

Submission to the Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria

March 2020

Submission:

Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria* for consideration by the Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care.

Our connection to this issue

Key message

Child development, parenting support and family strengthening activities are often impossible to provide when a family does not have a safe, secure and stable place to live.

Our members work directly with children, parents, carers, and families experiencing disadvantage and hardship. The core remit of the child and family services sector is to provide support to families focused on child development, safety, stability and wellbeing, responsive parenting and family strengthening. For an increasing number of families in contact with our services, housing insecurity and homelessness are their primary concern. This presents a significant challenge for our sector, as the supports we are best placed to provide are often impossible to deliver when a family does not have a safe, secure and stable place to live.

Homelessness and housing stress put children at increased risk. In Victoria, ten per cent of families reported to statutory child protection over the three-year period from 2014-15 to 2017-18 made up 40 per cent of all reports.¹ Of these families, three quarters also appear in homelessness data, and 41 per cent used family services.² We recognise that more must be done to provide these families with the support they need. Children and young people need to be prioritised in responses to homelessness in Victoria.

Our submission is structured in accordance with the terms of reference:

- Changing scale and nature of homelessness in Victoria
- Factors that impact on homelessness
- Policies and practices to address homelessness.

¹ Department of Health and Human Services 2019, *Roadmap for Reform: strong families, safe children*, Programme of action 2020-23, Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. 6.

² Department of Health and Human Services 2019.

Changing scale and nature of homelessness in Victoria

The Centre is deeply concerned that the number of children accessing Specialist Homelessness Services in Victoria is on the rise.

According to *The State of Victoria's Children Report*:

From 2011-12 to 2016-17, the number of Victorian children accessing homelessness services increased by 56 per cent. This was driven by a 65 per cent increase in children aged zero to nine years and a 76 per cent increase in children aged 10 to 14 years ... with vulnerable groups such as those experiencing family violence and children in out-of-home care (OOHC) significantly overrepresented.³

The increased number of children and families accessing these services points to broader systemic issues that need to be addressed urgently to turn this trend around and uphold the rights of Victorian children to be safe and secure.

Factors that impact on homelessness

There are many factors that contribute to family homelessness including family violence, relationship breakdown, financial crisis, housing affordability and availability, unemployment, poverty, health problems, mental illness, and substance or gambling dependency and abuse.⁴ Our submission focuses on the factors that have a high level of impact on children and their families, and key solutions to address homelessness.

Housing supply

Key message

There are not enough social housing properties to meet demand. Investment in housing supply is the most effective step government can take to address homelessness and is urgently required to meet the most basic safety and wellbeing needs of children and families.

Supply of social housing in Victoria is insufficient to meet demand and has been declining over time as a proportion of total housing supply.⁵ Victoria now has the lowest per capita rate of social housing in the country.⁶ Analysis of research from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) by the Everybody's Home campaign shows that the social housing shortfall for Victoria is 102,800 properties, and that an additional 166,000 properties will be needed by 2036.⁷ These figures have led the Council to Homeless Persons, Victoria's peak body for people experiencing homelessness, to call on the Victorian Government to invest in building 6,000 new social housing

³ Department of Education and Training 2019, *The state of Victoria's children report: a focus on health and wellbeing 2017*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. 63, p. 10.

⁴ Kirkman, M, Keys, D, Turner, A & Bodzak, D 2009, "Does camping count?" *Children's experiences of homelessness*, The Salvation Army Australian Southern Territory, Melbourne.

⁵ Department of Education and Training 2019.

⁶ Productivity Commission 2019a, *Vulnerable private renters: evidence and options*, Productivity Commission Research Paper, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

⁷ Everybody's Home 2018, Three times more social housing by 2036? Let's get it done! [Media Release], 15 November 2018, <<https://everybodyshome.com.au/media-release-three-times-more-social-housing-by-2036-lets-get-it-done/>>.

properties each year over ten years in order to increase stock to the national average of 4.5 per cent.⁸

The shortfall has led to growing numbers of people waiting for access to social housing on the Victorian Housing Register. An *Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program* conducted by the Parliament of Victoria revealed that 'as at 31 March 2018, the number of people on the register was 82,499. This was comprised of 57,877 adults and 24,622 children'.⁹

In addition to people already registered and waiting, *The State of Victoria's Children Report* states that:

Based on current eligibility criteria, nearly one per cent of Victorian households not currently in social housing would be eligible for priority access. This suggests that unmet demand for priority access is almost double that expressed through the Victorian Housing Register.¹⁰

Not only does limited housing supply contribute to homelessness, it can also contribute to children entering care, and affect the ability of families to be reunified, particularly for Aboriginal families.¹¹ Research has shown that 'the unintended consequences of limited housing pathways puts Indigenous women at significant risk of having their children removed by Child Protection'.¹²

Investment in social housing must be prioritised. It is the most effective step government can take to address homelessness and is crucial to supporting families to be safe and together.

Recommendation

As recommended by the Council to Homeless Persons, invest in building 6,000 new social housing properties each year over ten years to achieve real impact in homelessness reduction.

Housing stress

Over one fifth of Victorian children live in households experiencing housing stress.¹³ In Victoria, 32,656 people reported that housing affordability stress was a reason for seeking assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services in 2018-19.¹⁴

Housing stress is driven by a lack of social housing supply and insufficient availability of affordable private rental properties, coupled with a rise in the number of low-income households. A report from AHURI found a growing shortfall of affordable rental households for those in the lowest income decile, with 90 per cent of people in the lowest income bracket in Melbourne paying unaffordable

⁸ Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) 2019, *Council to Homeless Persons state budget submission 2020-2021*, CHP, Melbourne.

⁹ Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee 2018, *Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program*, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne.

¹⁰ Department of Education and Training 2019, pp. 61-62.

¹¹ Cripps, K & Habibis, D 2019, *Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), Melbourne; Fidler, L 2018, *In limbo: exploring income and housing barriers for reunifying Tasmanian families*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.

¹² Cripps & Habibis 2019, p. 1.

¹³ Department of Education and Training 2019.

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019a, *Data tables: specialist homelessness services 2018-19*, AIHW, Canberra.

rents. Families with children are at greater risk and are overrepresented among those experiencing *severely* unaffordable rents.¹⁵

Housing stress is indicative of housing instability, meaning there is a significant risk that a person will be unable to sustain safe and secure living arrangements. According to Queensland service providers, 'children from families with housing instability are more likely to be investigated by child protection services, placed in out-of-home care and stay longer in foster care'.¹⁶ Housing stability can also affect reunification, with research indicating that 'a lack of stable housing creates a barrier to reunification even if all other issues in relation to parenting behaviours and other risks have been met'.¹⁷

AHURI concluded that investment in new social housing is required to meet supply demands and maintain affordable rents, and this could be supported by an increase to Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA).¹⁸

In their report *Vulnerable Private Renters: Evidence and Options*, the Productivity Commission notes that CRA has not kept pace with rising rents and now covers a lower share of overall rents. The Productivity Commission also supports an increase to CRA, emphasising its ability to significantly improve rental affordability; reducing stress for families and the likelihood of homelessness.¹⁹

Recommendation

Lobby the Australian Government to improve rental affordability by increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 30 per cent, assisting low income families to maintain rental accommodation.

Social security policy

Key message

The failure of the social security system is contributing to homelessness in Victoria.

Social security policy at the federal level is having a significant impact on the ability of families to meet their housing costs.²⁰ Poverty is a known contributor to homelessness, yet the rate of social security payments including Newstart and Youth Allowance remain below the poverty line.

In Victoria, among people accessing Specialist Homelessness Services, 19,608 people (27.4 per cent) received Newstart as their primary source of income, 11,902 (16.6 per cent) were received Parenting Payment, 12,144 (17 per cent) were receiving the Disability Support Pension and 3,850 (5.4 per

¹⁵ Hulse, K, Reynolds, M, Nygaard, C, Parkinson, S & Yates, J 2019, *The supply of affordable private rental housing in Australian cities: short-term and longer-term changes*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), Melbourne.

¹⁶ Common Ground Queensland & Micah Projects Inc. n.d., *Families caught in the homelessness and child protection cycle: a supportive housing model for keeping families together*, Common Ground Queensland, Brisbane, p. 16.

¹⁷ Flanagan, K, Blunden, H, valentine, k & Henriette, J 2019, *Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), Melbourne, p. 45.

¹⁸ Hulse et al. 2019.

¹⁹ Productivity Commission 2019a.

²⁰ Fidler 2018; National Social Security Rights Network (NSSRN) & Canberra Community Law 2019, *Homeward bound: social security and homelessness*, Canberra Community Law, Canberra.

cent) received Youth Allowance.²¹ A total of 56,457 people sought assistance from homelessness services due to financial difficulties in 2018-19.²²

The National Social Security Rights Network (NSSRN) and Canberra Community Law conducted research exploring how the social security system could be improved to reduce or prevent homelessness.²³ The research found that particular aspects of the social security system have resulted in homelessness or increased risk of homelessness for the people in our community most in need of support, including:

- The low rate of payments
- Tightening of eligibility requirements and extension of waiting periods
- Harsh methods of raising and recovering Centrelink debts, and
- A punitive system of mutual obligations leading to payment suspensions.²⁴

For example, an increase in poverty among single parent families has been attributed to the 2007 decision to alter the eligibility criteria for Parenting Payment, which lowered the age of the youngest child from 16 to 8 years, and saw thousands of parents transferred onto the much lower Newstart payment.²⁵ This has been compounded by punitive compliance requirements introduced over the last decade and the introduction of suspensions to Parenting Payment for non-compliance with mutual obligations. Our inadequate social security system means that time out of the workforce to parent puts single parents, particularly mothers, at increased risk of homelessness.²⁶

A recent survey of our child and family services member organisations highlights the ways in which single mother families who receive social security payments struggle to survive on a day-to-day basis and the decisions they need to make about whether to use inadequate income to pay rent or buy food, buy children's clothes or pay school costs.²⁷ Findings from our survey show that the level of housing stress experienced by single mothers as a result of suspensions is a particular concern. One respondent reported that:

They have had to prioritise buying food for the family, cannot pay their rent and other payments, which results in them falling further behind financially. There have been instances of mothers and their children being threatened with homelessness, if they do not pay their rent.²⁸

The survey showed that state-funded child and family services in Victoria often employ brokerage funds for emergency relief to meet the immediate housing needs of families and to prevent homelessness. This cost-shifting to the state as a result of federal policy impacts on the capacity of Victorian child and family services to respond to family challenges affecting child safety, development and wellbeing.

²¹ AIHW 2019a.

²² AIHW 2019a.

²³ NSSRN & Canberra Community Law 2019.

²⁴ NSSRN & Canberra Community Law 2019.

²⁵ Davidson, P, Bradbury, B, Hill, T & Wong, M 2020, *Poverty in Australia 2020: part 1, overview*, ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 3, ACOSS, Sydney.

²⁶ NSSRN & Canberra Community Law 2019.

²⁷ Tennant, D & Bowey, K 2019, *The impact of social security reforms on single mothers and their children*, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne.

²⁸ Tennant & Bowey 2019.

While more social housing is crucial to addressing homelessness, families also need immediate relief to keep a roof over their heads and meet the needs of children. Immediate financial relief for families would also ease the strain on state-based services which could then better respond to other risk factors for homelessness.

Recommendation

Lobby the Australian Government to reduce the risk of homelessness by immediately increasing the rate of Newstart, Youth Allowance and related payments by a minimum of \$95 per week, without conditions.

Recommendation

Lobby the Australian Government to reduce the rate of poverty and risk of homelessness for children and their families by:

- Reversing the 2007 eligibility changes to Parenting Payment that saw the age of the youngest child reduced to eight years, and
- Abolishing the use of punitive compliance mechanisms, including payment suspensions.

Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS)

The Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) is a federally funded service that provides support to some asylum seekers on temporary visas, while they await the resolution of their immigration status. A component of the SRSS is a financial payment to assist those experiencing financial hardship.

In 2018, the Department of Home Affairs announced that the SRSS budget would be cut by over 60 per cent and the eligibility criteria changed. The Department's February 2018 figures show that Victoria had the largest number of SRSS recipients of all states and territories prior to the changes, with 5,863 people, or 44 per cent of all recipients, residing there.

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) and the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) have all expressed significant concern for the welfare of asylum seekers affected by the cuts to SRSS. A report published by the RCOA estimated that 79 per cent of clients would be at risk of homelessness and/or destitution if they lost SRSS payments.²⁹ This finding exacerbates existing issues with the rate of SRSS, which at around \$250 per week is already well below the poverty line and creates the need for asylum seekers to rely on emergency support services.

ASRC has reported that as of April 2019 they have seen an increase in demand for emergency accommodation services, sleeping bags for those sleeping rough, and emergency food packs. Data shows specifically that:

At the peak of demand in 2018 the ASRC paid rent for 348 people through the Rent Assistance Program and has provided 64,643 nights of accommodation this financial year. This was up from only 96 people supported over 17,682 nights in the 2016 financial year.³⁰

²⁹ Van Kooy, J 2018, *An unnecessary penalty: economic impacts of changes to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS)*, Refugee Council of Australia, Sydney.

³⁰ Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) 2019, *Cutting the safety net: the impact of cuts to Status Resolution Support Services*, ASRC, Melbourne, p. 4.

In response to these cuts, the Victorian Government stepped in to provide \$3 million to support those affected.

Recommendation

Lobby the Australian Government to reverse cuts to the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) so that people who are refugees or seeking asylum have the financial resources they need to access safe, stable and secure accommodation.

Recommendation

Continue to provide interim state funding to make sure that people who are refugees or seeking asylum have their housing needs met.

Family violence

Family violence is a major cause of homelessness, and for women and children, family violence is the leading cause of homelessness.³¹ In 2018-19, 49,405 Victorians accessed Specialist Homelessness Services due to family violence and for 38,540 this was a main reason for seeking support.³² Victoria must continue to build on the momentum and investment generated by the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The Centre recommends that homelessness caused by family violence should be a focus area for this inquiry.

Adolescents using violence in the home

Best practice responses to adolescents using violence in the home are not well understood. During our recent consultations with child and family services and specialist family violence services in Victoria, we heard consistent anecdotal evidence that families are at risk of ongoing harm, and young people using violence in the home are at risk of homelessness due to lack of available supports and alternative accommodation options, particularly in regional areas. This is an area that would warrant further investigation by the Committee.

Young people leaving care

Key message

We must interrupt the trajectory that sees too many young people homeless after leaving the care of the state.

In 2018-19, 507 Victorian young people transitioning from foster or residential care sought help from Specialist Homelessness Services and for 212 of these young people, this was a main reason for seeking support.³³ Housing and homelessness are significant issues for young people leaving care, who often make the transition to independent living at a younger age than their peers and without the support, guidance and resources they need.³⁴

³¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019b, *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story*, AIHW, Melbourne; Department of Education and Training 2019.

³² AIHW 2019a.

³³ AIHW 2019a.

³⁴ Campo, C & Commerford, J 2016, *Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care*, CFCA Paper No. 41, Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), Melbourne.

A study that linked data on children who exited care between 2013 and 2015 and homelessness data from 2015-16 found that 32 per cent of children leaving care accessed homelessness services. It was also found that 47 per cent of the children exiting residential care were present in the homelessness data, compared with 13 per cent from permanent care settings.³⁵

This data shows that current supports for young people in care are failing to set them up for security in adulthood, emphasising the need for a housing guarantee for all young people leaving care.

Home Stretch

Extending the leaving care age from 18 to 21 years and providing leaving care supports to young people in out-of-home care provides a proven solution to reducing youth homelessness.³⁶ In the US and the UK, where the leaving care age was increased to 21 years of age, youth homelessness for this group was halved.³⁷

A 2016 report by Deloitte Access Economics showed that for every extra \$1.00 spent on continuing foster care to 21 years of age, society benefits by \$2.13 in reduced crime, homelessness, mental health care, hospitalisation, and drug dependency.³⁸ Of these outcome areas, the analysis found that the greatest share of total cost savings for states and territories would be seen in housing and homelessness.³⁹

We welcome the Victorian Government's commitment to extending care through *Home Stretch*, however thus far, these supports have only been offered to a small number of care leavers.

All young people leaving care must be provided with:

- the opportunity to remain with their home-based carer (kinship or foster carer), or a contribution to their accommodation if leaving residential care, until the age of 21 years
- access to a range of housing options to meet individual needs, such as those offered by COMPASS⁴⁰, and
- support from a case worker.

Recommendation

Give every Victorian young person leaving care the support they need to secure a place to live, and prevent a trajectory into homelessness by:

- Providing the option to continue care until the age of 21 years, and introducing this into legislation
- Investing an additional \$25 million in Home Stretch on top of already committed funding over four years from 2020-21

³⁵ Department of Education and Training 2019, p. 65.

³⁶ Deloitte Access Economics 2016, *Raising our children: guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood*, Anglicare Victoria, Melbourne.

³⁷ Deloitte Access Economics 2016.

³⁸ Deloitte Access Economics 2016.

³⁹ Deloitte Access Economics 2018, *A federal and state cost benefit analysis: extending care to 21 years*, Deloitte Access Economics, Melbourne.

⁴⁰ COMPASS is a Social Impact Bond supporting young people to successfully transition from care. Several housing streams are offered to young people based on their needs, including purchased accommodation, head leasing, client's own lease with a subsidy, foster and kinship program (extended care) and supported accommodation.

- Providing a housing guarantee that includes access to a range of housing and support options to meet individual needs for all young people leaving the care system.

Family conflict and breakdown

Key message

Supporting families to be safe and together can prevent family breakdown and child removal leading to homelessness.

In 2018-19, 21,051 Victorians accessed Specialist Homelessness Services, identifying relationship or family breakdown as a reason for seeking support.⁴¹

A study titled *Couch Surfing Students: The Yarra Ranges Youth Homelessness Prevention Project* shows that this is a challenge facing young people in particular. The study sought to understand the experiences of secondary students who were couch surfing and to investigate how to intervene earlier.⁴² It found that 71 per cent of young people had first left home due to conflict with parents or siblings. Alarming, 30 per cent had first run away from home during primary school.⁴³

Along with the data relating to children and young people in out-of-home care and experiences of homelessness, this emphasises the need for early intervention with families to prevent entry of children into care and family breakdown leading to youth homelessness. According to Victoria's Department of Education and Training, 'healthy family functioning nurtures a child's development and can mitigate against negative factors such as exposure to violence, mental and physical health issues or homelessness'.⁴⁴

The State of Victoria's Children Report finds:

The most important familial factors relate to parenting style and providing a positive home environment. Family type is another factor to consider — for example, compared with other family types, one-parent families are more likely to face greater financial stress and increased disadvantage in relation to housing, employment and social participation ... these factors are often linked to greater risk of poor health and wellbeing outcomes.⁴⁵

According to a recent report from Social Ventures Australia, 'early intervention prevents progression to further disadvantage and high-cost interventions, including residential services, homelessness, and the youth justice system'.⁴⁶ The Centre's *State Budget Submission 2020-21* calls for an additional \$179.14 million of investment in 2020-21 (and \$736.56 million over four years) in the capacity of the child and family services sector to deliver early intervention programs that are proven to work.⁴⁷

⁴¹ AIHW 2019a.

⁴² Thielking, M, Flatau, P, La Sala, L & Sutton, D 2015, *Couch surfing students: the Yarra Ranges Youth Homelessness Prevention Project*, Swinburne University, Melbourne.

⁴³ Thielking et al. 2015.

⁴⁴ Department of Education and Training 2019, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Department of Education and Training 2019, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Social Ventures Australia (SVA) 2019, *The economic case for early intervention in the child protection and out-of-home care system in Victoria*, SVA Consulting, Melbourne.

⁴⁷ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW) 2019, *Intervening earlier with children and families experiencing vulnerability & addressing the crisis in Victoria's out-of-home care system*, State Budget Submission 2020-21, CFECFW, Melbourne.

This investment aims to interrupt the current trajectory that sees too many young people homeless by:

- providing family strengthening support to prevent family breakdown
- reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect
- addressing the concerns that result in children being reported to statutory child protection
- reducing entries into out-of-home care, and
- securing a better future for children who cannot live safely at home.

Key message

Support for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness is most effective when delivered collaboratively between schools and social services.

Schools are often the first to identify that a young person is experiencing homelessness.⁴⁸ A key finding of the *Couch Surfing Students* study was that young people were not aware that homelessness services could assist them before they became homeless.⁴⁹ The study concluded that information and support are best delivered in schools to enable earlier intervention.

Recommendation

Fund positions for child and family services and homelessness services workers to have a physical presence across primary and secondary schools in areas of greatest need to build relationships and engage with young people, provide information about available supports and deliver services when needed.

Mental health

Key message

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System offers a window of opportunity to influence policy in relation to housing and homelessness.

In 2018-19, 19,745 Victorians sought assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services due to mental health issues and for 1,329 this was a main reason for seeking support.⁵⁰ It is well established that 'poor housing quality, satisfaction and security are associated with poorer mental health outcomes'.⁵¹ In its *Interim Report*, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System acknowledged the two-way relationship between mental health and homelessness, the high rates of mental illness among young people experiencing homelessness and the impact of a lack of public housing on Victorians in need.⁵²

We acknowledge and support the recommendation in the Productivity Commission's *Mental Health, Draft Report* that:

State and Territory Governments should commit to:

⁴⁸ Thielking et al. 2015.

⁴⁹ Thielking et al. 2015.

⁵⁰ AIHW, 2019a.

⁵¹ Department of Education and Training 2019, p. 60.

⁵² Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System 2019, *Interim report*, State of Victoria, Melbourne.

- a formal policy of no exits into homelessness for people discharged from institutional care, comprehensive mental health discharge plans, and services available in the community to meet the needs identified in the plans
- working towards meeting the gap in supported housing places (that integrate housing, tenancy support and mental health services) for people who need regular mental healthcare and would otherwise be at risk of housing instability
- working towards meeting the gap in homelessness services, with a focus on long-term housing for people with mental illness.⁵³

Recommendation

The Committee work with the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System to develop housing recommendations for the Victorian Government in relation to a range of safe, sustainable and secure housing and support options for people experiencing mental health challenges.

Policies and practices to address homelessness

We welcome the Victorian Government's recent commitments and initiatives aimed at reducing homelessness and increasing access to affordable housing, and acknowledge the extensive work that has taken place in relation to housing policy. This includes the *Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan*, *Home for Victorians* and the release of *Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort: Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home*. These policies could be further strengthened through a focus on children's rights and direct responses to the needs and experiences of children.

A focus on children's rights

Key message

Victoria is failing to uphold the rights of the many children experiencing homelessness in our state. The safety and security of children and young people must be prioritised in responses to homelessness.

On census night 2016, around 24,800 Victorians were homeless, of whom 5,380 were children.⁵⁴ In 2018-19, Victorian Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) assisted a total of 26,918 children, of whom 16,015 were aged between zero and nine years of age.⁵⁵

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which recognises 'the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development'.⁵⁶ The Convention commits Australia to providing support to parents and carers to realise this right for the children in their care, and to providing housing assistance when needed.⁵⁷

⁵³ Productivity Commission 2019b, *Mental health, draft report*, Productivity Commission, Melbourne, p. 541.

⁵⁴ Department of Education and Training 2019, p. 63.

⁵⁵ AIHW 2019a.

⁵⁶ United Nations 1989, Convention on the Rights of the Child, viewed 3 September 2019, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>>.

⁵⁷ United Nations 1989 [Article 27, No. 3].

Stronger mechanisms are required to make sure the rights of children are upheld. We encourage the Committee to investigate such mechanisms and make recommendations to strengthen the policy response to children experiencing homelessness.

Recognise and respond to the needs and experiences of children

Key message

The needs and experiences of children must be recognised and responded to in all of our service systems, with dedicated resources, training and support to enable this.

According to a 2009 study of children experiencing homelessness in Victoria, 'children were sometimes left out of arrangements when their parents were being helped through homelessness ... [and] should be treated as clients in their own right'.⁵⁸

Since this study, our members tell us that there have been improvements in the recognition of children experiencing homelessness. However, specific training to work with children is lacking in many areas of social services and our systems often prioritise adults in the delivery of services. There need to be appropriately focused and specialised resources and supports for children.

In addition to improving practice in the homelessness and broader community services sectors, children can be better supported through adequate resourcing of child and family services. In Victoria, many people are unable to access assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services, with an average of 105 requests unmet each day (22,374 over a year), the highest rate of all states and territories.⁵⁹ This highlights the importance of providing support in other service systems where families may already have existing relationships.

Conclusion

In our submission, we have emphasised that children must be prioritised in responses to homelessness. Our recommendations are intended to inform and strengthen the Committee's actions in responding to the critical factors and circumstances that lead to homelessness – including housing supply, housing stress, social security, family violence, leaving care, family conflict and breakdown and mental health. Children's safety, development and wellbeing are at risk when families do not have a stable place to live.

⁵⁸ Kirkman et al. 2009, p. 3.

⁵⁹ AIHW 2019a.