

Yfoundations Report

Regional NSW youth homelessness services visits

2025



Acknowledgements

Yfoundations acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land we and our members operate on across NSW. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and thank them for protecting the land and its ecosystems for time immemorial.



About



As the peak body for child and youth homelessness in NSW, Yfoundations is committed to supporting positive change for and across the youth homelessness sector by providing advocacy, research, policy advice and sector development resources, with a focus on increasing the growth and sustainability of the sector and improving outcomes for children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

This sector holds a wealth of collective wisdom, knowledge, commitment, operational insight, and frontline and lived experience. For our work to be impactful, we believe it must be informed by the sector, voices from the frontline and the voices of those with lived experience.

Cover Image: Mark Thomas - Pexels

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Introduction:

Regional and remote service visits

In July 2025, Yfoundations staff visited youth homelessness service providers (both members and non-members) in four regions across NSW: Mid North Coast, Northern Rivers, Central West and the South Coast. These visits encompassed larger service providers that cover vast expanses, and smaller services with a local remit that are often the only provider across a larger area.



The Yfoundations visits were designed to strengthen connections between Yfoundations and service providers across the state, and to provide an opportunity for services to further articulate their specific service delivery and workforce challenges in place, the nuances of which are not properly understood outside those regions nor adequately captured in metro-based data or policy frameworks. Yfoundations also embarked on these journeys to expand on our knowledge and advocacy in this area.

This complemented the insights gained from our community of practice (CoP) created for staff working in regional and remote areas to explore geographic and systemic barriers to effective service delivery. Under the theme, the 'tyranny of distance', the regional and remote workers CoP explored the day-to-day realities of service delivery in regional and isolated areas, including recruitment and retention challenges, burnout risks and policy misalignment. These are highlighted in the analysis in the following section.

This report captures and encapsulates what we saw and heard from the services we visited. We preface our report on each region with a data-based regional snapshot of the economic,

environmental, social and structural challenges in each of the areas, sourced from publicly available regional breakdowns on homelessness across the state from the 2021 Census data and the AIHW SHS Annual Report 2024-25. We also sourced data from regional factsheets produced by NCOSS in June 2025 and other available reports. These are referenced throughout.

For each region visited, we collated and summarised our findings under the following headings:

- **Service delivery reality**
- **Drivers of youth homelessness**
- **Barriers within systems**
- **Workforce impacts**
- **Impacts on young people**
- **Identified systems and sector needs.**

A summary of the key themes that emerged from the visits is provided at the end of this report and reflects the range (and, in large part, commonality) of challenges that exist for homelessness services and in service delivery in regional and remote areas across the state.

The tyrannies of distance: insights from the community of practice

The term ‘tyranny of distance’ was coined in the 1960s to describe how Australia’s distance and isolation from Europe profoundly shaped its settler-colonial history, economy, infrastructures and identity, and to capture how remoteness influenced the development of social structures.

In the context of regional and remote community service provision and infrastructures, ‘the tyranny of distance’ highlights the challenges faced by communities that are geographically isolated from urban hubs – a distance that creates barriers to accessing housing, employment opportunities and essential services such as healthcare and mental health support. Geographic isolation is exacerbated (and characterised) by factors such as limited transportation, scarce housing supply and availability, and reduced access to specialist services.

This concept is critical when considering homelessness in regional areas. The physical remoteness not only limits access to services, it also limits policy attention and resource allocation. While providers of specialist homelessness support services often display resilience, strong collaboration and innovative approaches to service delivery, these efforts can be undermined by systemic neglect tied to geographic isolation – a physical isolation and

separation from the political, policy and decision-making centres of influence and focus, located in cities – the metropolis.

Historically, the development of new methods of transportation were transformative in the establishment of industries, townships, urban sprawl and holiday destinations. However, lack of accessible and cheap transport persists as a significant challenge in regional areas, exacerbating isolation for smaller towns that are bypassed on travel routes to larger regional centres. The adverse economic and social impacts of this shift on smaller communities and local economies, coupled with the lack of services and crisis accommodation in those communities, speaks to the tyranny of distance that also exists between larger regional centres and smaller remote areas.

Members of the Yfoundations’ regional and remote workers community of practice (YRWCoP) discussed how this impacts staff, clients and organisations alike:

‘We live in an area where there is virtually no transport for them. Most people don’t have licences or cars. We do have a few clients who have cars and licences, but not many of them, and it is a real barrier because we have to find that time where we can travel to them, which is also difficult, finding that time.’

‘Our closest youth refuge is 2½ hours north of us, and the next closest being Canberra, which is 3 hours away. That also raises some interesting concepts of trying to go across borders... a lot of the time they [young people] won’t be accepted because they’re considered transient if they cross the state lines.’

‘Distance is a disincentive to work because it is quite difficult to attract new people into some towns because they’re so isolated.’

The tyrannies of distance: insights from the community of practice

In addition to transport issues, smaller coastal towns have been significantly impacted by the effects of high tourism rates, Airbnb lets and holiday homeowners.

As a member of the YRWCoP explained, ***'We've got a couple of TA [temporary accommodation] providers here in the separate towns that we cover but the biggest problem we have is, because we're a high tourist area, during the tourist periods we have no TA providers because they all up their room prices and people get kicked out of TA because they want their room for tourism.'***

Another member stated, ***'We are a high tourist area and so heaps and heaps of Airbnbs and therefore very few rentals, which affects the young people but also affects the workers as well.'***

Lack of social and affordable housing and transport options, in addition to a range of employment-related issues discussed further on, contributes to staff recruitment and retention issues, with smaller regional towns struggling to retain experienced staff and/or incentivise new workers to settle in their area. As noted in our 2022 Regional Youth Homelessness Consultation Report¹, natural disasters, in the shape of bushfires and floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic had enormous impacts on housing security for both young people and workers alike in affected areas of regional NSW.

The fallout in terms of housing availability and affordability remains a significant and ongoing obstacle to housing security, particularly given the rise of remote working during and after the pandemic, which saw many people moving from cities to regional areas (where they could continue to work from home), buying up properties or renting in regional areas, which impacted housing availability and pushed up market prices. The increase of properties being used as holiday lets to capitalise on the return of tourism to those areas, and subsequent natural disasters, have also exacerbated the availability of long-term affordable rental housing in those areas.



Industries that exist in or are relocated to regional areas also play a role in housing and homelessness.

As one YRWCoP member explained, ***'If there's any major works or mining, this pushes rents up everywhere.'***

Throughout Yfoundations' travels, we noted industries such as commercial farming, mining, tourism and roadworks, with no accompanying investment in housing developments or accommodation to accommodate the influx of workers from out of town. Staff in services articulated that this plays a role in pushing up private rental prices and decreasing the availability of TA.

Constantly negotiating these challenges and the impact on clients along with increased demand for support and the lack of accommodation, while also being personally impacted by them, leads to staff burnout when services do not have the resources, support or access to mainstream services to address it. This exacerbates staff turnover and further impacts service delivery.

1. Yfoundations (2022). *Regional Youth Homelessness Forum Consultation Report*. Yfoundations, Sydney. Available at www.yfoundations.org.au/resources/Reports/regional-youth-homelessness-forum-consultation-report/

The tyrannies of distance: insights from the community of practice



As one YRWCoP member put it, there are ***'only so many times you can rearrange the deck chairs every couple of years between organisations... someone will offer a bit more money, so they'll go over there and then they may come back years down the track.'***

A consequence of this turnover is the additional onus on services that are stretched for resources to provide extensive internal training for staff, ***'Because it is very hard to attract trained staff... you invest time and money in training them up... and then they may leave.'***

This continued cycle of staff recruitment, investment and turnover due to conditions outside of organisational control has a financial cost (in recruitment, training and existing staff resources) and is a burden to services that are already underfunded and struggling to meet increased demand for support. This also impacts the continuity of support, especially important for young people given the need for stability in support provision to build trust and provide security.

Allocating resources based on the population of regional and remote areas feeds into concerns about the impact on contract availability and work security in those areas, with one YRWCoP member articulating that most workers are ***'usually short-term contracts because [the government] work out how many people in the area... to determine how many staff you should have. It becomes a closed system after that point.'***

The application of universal data measures to determine resource allocations for regional and remote areas does not take into consideration the additional specific challenges and complexities faced by these workforces in supporting their communities. One YRWCoP member described the workers as 'generalist specialists' due to the need for them to bridge lacking or disconnected generalist services in their area to deliver the necessary range of supports while also providing trauma-informed care to young people.

High poverty rates as a ratio of the population means that while populations may be small, the demand in many of these areas is large. For example, in Coffs Harbour-Grafton:

- the poverty rate in 2025 was 17.26% compared to NSW at 13.4%
- 43% of people rely solely on government payments compared to the NSW average of 17%
- 20.2% of children are living in poverty.²

Another YRWCoP member articulated concerns around the impact of resource allocation measures not addressing place-based need, noting, ***'some towns are highly disadvantaged and don't even get into the data sphere because they don't have a large enough population... it doesn't mean those areas are not experiencing any of the complexities that we experience, it just can't be covered.'***

2. NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) (2025). *Coffs Harbour - Grafton: Birpai / Biripi Nation Fact Sheet*. NCOSS, June 2025. Available at www.ncoss.org.au

The tyrannies of distance: insights from the community of practice

This was apparent during Yfoundations' service visits where most service providers described how they are going above and beyond what their service agreements require to meet the high level of need, including conducting outreach in areas where no services exist.

The goodwill and care that exists in frontline services is undoubtedly what keeps regional communities going. The strong collaboration between services, innovative thinking and willingness to go above and beyond what their funding allows was abundantly obvious and also crucial given the limited resources in these areas.

The significance of these relationships and dynamics was best described by a member of the YRWCoP, ***'There's definitely more interagency interaction because you need to rely on others to get the necessary resources or whatever else... also warm referrals because you personally know the worker that you're referring your client to, that goes a long way for the client.'***

However, this goodwill, altruism and deep commitment cannot be used as justification to turn a blind eye to the specific challenges faced in regional areas. One member encapsulates this: ***'[Government] have a set of rules that... don't allow for the nuances of regional and rural areas.'***

Communities are struggling, and youth homelessness services are not adequately resourced to meet need, particularly given the additional burden of navigating the failures of policy challenges to deliver appropriate support, and particularly when these policy challenges mean there are not enough crisis beds in a region to accommodate young people experiencing homelessness and there are no exit points from crisis accommodation, like youth housing models, social housing and affordable rentals. The impacts on the workers delivering these services cannot also be ignored.



Regional challenges are a whole-of-government responsibility to shine a light on and solve. While the 'tyranny of distance' positions services in geographic isolation, this should not include policy and resource isolation and inflexibility. The obvious challenges in regional communities that intersect with homelessness, such as lack of transport, limited mental health services, limited housing options, domestic and family violence, transience and limited employment options, are solvable.

Recognising the tyranny of distance underscores the need for tailored policy responses that address both the practical and social implications of regional isolation. It means tailored policy responses that suit the specific needs of a geographic location: place-based solutions, not only for the recipients of services but for the workforces that support them. This requires a recognition of the intrinsic link between staff wellbeing and client outcomes, and the dual burdens faced by staff when they are personally impacted by the same cost-of-living and housing crises as the people they support.

If we cannot solve youth homelessness, what hope do we have of creating a future where young people across this state are able to make safe choices, unhindered by limitations that mean the only choices they have are determined by what might be the least unsafe. As one worker put it:

'Our young people are facing choices to do with their own risk. They're having to ask themselves, "Where is the safest place for me to be homeless tonight?"'

Mid North Coast



In July 2025, Yfoundations visited services on the Mid North Coast operating on the lands of the Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung, Yaegl and Birpai nations. Yfoundations heard the perspectives of front-line service providers and learned about their experiences, the complexities of working in these areas, and what they see as distinct to their service areas.

The service delivery areas covered by these services fall into the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) Mid North Coast (MNC) district and cross into the DCJ Northern NSW (NN) district. These DCJ districts sit within the SA4 (ABS Statistical Level 4) regions of Coffs Harbour-Grafton (Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung and Yaegl nations), Mid North Coast (Birpai nation) and Richmond-Tweed (Bundjalung nation).

Regional snapshot

The Mid North Coast is experiencing sustained housing stress and rising youth homelessness within a broader context of economic disadvantage and disaster recovery pressures.

In the 2024-25 financial year in the Coffs Harbour-Grafton and Mid North Coast regions, approximately 40% of those who presented to specialist homelessness services (SHS) were under 20 years of age, demonstrating the disproportionate impact of these pressures on children and young people.³ Nearly one in three⁴ of these young people were already experiencing homelessness, demonstrating the urgent need for youth-specific housing responses.

According to a regional homelessness analysis for the North Coast (based on ABS Census 2021 figures), the number of people living in severely crowded dwellings in the North Coast increased, with an additional 2,310 people living in 'other marginal housing' on Census night, meaning these living arrangements were close to the boundary of homelessness or at risk of it.⁵ Natural disasters have compounded supply constraints, with more than 800 homes declared uninhabitable on the Mid North Coast following severe weather events,⁶ further tightening already constrained rental markets.

Housing affordability and financial stress are acute. In the Mid North Coast, 56% of people were living in housing stress and 55% had gone without meals due to financial pressure.⁷ Median household income (\$1,327 per week) sits well below the NSW average (\$1,829), while 32% of residents rely solely on government payments, nearly double the state average.⁸ Twenty-two per cent of children were living in poverty and 14.5% were developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains,⁹ indicating long-term social and economic risk. At the same time, rental vacancies remain critically low and housing costs have escalated post pandemic, limiting exit pathways for young people and increasing pressure on crisis and transitional services across the region.¹⁰

3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Client location-SA3 and age group by financial year: GCCSA table* (Client geography: general dataset, 2022-23 to 2024-25). AIHW Data Explorer. <https://dataexplorer.aihw.gov.au/webapi/jsf/tableView/tableView.xhtml>

4. *ibid*

5. Healthy North Coast, Planning Team. (2023, December). *Homelessness on the North Coast*. <https://hnc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Homelessness-Paper.pdf>

6. NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS). (2025). *Mid North Coast regional factsheet* (Version 1, 30 June 2025). <https://ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Mid-North-Coast-Regional-Factsheet-.pdf>

7. *ibid*

8. *ibid*

9. *ibid*

10. <https://www.realestatebusiness.com.au/industry/30233-nsw-rental-market-squeezed-as-vacancies-remain-at-crisis-levels>

Mid North Coast



In the Coffs Harbour-Grafton area, people living in housing stress is as high as 61%, with 43% relying solely on government payments compared to the NSW average of 17%, and just over 20% of children living in poverty.¹¹

Services visits

Yfoundations visited Pathfinders, Blue Sky Community Services, and Wesley Mission in Coffs Harbour during July 2025:

- **Pathfinders** delivers youth-focused homelessness responses, including crisis and transitional accommodation, case management, outreach, and family support for children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness across the Mid North Coast.
- **Blue Sky Community Services** provides early intervention, family support, youth programs and community-based services aimed at preventing homelessness and strengthening family and community connections.
- **Wesley Mission** delivers a range of housing and homelessness supports, including crisis accommodation, youth and family services, case management and community-based assistance for people experiencing housing insecurity.

Together, these services support children and young people across a large regional catchment – encompassing coastal and inland communities – and operate within a context of limited housing supply and high service demand.

The following insights are drawn from direct consultations with these services and reflect their operational experience and knowledge of youth homelessness and local housing market conditions.

Service delivery reality

The Mid North Coast continues to experience a severe shortage of housing for children and young people. Limited availability of social housing, private rentals and temporary accommodation significantly constrains service responses. High insurance costs, inflexible housing policies, and local planning and zoning restrictions limit opportunities for alternative or innovative housing models.

Temporary accommodation options are extremely limited and often unsuitable or inaccessible for young people. Access to health and mental health services remains constrained, with workforce shortages impacting service availability despite recent infrastructure investment. Limited public transport and long travel distances create additional barriers for both service delivery and access to support. Demand for youth homelessness services continues to rise while funding levels and workforce capacity remain largely static.

Drivers of youth homelessness

Key drivers of youth homelessness in the Mid North Coast include housing shortages associated with tourism, events and short-term rental markets, compounded by cost-of-living pressures. Intergenerational poverty and trauma, including impacts on Aboriginal communities, remain significant factors. Recent flooding and severe weather events have reduced available housing stock and increased overcrowding. Limited employment opportunities and gaps in mental health, alcohol and other drug services further exacerbate risk for young people. Discrimination in the private rental market disproportionately affects young people, increasing reliance on couch surfing or rough sleeping.

11. NCOSS. (2025). *Coffs Harbour-Grafton regional factsheet*. (Version 1, 30 June 2025) <https://ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Coffs-Harbour-Grafton-Regional-Factsheet-.pdf>

Mid North Coast



Image: Mausami Bhavsar, Unsplash

Barriers within systems

Systemic barriers include inflexible social housing and temporary accommodation policies, strict eligibility requirements and inconsistent policy application across local housing offices. Poor coordination between systems increases administrative burden on services and delays outcomes for young people. Limited access to transport funding and specialist mental health supports further restrict effective responses.

Workforce impacts

The housing crisis affects the youth homelessness workforce directly, with many workers unable to afford housing near their places of employment and commuting long distances to work. Short-term and insufficient funding constrains recruitment and retention. Increasing administrative and advocacy demands reduce time available for direct client work. Ongoing housing shortages and limited exit pathways contribute to workforce fatigue, distress and burnout.

Impacts on young people

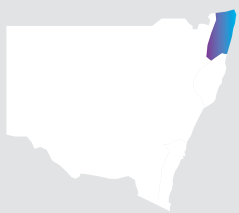
Young people experience prolonged periods without safe accommodation and may be required to relocate significant distances from family, community, Country and support networks to access shelter. Limited transport restricts access to education, employment and services. Overcrowding, couch surfing and rough sleeping increase exposure to harm, while gaps in mental health service availability leave many needs unmet.

Identified system and sector needs

Across the Mid North Coast, consistent priorities include:

- increased investment in social and affordable housing, including youth-specific crisis and medium-term accommodation and specialist responses for domestic and family violence
- improved access to youth-appropriate mental health services and transport options
- greater investment in regional infrastructure and more flexible planning frameworks to enable innovative housing models
- strengthened sector coordination, training, development and workforce support
- reduced administrative burden through simplified and streamlined systems
- more flexible funding aligned to rising demand.

Northern Rivers



In July 2025, Yfoundations visited services in the Northern Rivers region, operating on the lands of the Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl nations. Yfoundations heard the perspectives of front-line service providers and learned about their experiences, the complexities of working in this region, and what they see as distinct to their service areas.

The Northern Rivers sits within the DCJ Mid North Coast and Northern NSW districts and aligns primarily with the ABS SA4 region of Richmond-Tweed (Bundjalung nation), including Tweed, Byron, Ballina, Lismore, Kyogle and Richmond Valley local government areas (LGAs), and part of the Coffs Harbour-Grafton Region (Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung and Yaegl nations).

Regional snapshot

Housing instability remains pronounced following the 2022 floods and subsequent severe weather events, which significantly reduced available housing stock and displaced thousands of residents. Over 3,000 homes across the Richmond-Tweed were damaged in the 2022 floods¹² (not long off the back of the bushfires of 2019-20, which also destroyed homes in the area).

Socio-economic indicators further demonstrate the depth of vulnerability with 64% of people living in housing stress and 16% reporting overcrowding.¹³ Thirty-eight per cent of people had gone without meals because they were short of money and 16% of children were living in poverty.¹⁴

In 2024-25, 3,085 people presented to specialist homelessness services in the Richmond-Tweed region, with approximately 46.7% (around 654) aged between 0-24 years,¹⁵ reinforcing the disproportionate impact of housing instability on young people and families in the region.

Within the Northern Rivers footprint, Tweed, Byron and Lismore LGAs continue to record some of the highest rough sleeping numbers in the state, even where year-on-year figures fluctuate.¹⁶ High private rental costs, extremely low vacancy rates and constrained social housing supply limit exit pathways from homelessness, increasing reliance on crisis and transitional accommodation. Together, these factors indicate that youth homelessness in the Northern Rivers is closely linked to broader housing market failure, climate vulnerability and entrenched socio-economic disadvantage.



Services visits

Yfoundations undertook service visits in the Northern Rivers during July 2025, meeting with The Family Centre (Tweed Heads), Social Futures (Lismore), Social Futures (Grafton), and Nyami Gawbarri:

- **The Family Centre** operates medium-term accommodation for young people, alongside youth and family support services focused on housing stability, early intervention and prevention.

12. NCOSS. (2025). *Richmond-Tweed regional factsheet*. (Version 1, 30 June 2025) <https://ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Richmond-Tweed-Regional-Factsheet-.pdf>

13. *ibid*

14. *ibid*

15. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Client location-SA3 and age group by financial year (Client geography: general, 2022-23 to 2024-25)* [Data table]. AIHW Data Explorer. <https://dataexplorer.aihw.gov.au/webapi/jsf/tableView/tableView.xhtml>

16. NSW Department of Communities and Justice. (2025). *2025 NSW Street Count: Technical paper*. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2025-04/2025-nsw-street-count-technical-paper.pdf>

Northern Rivers



- **Social Futures - Lismore and Grafton** delivers youth homelessness responses across the Northern Rivers, including assertive outreach, case management, temporary accommodation access, transitional housing, and support to enter the private rental market through Rent Choice Youth.
- **Nyami Gawbarri** is an Aboriginal-led service operating as a cultural hub and drop-in centre on Gumbaynggir Country, providing culturally safe programs, material aid, brokerage and community-based support for Aboriginal people, including children and young people.

Together, these services support children and young people across a large and diverse catchment stretching from the Queensland border to Grafton, including flood-affected communities, regional centres and remote towns.

The following insights are drawn from direct consultations with these services and reflect their operational experience and knowledge of youth homelessness and local housing market conditions.

Service delivery reality

There is no youth-specific crisis accommodation operating within the Northern Rivers. Young people typically move between outreach, couch surfing, temporary accommodation, transitional housing and private rental options, but all stages of this pathway are constrained by limited supply. Geography and transport significantly shape service delivery, with long travel distances, limited public transport and dispersed communities, creating and further exacerbating barriers to access.

Temporary accommodation is scarce and often of poor quality, with limited options for children under 16 years. Rent Choice Youth is widely relied on to facilitate access to the private rental market, but escalating rents and extremely low vacancy rates mean subsidies frequently fail to achieve affordability. Services spend substantial time navigating cross-border eligibility rules, documentation requirements and housing system processes. Access to mental health, alcohol and other drug services, and NDIS support is limited, with long waiting lists and few local specialist options.

Northern Rivers

Drivers of youth homelessness

Youth homelessness in the Northern Rivers is driven by a combination of structural, social and environmental factors. Family breakdown, domestic and family violence, early contact with the justice system, substance use and unemployment intersect with intergenerational poverty and entrenched disadvantage. A chronic shortage of affordable rentals, driven by tourism, holiday letting and short-term rental markets, continues to displace low-income households.

Repeated floods and fires have reduced available housing stock and increased overcrowding. Cross-border policy settings and residency requirements delay access to assistance for young people moving between NSW and Queensland. For Aboriginal communities, displacement from Country and overcrowded housing exacerbate trauma and instability.

Barriers within systems

System barriers include strict eligibility requirements for housing assistance, proof-of-residency rules and documentation requirements that exclude young people without identification or a fixed address. Housing expectations often do not align with local market realities, placing unrealistic demands on young people to secure housing in areas with minimal rental availability.

Centralisation of temporary accommodation approvals to offices in other regions further south, long wait times for decisions, and inconsistent policy application across locations contribute to delays and service exits.

Child protection, housing and homelessness systems are poorly coordinated, creating gaps in support for children aged 10–16 years. Discrimination in the private rental market continues to affect young people and Aboriginal families. Data and reporting systems are often metro-centric and poorly suited to regional and culturally responsive practices.

Workforce impacts

The housing crisis affects the youth homelessness workforce directly. Many workers struggle to secure local housing and commute long distances or rely on temporary arrangements. Recruitment and retention are constrained by the inability of workers to relocate to the region.

High caseloads, extensive travel, administrative burden and advocacy demands reduce time available for direct client support. A high turnover of staff or lack of staff in other service sectors, like health and mental health, also impacts client support and outcomes.

Ongoing housing shortages and limited exit pathways contribute to worker fatigue and burnout, despite strong commitment to community and client outcomes.

Impacts on young people

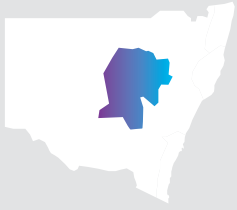
Young people in the Northern Rivers face prolonged periods without safe accommodation, no access to crisis beds, and limited transitional options. Children under 16 years are often required to travel long distances to access refuges, separating them from family, Country and support networks.

Without identification or a stable address, many young people are unable to access housing pathways and remain in insecure arrangements such as couch surfing or informal agreements.

Overcrowding places additional pressure on families and contributes to young people having to take on caring responsibilities. Young people exiting custody in the region are frequently discharged into homelessness.

Limited access to local mental health, alcohol and other drug services, combined with long travel requirements, further entrenches disadvantage.

Central West



In July 2025, Yfoundations visited services in the Central West region, operating on the lands of the Wiradjuri nation. Yfoundations heard the perspectives of front-line service providers and learned about their experiences, the complexities of working in this region, and what they see as distinct to their service areas.

The Central West sits within the DCJ Western NSW district and aligns with the ABS SA4 region of Central West (Wiradjuri country), covering LGAs including Orange, Bathurst, Dubbo Regional, Forbes and surrounding communities.

Regional snapshot

In 2024-25, 2,993 people presented to specialist homelessness services in the Central West (SA3).¹⁷ Of these, 1,128 were aged under 20 years, meaning 37.7% of all SHS clients were children and young people under 20.¹⁸ This demonstrates that homelessness in the region is driven largely by family instability and youth vulnerability rather than single-adult rough sleeping. Across the region, housing insecurity is often hidden in overcrowding, couch surfing and extended stays in temporary accommodation.

Broader socio-economic conditions reinforce these pressures. In the Central West, 50% of people are living in housing stress, 42% have gone without meals because they were short of money, and 42% could not afford essential travel to attend work or education. Over 17% of children are living in poverty.¹⁹ These indicators reflect significant financial strain across the region and increase vulnerability to housing instability.

Combined with limited private rental availability across centres such as Orange, Bathurst and Dubbo, and constrained social housing supply, these pressures restrict exit pathways from crisis and transitional accommodation. The Central

West therefore reflects a regional housing system under sustained strain, where youth homelessness is closely tied to affordability pressures and persistent financial hardship.



Uniting



Services visits

Yfoundations undertook service visits in the Central West, meeting with Veritas House (Bathurst region), CatholicCare Wilcannia-Forbes, and Uniting – Doorways (Dubbo):

- **Veritas House** delivers youth homelessness and Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) services across a large Central West catchment, supporting children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- **CatholicCare Wilcannia-Forbes** provides specialist homelessness services and family support across multiple rural local government areas, working with children, young people and families experiencing housing instability.
- **Uniting – Doorways (Dubbo)** operates a youth hub offering drop-in support, counselling, Reconnect, crisis assistance and practical supports for young people, with a strong focus on Aboriginal communities.

17. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2025). *Specialist Homelessness Services data cube: Clients by SA3 and age group, 2024-25*. AIHW. <https://dataexplorer.aihw.gov.au>

18. *ibid*

19. NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS). (2025). *Central West regional factsheet* (Version 1). <https://ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Central-West-Regional-Factsheet.pdf>

Central West



Together, these services support young people across vast geographic areas characterised by regional centres, small towns and remote communities. The following insights are drawn from direct consultations with these services and reflect their operational experience and knowledge of youth homelessness and local housing market conditions.

Service delivery reality

Across the Central West, youth homelessness services operate well beyond their funded capacity. Catchments cover extensive distances, requiring frequent long-distance travel to access temporary accommodation and other essential services. In many locations there is no dedicated youth refuge, with the nearest options located in regional centres such as Orange, and often at capacity.

Temporary accommodation options for children and young people, particularly those under 18 years, are extremely limited. Services spend significant time advocating within housing systems, supporting young people to navigate eligibility requirements, and assisting with

documentation. Discrimination in the private rental market and the absence of exit pathways from crisis accommodation into long-term housing further constrain service responses. Data and reporting systems are often poorly suited to regional contexts, contributing to misalignment between policy settings and local realities.

Drivers of youth homelessness

Youth homelessness in the Central West is driven by a combination of structural and social factors, including natural disasters such as floods, rising housing costs, low supply of affordable rentals, domestic and family violence, and intergenerational poverty. Early intervention programs are under-resourced, meaning many young people only receive support once they enter crisis.

Lack of access to identification documents, including birth certificates, delays engagement with housing and support systems. Children under 16 years often experience prolonged periods without appropriate assistance due to system requirements and thresholds, and limited-service availability.

Central West

Barriers within systems

Systemic barriers include inflexible child protection and housing responses, limited access to temporary accommodation for under 18s, and requirements for young people to travel long distances for short-term placements. Centralised processes and short temporary accommodation approvals create instability and repeated service exits. Expectations placed on young people to secure housing do not reflect local market conditions, and administrative burden associated with repeated applications and advocacy falls heavily on services.

Funding and contracting models do not adequately account for the scale and complexity of regional service delivery, limiting the ability of services to meet contractual coverage across large geographic areas.

Workforce impacts

Recruitment and retention challenges are acute across the Central West. Housing shortages and relatively low wages make it difficult to attract and retain qualified workers. In small communities, workers often support people they know personally, increasing emotional load and boundary complexity. Funding uncertainty contributes to job insecurity, while unfilled positions reduce service capacity, despite ongoing demand.

High caseloads, extensive travel, administrative demands and the emotional impact of turning away young people contribute to burnout. Limited access to training, professional development and peer support further affects workforce sustainability.

Impacts on young people

Young people in the Central West are frequently required to travel long distances to access temporary accommodation or support, separating them from family, community and Country. Many experience prolonged periods of rough sleeping or unsafe arrangements due to the absence of local youth refuges. Extended

stays in temporary accommodation can also undermine stability and wellbeing.

Aboriginal young people are disproportionately affected and are often required to leave Country to access services. Limited early intervention contributes to long child protection histories before housing instability is addressed.

Identified system and sector needs

Across the Central West, priority needs include:

- increased base funding and dedicated youth accommodation, including youth refuges, hubs and youth foyer models
- restoration of flexible brokerage funding to meet immediate needs such as transport, food and essential items
- improved coordination and accountability within child protection and housing systems, including clearer application of temporary accommodation and Rent Choice Youth policies
- recognition of regional youth homelessness services as essential, including rural loading, retention incentives and appropriate remuneration
- expansion of social and affordable housing in regional centres, and initiatives to engage private landlords
- regional training, communities of practice and sector hubs to strengthen workforce capability and peer support.

South Coast



In July 2025, Yfoundations visited services along the South Coast from Shoalhaven to Bega, operating on the lands of the Yuin nation. Yfoundations heard the perspectives of front-line service providers and learned about their experiences, the complexities of working in this region, and what they see as distinct to their service areas.



Regional snapshot

The South Coast sits within the DCJ Illawarra Shoalhaven and Southern NSW districts, and aligns primarily with the ABS SA4 regions of Illawarra, and Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven, extending south toward parts of the Capital Region, namely the Eurobodalla and Bega Valley LGAs (Yuin nation).

In 2024–25, 2,961 people presented to specialist homelessness services in the Shoalhaven, Bega Valley and Eurobodalla LGAs – 1,623 in Shoalhaven, 674 in Bega Valley and 664 in Eurobodalla.²⁰ Of these, 951 were under 20 years of age, meaning 32% of all SHS clients were children and young people under 20.²¹ Nearly one in two²² of these young people were already experiencing homelessness, demonstrating

the critical and urgent need for youth-specific housing responses. This reflects the pattern consistent across regional NSW: homelessness is strongly driven by family instability and youth vulnerability rather than single-adult rough sleeping alone.

Broader socio-economic indicators reinforce these pressures. The Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven report acute housing stress (77% of people) and financial hardship, with 50% having gone without meals because they were short of money.²³ Likewise, the Capital Region has high proportions of households experiencing rental strain and cost-of-living pressures.²⁴

Rental markets remain tight across coastal centres, particularly in the Shoalhaven, Bega and Eurobodalla LGAs, where short-term rental

20. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2025). *Specialist Homelessness Services data cube: Clients by LGA and age group, 2024–25*. AIHW Data Explorer. <https://dataexplorer.aihw.gov.au>

21. *ibid*

22. *ibid*

23. NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS). (2025). *Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven regional factsheet*. <https://ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Southern-Highlands-and-Shoalhaven-Regional-Factsheet.pdf>

24. NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS). (2025). *Capital Region factsheet*. <https://ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Capital-Region-Regional-Factsheet-1.pdf>

South Coast

conversion (due to holiday rentals in peak holiday seasons) and disaster recovery impacts following the devastating 2019-20 bushfires and floods continue to constrain supply. Areas within the region are still navigating the impacts of major floods and bushfires, including road repairs.

Limited affordable rental stock and constrained social housing availability restrict exit pathways from crisis and transitional accommodation.

The South Coast therefore reflects a mixed metropolitan-regional housing system under sustained strain, where youth homelessness is closely tied to housing availability and affordability pressures, and persistent financial hardship.



Service visits

Yfoundations undertook service visits along the South Coast from Shoalhaven to Bega, meeting with CareSouth, Campbell Page, South East Women's and Children's Services (SEWACS), and Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS):

- **CareSouth** delivers the Shoalhaven Youth Support Service, providing a youth refuge (emergency accommodation) for young people aged 18-24 years and outreach and residential support to young people aged 16-24 years who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness, including.
- **Campbell Page** operates the Moruya Youth Refuge, a purpose-built facility providing short-term crisis accommodation for young people aged 16-17 years, alongside youth outreach and early intervention programs across the region.
- **South East Women's and Children's Services (SEWACS)** delivers crisis

accommodation and support for young women and young people experiencing domestic and family violence, including brokerage assistance for transport, food and temporary accommodation.

- **Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS)** provides a Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) part-time outreach service for children aged 12-15 across the Bega Valley, supporting children with complex needs related to housing instability, safety and wellbeing. The service includes case management and early intervention for children and their families, in liaison with local school counsellors and health workers. SYFS also delivers HYAP in the Southern Tablelands (part-time outreach) in addition to other services, programs and accommodation options for young people experiencing homelessness across the Illawarra.

Together, these services support young people across a vast geographically dispersed coastal and rural catchment, characterised by limited transport options and constrained housing supply.

Service delivery reality

Youth homelessness services along much of the South Coast further south than Shoalhaven operate in a context of severe housing and transport constraints.

Public transport is extremely limited in many towns (one to two buses a day, with none in smaller areas), restricting the ability of young people to travel for appointments, education or alternative accommodation. This also creates additional barriers for service delivery and access to support that may involve travel to the next or a larger town centre. As a result, services are often reluctant to place young people outside their local area due to the risk of isolation and disengagement.

Local crisis and temporary accommodation (TA) options are scarce and the nearest TA options can involve long travel times and distances on public transport. They are also often unsuitable or inaccessible for young people. Services frequently provide basic material

South Coast

assistance to support young people when no crisis accommodation is available, and workers undertake regular outreach to ensure and maintain safety and connection.

There is only one youth refugee along the coast south of Shoalhaven, and no medium-term accommodation, limiting pathways out of crisis settings. Cross-border policy settings and residency requirements delay access to assistance for young people moving between NSW and Victoria.

Access to health and mental health services remains constrained, with workforce shortages impacting service availability (despite recent infrastructure investment), resulting in excessively long wait times for medical appointments.

Aboriginal young people are disproportionately affected, and in the absence of Aboriginal community-controlled homelessness services, existing services work closely with the local Aboriginal Medical Service, Land Council, and Aboriginal liaison workers in schools, where appropriate, to ensure culturally appropriate support and connection.

Drivers of youth homelessness

Youth homelessness on the South Coast is driven by a shortage of affordable housing due to the high proportion of holiday rentals and short-term letting, alongside ongoing recovery from bushfires, floods and broader cost-of-living pressures. Social housing is scarce.

Limited transport and few local education and training options contribute to school disengagement and early exit from education.

Poverty and housing stress lead to overcrowding and unsafe living arrangements, including family violence and breakdown, increasing reliance on couch surfing.

Substance use, including methamphetamine use, and limited access to treatment services further compound vulnerability for young people. Many young people are also presenting with mental health challenges, often undiagnosed and requiring support.

Barriers within systems

System barriers include the absence of medium-term accommodation and limited youth refuge options, particularly for children under 16 years. Strict eligibility settings and constrained funding reduce flexibility in responses. Changes to TA settings have reduced the length of available stays, and inadequate staffing creates delays in the turnover time for decisions on TA extensions, leading to exits and impacting stability for young people. One service reported having to sometimes pay for accommodation to extend stays.

Access to mental health care is impeded by workforce shortages, reliance on general practitioner referrals and complex administrative processes. Inadequate staffing in local Housing offices also results in long wait times for decisions.

Workforce impacts

Demand for youth homelessness services continues to rise while funding levels and workforce capacity remain largely static. Recruitment and retention challenges are significant, and high housing costs make it difficult to attract and retain qualified and experienced staff. The failure to recognise homelessness service staff as essential/key workers was identified as a barrier, particularly given the need for greater incentives to attract experienced and qualified workers to the area and ease staff retention. However, the lack of housing stock generally in these areas means targeted affordable housing development is required.

Workforce capacity is constrained by chronic understaffing, including in mainstream services, both public and private. Limited local workforces constrain mainstream service delivery, meaning workers themselves are also impacted by long wait times to access local GP and other services, and are required to travel long distances for services out of area.

Part-time funding and contract arrangements reduce service coverage and place additional

South Coast

strain on workers to manage demand across limited hours. Some services operate with only one full-time worker and small teams comprising part-time or casual workers. Reporting requirements are onerous and juggling these with support provision is challenging.

Staff frequently balance crisis and outreach roles to maintain service continuity, alongside extensive travel requirements. All services reported high rates of burnout among staff, with one service frequently rotating staff from crisis to outreach work to provide relief and reduce burnout from constant crisis support provision. Funding uncertainty and short-term grants contribute to job insecurity and increase the risk of burnout.

Impacts on young people

Intense competition in the private rental market places young people at a significant disadvantage. Young people experience prolonged periods of housing instability, often relying on couch surfing or sleeping rough when services are at capacity. They are often required to travel long distances to access crisis accommodation, disrupting education, family connections and community supports. Limited transport also prevents many young people from accessing TA, maintaining contact with support networks or returning to school.

Stays in crisis accommodation are time-limited, and without medium-term options, young people are frequently required to relocate to other regions, further severing ties to education, family, community and Country.

Aboriginal young people are disproportionately affected comprising around 30–40% of young people presenting to homelessness services in the Shoalhaven area and over 50% of young people along the coast and inland further south. They often need to leave Country and community to access services.

Limited early intervention contributes to long child protection histories before housing instability is addressed, often exacerbating and adding to trauma and complex issues.

Long wait times for medical and mental health services further delay access to support for young people, with wait times of up to three months for appointments with GPs to obtain referrals to mental health services, and additional wait times after a referral is obtained to access a mental health service. This leaves needs unmet.

Identified system and sector needs

Across the South Coast, priority needs include:

- development of transitional and medium-term youth accommodation, including youth foyer or step-down models to provide pathways out of crisis
- expansion of youth refuge capacity, including additional beds and a dedicated youth refuge in the Bega Valley
- local education, training and alternative schooling options to support sustained engagement
- improved transport options and subsidies to enable safe travel within the region
- increased investment in social and affordable housing, and measures to address the impact of short-term holiday rentals
- strengthened funding for youth services and HYAP, including full-time positions, adequate staffing coverage, brokerage
- improved resourcing of housing and homelessness systems to support consistent, youth-appropriate responses
- increase in Rent Choice Youth subsidy rate to adequately meet the price of market rents
- increased staff in local housing offices to manage the volume of requests and enquiries on behalf of clients.

Key themes

This summary of the themes that emerged from the Yfoundations services visits reflects the range of challenges that exist for youth homelessness service providers and service delivery in regional and remote areas across the state. Most importantly, it highlights the commonality of these challenges for youth homelessness service providers across regional and remote NSW, and documents what services have long identified as key obstacles to addressing youth homelessness.

1. Strong interagency collaboration and local commitment

- Services across the region are working collaboratively to fill critical system gaps, often going well beyond their funded roles.
- This collaboration is driven by deep local knowledge, trust and a shared commitment to community wellbeing. Many workers live in the areas they work in and know the families they serve across generations.
- Many providers emphasised the importance of sustained funding for locally embedded, place-based approaches.
- Many services are doing their own forward planning by establishing themselves in local hubs in order to be one-stop shops.

2. No housing

- Across all communities visited, the lack of housing (temporary, crisis, transitional, social and affordable) was described as the single greatest issue.
- In many areas, there is no available housing stock: not for clients, not for staff, not for people in crisis, and not even for temporary stays.
- Social housing waitlists are years long. Private rentals are unaffordable or unavailable, taken up for tourism, Airbnb or industry workers.
- Services are left with no viable housing pathways to offer clients, creating a system where people are stuck in crisis indefinitely.

- Young people and Aboriginal clients are especially impacted, often forced to leave their communities to access accommodation only to be labelled 'transient' and lose eligibility.

3. Early intervention programs are no longer early

- Programs funded as 'early intervention' are increasingly supporting people already in deep crisis.
- Services report that there's little distinction between early intervention and crisis response in practice due to the housing shortage and system backlog.
- Without housing or genuine prevention infrastructure, 'early intervention' is functionally just crisis work with different branding.

4. Housing crisis impacting both clients and workforce

- A chronic lack of housing is affecting not only those at risk of homelessness but also the staff needed to support them.
- Young people are often displaced to access Temporary Accommodation (TA) in other local government areas (LGAs) or across state borders, leading to them being labelled 'transient' and losing eligibility for long-term housing.
- There is strong demand for youth-specific refuges in every LGA and tailored, place-based housing strategies.

Key themes



- Coastal towns face additional pressures from tourism and Airbnb markets, while primary industries (e.g. mining, agriculture) in more remote locations are taking up short-term rentals and hotels, leaving no TA options for crisis responses.
- Social housing supply is not meeting demand, and housing affordability continues to decline, especially in the wake of COVID-19-driven regional migration.

5. Workforce sustainability, burnout and devaluation

- Attracting and retaining skilled staff is an ongoing challenge due to geographic isolation, insecure and short-term funding, low pay and the lack of local housing.
- Services report that workers are not treated or compensated as essential, despite the frontline, high-complexity nature of their roles.
- Staff identified that not being classed as essential or key workers, despite the fundamental services they provide, means they are not eligible for government affordable housing initiatives for key workers that may alleviate their own housing challenges.
- Staff burnout is increasing, with many workers left feeling emotionally distressed by being the 'last stop' for clients stuck in crisis with no exit pathways.
- Training investments in staff are often lost as staff leave for more stable, better-resourced roles.

6. Inflexible, metrocentric systems misaligned with regional realities

- Regional services are consistently expected to deliver metro-level outcomes with far fewer resources, infrastructure or workforce capacity.
- Policy and funding models are too rigid and not adaptable to the context and complexity of regional areas, where providers are often forced to 'be everything to everyone' (e.g. mental health, DV, housing, crisis support).
- A clear and consistent message from services: regional areas are not just smaller versions of cities.
- There is an urgent need for flexible, place-based funding and policy frameworks designed with regional realities in mind – not scaled-down metro models.

Key themes

- Data used for planning and funding decisions is often applied using metro-centric measures, and fails to capture regional complexity, resulting in resource mis/under-allocation.
- Standard data indicators don't account for regional variations in population movement, informal support networks or local service gaps.
- Services are calling for better, place-informed data collection and analysis to drive effective, responsive policy.
- Service delivery must reflect unique cultural, geographic, economic and social dynamics, with flexible approaches tailored to each community.
- There is strong advocacy for decentralised decision-making, local leadership and investment in local solutions.

7. Disconnect between DCJ policy and practice

- Services expressed concern that DCJ policies are often poorly understood by staff, inconsistently applied, and disconnected from real-world implementation. They also reported high staff turnover at housing offices and of contract managers, or understaffing, leading to delays that impact client support.
- Greater policy clarity, transparency and genuine co-design with local services are needed to rebuild trust and effectiveness.
- Services reported the presence of informal 'blacklisting' practices, where individuals or families are denied access to housing or support, based on past behaviour or reputational assumptions. In small communities, these labels can follow people for years, with no formal review process or accountability, creating long-term systemic exclusion and compounding disadvantage. This undermines principles of fairness, transparency and the right to housing and support.

8. Systemic racism and cultural disrespect towards Aboriginal communities

- Current housing and support systems often fail to respect Aboriginal kinship, culture and connection to Country.
- Families are penalised for culturally appropriate living arrangements (e.g. taking in relatives, kinship care), with overcrowding used to justify eviction or denial of services.
- Young Aboriginal people are regularly forced off Country to access TA, breaking cultural ties and access to local support.
- There is a strong desire to invest in and grow Aboriginal community-controlled homelessness services, with leadership, resources and decision-making led by Aboriginal people.



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