



Policy Platform: Housing and Homelessness

Youth Coalition of the ACT

Housing is a fundamental determinant of the wellbeing of young people and should be given extremely high importance in any government policy development. Safe and stable housing is also a basic human right. These human rights are protected by a number of international human rights treaties, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,¹ the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,² and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.³ Having ratified these treaties, Australia and all its governments (federal, state, territory and local government) are under legal and moral obligations to promote, protect and realise the human rights of all people within their territory or under their control. However, despite these treaties many young people still experience housing stress or homelessness.

Housing affordability and young people

Many young people in the ACT experience severe financial hardship associated with the high cost of living.⁴ As young people are often working casually or still completing training, they struggle to compete in the private rental market. In December 2012 median weekly house rentals in the ACT were \$480 per week and median weekly unit rentals were \$430 per week.⁵ Over the last three years rents have risen by an average of 10 per cent nationally, while the maximum rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) have increased by only 2.7 per cent.⁶

Even if students receive Rent Assistance 43% of recipients experience housing stress because they are paying more than 30% of their income in rent. Housing stress for a young person means having to forego living close to shops, schools and public transport. It could also mean forgoing other items such as food. Rent assistance paid to students is subject to more restrictions and is paid at a lower rate than rent assistance pays to people on other payment types.⁷ The Commonwealth Rent Assistance is capped at the rate of inflation, but due to extremely low vacancy rates (especially in the ACT), rents have risen much more quickly than the inflation rate.

Consultations with young people indicated it is difficult to access affordable housing in Canberra given the expensive rental market and high student population. In the 2012 *Rate Canberra* survey conducted by the Youth Coalition, 12% of respondents indicated 'paying rent, board, or mortgage repayments' was worrying them.⁸ Vulnerable young people also report they may have forgone proper nutritional meals, struggled to pay utility bills, especially in winter, and had difficulties paying rent due to the amount of income support being inadequate for their needs.⁹

The private rental market in the ACT is amongst the highest in Australia. Many young people report difficulty in gaining entry to private rental properties, due to cost, availability and discrimination. The Youth Coalition argues that more work needs to be done by the ACT Government in the area of housing affordability, and supporting

young people to rent privately. The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness is due to be re-negotiated in 2013 and it is urged that more funding is allocated to affordable housing initiatives for young people.

Various groups of young people have particular problems accessing housing including: tertiary students, apprentices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and women. In general, young people require housing that is located close to transport, educational institutions, employment, and universal services. They also require a range of different accommodation models and choices to ensure their needs can be met to the highest possible standard.

The Youth Coalition supports a range of models for housing provision for young people. The Youth Coalition notes, and supports the ACT Government's commitment to investigate the provision of student housing through creative models such as Canberra Student Housing Cooperative (CSHC) started by students at the Australian National University.¹⁰

Youth homelessness and homelessness support

Housing support services that exist across Australia are struggling to cope with the demand. In the ACT in 2010-2011, 59% of all people seeking immediate accommodation were turned away.¹¹ Young people identified that if an initial request for housing support is unmet, this may negatively influence their decision to seek assistance in the future.¹²

Much has been done over recent times to address the housing crisis, such as *The Road Home Homelessness White Paper*, introducing a national approach to reducing homelessness.¹³ The Youth Coalition recognises some of the initiatives that have been introduced in the ACT as positive steps.

The Youth Coalition uses the following definition of homelessness:

- Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation such as those who 'sleep out', or use derelict buildings, cars, railway stations for shelter.
- Secondary homelessness: people who frequently move from temporary accommodation such as emergency accommodation, refuges, and temporary shelters. People may use boarding houses or family accommodation on a temporary basis.
- Tertiary homelessness: people who live in rooming houses, boarding houses on a medium or long-term basis where they do not have their own bathroom and kitchen facilities and tenure is not secured by a lease.
- Marginally housed: people in housing situations close to the minimum standard.¹⁴

The national rate of homeless in Australia has increased by 8% to 105,237 since 2006.¹⁵ The ACT has the second highest rate, with 50 in every 10,000 people being homeless. 42% of those people are under 25 years of age. Whilst the topic of youth homelessness can invoke images of 'street kids', many homeless young people are invisible. Some live with relatives and family, or even complete strangers, often couch surfing, while others are in boarding houses or refuges.

The Youth Coalition acknowledges that family breakdown is a major factor in homelessness. Women and children represent a large proportion of the homelessness statistics due to issues such as domestic violence. 24% of all clients

of specialist homelessness services report domestic violence as their main reason for seeking assistance.¹⁶ This is the most cited reason for seeking help.

The ACT's youth housing and homelessness service system has undergone recent reform. This has meant that workers have had to adjust to a new system and be able to assist clients with the transition in living arrangements. It must be recognised that there will always be uncertainty in times of transition and the sector in the ACT has used limited resources to support its clients. More funding for workers in the youth housing and homelessness sector would ensure better mechanisms for collaborating and developing a fully functioning workforce. An independent evaluation of the new service system in the ACT is still required in order to seek learnings from this process and inform policies for the future. Part of the evaluation could include the cluster model of crisis accommodation, which replaced the previous group housing model. Presently the cluster model has little evidence base to support it. Such an evaluation would help to assess its effectiveness.

The complexities and issues faced by young people experiencing homelessness are still in need of more attention. For many young people, simply providing a place to live is insufficient to addressing the root causes of homelessness, and does not always end the potential pathways to homelessness in later life. Issues around mental health, employment, education, alcohol and other drug use can be barriers to stable housing.

For many young people, living out of home for the first time can be an extremely difficult, as they may lack the necessary living skills, experience isolation and feel disconnected from their peers. Innovative, responsive and evidence-based models of supporting young people through various transitions, such as from experiencing homelessness to crisis accommodation, and from supported medium term housing to independent living, are needed to ensure these transitions are successful. It is also important to understand that for many young people, a linear move from homelessness to independent living is not possible. The Youth Coalition supports the concept of a spectrum of support that recognises this.¹⁷

Commitments

1. Working with all stakeholders in the housing and homelessness sector to improve collaboration and communication between government services, non-government services and young people experiencing homelessness, to assist in reducing barriers to effective service delivery.
2. Calling for the ACT and Australian Governments to increase funding to first contact services that support young people experiencing homelessness in the ACT, in order to reduce high turn-away rates.
3. Supporting efforts from government and non-government agencies to engage in, and benefit from, research and professional development opportunities.
4. Promoting a whole of government approach to homelessness and housing issues, that recognise the many aspects of homelessness pathways.
5. Calling for the Australian Government to match Centrelink's Rent Assistance payments to geographical needs, and increase Rent Assistance to ACT residents who attempt to rent in one of the most expensive rental markets nationally.

6. Advocating for an independent evaluation of the ACT's re-modelled youth housing and homelessness service system, and to implement relevant evaluations side by side in order to link outcomes.
7. Advocate for the development of an evidence base in relation to the cluster and share models of housing, in order to ensure that housing for young people is safe and secure, and meets their individual needs.
8. Advocating for mechanisms to be developed and implemented that support young people to access the private rental market, and remove current barriers related to cost, availability and discrimination.
9. Advocating for expanded affordable housing programs for vulnerable young people.
10. Advocating for the active involvement of young people in designing, planning and evaluating youth housing & homelessness policy and service delivery frameworks.
11. Advocating for the active and supported participation of young people in their individual care planning and case management.

¹ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, Article 17.

² *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Article 11(1).

³ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 27(3).

⁴ The Salvation Army (2010) *Perceptions of Poverty: An Insight into the Nature and Impact of Poverty in Australia*

⁵ Australian Property Monitors (2012) *Rental Report December 2012*, Australian Property Monitors, viewed 25 February 2013, <<http://apm.com.au/MarketReports.aspx>>

⁶ National Welfare Rights Network (Jan 2012) *Fairness & support in uncertain times: 2012-13 Federal Budget Statement Priorities*, National Welfare Rights Network, p. 19.

⁷ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (2012) *Submission in response to: The adequacy of the allowance payment system*, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, p.14.

⁸ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2012) *Rate Canberra 2012: Findings from the Survey of Young People aged 12-25 in the ACT*, Youth Coalition of the ACT, Canberra, p.23.

⁹ The Salvation Army (2010) *Perceptions of Poverty: An Insight into the Nature and Impact of Poverty in Australia*

¹⁰ Katy Gallagher, (2013) Government Response To The Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs: Accommodation Needs of Tertiary Education Students in the Act, Report 10, August 2012, The Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, Canberra.

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2011) *People turned away from government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation 2010-11*, Australian Government, Canberra.

¹² Youth Coalition of the ACT (2004) *Telling it How it Is*, Canberra.

¹³ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008) *The Road Home Homelessness White Paper*, Australian Government, Canberra.

¹⁴ Chamberlain and Mackenzie (2001) *Counting the Homeless NSW 2001*, Swinburne University, Victoria.

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness*. Australian Government, Canberra.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection: March Quarter 2012*. Australian Government, Canberra.

¹⁷ Coffey, M (2010) 'Out of Sight, Young People, the Hidden Homeless', *Parity*, Vol. 23, Issue 3.