

# **Youth Workers' Perspectives on Youth Homelessness for 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory**

July 2018



The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Indigenous cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is the peak youth affairs body in the Australian Capital Territory. The Youth Coalition's vision is for an ACT community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people.

The Youth Coalition receives funding for peak activity (policy development, sector development, advocacy & representation) from the ACT Government - Community Services Directorate.

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge and thank all of the youth workers who contributed to this report. In particular, we acknowledge the role of the Youth Housing and Homelessness Forum (YHHF) in raising concerns about this issue over a number of years.

## Project Team

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## To Cite this Report

Chowdry, K., Barker, J., and Watts, H. (2018). *Youth Workers' Perspectives on Youth Homelessness for 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory*. Canberra: Youth Coalition of the ACT.

## Contents

Introduction .....	5
Background .....	5
Origin of the project .....	5
Rationale for this component of the broader project .....	6
Methodology .....	6
Research method .....	6
Research design .....	6
Recruitment & Sample.....	6
Analysis .....	7
Findings .....	7
Scale and visibility of the issue .....	7
Experiences/issues that face this population group.....	8
Key findings .....	15
Conclusion .....	16
Recommendations .....	16
References.....	18
Appendices: Focus Group Participants .....	19

# Youth Workers' Perspectives on Youth Homelessness for 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory

## Introduction

### Background

For over a decade, youth workers and specialist homelessness services (SHS) in the ACT have voiced a strong concern about the inadequate accommodation for young people aged 12-15 years who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. It has been frequently asserted that although the number is not numerically large, 12-15 year olds are a highly vulnerable demographic in society. Young people who experience homelessness are exposed to a range of conditions that put them at a high risk of developing negative health, social and economic outcomes (Homelessness Taskforce 2008; National Youth Commission 2008). Furthermore, they are consistently linked to disengagement from traditional social institutions and forms of support and pro-social forms of social capital (Heinze, Jozefowicz, and Toro 2010). The burden of harms linked to youth homelessness causes significant social, emotional and financial costs to the individuals, families and the community. Of the adult homeless population, those who experienced homelessness as a young person have the greatest difficulty in exiting homelessness due to an adaptation to the living conditions associated with homelessness (Chamberlain and Johnson 2013). A large proportion of people who go on to become chronically homeless had their initial experience of homelessness as a young person, reinforcing the need for early intervention targeting supports to children and young people, which are appropriate and specific to their needs (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008).

### Origin of the project

In early 2018, the ACT Government's Community Services Directorate (CSD) announced that a research project would be undertaken to better understand the risks and experiences of young people aged 12-15 years who had experienced homelessness. The need for the project was brought to the attention of CSD by the Joint Pathways Committee, whose members highlighted the gap in services for this population group. The specialist homelessness services (SHS) that constitute the Joint Pathways Committee, along with frontline youth services, had been seeing a demand for services for 12-15 year olds in their practice and noted that there was an inadequate response to their needs. These service providers highlighted that there were currently no services funded to accommodate this age group, yet there was ongoing demand for this service type. At the request of the Joint Pathways Committee, research was commissioned by CSD to better understand the perspective, scope and scale of the needs of 12-15 year olds who are at risk of or have experienced homelessness.

CSD conducted a literature review on the issue of youth homelessness and developed an approach to estimating the number of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness between 12-15 years of age in the ACT. CSD also commissioned the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) at the Australian Catholic University to conduct a qualitative research project with young people aged 16-19 who previously experienced homelessness between 12-15 years of age, to try to better understand their experiences. CSD has also

committed to holding an 'Insights Workshops' with various stakeholder groups, such as those from the community sector.

## Rationale for this component of the broader project

The need for this project came from the homelessness and youth sectors who identified this gap in services for this age group. However, research involving these service providers was not included in the initial research plan. The Youth Coalition of the ACT noted this omission and recognised the service providers as the ideal research participants to identify the systemic and structural barriers to supporting the needs of this population group and their intimate knowledge of and role in supporting these homeless young people. Each youth worker effectively holds the knowledge and experience acquired through observing and working with numerous young people who have been at risk of or experienced homelessness. Thus, youth workers provide the ideal research participants to identify the needs of this population group as viewed from a service provider's perspective, and can articulate the broader barriers and enablers to more effectively supporting their needs.

## Methodology

### Research method

The project is grounded in a qualitative methodology in order to contextualise findings within the social and economic environment of the ACT's youth homelessness sector, and was informed by the experiences and perspectives of the research participants. It used semi-structured focus groups; structured to direct the topic of discussion while still allowing for the participants to provide their own experiences and knowledge. This method is ideal for this project as it allows for an exploration of the nuanced and complex experiences of the youth workers, the range of young people they have worked with and the conditions they operate within. Focus groups allow for discussion and dialogue as the research participants share their experiences and perspectives, eliciting and drawing out supporting data and counterarguments.

### Research design

The focus groups facilitator posed the following questions, allowing participants to respond directly to and/or elaborate on others' comments between each question:

1. How visible are homeless 12-15 year olds?
2. What are your experiences of engaging with homeless 12-15 year olds?
3. What is needed to fill gap in support services for homeless 12-15 year olds?

### Recruitment and Sample

A target sample of youth workers with extensive experience working with young people who have been at risk of and/or experienced homelessness between the ages of 12-15 were invited to participate. Two focus groups with a combined total of 16 people were held across two days (see Appendices for services that participated in the focus groups).

## Analysis

Two people transcribed and noted observations of the focus groups alongside the focus group facilitator, enabling him to engage and participate in the dialogue with the participants. These notes were coded in situ, highlighting themes and issues as the focus groups were conducted. Following the focus groups the scribes and facilitator compared notes of the emerging themes and did a coding comparison. This process allows for a more robust and reliable analysis of the data as three perspectives were drawn together to ensure that the themes were consistent and not particular to the perspective of one researcher.

The initial coding comparison resulted in the preliminary structure of the findings and informed the next level of analysis. The lead researcher populated the preliminary coding structure with data collected by the two scribes. This process ensured that there was data to support each of the themes that had been identified and allowed them to be refuted or to identify others that had not been highlighted in the initial coding comparison that resulted from the in situ coding. This level of coding, removed from the time constraints of in situ coding, often elicits further depth of analysis not first noted. This final structure of the findings was then checked by the research team as a last measure of rigour, ensuring that each of the findings aligned with the data.

## Findings

The findings in this report are structured in an way that reflects the order in which the questions - as shown in the methodology - were posed to the participants. The content of the findings are structured by the themes identified through the analysis of the data, highlighting the central issues raised by the participants in response to the questions and/or other people's responses to the questions. The quotes included are verbatim comments made by the participants in relation to respective issues and are indicative of the views held by the participants toward the particular issue.

### Scale and visibility of the issue

There was a strong consensus among the research participants that the issue of at-risk and/or homeless young people aged between 12-15 is a significant problem that exists in the ACT. Moreover, several workers highlighted that homelessness amongst this cohort had been an issue for numerous years without an adequate system response. It was highlighted that the scale of this issue is difficult to estimate due to the nature of this social issue. The methodological issues in accurately estimating the homelessness population are widely acknowledged in the literature and only more problematic for this age group. However, all of the research participants reported having some interaction with such young people in the past 12 months.

*'It's not a big issue in terms of numbers but it is a big issue.'*

Many participants reported that the primary channel through which they encounter at-risk and/or homeless 12-15 year olds is through outreach or referrals. The research participants are frequently contacted by other services and the community enquiring about the possibility of providing assistance to this age group. Participants from crisis accommodation services noted that they have regular contact with young people through referral processes but

indicate that within the scope of their existing service model, they are unable to provide support to those aged below 16. Nonetheless, the accommodation services are still receiving referrals through formal channels, such as OneLink and other services, and from the community that have previous knowledge of the services or acquired a direct phone number. As a result, one service noted that they monitor the demand from this population group:

*'We have a list of "unmet needs" clients, most who are under 16.'*

The research participants noted that the visibility of this age group and, in turn, awareness of their needs, had declined since the defunding of several community programs that were previously held during school hours, such as youth centres and drop-in. Previously these services would be places that young people disengaged from school would seek assistance and social activities. Participants suggested that these spaces provided young people with a 'safe space' where they could discuss issues, such as living conditions, with youth workers. Without these programs and other specific services that cater to this population group, the formal mechanisms that render this group visible are limited. The scope, scale and significance of the issues that face the cohort was considered by the research participants to be further obscured by assumptions that at-risk or homeless young people between 12-15 years would be known to Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS). There was a strong perception that this misconception obfuscates what the actual demands and needs are of young people aged 12-15:

*'Policy writers don't see what is really going on. According to them, no-one under 16 is homeless because they are picked up by care and protection. This is very different on the ground.'*

## Experiences/issues that face this population group

### Lack of accommodation services

Participants unanimously emphasised that there are currently no accommodation services for young people, aged 12-15, who are experiencing homelessness in the ACT. As a result, young people are often couchsurfing or finding other unsafe and insecure accommodation options. Alternatively, young people may be forced into returning to family homes which can be potentially detrimental to their physical and/or mental health.

*'We meet with [12-15 year olds] and advise them on the lack of options for accommodation. We discuss what has led to their need to find other accommodation, and find out if there is an opportunity to address the underlying causes. This is sometimes helpful, but many times young people aren't wanting to address those things - they are just looking for safe housing.'*

The lack of accommodation options was the strongest recurring theme from the youth workers' focus groups. Having no service that can accommodate 12-15 year olds means that the workers are unable to respond to the most pressing and urgent need that these young people articulate. The consequence of their inability to respond adequately to the needs of the young people is that this population group learn to stop asking for support, expecting or predicting that not only will their specific needs not be met, but also resulting in them feeling unheard. Having no funded services to meet their accommodation needs contributes to the feeling of futility, and sense that they need to seek other supports amongst their street-peers

that are often unsafe, insecure and further embed them into a culture and lifestyle that can have adverse outcomes.

*'Under 16 homelessness services were not being defunded because of a lack of demand. The idea is that a more appropriate service would emerge, but that hasn't happened, so now we have a black hole.'*

*'[Outreach services] often get phone calls at 4:30pm on Friday afternoon from young people saying that they have nowhere to stay overnight/weekend. But there's nothing we can do to help them.'*

## **Centralised Intake**

The research participants all maintained that the centralised intake, OneLink, was an ineffective mechanism to both account for the size of the demand for services from this cohort and to provide adequate responses. These two issues are interrelated as people had learnt to not use Onelink based on past experience, having previously been unable to access the supports that met their need - primarily accommodation.

*'Some of the services that are able to accept referrals directly and not go through centralised intake, are in high demand and have waiting lists.'*

Participants expressed a frustration with the ineffectiveness of the referral process. Those youth workers that had made a referral to OneLink in the past described how a young person was often referred back to the service where they were first encountered. As a result, the young person ends up going around in a cycle without receiving any support. Participants found that most young people chose to exit the system as they became resigned to the idea that they would not receive the help that they require. This cycling through OneLink and services is the result of a lack of service models funded to address the needs of this population group. Unable to find an adequate response, young people become frustrated as they come to learn that their help seeking appears to fall on deaf ears. The research participants noted that while they hear the needs of this population group, they are constrained by virtue of this age group being outside of their inclusion criteria and having no service to refer to that can meet their needs.

Some participants were highly critical of OneLink for referring young people to inadequate or inappropriate services. This issue was exacerbated by some young people accepting the referral out of sheer desperation for help.

*'Through central intake, referrals are made to outreach programs because the young person feel like they need to say yes, rather than that being the most appropriate service.'*

## **Shame, stigma and pride**

Participants discussed how the stigma attached to being homeless can lead to young people avoiding asking for assistance. Some participants reported that on several occasions young people would stay beyond closing hours of the service until no other young people were around, and only then would they ask for assistance with finding accommodation. Likewise,

the frequency of telephone calls made to youth services at closing time is indicative of the difficulty that young people experience in requesting help with finding safe accommodation.

*'Because of shame clients won't come in, or won't identify that they are homeless. Young people won't bring it up and ask for help, but will answer questions if asked. They don't necessarily want to open up about what's going on.'*

The stigma and shame attached to young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness can result in a range of behaviours that add further difficulty to their lives. Consistent with past research, participants highlighted that some young people are resistant to seeking help due to perceived negative connotations, acutely aware of the symbolic burden of homelessness (Farrugia 2011). Some young people resist or react to the negative associations with becoming homeless by avoiding contact with services. However, other young people in this age range were seen by the workers to embrace not only the negative connotations but the associated lifestyle and survival strategies of homelessness (Rayburn & Guittar 2013). Numerous workers expressed that some of the young people they encountered between 12-15 years of age had immersed themselves in a street culture in order to garner the supports that they had not found in the services sector, notably the accommodation and a sense of belonging. This process of enculturation is at the core of long-term adverse outcomes of young people who experience homelessness.

### **Youth centres and drop-in services**

Participants demonstrated a frustration with the decline in the presence and operating hours of youth centres. Research participants noted that in the past youth centres were open between 12-7pm, however, due to what is believed to be a misinformed shift in policy, several were forced into closure or to reduce their operating hours. This has contributed to growing difficulties that youth workers experience in being able to intervene early and provide young people with individualised and tailored supports. Drop-in and youth centres provided an opportunity for young people to access supports.

The research participants noted that services are often unable to open during school hours, based on the assumption that children and young people are theoretically in school. However, this theory does not match the reality of some marginalised children and young people at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness. Thus, services that close during school hours do not see these young people, let alone meet their needs. It was noted that it is unreasonable for children and young people to be actively participating in school when they do not have the underlying stability of secure housing and the supports that most children aged between 12-15 enjoy.

*'Saying "we can't help you" means that the young person will often shut down.'*

*'Telling young people that we can't accommodate them leads to these young people not accessing support even if they are offered other kinds of support, as they may only be seeking accommodation.'*

## Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS)

The research participants mentioned a common misconception that anyone under 16 years who is experiencing or at risk of homelessness will be known to and serviced by CYPS. The participants indicated that the reality was far removed from this assumption, due to the fact that many young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are not seen to meet the threshold for CYPS and are ineligible for support. Some participants were critical of this threshold, suggesting that they do not adequately capture the harms or the underlying causes that lead to a young person becoming homeless. Rather, the gap between meeting the threshold for receiving support from CYPS and the inclusion criteria for youth homelessness services was identified as the key issue that needed to be resolved to adequately respond to this issue.

Participants also stated that some young people want to avoid contact with CYPS. Trying to avoid contact with CYPS or minimising the severity of the issues that they face when they encounter services that they perceive to be mandatory reporters, is another key reason this population group is under-reported and relatively invisible in existing data. The research participants noted that many young people had previous negative or ineffective encounters with CYPS. The reputation and fears regarding CYPS involvement are pervasive and common, preventing young people from seeking help or disclosing the severity of their circumstances. Furthermore, the participants reported that some young people had sought help from CYPS and been met with an inadequate response. A frequently described scenario involved young people contacting CYPS about unsafe living conditions. Young people are then required to complete documentation outlining the issues that they are experiencing, but in response no action is taken by CYPS, which can lead to more detrimental living environments.

*'Some kids are hanging out for their 16th birthdays to be able to get into crisis accommodation.'*

The research participants emphasised that involvement with CYPS was not the desired or best response to 12-15 year olds being homeless. Rather, the service gap between the CYPS involvement and available homelessness supports highlights the unique needs of the population group that are not being attended to.

## Family

Participants discussed a misconception that for those under 16 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, there are always family supports available that they are deliberately choosing to not use. This misconception falls into the problematised notion of 'runaways' and 'choice' in the field of youth homelessness. This assumption undermines the severity of the causes of youth homelessness. Family conflict and breakdown is the leading cause of youth homelessness, which in many cases is more appropriately termed domestic and family violence (Roche and Barker 2017). Furthermore, abuse and neglect, alcohol and other drug abuse, sexual abuse and mental health issues are common causes of homelessness for young people between 12-15 years (Homelessness Taskforce 2008; National Youth Commission 2008). The research participants highlighted that the young people they encountered in this age range had not left their family homes on a whim. Rather, they had complex issues that resulted in leaving home being a safer or more secure option than remaining in a hostile or chaotic environment. These events are not always clearly articulated by young people at first, often linked to the stigma and shame identified above. Moreover,

many of the young people have come from family environments that had normalised these adverse behaviours. This was reiterated by the research participants who highlighted the intergenerational issues that impacted the lives of the young people. Some of the more experienced workers noted that they now see young people who are the children of past clients.

Participants strongly asserted that for many of these young people it is unsafe and inappropriate to encourage them to return to their family homes. Instead of assuming that they should return home or should otherwise meet the inclusion criteria for CYPS, it was suggested that we should listen to and respect the views of these young people who have assessed their living circumstance and opted to leave to seek external support. The assumptions that have created the service gap for this population group, that someone else should be looking after these young people (family, CYPS, homelessness services), does not recognise that these are not always available and are sometimes inappropriate responses.

The research participants also noted that where safe and possible, the best outcome is often to keep young people in contact with their families and endeavour to address the underlying problems that challenge the young person's sense of security and safety. This assertion is aligned with the evidence that suggests that most young people who experience homelessness have improved outcomes if they maintain contact with family (Barker, Humphries et al 2013). As such, when it comes to creating and delivering support to young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the research participants proposed that programs address the needs of the whole family. Participants were critical of CYPS for failing to use this method before removing a child from their home, or if they do opt to provide support to the family, they often won't engage until things get really problematic.

*'A grandparent ended up having to ask CYPS to take a young person who they were responsible for because she just couldn't help him any more. Only after this, support was put in place to get the grandparent some in-home support, which meant the child was able to stay.'*

Despite not being funded to do so, most participants noted that they engage with parents when appropriate, as they felt it leads to the best outcomes for young people. Participants noted that it is imperative to have the support of the family to positively affect the way a young person feels within their home.

*'Getting parent buy-in is half the struggle and the solution.'*

In line with the spectrum of needs of young people aged 12-15 years who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness articulated by the participants, it is imperative that we undertake assessment of their needs that is not restricted by assumptions. Furthermore, there clearly needs to be a range of service models to adequately respond to these diverse needs.

Participants stated that lecturing young people that they are too young to not be with their parents/family is not only ineffective, but undermines the risks they face and actually puts them at further risk, distancing them from potential avenues for support and improved outcomes. The participants noted this attitude is representative of not listening to and valuing the perspectives and experiences of young people that is reflected in the inadequate policy and service responses for this age group. Not listening to or responding to their identified

needs leads to these young people not seeking or asking for help, as they assume that people will not respond adequately to their needs.

### **Social capital and networks**

The participants discussed how homeless young people often become associated with other street peers who do not provide positive social capital. Several participants described how these young people were longing for companionship and the support of other people. This drive to be with other people could at times be an expedient way to obtain accommodation or access to other valued resources. However, many of these young people were lonely and wanting company, a human connection. Again this observation is supported by research (Barker 2013). Some research participants maintained there is a lack of a sense of belonging and connection which leads these young people to connect with whomever offers it. The supports that are most attractive to these young people were not always the most appropriate, often leading to adverse outcomes:

*‘When not given somewhere safe to go, they go with whoever they run into on the street - “what are you up to?” and then off they go, and can get lost in the ‘system’ of dealers, street survival, and then struggle to get out of that system into a supportive system even after they turn 16 and are eligible for accommodation support.’*

One participant also highlighted that the consequential thinking of 12-15 year olds restricted their capacity to make decisions that were in their long-term interests. This was often seen as an apparent lack of concern that some homeless 12-15 year olds display. However, this presentation of hubris and bravado is often essential to survive the conditions of homelessness (Barker 2012; Sandberg 2008). This display of not caring about their future or current living conditions can be mixed with the understandable desire to find distractions and fun:

*‘They don’t care about school, their health, or anything else. They just want to have fun.’*

The survival strategy of finding other people to be with for support and company often leads to young people becoming enmeshed in a culture of homelessness or street culture that could otherwise be prevented if offered other supports.

### **Culture of chronic homelessness**

There was a clear message from participants that young people experiencing homelessness face a very serious risk of falling into chronic homelessness and associated behaviours such as substance addiction, crime and/or violence. Participants suggested that for most young people, there is trauma attached to the experience of being homeless or from the experiences that contributed to their homelessness. The trauma and adaptations to survive in these difficult conditions often lead to behaviours that are counterproductive.

The research participants strongly voiced that the earlier young people become enmeshed in the conditions of homelessness and socialise with homeless and street involved peers, the greater the risk. The participants noted that it was imperative that supports are put in place to prevent or reduce the adverse outcomes of young people being homeless between 12-15 years of age. Participants noted that these young people often appeared to be more

'hardcore' and quickly became enculturated to adverse social groups and behaviours. Moreover, the participants noted that these young people continue to be involved in the homelessness and other supports systems through their youth and young adulthood. Again, some of the more experienced workers noted that some of these young people become young parents whose children they later see in similar living conditions. Thus, the research participants emphasised a dire need for early intervention with this group that are currently not being adequately supported.

*'There is a misconception that giving support to a young person will lead to them needing long term support. Historically, young people under 16 who were supported to return home end up finding safe and stable family connections in the long term.'*

### **Redesign the requirements for receiving support**

Participants strongly stated that the government is responsible for the funding of programs that service this cohort, as the current system does not include service models and responses to 12-15 year olds at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Currently this population group fall between the existing homelessness services and the criteria to meet the threshold for statutory support. Thus, it was repeatedly reinforced by the research participants that this systemic and structural gap must be addressed by government.

Participants were also critical of education or employment being a requirement for young people to access services, including accommodation. While they insist that services should link in with education and employment services if appropriate, they should not be a requirement to receive access to accommodation. The research participants highlighted that this would allow for services to provide support to young people who are disengaged from education due to the circumstances of their life but allow them to provide support that could ultimately improve educational engagement and aspirations. However, denying them support will only exacerbate the risk and harms to a subgroup of this cohort who are perhaps the most at risk.

## Key findings

The conditions faced by 12-15 year old young people experiencing homelessness in the ACT are severe. These conditions have a detrimental impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of these young people. As a consequence of experiencing homelessness at an early age, the risk of young people falling into cycles of chronic homelessness and their propensity to engage in negative social behaviours is significantly elevated.

There are no accommodation services in the ACT for homeless young people aged 12-15. Services that previously existed have since been defunded due to policy changes. This has resulted in youth homelessness becoming less visible, rather than decreasing the actual number of at-risk or homeless 12-15 year olds. Homelessness and youth services that support young people frequently report coming in contact with at-risk or homeless 12-15 year olds but are unable to provide them with accommodation due to an absence of these services.

Centralised intake (OneLink) does not provide effective assistance to at-risk/homeless 12-15 year olds seeking accommodation, as it cannot refer to accommodation services which do not exist. They can make referrals to outreach services or case management programs, however, these young people end up being referred back to OneLink when they need accommodation support.

The CYPS thresholds for a young person to receive support demonstrate a misunderstanding of the factors that drive homelessness for 12-15 year olds. Furthermore, in many instances, CYPS is not an appropriate service for young people experiencing/at-risk of family conflict related homelessness.

Pride and shame continue to act as a barrier that prevents young people from asking for help with secure or safe accommodation. There remains a great deal of stigma attached to being homeless for young people as they believe it is a symptom of their own behaviours or actions. Having sought help and not received appropriate support in the past, some young people have become disenfranchised and unwilling to re-engage with services. However, creating services that specifically cater to this population group sends a message that this is an experience that is shared with others, validating their need for support and decreasing the associated stigma.

There is also a lack of early intervention services that can be used to disrupt the pathways into homelessness and intergenerational homelessness and disadvantage. Family focused youth work practice can provide an effective and evidence based approach to prevent homelessness or to reduce the impact of homelessness. Providing support to parents to increase family functioning with concurrent supports for the young person is the most effective approach to early intervention and prevention of youth homelessness.

## Conclusion

Youth homelessness continues to be a prominent social issue in spite of ongoing prosperity within Canberra. As they have for many years now, the research participants continue to see young people aged 12 to 15 years who are experiencing homelessness with no adequate response available to them. Prevailing assumptions about young people in this age range - such as that they should be with family - fly in the face of the reality of their lived experiences and downplay the significance of this issue for these individuals, their families and our society. However, we know that providing timely and targeted responses can prevent or reduce adverse outcomes for these young people. This project also highlights how we are currently not responding adequately to the needs of these young people.

This project investigating the issue of youth homelessness for 12-15 years olds was brought to the attention of CSD by the youth and homelessness sectors. The research with youth workers further emphasised the concerns for this cohort that they continue to encounter in their work. However, there are currently no accommodation services that are able to provide shelter to young people experiencing homelessness aged between 12-15 years. Moreover, there is no targeted early intervention and prevention services for this cohort. Consequently, we are currently doing nothing to address or prevent this social issue.

## Recommendations

The findings of this research lead to two clear recommendations that address crisis, early intervention and prevention. These recommendations can be addressed by the creation of two overlapping programs which would replicate other successful service models that have been implemented in Australia. These recommendations are not only the logical conclusion of this research but align with the evidence base for addressing youth homelessness.

### **Safe and stable accommodation for 12-15 year olds experiencing or at risk of homelessness**

The research participants said that if a young person is in stable accommodation they are able to build up confidence and have a sense of security and stability from which they can begin to make other positive changes in their lives. This is supported by the research literature, which highlights the need to provide safe and secure accommodation as soon as possible to people who are experiencing homelessness, to reduce the chance of cumulative adverse outcomes. Secure accommodation is a necessary foundation to homelessness interventions, the basis upon which other interventions can be put in place to bring about positive medium and long term outcomes.

*'There needs to be a place for people under 16 to go to when they need to find shelter. They need a safe bed, which gives stability; and from there, other issues can be addressed.'*

A participant commented that merely extending the age range of the existing services is not suitable, but there needs to be age appropriate and specific accommodation services for young people aged between 12-15 years. The participant identified that the needs of young people of this age are different to those aged above 15.

*‘Merely enhancing existing supports isn’t going to be enough. It requires new, targeted methods of support.’*

Providing a safe space for respite for young people who are experiencing episodic homelessness increases the likelihood of the safe reconnection to family and reduces the likelihood of becoming enculturated into adverse conditions and lifestyle. Pathway approaches to youth homelessness research highlight that many young people can return home if they are provided with this option (Milburn et al. 2007; Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008; Mallett et al. 2009). Nonetheless, it is apparent that some young people are unable to return to the family home due to the ongoing presence and impact of the issues that led them to leave their home initially (Mayock, Corr, and O’Sullivan 2008).

Ruby’s accommodation service in South Australia offers an example of a youth homelessness model that can work with young people under 15 years of age. This service model works with the young person and their family to offer both the opportunity to return home or transition to alternative accommodation if necessary. Either way, the service endeavours to build the relationship with family in order to improve outcomes for the young person where safe and appropriate. Therefore, this model can be considered a *family focused youth accommodation service*.

### **Early intervention and prevention - family focused youth work practice**

Family breakdown and conflict are the leading causes of youth homelessness (Roche and Barker 2017). Providing support to young people and their families increases the likelihood of preventing homelessness or intervening early to reduce the impact of homelessness. Interventions that aim to improve family functioning continue to have the most promising evidence base for preventing youth homelessness. Furthermore, young people who become homeless have better outcomes if they maintain contact with their family, where safe and appropriate.

Canberra needs family focused youth work services that aim to improve family functioning and address the needs of the young person at risk of homelessness. For early intervention and prevention the service model would need to be conducted in an outreach capacity in order to keep young people in their homes and with their families. However, the accommodation service (Recommendation 1) would also need to offer respite and family mediation, and support to offer the opportunity to assist young people to return home.

The Youth Hope Program in NSW offers an example of family focused intervention for young people 9-15 years of age that are at risk of harm but do not meet the inclusion criteria for statutory child protection. The Youth Hope models vary, but all provide outreach to young people and their families for 12 months. This model is currently being evaluated.

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## Appendices: Focus Group Participants

Members from the following organisations were represented in the focus groups:

Organisation	Purpose	Accommodation	Ages
Ted Noffs - Take Hold	Outreach & mentoring program	No	16-25
Canberra Youth Residential Service	Crisis accommodation, advice and referral	Yes	16-25
ACT Together	Out of home care services consortium	Yes	0-25
Oasis Youth Services	Crisis accommodation	Yes	15-25
Gugan-Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation	Drop in, outreach, case management	No	10-18
Belconnen Community Service	Drop in, case management	No	12-25
CatholicCare - Youth Housing Support Service	Outreach program for homeless or at risk of homelessness young people	No	12-25
Woden Community Service	Drop in, case management	No	12-25
Create Foundation	Varied support for young people with an out of home care experience	No	0-25
Barnardos	Intensive case management	No	16-25
Youth Care Canberra	Outreach program, after hours support	No	12-25