Parity

A Call for Contributions – April 2024

"Going it Alone: Unaccompanied Child and Youth Homelessness – Pathways into and out of Homelessness"

Submission deadline: COB Friday 22 March 2024
Word length: Contributions can be up to 1,600 words. Submissions to be sent to:
parity@chp.org.au

Introduction

The central focus of this edition of *Parity* is an examination and discussion of unaccompanied children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
Unaccompanied children and young people are a significant group experiencing homelessness across Australia. In 2022–23, around 38,300 or 14% of all people seeking accommodation and assistance from SHS nationally were children and young people aged 15–24 years presenting alone. Of those young people, 45% or 17,200 needed short-term or emergency accommodation but concerningly, less than half received a crisis bed when they needed it. Another staggering statistic is that 47% or around 17,900 clients of young people presented with a long-term housing need and only 4.3% received this service. Lastly, in 2021-22, 3,317 children aged 10-14 years presented alone to a Specialist Homelessness Service (i.e. without a parent or guardian). We must be mindful that these numbers only represent the children and young people who had the knowledge and capacity to contact a service and there are many more who are absent in the data.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics concedes that Census estimates for unaccompanied child and youth homelessness are likely to be under-represented particularly those who are couch surfing and incorrectly report their usual address on the evening of Census night. Regardless of this potential undercounting, the 2021 Census data was a stark reminder that children and young people in Australia are experiencing homelessness in significant numbers. Of the 122,494 people experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2021 nearly:

- a quarter (23%) of all people experiencing homelessness were aged 12–24 years (28,204 people)
- 38% of people experiencing homelessness in the 2021 Census were under 24 years old.

The true number of children and young people who are homeless and on their own is sure to be higher. These kids have nowhere safe and stable to call home. They may sleep rough, couch surf with extended family, friends and acquaintances, or turn to specialist homelessness services – mostly providers of short-term accommodation.

They will struggle to attend school regularly and get health care. They have limited access to the places and services that offer care and safety at the very time they are likely to be experiencing poor sleep and nutrition, psychological distress and violent victimisation.

The mismatch between the reality of children's and young people's lives and the systems and services to support them is stark. The efforts of children and young people to remove themselves from harm may be characterised by overstretched systems as proof of their 'independence'. However, what they need are standalone responses that address the extremities of their needs.

Given the impacts being homeless can have children and young people, the Australian Government's new National Housing and Homelessness Plan should provide much-needed funding and services. Distressingly, children are not mentioned once in the recent release of the Australian Government's *Summary Report: Consultations on the National Housing and Homelessness Plan*, and they are not a priority cohort in the current National Housing and Homelessness Agreement. Young people are only mentioned in relation to Foyers and rental subsidies in the summary report and the calls from the Australian community for a standalone plan for unaccompanied children and young people have been ignored.

There is a need for a clear national signal that unaccompanied children's and young people's experiences of homelessness matter and are solvable. The new National Housing and Homelessness Plan could offer a strategic vision and target the resources needed to end their homelessness. Otherwise, the risk is they will continue to fall through the cracks in state and territory services and become the next generation of adults experiencing homelessness.

State/territory and federal governments can begin to fix the cracks in the system by ensuring all agencies are held accountable for upholding the rights of children outlined by the United Nations convention (1) – especially those without family they can rely on. A collaborative, integrated response that recognises the complexity and reality of children's and young people's lives, including their independent housing, health and safety needs is critical. However, breaking down

service system silos is one of the biggest challenges that is yet to be achieved. But why is it so difficult?

Papers exploring the following issues are encouraged by those with lived expertise and a broad range of practitioners that come into contact with these cohorts such as – but not limited to – service providers, academics, government, health professionals and those working in the judicial system.

This edition of *Parity* has as its central focus an examination and discussion of:

- the different pathways unaccompanied children and young people take into homelessness and the factors that entrench them
- the ways and means by which unaccompanied children and young people can transition out of homelessness and how we prevent ongoing homelessness
- the roles of federal, state and territory governments in responding to child and youth homelessness
- existing policy frameworks that should be protecting children and young people but are failing them
- service system failures that cause unaccompanied child and youth homelessness and the impact on the youth homelessness sector
- effective and achievable multi-systemic responses for unaccompanied children and young people
- culturally appropriate responses for Aboriginal children and young people
- difficulties young people experience accessing housing and how social housing providers fail to allocate housing to them.

A framework for discussion

Chapter 1: What role should existing key policy frameworks play in halting transitions into homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people?

The failures of government policies see at-risk children and young people all too often end up in the youth homelessness service system – a system that has neither been designed nor resourced to respond to these failures. Often, the failures of the service systems responsible for keeping children and young people safely housed are the reason they seek homelessness support.

In identifying some of the causes of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness, Yfoundations, the NSW youth homelessness peak body, argues that children and young people are often failed by service systems prior to them becoming homeless. These systems fail children and young people who are impacted by child abuse and neglect; domestic and family violence (DFV); poverty; and poor exits from out-of-home care (OOHC) and youth justice.

Nationally, the two key policy frameworks that should be addressing unaccompanied child and youth homelessness fail to identify them. These include:

- Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031
- The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.

Early signs indicate this may likely be replicated in the forthcoming National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

The purpose of this section is to identify and discuss how the policies and strategies designed to address the issues that can trigger homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people can work more effectively to halt these escalations.

For Discussion:
- Should the federal or state/territory governments be responsible for leading the charge to prevent unaccompanied child and youth homelessness happening in the first place?
- How can federal and state/territory governments be held accountable for preventing and responding to unaccompanied child and youth homelessness?
- How can advocates influence existing policies, strategies and funding sources to focus on unaccompanied children and young people to prevent and respond to their homelessness?
- How can these existing policy frameworks be strengthened to prevent unaccompanied child and youth homelessness from happening in the first place?
- What are the roles of other parts of the service system in both preventing the entry of young people into homelessness and intervening to halt the trajectory from youth to adult homelessness?

Chapter 2: The call for a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan – where did it land?

Advocates have actively called for a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan, and last year's April edition of *Parity* focused on this issue. The NSW Government

has taken up the cause and recently consulted with key stakeholders to commence the development of a standalone Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

However, the recent release of the Australian Government's *Summary Report: Consultations on the National Housing and Homelessness Plan* has clearly ignored calls to develop a standalone plan for unaccompanied children and young people. Moreover, young people are only mentioned in relation to housing models (youth foyers) and rental subsidies, and there is a complete absence of unaccompanied children.

Evidence shows that subsuming children and young people into generic adult housing and homelessness responses, or listing them as a vulnerable or priority cohort, is not enough for the following reasons:

- Children and young people don't have the same coping strategies and resources generally attributed to adults (whether that's financial, support networks or life experience) to self-address their lack of access to housing and services. This means responses to children and young people presenting as homeless requires the service system to respond differently, particularly by adopting a trauma-informed, age- and development-appropriate lens to any response.
- Children and young people need age- and developmentally-appropriate responses. Successful responses for adults such as Housing First are not suitable for children and may not necessarily be suitable for young people who might need care first as opposed to housing first.
- The triggers that escalate children and young people into homelessness are different to those of adults: neglect; family breakdown and dysfunction; lack of effective care and guardianship by family or state governments; homophobia; and transphobia.
- While other dominant triggers, such as DFV and sexual violence, abuse, racism and poverty are also key triggers for adults, children and young people don't have the same experiences, coping strategies or resources as adults, which will most likely make them more vulnerable and their experiences potentially dangerous.
- These triggers – or precursors into homelessness – for children and young people will be traumatic. Trauma can have devastating impacts on children, which will carry into their adult lives. Specialised responses must be responsive to trauma and consider ways children and young people can heal to reduce the long-term impacts in their adult lives.

For Discussion:
- In the absence of the Federal Government developing a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan, how can we ensure child and youth homelessness doesn't happen in the first place and, if it does happen, there are accessible and effective responses

to catch them, combined with a service system that provides a pathway out so it's a once in a lifetime occurrence.

- How can we encourage state and territory governments to take responsibility for unaccompanied child and youth homelessness in the same way as the NSW State Government is currently doing?
- In his speech at the National Press Club on 25 January 2024, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese consistently said, "No one held back, no one left behind". However, the exclusion of unaccompanied children and young people from the government's Consultation Summary Report is fundamentally leaving our most vulnerable children and young people behind. How can we convince the Australian Government that if we fail to respond appropriately, these children and young people will present as the next generation of people experiencing homelessness?

Chapter 3: What factors entrench unaccompanied children and young people in homelessness? How do unaccompanied children and young people access a multidisciplinary response?

Many unaccompanied children and young people who access youth homelessness services are presenting with multiple and complex issues. Nationally, youth homelessness services report the difficulties they encounter when attempting to access the range of services and support these children and young people urgently need. The failure to access these services can result in them becoming trapped in the system with no clear pathways out of homelessness. They become 'stuck' and identified as homeless when they are struggling with other issues of equal concern, such as mental health, violence, abuse, neglect, education problems or the need for family mediation. The youth homelessness service system continues to plug the gaps of other service systems without additional resources and in the absence of a government commitment for mainstream agencies to meet the responsibilities of their portfolios.

The agencies, services and practice models needed to prevent and end homelessness for unaccompanied children are unique due to the age, capacity and legal status of these children. However, breaking down service system silos is one of the biggest challenges. Why is it so difficult?

This is particularly problematic for unaccompanied children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness who present to services with significant and multiple issues and who often don't have parents or guardians to support them to access the multiple services required.

For Discussion:

- A collaborative, integrated response that recognises the complexity and reality of children's lives, including their education, health, care and safety needs is critical. What could an integrated, seamless response for children at risk of or experiencing homelessness look like?

- The terms 'wrap around' and 'multi-disciplinary' responses have been cited as best practice approaches to provide multiple responses in a streamlined way. However, how often are real wrap around or multi-disciplinary responses achieved in a way that is not disjointed or onerous? What could an integrated, seamless response for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness look like?

- Does the 'no wrong door' concept work to prevent children and young people slipping through service gaps or do they need something different? Should we consider reintroducing youth centres or youth health centres where children and young people can access the full spectrum of service responses they need within a hub environment?

- Children and young people who experience homelessness and repeated cycles of violence talk about persistent suicidality, mental illness, abortion, miscarriage and substance use as common features of their lives. However, one in two children and young people are being turned away every day in Australia when they try to access a Youth specialist homelessness service (SHS). How can we encourage governments, politicians and the community to acknowledge the dire situation these children and young people are facing?

- What role could/do Youth SHS and youth services play to streamline access for children and young people?

- What existing frameworks could be used to provide integrated and streamlined responses for unaccompanied children and young people instead of reinventing another framework?

- Are there international examples where children and young people receive effective wrap around responses that could be adopted in the Australian context?

- Recognition of and action on preventing and responding to homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people has evolved unevenly across states and territories, meaning we have siloed policy, service system and practice development. What opportunities exist to create a national vision to broaden recognition of the issue and understand how to confront it?

Chapter 4: What happens to the children who are experiencing homelessness and have slipped through an overwhelmed child protection and OOHC system?

Unaccompanied children at risk of or experiencing homelessness who do not have protection orders in place are one of the most vulnerable cohorts in our society because no one is responsible for them. State/territory and federal governments can begin to fix the cracks in the system by ensuring all agencies are held accountable for upholding the rights of children outlined in the United Nations convention – especially those children without a family to rely on.

The OOHC sector is in crisis. Governments are scrambling to find placements and foster carers, and we are seeing a poor use of funding for Alternative Care Arrangements, which could be invested in better ways.

There are differing opinions about the most appropriate service response for unaccompanied children experiencing homelessness. Some believe children should only be placed in OOHC, while others consider that Youth SHS can support children better than OOHC.

We are at a critical juncture where it is imperative to raise the dire situations unaccompanied children are in: no one to care for them and keep them safe; an absence of documentation such as a Medicare card to access health services; a focus on survival, which precludes them from accessing education; and living in dangerous and precarious environments just to keep a roof over their head.

For Discussion:
- In the absence of OOHC placements for unaccompanied children experiencing homelessness, can Youth SHS play the same role?
- Are Youth SHS a more appropriate environment than OOHC for unaccompanied children of a certain age? Or would it be preferable to have a dual response that provides both options to children? What are the challenges and barriers that present for each response?
- Youth SHS often find it difficult or almost impossible to get older children into OOHC, which results in Youth SHS being the only feasible option, particularly when it's urgent to ensure a child is safely housed. However, funding for Youth SHS is significantly less than OOHC funding. What authorising environment is needed so governments see Youth SHS as viable alternatives to the OOHC and provide commensurate funding?
- Given there will always be children who do not receive an OOHC response, how do we ensure the SHS system is authorised, regulated and monitored to provide child safe care?
- What do we need to better champion unaccompanied child homelessness? Currently there is no champion to hold governments accountable, to drive system improvement and to conduct investigation and monitoring of outcomes for children who are experiencing homelessness. Does the answer lie in an independent commissioner to provide oversight of unaccompanied children?

Chapter 5: The relationship between domestic/family violence and unaccompanied child and youth homelessness

Escaping family violence is a common precursor to unaccompanied child and youth homelessness. Anecdotally, we have heard that a significant proportion of the children and young

people accessing Youth SHS are escaping domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV). Some services are indicating it is as high as 100 per cent. But DFSV policies are yet to acknowledge the relationship of DFSV and homelessness in the lives of unaccompanied children and young people.

The Australian Government heralded their National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 as the key mechanism to end gendered violence in one generation. However, a massive gap in the Plan is responses for unaccompanied children and young people. This has trickled down to the state and territory DFSV plans.

The narrative in the Plan around 'children and young people in their own right' lacks context or nuance, which may suggest this was added as an afterthought. In the SHS vernacular, the term 'children and young people in their own right' is often used to indicate that children and young people who accompany their parents/caregivers into a service should not be seen as an appendage to them and should be provided a response and case plan 'in their own right'.

An unaccompanied child or young person seeking a service because of DFSV needs a different response because of their age, experience and vulnerability than that provided to a woman seeking a service with her children for the same reason. However, there is an absence of services for unaccompanied children and young people experiencing DFSV. The lack of public discourse and service responses, and the absence of policy and funding to respond to unaccompanied children and young people experiencing DFSV only reinforces their belief they are not victims/survivors.

For Discussion:

- How do existing policies fail unaccompanied children and young people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV), and what can be done to change the current position?
- What currently exists in Australia and internationally that demonstrates successful outcomes for children and young people experiencing DFSV?
- The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 is heralded as the mechanism to end DFSV in Australian in one generation but how could this possibility be achieved when unaccompanied children and young people are mostly excluded in the narrative, funding distribution and action plans?
- The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 focuses on violence against girls and women but almost half of Youth SHS clients are male or non-binary and are leaving violent homes. How can we shift the dominant narrative of gendered violence to include all unaccompanied children and young people?

- Youth homelessness services is possibly the only sector that responds to unaccompanied children and young people experiencing DFSV. Given the intersections between DFSV and homelessness, how can connections be created to coordinate both sectors to support unaccompanied children and young people experiencing DFSV?

Chapter 6: Housing responses to youth homelessness

Housing must be at the heart of any national response to homelessness. However, young people are especially disadvantaged – to the point of discrimination – in terms of access to housing, particularly in the private rental market. In addition, social housing providers do not tend to allocate housing for young people, especially those with complex needs. Young people who receive Youth Allowance are at an extreme disadvantage because they are unable to afford most private rental in Australia.

The aim of this chapter is to explore and articulate the role housing policies in general, and youth housing in particular, can and do play in meeting the housing needs of young people without a home and those at risk of homelessness.

For Discussion:
- How can existing policies or future strategies ensure a fair proportion of social housing allocations is provided for young people?
- Is there a need for dedicated youth housing initiatives and what could they look like?
- Can social housing be developed and targeted to meet the needs of young people, particularly those at risk of youth homelessness?
- What innovative responses currently exist to increase housing for young people? How can responses that achieve good outcomes be resourced better?
- What would make it viable for landlords to increase access for young people into their private rental properties?

Chapter 7: Responses for Aboriginal children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness

The historical disadvantage stemming from the history of racist dispossession in Australia and the social exclusion of Aboriginal people has resulted in vastly disproportionate rates and levels of homelessness, housing instability and insecurity. The social trajectories of Aboriginal children and young people, including their experiences of homelessness, are clear evidence of this.

Aboriginal children and young people are also disproportionally represented in OOHC and youth justice and homelessness compared to non-Aboriginal people. Cultural support initiatives and programs that improve positive connections to culture for Aboriginal children and young people

have proven success. However, the availability of Aboriginal-owned and controlled solutions is disproportionate compared to the numbers of Aboriginal children and young people at risk in the community.

For Discussion:
- How can we ensure Aboriginal controlled solutions and self-determination are first principles in working with Aboriginal young people and any increase in investment must prioritise Aboriginal young people and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations?
- What are examples of existing effective services and/or approaches targeted to Aboriginal children and young people that are designed and delivered by Aboriginal Community Owned and Controlled Organisations?

Chapter 8: Lived Experience and Expertise

All relevant services should do as much as possible to facilitate the involvement of those with lived experience and expertise of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness in the various processes that will lead to the development of policies and plans that respond to homelessness, DFSV and child protection.

There are many successful models and methods that could be employed to ensure the voices of young people with lived experience are at the forefront. The aim of this chapter is to make sure the voice of lived experience informs all discussions towards the development of a national child and youth homelessness and housing plan.

For Discussion:
- Co-design has become a favoured model for the inclusion of lived experience in the development and design of services and service responses. How can co-design become the basic requirement for service development and delivery?
- What are some examples of successful co-design that could be used for the development of a national child and youth homelessness and housing plan?
- How do we avoid consultation and co-design simply becoming a mechanism of co-option, where community input and lived experience is not factored into the final product?

Endnote
1. https://www.unicef.org.au/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child

Key information

Submission deadline: All contributions need to be submitted by COB Friday 22 March 2024.

Submissions format: All contributions should be submitted as Word documents, emailed to parity@chp.org.au.

Word length: Contributions can be up to 1,600 words (including references). This equates to a double page spread in *Parity*. Single page articles can be up to 800 words in length. Contributions of a greater length should be discussed with the *Parity* Editor.

Artwork: Contributors are invited to submit the artwork they would like to accompany their article. Inclusion is dependent on the space being available. If artwork is not provided and is required, it will be selected by the *Parity* Editor.

Embedded media: Contributors are able to make suggestions for the placement of relevant hyperlinks, video and other multimedia within their content which can be embedded in the *Parity* online edition. Any suggestions will be reviewed by and decided upon by the *Parity* editor.

Content: By providing your contribution, you confirm and agree that (except where you have referenced or cited any other's work) the contribution is your original work and has not been copied from any other source.

Use: If your contribution is accepted, it will be published by or on CHP's behalf in an edition of the *Parity* magazine. *Parity* is available in hard copy and online.

Questions: If you have any questions at all about contributing to this edition, please contact the *Parity* Editor, Noel Murray on:

> e/ parity@chp.org.au
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References

All works that are cited or referred to in an article should be referenced. *Parity* does not encourage contributors to list a bibliography of references used in the development of an article but are *not* cited in the article. There is simply insufficient space for the inclusion of extensive bibliographies.

In-text citations

CHP uses numbered-citation for all in-text citations.

- Number references consecutively in the order in which they are first mentioned in the text. The first reference you cite will be numbered (1) in the text, and the second reference you cite will be numbered (2), and so on.
- A number is assigned to each reference as it is used. Even if the author is named in your text, a number must still be used.
- References are listed in numerical order at the end of the document.
- If you use a reference consecutively assign the consecutive number and use Ibid.
- If the same reference elsewhere in your article, assign the consecutive number and use op. cit. For example, Seung S 2012, op cit, p. 34.
- The number can be placed outside the text punctuation to avoid disruption to the flow of the text.
- If a single sentence uses two or more citations, simply identify the references one after the other.

For example:
International research has found that resilience in a homeless youth sample correlates with lower levels of psychological distress, suicide ideation, violent behaviour and substance abuse. (4) (5)

Parity referencing style

All references used in *Parity* articles should be listed using the following guidelines:

Books

Author's surname, initial(s), year of publication, Title of book, Publisher, Place of Publication, Page number**(s).**

For example:
1. Seung S 2012, Connectome: How the Brain's Wiring Makes Us Who We Are, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, p.90.

Journal Articles

Author's surname, initial(s), year of publication, 'Title of article'**,** *Title of Journal,* volume number, issue number, Page number(s).

For example:
Trevithick P 2003 'Effective Relationship Based Practice', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, vol.17, no.2, pp.163-176.

Newspaper articles

With identified author:
Authors Surname Initial Year of publication, 'Title of article', *Name of publication*, Date and year of publication, Page number(s) or <URL> if applicable.
For example:
Kissane K 2008, 'Brumby calls for tough sentences', *The Age*, 29 October 2017, p. 8.

With no author:
Use 'Unknown'
For example:
Unknown 2008, 'Brumby calls for tough sentences', *The Age*, 29 October 2017, p. 8.

Webpage/document within a website or blog post

Author's surname (if known) Initial, 'Page/Blog/Document Title', *The person or organisation responsible for the website,* Year of Publication (if known) <URL>
For example:
Greenblatt S, 'A special letter from Stephen Greenblatt', Australian Council of Social Services, 2017 <http://acoss.org/media/greenblatt>

Audio podcast

Speaker/Hosts surname Initial, 'Title of episode', *Title of Podcast*, Year and date of Publication, <URL> (if available).
For example:
Todd B 2018, 'What homelessness looks like for women', Stuff Mom Never Told You, 14 March 2018 <https://www.stuffmomnevertoldyou.com/podcasts/what-homelessness- looks-like-for-women.html >

Online video/film or documentary

Title Date of recording, Format, Publisher.

For example:
Indigenous homelessness 1992, video recording, Green Cape Wildlife Films.

Personal communication

Personal communication may include (but are not limited to) email, fax, interview, conversations, lectures, speeches, telephone conversations and letters. Usually personal communications do not appear, as the information is not retrievable. However, due to the numbered citations used in *Parity*, we ask that they be included as follows:

Author's surname First name, Method of communication**,** Date and year of Communication
For example:
Johnson George, Telephone interview, 12 August 2018.

Citing the same reference more than once

When a reference is cited a number of times, use op cit. after the year has been given. If the page number is different from the first use, cite the new page number as well.
For example:
Asante K O and Meyer-Weitz A 2015 op cit. pp. 230-231.

Citing the same reference consecutively

Use Ibid. when the same reference appears consecutively. If the page number is different from the first use, cite the page number as well.
For example:
1. Florn B H 2015, 'The cost of youth homelessness', *Journal of Adolescence*, vol.17, no.2, pp.163-176.
2. Ibid. pp.32-33.

Multiple Authors

For every reference type, give all the authors Surnames and first Initials followed by a comma in the bibliography. The last author listed should be preceded by 'and'.
For example:
Sharp J, Peters J and Howard K 2002, The management of a student research project, Gower, Aldershot, England.