

3

Young people become homeless because of family breakdown, often stemming from parental conflicts or a collapse of their relationship with a husband/wife or partner. Some young people who are living independently become homeless because they can't afford living expenses including rent. Being homeless is unsafe, unhealthy and very stressful. Young people experiencing homelessness are not a homogenous group. They come from a range of family backgrounds, have diverse dispositions, expectations and desires, and they encounter services of varying quality. Their common needs are to have a stable home; friends; healthy nutrition; to be cared about as individuals; to have adequate educational support; help when they need help; and reliable adults in their lives. The frustration, distress and anger expressed by many of the young people who submitted evidence indicates that Australia still struggles to meet their needs.

Chapter 3 | Experiences of Youth Homelessness

Staying at school was hard.

Finding work is hard.

Keeping a job is hard.

Eating well (if at all) was hard.

Being social is hard.

I felt helpless and alone.

It's hard to feel like a normal person.¹

Introduction

3.1 At the outset of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homeless, the Commissioners encouraged young people to come forward and provide direct evidence about the experience of being homeless. Young people appeared before the Commissioners at the majority of public hearings and were notable for their generosity in sharing their stories. Additionally, a significant number of young people responded to the National Youth Commission's Youth Survey, once again demonstrating great generosity in offering important personal information about what it is like to be homeless in Australia in 2007.²

3.2 The Inquiry also sought evidence about the experience of youth homelessness from organisations and researchers. These witnesses provided information that supplemented and expanded on the material provided by young people.

3.3 The picture that emerged from the evidence submitted to the Inquiry is one of diversity and universality. Young people experiencing homelessness are not a homogenous group. They come from a range of family backgrounds, they have a range of dispositions, they have differing expectations and desires, and they encounter services of

differing quality. What unifies young people are their needs as adolescents and as human beings, some of which include having a home; having friends; being properly nourished; being cared about as individuals; having adequate support to complete an education; being offered help when they need help; having adults in their lives who can be relied upon. The frustration, distress and anger expressed by many of the young people who submitted evidence is indicative that Australia still struggles to meet these needs.

Experiencing Homelessness

3.4 Through its Youth Survey, the Inquiry invited young people to reflect on some of the hardest aspects of being homeless. Young people responded by outlining the reality of daily life: being cold³, being hungry and uncertain about where your next meal will come from⁴, having to move all the time and not knowing where you will sleep⁵, being unable to shower⁶, being short of clothing⁷, being unable to keep or protect personal possessions⁸, getting sexually assaulted, hurt or threatened⁹, and being 'moved on' in public spaces.¹⁰ One young woman who became homeless at 13 wrote:

*Being so young with no home, I had no money, no bed, no clothes, wasn't able to bathe or eat and drink.*¹¹

Another young woman who became homeless at 17 wrote about:

*... being left out in the cold and not having any warm clothes/shoes to wear.*¹²

A young man advised the Inquiry about what he found most difficult:

*... not knowing where to go to sleep. Not having privacy. Cannot have any belongings that are valued because you don't know where you will put [them].*¹³

3.5 The evidence of services and researchers provided a context for the material submitted by young people. At the hearing in Hobart and through its submission, Alted, which is an alternative education provider, pointed out that young homeless people don't have cooking facilities and eating is therefore more expensive for them than it is for people who are housed.¹⁴ The service also mentioned the closure of some of the free food services operating in its region. YouthLaw (Vic) advised the Inquiry that young people on low, or no, incomes do not have adequate funds to pay for transport when travelling to gain important help, such as antenatal care, food, accommodation, and emotional support.¹⁵ Service to Youth Council (SA) explained that young homeless people are at a disadvantage in terms of their lack of life skills and that they also experience discrimination when seeking housing.¹⁶ A number of services submitted evidence suggesting that young people from refugee backgrounds often have additional vulnerabilities.¹⁷ Services also highlighted the vulnerabilities of young pregnant women and young families.¹⁸ A witness from Crossroads West, a Western Australian service with a vast geographical catchment spoke about young families living in shocking circumstances:

*We had an example of a young woman who is currently in regional Kalgoorlie who is living in a shed with two children because she has no place to go.*¹⁹

Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre (Qld) told the Inquiry that young homeless

women with children tend to sleep in unsafe situations, such as on couches in the houses of people they don't really know, rather than go into shelters or live on the streets.²⁰

3.6 In their direct evidence about the experience of being homeless, young people also touched on the emotional toll of homelessness. They described feeling frustrated²¹, embarrassed²², helpless and vulnerable²³, hopeless²⁴, unhappy²⁵, worthless²⁶, scared and fearful²⁷, anxious²⁸, isolated and lonely²⁹, angry³⁰, and envious of other young people with homes and families³¹. One young woman described her emotions this way:

*The feeling of hopelessness, like you're not worth anything, you feel like giving up, like it's not worth it.*³²

A young man wrote to the Inquiry about what he found most difficult:

*The embarrassment from being homeless. You get dirty looks and people never seem to understand.*³³

3.7 A worker who was homeless as a youth pointed out that these emotional experiences are not always transitory:

*By the time I was 19, I had witnessed or personally experienced every negative behaviour or act a human being can inflict upon another. One of my most vivid memories was during one of my stays in a refuge, when a young woman showed me the scars under her breast from where her boyfriend would butt out his cigarettes. She was only a couple of years older than me at the time.*³⁴

She pointed out that such experiences change young people and compound their problems.

3.8 Many of the young people who appeared at the public hearings came with trusted services and with friends, partners and young children, underscoring the evidence the Inquiry received about the centrality of relationships in young people's lives. For young people who do not have positive ongoing connections with family, relationships with workers take on increased significance. A young person in Melbourne pointed out that good workers in good services can fill some of the emotional gaps:

*... there were a couple of places in Sydney, that had a real thing going where the workers became like a surrogate parent, and every time that you had a bit of a step back you could go back to the refuge, just like going back home if you had a normal sort of family.*³⁵

In Brisbane, another young person voiced similar sentiments:

I could have left youth shelters and that and lived independently, but I found the problem was that you become so emotionally attached to those places. Because you know, even though the professional people aren't meant to be like emotionally involved and that sort of stuff, they are ...³⁶

3.9 In Perth, a young person told the Inquiry about how important it was to be respected and cared for by workers, to be given family-style support, where workers are available to you at any time of the day or night.³⁷ In Sydney, a young person talked

about his continuing connection to two workers who helped him find a path out of homelessness:

*These two ladies know me like the back of my hands. Sometimes probably better than I know myself.*³⁸

3.10 Many young people who submitted evidence to the Inquiry identified the presence of 'good' services as a positive influence in their lives.³⁹ Many also identified friendship as a sustaining factor.⁴⁰ One young woman talked about friendship making a real difference when she was on the street:

*... I was lucky to be surrounded by good people. You look after them, they look after you*⁴¹.

A young person in Brisbane talked about the importance of friendships with young people who were a year or two older:

*It helped because they understood what I had been through ...*⁴²

3.11 Another young person in Brisbane acknowledged the community spirit and the freedom that he'd experienced on the street, but told the Inquiry that it was hard to cope with the other, darker side: the uncertainty about food, shelter and personal safety.⁴³

3.12 At the Sydney hearings a young person who experienced homelessness for a number of years before returning to education and finding employment, reflected on the attraction street life can have for some young people, casting that attraction in terms of deprivation:

*... kids don't know where to go and they end up going and hanging out with gangs who feel like family to them and so you'll back each other up, but then you just end up getting into all sorts of trouble.*⁴⁴

3.13 A number of services spoke and wrote about the vulnerability of young people to exploitation in the face of their unmet needs.⁴⁵ Key College, an alternative school in Sydney, placed these unmet needs in terms of an experience of having been let down by family, education and society:

*So what do they do? They go out and they find unsuitable peers, they find people that will take advantage of them. They get involved with drugs, they get involved with crime, all, I think, motivated by this sense of wanting to fit in somewhere, wanting to belong.*⁴⁶

3.14 In a combined submission, Queensland Public Law Interest Clearing House with a number of other key services warned the Commissioners to be careful when assessing evidence of resilience in the face of danger and difficulty, reminding the Inquiry that an ability to cope:

*... should not disguise the face that [these young people] are still children, who have basic needs which are not being met by society.*⁴⁷

This point was emphasised by a young woman in Brisbane who told the Commissioners:

*... nobody chooses to be homeless.*⁴⁸

3.15 Not all of the direct evidence provided by young people was about life on the street. Young people also gave accounts of some of the events that led to their homelessness and many talked about sheltering with a range of people in their social and kin networks.⁴⁹ The experience of couch-surfing with friends, friends' parents and with acquaintances was common to many young people who provided evidence to the Inquiry.⁵⁰ Often the experience was difficult. One young person described staying with an ex-boyfriend:

*... who I had only just started talking to again. It was uncomfortable and sad.*⁵¹

Another wrote about being aware of the strain she was putting on the household:

*My best mate is letting me stay at her house. She has a baby and it's hard [on] her ...*⁵²

One young woman talked about running out of options:

*...I have lived in about 13 to 14 different places. I moved from friend's house to friend's house. Eventually I ran out of places ...*⁵³

Another told a similar story:

*I was just going from friend's place to friend's place until basically all their parents said, you know, he can't stay here any more ...*⁵⁴

3.16 For a number of young witnesses, couch-surfing appeared to precede their contact with support services.⁵⁵

3.17 While some young people told the Inquiry that they had initially been outside the service system because they were unaware that help existed⁵⁶, other young people talked and wrote about not having easy access to shelters⁵⁷, about finding it difficult to comply with shelter expectations, rules and restrictions⁵⁸ and about being evicted or 'exited'.⁵⁹ In Brisbane, a young woman talked to the Inquiry about struggling with the decision about whether to stay in a shelter away from her friends or be with her friends, but have to live on the streets:

*... that aspect of my life had become so ingrained into my identity that that's all that I identified with then.*⁶⁰

3.18 The Inquiry also received evidence from young people that they felt safer living on the streets among their peers than in boarding houses, squats, foster homes and shelters.⁶¹ Equally, the Inquiry heard from other young people about the streets being unsafe.⁶²

3.19 Queensland Youth Housing Coalition advised the Inquiry that there are some homeless young people who never reach services and remain outside the system:

*... that certainly has come through anecdotally in terms of talking about 'Where are young people?' And they are predominately outside the service system ...*⁶³

This assertion is supported by the evidence submitted by Project i, which indicates that different groups of young people, tread different pathways in and through homelessness, some of which do not involve using homeless services.⁶⁴ Project i told the Inquiry:

... we hear the negative story about young people but in fact many of them are doing well and there are reasons why they are doing well. Many of these young people have avoided the homelessness service sector altogether. They have chosen to couch surf. They

*have chosen to use the generalist youth services if they have had to. They have remained in employment, education and training ... and they typically come from families where there has been no mental illness, no drug and alcohol use in the parenting, a high degree of long-standing conflict around issues of freedom and responsibility, and the young people themselves typically have not had ongoing drug and alcohol issues.*⁶⁵

3.20 In relation to general population of homeless people, there is evidence that only a minority of people, some 14 per cent, are accommodated in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program.⁶⁶

Conclusions

3.21 In 1989, the Burdekin Report described the experience of being homeless in Australia, emphasising that:

- young people don't fit a single mould
- age, skill level and maturity influence need, and
- duration of homelessness can be used to categorise young homeless people.⁶⁷

In the subsequent years, our understanding of youth homelessness has become more sophisticated. We know more about who is homeless, why young people become homeless, and what services they might need. Some of that material is examined in subsequent chapters. What appears little changed is the experience of homelessness itself. The Burdekin Report presented disturbing evidence about life on the street, life on other people's couches and of exploitation in the face of human need for shelter and safety. That evidence is remarkably consistent with the evidence that has been submitted to the National Youth Commission, suggesting that the experience of being homeless in Australia in 2007 is traumatic, with support often arriving quite late in a young person's journey out of home.

3.22 While the evidence presented to the Inquiry about the experience of being homeless is consistent with the negative experiences reported in the Burdekin Report⁶⁸, there does appear to be new and more positive evidence about young people's encounters with services. Young people submitted evidence to the National Youth Commission that suggests that services can and do get it right. However, problems exist in terms of different sectors being able to work seamlessly to achieve outcomes for young people with multiple issues that require assistance from different sectors of the service system. A second problem is that there are simply not sufficient support services across Australia to deal with at-risk and homeless young people. The evidence about the current response of protective services, health services, early intervention services and accommodation services is examined in some detail in Chapters 13 to 23 in this report.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 13.
- 2 27 young people responded to the Survey.
- 3 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 9; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 6.
- 4 For example include Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 11; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 3.
- 5 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 1; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 10.
- 6 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 3; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 16.
- 7 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 3; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 25.
- 8 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 9; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 14; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 19.
- 9 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 12; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 19; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 24.
- 10 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 9.
- 11 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 3.
- 12 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8.
- 13 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 1.
- 14 A. Mercrae, Alted Elizabeth College, Hobart Day 17, 03-05-2007 and Submission 13, A. Mercrae, Oenghus Youth Services and Alted Elizabeth College.
- 15 Submission 24, YouthLaw, Young People's Legal Rights Centre.
- 16 Submission 74, Service to Youth Council.
- 17 For example Submission 43, Refugee Youth Issues Network of South Australia; J. McKay, Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre, Brisbane Day 6, 11-04-2007; Submission 53, Concerned Workers.
- 18 For example J. McKay, Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre, Brisbane Day 6, 11-04-2007; D. Ireson, Adolescent Mothers Support Service and Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth, Perth Day 19, 07-06-2007; Submission 51, Starting Out, Connections Child, Youth and Family Services, UnitingCare.
- 19 S. Mollasi, Salvation Army Crossroads West, Perth Day 19, 07-06-2007.
- 20 J. McKay, Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre, Brisbane Day 6, 11-04-2007.
- 21 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 3; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 26.
- 22 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 18.
- 23 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 26; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 2; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 4.
- 24 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 11; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 2.
- 25 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 19.
- 26 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 11.
- 27 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 25; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 4; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 19.
- 28 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 26.
- 29 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 25 and Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 14.
- 30 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 12.
- 31 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 25.
- 32 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 11.
- 33 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 18.
- 34 M. Johnson, Shelter SA, Adelaide Day 15, 26-04-2007.
- 35 Young Person, Melbourne Day 14, 24-04-2007.
- 36 Young Person, Brisbane Day 6, 11-04-2007.
- 37 Young Person, Perth Day 20, 08-06-2007.
- 38 Young Person, Sydney Day 9, 17-04-2007.
- 39 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 1; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 2; Young Person,

- NYC Youth Survey, 5.
- 40 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 1; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 23; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8.
- 41 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 6.
- 42 Young Person, Brisbane Day 5, 10-04-2007.
- 43 Young Person, Brisbane Day 5, 10-04-2007.
- 44 Young Person, Sydney Day 9, 17-04-2007.
- 45 For example M. Visschedijk, YWCA Canberra, Canberra Day 11, 19-04-2007; Submission 66, Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic, Queensland Public Interest Law Clearing House with Brisbane Youth Service, Salvation Army Youth Outreach Service, Australian Red Cross; Y. Paterakis, DAISY, Centacare NT, Darwin Day 4, 04-04-2007.
- 46 B. Eviston, Key College, Youth Off The Streets, Sydney Day 9, 17-04-2007.
- 47 Submission 66, Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic, Queensland Public Interest Law Clearing House with Brisbane Youth Service, Salvation Army Youth Outreach Service, Australian Red Cross.
- 48 Young Person, Brisbane Day 5, 10-04-2007.
- 49 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 22; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 17; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 26.
- 50 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 1; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 2; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 8.
- 51 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 17.
- 52 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 23.
- 53 Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 11.
- 54 Young Person, Sydney Day 9, 17-04-2007.
- 55 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 6; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 11; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 17.
- 56 Young Person, Brisbane Day 5 and Young Person, Melbourne Day 13, 23-04-2007.
- 57 For example Young Person Brisbane Day 6, 11-04-2007; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 12; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 24.
- 58 For example Young Person Sydney Day 9, 17-04-2007; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 20; Young Person Darwin Day 4, 04-04-2007.
- 59 For example Young Person Sydney Day 9, 17-04-2007; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 21; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 24.
- 60 Young Person, Brisbane Day 5, 10-04-2007.
- 61 For example Young Person, Brisbane Day 5, 10-04-2007; Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 6; Young Person, Brisbane Day 5, 10-04-2007.
- 62 For example Young Person, NYC Youth Survey, 11; Young Person, Brisbane Day 6, 11-04-2007; Young Person, Melbourne Day 13, 23-04-2007.
- 63 M. Leebeck, Queensland Youth Housing Coalition, Brisbane Day 5, 10-04-2007.
- 64 Mallett, S., Rosenthal, D., Keys, D. & Myers, P. (2006) Moving out, moving on: young people's pathways in and through homelessness in Melbourne, Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne and Center for Community Health, University of California Los Angeles, Unpublished Manuscript.
- 65 S. Mallett, Project i, Key Centre for Women's Health, University of Melbourne, Melbourne Day 14, 24-04-2007.
- 66 Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D, (2001) ABS Counting the homeless, cat no 2050.0, p.2.
- 67 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) *Our homeless children, report of the national inquiry into homeless children*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- 68 Ibid..