



Unaccompanied children accessing homelessness services

Yfoundations position paper

The issue

Every year, thousands of children aged 15 years and younger turn up alone to the youth Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) in NSW. According to [NSW Government policy](#), the Department of Community and Justice's (DCJ) Child Protection division must immediately step in and find safe accommodation for under 12-year-olds. But 12 to 15-year-olds are allowed to stay in youth SHS temporarily, while caseworkers assess their situation and – wherever possible – work towards family reunification. DCJ funds 17 SHS providers across 19 regions in NSW to support this work through the Homelessness Youth Assistance Program (HYAP).



[See our HYAP
Factsheet](#)

A 2020 [evaluation of HYAP](#) found that SHS are successfully supporting those homeless 12 to 15-year-olds who can safely return home to do so. But many of the children who turn up alone to SHS come from homes experiencing intergenerational issues such as family violence, abuse and neglect. They require much more intensive interventions than youth SHS are funded to provide, such as the family preservation programs offered through the [Child Protection system](#). If home-based programs aren't effective or safe, these homeless children may require out-of-home care (OOHC).

But Yfoundations' [research](#), and that of the [NSW Ombudsman](#), suggests that SHS providers' Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports to Child Protection about 12 to 15-year-olds often go unanswered. This is because the system is overburdened, and caseworkers prioritise younger children over teenagers. There is also a severe shortage of intensive family interventions and a lack of appropriate out-of-home-care placements for children and young people, particularly those with complex needs. As a result, our under-funded youth SHS are left to care for these traumatised homeless children and young people.

Our asks

The NSW Government must monitor the updated Unaccompanied children 12-15 years accessing Specialist Homelessness Services Policy and adjust its implementation plans accordingly.

DCJ has worked with Yfoundations and SHS providers to update their policies regarding 12 to 15-year-olds accessing SHS. The new policy makes it clear that Child Protection must take the lead if a child living in an SHS is at ROSH and unable to return home. It also provides an Escalation Pathway for SHS providers to follow if they feel this responsibility isn't met.

Getting the policy right is just the first step. DCJ must continue to work with Yfoundations and SHS providers to ensure the new policy is effectively implemented. This means monitoring and reporting on the policy's effectiveness through key indicators, such as the response to ROSH reports regarding unaccompanied children and adjusting its implementation plans accordingly.

The NSW Government must fund family support and family therapy for unaccompanied homeless children in SHS and HYAP.

As part of the [2021 family preservation recommissioning process](#), DCJ has changed the criteria for its family preservation programs to include unaccompanied homeless children. But providers of this program, such as [Mission Australia](#), have identified that there is already a shortage of placements for children heavily involved in the Child Protection system. Changes to the eligibility for such programs will only have an impact if they are accompanied by an increase in available placements.

The NSW Government must improve access to therapeutic OOHC placements for unaccompanied homeless children.

The NSW OOHC system relies heavily on volunteer foster and kinship carers. While living with family and non-professional carers is always preferable, these carers often struggle to manage the challenging, trauma-based behaviours that older homeless children can display. This leads to high rates of placement breakdowns, which can compound the child's trauma.

Therapeutic OOHC options, such as treatment foster care and therapeutic residential care, can help these young people recover from their trauma and reconnect with family. But as outlined in our position paper on 'homeless adolescents with complex needs', there is a severe shortage of such placements in NSW. Until this shortage is addressed, homeless children will continue to be in SHS/HYAP services because Child Protection considers them too complex to deal with.

The NSW Government must invest in in school-based and community-based early interventions to identify and support children at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The evidence

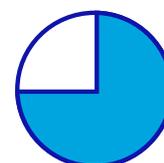
On average, more than 2,000 children access Specialist Homeless Services alone in NSW every year.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
12-15 Years	1,420	2,042	2,415	2,485	2,588	2,381



An even greater number of 12 to 15-year-olds are part of the 'hidden homeless'. A [2017 study](#) of couch surfers in western Melbourne found that almost 50 per cent had begun couch surfing during primary school.

[Mission Australia's 2020 Youth Survey](#) found that one in six 15 to 19-year-olds had experienced youth homelessness. Nearly 75% of these young people had first experienced homelessness before turning 16.



Relationship/family breakdown	26%
Disengagement from education and/or training	14%
Domestic and family violence	10%
Mental health issues	4%
Lack of family and/or community support	6%

Data commissioned by Yfoundations shows that relationship and family breakdown is the leading cause of homelessness amongst 12 to 15-year-olds in NSW, followed by school disengagement, domestic and family violence and mental health issues.

The [HYAP evaluation](#) from the Centre for Evidence and Implementation found that just over 50% of 12 to 15-year-olds who received HYAP support had previously been subject to at least one Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) report. This is primarily because of concerns about their caregiver's behaviour, in addition to the risks that children and young people presented to themselves.



30%

of SHS/HYAP providers reported that Child Protection was 'not at all responsive' to ROSH reports from SHS providers regarding 12 to 15-year-olds

In a [2020 survey by Yfoundations](#), 30% of SHS/HYAP providers reported that Child Protection was 'not at all responsive' to ROSH reports from SHS providers regarding 12 to 15-year-olds. The majority (52%) reported that they were only 'somewhat responsive'.