



Mission Australia

# Homeless young Australians: Issues and responses

Snapshot  
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## Introduction

On any night, there are almost 100,000 Australians who are homeless. Nearly half this group is aged under 25 years, and young people aged 12 to 18 make up a quarter of all those who are homeless (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2003).

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is Australia's primary response to homelessness and is jointly funded by the Australian and state and territory governments. In 2005-06 almost 37,000 Australians under 25 years of age were SAAP clients (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). This does not include persons under 18 years who accompanied a parent/guardian who was a SAAP client.

This publication highlights some of the experiences of homeless young Australians, drawing on responses to Mission Australia's National Survey of Young Australians 2006, as well as other recent research. Homeless young people are a diverse group and the survey responses cannot represent all of their experiences, however they offer rare insights into the lives of a vulnerable group of Australians.

## Defining homelessness

A homeless person is someone who does not have access to safe, secure and adequate housing. Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2003) define four levels of homelessness:

- *Sleeping rough* (primary homelessness) – people who may be living rough on the streets, sleeping in parks or vehicles, or squatting in derelict buildings.
- *Stop-gap housing* (secondary homelessness) – people who are in temporary shelter, crisis accommodation or staying with friends or other families because they have no accommodation of their own.
- *Boarding house residents* (tertiary homelessness) – people staying in a boarding house on a medium to long term basis without security of tenure.
- *Marginally housed* – residents of caravan parks who experience difficulty in accessing more mainstream housing and rent out of financial necessity, rather than lifestyle choice.

A significant proportion of homeless young people are staying temporarily with friends or relatives. In some cases the young person may return home after a 'cooling off' period, whereas others will start to move from one friend's house to another, in what is known as 'couch surfing' (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2003).

How young people perceive their housing circumstances may also not fit neatly with the above definitions, and at Census time if they are staying with friends or relatives

they may be identified as a 'visitor' rather than 'homeless'. Both of these factors could result in an under-estimation of the number of homeless young Australians.

## Homelessness and young people

The reasons young people leave home are complex and include family conflict, physical and/or sexual abuse, substance abuse and trauma. This has been described as young people 'running from' family or personal problems. This has been contrasted with homeless young people who initially leave home to assert independence, escape boredom, seek excitement or because of the allure of the streets and this group is described as 'running to' (Rosenthal *et al* 2006).

Recent Australian research with close to 700 homeless young people offers some important insights into the reasons young homeless women and men give for leaving home. Table 1 highlights both a range of 'running from' and 'running to' factors, with 'conflict with parents' being clearly the most significant reason given by both males and females. The research also shows some important gender differences, with 'anxiety or depression' for example, being an 'important' or 'very important' reason for close to 60% of homeless young women leaving home, compared to less than 40% of homeless young men.

**Table 1: Main reasons identified by homeless young women and men for leaving home**

Reason for leaving home	Young women	Young men
Conflict with parents	73.9	72.6
Anxiety or depression	56.7	38.5
Desire for independence	48.7	44.3
Violence at home between family members	41.3	37.3
Desire for adventure	31.2	36.7
Traumatic event involving family	30.4	23.9
Personal alcohol and drug abuse	27.2	34.7
Physical abuse	27.2	21.0
Trouble with the police	10.6	27.1

Note: All figures are percentages of respondents who identified reason as being 'important' or 'very important' in their leaving home. Source: Rosenthal *et al* (2006)

## National Survey of Young Australians

Since 2002 Mission Australia has conducted an annual survey of young Australians aged 11 to 24 years which asks what they value, their concerns, who they turn to for advice and who they admire. In 2006 almost 15,000 young Australians responded, and of these, 154 indicated they

were 'homeless' or 'living in insecure housing'. Some of the characteristics of the homeless group were:

- **Age:** 56 were 11-14 years; 84 were 15-19 years; and 14 were 20-24 years.
- **Gender:** 60% were male; 40% female.
- **Aboriginality:** One third identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- **Metro/non-metro:** 60% lived in capital cities and 40% in non-metropolitan areas.

Previous research by Mission Australia (2006) identified nine factors as being critical in the social and economic participation of young people. The National Survey of Young Australians collected data which is relevant to three of these factors, namely financial security, appropriate education and training and rewarding and secure employment:

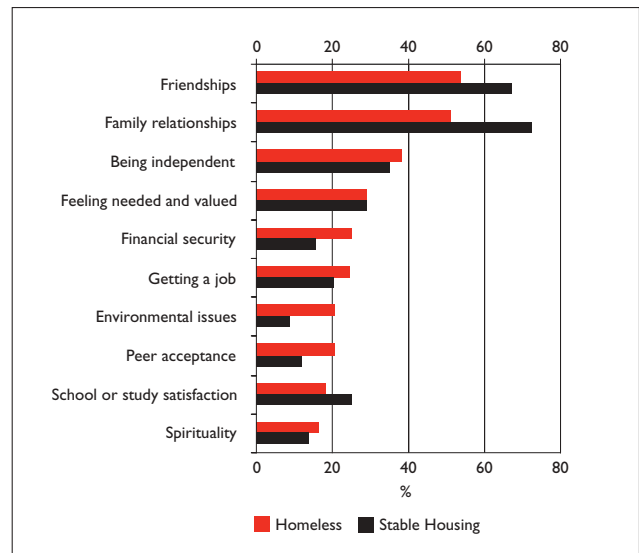
- **Income:** Homeless young people who responded were heavily reliant on government allowances (28% of them compared to 5% of those in stable accommodation indicated this was their main source of income).
- **Education:** Just over 60% of the homeless respondents were participating in education, well below the 86% for young people in stable accommodation. Other research has found that most teenagers who become homeless while at school will eventually drop out (AHURI, 2004). Given the importance of educational participation, the level of non-participation in education by homeless young people, whilst understandable, is a concern.
- **Employment:** A significant proportion (43%) of homeless young people was participating in employment. This is a major achievement given the significant challenges this group faces.

## What do young people value?

The National Survey of Young Australians asked young people to rank the things they valued from a range of options. In comparing the responses for homeless young people and those in stable accommodation there are some important similarities and differences, as shown in Figure 1. The top three items for both groups included *family relationships*, *friendships* and *being independent*. However both *family* and *friends* were highly valued by a much smaller proportion of homeless young people than those in stable housing. Around half of homeless young people compared to three quarters of other young people highly valued *family relationships*.

*Feeling needed and valued* was equally important to both groups of young people (around 30%) and *financial security* was, perhaps not surprisingly, valued by a higher proportion of the homeless group (25% compared to 16% for those in stable accommodation). As with data from previous Mission Australia National Youth Surveys, a much higher proportion of homeless young people than those in secure housing valued *environmental issues* (21% compared to 8%).

**Figure 1: What young people value**

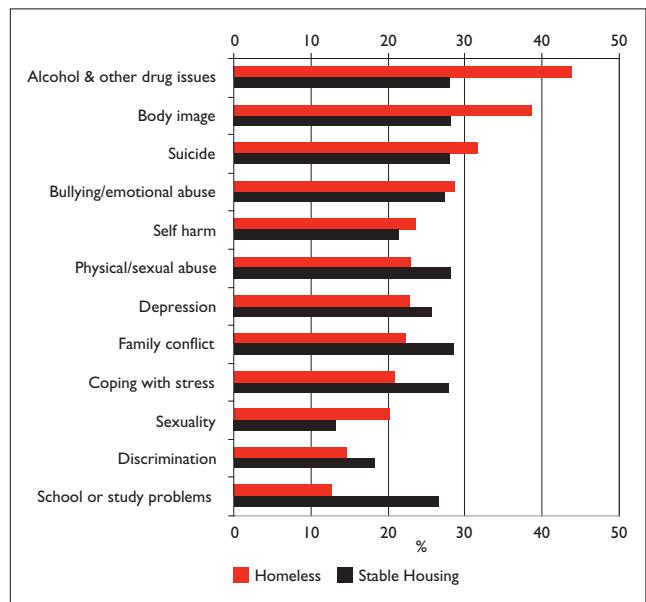


Note: The data is aggregated and includes items ranked one, two or three by respondents.

## Issues of concern

As Figure 2 shows, the top issue of concern for homeless young people in the 2006 survey was *alcohol and other drugs*, as it has been for this group in previous surveys. Close to 44% of homeless young people identified it as being an issue of significant concern, compared with around 28% of young people in secure housing. This may in part be linked to the fact that homeless young people have been found to be "...more likely to engage in drug and alcohol abuse ... compared to their non-homeless peers" (Rice *et al* 2005, p.1103).

**Figure 2: Issues of concern**



Note: The data in this table is aggregated and includes items ranked one, two or three by respondents.

Perhaps surprisingly, the second top issue of concern for homeless young people was *body image*, with close to 40% of this group indicating it was one of their top concerns. This is a much higher rate than the 28% for those living in

secure accommodation. This may in part reflect the direct impact that homelessness, particularly sleeping rough, can have on personal appearance which can contribute to low levels of self esteem (Chamberlain *et al*, 2007).

Both homeless young people and those in secure accommodation had similar levels of concern regarding a range of issues such as *suicide* (around 30% indicated it was a major concern), *bullying/emotional abuse* (around 28%), *self harm* (around 23%) and *depression* (around 24%).

Despite similar levels of concern regarding suicide, other recent research has found that 41.9% of surveyed homeless young Australians aged 12-20 years had attempted suicide at some time in their lives, and that 11.6% had done so recently (within the last three months) (Milburn *et al*, 2006, p.5). Accessing mental health services is likely to be especially difficult for young people struggling with housing and other issues: "Only one out of every four young persons with mental health problems receives professional help ... It would be safe to hypothesise that the proportion of homeless young people accessing needed treatment is even less" (O'Brien, Hodges and Lloyd, 2007, p.22).

*Sexuality* was of concern to a higher proportion of homeless young people than those living in stable accommodation. One in five homeless young people identified it as a major issue, compared to close to one in ten in stable accommodation, but the precise nature of that concern is unclear and may warrant further research. It may reflect concern regarding a range of issues, such as sexual assault, poor sexual health outcomes, unwanted sex

and sexual identity. Homeless young people for example, experience more sexual assault both prior to and after becoming homeless, than other young people (Brown 1993 cited in Rosenthal and Mallett, 2003).

Other recent research with around 670 homeless young people aged 12 to 20 years in Melbourne indicated that:

- 32.4% had been pregnant at some time in their life.
- 17% identified as non-heterosexual.
- 37 were engaged in sex work (Milburn *et al*, 2006, p.5).

*Family conflict* was of significant concern to a smaller percentage of homeless young people than their counterparts in stable housing (22% compared to 29%). Given that family conflict has been identified as a major reason for young people leaving home, this lower level of concern may reflect that some homeless young people have already disengaged from their family networks.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the lower levels of participation by homeless young people in education, *school or study problems* were a concern for a much smaller proportion of this group compared to their counterparts in stable housing (13% compared to 27%).

## Where do young people turn for advice and support?

The survey results provide important insights into where young people seek advice and support when they have a personal problem. As Figure 3 shows, young people from

## Youth Accommodation Support Services (YASS)

Mission Australia's Youth Accommodation Support Services (YASS) supports young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Based in Perth, Western Australia, it offers three levels of housing to people aged 15 to 25:

- A crisis house which is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, where young people can access counselling and support services.
- On-site units for young people who are not yet confident or skilled enough to cope with the pressures of independent living.
- The Transitional Housing Program, which helps young people to make the transition to independent living and continues to provide information and assistance with employment, education, life skills, drug and alcohol issues, finances and family relationships.

Most young people who access YASS do so for reasons of family/relationship breakdown, domestic/family violence and physical/emotional abuse. Drugs and alcohol misuse are often the unfortunate results of their efforts to escape reality, and mental health issues a consequence of their circumstances.

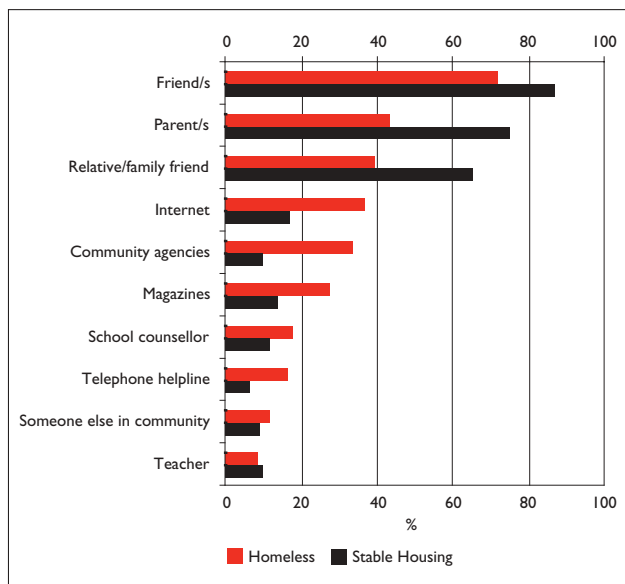
The success of YASS is illustrated by comments made by young people who have stayed there: "They care about you and get to know you as a person." Staff are "there for you, whatever" and "would do anything for you."

The key factors which contribute to the outcomes which YASS achieves include:

- Good rapport between staff and young people creating a safe space, a sense of belonging and an holistic nurturing family environment.
- The listening skills of staff.
- A behaviour management model based on trust and respect rather than punitive measures. Staff give unconditional support, taking into account the young people's fear of intimacy and suspicion of kindness due to previous experiences.
- Young people share household responsibilities.
- The attractive physical layout of the crisis house, together with the on-site transition facilities.
- Access to a drug and alcohol counsellor, a financial counsellor and a *Reconnect* worker who engage regularly with the young people on site in an informal yet professional way.
- Developing partnerships and consortia to: improve mutual training opportunities for up-skilling staff; provide group support for young women aged 15-18 who have been subjected to domestic violence; and provide cottage parent-style lead tenant support to a cluster of young Aboriginal mothers.

both groups identified the same top three sources of advice, namely *friends*, *parent/s* and *relative/family friend*, but in each case the proportions of homeless young people were significantly lower. *Friends* were by far the most popular source of advice for homeless young people, although at a rate about 15% lower than for their counterparts in stable housing. Other research by Rice *et al* (2005, p.1119) indicates homeless young people are “...engaged in a great deal of mutual social support and exchange of necessary resources for surviving on the streets”.

**Figure 3: Sources of advice and support**



Note: The data in this table is aggregated and includes items ranked one, two or three by respondents.

Less than half of the homeless group identified *parent/s* as a major source of advice compared to about three quarters of those in stable housing. This again may reflect that some homeless young people have disengaged from their family networks. The data also raises the question of how well equipped parents and relative/family friends feel they are to provide advice to young people, particularly those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

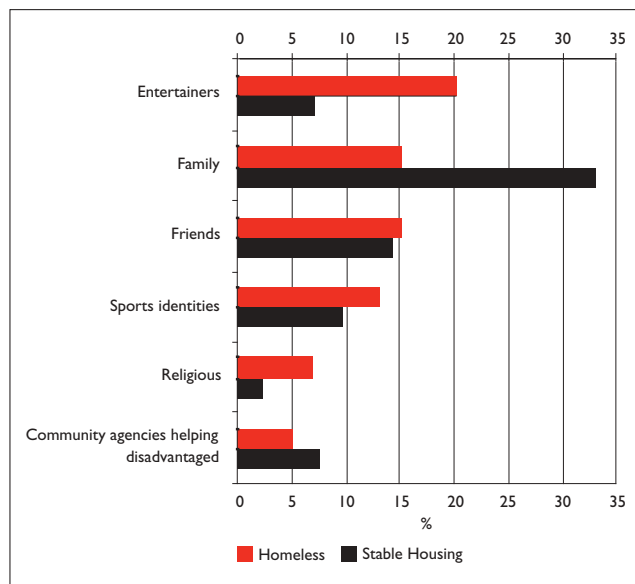
Homeless young people were significantly more likely than young people in stable accommodation to seek advice and support from the *internet* (37% compared with 17%), *community agencies* (33% compared to 10%), *magazines* (27% compared to 13%) and *telephone helplines* (16% compared to 6%). This points to the important role that community agencies and helplines can play in the lives of homeless young people but also raises questions regarding the adequacy and accuracy of information available, for example, on the internet.

A higher proportion of homeless young people (30%) compared to those in stable accommodation (15%) indicated that they wanted more information on issues of concern, suggesting that improvements can be made in the availability and accessibility of good quality information to homeless young people.

## Who do young people admire?

The 2006 survey shows that homeless young people were much more likely than other young people to identify *entertainers* as one of the top groups of people they admire. As Figure 4 shows, one in five homeless young people indicated they admired this group and they were much less likely than other young people to indicate that they admired their *family* (15% compared to 33%). This is compatible with the issues of family disengagement identified above.

**Figure 4: Who young people admire**



## Alice's story

Alice\* was born in central Africa where at the age of eight she witnessed her mother being raped and massacred. Years later, her father and four siblings immigrated to Australia as refugees. On top of her full-time schooling Alice's father demanded she care for her younger siblings and maintain the household. Nothing she ever did was good enough and she was regularly verbally and physically abused. One day when she was too sick to get out of bed, her father dragged her out of the house for being lazy and told her never to return. Alice called the police and she was referred to YASS.

When Alice first came to YASS she had never stayed in a hostel before and was very scared and shy. She barely spoke for the first week. Slowly, different staff began to engage Alice and gain her trust. Over a period of two months staff gained enough trust for Alice to tell her story and begin to plan her future. Alice was successful in getting into the YASS Transitional Housing Program which provided her with stable accommodation for 12 months. YASS staff helped Alice to get into an accredited course relevant to her chosen career, after which she gained full-time employment. They also assisted her to find private rental accommodation which she now shares with her younger sister.

\* Not her real name.

## Jane's story

Jane's\* father left when she was three years old. Years later her mother began seeing someone who Jane fought with all the time and at age 14 she was told to leave home. Jane stayed with some relatives for a while until an uncle tried to sexually abuse her, and no one in the family believed her when she told them what had happened. She dropped out of school and began 'couch surfing' from one friend's house to another and met some new friends who introduced her to drugs and alcohol. For the next few years Jane moved between friends' houses and hostels. Looking back, Jane sees that lots of people tried to help her but either they didn't know how or she wouldn't let them.

When Jane arrived at YASS she smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol and had taken speed, ecstasy and marijuana. She had been sexually abused twice and was very distrusting of adults. For the first few weeks Jane "sussed out" the staff, looking for ways of affirming that adults were untrustworthy. After a while she began to notice that the staff genuinely

cared about the young people at YASS. They cared about her story and cared for her as an individual. The more of her story that Jane told the more staff were able to help her. With their help Jane stabilised her life and stopped taking drugs and smoking. She began to re-establish some family relationships and discovered that she had a whole other side of her family living in NSW, including a younger sister, who were very interested in meeting her.

Jane couldn't afford the fare but YASS staff managed to get her a free flight through a corporate sponsor. They found her some temporary accommodation within an hour of where her family lived. Since then Jane has found long term accommodation, is studying full-time at TAFE and working part-time in a café. She volunteers at her local youth centre and wants to become a youth worker.

\* Not her real name.

## Policy and program implications

Research with young homeless people has increased in recent years, and most, like the National Survey of Young Australians has been with a small number of this group. It confirms both the diversity and complexity of this group and their pathways into and out of homelessness. The continued levels of youth homelessness in Australia, and the research and practice experience of organisations like Mission Australia who work with homeless young people, indicates that more can be done at both policy and program levels. Action in these areas is in the social and economic interest of not only young people, but also the broader Australian community.

Key priority areas include:

- *Early intervention and prevention:* Given the significant role of family conflict and family violence in youth homelessness, programs which enhance family relationships and eliminate family violence can play a key role in the wellbeing of young people. Both early intervention programs, including through school and community organisations, plus programs that work with young people who are recently homeless can have a significant impact. Research by Milburn *et al* (2007) suggests that family-based interventions which work with homeless young people and their families may be viable and underdeveloped alternatives, particularly for younger adolescents. Expansion of effective programs such as *Reconnect* should also be considered (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2004).
- *Diversity of service system responses:* The age, gender, location, developmental stage and length of time a young person has been homeless impacts on what they need and appropriate responses. The current service system does not sufficiently reflect this diversity. There is a need in particular for service models for young people who need intensive support but whose behaviours make them challenging to accommodate, as well as for 'stepping stones' services for young people needing more supported medium term accommodation (Keys *et al*, 2005). Services for young women (under 18 years) who have experienced domestic violence are also very limited. In addition, there could be benefit in piloting alternative accommodation options for homeless school students, in order to avoid them becoming acculturated into long term homelessness (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2004). The Foyer Model has also been identified as a potential option for homeless young people, especially those in regional and rural areas (AHURI, 2006).
- *Integrated and holistic services:* Many homeless young people need support in a range of areas, including drug and alcohol and/or mental health services. Increased collaboration between specialist services and homeless youth services would benefit homeless young people. Cross-sector forums which enable reflective discussion on how best to work with homeless young people would also be of value (Keys *et al*, 2005).
- *Education:* Given the importance of educational participation to the long term wellbeing of young people, enhancing programs that help young homeless people to stay in education and increasing the capacity of the education and homeless sectors to work more closely together would be of value. Opportunities which enable homeless young people to re-engage with education and participate in training are also required. Once young people do become homeless and leave the education system, education or training "...greatly enhances their

ability to make incremental changes that stabilise their lives, interact with peers and mentors and take an active role in determining their future” (YEETI, 2007, p.41).

- *Areas of concern:* Enhanced strategies to address major areas of concern for homeless young people, including alcohol and other drugs, body image and sexuality are needed. Further attention should also be given to providing timely and accurate information to homeless young people on issues of concern to them. This should include enhanced support to friends, parents and relative/family friend who are a provider of support to a significant number of homeless young people.
- *Employment:* Programs and supports which help homeless young people find and maintain employment are a key component of their long term wellbeing.
- *Income:* Ensuring the adequacy of social security provisions is a key issue, given the significant proportion of homeless young people who rely on it.

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*Inspired by Jesus Christ, Mission Australia exists to meet human need and to spread the knowledge of the love of God. Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life.*



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Macquarie Bank, Australia's largest independent investment bank, provides community support to a wide range of organisations through the Macquarie Bank Foundation. The Foundation has formed a major partnership with Mission Australia, to enhance its research into key social issues. This research guides Mission Australia's policy development and advocacy, ensuring its employment programs and community services continue to deliver to those most in need.

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