

Submission to the Victorian Youth Strategy



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Introduction

Young people experience homelessness differently to adults. Young people need care and support, and are not usually developmentally ready to fully control the circumstances of their own health, safety and positive development. The challenge of supporting young people without a home includes more than accessing a stable home. The question remains as to how a service system can meaningfully provide a substitute for the care and guidance so critical to positive adolescent development, where that influence is and/ or has been inconsistent in the home. Victoria is yet to fully grapple with this question.

Currently, young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria may be able to access homelessness supports specifically designed for young people, but this access is within a system primarily designed for adults. The needs of young people experiencing homelessness differ from those of adults, and they regularly fail to benefit from adult focussed services. These include triage services built around adult considerations, emergency shelter options predicated on an assumption of independence, and case management that assumes that people need a brief period of support to resolve a momentary crisis – rather than guidance and support to understand their own needs, to set goals, and to attain those goals in the future.

This submission seeks to conceptualise a homelessness service system designed for young people, rather than an adult system with *ad hoc* youth appropriate elements. The submission doesn't seek to comprehensively outline the various interventions required to meet the multiple needs of young people without homes, rather it seeks to envisage a structure in which young people can be supported to thrive. Further work is required to determine the program level interventions which are necessary additions to this framework.

All young people deserve an opportunity to live well in our community, and to develop into adults who are more independent, interdependent, connected to community, and engaged in planning and achieving their dreams. This submission looks at how we can deliver on that promise for the most marginalised young people in Victoria.

Recommendations

1. Support young people to live well in their communities by delivering reforms to address poverty, and funding a strong ecosystem of support services
2. Fund universal risk assessment for youth homelessness and associated vulnerabilities, particularly in regions with a high incidence of youth homelessness, while also funding appropriate youth-specialist responses
3. Resource youth-focused community services to provide collaborative responses to highly vulnerable young people
4. Measure and meet the need for youth-focused community services, including family mediation, psychosocial rehabilitation, education focused support, youth workers, and alcohol and other drug treatment
5. Resource access points with youth specialist staff focused on finding short to medium term housing arrangements with suitable adults
6. Make universally available family reconciliation and mediation to all young people experiencing homelessness for whom it is appropriate
7. Make available support for young people experiencing homelessness allowing for long-term continued engagement, and with the capacity to increase intensity when a young person has need
8. Support community connectedness and positive development of young people experiencing homelessness by increasing funding to youth and recreational services that connect with young people in homelessness programs
9. Invest in additional refuge and/or medium term supported congregate models, as well as support in areas with high unmet need
10. Fund youth homelessness services to deliver youth peer support programs
11. Develop and deliver a model of longer-term transitional housing for young people, equipped with adequate support to achieve a goal-setting approach
12. Provide housing subsidies for young people where a lone-person private rental outcome is appropriate, but is financially unviable
13. Develop medium term supported congregate housing models for young people who are working towards greater independence

14. Fund therapeutic support as a core component of specialist homelessness service provision for young people
15. Ensure therapeutic residential care meets the multiple needs of young people
16. Monitor the two-bedroom model of therapeutic residential care, to assess the extent to which individual therapeutic housing is needed in some instances
17. Deliver Housing First for Youth for young people with concurrent homelessness, mental illness and or substance abuse
18. Provide programs to support young people experiencing homelessness to stay engaged in learning
19. Invest in a new medium term supported congregate housing model to provide accommodation and support for young LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness
20. Provide support for youth homelessness programs to achieve LGBTIQ inclusive practice
21. Guarantee a suitable social housing offer for all young families where homelessness is the primary justification for an impending child removal , including for unborn reports
22. Continue to develop the capacity of the 'linked dataset' and provide regular reports in order to target support priorities for highly vulnerable people.

What is youth homelessness?

Children and young people experience homelessness at very high rates compared to the broader population. Adolescence is by its nature a period of transition for young people as they move from childhood to adulthood. Every individual young person has a unique experience of this transition, and there is no single year of age where we can delineate that all people younger than a certain age are children, and those older than this age are young adults.

In defining youth homelessness, Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) instead seeks to identify a practical consideration. Where a young person experiences homelessness with their family, it can be assumed that they have parental (or like) resources to draw upon, including incomes and some degree of guidance in their transition to adulthood.

By contrast, where young people leave their family either temporarily or permanently and experience homelessness separated from their family, or as the head of a family unit (as when they have children of their own), they typically lack access to parental guidance and financial resources, and are less likely to receive daily support in their transition to adulthood.

For this reason, CHP is using a definition of youth homelessness whereby all young people who experience homelessness separated from a family unit with a parental figure, experience 'youth homelessness'. All young people aged 0-18 who remain living with their family of origin (or another adult influence) experience childhood homelessness, even where those relationships are harmful.

CHP recognises that homelessness is an inherently unstable experience, perhaps especially among young people. Both living arrangements and relationships with parental figures are subject to regular change, and people will move between these two definitions. A majority of young people who experience homelessness return to their home of origin at some point within the first two years of having left.¹ While this submission focuses on how to support young people experiencing homelessness separated from the family unit, we recognise that reforms that strengthen children and young people's wellbeing within the home are important to *prevent* youth homelessness. Nevertheless, we consider this definition as a practical way of describing the differing support needs of the two cohorts.

The focus of this report is on youth homelessness – that is, young people who are experiencing homelessness living apart from a parental figure.

The extent of youth homelessness in Victoria

By nature, homelessness is often hidden, often unstable experience, which makes the number of people without a home difficult to quantify. This is especially true of youth homelessness, as young people are less likely to identify their situation as homelessness, and less likely to seek help from specialist homelessness services.

There are two main publicly available sources of data on homelessness in Victoria: the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Census of Population and Housing, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC).

Census 2016; a point in time count

The Australian Census is Australia's most comprehensive point in time count of the population, demographics, and how people live – including their housing situation. As a point in time count, it tells us about how many people experienced homelessness on one day – specifically 9 August 2016. Updated every five years, this data is often used as a measure of the extent of homelessness in Australia.

According to the Census there were 6,370 young people aged 12-24 experiencing homelessness in Victoria on Census night 2016.¹ Table 1 below demonstrates that young people experience homelessness at far higher rates than the rest of the population, with those within this 12-year age cohort representing 26 per cent of those without a home counted on Census night, despite being just 16 per cent of the total population. It is important to note that the Australian Bureau of Statistics recognises that this is likely an underestimate, and that young people are likely to represent an even greater share of those experiencing homelessness, due to the difficulty in ascertaining whether an instance of young people temporarily staying with another household is, or is not, 'couch surfing'.

¹ Single year of age reporting is not available for the Census homelessness count, so it is not possible to exclude those aged 12-14 from this count. Nor is it possible to exclude those who are experiencing homelessness alone, from those who are experiencing homelessness as part of a family unit.

Nevertheless, Table 1 below demonstrates that despite the limitations of the data, young people, and especially young people aged 19-24, are far more likely to experience homelessness than any other population age group.

Table 1. Rate of homelessness, by age 2016

Age	Homelessness per 10,000 people
Under 12	38.4
12–18	41.8
19–24	88.9
25–34	61.9
35–44	42.0
45–54	36.9
55–64	26.8
65–74	19.2
75 and over	12.5

Forms of youth homelessness

We can also understand from the Census how young people are experiencing homelessness, whether it be on the streets, in crisis accommodation, or couch surfing.

Table 2 below shows that young people are less likely than other people experiencing homelessness to be “living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out”, otherwise known as sleeping rough. In fact, rough sleeping is relatively rare among those young people experiencing homelessness, making up just 2 per cent of instances on any given night – just 130 young people were counted sleeping rough in Victoria in the Census.

The 12-18 age group are more likely than other people experiencing homelessness to be in ‘supported accommodation for the homeless’, sometimes called crisis accommodation. Those aged 19-24 are substantially less likely to be living in crisis accommodation. This is likely reflective of the priority given to both children and the younger end of the 15-24 age cohort in a youth homelessness system designed to prioritise the most vulnerable. However, both consumers and service providers report that it is particularly difficult to obtain crisis accommodation and support for young people aged 22-24, whose life stage may be incompatible with residing with people in their mid-teens, while they are also too young to safely reside in adult crisis accommodation.

While recognising that young people who are couch surfing are undercounted in the Census, and that this is a prominent form of accommodation for homeless young

people, the Census shows that young people are most over-represented among those living in severely over-crowded dwellings (in houses that require at least four additional bedrooms to appropriately accommodate all residents). This reflects the challenges faced by low income families in finding suitable affordable accommodation, as well as the inadequacy of income supports for young people.

Table 2. Living situation of homeless young people, 2016

	Percentage (ages 12 -18)	Percentage (ages 19-24)	Percentage (all 12-24)	Percentage (all homeless)
Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out	1.5	2.3	2.0	4.5
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	41.8	18.7	26.0	28.8
Persons staying temporarily with other households	6.7	9.4	8.5	12.5
Persons living in boarding houses	3.9	17.7	13.3	17.8
Persons in other temporary lodgings	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.4
Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings	45.8	51.6	49.8	36.0
All homeless persons	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The Specialist Homelessness Services Collection

The AIHW also collects data on the number of people being supported by homelessness services in each year. This data is called the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) and is drawn from the information collected from each person seeking assistance from a specialist homelessness service in Australia. Unless otherwise stated, all data in this submission refers specifically to Victorian figures.

The AIHW data is especially helpful in understanding youth homelessness, as it allows for an age breakdown helpful to understanding young people experiencing homelessness outside of their families of origin. In this section we explore the homelessness service use data for those aged 15-24. While this data is consistent with the accepted age range of youth homelessness, this means that the AIHW data is not completely comparable to the Census data provided above. While this service data makes it possible to distinguish young people presenting alone from those

presenting as part of a family unit, it is important to understand that many young people are and present to our services as parents.

The 2018-19 data reveals that across that year 19,253 young people sought help from Victoria’s Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), 37 per cent of whom were male, 63 per cent were female. This proportion is broadly in line with the sex makeup of the total SHS using population.²

Table 3 below shows the household composition (by sex) of young people seeking assistance from SHS. It shows us that young women are slightly more likely to present alone, and that young people are slightly less likely to present in single parent households.³

Table 3. Household composition of young people (15-24) attending homelessness services (by sex)

Presenting unit type—first reported	Male Youth		Female Youth		All ages SHS users
	Number	Proportion of all young males	Number	Proportion of all young females	Proportion for all SHS users
Lone person	4,633	64.9	8,738	72.1	65.2
Couple with child/ren	401	5.6	395	3.3	4.5
Single with child/ren	1,632	22.9	2,348	19.4	26.0
Couple without child/ren	301	4.2	364	3.0	2.6
Other family	99	1.4	167	1.4	0.8
Other group	75	1.1	100	0.8	0.7

² Specialist homelessness services may identify a person’s sex in one of two ways; a worker may infer the person’s sex based on their presentation, or they may ask a person how they identify. It is likely that in many instances the ‘sex’ indicator reflects a person’s gender rather than their sex (where these are different).

³ Some single parent households include the young person not as the parent, but as the dependent child. As such, the reduced likelihood of a young person being a single parent is probably understated in this table.

Table 4 below shows that at their first presentation, 45 per cent were already experiencing homelessness, and 55 per cent were at risk of homelessness. Young people are considerably more likely to already be homeless when accessing homelessness services than the broader SHS user group, 35% of whom are homeless on first presentation. This likely reflects two phenomena of youth homelessness; many young people are neither aware that they are experiencing homelessness, nor that supports are available to them. Further, many young people seek to stay with their family of origin even after that arrangement has become unmanageable.

Table 4. Homelessness on first presentation, young people 2018-19

Young people	
Homeless	8,019
At Risk	9,873
Not stated	1,361

Table 5 (below) shows the housing situation of people accessing specialist homelessness services in 2018-19, both at the start of their support, and at the end. 'No tenure', 'rent free – private housing' and 'other rent free' constitute three of the four most common housing situations for young people presenting to homelessness services. This is likely to reflect the heavy reliance of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness on living in the family home and on couch surfing.

It is notoriously difficult to rehouse young people who cannot return home. This is in large part due to their low incomes, which can make private rental unsustainable. Another important factor is that homelessness services are understandably reluctant to recommend young people for secure tenure public or community housing, where it is anticipated that upon resolution of their immediate crisis young people might be able to sustain market housing. Table 5 below demonstrates that small but important progress is made by homelessness services supporting young people to obtain private rental or transitional housing. Later in this report we examine current barriers to obtaining such housing and make recommendations to improve young people's access to these forms of accommodation.

Table 5. Housing outcomes for those aged 15-24

Housing tenure at start and end of homelessness support, Victoria, 2018-19	Tenure— first reported	Tenure— last reported	Percentage change
Renter - private housing	3,715	4,397	18%
Renter - public housing	751	1,111	48%
Renter - community housing	159	268	69%
Renter - transitional housing	585	1,215	108%
Renter - caravan park	77	103	34%
Renter - boarding/rooming house	303	468	54%
Renter - emergency accommodation/night shelter/women's refuge/ youth shelter where rent is charged	276	306	11%
Other renter	576	507	-12%
Rent free - private housing	2,626	2,240	-15%
Rent free - public housing	339	317	-6%
Rent free - community housing	50	39	-22%
Rent free- transitional housing	170	198	16%
Rent free - caravan park	23	16	-30%
Rent free - boarding/rooming house	105	78	-26%
Rent free - emergency accommodation/night shelter/women's refuge/ youth shelter where rent is not charged	282	263	-7%
Other rent free	1,234	962	-22%
Life tenure scheme	1	1	0%
Owner - shared equity or rent/buy scheme	10	9	-10%
Owner - being purchased/with mortgage	159	151	-5%
Owner - fully owned	16	18	13%
Other tenure type not elsewhere specified	71	61	-14%
No tenure	4,862	3,455	-29%
Invalid or missing	2,863	3,070	7%

Youth homelessness – a typology

It is commonly accepted that young people experiencing homelessness have vastly different needs from one another. Many young people continue to require care and guidance in their development towards adulthood. Both practice experience and academic literature recognise that young people can be negatively impacted when that guidance stems from other young people whose behaviours include risk taking and/or antisocial behaviours.²

A typology of youth homelessness can help us to understand appropriate care models for young people with different needs. However, it is also important to understand the limitations of this typology.

The first thing to recognise about outlining three types of youth homelessness is that all young people without homes continue to require the care and guidance received by young people living well with their families of origin. There is not a 'low-needs' cohort. Considering Johnson's typology, even among those with the 'lowest' support needs, 45 per cent of young people had been barred from services.³

'For example, I was in high school, I was doing year 11 and 12, I was couch surfing, I was homeless, I was travelling long distances, hours, to get to school every day... I was trying my best, but I was also soothing with drugs, self-medicating with drugs and I was literally just doing everything on my own. I was a child, but I could get into clubs. I would go out on a Thursday night and not come back to Monday, because I was homeless. I'd just go out every day and every night. And doing all of that I still tried to get my year 11 and 12 and I would still show up to school.'

- Joal Presincola, Consumer / Advocate

A typology of youth homelessness does not obviate the need for homelessness services to be equipped to be responsive to young people's needs. Any young person without a home will require intensive supports intermittently, and will take significant backwards steps on their journey to housing stability. It is vital that we have a youth homelessness support system that meets the needs of the young people seeking its care, rather than trying to fit young people into segmented and limited service offerings.

'People need to be able to transition and flow between groups and that should be able to be seamless and it should not require a dramatic change in resources and support. Young people's needs change really quickly, and it has to be fluid and flexible.'

- Jody Letts, Consumer / Advocate

The academic literature has identified a range of typologies of youth homelessness. CHP notes that most typologies share significant similarities such that for functional purposes, they can stand alongside one another without contradiction. Hence, in this paper we consider the needs of three cohorts:

1. Those engaging with positive influences
2. Those disconnected from positive influences
3. Those with very high use of services that intervene.

Those engaging with positive influences

Youth homelessness must be understood within the context of the process of adolescent development, which all young people are undergoing. During this time of transition from childhood to adulthood, young people not only develop physically, but also in terms of their sense of personal identity, their understanding of intimate and interpersonal relationships and boundaries, and towards establishing the independence and interdependence of adults.

All young people are influenced to an extent by their peer groups as they journey through these critical developmental milestones. For young people without a home, the influence of their peers may be even more influential in the absence of active and positive parental guidance.

Young people who continue to engage in education through their experience of homelessness are an important example of such young people. Schooling supports educational attainment and ultimate employment outcomes, as well as self-esteem, and helps young people to maintain positive routines.⁴ This matters; retaining a link to schooling has been shown to be a highly protective factor against lifetime homelessness.⁵

School is not the only environment in which a young person without a home can benefit developmentally. Programs that seek to foster community connectedness for young people without homes have demonstrated important improvements to young people's mental health, loneliness, social skills, and decreased risk-taking behaviour.⁶

Other important environments might include workplaces or sporting teams. Cultural connections can be particularly important for CALD or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

All young people experiencing the trauma of homelessness require housing and therapeutic supports. For those young people also engaging with positive influences, it is important that there are resources to meaningfully support their continued engagement with their positive environment of choice.

'I think there's a very fine thread where I was across the three (typological segments). I was engaging in school and employment, but I was opting out of other things. Sometimes I wouldn't go. And there was a lot of instances where I was antisocial. And sometimes I needed some of that (intensive) support.

I was always being grouped. Because I had a job they thought I was okay on the surface. I felt so misunderstood. I was going through it and people couldn't understand me or I couldn't articulate it. I was at Uni but it was hanging by a thread. I wasn't attending, I wasn't do well, I was always before the (academic progress) panel.'

- Cathie, Consumer / Advocate

Those disconnected from positive influences

Young people who are disconnected from the affirming environments detailed above can be considered another group under this typology. These young people usually have been rejected by family, school and the housing and labour markets. In this context, these young people often develop close (if transient) relationships within peer groups of other such young people, who having experienced similar traumas, can counter the feelings of unworthiness stemming from these multiple rejections.⁷

'The ones who have also gone through shit, they're the ones you really bond with. But I don't know if that was the best thing for me, in terms of what I was trying to build. That loneliness, who are my friends? But it meant a lot to me, because I didn't have that family.'

- Cathie, Consumer / Advocate

Such peer groups, while personally validating, can be harmful influences on positive achievement of the important adolescent developmental milestones. These young people are more likely to develop substance abuse problems, be exploited, be pressured into sex for accommodation arrangements and other sexual exploitation and violence, and are less likely to be considering how to end their homelessness. Ultimately, this group experiences homelessness for a longer period.⁸

When I was in the (Turana) training centre, they mixed the young kids with the older kids, and the older kids abused us.

- John Kenney, Consumer / Advocate

Those with very high use of services that intervene

Among the most highly vulnerable people in our community, is the group of young people with highly complex needs. This small but under-served group of young people can demonstrate complex behaviours early on in life, including cognitive disability, severe psychological distress, homelessness, and increased contact with police. If left untreated, the neurological impacts of early childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences, can become a lifelong disability.⁹

Such disabilities can be associated with reduced capacity to regulate emotions, poor impulse control and limited independence.¹⁰ Without support, young people can incur a lifetime of costs between the homelessness, hospital, and corrections systems.¹¹ However, for young people with multiple complex needs, including disability, mental illness, homelessness, and substance abuse, there are few intensively supported therapeutic residential facilities available to support their future housing stability.

There is not a single government agency responsible and equipped to support the various needs of this cohort. In this context, police are often required to provide the frontline response to the housing, child protection, mental health and cognitive disability needs of these young people.¹² Police express frustration – seeing as they do the transition that many of these young people make from victim of crime to criminalised person - that support services are unable to intervene at this critical stage. A police led response is not designed for and cannot deliver long-term positive outcomes for these young people.

In this submission we consider how the needs of these young people can begin to be met, whether inside or outside of the homelessness service system.

Victoria's Specialist Homelessness Services System – a system for adults

Victoria's specialist homelessness services (SHS) system includes approximately 140 organisations, delivering around 500 programs. The SHS provide initial assessment and planning, a variety of supports that may be attached to accommodation or provided on an outreach or appointment basis, as well as linking people to available accommodation or housing, and providing brokerage to facilitate service users into properties.

Victoria's homelessness services operate under the 'opening doors' framework. Generally, a person experiencing or at risk of homelessness attends an 'access point' service, whereupon their needs for housing and support are assessed. At this point, they may be matched with refuge accommodation, transitional housing or support available on the 'vacancy management system', a common register of all available homelessness support or supported housing resources in their area. However, due to the under-resourcing of homelessness services compared to need, it is far more likely that the person will receive a short-term response of a few days funding for a hotel room, or a few weeks funding for a rooming house, and be placed on a waiting list for accommodation and/or support. A statewide youth specialist access point, located in Melbourne, but available across Victoria over the telephone, performs this role for 2,500 of the young people seeking homelessness support,¹³ with the remainder attending their local SHS access point.

Only a small proportion of those who attend an 'access point' receive case management support, typically on a triaged needs basis. Those in receipt of case management are in practice further triaged, with only some people able to access the limited number of more intensive support and supported housing programs provided by other homelessness services and as identified on the vacancy management system.

This framework is relatively successful at allocating the resources available for an immediate shelter response, and triaging these scarce resources to those most at risk and most in need.

However, under resourcing means that many young people are not able to receive a service, or are not able to receive a service that appropriately responds to their developmental stage or level of need. For example, many young people are placed

in rooming houses or motel room also used by adults experiencing homelessness and without ongoing support.

A specialist homelessness service system for young people

For most young people, the most appropriate responses to homelessness sit outside the homelessness service system. Homelessness services can only poorly approximate the love and guidance young people require in support of their transition to adulthood. Evidence and practice experience tell us that in order for young people to avoid many of the harms of homelessness, early intervention services must be designed to limit the length of time a young person is exposed to homelessness.¹⁴ Prolonged youth homelessness is also a powerful predictor of a lifetime of episodic homelessness.¹⁵ By supporting young people with family conflict, mental health issues, substance misuse, or educational disengagement, support services can not only prevent or quickly end homelessness, but can also help to build the community connections and family relationships that benefit young people long term.¹⁶

A youth homelessness service system that prioritises prevention and early intervention can both reduce the reliance on inappropriate emergency accommodation responses for young people, and better provide appropriate youth housing options and support to keep vulnerable young people safe.

Upstream prevention – a proactive ecosystem of support services

The best way to prevent youth homelessness is to support young people to thrive in their communities. When young people have functioning family relationships, are engaged in education or employment, have a sufficient income, have strong healthy relationships with their peers and feel well within themselves, they are far less likely to experience youth homelessness. A proactive ecosystem of support services can help to achieve this aim.

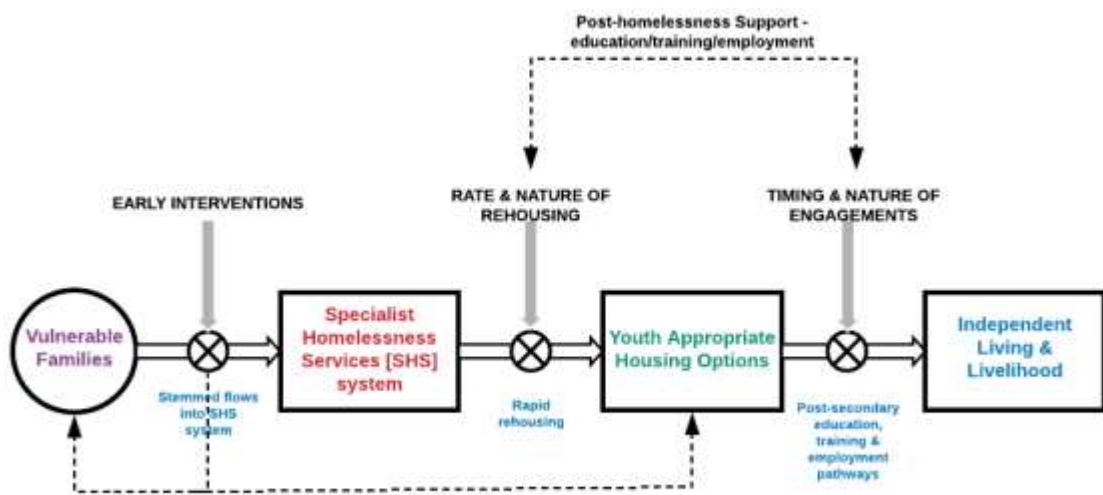
Young people, even more than other adults, live within local geographic communities. Typically, when we consider ‘universal services’, they are universally available to members of the community, such as libraries, hospitals, and policing. Schools, a youth-focused universal service, are not only available to all young people, and they achieve near total engagement. This ecosystem of support services includes health services, local government, and community services.

These services are uniquely placed to provide collaborative responses to highly vulnerable young people and their families. Figure 1 (below) demonstrates that important work with vulnerable families by these service can prevent homelessness for young people, as well as to provide early interventions, which can keep young

people out of the specialist homelessness services system (explored later in this submission).

By better responding to the factors that contribute to homelessness before a young person becomes homeless, a young person might avoid homelessness entirely. Highly collaborative responses through universal and targeted services have been shown to be effective to this end.

Figure 1: Stock and flow diagram of the homelessness service system for youth¹⁷



Source: Developed by MacKenzie, D.

Programs that provide early intervention in the circumstances that we know can make an impact on youth homelessness, such as family conflict or school disengagement, have been shown to be extremely effective at preventing homelessness. By supporting both educational engagement for young people at risk of disengaging, and family conflict where it is identified, one such project achieved a 40 per cent reduction in adolescent homelessness in the region in which they operate.¹⁸

In localities with high incidences of youth homelessness, schools may be an important environment for identifying young people at risk. Appropriately resourced youth-specialist services should stand ready to provide appropriate responses.

However, strengthening collaborative responses to highly vulnerable young people across the service ecosystem should be considered core work within every service ecosystem, and should provide the direction for youth homelessness prevention across Victoria, regardless of the incidence of youth homelessness.

Later in this submission we discuss the need for greatly expanded access to family mediation for young people who leave the family home. However, when homelessness triggers family mediation, conflict has often become entrenched. These young people would have better outcomes from family mediation in the years prior to the relationship breaking down to this point. Nonetheless, a greater focus on providing care for young people within their existing networks (known as family and natural supports), rather than through the homelessness service system is increasingly emphasised to prevent youth homelessness, prevent a return to youth homelessness, end youth homelessness, and to prevent later adult homelessness for young people.¹⁹

Family mediation is not the only area where improved provision of community services could reduce the distress of and negative outcomes for the young person, and improve the home lives of young people and the chances they might stay in the family home. Psychosocial rehabilitation, education-focused supports for young people at risk of disengaging, and alcohol and other drug treatment for young people are all provided at a scale that is nowhere near sufficient to meet the level of demand. For many young people, by the time that they are experiencing homelessness and are put forward for these supports, their needs and behaviours have become incompatible with the way these supports are delivered. This dearth of relevant services mean that young people's situations often continue to deteriorate, which can contribute to their home lives becoming untenable.

A range of services are currently involved in the lives of vulnerable young people, with key contributors including schools, youth workers, and child protection services. These environments should present opportunities to refer young people for the family and community services that they require – unfortunately however, these services are not widely available.

Improved collaboration further provides the opportunity for working together when young people begin to show signs that indicate increasing vulnerability to poorer outcomes. Such behaviours might include police and justice involvement, substance misuse, or the onset of mental illness. Well resourced, collaborative, youth-specialist service systems can work together to provide the interventions that keep young people connected to positive influences, and prevent future homelessness.

Recommendation 1: Support young people to live well in their communities by delivering reforms to address poverty, and funding a strong ecosystem of support services

Recommendation 2: Fund universal risk assessment for youth homelessness and associated vulnerabilities, particularly in regions with a high incidence of youth homelessness, while also funding appropriate youth-specialist responses

Recommendation 3: Resource youth-focused community services to provide collaborative responses to highly vulnerable young people

Recommendation 4: Measure and meet the need for youth-focused community services, including family mediation, psychosocial rehabilitation, education-focused support, youth workers, and alcohol and other drug treatment

A supportive place to stay

Young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness need a safe place to stay, not a hotel or a rooming house. An 'access point' system for young people should be underpinned by a system of safe and supportive alternative options to home.

'Couch-surfing' arrangements are common among young people experiencing homelessness, but are typified not only by a lack of tenure, but often by a lack of a shared understanding between the young person and the host as to the expected duration of the stay, and of the household rules by which the young person must abide. A lack of financial resources can also cause the situation to deteriorate, or may preclude an otherwise appropriate arrangement due to practical considerations – such as the availability of a bed.

As a result, young people often stay a short while with one household until they are no longer welcome, and then secure a similar short stay with another. Often, this process continues until they have exhausted the safe options with positive influences available to them, and with the next options being riskier. Currently, young people make this assessment for themselves, while in the midst of a considerable crisis.²⁰

'My pathway into homelessness started with my mother had enough of me and asked me to leave the home... I ended up moving in with drug dealers, and there was no place I knew to go to where I had a roof over my head. And that began the use of drugs for me as well.'

- Matthew Stuart, Consumer / Advocate

Youth-specialist support workers could help young people to ascertain appropriate family or friends with whom to stay, support them to discuss the expectations of the host and their own needs, and use flexible brokerage funds to support the viability of agreed arrangements. This would be a far preferable immediate response to a young person's homelessness than the hotels and rooming houses currently being used.

Recommendation 5: Resource access points with youth specialist staff focused on finding short to medium term housing arrangements with suitable adults

Family reconciliation

While for some young people it is not safe to return to living in the family home, for many, reconciling with family and returning home is the best possible option.²¹ Even where they leave home, it is rare for children and young people to desire a complete break of family ties. In many circumstances, an opportunity exists to reconcile and strengthen the capacity for ongoing family connections.²²

Research suggests that young people who have experienced homelessness and return to their family of origin achieve better outcomes than those who do not.²³ Currently, family mediation and reconciliation services are provided in an *ad hoc* way across Victoria. Many young people do not get the support they need, precipitating unnecessary and often prolonged experiences of homelessness. Young people who reengage with their families not only address their immediate homelessness, but are more likely to avoid the negative consequences of homelessness.²⁴

CHP contends that for most of the 19,000 young people attending homelessness services each year, the provision of family reconciliation is an important tool needed to improve the health of family relationships, which have a lifetime impact on the outcomes achieved by a young person. Family reconciliation provides the additional benefit, of playing an important role diverting young people from the formal homelessness system and keeping them connected within their community. This is particularly the case, when paired with the supports needed to live temporarily with supportive family or friends. For many of those engaging with positive influences, these two supports may be sufficient to prevent an ongoing experience of homelessness.

Recommendation 6: Make universally available family reconciliation and mediation to all young people experiencing homelessness for whom it is appropriate

Reimagining case management; long-term and readily available

Victoria's youth refuges provide accommodation and intensive on-site support to young people experiencing homelessness. Victoria currently has 184 youth refuge beds, funded to provide an eight week stay – providing 1,000 – 1,200 youth refuge placements in total each year.

For those young people disconnected from positive influences, youth refuges can serve an important role, including in assessing the young person's needs. Refuges can also play an important role in supporting young people in practical and therapeutic ways; from assisting a young person to secure an income to support greater independence, to helping them to understand their trauma responses and how to improve self-regulation of their emotions. Almost all young people

experiencing homelessness disconnected from positive influences have experienced trauma. When they have sufficient capacity to provide case management, refuges can also play an important role in assessing a young person's needs, and connecting them with appropriate supports such as psychosocial rehabilitation, staffed congregate facilities, or counselling for substance misuse.

Many young people however, find the refuge model frustrating, reporting that it makes them feel "trapped".²⁵ A lack of housing exit options for young people means that they often stay longer in refuges than the system intended, in accommodation ill-suited to longer stays. This has a negative impact on the goal planning and attainment that is a critical element of supporting young people experiencing homelessness to housing stability.²⁶

"We're just stuck here on waitlists. We've got nothing to do all day long because we're just sitting and waiting and waiting on lists... So the system needs something to cut that waiting period out, because then they get comfortable waiting, then they just get stuck in the loop of they don't want to make a decision because what could come next? If the next thing isn't better, then you just don't want to make a decision, so you just go nowhere."

- Consumer, reported in Melbourne City Mission 2020²⁷

In the next section we will explore what these housing options might look like.

Young people without a home need services funded to provide the long-tail support that young people require. No eight week intervention into the life of a young person can replace the care, guidance, and love that most young people can expect from their family across their adolescence. The lack of availability of case management through Victoria's homelessness services means that most people, including most young people, miss out. For young people experiencing homelessness, for whom care and guidance from the family has been inconsistent, such support is a necessity.

For the small number of young people for whom family reunification is an inappropriate and unsafe outcome, a youth homelessness service system needs to be developed to provide a continuum of care options. Options to allow young people to leave the refuge include ongoing case management to continue the discussion of progress against a young person's goals regularly over the months and years after their refuge stay. This ongoing relational engagement provides the mechanism to assess when these young people, who lack traditional support structures, may require further periods of more or less intensive support.

Long-term case management support isn't just required by young people leaving refuge, but by all young people for whom family reunification is an inappropriate

outcome. Further to this, young people's positive development requires that they should be supported to have ample opportunity to form strong connections within their communities. Opportunities to participate in recreation and community events can support young people to develop strong interpersonal relationship skills, and a healthy sense of self. While services and community groups exist that can provide these opportunities to young people, currently there is little integration between these services, and young people experiencing homelessness. Given the deep exclusion these young people face, greater emphasis should be placed on facilitating young people experiencing homelessness into recreational and community programs.

Recommendation 7: Make available support for young people experiencing homelessness allowing for long-term continued engagement, and with the capacity to increase intensity when a young person has need

Recommendation 8: Support community connectedness and positive development of young people experiencing homelessness by increasing funding to youth and recreational services that connect with young people in homelessness programs

Currently Victoria has 18 youth refuges, and seven medium term supported congregate housing facilities, like Foyers. These services have been developed in a piecemeal fashion over the decades²⁸, with many parts of Victoria missing out as a consequence. This means that many young people have to leave their local community to access accommodation, impeding their efforts to continue with school, tertiary education, or work²⁹ and to remain connected to the important people in their lives.³⁰

Recommendation 9: Invest in additional refuge and/or medium term supported congregate housing models, as well as support, in areas with high unmet need

One outcome which the Victorian Youth Strategy seeks to achieve is youth leadership in community services. Victoria's homelessness service system is well positioned to advance this cause through the use of youth peer support workers. In a system where each vacancy in a support program or property has multiple applicants for each vacancy, young people face of significant uncertainty about whether their needs will be met by homelessness services. Users of Victoria's specialist homelessness service system report that it can be difficult to understand what services are doing for them, and what they can expect.

In order to address this uncertainty, a number of Victorian specialist homelessness services have been trialling models of peer support. Young people who have successfully exited homelessness can play a critical role in helping other young

people to navigate the service system and understand what they can reasonably expect from services. Peer support workers also perform an important role in helping young people build their self-esteem and maintain a sense that their current circumstances are temporary – and that they can set goals for their future and achieve them.

Homelessness peer support workers are not currently a funded aspect of the homelessness system. But where they have been trialled they have been successful, and service users report high levels of satisfaction with the programs. In order to empower youth leadership within the homelessness service system, we should provide paid jobs to young people who have experienced homelessness as youth peer support workers.

Recommendation 10: Fund youth homelessness services to deliver youth peer support programs

A range of housing options for young people

'Everywhere I went that reconciliation piece was really pushed. And that was the worst thing. I was trying to get away from them. Everybody wants that children and their parents should be together. But to this day I haven't reconciled, and it was the best thing for me, for ten years now.'

- Cathie, Consumer / Advocate

Young people for whom family reunification is not a positive outcome are not a homogenous group. For many, the goal of mainstream private rental, as part of a share house is an achievable goal in the short to medium term, consistent with the independent housing options available to other young people. Others, such as those with significant disability, may benefit from access to long-term social housing from a young age. For most young people however, it is likely to be appropriate to provide a youth specific variant on transitional housing, a form of medium-term social housing, to young people as a pathway to independent living at the conclusion of an eight-week refuge stay.

Transitional housing sits outside of the mainstream housing market, and offers young people rents proportional to their income. While concern has been expressed that this may serve as a disincentive for young people to achieve the mainstream private rental outcomes that represent housing stability for most of this group, CHP disagrees. Instead, it is imperative that there is an expansion in the availability of transitional housing for young people that is paired with step-up step-down long-tail support.

Case work focused on goal setting and attainment can serve as a counter-balance to the inertia that many fear may result from secure, affordable, non-market housing. With appropriate support, transitional housing can be an important setting in which to grow the practical and emotional skills necessary for a transition to share housing. It is proposed that a youth transitional housing model would include greater flexibility in the duration of the tenure, recognising that for many young people with more complex needs, a secure home in which to grow and tackle casework goals is consistent with models of Housing First for youth.³¹

Recommendation 11: **Deliver through Victoria's Big Housing Build** a model of dedicated and custom-designed longer-term transitional housing for young people, equipped with adequate support to achieve a goal-setting approach

For many young people, lone-person private rental property would be a positive stable housing response. However, young people struggle to be offered private rentals, particularly when they don't have family references, rental histories, or adequate incomes. An ongoing barrier for young people's access to housing is the very low rate of the Youth Allowance payment. Young people on this payment cannot afford private rental in Victoria, and in many instances, cannot afford share housing. A group of young people exists for whom shared accommodation is unsustainable. In order to sustain housing outcomes for this group, an ongoing rental subsidy could achieve positive results.

Recommendation 12: Provide housing subsidies for young people where a lone-person private rental outcome is appropriate, but is financially unviable

Not all young people are ready to live independently, and it is not the choice of many. Medium-term, therapeutic, staffed congregate facilities can help young people to not just remain housed, but to be cared for in a means similar to that available to young people who are not experiencing homelessness. This is true of many young people whether they are connected or disconnected from positive influences.

Young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria should have an opportunity to live in staffed and supported accommodation, with private bedrooms, and shared kitchen and living spaces, while achieving other goals, such as education, employment, or progress against the goal plans. This approach is similar to the Foyer programs of which there are a small number in Victoria.

Recommendation 13: Develop medium term supported congregate housing models for young people who are working towards greater independence

Therapeutic responses to young people's trauma

Young people in the group described as disconnected from positive influences typically come to experience homelessness through traumatic experiences such as family violence, or parental relationships in which they have been unable to have their needs met. For young people, such trauma regularly results in mental ill health and substance misuse,³² with 57% of young people experiencing homelessness also experiencing very high or high psychological distress, as measured on the Kessler 10 (K10) scale. This compares to a rate of 3.4% of the general Australian population.³³

Young people receiving support from the specialist homelessness service system typically receive this support from a case worker. Case workers work with young people in a trauma informed way to set goals and support the young people to achieve them. This regularly includes referral to supports that sit outside of the specialist homelessness service system, including mental health care.

However, the homelessness service system does not include therapeutic support as a readily available component. Many homelessness services incorporate therapeutic supports at a program level, but access for all young people receiving homelessness support is far from guaranteed. Typically, young people receiving homelessness support are unable to access the therapeutic support they need from the mental health service system.

The needs of young people experiencing homelessness are substantial, and they face significant barriers to accessing mental healthcare within the mental health service system, which both has a high threshold for entry and requires them to attend sessions proactively and autonomously. It is important to consider the circumstances in which such young people find themselves. This is likely to include a lack of access to personal transportation, disconnection from the community in which they are currently living, trauma, anxiety, and a low level of trust in services.³⁴

A service system must be designed to meet the needs of young people experiencing homelessness, rather than requiring young people to match the needs of the service system. For all young people disconnected from positive influences, this would include access to therapeutic support while receiving homelessness services.

'My daughter started experiencing mental health issues, probably 3 or 4 years after we'd secured a home. She would have been about 13 or something like that. She had a lot of mental health issues, phobias, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, depression. It totally disrupted her schooling around years 8 and 9. I believe that was a direct result of her having to deal with homelessness and losing her sense of security and belonging. And isolating herself, not knowing how to fit in. In particular, people who are hitting puberty do find it a lot harder during that stage to have a proper

developmental cycle when they've experienced some kind of homelessness, and not just the homelessness, but also the reasons that led them to experience homelessness, that starts to really play in when you experience homelessness, regardless of what age you experienced it.'

- Christine Thirkell, Consumer / Advocate

Recommendation 14: Fund therapeutic support as a core component of specialist homelessness service provision for young people

Therapeutic residential care

The young people with very high use of services that intervene, are among the most highly vulnerable people in our society. These young people regularly fall between the cracks of the intersecting but not interlocking remits of the homelessness, child protection, justice, policing, mental health, and alcohol and drug therapy systems. Currently, no one system is equipped to meet all of their needs.

Younger members of this cohort may be accommodated and supported through the child protection residential care system, although many young people with significant needs make themselves absent from care for periods of time. One important reform called for by the Victorian Ombudsman is to transition residential care for young people to a two-bedroom therapeutic model.³⁵ A full examination is required of the level and types of therapeutic supports needed and available to young people in residential care. In a limited number of instances, one bedroom properties will also be required. Upon implementation, monitoring will be required to ascertain the balance of individual and two-bedroom therapeutic housing needed as options in residential care.

Recommendation 15: Ensure therapeutic residential care meets the multiple needs of young people

Recommendation 16: Monitor the two-bedroom model of therapeutic residential care, to assess the extent to which individual therapeutic housing is needed in some instances

Housing First for Youth

In Australia and overseas there is consensus that Housing First programs are *the* most appropriate and effective intervention for people with long histories of homelessness.^{36 37}

Housing First for Youth is a model of Housing First that recognises the unique needs of young people with significant complexity in their lives. It is an appropriate

intervention for two of the identified cohorts; it is appropriate for a subset of those disconnected from positive influences, particularly those with more significant mental health issues and substance misuse. It is also appropriate for those with very high use of services that intervene, especially those young people who are too old to be eligible for child protection residential therapeutic care.

Housing First for Youth relies on the forms of accommodation that exist within the range of options available to young people – from private rental to transitional housing, to medium term supported congregate housing models. But in addition to stable housing a more intensive, flexible, persistent and prolonged approach to support is available as a young person journeys towards sustainable housing stability.

Housing First for Youth is based on five key principles:³⁸

1. A right to housing with no preconditions
2. Youth choice, youth voice and self-determination
3. Positive youth development and wellness orientation
4. Individualised, client-driven supports with no time limits
5. Social inclusion and community integration.

Despite Victoria's recent adoption of Housing First principles for those experiencing long-term homelessness, Housing First for Youth is yet to become a feature of Victorian service delivery. But for many young people, particularly those whose concurrent homelessness, mental ill-health, and substance misuse requires intensive interventions that are not currently delivered, Housing First for Youth is likely to be the answer.

Recommendation 17: Deliver Housing First for Youth for young people with concurrent homelessness, mental illness and or substance abuse.

Responding to the needs of homeless young people

While most people attending homelessness services need support across a range of domains, SHS users are asked to identify their “main reason for seeking assistance”. These are outlined in Table 6 below.

Considering Table 6 below, we see that consistent with the general SHS user population, by far the two largest causes of youth homelessness are accommodation needs, and domestic and family violence. However, compared to the general SHS user population, young people are more likely to identify a primary accommodation need, and less likely to identify a primary family violence reason. Nevertheless, these two causes alone are the main reason that 14,398 young people present to homelessness services – 75 per cent of all presentations.

Table 6. Main reason for seeking assistance – first reported, young people (15-24), Victoria, 2018-19³⁹

Group	Main reason for seeking assistance—first reported	Client count	% (15-24)	% (all ages)
Financial	Financial Group total	1,689	8.9	12.0
	Financial difficulties	1,596	8.4	11.5
	Employment difficulties	42	0.2	0.2
	Unemployment	51	0.3	0.3
Accommodation	Accommodation Group total	9,662	50.6	42.5
	Housing crisis	4,232	22.2	18.3
	Inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions	2,253	11.8	9.6
	Housing affordability stress	1,340	7.0	6.1
	Previous accommodation ended	848	4.4	3.2
	Transition from custodial arrangements	359	1.9	3.4
	Transition from foster care and child safety residential placements	188	1.0	0.2
	Transition from other care arrangements	133	0.7	0.2
	Discrimination including racial discrimination	8	0.0	0.0
	Itinerant	163	0.9	1.1

	Unable to return home due to environmental reasons	54	0.3	0.2
	Disengagement with school or other education and training	84	0.4	0.1
Domestic and family violence	Domestic and family violence Group total	4736	24.8	34.4
Interpersonal relationships	Interpersonal relationships Group total	2,013	10.5	5.1
	Time out from family/other situation	323	1.7	0.7
	Relationship/family breakdown	1,343	7.0	3.0
	Sexual abuse	20	0.1	0.1
	Non-family violence	66	0.3	0.5
	Lack of family and/or community support	261	1.4	0.8
Health	Health Group total	363	1.9	2.4
	Mental health issues	237	1.2	1.2
	Medical issues	53	0.3	0.7
	Problematic drug or substance use	64	0.3	0.3
	Problematic alcohol use	7	0.0	0.1
	Problematic gambling	2	0.0	0.0
Other	Other Group total	619	3.2	3.7
Not stated		847		

In this section we explore the additional programmatic interventions that are needed to support the multiple needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

Supporting young people to stay connected to school

Retaining a link to schooling is a highly protective factor against lifetime homelessness. Schooling supports educational attainment and ultimate employment outcomes, as well as self-esteem, and helps young people to maintain positive routines.⁴⁰

Homelessness services have seen an explosion in the number of school students attending our services. Where 3,819 school students sought homelessness assistance in 2011-12, there were 12,668 in 2018-19.⁴¹

Young people seeking to complete their education while experiencing homelessness may need a range of practical supports. These may include: brokerage to meet the costs of textbooks or uniforms at multiple new schools; transport to and from a school that is far from their accommodation; educational support to check in with

their home-based study; or support to pick up where their new school is up to in the curriculum.

Recommendation 18: Provide programs to support young people experiencing homelessness to stay engaged in learning.

LGBTIQ young people and homelessness

LGBTIQ young people are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.⁴² Yet despite the extremely high prevalence of LGBTIQ youth homelessness, there are very few specific specialist homelessness services for this cohort, and they often experience challenges in mainstream services. A dedicated housing and education facility should be a priority for this underserved group.

Recommendation 19: Invest in a new medium term supported congregate housing models to provide accommodation and support for young LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness

Recommendation 20: Provide support for youth homelessness programs to achieve LGBTIQ inclusive practice

Child protection involvement as a trigger to support young parents experiencing homelessness

A growing problem in Victoria is the interaction of Child Protection with homeless families.

The lack of a safe and stable home can be extremely damaging for children, and can hinder their development. However, it is also recognised that removing children from their family of origin is a significant adverse life event in its own right, which can cause lasting harm to children, parents, and to the parent-child bond. As such, it is perverse that child removal is a regular response to family homelessness. Providing access to a home would both end the harm of homelessness for children, as well as in many cases, avoid the harm of child removal.

Child Protection actions can be particularly complex for people experiencing family violence. Child Protection workers suggest that families feel that they must abide by in order to avoid child removal. Adherence to these directives is not always easily achievable. For example, Child Protection can advise women not to return with their children to a home in which violence is occurring, occasioning homelessness. Yet should that homelessness, precipitated by Child Protection's advice, not be well supported by government agencies, that very homelessness can be a trigger for child removal. These complex interactions fall particularly heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children.

Whether precipitated by Child Protection or not, homelessness should be a trigger for government agencies to respond with dedicated housing access, not with traumatic child removal. In other countries there is a legal right for housing for homeless children.⁴³ At a minimum, the Victorian Government should ensure that a suitable social housing offer is made to all parents whose homelessness is the primary justification for an impending child removal.

Recommendation 21: Guarantee a suitable social housing offer for all young families where homelessness is the primary justification for an impending child removal, including for unborn reports

Using data to target support priorities for highly vulnerable young people

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services is able to identify the use of multiple service systems by individuals, through what is known informally as the 'linked dataset'. This resource could prove invaluable in assisting Victoria's efforts to develop a service system for the cohort who have high use of services that intervene.

Recommendation 22: **Continue to develop the capacity of the 'linked dataset'** and provide regular reports in order to target support priorities for highly vulnerable people.

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