

NAPCAN PREVENT CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

This submission by **NAPCAN Youth Speak Out** (NYSO Council) will centre on addressing homelessness within a highly susceptible demographic: youth. In Australia, where the cost of living is steadily increasing, the youth population continues to face significant vulnerabilities. They often encounter challenges related to limited employment opportunities, a lack of rental history, and a lack of targeted policies aimed at their support. It is crucial to note this submission on youth homelessness has been written by a group of young people.

How can governments and community service providers reduce homelessness and/or support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless in Australia?

1.0 Making services available to young people (effective communication between services and at risk youth)

One of the fundamental ways to support young people at risk of homelessness is making services available, tailored to them and that are prepared to address the multifaceted needs that young people have. As it is already overwhelming to connect with services as a young person, strong communication by services will increase the young people accessing and utilising them (Shaw and Gamble, 2023, p. 22-23). It has been cautioned by “poor communication or collaboration between services can deter young people from utilising them, particularly if they are required to detail their circumstances repeatedly” (Shaw and Gamble, 2023, Black et al., 2018) .

As youth homelessness comes with other issues such as mental health issues, trauma or domestic or family violence matters. As there are many sensitive issues surrounding homeless youth, having a trauma informed communicator bridging the gap between community service providers and youth is imperative. A proposition to be implemented into the National Homelessness Plan, is to incorporate youth workers, or specifically

qualified, trauma informed people, to act as mentors and support communicators for young people at risk of homelessness (Shaw and Gamble, 2023). Targeting at risk youth will create that needed connection and availability between government service providers or community service providers, connecting at risk youth with appropriate services.

To determine at risk youth, it is important to account for the studied and identified risk factors that underpins youth homelessness. These are well researched and acknowledged; family breakdown or conflict, abuse and/or neglect, unemployment, poverty, family homelessness, mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse and lack of support when transitioning from institutional care (Roche et al., 2017, p. 28-30). Thus, it is clear 'at risk' youth have more complex needs, that one service will not be able to provide, and the housing plan needs to incorporate these complex needs into the solution.

2.0 Youth focused government support

To target at risk youth, programs and services need to identify youth homelessness as a separate issue to homelessness in general. As some risk factors may intersect between adults and youth being homeless, the employability for youth is much less. Employability is coupled with income, impacting their ability to afford to pay rent. At the moment, the minimum wage per week is \$882.80 (for a full-time 38 hour week) (Fair Work, 2023). The available Centrelink income support (per fortnight) is less than minimum wage, with the maximum amount you can receive being \$760.40 per fortnight if you are single with children.

For at risk youth, increased government income support for at risk youth, would be beneficial at reducing homelessness. This monetary support, alongside with the above proposed youth worker/mentor support to at risk youth, would significantly support

vulnerable young people and look to reduce homelessness. Homelessness will not be reduced for at risk youth if the cost of living remains unaffordable.

3.0 Incorporating Youth Voices in Policy

Young people's voices are often not incorporated into the development of policies and services which directly impact them. Integrating youth participation, by impacted or at-risk youth on homelessness related policies, is recommended. This will increase the effectiveness of the policy design through honing into the experiences and opinions of young people who have insight into the benefits and flaws to existing policy and support (Keevers and Rambaldini-Gooding 2020).

The establishment of a youth advisory council, with members being young people with experience of homelessness, housing insecurity or impact by existing policies is recommended. Treating young people as experts on their own experience and including them in research and policy-making in a supported and non-tokenistic manner improves the quality of research and policy output (Hart, 1992; McCarry, 2012; Taft & Gordon, 2013).

Due to the unique variables involved in youth homelessness, hearing from the people who will be impacted by the policies and plans created is crucial. How are you to really understand what goals need to be met and what needs changing without speaking with the source directly?

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How can governments, across all levels, best work with communities to support better housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Before this short response, a note on positionality is important. The author of this section is an Aboriginal man. Though not having lived experience of homelessness, the writer has spent his entire life living within a settler society which has, for many centuries, created and willingly maintained the systemic oppression of his community and First Nations cultures. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within homelessness services, youth justice systems, and out-of-home care is not a coincidence. We continue to be failed by successive governments – governments who are unable to begin to articulate the realities we face. As such, parts of this discussion are referenced in consultation with the lived experience of the author whose worldview and understandings are inherently Indigenised and decolonial. Advice will be thoughtful, but at times potentially blunt. We need change now.

Contemporary mainstream definitions of homelessness, as evident in the work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), are not always applicable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples regarding housing circumstances or outcomes. For example, what a ‘home’ is, and therefore what ‘homelessness’ would mean, are concepts which are contested, even within the policy sphere. However, from Indigenous grassroots understandings, the Western concepts of

'home' and 'homelessness' do not always necessarily align with First Australians (Tually et al., 2022). As such, approaches to supporting better housing outcomes cannot be lead with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach at the fore. This is exacerbated through understanding that our experiences with government, and government interventions/support, have historically imparted deep trauma to us as peoples. Government was established on the invasion of land and denial of our ways of being; governments have enthusiastically sanctioned the removal of our children; and government continues to profit from the dispossession of our lands, building prisons in which we and our children are left to languish in at unprecedented rates. Therefore, it is realised here that for governments to support better housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such needs to occur through, at the very least, meaningful co-designed programmes and responses to Indigenous homelessness (Tually et al., 2022). Ideally, we outline that this would further occur through wholehearted investment and support in Mob community-based organisations and initiatives, who know their communities best. These are organisations where faith is not broken – organisations where community are genuinely cared for. Tually and colleagues (2022) note here that the 'nothing about us, without us' mantra is especially poignant, emphasising First Peoples' inherent need and right to self-determination, as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Homelessness Australia (2022) highlights that ending homelessness for First Australians can be best achieved through government-sanctioned support of a self-determined community-developed initiative. Our recommendation reinforces this understanding. Supporting the self-determination of Indigenous peoples in creating better housing outcomes through uplifting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations also comes from the overwhelming need for responses to homelessness to be situationally specific, as well as culturally safe, relevant, and appropriate (Tually et al., 2022). Here, some examples can be displayed. The surveying of rough sleepers, as seen in the Adelaide Zero Project, would fail to be culturally safe in concentrated Indigenous communities if undertaken, let alone if undertaken by a non-blak person. It wouldn't be culturally relevant to consistently identify the crowding of

some Indigenous dwellings as aligning with the ABS definitions of homeless, as is done too often at present, when it may not be as such from an Indigenous perspective – especially without further consideration of the complexities between one’s circumstance and cultural responsibilities in these situations. Lastly, it wouldn’t be culturally appropriate to roll out an initiative tackling homelessness in full English, employing complex jargon along the way. Current approaches disengage us, and such situations would be unlikely to occur with significantly improved and supported cultural competency. We need solutions supporting better housing to be made *for us, by us*. We know that better outcomes occur when self-determination is allowed to shine. As Wehmeyer (2020, p.1) writes:

Theoretically, definitions of self-determination have framed the construct with regard to its contribution to a person’s overall quality of life, while theoretical frameworks of quality of life have included self-determination among the core dimensions contributing to enhanced quality of life.

We urge you to support the self-determination of us as peoples so as we can make a better history for ourselves and our future Knowledge Holders.

In closing, the benefits of such a model are emphasised through noting the many intersections Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples dealing with housing insecurity face. For instance, complexities are apparent in the vulnerabilities for inflow into homelessness upon exiting other systems, such as correctional justice and health services (Tually et al., 2022). Here, Tually and their team (2022) note that the incorporation of Indigenous community supports and services in amending this gap are imperative. They further highlight that the entry for Indigenous peoples into homelessness require culturally specific responses (Tually et al., 2022) – e.g., tenancy management is best conducted through community resources; entry into housing is paired with educational and social support; and linking housing services to culturally safe mental health services. We can’t expect government to have first-hand knowledge of these struggles, but we can ask government to follow our lead, learning as we guide

them on what is best for our circumstances, as listed previously. We Indigenous folk access homelessness services at higher rates than our non-Indigenous counterparts (AIHW, 2014), and therefore it is crucial that cultural safety is accounted for.

At the core of this response is one thing – the urgent need for governments to support our communities and our organisations which know us best and understand how to impactfully enhance self-determination, and better outcomes, through unwavering belief in us. Current colonial paradigms aren't working, so why not try something new? As stated throughout, our experiences continue to be shaped by the misunderstandings and failings of government after government (Tually et al., 2022). But it's not too late to change this reality within the context of homelessness. We can do better for our First Peoples. We must. Here, there is hope – and that hope is within us.

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How can all levels of governments, along with housing organisations, institutional investors, not-for-profits, and private industry, improve access to social housing, which includes public housing and community housing?

As a young person, if you are unable to remain at home with your parents, and have access to financial support, in this day with the current cost of living, it is very difficult to

sustain secure housing. Naturally, young people are less employable, and have access to very low-income brackets due to less education and prior experience. Additionally, many young people are also studying, to try to increase their employability and eligible income, but this means they are unable to retain full-time employment, which also creates difficulty for affording housing.

With many niche elements of a young person's situation already manufacturing vulnerability prior to risk factors (as discussed in question 1) coming into play, young people need to be prioritised in assisted/community/public housing.

Additionally, as young people generally have little to no rental history, this can mean they are seen as less reliable or less capable of living out of home. They can also be seen as less of a priority due to the fact they can probably return home to their families and parents. The reality is that this is not the case for most young people. Most young people cannot help, due to age and experience having little to no rental history, and they may not be able to return home for reasons of being in the city to study, safety or much more.

Below are some recommendations to ensure young people are correctly prioritised.

Ensuring a percentage of young people have access to priority housing

A percentage of housing should be specifically allocated to youth, due to their additional vulnerabilities and need for support. This will ensure youth are not overlooked and they receive adequate support. Adults are generally more employable, have more rental history and are usually better candidates for housing, therefore youth need additional support.

Creating additional criteria for under 25's

As rental history is not telling of most young people's eligibility and need for being successful in being selected for a rental property, creating a more realistic criteria for young people under 25 would be a reasonable idea. This could give a broader picture of their needs and fitness for housing.

What should governments, private industries, the not-for-profit and community sectors focus on to help improve access to housing and housing affordability in the private market?

Improving access to housing and housing affordability for young people in the private market in Australia is a complex challenge. Several factors contribute to the difficulties young people face in accessing housing.

Risk factors for young people

Young people are more likely to work in casual jobs with uncertain hours, lower wages, and limited work-from-home flexibility. Additionally, many young individuals work fewer hours due to study commitments. These factors make it challenging for them to pay consistent or rising rents or save for homeownership. Governments should resist the increasing casualisation of the workforce and ensure that young people have access to stable employment.

Young people are also at unique risk of homelessness. The primary causes of youth homelessness are housing crises such as eviction (19%), domestic violence (16%), or family breakdown (12%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). At the same time, young people are increasingly dependent on family for providing housing, primarily due to a lack of housing affordability (Budinski et al., 2023). Therefore for those who live in unsafe households, addressing these root causes through early intervention programs and support services is crucial to preventing homelessness and ensuring young people have stable housing options.

Rental market Issues

Renting should ideally provide an affordable and stable means of accessing housing. However, short-term rental leases are common in Australia, putting renters, particularly young ones, at risk of homelessness if they cannot renew their lease or find new housing in time. Moreover, young people may find it difficult to take paid time off work to move accommodation, exacerbating the affordability challenges. Approximately 90% of lease agreements in Australia are for 12 months or less, which reduces affordability since rent increases are larger for new tenants compared to existing ones (Hanmer & Marquardt, 2023).

To address these challenges, both the private sector and government regulation could play a role in providing longer-term leases, which would enhance both affordability and security for young renters. However, while increasing lease durations can help, it is also important to introduce measures such as rent freezes or rent increase limits to ensure that rents remain in line with inflation and wage increases. Furthermore, strengthening the power and funding of tenancy advocacy bodies can play a crucial role by offering more robust legal assistance to renters in disputes and conducting more educational outreach to inform young people of their rights as tenants.

Reforming Homeownership

The primary purpose of homeownership should be to provide people with a place to live rather than an investment. To achieve this, policymakers could consider implementing taxes to discourage multiple home ownership, especially in areas where housing accessibility is a challenge. There should also be requirements to ensure that houses are occupied or on the rental market, to prevent investment properties sitting vacant. Greater assistance for first home buyers such as tax breaks would also help prioritise housing for young people over those who already own their own homes. Stricter regulations on short-stay holiday accommodations, such as taxes or limiting the number of nights per year a property can be rented out for short-term stays, can also help

promote affordability, as has been done in many large cities around the world (Daly, 2023; Williams, 2023).

In summary, improving housing access and affordability for young people in the private market in Australia requires a comprehensive approach. It involves addressing employment and income challenges, reforming the rental market, promoting responsible homeownership, and preventing homelessness through supportive policies and programs. Collaboration among governments, private industries, not-for-profit organisations, and communities is essential to create meaningful change in this area.

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How could governments work better with industry, community services and other organisations to improve housing outcomes for all Australians?

Collaboration amongst governments, community services and organisations is fundamental to creating sustainable solutions for housing challenges in Australia. Together stakeholders can pool resources and expertise to improve outcomes for all Australians. Governments can achieve these outcomes by;

1. **Listening deeply:** The first step to any solution is listening, genuinely. Community services and relevant organisations are often on the frontline of these issues. Acknowledging they have invaluable workforce experience and potentially practical solutions will be a huge step forward.
2. **Collaborations:** Governments should fund cross-sector collaboration opportunities (i.e host or fund a summit to address homelessness in Australia). Governments should also be fostering better relationships amongst varying government agencies responsible for housing, health, education and employment. Each of these agencies have shared accountability for the state of homelessness in Australia. To date, governments, community services and organisations have all been working in 'silos'. Ultimately, community services, organisations and governments need to come together and build a common understanding of the complexities, systemic problems and differences of youth and adult homelessness.
3. **Prevention:** As previously mentioned in question 1 there is well researched evidence to show the drivers of homelessness (abuse and/or neglect). Investing

in homelessness prevention programs that target the causes of youth homelessness such as domestic violence, mental health and housing issues will inevitably assist in reducing maltreatment amongst children and young people overall.