



NYCH FACTS AND STORIES: COUNTDOWN – EVERYONE COUNTS

1. Youth Homelessness is Unseen!

We often hear the reference to ‘street kids’ but in fact most homeless young people are invisible to us. The data¹ tells us that 79% of homeless youth (12-18) in NSW are ‘couch surfing’ and living in other unstable situations. This generally means that they are temporarily staying with friends, relatives, family and sometimes with complete strangers. These young people will often be sleeping on couches or on the floors of these people’s houses until they outstay their welcome and move on to the next place – hence the couch surfing term.

Of the remain youth homeless population, 15% are living in a refuge, hostel or transitional housing and 1% are sleeping rough (on the street, in a car or tent or squatting).¹

This is contrary to what the general public might assume in that homeless people are generally thought to live on the streets or in refuge accommodation. You don’t have to be houseless to be homeless. These young people are not visible to the public yet they are a large proportion of the homeless youth population.

Key point: Young homeless people do not need rough sleeping initiatives alone but rather they need effective access to accommodation, family reconciliation services and community support and education programs to prevent homelessness.

¹ MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008 Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006, Counting the Homeless Project 2006 page 15. This figure technically refers to the percentage of homeless school students in Australia who are residing with friends, relatives, moving around or other temporary accommodation. The homeless school student census is a reasonable representation of the broader youth homeless population.

Natalie is a 17 year old girl from the Northern Rivers region. Her parents have had long term drug and alcohol problems and Natalie cannot rely upon them for support, as the relationships have become hostile and distant. She has moved around from family and friends couches for the past weeks, but relationships have been stretched and she cannot stay there anymore. Due to a lack of youth crisis accommodation vacancies in the region, a bed for Natalie could not be found and contact has been unable to be maintained due to a lack of outreach services to support her.²

2. Nearly half of all homeless Australians are children and young people under the age of 25³

There were 44,547 children and young people aged 0-25 who were homeless on census night in 2006. Broken down, there were 12,133 children under 12; 21,940 young people aged 12-18; and 10,504 young adults aged 19-25 who were homeless on census night in 2006.

Whilst the number of homeless youth has dropped since the 2001 census date there has been an increase in homeless children and young families and couples. This figure is 43% of all homeless people so therefore children and young people under 25 make up nearly half of all homeless people in Australia.

Key Point: Specific strategies to address child and youth homelessness are critical to the overall reduction of homelessness in Australia

Holly is 21 years of age and homeless in the Newcastle area. She got kicked out of home when she was 16 because her step father did not get along with her. She was kicked out of where she was living with some other young people and then she moved in with a boyfriend for a while. She broke up with her boyfriend due to violence and has since been staying at friend's places wherever she can.

She is requesting help to get somewhere safe and stable to live so she can commence a uni bridging course and undertake a uni degree that she has always wanted to do.

² A true story from a young person who contacted the YEAL line at YAA

³ Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008 Counting the Homeless Report 2006, ABS

Her parents want nothing to do with her and have effectively abandoned her. She is consumed by just trying to survive and she desperately wants to get somewhere safe to live. However she has found that trying to get a place with only Centrelink payments is hard.

She points out that she can't get a job if she has nowhere to live but she also is unwell medically. She has permanent tonsillitis and needs to see a specialist but the waiting list is long and she is moving around a lot.⁴

3. Homelessness can affect any young person

There are a variety of reasons why children and young people become homeless that are often outside of the control of the young person. The general public often has a view that young homeless people are run-aways and could really return home if they wanted to. In reality many young people become homeless due to family breakdown, family violence and child abuse.

Statistically 45% of homeless young people identify interpersonal relationship problems including family violence and parent/adolescent conflict as the primary reason for becoming homeless. The next most common reasons are accommodation issues (18%) such as being evicted or unable to find suitable accommodation and financial reasons (14%) such as unable to pay rent or other financial difficulty.⁵

Many young people find it difficult to be approved for leases due to the high demand on rental properties and discrimination against young people. There are also issues around overcrowding and the cost of housing that cause young people to become homeless.

Homelessness affects all groups of people and we know that young people who are indigenous, are from a single or blended family, have been homeless as a child or have been in statutory care, are at greater risk of homelessness.

⁴ A true story from a young person who contacted the YEAL line at YAA

⁵ 2006/07 AIHW National SAAP Data Report published in 2008

Key point: The community needs to stop judging homeless youth as delinquent and create opportunities for young people to not become homeless or to access long term housing.

Rachel is a 15 year old girl from the Northern suburbs. Rachel needed to leave her family home, as her dad was physically and emotionally abusive and her mother is no longer around. Rachel presented herself at the local DoCS office and fortunately, crisis accommodation was found for her. Rachel is aiming to keep her part time job and finish school with the support of her case worker and youth accommodation service.⁴

4. A job alone is not the solution for youth homelessness

Can you imagine trying to maintain or find work when you have no stable living arrangement? Many young people are expected to secure and maintain a job without stable accommodation and support. Some people also believe that getting a job will resolve homelessness by providing an income but this does not acknowledge the underlying causes of homelessness in young people.

Young people require safety and security, trust, and an appropriate support network for them to succeed at anything.

The Australian Government has taken steps to reform the employment services sector to ensure that greater support is provided to young people who are homeless and job seeking however we must ensure that homelessness intervention is not simplified to finding a job as there are other reasons why young people are homeless.

Key Point: It is important that young people are able to access appropriate support to address the underlying causes of their homelessness whilst they are supported to secure appropriate employment.

James is a 17 year old Aboriginal boy. He has struggled to find steady accommodation for most of his teenage years, due to a result of family troubles and relationship breakdowns. James was in the custody of the state and then has jumped from crisis refuge to refuge, in between the times he has spent in custody due to a chronic offending history. He currently is still held on remand, due only to the fact that he does not have supportive accommodation to go to and no form of income.

James would like to get a job as an apprentice chef yet he is unable to get out of the cycle of homelessness and youth offending on his own and no one wants to employ a criminal.⁶

5. How would you cope with school if you were homeless?

There are nearly 10,000 homeless school students in Australia (2,500 in NSW) aged between 12 and 18 years old⁷. In the Federal Government's White Paper on Homelessness the government commits to the following:

- *Provide additional specialist support to children including brokerage funds to assist them to return to home and school.⁸*
- *Deliver additional services for up to 9,000 12–18 year olds at risk of homelessness to remain connected with their families, where it is safe and appropriate, as well as access to education, training and employment.⁹*

There is a need to hold Federal AND State levels of government accountable to these commitments to ensure that specific programs and resources are allocated to support children and young people to remain at or re-engage in education or employment where appropriate.

⁶ A true story from a young person who contacted the YEAL line at YAA

⁷ MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008 Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006, Counting the Homeless Project 2006 page 13.

⁸ The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness, Dec 2008 (pp. 52, 56).

⁹ The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness, Dec 2008 (pp. 30, 36)

Traditionally, homeless youth and those at risk of family breakdown have struggled to fit into the usual school environment. Their attendance usually suffers along with their level of concentration. Many students struggle to maintain positive friendships and others become withdrawn or their behaviour becomes disruptive to other students. Some students will drop out of school and may need assistance to re-enter school once their accommodation becomes stable. In some cases this may mean additional tuition or temporary breaks from their education.

In NSW, schools provide an excellent environment for early detection of risk factors that lead to homelessness and family breakdown. Therefore schools also provide an excellent avenue to assist families and young people to access appropriate support services to prevent homelessness. Therefore specific strategies are needed in the education system to prevent homelessness and to enable schools to adapt to the needs of these students so that their education does not suffer.

Key Point: Specific strategies are needed to support homeless children and young people to maintain or re-engage with their education. Strategies are also needed to provide effective early intervention and prevention services to children and young people at risk of homelessness.

Aaron is a 16 year old boy from Victoria, who had been under the care of Department of Human Services. Aaron came to Sydney to reunite with his mother. The relationship became strained after a month due to his mother's psychiatric illness and not getting along with her partner. Aaron has expressed suicidal ideations and is beginning to increase his use of alcohol and marijuana. He has no more family or social support networks and no form of income. Aaron is currently trying to complete his School Certificate.¹⁰

¹⁰ A true story from a young person who contacted the YEAL line at YAA