

Trish Connolly

Chief Executive Officer, Yfoundations



If it takes a village to raise a child, then what will it take to stop our children and young people falling into homelessness and setting them up for a future not of their making?

Not long ago, while having lunch with some friends in my flat, I was startled by the ominous noise of metal crashing on metal. As is human nature, I went out the front to see what happened and was confronted by the awful sight of a motorcyclist lying on the road having just been hit by a car. My first instinct was to rush over and help but a wave of bystanders beat me to it, so I held back and went inside once I was satisfied the motorcyclist was in good hands.

What struck me was how swift the response was from the bystanders: one was calling an ambulance; another was doing what I assumed was a risk/pain assessment on the injured person; another was advising those in proximity that under no circumstances should anyone remove the cyclist's helmet in case there were head injuries; someone started directing traffic around the accident; and a doctor from the medical centre where the accident occurred appeared,

slipped on their surgical gloves and proceeded to assess the injured cyclist and administer pain relief.

The response was breathtaking. I felt proud of my fellow citizens for taking such gentle and precise care of a member of the community. As the day wore on, however, this feeling changed. I had just recently taken on the important and enormous role as the new CEO of the only youth homelessness peak body in Australia. I started thinking: *'Why don't we see this kind of response to our children and young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness? Why aren't we taking such good care of them? Why are some of our most vulnerable children and young people often neglected in government plans and funding allocations?'*

Overwhelmingly, I couldn't help imagining: *'What if we could respond to children and young people as swiftly and comprehensively as happened with the injured cyclist?'*

I am continually struck by how children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness keep slipping through the gaps. It's been happening for as long as I've been in the sector and continues to happen. What has become apparent to me are the allowances we (including myself) make to prioritise other cohorts over children and young people. I hear myself saying in meetings, *'Of course we understand that a child protection worker is going to prioritise responding to a young child if they had to choose between them and an older child or teenager. We get it that*





we must prioritise women and their children escaping domestic and family violence. Yes, it's fair that families experiencing homelessness must be given priority access to social housing.' But realistically, how long can we make these concessions and think it's justifiable to keep deprioritising children and young people?

Personally, and professionally, I have reached the point that I will never utter those words again. I have pledged to no longer make excuses and allowances for not prioritising children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. I will always have children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness front and centre in my advocacy, campaigning, negotiating and policy development.

I believe another reason children and young people slip through the gaps is because of their incredible resilience

and resourcefulness when seeking out a bed for night. Sadly though, this resourcefulness can and does put them in seriously dangerous situations.

Obviously, rough sleeping is a precarious form of homelessness but couch surfing — the most prevalent type of homelessness experienced by children and young people — is unsafe and can expose them to extreme forms of violence, sexual abuse, exploitation, servitude and higher levels of psychological distress. The extent and prevalence of children and young people who are couch surfing is not well understood, particularly with the Australian Bureau of Statistics conceding that capturing this form of homelessness in the Census is difficult because it is often masked or misreported.

However, what the 2021 Census data does tell us is that the highest rate of homelessness was among young

people — those in the 19 to 24 years age group (91 people per 10,000). It also tells us that, between 2016 and 2021, the rates of homelessness per 10,000 people decreased across most age groups except for children and young people — those aged 0 to 12 years (48 per 10,000) and 12 to 18 years (53 per 10,000).

Severe overcrowding, another prevalent form of homelessness that children and young people experience, puts them at high risk of negative impacts on their physical and mental health, developmental and educational outcomes. It can also increase the likelihood of family conflict and tenancy dissolution, both drivers of youth homelessness. The 2021 Census data reveals that 50 per cent of those experiencing severe overcrowding are aged under 25 years, up from 45 per cent in the 2016 Census. Under 12-year-olds and 19- to 24-year-olds make



up the second and third highest age brackets respectively, across all age groups, living in severely overcrowded dwellings.

In reviewing all state and territory housing and homelessness strategies in Australia, Yfoundations found that responses for children and young people are mostly focused on out-of-home care exits, early intervention and Foyer models — all of which are necessary and important approaches for child and youth homelessness. However, the focus on these approaches — and little else — is narrow, underwhelming and inconsistent with what's needed to respond to the most prevalent forms of homelessness for children and young people, including couch surfing and severe overcrowding.

In addition, children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence on their own – not

those accompanying their mothers or caregivers — are absent in the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*. The vision of the Australian Government set out in this 10-year National Plan is to end gender-based violence in one generation.

However, isn't this vision misguided if it neglects children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV) on their own? More harmful than this is that children and young people are being left to fend for themselves or put themselves in even more vulnerable situations to escape the violence in their family homes or intimate partner relationships.

While the *2021-2022 Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Annual Report* data only tells us part of the story, it still paints a grim picture with 51 per cent of children and young

people (15 to 24 years) in Australia who tried to get crisis accommodation being turned away because services were at capacity. Put in context, this means that for every two children and young people who try to get a bed tonight, only one will. And we must remember that this data only counts the children and young people who had the knowledge and ability to seek a service. What is most concerning with this statistic is: *Where did the one in two children and young people sleep that night who couldn't secure a bed? Did they return to a violent home? Did they couch surf or return to a severely overcrowded house? Or did they sleep on the street that night?*

Recently, I visited a regional service in New South Wales that accommodated 240 young people in their crisis beds the previous year but had to turn away 600. Being a regional location, the young people who were turned away most likely had to find an alternative option (that is, couch surfing, severely overcrowded accommodation, or return to a violent home) because the nearest youth homelessness service would be hours away.

Another concerning statistic from the 2021-22 SHS report is that 46 per cent of young people presenting alone to SHS needed long-term housing but only 3.9 per cent of them received this service. The reality is that young people are not prioritised for long-term social housing because their tenure is just not as attractive as those of other cohorts. My colleagues, Alice Taylor and Jessie Adlidge have contributed an in-depth article about young people accessing housing in this *Parity* edition, so I encourage you to read that to get a deeper understanding of this issue.

Together, what the 2021 Census data and the *2021-22 SHS Annual Report* are clearly telling us is that the failure to seriously prioritise and properly strategise to address child and youth homelessness is only making it worse. We cannot continue to ignore this negligence and the long-term detrimental impacts that homelessness and DFV have on the futures of our children and young people.

Yfoundations manages *Youth Homelessness Matters Day 2023*, which is on 19 April. Nationally, we are calling for a standalone national

child and youth homelessness and housing strategy that has a clear and dedicated focus on child and youth homelessness and responds to the systemic failures that continue to perpetuate it. Our vision is to bring together governments, service providers, academics, philanthropists and the community to tackle what is, essentially, a scourge on our society.

Why do we need a standalone strategy? Because we know what's happened in the past has not worked: as already identified, state and territory plans neglect children and young people and a clear direction from the Australian Government will be the imprimatur to ensure this does not continue into the future; and children and young people don't have the same coping strategies and resources generally attributed to adults and need age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate responses.

A standalone Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan will put an end to the 'adultification' of responses for children and young people whereby it's assumed that what works for adults will work for children and young people.

Let's look at it this way: A child or young person seeking a service because of DFV needs a different response because of their age, experience and vulnerability than an older woman seeking a service with her children for the same reason. Further, there are blockages in the DFV sector for children and young people. A situation that clearly demonstrates this was recently explained to me by one of our members. A 15-year-old with a one-year-old baby sought crisis accommodation in their youth refuge because of DFV; however, they couldn't put her in the refuge because of the baby and they were unable to refer her to a DFV refuge because of her age. The only option was to place her in a hotel and provide 24-hour support to ensure she and the baby were safe.

This is unsustainable and services are not funded to provide this level of service. Nor is it effective or good practice — frankly, it's merely a bandaid for what's going on in that child's and her baby's lives. We need specialised crisis accommodation options —

not hotel rooms — for children and young people experiencing DFV, especially for those who have children. We should be providing children and young people with appropriate support, an opportunity to heal and equip them with skills to be resilient and safe when they leave. Otherwise, we are just introducing them to the merry-go-round of the service sector.

I often hear youth homelessness services despair about how their clients 'refuge hop' for years because policy only allows them to stay for three months. Why? Simply because there are no exit options for them. There are no accommodation options to exit these young people into where they can be guaranteed stability and support for a couple of years. I'm told of amazing young people doing their HSC while living in youth refuges because there is simply nowhere else for them to go. A lot of these young people are independent and don't need to be in crisis accommodation, they just need somewhere to live with access to support if required. Unfortunately, maintaining these clients in crisis accommodation clogs up the system for other children and young people who need a bed but, without the exit options, there are no options. This situation will only worsen with the current cost of living crisis and lack of affordable housing options which will impact young people on a different scale to others.

Our proposed standalone plan recognises the broad and complex issues children and young people experience that put them at risk of or escalates them into homelessness. It recognises that children and young people need responses appropriate for their developmental age, which are often quite different to those for adults experiencing the same issues. And it seeks a trauma-informed, person-centred response, which necessitates a suite of services being available to children and young people. Our proposed plan would consider the following range of options that are necessary, depending on age, presenting issues and capacity for independence, including:

- specialist youth crisis accommodation
- transitional accommodation (2 to 5 years)

- medium-term accommodation (1 to 5 years)
- specialist children and young people-focused DFV support and accommodation
- family reunification services
- exiting out-of-home care responses
- exiting youth justice responses
- early intervention approaches, such as Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model
- Youth Foyers
- youth social housing and affordable private rentals.

So, given this range of service responses being available for children and young people, I'd like to take us back to the scenario of the injured motorcyclist to envisage how we would respond, in the same way, to children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The child or young person receives a thorough, trauma-informed risk assessment to gauge what has happened to them; the risks are identified and the child or young person receives what they need immediately to prevent or minimise further harm and ensure they are safe; the child or young person is transitioned into the service that best meets their needs; and everyone who needs to take part in the development of the child or young person's case plan is there to ensure the response is seamless, holistic, integrated, appropriate and effective. Just like with the motorcyclist — everyone knows their role and functions like a well-oiled machine. Just for one minute, imagine what it could look like: children and young people, regardless of their circumstances, are given all the tools they need to face the world as independent, resilient and stable adults.

It's time for governments to act. If it takes a village to raise a child, then what will it take before governments act to stop our children and young people falling into homelessness and setting up them for a future not of their making?