2023 Youth Survey.\* At the time they entered our services, seven out of ten (71%) presented with someone else, while 29% were alone. Most of these young people (85%) received support from Mission Australia for a period of six months or less.

Of the young people that Mission Australia helped, just over half (53%) were classified as at risk of homelessness when they entered our services. When they left Mission Australia, 96% remained living in a safe home and avoided homelessness. In terms of living arrangements at exit, most of these young people (86%) were living with parent(s), other family members or someone else – with only 14% living alone.

The remaining half (47%) of the young people that Mission Australia helped were homeless when they entered our services, with a quarter of this group (27%) rough sleeping (e.g., on the street or in a car). When they left our services, more than half (56%) were living alone, while 44% were living with another person.

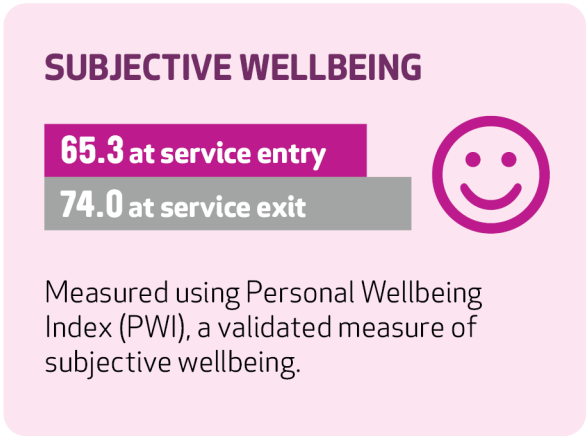
The people who use our services are invited to complete an Impact Measurement (IM) survey at the beginning of their engagement with a service, during their interactions with our staff, and when they leave the service. These surveys help us understand the impact that Mission Australia has had in their life. The surveys include the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)<sup>†</sup> to measure subjective wellbeing (level of happiness) plus questions related to the intended outcomes of the service (for example, questions related to housing).

**We celebrate the young people we support. Overall, we see improvements in a range of wellbeing areas for young people who engage with a Mission Australia homelessness service.** The young people who completed IM surveys had an average PWI total score of 65.3 out of 100 when they entered our services, below the normative range for Australian adults (74 to 77). However, by the time they left our services, the average score had increased to 74.0 out of 100, meeting the normative range.

When examining individual questions within the PWI and other measures, we saw that three out of five young people reported an increase in their level of happiness with their standard of living (61%) and future security (59%). More than half reported an increase in their level of happiness relating to feelings of safety (53%) and their personal relationships (52%). Pleasingly, over two thirds (68%) showed an uplift in the level of control they felt over their life.

While many young people have positive outcomes, resourcing and affordable housing shortfalls mean that too many young people do not achieve a safe and stable home. Of those who were homeless when they engaged with a Mission Australia service, more than three quarters (77%) left with insufficient outcomes. Of those, seven in ten (69%) were in short-term or emergency accommodation and the remaining young people (31%) were rough sleeping or in non-conventional accommodation.

Mission Australia staff who work directly with young people say the situation is worse than they have ever seen. The day-to-day reality is one in which long-term housing is virtually impossible to find and only a lucky few can access temporary accommodation. The lack of long-term housing means that those who do get into temporary accommodation are forced to stay there, excluding others from accessing that accommodation.



\* The period of April 2022 to August 2023 was chosen for analysis of Mission Australia client data as it overlaps with the time period we asked Youth Survey respondents to take into consideration when answering whether they have experienced homelessness in the 'past year'. Clients with their case closed in this period were included if aged 15-19 on the date their case was closed at the service, aligning to the Youth Survey age range (n=2,010). See appendix for more detail relating to the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework used to monitor programs, and the client numbers / IM survey respondent numbers for data discussed on this page (see Tables 1-3).

<sup>†</sup> The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) is a validated measure of subjective wellbeing asking respondents to rate happiness with their life as a whole, and across seven life domains, on a scale of 0 to 10. Scores for the life domains are converted into a total score out of 100 to represent a person's overall subjective wellbeing [43].

*“Trying to support young people into accommodation services has become incredibly challenging. Leaving work knowing young people you have seen that day are sleeping in vulnerable situations where they are at risk leaves you at times feeling quite helpless.”*

MA staff member, inner Perth WA

*“In our area there is hardly any accommodation. We try really hard to find other places for young people to stay using family mapping, talking to schools, or if they are older we can find some hotel accommodation ... we just work day-by-day until we can secure something long-term. We never turn anyone away, but sometimes we have to talk to people about moving far away from the local area to find a place to live.”*

MA staff member, western regional NSW

*“Our service is at capacity most of the time. We have to do what we can to support young people while we wait for that rare place to become available.”*

MA staff member, southern regional NSW

*“One of the challenges with youth homelessness is that services often feel like they are applying temporary fixes. Three months is a brief period for a young person to completely change their life.”*

MA staff member, south east Perth WA

*“Most of the young people we see are refuge-hopping because there’s no way they can afford a home in Sydney.”*

MA staff member, inner west Sydney NSW

**We understand what young people and their families need and link them to the best available support. But without adequate, appropriate and affordable housing stock, we cannot help everyone achieve long-term sustainable housing.**

## What is needed to end youth homelessness?

Youth homelessness in Australia has been a significant social issue for decades, with few signs in the national data of any meaningful decline. Other than a boost to investment in ending homelessness initiated by the Australian Government in 2007, there has been limited Federal focus on homelessness as a policy issue until very recently.

Ending homelessness for young people will require a range of approaches, from prevention measures through to crisis responses, to make sure that experiences of homelessness are rare, brief and non-recurring.

At present, efforts to reduce homelessness across the board are largely crisis measures that are targeted at people who have already lost stable housing [16] [17]. Although these have some positive outcomes, they do not prevent new incidences of homelessness [16].

In order to end youth homelessness, much more investment is needed in measures that address the spectrum of its causes, from universal prevention responses such as alleviating poverty and ensuring sufficient affordable housing through to responses that address system failures and individual and family circumstances.

Governments, community service organisations, schools, health facilities, and many other partners have important roles to play in ending youth homelessness. In particular, government leadership is needed to create a pathway that will allow all of these partners to collaborate on taking action to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring for our young people.

Responses need to be flexible and person-centred, reflecting the circumstances, needs and preferences of young people who are experiencing homelessness. Responses need to take into account the different experiences of children and young people who are homeless with their family versus those who are unaccompanied, and the varying needs of young people of different ages.

These responses can be thought of in six domains that, as detailed throughout this report, encompass a range of solutions needed to end youth homelessness:\*

<p>1 Put young people at the centre of homelessness responses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise young people as a priority cohort in future national homelessness and housing strategies and funding agreements</li> <li>• Integrate homelessness and other elements of the human services system at policy and service delivery levels</li> <li>• Engage young people with lived experience of homelessness in the design and delivery of policy and programs</li> </ul>
<p>2 Create more long-term housing plus support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase youth housing options in social housing and private rental, including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Develop and maintain a national pool of at least 15,000 dedicated social housing youth tenancies</li> <li>○ Construct ten 40-unit Youth Foyers over the next three years</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>3 Implement universal homelessness prevention measures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase income support and improve rental subsidies, including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Increase JobSeeker and Youth Allowance to \$80/day</li> <li>○ Increase the maximum threshold of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 60% and review it together with other rental subsidies, including specific new measures to address the rental gap to remove disincentives for landlords to grow youth-specific housing</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Screen early for homelessness risk through schools</li> </ul>

\* The solutions are categorised according to the Homelessness Solutions Model Framework, a joint venture under development between Mission Australia and the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia. The typology used in the Homelessness Solutions Model Framework is based on a five-part typology proposed by Fitzpatrick et. al. [17], with some modifications to suit the Australian context.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End gender-based violence by fully funding the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children</li> <li>• Ensure adequate funding for mental health care</li> </ul>
4 Adopt further prevention measures for young people with elevated risks of homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instigate a \$500 million Homelessness Prevention Transformation Fund, delivering targeted prevention programs and policy reform for groups of young people with elevated or immediate risk of homelessness</li> <li>• Support at-risk families, through evidence-based early intervention support programs</li> <li>• Keep at-risk young people engaged in education</li> </ul>
5 Adopt further prevention measures for young people at immediate risk of homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rebuild family relationships and households if safe, including by expanding the Reconnect program</li> <li>• Support youth tenancies through early intervention tenancy support programs</li> </ul>
6 Implement more crisis responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement more crisis support and accommodation responses for young people that are adequately-funded, person-centred and located according to demand</li> </ul>

The measures described above in domains 2-6 are detailed in the following chapters according to subject matter (financial circumstances; relationships; education/employment; mental health and wellbeing). In addition, several systemic reforms set out in domain 1 are needed to frame and address these individual issues:

First, young people should be recognised as a priority cohort in national strategic documents such as the National Housing and Homelessness Plan, and National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness.

Second, as discussed throughout this report, young people who are homeless face a range of disadvantages, each of which can serve to compound the others. Measures to improve systems integration at the policy and service delivery levels are an important part of preventing not only homelessness but also negative outcomes in other areas including health/mental health, education and employment.

Third, young people who have been homeless, or at risk of homelessness, should be involved in designing policy and program solutions, as engaging with young people affected by homelessness is a crucial step in making sure that policy and services are ‘appropriate, sustainable and aligned with their particular needs’ [18].

## Recommendations about systemic reform

The Federal and State/Territory governments have a vital role to play in committing to greater investment in homelessness prevention and crisis support. Government leadership on a number of issues is needed to create a pathway to ending homelessness. On the basis of *Youth Survey* findings, we recommend that:

- In view of the particular needs and circumstances of young people experiencing homelessness, the Federal and State/Territory governments continue to recognise young people as a priority cohort in future national homelessness and housing strategies and funding agreements.
- Federal and State/Territory governments commit to integrating homelessness and other elements of the human services systemic at policy and service delivery levels.
- Federal and State/Territory governments commit to engaging young people with lived experience of homelessness in the design and delivery of policy and programs.

# 2

## The Youth Survey reveals persistent homelessness rates over time

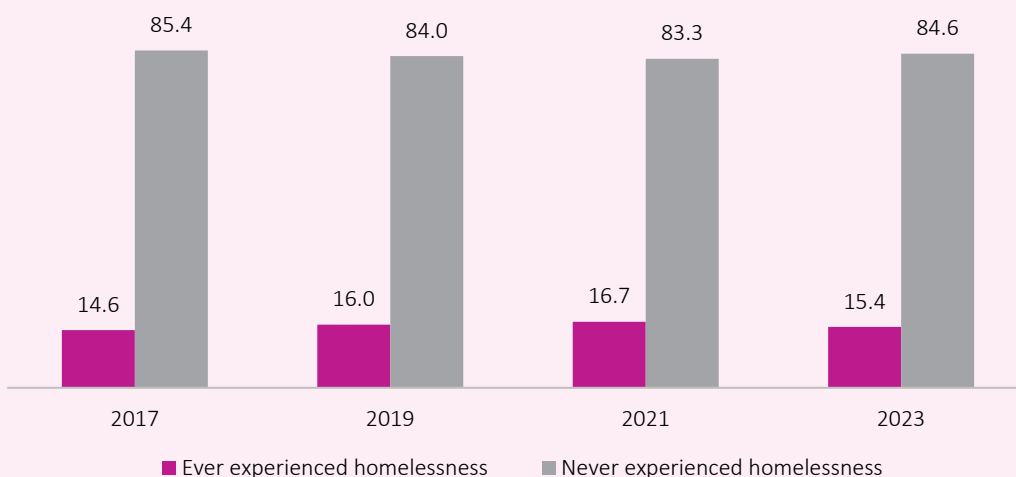
Every two years we ask *Youth Survey* respondents a detailed set of questions relating to their housing situation. Since 2017, we have included questions that allow us to identify young people who have experienced homelessness at some point in their life. We define a **young person who experienced homelessness** as someone who said *yes* to experiencing *no fixed address or lived in a refuge/transitional accommodation* and/or said *yes* to having *spent time away from home because they felt they couldn't go back*.

In this chapter, focused on *Youth Survey* trends over time, we examine two cohorts – **young people who have ever experienced homelessness in their life,\*** compared to **young people who have never experienced homelessness in their life**.

### Prevalence of homelessness

Since 2017, the first year for which comparable data can be drawn, the *Youth Survey* shows persistent rates of homelessness reported by respondents; between 15% and 17% report experiencing homelessness ever in their life (see figure 1).

Figure 1: % *Youth Survey* respondents by homelessness status, 2017-2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: 2017 n=23,734; 2019 n=24,353; 2021 n=19,745; 2023 n=18,876

\* Later chapters focus on young people with more recent experience of homelessness, those who have experienced it in the past 12 months.



## Outcomes

In addition, trended *Youth Survey* data reveals that **young people with experience of homelessness have persistently poorer outcomes than their peers across multiple aspects of life**. In particular, when compared to those with no experience of homelessness, they are more likely to:

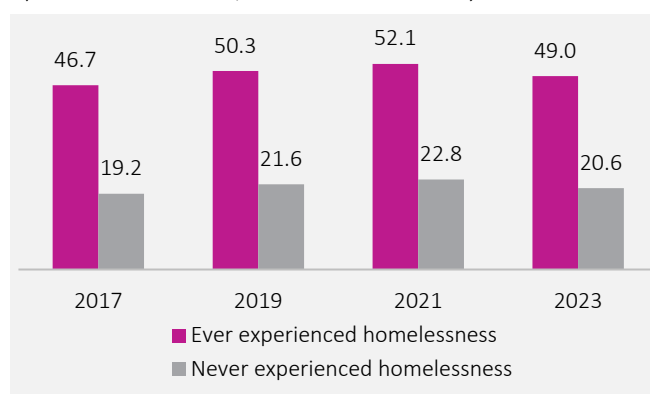
- experience mental health challenges,
- experience dissatisfaction relating to study,
- feel less positively about the future, or
- experience strained family relationships.

Trended data also shows that these results have eroded over time for both young people experiencing homelessness and for 15- to 19-year-olds more broadly. This aligns to other evidence that demonstrates a concerning decline in wellbeing across a range of measures for young people in Australia [19].

## Mental health

Over time, young people with experience of homelessness had significantly larger rates of high psychological distress than those with stable housing.\* Since 2017, close to half recorded a result in the high psychological distress range, compared to approximately 20% among those without experience of homelessness (see figure 2).

Figure 2: % young people with high psychological distress, by homelessness status, 2017-2023 *Youth Survey*

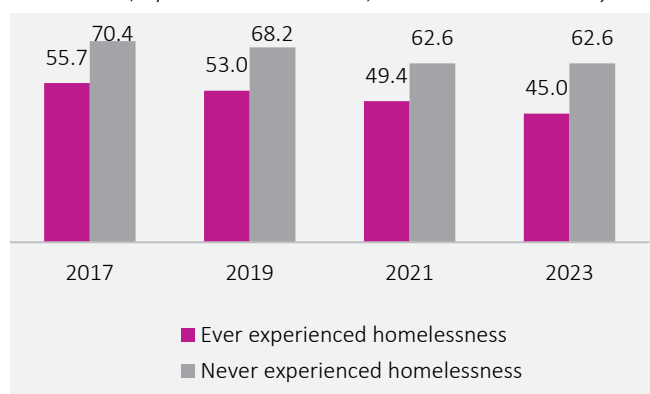


Sample: ever experienced homelessness 2017 n=3,322; 2019 n=3,759; 2021 n=3,205; 2023 n=2,798; never experienced homelessness 2017 n=19,715; 2019 n=19,806; 2021 n=15,960; 2023 n=15,503

## Education

There is also a marked difference in educational satisfaction between the two cohorts over time. Among those with experience of homelessness, 56% rated their level of satisfaction with studies as *satisfied/very satisfied* in 2017, declining to 45% in 2023. There is a significant gap between these young people and their peers without experience of homelessness (between 13 to 18 percentage points), with those not experiencing homelessness reporting greater satisfaction with their studies (see figure 3).

Figure 3: % young people who were *satisfied/very satisfied* with their studies, by homelessness status, 2017-2023 *Youth Survey*



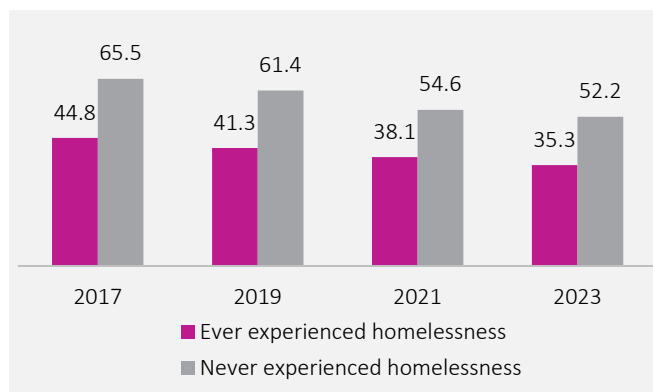
Sample: ever experienced homelessness 2017 n=3,250; 2019 n=3,301; 2021 n=2,882; 2023 n=2,527; never experienced homelessness 2017 n=19,582; 2019 n=18,335; 2021 n=14,814; 2023 n=14,626

\* The Kessler 6 is used, a measure of non-specific psychological distress [44], with scoring (low/medium/high psychological distress) based on the scoring criteria used by the Australian Institute of Family Studies [42].

## Feelings about the future

Young people’s feelings about the future changed over time. Among those who experienced homelessness, positive feelings about the future declined from 45% in 2017 to 35% in 2023. The difference between young people with experience of homelessness and their peers with stable housing ranged from 17 to 21 percentage points, with those in stable housing feeling more optimistic about their future (see figure 4).

Figure 4: % young people who were *positive/very positive* about their future, by homelessness status, 2017-2023 Youth Survey

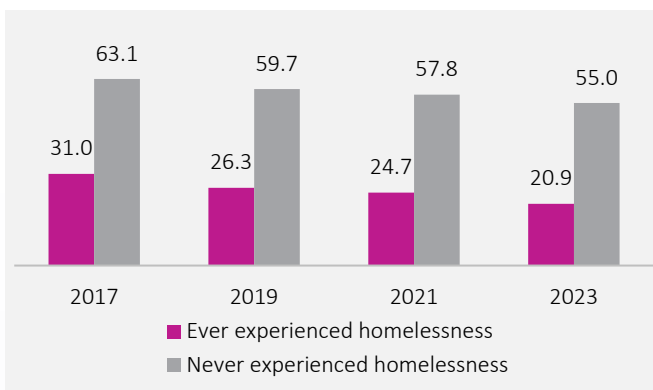


Sample: ever experienced homelessness 2017 n=3,412; 2019 n=3,857; 2021 n=3,283; 2023 n=2,868; never experienced homelessness 2017 n=19,986; 2019 n=20,234; 2021 n=16,372; 2023 n=15,792

## Family relationships

Young people with experience of homelessness were more likely than their peers to encounter strained relationships in their family. Among those who experienced homelessness, those rating their family’s ability to get along as *excellent or very good* declined from 31% in 2017 to 21% in 2023. The gap between these young people and their peers without experience of homelessness ranged between 32 to 34 percentage points, with a higher proportion of young people in stable housing reporting more positive relationships with their family (see figure 5).

Figure 5: % young people who reported their family’s ability to get along as *excellent/very good*, by homelessness status, 2017-2023 Youth Survey



Sample: ever experienced homelessness 2017 n=3,408; 2019 n=3,873; 2021 n=3,290; 2023 n=2,861; never experienced homelessness 2017 n=19,950; 2019 n=20,294; 2021 n=16,361; 2023 n=15,798



# 3

## Presenting the experiences of youth homelessness and solutions

Focusing on the latest 2023 *Mission Australia Youth Survey* data, this report examines the experiences of 15- to 19-year-olds across their financial and living circumstances, relationships and community connectedness, education and work, and mental health and wellbeing, continuing to highlight key areas of significant disparity between those with and without experience of homelessness. Each sub-chapter also presents case studies and discusses public policy recommendations to drive systemic change to end youth homelessness in Australia.

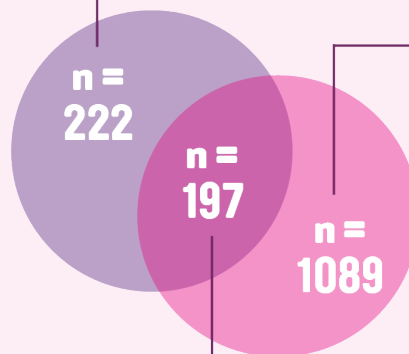
According to *Youth Survey* data in 2023, 1,508 young people that participated in the survey (or 8.6% of respondents) had a recent experience of homelessness. We define a **young person who experienced homelessness in the last year** as someone who said *yes, in the last year* to experiencing *no fixed address or lived in a refuge/transitional accommodation* and/or said *yes, in the last year* to having *spent time away from home because they felt they couldn't go back* (see figure 6). We continue to compare this to young people who have never experienced homelessness in their life.

Figure 6: *Youth Survey* respondents who experienced homelessness in the last year, 2023 *Youth Survey*

**Total respondents with experience of homelessness in the last year N = 1508**

Have you experienced a time when you had no fixed address or lived in a refuge or transitional accommodation?

**Yes, in the last year**



**Experienced both in the last year**

Have you spent time away from home because you felt you couldn't go back?

**Yes, in the last year**

## 3a Housing and financial circumstances

**Key differences for young people who experienced homelessness vs those who did not.**



**Significantly more likely to:**

- move house or flat more often
- live in public housing or out-of-home care
- live away from family and friends, key social connections
- live in homes with facilities that may not meet their needs
- experience monetary difficulties

The housing and financial circumstances of young people who experienced homelessness are significantly poorer than their peers with stable housing. The *Youth Survey* findings build a picture of the instability and uncertainty that these young people face, relating to housing and money, compared to their peers with stable housing.

Other homelessness research confirms that poverty is a key driver of homelessness [17], and that homelessness generally occurs in the context of persistent and severe deprivation rather than brief financial shocks [20]. In particular, child poverty has been identified as underpinning youth homelessness [8]. Conversely, high socioeconomic status has been identified as a protective factor for youth homelessness [16].

Furthermore, many young people with experience of homelessness have faced different types of homelessness (e.g., couch surfing and living in a shelter), have times of rapidly churning between being housed and homeless, or have had interactions with the juvenile justice and out-of-home care systems [9] [10].

The *Youth Survey* findings confirm key areas of disparity relating to housing and financial stability for young people who experienced homelessness in the last year. Moving regularly and living in dwellings that do not meet their needs was common. Financial insecurity relating to essential living costs and assistance from charitable organisations was more frequent for this cohort. In the last year, they were also more worried about finding a safe place to stay.

***“[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] homelessness, bouncing from house to house at a young age.”***

Male, 18-year-old, Northern Territory

## Youth Survey findings

***“At the start of this year, I moved out of my parents’ house, having dealt with domestic family violence. I stayed in a motel for 2 nights, then moved into a refuge for a month and a half, and now I am staying at a transitional apartment...”***

Gender diverse, 17-year-old, New South Wales

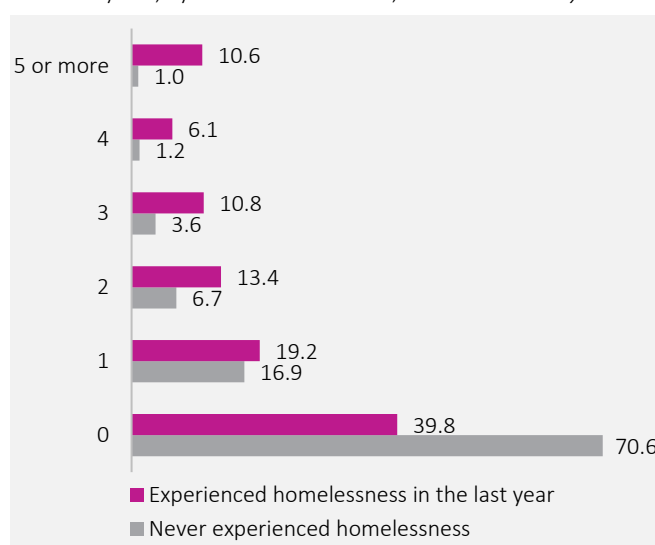
Young people who experienced homelessness in the last year were significantly more likely to report being worried about having a safe place to stay compared to their peers with stable housing (55% compared to 6%). These young people were also more likely to be exposed to instability relating to their place of residence, with significantly higher proportions saying that they had moved house or flat multiple times in the past three years. Among those with experience of homelessness, 41% had moved two or more times across the period compared to 13% of those who had not experienced homelessness (see figure 7).

At the time of completing the survey, most young people with experience of homelessness lived in a privately owned or rented home (72%). However, a significantly higher proportion said that they lived in public or social housing (10% compared to 5.1% for those with stable housing) or in out-of-home care (3.2% compared to 0.7%) (see figure 8).

***“[The biggest personal challenge I faced was] moving houses 6 times so far this year.”***

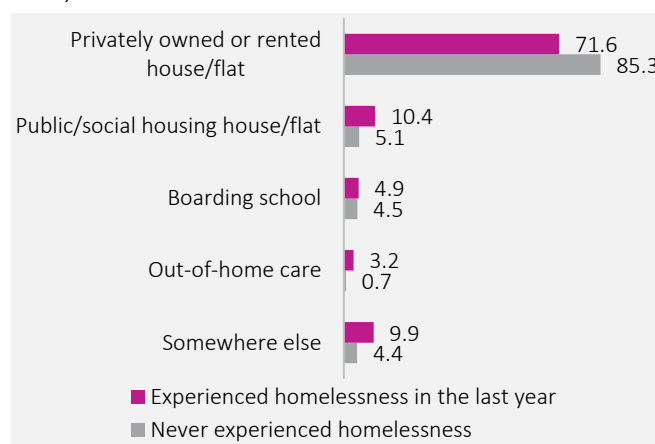
Female, 15-year-old, South Australia

Figure 7: % young people by number of times moved house/flat in the last 3 years, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,499, never experienced homelessness n=15,923

Figure 8: % young people by residential setting most of the time in the past three months, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,492, never experienced homelessness n=15,756

We asked young people about their housing situation across a range of characteristics. On a five-point scale, from *very poor* to *very good*, we asked about features relating to space, comfort, condition and accessibility to understand if their housing needs were being met. Young people who experienced homelessness in the last year were more likely to report having a *very poor/poor* housing situation in relation to all characteristics presented to them. *Space to do homework/study with minimal distractions*, *distance to your family/friends* and *distance from public transport* were the most selected characteristics (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Young people's housing situation by % *poor/very poor*, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey\*

## Housing situation for young people who experienced homelessness vs those who did not

### POOR OR VERY POOR:



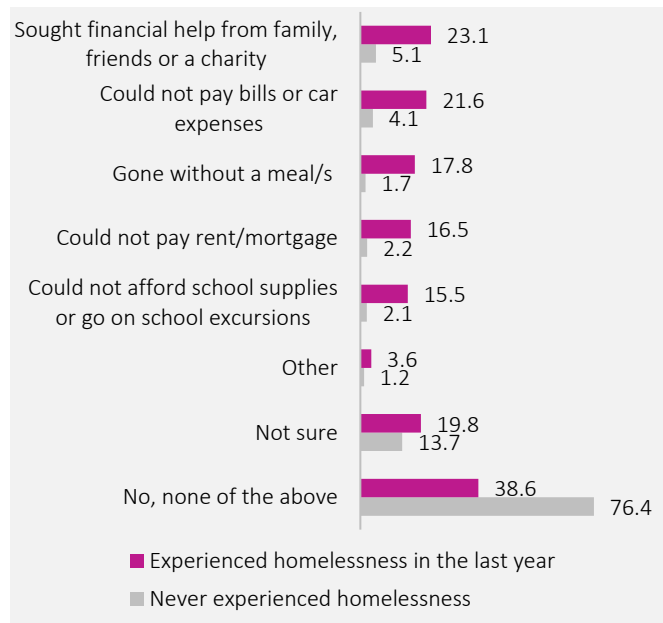
*"[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] financial freedom because money may not be the root to happiness, but it is definitely the root for survival. And growing up with a below average income family has made things tough..."*

Male, 16-year-old, South Australia

\* Sample sizes vary across the different characteristics

We asked if young people or their family had experienced monetary concerns in the last year, with respondents able to select from a range of options or specify their own concern. Financial difficulties were significantly more prevalent among young people with experience of homelessness. Of those with stable housing, 76% indicated no financial difficulties compared to 39% among young people with experience of homelessness. Among the cohort with experience of homelessness, 23% *sought financial help from family, friends or a charity* (compared to 5.1% for those with stable housing), 22% said that they *could not pay bills or car expenses* (compared to 4.1%), 18% said that they had *gone without a meal/s* (compared to 1.7%) and 17% said that they or their family *could not pay rent/mortgage* (compared to 2.2%) (see figure 10).

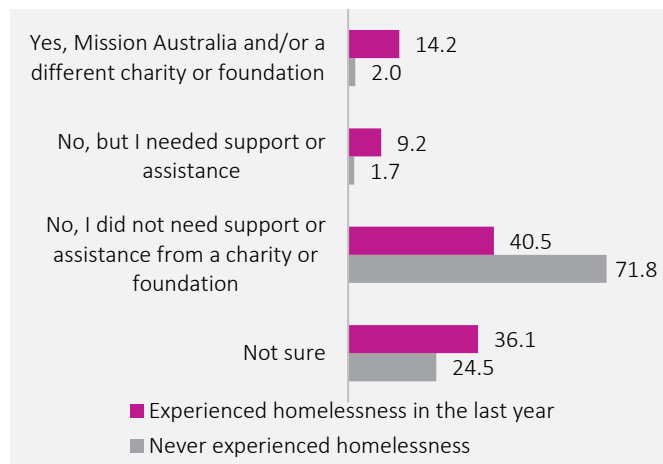
Figure 10: % young people by monetary concern experienced in the last year, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,436, never experienced homelessness n=15,448; multiple choice question

When compared to those with stable housing, it was more likely that young people with experience of homelessness or their family received support or assistance from a charity or foundation in the year prior to completing the survey. They were seven times more likely to receive support or assistance from *Mission Australia and/or a different charity or foundation* than those who did not experience homelessness (14% compared to 2%) (see figure 11).

Figure 11: % young people requiring support from a charity or foundation in the last year, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,431, never experienced homelessness n=15,487

***“...Mission Australia was helping with a lot of my mental health problems and other alcohol related concerns. Also, government agencies such as Centrelink helped with finances.”***

Male, 18-year-old, South Australia

## Policy discussion and recommendations

Poverty and a lack of high-quality affordable housing underpin the experiences of young people facing homelessness. Both are long-standing structural issues that governments have failed to adequately address, and that young people are left to overcome with limited means and options.

Young people who are homeless usually rely on government income support payments, as levels of employment are typically low [10]. They can be particularly disadvantaged in finding affordable housing, as Youth Allowance is inadequate for covering most rental properties. The most recent Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot found zero private rental properties across Australia that were affordable for single people on Youth Allowance, including share properties [21]. Also, young people often experience age-related discrimination in the private rental market and are at further disadvantage due to a lack of rental references [22].

Some young people are not well-suited to private rental, for example due to persistent serious mental illness, and social housing is a more stable option: that is, public housing delivered by government agencies, or community housing delivered by Community Housing Providers (CHPs). However, people aged 15-24 account for only 2.7% of main tenants in social housing in Australia (young people aged 15-19 account for only 0.5%) [23].

This is largely due to the general shortage of social housing, with 225,000 people on waiting lists around the country. Other factors include: some social housing provider staff's unwillingness to place young people there in the belief that they are better off living in private rental; and guidelines and attitudes that restrict young people sharing a tenancy. Another significant impediment is that it is not financially feasible for social housing providers (government agencies and CHPs) to provide and develop social housing for young people. Generally, tenants pay 25% of their income to their social landlord as rent, and the low welfare payment rates for young people mean their rent contribution does not cover the costs of providing and maintaining the property.

Some young people will have complex support needs and will require long-term supportive housing with specialist support, including higher staff ratios and clinical supports. There are very few facilities providing this model of accommodation and supports for young people in Australia.

Given the scarcity of long-term affordable housing, both in the private rental market and social housing, many young people must instead stay in crisis or transitional accommodation while they are waiting for a more stable home. However, there is also a severe shortage of crisis and transitional accommodation options. Among young people who presented alone to SHS agencies in 2022-23, only half of those who needed emergency or short-term accommodation received it, one-quarter of those needing transitional or medium-term accommodation received it, and only 4% of those needed long-term housing received it [1]. Those shocking facts cannot remain unaddressed.

Mission Australia staff members have emphasised how difficult it is to find suitable housing for young people for all of the above reasons. They emphasise that the lack of housing options of all types is particularly critical in regional, rural and regional areas.





**Universal prevention** measures are needed to reduce poverty and increase affordable housing for young people. These include increasing the level of income support payments and rental assistance so that they support stable housing for young people, and removing the barriers to young people's access to social housing. Youth Allowance rates and rental assistance products available for young people should be adequate for those who are living independently; equally important are adequate JobSeeker and other payments available for parents, to support the needs of young people who are homeless with their family.

Raising income support and rental assistance rates will also remove the current disincentive for social housing providers (government agencies and CHPs) to develop more social housing specifically for young people.

To reduce the churn of young people moving through various forms of housing and homelessness, **targeted prevention** initiatives are needed to catch those who are at particular risk of homelessness before they become so. This includes young people leaving institutional care – including justice, health/mental health and out-of-home care settings – to receive transitional support to help them find and maintain safe and affordable housing. Evidence supports the efficacy of these programs for adults [8], and there is some support from evaluations of Australian programs to suggest that these programs are effective approaches for young people also [24] [25].

Additionally, more **immediate prevention** measures are needed, including youth-specific rapid rehousing and tenancy support programs. An example of this is the RESET4Youth program.

## Case study: RESET4Youth

Mission Australia's RESET4Youth is a philanthropically-funded program that supports young people by identifying early risks, providing rapid rehousing and supporting them to sustain tenancies. The Program takes referrals from youth crisis accommodation services and from the community and provides rental brokerage, wrap around support and support co-ordination.

### Story of young person

Martha (name changed to protect privacy) is a 17-year-old single mother who was unable to sustain her tenancy for transitional housing without assistance. She was in advanced rental arrears and was not connected to any support services to help her develop independent living skills.

Martha's case manager has been helping her articulate her goals, which include taking driving lessons, improving her mental wellbeing, learning financial management skills, and gaining employment. Martha was referred to three programs to assist with the rental arrears, access financial assistance and pay for driving lessons. Her case manager has also worked closely with Martha to update her resume, as well provide coaching to increase her confidence at work and in her personal life.

Martha has shown more confidence to reach out for support and has taken the initiative in setting up many appointments. She has been able to manage her finances since receiving assistance for rental arrears and is attending financial workshops. Martha has now been offered job opportunities that will be feasible once she has gained her driver's licence.

Since engaging with RESET4Youth, Martha has shown more assertiveness in her family relationships and employment, for example to request work references. Martha has also improved her mental wellbeing by consistently attending a gym and the local women's health centre.

**Crisis responses** are an important part of the current system for young people who have become homeless and cannot return safely to their family, due to the inadequate supply of suitable long-term homes in the private rental market or in social housing. While waiting for a home to become available, many young people must instead stay in crisis or transitional accommodation, which aims to provide safe housing and wraparound support across a range of life domains to improve wellbeing. Even though such accommodation is designed to be short-term, the current housing emergency means that many young people must stay in crisis or transitional accommodation for prolonged periods, creating a bottle neck where young people ‘bounce’ from one crisis service to another due to a lack of exit pathways.

Mission Australia staff have observed that young people often return to crisis accommodation after spending further time on the streets, during which time their needs have increased due to their mental health declining as a result of the traumatic experiences they have faced during homelessness, as well as increased substance use as a coping mechanism. This is tied to young people losing hope for the future, as seen in the *Youth Survey* data.

Over time, an increase in prevention responses should result in a decreased need for crisis and transitional accommodation, but in the current emergency circumstances this is not yet possible. At present, not all young people who need crisis or transitional accommodation can access it [1] and facilities are under-funded for the services needed by the young people in their care.

There are also other forms of crisis responses to youth homelessness. Integrated models of care that are supported by research evidence [8] include:

- youth hubs - where young people can drop in and receive assistance in a welcoming environment where multiple services are co-located; e.g., housing, mental health care and employment services; and
- assertive outreach mobile programs like Mission Australia’s YouthBeat - where workers build trust through “soft entry” activities like sports, then connect the young people to the supports they request.

Again, the availability of all forms of crisis responses does not meet demand and is especially sorely lacking in remote, rural and regional areas. Some current youth crisis services are underfunded; all must be funded sufficiently so they can deliver integrated, flexible, person-centred and trauma-informed care, and so that they can reflect the circumstances, needs and preferences of young people who are experiencing homelessness.



## Recommendations about housing and income

The Federal and State/Territory governments have a vital role to play in implementing housing and income support settings that are needed to end homelessness. On the basis of *Youth Survey* findings, we recommend that:

- The Federal Government lift income support payments, including JobSeeker and Youth Allowance, to \$80/day in order to keep people out of poverty and away from homelessness risk.
- The Federal Government provide an immediate increase to the maximum threshold of CRA by 60% and direct the Productivity Commission to undertake a comprehensive review of rental subsidy programs including CRA and State/Territory schemes, including considering new specific measures to address the rental gap, to remove disincentives for social and private housing landlords to grow youth-specific housing.
- The Federal and State/Territory governments develop and maintain a national pool of at least 15,000 dedicated social housing youth tenancies, including stock in remote, rural and regional areas.
- State/Territory governments provide information to real estate agents to encourage them to consider young people as tenants in the private rental market.
- The Federal and State/Territory governments instigate a \$500 million Homelessness Prevention Transformation Fund, delivering:
  - targeted prevention programs for groups with elevated homelessness risk, including unaccompanied children and young people who become homeless due to family conflict and breakdown, and young people leaving institutional care;
  - immediate prevention programs, including youth-specific tenancy support programs;
  - policy reforms for these groups, including exit planning and housing assistance for young people leaving institutions such as correctional facilities, out-of-home care and health or mental health facilities.
- State/Territory governments implement more crisis support and accommodation responses for young people that are adequately funded, person-centred and located according to demand.

What advice would you give other young people who are facing challenges with their housing situation?

***“When facing housing challenges, young individuals should maintain a positive outlook and prioritise their needs, exploring various housing options while adhering to a realistic budget. Seeking advice from peers, mentors, and experts, researching thoroughly, and advocating for favourable terms are essential steps. It's crucial to stay open to compromises, utilise available programs, prioritise safety and persevere in finding solutions while also caring for one's well-being.”***

Male, 15-year-old, Western Australia

## 3b Relationships, supports and community connections

**Key differences for young people who experienced homelessness vs those who did not.**



### Significantly more likely to:

- experience strained family dynamics
- have less support, especially from family and friends
- feel less positivity toward their community and what it provides
- experience issues integrating into their community
- experience of unfair treatment or discrimination

**Family separation and conflict are strongly associated with homelessness. There are well-established links between housing insecurity and family conflict, family breakdown, abuse and interaction with the child protection system.**

There is a strong correlation between youth homelessness and experience of violence and aggression in the home as a child. The majority (90%) of young homeless people in one Australian study reported that they had witnessed violence between family members at home in one form or another. Close to two in five (39%) reported police coming to their home because of violence between parents on at least one occasion. More than half (56%) had to leave home at least once because of violence between parents/carers; the median age of those who did so was only 10. Two-thirds of young people had been placed in some form of out-of-home care as children, and current contact with family was infrequent [10].

On the other hand, positive relationships with family and other natural supports can reduce the risk of homelessness [16]. Supportive family and other personal networks significantly reduced the incidence of homelessness among a group of young people leaving out-of-home care [26]. When a young person experiencing homelessness feels supported by their own social group or family, there is a significant correlation to their sense of recovery from mental illness [27].

*Youth Survey* results confirm key areas of difference relating to social connectedness for young people with experience of homelessness, in both their personal relationships and in their interactions with the broader community. Aligning to the literature, they were significantly more likely to experience challenging family relationships or discrimination, and expressed heightened concern around issues relating to family and domestic violence. These young people also felt more challenged in undertaking everyday social and community-based tasks, and held lower opinions of their community and associated supports.

Compared to their peers without experience of homelessness, we saw a similar level of participation in extracurricular activities and groups among young people who had experienced homelessness in the last year. This is an indication that, despite the challenges they face, many are motivated to build relationships, foster connections and pursue their interests.

**“[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] coming to terms with not being able to see my mum because of drug addiction. Struggling with addiction myself. Having falling outs with close friends. Ending a toxic long-term relationship. Working through depression and crippling anxiety. Facing homelessness.”**

Female, 16-year-old, Victoria

## Youth Survey findings

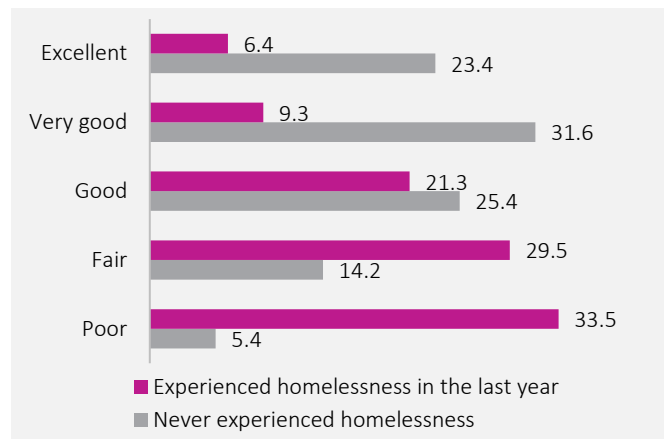
In the 2023 *Youth Survey*, we asked a range of questions relating to young people’s sources of support and sought to understand more about their relationships with other people. We also asked questions to understand how young people integrate into, interact with, and feel about their community.

A key disparity in the life of a young person with experience of homelessness compared to someone with stable housing relates to family relationships. Young people who reported homelessness in the last year were almost seven times more likely to rate their family’s ability to get along as *poor* (34% compared to 5.4% among young people with no experience of homelessness) (see figure 12). Unsurprisingly, young people with experience of homelessness were significantly less likely to identify *parents or guardians* as someone they would go to for help with important issues in their life (36% compared to 69%). *Brother/sister* and *relative/family friend* support was also lower for this cohort (see figure 13).

**“[What helped me overcome my biggest personal challenge was] talking to staff at Salvation Army Homeless Service. Talking to family. Talking to counsellor.”**

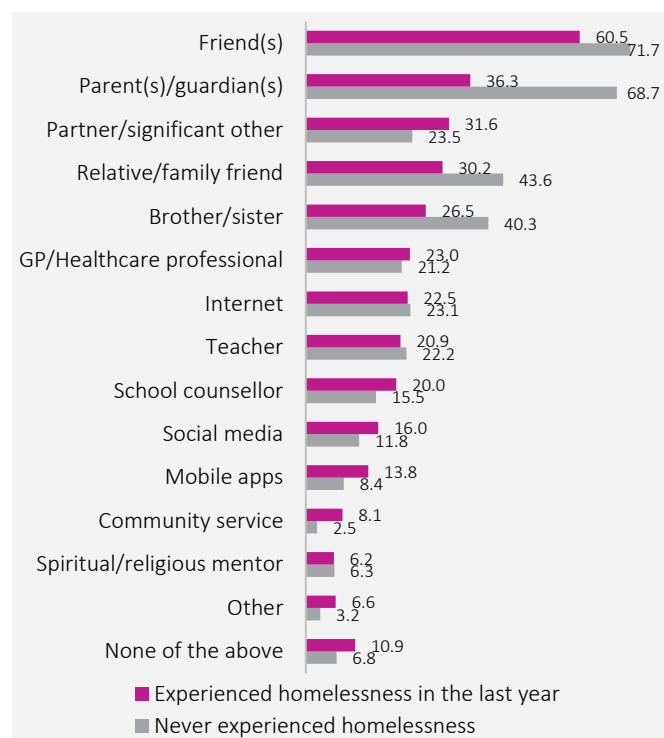
Female, 19-year-old, Western Australia

Figure 12: % young people by ability to get along with their family, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,482, never experienced homelessness n=15,798

Figure 13: % young people by sources of support, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,493, never experienced homelessness n=15,873

Youth Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of personal concern against a range of topics on a five-point scale from *not at all concerned* to *extremely concerned*. While we do not ask whether they have a direct experience of these issues, concern for *family conflict* and *domestic/family violence* was significantly higher for young people with experience of homelessness compared to their peers. Nearly half (48%) of our cohort was *very/extremely concerned* about *family conflict* (compared to 11% among young people with stable housing), with close to one quarter (23%) concerned about *domestic/family violence* (compared to 5.0%) (see figure 14).

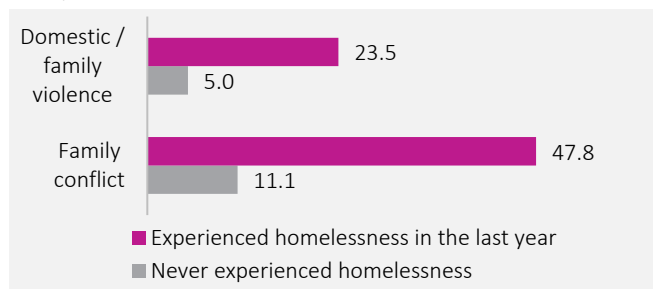
**“[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] being kicked out of home and issues with family violence with my father.”**

Gender diverse, 15-year-old, Victoria

Those who experienced homelessness in the last year were more likely to experience challenges undertaking everyday tasks. Over half (52%) said that they found it hard to *turn to friends and family if they need help* (compared to 26% for young people with stable housing), while more than two in five (46%) said that they find it hard to *fit in and socialise with everyone else* (compared to 26%) (see figure 15).

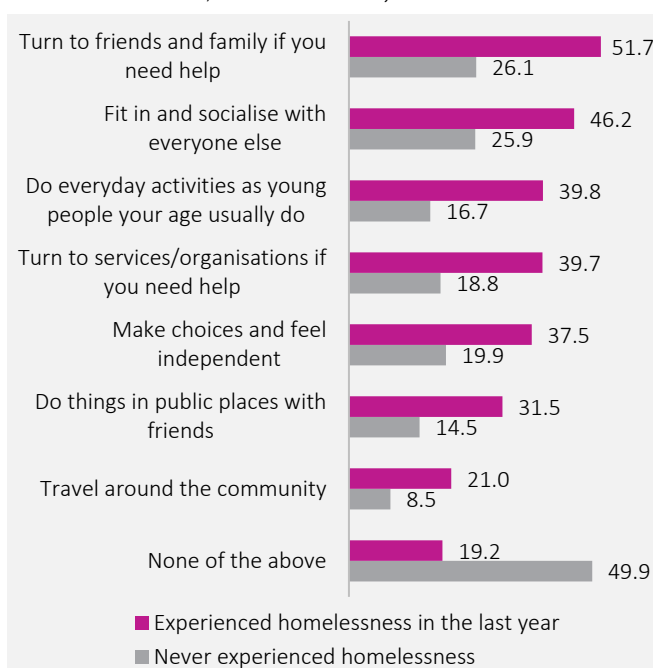
Positive feelings relating to their broader community were lower for young people with experience of homelessness. They were more likely to answer *strongly disagree/disagree* with the statements about their community than those who had never experienced homelessness. Three out of ten (30%) young people with experience of homelessness *strongly disagreed/disagreed* that *young people in my community have a say on issues that matter to them*, higher than their peers with stable housing (16%). Positive sentiment was also lower for both community pride and whether their *community has the things they need for a positive and thriving future* (see figure 16).

Figure 14: issues of personal concern, % young people very/extremely concerned, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year (sample range n=1,479-1,490), never experienced homelessness (sample range n=15,805-15,806)

Figure 15: % young people that found activities hard to do, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,450, never experienced homelessness n=15,430

Figure 16: young people’s feelings about the community, % by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year (sample range n=1,391-1,396), never experienced homelessness (sample range n=15,445-15,457)

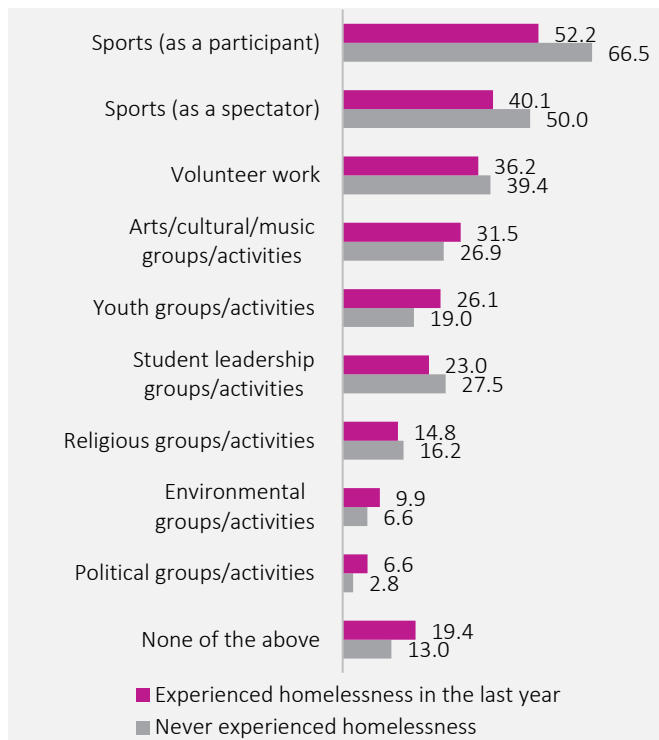
The majority of young people with experience of homelessness in the last year were involved in groups and activities, with four in five (81%) stating that they were involved in one or more of the groups or activities presented to them in the *Youth Survey*. Of young people with experience of homelessness, *sport* was most selected (52% with *participation*, 40% as a *spectator*), although this was significantly less than their peers in stable housing (66% and 50% respectively). They also had relatively high rates of participation in other groups and activities, including *arts/cultural/music groups* (31% compared to 27% among young people with stable housing) and *youth groups/activities* (26% compared to 19%) (see figure 17).

Concerningly, half of young people who experienced homelessness reported being treated unfairly in the last year, a rate that was more than double that of their peers with stable housing (50% compared to 23%). Reasons for the discrimination they faced varied; almost half (47%) cited *physical appearance*; a similar proportion cited *mental health* (46%); and 37% cited *gender* (see figure 18).

**“[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] discrimination based on my gender.”**

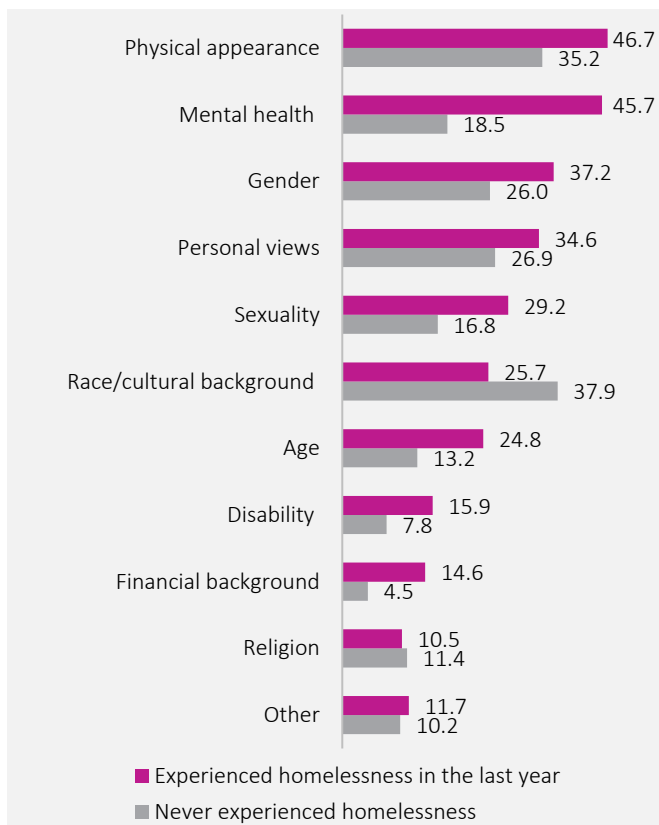
Gender diverse, 17-year-old, Western Australia

Figure 17: % young people’s involvement in groups/activities, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,479, never experienced homelessness n=15,719

Figure 18: % reason for discrimination, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: Those who said ‘yes’ to being treated unfairly in the past year AND experienced homelessness in the last year n=740; OR never experienced homelessness n=3,682

## Policy discussion and recommendations

Family breakdown and conflict is a key driver of homelessness for young people, while supportive family and other relationships are protective factors against homelessness. Promoting positive family and other relationships is an important approach to ending youth homelessness. Nevertheless, family reunification will not be possible for all young people, and alternative measures need to be available for when staying with family is not safe.

**Universal prevention** measures are needed to address the violence and relationship breakdown that can cause homelessness. There is relatively strong evidence for the efficacy of respectful relationship and violence prevention education programs [28]. The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 outlines a range of priority areas for action aimed at ending gender-based violence in Australia, including embedding respect and equality through efforts in workplaces, schools, media and technology [29]. Although the National Plan has been broadly well-received as a strategic vision, there is concern that the funding allocated so far will not meet the scale of need [30].

**Targeted prevention** measures to support families where there is an elevated risk of homelessness, either for the young person individually or the family as a whole, include programs that strengthen family and other natural supports (for example, teachers, co-workers and coaches) [8]. The first 2,000 days of a child's life are critical determinants of physical, social, and emotional health. For at-risk parents and families, support programs such as the Family Preservation program in NSW can help contribute to positive outcomes for children and young people.

## Case study: Family Preservation Program

The primary aim of the Family Preservation program, funded by the NSW Government, is to deliver support to enable children and young people to remain living safely at home wherever possible and prevent unnecessary out of home care (OOHC) placement. In order to do so, the program focuses on improving child and family functioning and enabling families to access appropriate social and practical support.

The program aims to help families achieve positive outcomes including: developing and maintaining essential life and parenting skills; accessing suitable housing, financial assistance and appropriate support services; overcoming addiction and substance abuse problems; accessing appropriate psychiatric assessment and treatment; enrolling children in school and access supports for their educational needs; and identifying and maintaining support networks from within families' existing circle of positive connections.

Other targeted measures specifically focused on homelessness prevention include safe-at-home programs that are designed to keep victim/survivors of domestic and family violence housed. Positive short-term outcomes have been reported from safe-at-home programs, although a lack of longitudinal evaluations means that long-term outcomes are not well understood [31]. Nonetheless, the potential of safe-at-home measures has been recognised and expansion of these measures has been recommended by, for example, the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence [32] and included in the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 [29].

**Immediate prevention** measures that seek family reunification (where it is safe to do so) and promote community connections, such as Reconnect, have been demonstrated to have strong prospects of success for helping young people to stabilise their housing and improve their wellbeing in other areas.



## Case study: Reconnect

The Reconnect program is a vital response for young people at risk of homelessness, as it is the only large-scale youth homelessness program in Australia focussed on preventing homelessness. It has been funded by the Federal Government for over 25 years and is the only homelessness service they contract.

Mission Australia is the provider of seven Reconnect services in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, and assisted over 440 clients in the 2022-23 financial year. Our goal is to improve family relationships so each young person (12-18 years old) can return to the family home, if safe and appropriate. If this is not possible, the young person is supported to obtain alternative housing.

Three out of four young people (74%) had improved subjective wellbeing (PWI) when leaving Mission Australia's Reconnect services. We also saw that two thirds (67%) showed an uplift in the level of control they felt over their life, with a similar proportion (65%) reporting an increase in their level of happiness with their future security. Almost all young people (97%) were living in secure and stable housing when they left the service.\*

### Recommendations about relationships and community connections

Government leadership and funding can play a key role in promoting positive relationships and ending violence. On the basis of *Youth Survey* findings, we recommend that:

- The Federal and State/Territory Governments commit to adequately funding the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children to support its full implementation.
- State and Territory governments roll out evidence-based early intervention family support programs for families at risk of homelessness.
- The Federal Government extend the Reconnect program until 2029 and expand its geographic reach, through an investment of at least \$100 million, to prevent youth homelessness.

What advice would you give other young people who are facing challenges with their housing situation?

***“If it is because your family can't afford to live there, trust me, your parents are doing everything possible to make sure your safe and have a roof above your head. If it is because your family is dangerous, talk to someone, anyone.”***

Male, 17-year-old, Australian Capital Territory

\* Reconnect data was analysed across July 2022 - December 2023 and includes clients who had matched IM survey data at exit for PWI, control over life and future security. Secure and stable housing data is provided by staff at client exit. Sample sizes: PWI n=188, control over life n=189, future security n=189, secure/stable housing n=240.

## Story of young person

Emily (name changed to protect privacy) is 16 years old and was referred to Mission Australia for help by a local victim services counsellor. Emily had moved out of her family home to live with her maternal aunt, uncle and younger cousin after the breakdown of her relationship with her mother. She had a history of significant physical and emotional neglect and was experiencing ongoing verbal and emotional abuse from her mother, until she decided she was unable to continue to live safely in the family home.

Emily's extended family provided a safe alternative home for her as they were made aware of the neglect and abuse she was experiencing. Emily's case manager immediately helped her to apply for income support from Centrelink. Following this, the case manager met with her and her aunt's family to ensure that the new living situation remained positive and stable. This involved discussing family expectations and rules, as well as explaining how neglect and abuse can impact development, and how to respond when Emily was struggling to manage emotions due to the trauma.

Emily continues to live successfully with her aunt's family and maintains contact with her mum. She also sees her counsellor regularly and is using strategies to address her trauma, regulate her emotions and improve her self-care. Throughout this time, she has maintained a strong connection to school and community sport.

The support Mission Australia offered to Emily has focused on liaising with family members to stabilise the new living situation, strengthening relationships between herself and her extended family, helping her access medical care she had not previously been able to, supporting ongoing engagement with education, and building independence and self-care skills.



## 3c Education and employment

Key differences for young people who experienced homelessness vs those who did not.



### Significantly more likely to:

- experience lower satisfaction levels relating to study
- change schools more often
- experience more barriers to achieving study and work goals
- be searching for a job

**Exclusion from education and employment is commonly associated with homelessness for young people.**

Studies over a long period have shown children who are homeless also have a high rate of disengagement from education [33]. Homeless young people are more likely than their peers to leave school early, although some studies have identified higher-than-expected rates of attendance that speaks to their resilience and the support that they are receiving through formal or informal channels [10].

Unemployment rates among homeless young people have been measured as high as 84%, with a lack of permanent accommodation and poor health or disability being identified as common barriers to finding and keeping work [10].

Despite these barriers, the *Youth Survey* showed that the proportion of young people, with experience of homelessness, who held paid employment was consistent with their peers. Among those without a job, there was a greater proportion who were actively looking for employment among young people with experience of homelessness.

Among *Youth Survey* respondents with experience of homelessness in the last year, many reported that they were attending school or other educational institutions. However, dissatisfaction with study was more prevalent for this group than for their peers with stable housing, and they faced more barriers to achieving their study or work goals.

*“I’m not happy with where and how I live. My family was all good, I had a pretty good house and everything was chill, but then my parents got divorced and my dad’s business failed, and he had to sell the house for cheap. Now my dad is too old to do full time work and is near retirement, and so we have to use government housing/social housing, and idk lately I’ve been getting a bit worked up about that so I’ve been taking it out on him, just yelling and all that. Cos [sic] of this I’ve been trying to solve it on my own. I keep tryna [sic] find different ways to make money and I think its distracting me from school, because I don’t think school is directly gonna [sic] help me make money in the present and the future.”*

Male, 15-year-old, Western Australia

## Youth Survey findings

In the 2023 *Youth Survey*, we asked a range of questions relating to education and employment to understand if respondents are currently studying, satisfied with their studies, have paid employment status, are confident to achieve their goals, and face any barriers in achieving their work or study goals.

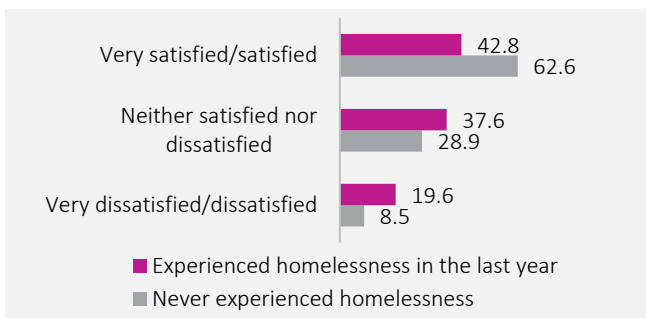
There was a high level of engagement in education for both cohorts, with close to nine in ten (89%) *Youth Survey* respondents with experience of homelessness in the last year engaged in full-time or part-time study (only slightly less than those with stable housing, 93%).

However, young people who experienced homelessness were more likely to feel dissatisfaction towards their studies. More than double the proportion (20%) of young people who experienced homelessness in the last year reported being *very dissatisfied/dissatisfied* with their studies compared to those who did not experience homelessness (8.5%). Though this finding is significant, it is hopeful to see that 43% were *satisfied/very satisfied* with the remaining 38% giving a neutral response (see figure 19).

As reported in the *Housing and financial circumstances* section, 22% of young people experiencing homelessness found their housing situation to be inadequate as a *space to do homework/study with minimal distractions* (compared to 5.3% for young people with stable housing). This increases to 36% among those who reported dissatisfaction with their studies, an indication that resources and supports at home play a role in overall educational satisfaction.

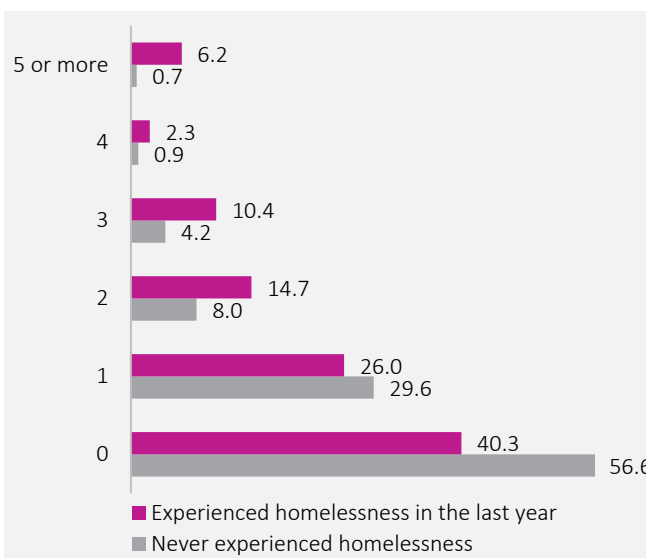
Young people change schools for a variety of reasons, but research shows that the more times a student moves schools, the greater the negative impact on outcomes and an increased likelihood of leaving school before completing Year 12 [34]. We asked young people who moved homes at least once in the last three years how many times they had changed schools. Young people who experienced homelessness were significantly more likely to have changed schools in the last 3 years compared to their peers with stable housing, with a third (34%) reporting they changed schools two or more times in the last three years compared to 14% among those without experience of homelessness (see figure 20).

Figure 19: % young people's level of satisfaction with their studies, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: Those who were studying AND experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,319, OR never experienced homelessness n=14,626

Figure 20: Number of times young people changed schools in the last 3 years, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: Those who moved homes at least once in the last three years AND experienced homelessness in the last year n=889, OR never experienced homelessness n=4,631

***“Moving has been the hardest for me this past year because we were always moving around, and I was going to different to schools...”***

Female, 17-year-old, Queensland

The proportion of young people in both cohorts who had paid employment was consistent, with just over half in either permanent or casual employment. However, different circumstances were at play among those who were not employed. More than a third (36%) of young people who experienced homelessness said they were currently not working but were looking for work, a significantly higher proportion than those with no experience of homelessness (27%) (see figure 21). This reflects a similar finding in another study, where 52% of young people who were homeless were not employed but reported that they were looking for and available to start work [10].

Figure 21: % young people by paid work status, by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,499, never experienced homelessness n=15,913



When asked if there were any barriers that impacted their achievement of study and/or work goals, young people who experienced homelessness were more likely to say yes than those who have never experienced homelessness (63% compared to 35%). The number of barriers faced by this cohort was also higher at an average of 3.4 per respondent (compared to 2.6 among young people with stable housing). The main barriers that were reported by young people who experienced homelessness were *mental health* (57%), *academic ability* (33%) and/or *financial difficulty* (32%) (see figure 22).

Figure 22: Barriers experienced that prevented achievement of work/study goals, % by homelessness status, 2023 Youth Survey



Sample: Those who said 'yes' to having a barrier that prevented them from achieving their school/work goal AND experienced homelessness in the last year n=719, OR never experienced homelessness n=4,598

*"[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] my mental health and lack of family support."*

Female, 16-year-old, Queensland

## Policy discussion and recommendations

Efforts need to be directed at keeping young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness engaged with education. Educational attainment is an important predictor of future employment, welfare and health outcomes. Research indicates that young people who have achieved Year 12 or higher qualifications are less likely to experience economic disadvantage in later life [35].

As well as being important for maintaining the wellbeing of young people, and contributing towards their long-term social and economic participation, schools provide a near-universal opportunity for screening and early identification of risk of homelessness. The Community of Schools and Services model is a good example of this.

### Case study: Community of Schools and Services model

The Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model is an effective early identification model for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The Geelong Project, the original exemplar of the COSS model and funded by the Victorian Government with support from the Federal Government and Swinburne University [36], aims to reduce youth homelessness and educational disengagement by building capacity and resilience, ensuring safe and supportive environments, maintaining positive engagement with education, and connecting young people and families to their community. This is achieved through the universal screening of young people and the provision of support to schools, young people, and their families through a collaborative network of the partners.

Between 2013 and 2016, the number of adolescents entering the SHS system in Geelong declined by 40%. Since 2019, universal risk screening has also been successfully piloted, with NSW Government funding, in secondary schools in Albury, Penrith and Mount Druitt [37].

Some young people who cannot live at home may only need short-term assistance with accommodation to develop and achieve educational or employment pathways. For this group, Youth Foyers are a very effective model, as they provide an integrated learning and accommodation setting coupled with personalised mentoring and coaching to reduce each young person's dependence on social or welfare services.

### Case study: Youth Foyers

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 and employment supports.

Based on 2020 data from nine Foyers across Australia, young people are 1.6 times more likely to achieve a higher level of education compared to their peers accessing specialist homelessness services (SHS). Further, 65% of young people in Foyers gain employment compared to 51% in SHS, and 80% exit into stable housing compared to 62% for SHS.

It is estimated that Foyers results in an overall per person benefit to government of \$172,417 in avoided costs over 40 years. The investment in Foyers is paid back within four years [14].

Young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness face an immediate crisis situation that can easily distract them from focusing on their schooling. This could be a disruptive or unsafe home, concerns about where they will sleep that night and/or whether they will have something to eat. Expecting young people to remain actively engaged in education under these circumstances is unrealistic without offering support or flexible and alternative learning options.

As reflected in the *Youth Survey* data, an encouraging proportion of young people who are experiencing homelessness are still able to engage with study. This is an extraordinary testament to their perseverance and commitment to learning. Mission Australia staff have supported many young people living in crisis or transitional accommodation to attend school, TAFE or university, and specialist workers are sometimes funded to provide this support and encourage educational engagement.

Where students disengage from traditional forms of education, alternative education programs can help by addressing the complex issues that drive non-attendance at school and provide a flexible, safe and supportive learning space that helps to foster feelings of independence, security and tolerance among the students.

## Case study: SOLAR

During the first COVID lockdown in 2020, Youth Off The Streets developed a schooling program via Off-campus Learning for At-Risk students (SOLAR) and integrated it into an independent school. The program offers students personalised curricula through a mix of in-class and remote settings. The program follows a project-based learning model to maximise student engagement and is delivered by one teacher, promoting trusting relationships with the teacher and the small group of classmates facing similar adversity, within a safe, less distracting environment.

This program is now embedded in six independent schools operated by Youth Off The Streets, which are registered and accredited with the NSW Education Standards Authority. These schools additionally offer learning programs for students in Years 9-12 that comply with NSW and Australian curriculum requirements, wellbeing initiatives, highly skilled teaching staff and a flexible approach to learning that responds to the needs and interests of individual students.

## Recommendations about education and employment

Governments can play a key role in keeping at-risk young people engaged in education, including through funding, evaluating and replicating education support and alternative pathways that address the complex needs of students experiencing or at risk of homelessness. On the basis of *Youth Survey* findings, we recommend that:

- State and Territory governments roll out universal homelessness risk screening tools, based on the Community of Schools and Services model, in all schools.
- The Federal Government invest \$184 million capital to construct ten 40-unit Youth Foyers over the next three years.

What advice would you give other young people who are facing challenges with their housing situation?

***“Have as many people around you who can support you, the more support the easier it is. Try to keep going to school. Don't let being away from home stop you from getting an education.”***

Female, 16-year-old, South Australia



## Story of young person

Jenny (name changed), aged 17, was referred to Mission Australia for help with behavioural issues and alcohol and other drug concerns. She needed support to better cooperate with people in the youth justice system and her school.

Jenny left school at the start of the year but found a job within three days of leaving. She is now doing an apprenticeship, always arrives on time for her shifts and works beyond her allocated hours.

Jenny had a rough patch when she and her partner became homeless. Her case manager secured them both temporary accommodation and Jenny still managed to arrive at work on time, showing persistence during difficult times. Throughout the months spent working with Jenny, her case manager noticed an amazing improvement in her willingness to keep learning and working towards her goals.

Jenny has recently been successful in finding semi-independent accommodation with a housing provider. She is excited and grateful about this opportunity and is determined to stay on the right track.

Since then, Jenny's case manager has been working with her to build her confidence and self-worth. She has not engaged in any criminal activity and has not received any additional warnings or cautions. She is committed to disengaging with destructive behaviours, only being around people who can reinforce her choice of that and continuing with her educational journey.



## 3d Mental health and wellbeing

**Key differences for young people who experienced homelessness vs those who did not.**



### **Significantly more likely to:**

- rate their general mental health and wellbeing as poor
- experience high psychological distress
- experience loneliness
- be less optimistic about the future
- feel less in control of their life

**There is a strong relationship between mental ill-health and homelessness. For some young people, mental ill-health causes or contributes to homelessness; for others, experiences of homelessness result in mental ill-health; and for other people the two are co-occurring [38] [8].** Extremely high levels of psychological distress have been reported among populations of homeless young people [39] [40]. Young people have identified better access to mental health supports for themselves and their families as something that would prevent homelessness and make transitions to stable housing faster and more successful [8].

Nearly half (48%) of young people presenting alone to SHS in Australia reported having a current mental health issue, and 15% needed help in connecting to mental health services (compared to 8.3% of all people seeking help from a service) [1].

*Youth Survey* results align to the literature and SHS data, with our measures of mental health and wellbeing continuing to highlight the challenges that young people with experience of homelessness face compared to their peers. Results showed that more than half of this cohort experienced high psychological distress four weeks prior to completing the survey, and were also more likely to experience heightened loneliness, lack of control over their lives, and report more pessimistic views about the future.

*“[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] battles with my mental health and family relationships. I have C-PTSD from my current living situation and having bad mental health and still living with them it has been so difficult to get through my life. With the current housing crisis my family have been feeling unstable and not sure when we will become homeless because it is becoming more and more likely.”*

Gender diverse, 17-year-old, Queensland

## Youth Survey findings

In the 2023 *Youth Survey* we asked young people if they identify as a person with a mental health condition. Among those who experienced homelessness in the last year, we saw a significantly higher proportion indicate *yes*, compared to those who have never experienced homelessness (41% compared to 13%). Some of the conditions they reported were anxiety, depression, attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

We asked young people how they would rate their own mental health and wellbeing on a five-point scale from *poor* to *excellent*, with significant differences between young people who experienced homelessness compared to those with stable housing. More than a third (36%) of young people who experienced homelessness selected *poor* compared to 9.4% among those who had never experienced homelessness. They were also over-represented in the *fair* category at 30% compared to 24% for those with no experience of homelessness (see figure 23).

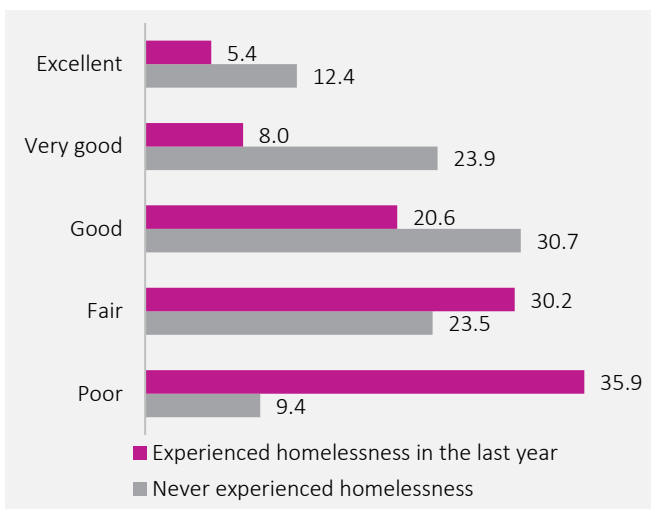
***“[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] poor mental health, money troubles, having to leave my house because of my alcoholic stepdad..”***

Female, 16-year-old, South Australia

Close to three times the proportion (56%) of young people who experienced homelessness in the last year had high psychological distress compared to those who never experienced homelessness (21%) (see figure 24).<sup>\*</sup> As found in other research, psychological distress is a known risk factor for homelessness, with the latest *Youth Survey* data continuing to demonstrate that this is a persistent issue for young people with experience of homelessness.

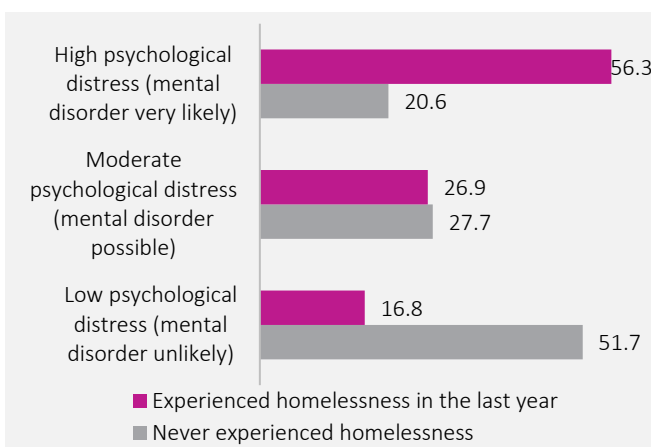
<sup>\*</sup> The Kessler 6 is used, a measure of non-specific psychological distress [44], with scoring (low/medium/high psychological distress) based on the scoring criteria used by the Australian Institute of Family Studies [42].

Figure 23: % young people by general mental health and wellbeing, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,497, never experienced homelessness n=15,897

Figure 24: % young people by level of psychological distress, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,435, never experienced homelessness n=15,503

***“My mental health has been really dark for the past year as a factor of difficult circumstances at home..”***

Gender not given, 17-year-old, Victoria

The *Youth Survey* asked young people about the degree to which they felt lonely, that helps to build an understanding of young people's social connectedness. Most *Youth Survey* respondents felt lonely at least *a little of the time*, but for young people who experienced homelessness, this was a much more common occurrence. Close to half (47%) of those who experienced homelessness in the last year felt lonely *all of the time* or *most of the time* in the four weeks prior to completing the survey, which was much higher than those who had never experienced homelessness (18%) (see figure 25).

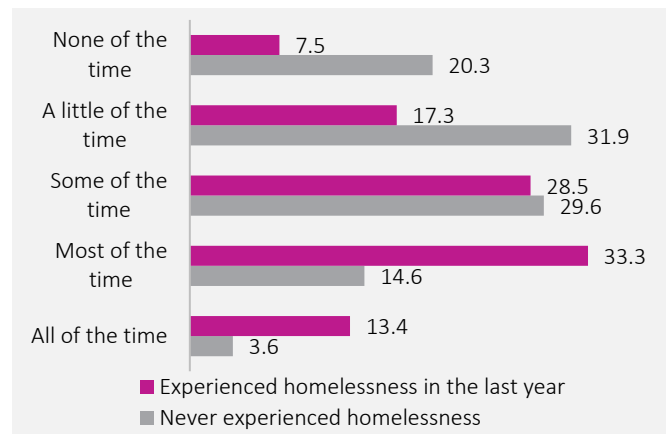
We asked young people how they felt about the future to understand the level of optimism or pessimism they had for what lies ahead. One third (32%) of young people who experienced homelessness in the last year felt *very positive/positive* about their future, which was less than those who had never experienced homelessness (52%) (see figure 26).

We also asked young people to rate the level of control they felt they had over their life. Three out of ten (30%) young people who said they experienced homelessness in the last year reported feeling like they had *no control* or *almost no control* over their life, which was significantly higher than those who never experienced homelessness (8%) (see figure 27).

***[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] trying to make friends. I tried to speak to everyone and be kind and learn names at the start of the year but no one really starts conversations with me outside of school unless I start and I've ended up being quite lonely.."***

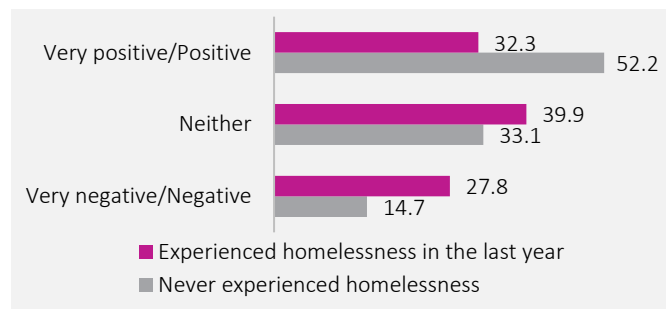
Female, 17-year-old, Victoria

Figure 25: % young people by how often they felt lonely in the last four weeks, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



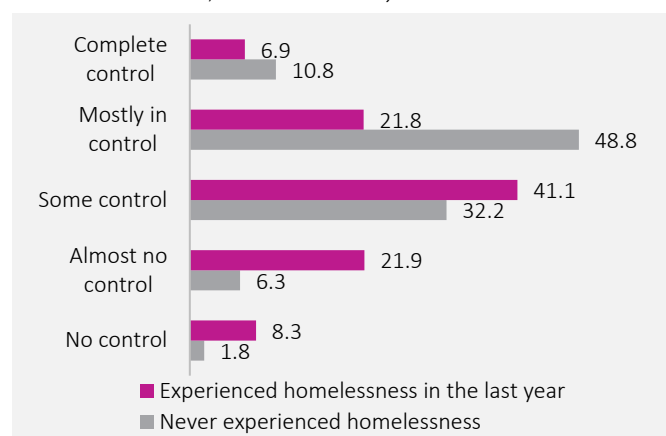
Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,485, never experienced homelessness n=15,823

Figure 26: % young people by feelings about the future, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,483, never experienced homelessness n=15,792

Figure 27: % young people by level of control over their life, by homelessness status, 2023 *Youth Survey*



Sample: experienced homelessness in the last year n=1,477, never experienced homelessness n=15,821

*“[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the last year was] bad mental health, and unfortunately suicidal thoughts. Struggling with depression but no one around. Being scared of the future and not having a mentor or guide. Family dramas and fights, I guess struggling with life in general!”*

Male, 17-year-old, Queensland

When mental health challenges are present, other aspects of a young person’s life can be impacted. As discussed in the *Education and Employment* section of this report, mental health was the top barrier to achieving study and/or work goals, well ahead of the other identified barriers. Additionally, as reported in the *Relationships, supports and community connections* section, half of young people with experience of homelessness reported being treated unfairly in the last year, with mental health the most commonly cited reason for this discrimination.



## Policy discussion and recommendations

Gaps between the homelessness and mental health system for young people have been widely recognised, and include funding constraints, lack of outreach services, and missed opportunities for early intervention that perpetuate a cycle of some young people moving between hospital Emergency Departments and crisis accommodation [41].

Policy and program solutions need to be in place to address the role that mental health plays as both a precursor to homelessness as well as a consequence of homelessness. The changes required span the mental health and housing and homelessness systems, requiring a wholistic and coordinated response that acknowledges that positive, sustainable outcomes for people across these domains are intrinsically linked.

**Universal prevention** measures are needed to ensure that poor mental health does not result in homelessness. These include the provision of adequate and affordable mental health care to all who need it, including early intervention, community-based programs and programs to address the gap between early intervention and acute responses to severe mental illness. The existence of this 'missing middle' means that initial presentations of relatively mild mental health issues can become worse over time if they remain unaddressed.

As addressed in the *Housing and financial circumstances* section, long-term affordable housing options with support as needed are critical infrastructure for young people who are at risk of homelessness or have become homeless, especially those with mental illness. Housing gives a stable base for people to access treatment or support, engage with their community and build relationships. It's vital that long-term housing is available for young people, with supports targeted to meet their specific developmental needs, including their mental health needs [18].

**Targeted prevention** measures are needed for young people at elevated risk of homelessness, including to ensure that those exiting mental health facilities are supported with a transition to stable housing and wraparound supports as needed. Initial funding for this could be through the proposed Homelessness Prevention Transformation Fund.

**Responses for young people who have become homeless** must be tailored to meet their specific needs and priorities. This could include the provision of a range of person-led approaches, including drop-in and outreach models, an emphasis on care coordination and navigation, and the involvement of young people with lived experience of homelessness and mental health issues in the design and delivery of programs [18]. As mentioned previously, youth hubs are an evidence-based model of integrated service delivery that can help young people meet their needs 'under one roof'.

### Recommendations about mental health and wellbeing

Governments play a key role in determining the cost and availability of the range of mental health care responses needed for young people. On the basis of *Youth Survey* findings, we recommend that:

- Governments fund early intervention, community-based mental health care and programs to address the gap between early intervention and acute responses to severe mental illness.
- Governments reform policy and commit funding to preventing young people exiting from mental healthcare facilities into homelessness as part of the Homelessness Prevention Transformation Fund.

What advice would you give other young people who are facing challenges with their housing situation?

***“Don't give up. Things will eventually start to slowly improve. Make sure to speak to someone regularly about your mental health and make sure you're honest with them. In the end you won't regret it. Also make sure to cherish those people who genuinely care about you.”***

Female, 16-year-old, Victoria

# 4

## Conclusion

**We continue to see persistent and increasing rates of homelessness among young people in Australia.** Key areas of unfair divide exist between young people who experience homelessness, compared to those who do not, across financial and housing situation, relationships and supports, community connectedness, education, employment, and mental health and wellbeing. In this report, we have shown that, when young people experience homelessness, it makes everything harder and exacerbates their vulnerability.

**Mission Australia and organisations like ours have a positive impact in the lives of many young people, but because of the housing emergency and a lack of resources, we cannot help them all achieve a safe, stable home.** Young people affected by homelessness across Australia are far too often unable to access the housing and support they need.

As detailed in the recommendations throughout this report, ending homelessness among young people will require a range of approaches to make sure that experiences of homelessness are rare, brief and non-recurring. Greater investment is needed in measures that address the spectrum of its causes, from universal prevention responses through to responses that address system failures and target young people and families in circumstances of high homelessness risk.

At Mission Australia, we are committed to working with young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness and will continue to advocate for their basic right to a home. **We believe every person across the country should have access to safe and secure housing and the support they need to thrive.**

**More must be done to end youth homelessness in Australia. Now is the time.**

# Appendix

## About the Youth Survey

The Mission Australia *Youth Survey* is the largest national annual survey of young people aged 15-19 in Australia. The survey aims to identify the values, aspirations and issues of concern to young people. We have conducted the *Youth Survey* for more than 20 years to strengthen our capacity to support and advocate for young people in need.

In 2023, 19,501 young people across Australia completed the *Youth Survey*. The 2023 survey sought to capture the experiences and perspectives of young people on a broad range of issues as well as collecting valuable socio-demographic data. Topics covered included housing and homelessness, education and employment, barriers to achieving study and work goals, financial situation, personal challenges and possible solutions, national concerns, sources of support, discrimination and unfair treatment, mental health and wellbeing, and community connection.

Survey participation by young people was voluntary and no survey incentives were offered to survey respondents. The survey could be completed online or by paper. Respondents were able to skip survey questions, except for state and date of birth, and could exit the survey at any point. Young people were engaged via schools, local governments, community and service organisations and through Mission Australia services. The survey was also available on the Mission Australia website and promoted via social media.

Human Research Ethics Committee approval was obtained from the University of Melbourne (Ref: 2023-22721-37099-6) as well as research approval from State and Territory Education Departments and Catholic Education Offices.

More information about the survey can be sourced from *Youth Survey Report 2023*. This is available on our website (<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey>).

## Methodology

Only completed surveys were used in *Youth Survey* analysis. An online survey was considered complete if the respondent finished and submitted the survey (regardless of how many questions they responded to). A paper survey was considered complete if the majority of questions were answered. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29.

Only comparisons between cohorts that are statistically significant are featured in the report commentary. A p-value equal or lower than 0.05 was interpreted as statistically significant.

The analysis of *Youth Survey* data was weighted to make the sample representative of 15- to 19-year-olds by gender, location (state/territory), and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) developed Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). Gender and location correspond to the ABS' Estimated Residential Population statistics (ERP), as it provides year on year figures. Random iterative method (RIM) weighting is utilised. This balances the marginal distributions of each weighting element one after the other, repeating until all factors are within a reasonable margin of the target.

Mission Australia's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework data is included in this report to understand the effectiveness of our homelessness services. The MEL framework is used to monitor program inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, using data that is linked from Mission Australia's client information system and Impact Measurement surveys. This data set includes client demographics, reason for seeking assistance, service activities, reasons for exit, accommodation types and outcomes across PWI domains.



## MEL data tables

Table 1: Mission Australia clients and their situation

Young person's situation	Base sample (missing/unknown data excluded)	Number of clients	Proportion (off base)
Young people who <b>received support from Mission Australia for six months or less</b>	2,222	1,878	85%
Young people's <b>living arrangements</b> when they <b>entered our service – living with someone</b>	1,761	1,254	71%
Young people's <b>living arrangements</b> when they <b>entered our service – living alone</b>		507	29%
<b>Entry status – risk of homelessness</b>	1,589	842	53%
Young people who remained <b>living in a safe home and avoided homelessness at exit</b>	806	774	96%
Young people's <b>living arrangements</b> when they <b>exited our service – living with someone</b>	773	667	86%
Young people's <b>living arrangements</b> when they <b>exited our service – living alone</b>		106	14%
<b>Entry status – homeless</b>	1,589	747	47%
<b>Rough sleeping</b> (e.g., on the street, in a car) when they <b>entered our service</b>	725	199	27%
Young people's <b>living arrangements</b> when they <b>exited our service – living alone</b>	609	340	56%
Young people's <b>living arrangements</b> when they <b>exited our service – living with someone</b>		264	44%
Young people who <b>exited our services with insufficient outcomes</b>	733	564	77%
<b>Short-term or emergency accommodation</b> when they <b>exited our service</b>	564	390	69%
<b>Rough sleeping</b> (e.g., on the street, in a car) when they <b>exited our service</b>		174	31%

Table 2: Mission Australia Impact Measurement (IM) survey respondents who experienced an uplift in their wellbeing scores

Wellbeing measures	Number of clients with completed IM survey (missing/unknown data excluded)	Number of clients	Proportion (off base)
Young people who experienced an uplift in their level of happiness rating about their <b>standard of living</b>	200	122	61%
Young people who experienced an uplift in their level of happiness rating about their <b>future security</b>	199	118	59%
Young people who experienced an uplift in their level of happiness rating about their <b>feelings of safety</b>	201	107	53%
Young people who experienced an uplift in their level of happiness rating about their <b>personal relationships</b>	201	105	52%
Young people who experienced an uplift in the <b>level of control</b> rating they felt over their life	176	119	68%

Table 3: Mission Australia Impact Measurement (IM) survey respondents and their PWI score

Subjective Wellbeing measurement	Number of clients with completed IM survey (missing/unknown data excluded)	Average PWI score
Completed a survey at <b>Service entry</b>	200	65.3
Completed a survey at <b>Service exit</b>	197	74.0

Data tables relating to *Youth Survey* data discussed in this report are available in the supplementary data pack. This is available on our website (<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey>).

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# Who is Mission Australia?

**Mission Australia is a national Christian charity motivated by a shared vision of an Australia where everyone has a safe home and can thrive. Since 1859, we've been standing alongside people in need across Australia, offering real hope that has lasting impact.**

Backed by our supporters, churches, partners and funders, we work together for the long-term wellbeing of anyone who needs us, reflecting our values of respect, compassion, integrity, perseverance and celebration.

We collaborate with people experiencing homelessness or disadvantage to tackle the root causes of their challenges through providing access to safe, affordable homes and innovative, evidence-based support services.

**Every day we deliver homelessness crisis and prevention services, provide social and affordable housing, assist struggling families and children, address mental health issues, fight substance dependencies, support people with disability and much more.**

Mission Australia believes a person's circumstances shouldn't define their future and that given the right support, everyone can reach their full potential.

**That's why we stand together with Australians in need, until they can stand for themselves**



# MISSION AUSTRALIA

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