

**BERRY
STREET**

Believing In
Children,
Young People,
Families &
Their Future.

HOMESICK. DREAMIN' OF A HOUSE TO CALL HOME

Y-CHANGE'S SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY
INTO HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA

MARCH 2020



**"WE ARE MADE TO FEEL
GRATEFUL FOR WHAT
WE HAVE, EVEN WHEN
IT'S BROKEN."**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge that we live, work and play on sacred land that belongs to First Nations People. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and honour the self-determination and survival of Indigenous Australians and the continued impacts of colonisation on the communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We acknowledge that as people who use personal experiences to influence social and systemic change, we stand on the shoulders of giants. We want to nod to the Council to Homeless Persons Peer Education Support Program (PESP)¹ and Launch Housing's Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG)², who are leaders in the space of homelessness lived experience advocacy in Victoria.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	p. 1
Introduction	
• Berry Street and Y-Change	p. 3
• About our approach	p. 4
• Definitions	p. 5
• First things first – setting the scene	p. 7
• Summary of recommendations	p. 9
Homelessness and the issues that intersect	
• Housing affordability and availability	p. 12
• Addiction and substance misuse	p. 13
• Asylum seekers and refugees	p. 14
• Disability	p. 15
• Family violence	p. 16
• First Nations People	p. 17
• Financial hardship and poverty	p. 18
• LGBTIQ+	p. 19
• Out-of-home care (OOHC)	p. 20
• Mental-ill health	p. 21
• Rural and regional areas	p. 22
Our recommendations and big ideas for change	p. 23
Bringing it all together	p. 46
Personal narratives	p. 47
References	p. 51

BERRY STREET AND Y-CHANGE

Berry Street is one of Australia’s largest independent family service organisations. We are committed to engaging young people as experts of their own experience and believe it is a fundamental right for young people to be heard.

Berry Street’s Y-Change initiative is a social and systemic change platform for young people aged 18-25 with lived experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage.

We believe that young people who have experienced disadvantage are the only people who can tell us what a policy looks and feels like when it comes to life. We are key knowledge holders in the search for “what works” and the understanding of what doesn’t, and must be partnered with to design solutions, always.

ABOUT OUR APPROACH

This submission centres the lived experiences and expertise of young people.

We have intentionally centred our voices in the creation of every aspect of this paper: ideas, stories, recommendations for change and most importantly, the style of language.

We believe that all young people have a right to access information and policy documents in ways that make sense. For this reason, we have made sure this submission is written simply and that you can hear our voices in it.

To do this, we used a method called co-production, which is defined as:

“... a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them.”³

As young people, our lives have been forever changed by homelessness. We have inherited and often internalised the faults of systems. We wear the cost. Now, what we seek to do is make our pain purposeful. This submission centres our voices, our stories and our ideas for change.

We're big believers in using creative ways to express ourselves and share our insights. Towards the end of this submission, you'll see personal narratives we've written about the issue of homelessness from a more direct perspective.

DEFINITIONS

We've broken down definitions for some of the more abstract concepts we refer to in order to help make our submission easier to read and understand.

Co-production

“Co-production is not just a word, it's not just a concept, it is a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them.”³

Homelessness

“When a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives, they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- *is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or*
- *has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or*
- *does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.”⁴*

Lived experience

“Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, firsthand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people. It may also refer to knowledge of people gained from direct face-to-face interaction rather than through a technological medium.”⁵

Paternalism

“In relation to public policy, paternalism refers to the interference of a government or state with a person without their consent and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm.”⁶

Punitive

“Intended as punishment.”⁷

Service system

“A service system is a coherent combination of people, processes, and technology that delivers some value to an end user.”⁸

Social capital

“The goodwill available to individuals or groups.”⁹

Survivor’s guilt

“An intense feeling of guilt or shame, where you have survived a traumatic event where someone else may not have.”¹⁰

FIRST THINGS FIRST – SETTING THE SCENE

It's about more than just homelessness. It's about everything that happened and didn't happen before it, and what came after as a result. We want to begin by setting the scene about where we're coming from before you read on.

Everything is interconnected

Homelessness cannot be looked at in isolation to other issues that intersect with it. Everything is interconnected, so we can't look at homelessness out of context.

Housing is a human right

As young people who have experienced homelessness, our human rights have been violated. We have been made to feel that our rights are non-existent and somehow seen as privileges through the eyes of the sector. Access to adequate housing is a human right;¹¹ let's not forget that.

Punitive approaches and blaming the individual

Moving through the service system, we have often been punished for “acting out”, when most of our “behaviours” relate to defence and coping mechanisms – mechanisms that have been in place in order for us to survive things like homelessness. Zero tolerance approaches can have serious consequences on people with little social capital. Everyday decisions and inflexible policies and procedures often have disastrous and ongoing consequences in our lives.

Services and paternalism

It's an ingrained belief for services and systems to think they know what's best for people doing it tough, especially young people. There is often an inherent paternalism to how services act and react. We need to shift the culture of our community sector towards working *with*, not *for* young people as the standard.

Servicing the ongoing cycles of crises

As young people who have a continued need for housing support, we want to make the pressure that exists to either play up or down our own personal crises to get access to basic care visible. We often need to be in “just the right amount of crisis” to be eligible for services. The tick boxes and categories that currently exist act as massive barriers, blocking us from getting the resources we need.

Stereotypes of homelessness

Stereotypes of people who typically experience homelessness have many of us feeling like we’re not worthy of receiving services. The effects of having a triaging system – due to the severe lack of adequate housing options – means we often internalise how the Homelessness Service System sees or doesn’t see the seriousness of our situations. These assumptions influence organisational cultures and often result in people working *for us*, rather than working *with us*.

Treating the symptoms, not the cause

We’re missing the big picture while we’re all kept busy servicing the crisis. We need more investment in early intervention and prevention. We can’t keep moving from short-term solution to short-term solution. We won’t ever be able to thrive if we don’t have access to a safe and sustainable base to call our home.

We are not the problem

Service systems often refer to young people as “manipulative” and call us out for “playing the system.” We’d like to remind people that we are often put in this position by the way service systems have been setup. We are fighting to survive in the only ways we know how and there are limited opportunities available. We are trying to navigate services that are more like mazes while dealing with impossible sets of circumstances.

We need you to take this seriously

This inquiry is a good start, but how bad does it have to get before serious action is taken? We can’t solve homelessness quickly when it took so many years to get to the situation we’re currently in, but this shouldn’t stop us from investing in what we know works – now.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Aren't we worth more?

Build and invest in more affordable and social housing and improve the quality of what we currently have. We need to throw away the “beggars can't be choosers” attitude in the service sector. We need more action and less talking. We know what needs to be done.

2. Don't kick us when we're down

Centrelink needs urgent reform. We cannot keep forcing people who are experiencing homelessness or who are unable to work to jump through impossible hoops in order to survive. They need to provide empathy and care.

3. Help us before shit hits the fan

We need urgent investment in early intervention and prevention initiatives. We cannot keep servicing the crisis with no light at the end of the tunnel.

4. It's not our fault

We are often fighting to survive in the only ways we know how. There are limited socioeconomic opportunities available that are meaningful, long-term and accessible.

5. Out-of-home care is a homelessness problem

No young person exiting care should enter into homelessness by losing their access to housing and supports. No young person should be abandoned by services or left desperate. Young people in and exiting care need to know what they are entitled to in setting them up for their future.

6. Support us, don't punish us

Systems are often set up harshly and deeply affect those who are experiencing and attempting to escape intergenerational trauma and poverty. We need to reorient our entire community sector to prioritise care at the centre of services. Having access to quality housing and services should be the rule, not the exception.

7. Trust us to be part of the solution

Trust that people who have experienced homelessness have ideas and solutions to help improve the Homelessness Service System. This includes influencing policy through submissions like this one and improving how services work.

8. We are people, not products

We need a paradigm shift towards human-centred models of care and away from seeing people through the lenses of business models. We need to move beyond measuring outcomes through tick boxes and towards more flexible and better quality services for communities. There is no one-size-fits-all.

9. We have a right to choose

Service systems are set up to support the people who need to use them. We should be enabled to feed back about what's working well and what needs to be improved. We need service models that meet the complexity of our lives.

10. We need places to go

We need spaces to have a rant, have a rest, wash our clothes and get a feed. The responsibility should not be on us to drag ourselves from service to service when we are in crisis. There should be no wrong door and no strings attached.

These recommendations are detailed in full on pages 23-45 of this submission.

HOMELESSNESS AND THE ISSUES THAT INTERSECT

Before we dive into our recommendations and big ideas for change, we want to share some insights and statistics into homelessness. The issues that intersect help to paint a picture of the scale of the problem we are dealing with and the communities it affects.

As we've mentioned, no issue can be looked at in isolation. Homelessness is often the result of lots of other things going wrong, first. This section helps to illustrate this.

Zooming out – where we're at now

In 2018-19¹² there were 112,000 Victorians at risk of or who experienced homelessness, with homelessness services responding to over 100,000 people seeking support each year in Victoria alone.¹³ On Census night in 2016, 39 per cent of the Victorians counted as homeless were under 25 years old.¹⁴ This number only includes young people who completed the Censusⁱ – those unable to complete it are unaccounted for.

The Homelessness Service System across Victoria only has access to 423 government funded crisis beds,¹⁵ with over 24,000 Victorians homeless on any given night. Even so, Victoria spends less than half the national average on social housing – \$83 per person in 2017-18 compared to the national average of \$167.¹⁶

The main causes for most young people who become homeless are family breakdown, violence and being forced into homelessness following a crisis.¹⁷ Other risk factors include mental health issues and family violence, which contribute to family breakdown.¹⁷ It is important to acknowledge that homelessness is not an isolated issue and that there needs to be recognition and a deeper understanding of the complex nature of homelessness and the many intersecting issues impacting young people.

Research shows that strengthening and integrating key services in the community to prevent young people from becoming homeless could save an estimated \$626 million per year across the youth justice and health services systems alone.¹⁸ We can't afford *not* to transform our responses to homelessness.

ⁱ The Census is the largest form of information gathering conducted in Australia.
www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/about

Housing affordability and availability

“We all need a home. Our housing system should make sure that everyone has a safe, secure roof over their head.”¹⁹

Lack of affordable housing options is a nationwide issue and one of the main causes of homelessness in Australia.²⁰ Housing is rapidly becoming more expensive and access to safe and secure housing is further out of reach for young people.²¹

In 2019, The Rental Affordability Snapshot found there was just one property out of more than 69,000 that were affordable and suitable for people receiving Youth Allowance and only two for a single person on Newstart.²²

Most young people experiencing homelessness are staying in severely crowded residences, refuges and other forms of crisis accommodation.²³ Not only are most of these options temporary, they are extremely unsafe.²³

Social housing is at an all-time low, with people on waiting lists ranging up to 10 years.²⁰ The waitlist for new public or community housing in December 2019 was 44,379 applications, and each application can include more than one person.²⁴ The average Australian is struggling to afford private rental properties, forcing them to access crisis accommodation services and public housing – in turn, putting pressure on social services.¹⁹

We need to address the deeper issues that cause people to become homeless and this cannot be done by individuals and organisations alone. We need all levels of government to commit to and expand the supply of social and affordable housing.

Zooming in – who’s being affected?

Looking at the broad statistics, it can be easy to forget the people experiencing homelessness every day and how their lives and communities are being affected. This section aims to dig deeper into the intersecting issues that contribute to homelessness for specific groups of marginalised young people who are most affected.

Although we cannot speak to every lived experience, we have worked to ensure the representation of disadvantaged young people are visible and would also like to recognise that there are groups who are unintentionally missing from this narrative.

Addiction and substance misuse

“I didn’t become homeless because I did drugs, I did drugs to cope with being homeless.”
– Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Substance misuse is the harmful use of substances, such as drugs and alcohol, for non-medical purposes,²⁵ whereas addiction is a physical and/or psychological need for a substance, due to regular usage.²⁵

It is important to remember that although people choose to start using drugs, they don’t choose to be addicted. No-one wakes up and decides they want a substance to control every aspect of their lives. Addiction is not a sign of personal failure or weak character – a common misunderstanding in our society. Overcoming substance misuse requires significant, ongoing support; for many young people experiencing homelessness, this support isn’t always readily available or accessible.²⁵

For some young people, home is an unsafe environment because their parents/caregivers use alcohol and/or drugs. Young people’s homelessness and substance use can be directly related to family members’ alcohol and/or drug use or family conflict.²⁶

For other young people, their substance use is a means of coping with their current situation and a way to manage their day-to-day lives. Many young people report using drugs not only to cope with their current situation but as a means of survival.²⁶

Substance misuse and addiction look different for everybody and for some, it is the only way to cope with the experience of homelessness. This could be young people using drugs to keep themselves awake at night to avoid getting abused or drugged, or to subside their mental health symptoms if they cannot afford to get treatment and support.²⁶

Asylum seekers and refugees

Although we do not have a Y-Change team member who can speak specifically from this lens of lived experience, it is important for us to acknowledge the complexity of disadvantage for asylum seeker and refugee young people experiencing homelessness.

Asylum seekers are among the most disadvantaged people living in Victoria, receiving little to no government supports.²⁷ The 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census shows that people born overseas who arrived in Australia over the previous five years accounted for 15 per cent of the homeless population.²⁸

People seeking asylum in Victoria rely on specialised housing agencies while waiting for their refugee claim to be determined. This process can be compounded by having no financial safety net, difficulties finding employment and language barriers.²⁹ It is crucial for Australia to make it easier for people seeking asylum to access government funded transitional housing to prevent the rapidly increasing numbers of homelessness.³⁰

The Australian Government is forcing up to 80 per cent of people seeking asylum into extreme poverty and homelessness due to cutting support payments.³⁰ This means that 13,299 people are at risk of losing support, with 4,059 of those being children.³¹

These cuts in payments will result in many people seeking emergency relief for food, clothing, blankets and housing. Homelessness services will continue to see an influx of more young people from asylum seeker and refugee communities, as there will be no other supports available to them.³²

Disability

Young people with disability have the right to access housing that is affordable, safe, secure and meets their needs.³³ A disability is any condition that restricts, limits or impairs a person's sensory, mental or physical functions and can be caused by trauma, accidents, genetics or disease.³³ Research suggests that people with a disability are more likely to be exposed to the risk of homelessness than the general population.³³

In 2015 there were around 140,600 people with a disability under the age of 25 years in Victoria, up from 135,200 in 2012.³⁴

The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey found that 11.2 per cent of Australians with disability were living in affordable housing compared to 7.6 per cent of people without disability.³⁵ They were also much more likely to live in social housing compared to people without disability (7.9 per cent versus 1.5 per cent).³⁵ For people with intellectual disability, this was particularly high with 18.4 per cent living in social housing.³⁵

In 2019, The Rental Affordability Snapshot identified 317 homes out of 69,485 advertised properties that were affordable for recipients of the Disability Support Pension.³⁵ In Melbourne, there were only six out of 14,026 rentals.³⁵

Both homelessness and disability strongly relate to an increased risk of poverty, mental and physical ill-health, educational disruptions and vulnerability to violence, abuse and exploitation.³⁶ The relationship between homelessness and disability is devastating for young people, with research showing that young people with disability are more likely to become homeless, are overrepresented in shelters and that these experiences of homelessness can lead to developmental delays.³⁶

Young people with disabilities often face extra barriers when accessing homelessness services, which include:

- not being aware that services exist
- not knowing how to reach services
- not knowing how accessible they are.³³

It is important to recognise that young people with a cognitive disability experiencing homelessness are not a target group of homelessness services, unlike mental health or substance use.³⁶ Finding decent accommodation is hard enough for most young people, but for young people with disability, a shortage of accessible housing is deeply affecting and altering their lives.³⁷

Family violence

“Homelessness can be a punishment for standing up against family violence.”

– Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

For many young people, the reality of growing up in a safe, secure and predictable environment is far from their reality. Although many reasons contribute to youth homelessness, housing crisis and family violence are the top reasons young people aged between 15-24 seek homelessness help.³⁸

A common view in society is that young people find themselves homeless as a result of their “difficult behaviour” rather than factors outside of their control. Blaming young people, as opposed to looking at the influences of broader social structures and support systems, is often extremely harmful and has long-term impacts.

As part of The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia study, nine out of ten surveyed young people experiencing homelessness reported that they had seen violence between family members at home.¹⁸ More than half of these young people had left home because of violence between parents or guardians on at least one occasion, and about one in six had left home more than 10 times because of violence.¹⁸

Exposure to family and domestic violence can disrupt healthy brain development. It extends well beyond the years of early development and into adulthood.³⁹ Trauma survivors often view their world through a unique lens that impacts their relationship with themselves, others and their place in the world.³⁹

First Nations People

Although we do not have a Y-Change team member who can speak specifically from this lens of lived experience, it is important for us to acknowledge the high percentage of Indigenous young people who are experiencing homelessness.

Since colonisation, Aboriginal people have been internally displaced from their country.⁴⁰ Homelessness among Indigenous people is a result of the history of colonisation and exploitation of Indigenous land and people.⁴¹

Indigenous Australians make up 0.9 per cent of Victorians, but 9.8 per cent of homelessness service users. In the three years to 2018, homelessness among Victoria's Aboriginal community grew by 22 per cent, compared to 10 per cent for other Victorians.⁴²

First Nations people are 15 times more likely to be staying in improvised residences, tents or sleeping rough than non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.⁴³ The issue of homelessness among Indigenous people can be traced back to historical trauma, racism, discrimination and oppression.⁴¹

The concept of home is often vastly different for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people – it is not just a lack of accommodation or physical space, but rather a combination of spiritual and physical homelessness.⁴³

It is important to acknowledge the impact of disconnection from country on Indigenous young people and the role that spiritual homelessness plays.⁴⁴ Many Indigenous young people suffer spiritual homelessness through separation from country, communication, kin and traditional wisdom.⁴⁴

Y-Change supports self-determined strategic policy directions led and developed by the Victorian Aboriginal community. A recently launched best practice framework is the *Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort: Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home*, which sets out a blueprint to improve Aboriginal housing outcomes in a generation.⁴⁵

Financial hardship and poverty

“I can barely make rent with fortnightly payments from Centrelink.”

– Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Financial hardship tends to go hand in hand with disadvantage and homelessness.⁴⁶ Financial hardship happens when you become regularly short of money for essential items such as rent, bills, education, clothing, food and transport.⁴⁶

Currently, there are 3.24 million people living below the poverty line of 50 per cent of median income in Australia – including 774,000 children (17.7 per cent) and 424,800 young people (13.9 per cent).⁴⁷

Almost 18 per cent of Australian children live in poverty due to rising housing costs and a lack of income support, causing serious fears that the next generations of young people are being set up to fail.⁴⁸

Government support payments such as Youth Allowance and Newstart do not cover the basic costs of living.⁴⁹ Newstart has not increased in 24 years (in real terms), with more than half of the people on Newstart Allowance – 55 per cent of 647,000 people – living below the poverty line.⁵⁰

The absence of safe and secure accommodation, compounded by financial circumstances and social isolation, negatively impacts on young people’s health and wellbeing.⁵¹ Not having equal access to education and employment opportunities may leave young people in an ongoing cycle of disadvantage.⁵²

LGBTIQA+ⁱⁱ

“There is a lack of access for appropriate services and housing for us who are part of the LGBTIQA+ community.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Family rejection, violence and discrimination are just some of the reasons why LGBTIQA+ young people are at least twice as likely to find themselves without a home.⁵³

LGBTIQA+ young people who have experienced homelessness are at higher risk than their cisgenderⁱⁱⁱ peers to experience bullying at school; poor mental health; trauma and childhood abuse; substance misuse and longer and reoccurring periods of homelessness.⁵⁴

The main reason for homelessness among LGBTIQA+ young people is leaving home due to rejection and fear of retaliation. When forced out of the family home, many of these young people end up sleeping rough, couch surfing or in boarding houses.⁵⁵

LGBTIQA+ young people experience misgendering, harassment, violence and discrimination in rooming houses, shared accommodation, housing services as well as discrimination in the private rental market.⁵⁶

Many services and workers have identified that there is limited safe housing for trans and gender diverse young people. If the few safe places for these young people have no available beds, it is reportedly safer for workers to prepare them to sleep rough until something becomes available.⁵³

Not only is there discrimination from other young people who are homeless, research suggests that discrimination from services and workers is also a contributing factor. This discrimination is an obstacle to safe and appropriate service delivery.⁵⁴

Services and workers must be aware of the diverse range of young people who come through their doors. They must work alongside them respectfully, regardless of their gender or sexuality.

ⁱⁱ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual or other gender and sexual diversities. This acronym is often used by people to describe their sexual or gender identity. www.catalystfoundation.com.au/our-services/lgbti/

ⁱⁱⁱ Cisgender is when your gender identity matches your sex.

www.minus18.org.au/index.php/articles/item/41-an-intro-to-sexuality-and-gender

Out-of-home care (OOHC)

“Out-of-home care needs to come under the umbrella of homelessness in the current system. We need to invest in alternatives to out-of-home care.”

– Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a significant social and developmental stage for every young person.⁵⁷ Young people transitioning from out-of-home care often face this transition without family support or guidance.⁵⁷

We know that 63 per cent of homeless young people reported that they had been placed in some form of out-of-home care by the time they turned 18 years old.¹⁸ A large proportion of young people who were in state care access homeless services when they turn 18, as there are often no provisions for ongoing care.⁵⁸ We know that 35 per cent of young people are likely to become homeless within the first year they leave care.⁵⁹

Current government policies require the child protection system to begin preparing a young person to leave care as early as 15 years, with support services officially cutting off the day young people in care turn 18 years old.⁶⁰ The State withdraws all formal support to a child, including caseworkers, counselling services and benefits for foster and kinship carers.⁶¹

Young care leavers are at an increased risk of homelessness, substance use and contact with the criminal justice system.⁵⁷ They are also more likely to have poorer health, education and employment outcomes than those young people who have not been in care.⁵⁷

It is now well recognised that there needs to be drastic changes within the out-of-home care system. Research confirms that extending the leaving age of care to 21 will double educational engagement, halve homelessness and considerably reduce mental illness, drug dependence and hospitalisation for some care leavers.⁶²

Mental ill-health

“I wasn’t able to be treated for my mental health because I was experiencing homelessness – I couldn’t even get access to my medication.”

– Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Mental ill-health is one of the largest factors impacting on the risk of homelessness for young people in Australia.⁶³ Young people with a probable serious mental illness are:

- 3.5 times more likely to have spent time away from their home because they felt they couldn’t go back
- nearly twice as likely to have spent time away from home on six or more occasions compared to their peers.⁶³

It is important to recognise that homelessness and mental health have a two-way relationship.⁶⁴ Mental ill-health can increase the likelihood of poor housing outcomes and housing instability, *and* homelessness may also act as a trigger for mental ill-health.⁶⁴ This often sees young people more vulnerable to common risk factors for homelessness such as domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug addiction and unemployment.⁶⁴

Many structural factors increase the likelihood of poor housing outcomes among people with lived experience of mental-ill health.⁶⁴ The most common form of tenure for people with lived experience of mental illness is private and social rental, where discrimination is reportedly common.⁶⁵

Research suggests that opportunities for early intervention and prevention and potential key areas for system improvement are often missed in the housing and mental health systems.⁶⁴ Currently, housing, homelessness and mental health service systems are often seen as operating separately. These systems must work in ways that are more integrated to provide the best care outcomes for young people.⁶⁵

Young people suffering with mental-ill health need access to safe and secure housing to enable a greater focus on recovery, as opposed to having to invest all their energy in finding stable accommodation.

Rural and regional areas

“There are countless reasons why rural people become homeless that are vastly different from those in urban areas.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We know that 60 per cent of Australia’s homeless population live in regional and rural communities.⁶⁶ A recent study revealed that there’s an immediate need for 28,600 social housing properties across regional Victoria, with that number expected to rise to 48,000 by 2036.⁶⁷

Young people experiencing homelessness in rural or remote areas have very different experiences to their peers in the city.⁶⁸ They face additional barriers that make their experiences more challenging, such as:

- limited employment and education options
- a lack of services that can adequately support their needs
- sub-standard rental housing options that often discriminate against young people.⁶⁸

In rural and remote areas, there are significantly less homelessness services than in metropolitan areas, with people sometimes needing to travel for hours or days to reach a location where services are available.⁶⁹ This travel time and distance poses a significant barrier to young people needing access to support services.

Current housing problems for rural populations with mental health and/or substance use issues include unavailability of affordable accommodation, poorly maintained accommodation and isolation from social and support networks.⁷⁰

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS AND BIG IDEAS FOR CHANGE

"The shape of the response needs to meet (not match) the shape of the trouble."

– Nora Bateson⁷¹

We hope that the issue of homelessness ends in our lifetime.

The following list of recommendations is not exhaustive and we expect you to explore the campaigns, policies, resources and services that we've mentioned to gain a broader understanding of our recommendations.

Although our recommendations are specific to the Homelessness Service System, in some cases these recommendations have implications for agencies outside the specific responsibility of the homelessness system. As we know, homelessness is the result of many other issues deeply impacting people's lives first, and so strong responses that can meet complexity are vital.

An overarching message that sits above our recommendations is the importance of collective responsibility as a community to look after one another, especially outside our immediate circles and networks. Homelessness affects us all.

Y-Change's recommendations begin on the next page.

AREN'T WE WORTH MORE?



Aren't we worth more?

Build and invest in more affordable and social housing and improve the quality of what we currently have. We need to throw away the 'beggars can't be choosers' attitude in the service sector. We need more action and less talking. We know what needs to be done.

- We'd like to draw particular attention to the Council to Homeless Persons blueprint for solving homelessness – the *Victorian Homelessness Election Platform*⁷² and the 'Child and youth homelessness; it's time for a joined-up approach' chapter and its call for actions.
- Advocate and build a strong coalition for a National Housing Strategy.^{iv}
- Build on the *Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill 2018*⁷³ with the development of comprehensive regulations that further increase accountability measures and protections for renters.^v Landlords and tenants must be held equally accountable.
- Greater government incentives for supporting people into quality, affordable housing.
- Invest in affordable housing specifically for at-risk young people and students.
- Look into housing alternatives like Tiny Homes^{vi} as a first step out of crisis – but not necessarily as a long-term solution.
- Remember that we have equal rights. People experiencing homelessness have less rights. We're often treated like we're lucky to have a roof over our heads – even when the roof is falling off.
- More opportunities for ethical and sustainable rent-for-keep models of housing.

^{iv} We support the Everybody's Home campaign asks. <https://everybodyshome.com.au/our-campaign/>

^v We support the Make Renting Fair campaign asks. www.makerentingfair.org/

^{vi} Launch Housing's Harris Transportable Housing project is one example. www.launchhousing.org.au/harris-transportable-housing-project/

DON'T KICK US WHEN WE'RE DOWN



Don't kick us when we're down

Centrelink needs urgent reform. We cannot keep forcing people who are experiencing homelessness or who are unable to work to jump through impossible hoops in order to survive. They need to provide empathy and care.

- Broaden scope of eligibility criteria for Centrelink payments. There are young people whose parents are classified as earning “too much”^{vii} but who are not being supported by them or who are victims of family violence. They need supported pathways out of unsafe environments.
- Don't make appointments without talking to us first and then give us unfair demerit points⁷⁴ for not showing up. We have valid reasons for not being able to make it, like commitments to our health, schools and employers.
- Increase Newstart, Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance immediately.^{viii}
- Make it easier for people living with a mental and/or physical illness, injury or disability to receive the help they need. There are currently impossible hoops to jump through and people are defaulted to Newstart, even when they cannot work.⁷⁵
- Stop insisting that parents or legal guardians need to sign everything – this is not always possible, especially when family violence is a factor.
- We need ongoing and readily available homelessness crisis payments and sufficient specialist homelessness support workers at Centrelink.

^{vii} If young people under 22 years old cannot prove they are 'Independent' for Centrelink purposes, Centrelink will consider these young people 'dependent' on their parents. <https://srcusyd.net.au/src-help/centrelink/parental-income/>

^{viii} We support the Raise the Rate campaign asks. <https://raisetherate.org.au/>

HELP US BEFORE SHIT HITS THE FAN



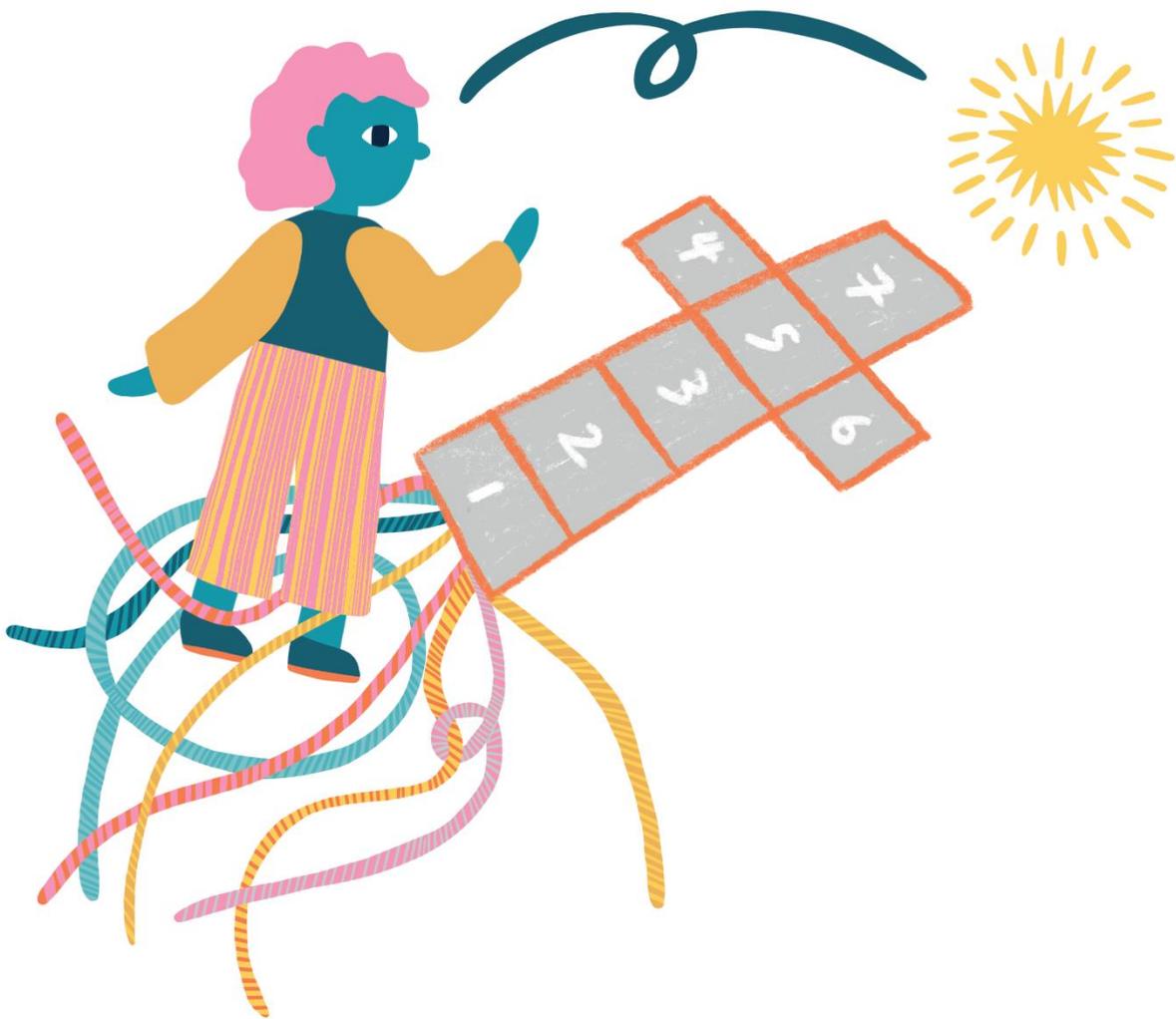
Help us before shit hits the fan

We need urgent investment in early intervention and prevention initiatives. We cannot keep servicing the crisis with no light at the end of the tunnel.

- Going back to family violence or unsafe homes should never be an option – family reconciliation and mediation is not always possible or what we want. Work *with* young people and help us make the best decisions for ourselves.
- Invest in supporting us to learn the basic life skills we might have missed. We don't feel like we're being set up to succeed in the current, mainstream schooling system. You're not preparing us for the futures we are inheriting.
- Support young people to apply for important things like Centrelink, private rental and bulk billing services. We need a hand in being able to navigate complex, confusing and inaccessible paperwork and online systems.
- Waiting lists are too long for housing, health and allied supports, and people in desperate need give up. Service availability needs to match demand.
- We need dedicated, long-term peer advocates^{ix} who are paid employees at community sector organisations. We need them to walk alongside us to navigate systems so that we don't fall through the cracks.
- We need quality educational and systems change initiatives in secondary schools, that support us to understand what homelessness is and where we can go to get support if it ever happens to us. Don't hide information from young people – help us be aware and informed.

^{ix} Peer advocacy is taking action to represent the rights and interests of someone other than ourselves.
www.peerconnect.org.au/stuff-peer-networks-talk-about/having-voice/advocacy-skills/

IT'S NOT OUR FAULT

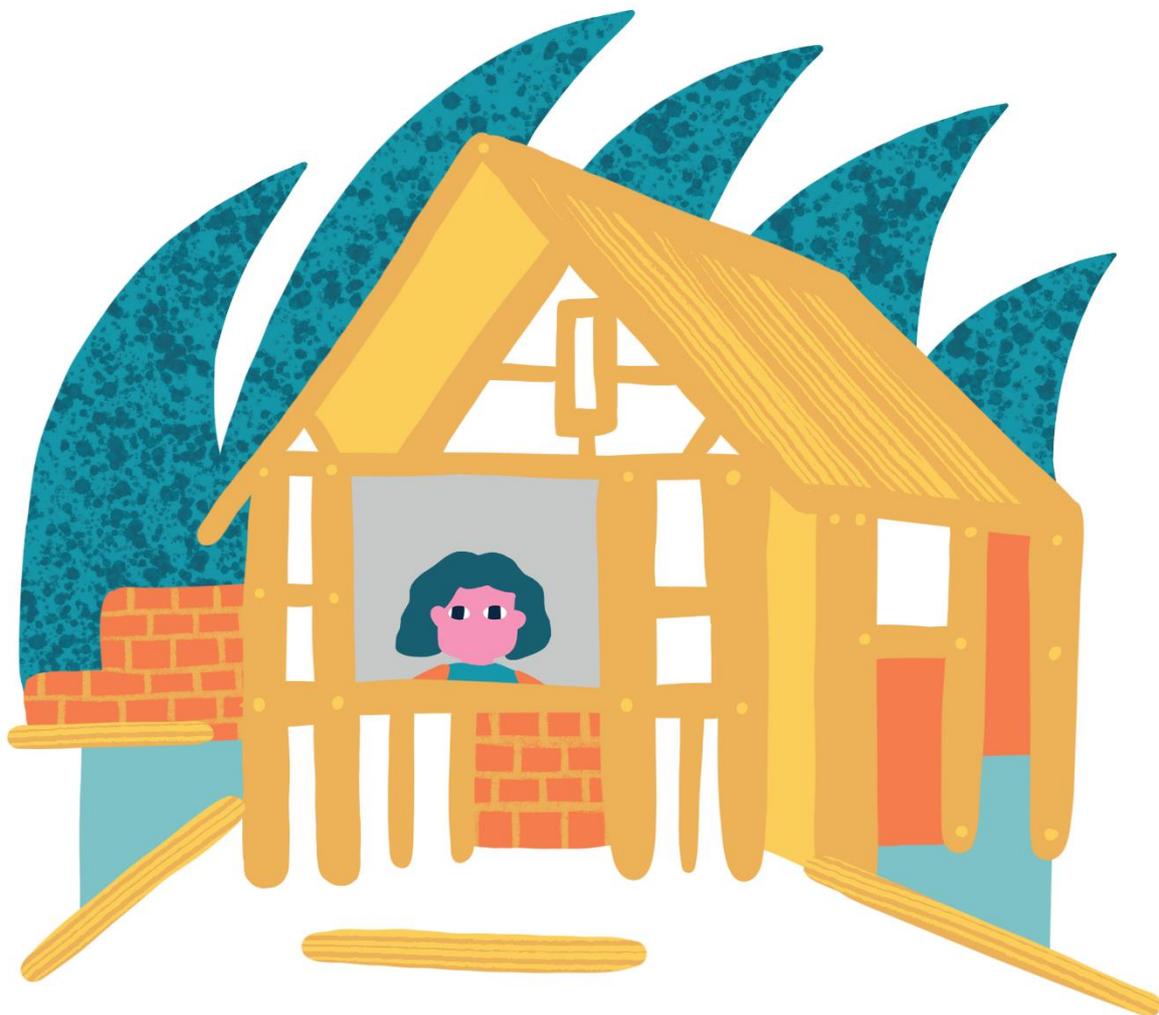


It's not our fault

We are often fighting to survive in the only ways we know how. There are limited socioeconomic opportunities available that are meaningful, long-term and accessible.

- Experiencing homelessness often means reduced access to social networks and opportunities. We need meaningful ways to build a sense of community and to be able to do fun things, too. It's no good for our minds, bodies and spirits to be in survival mode all the time.
- Lack of education plus stigma equals shame. Because most people don't know what homelessness is, we feel ashamed about our experiences as they are seen as taboo. We need awareness raising campaigns that humanise people experiencing homelessness. It is an issue that affects all of us.
- Our parents' actions often dictate the barriers we're experiencing in our present and into our future. Don't punish us for doing our best to escape situations we never asked to be in. Please centre care in your practice and know that we're doing the best we can with what we have.
- There is too much pressure put on young people's shoulders to "succeed", when what we should have access to is wrap-around supports. Victimising and shaming people who are struggling doesn't help in any way. Shift the blame to where it belongs – to the systems that have failed us.

OUT-OF-HOME CARE IS A HOMELESSNESS PROBLEM



Out-of-home care is a homelessness problem

No young person exiting care should enter into homelessness by losing their access to housing and supports. No young person should be abandoned by services or left desperate. Young people in and exiting care need to know what they are entitled to in setting them up for their future.

- Continue to build on the *Beyond 18 longitudinal study of leaving care*⁷⁶ project with greater long-term investment in opportunities for young people with a lived experience to be more actively involved in the process. Expand the research cohort beyond young people already in the care system to include those who have fallen through the gaps.
- Dedicated caseworkers and ongoing supported accommodation for every young person with an experience of care up to 25 years old.
- Dedicated, long-term peer support workers – employing young people who have exited care to support their peers navigate service systems.
- Dedicated private rental stock for young people exiting care who are trying to escape cycles of disadvantage.
- Fight for good-fit matches in kinship care with a thorough assessment process – don't just give up when hurdles emerge. Support of age siblings to live together independently where appropriate, especially when going back to the family home will do more harm than good.
- Fully support The Home Stretch^x campaign into the future across the state: give every young person exiting care the option to be supported until the age of 21.
- Greater investment in specialised and supported Youth Foyers for young people exiting care.

^x The aim of The Home Stretch is to campaign to all States, Territories and the Federal Government across Australia to allow the option for young people to remain in a care placement to 21 years of age. <http://thehomestretch.org.au/>

- Guarantee housing to young people leaving care or allow them to stay on in services until adequate housing is found. We cannot exit young people from care into homelessness or precarious housing.
- Review the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA)⁷⁷ and work to address the significant barriers and strict eligibility rules that are preventing young people from accessing it – such as needing to be linked in with a case worker to be granted the funds.
- Trust and support us to look after our family and friends, especially if we're young carers. Make it easier for us to apply for legal guardianship, know that every young person's situation is unique – we do not fit into tick boxes. Stop breaking up siblings who want to live with each other. The damage done to children and young people when they are separated is irreparable.
- Violence is violence, no matter how it manifests – see all forms of violence as equally damaging to children and young people in care.
- We need to explore and invest in other options to out-of-home care in partnership with young people with a lived experience.

SUPPORT US, DON'T PUNISH US



Support us, don't punish us

Systems are often set up harshly and deeply affect those who are experiencing and attempting to escape intergenerational trauma and poverty. We need to reorient our entire community sector to prioritise care at the centre of services. Having access to quality housing and services should be the rule, not the exception.

- We need more specialist services for groups of people being forgotten and left behind. Dominant services often don't cater to marginalised groups of young people, such as First Nations, children, culturally diverse, LBGTIQA+, those with a disability, rural and regional folk, and young men who are victim survivors of family violence.
- Don't treat us as "heroes" or "success stories" when we do well. Homelessness should never have happened to us in the first place. We need to move away from victim to victor narratives as we are many things at once. Success stories can be damaging, some of us don't survive homelessness at all. Many of us experience survivors guilt for making it out and trying to move forward in our lives. We should not be the exception.
- Let us keep and have our pets – it can be a matter of life or death for both young people and our pets, especially in crisis accommodation.^{xi}
- People's priorities are important, even when you don't understand them. Listen to what we need and what we think needs to be addressed first to support us best. It doesn't mean we're always right, it means we are offered choices and our voices are considered equally.
- Pressure to always be "doing better" can put our health at risk. We think there's an obsession with recovery culture in the service sector and want organisations to understand how bone-tired you get when experiencing homelessness. Being supported to rest is an important need, too.

^{xi} Launch Housing are pioneering in this space with the Pets in Crisis Accommodation Project. www.launchhousing.org.au/a-new-innovative-service-gets-people-their-pets-housed/

- We need to challenge the “one good worker” narrative – high quality workers should be the rule, not the exception. We need investment in more trauma-aware and social justice informed workers, who are funded long-term and able to support us holistically. Traditional therapeutic offerings don’t work for everyone – we need young people’s imaginations in designing alternate offerings.

TRUST US TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION



Trust us to be part of the solution

Trust that people who have experienced homelessness have ideas and solutions to help improve the Homelessness Service System. This includes influencing policy through submissions like this one and improving how services work.

- Intentionally look for ways to work alongside and partner with young people with a lived experience of homelessness in policy and service design and delivery. Pay us for our time in ways that are meaningful.
- Invest in, employ and support a homelessness lived experience peer workforce who can walk alongside other young people at-risk of or currently experiencing homelessness.^{xii}
- Trust us to be part of conversations and take what we say seriously. Make sure the information you give us is accessible and that we know what's going on, otherwise we can't contribute and our involvement is tokenistic.
- We need services that match our needs, rather than us needing to fit into services. Partner with us to design and imagine better ways of doing things – build services and spaces *with* the people who will use them.

^{xii} Launch Housing's Peer Support Workers at their Southbank crisis accommodation site are a good practice example. www.launchhousing.org.au/a-journey-from-lived-experience-to-supporting-people-in-crisis/

WE ARE PEOPLE, NOT PRODUCTS



We are people, not products

We need a paradigm shift towards human-centred models of care and away from seeing people through the lenses of business models. We need to move beyond measuring outcomes through tick boxes and towards more flexible and better quality services for communities. There is no one-size-fits-all.

- Don't treat us like key performance indicators (KPIs) – prioritise care in your practice. Don't disguise KPIs as anything other than what they are.
- Move away from catchment areas. Our postcodes (or lack of a postcode) shouldn't dictate the services we get. We are entitled to quality services that support us out of homelessness.
- We need to know our rights when we're accessing services. We need to know what help we're eligible for, and where to go and who can support us when we're not getting it.
- We want to have people able to visit us when we're living in services. It's important for us to be able to connect with our support systems.
- With housing support workers, we need *consistent* people to talk to and get the help we need. Having to repeat our stories and work to "convince" those who don't believe us is exhausting and traumatising.

WE HAVE A RIGHT TO CHOOSE



We have a right to choose

Service systems are set up to support the people who need to use them. We should be enabled to feed back about what's working well and what needs to be improved. We need service models that meet the complexity of our lives.

- Build and invest in more Youth Foyers and move towards a greater emphasis on wellbeing as a key measure of “success.” There needs to be a stronger focus on mental health as a key part of the model, with mental health specialists dedicated to young people living in Foyers.
- Don't book appointments without us – work with us to be more flexible and understand we have a lot going on. We have jobs, school and other things we are committed to. We need services and workers beyond the nine to five.
- Give us some choice in how funding is spent – ask us about what we might need, don't make decisions for us. We should be partnered with when thinking about the level of service involvement in our lives. We want people to help us find our own solutions.
- Trust us to know when certain places aren't the right fit for us. We can't move forward in our lives when we're around certain people and put in places that are not safe for us, such as substandard crisis accommodation.¹⁵
- We have the right to access our case notes and files without fear of being punished. Workers should help us, rather than act as roadblocks. Our personal information needs to be written about objectively and standards must be upheld. We should not be defined by other people's assumptions and narratives.

WE NEED PLACES TO GO



We need places to go

We need spaces to have a rant, have a rest, wash our clothes and get a feed. The responsibility should not be on us to drag ourselves from service to service when we are in crisis. There should be no wrong door and no strings attached.

- We need access to multiple services in the same place, which means greater investment in co-located services, so we can access help where we go to get it. We need multidisciplinary workers. Specialists are important, but we also need communities of practitioners working together in the same spaces.
- Religious beliefs should never dictate people’s eligibility to receive the services and support they are entitled to.
- We need holistic services and places to go that address homelessness and the other issues surrounding it, such as mental health and health – especially dental care and GP support.
- We need longer refuge stay periods with more consistent and intensive wrap-around support.
- We need to be able to access places and be in spaces where we can get what we need without being forced to sign up to services. We need no strings attached offerings where we can do things like have a rant, have a rest, wash our clothes and get a feed.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

The impacts of homelessness never just end with a house. We know what homelessness costs our economy, but we don't always consider the human cost.

It is a common view within our society to blame individuals for being homeless, as opposed to looking at the larger social and structural inequalities that cause homelessness, such as unemployment, limited housing affordability and availability and family breakdown.⁷⁸

Homelessness costs our dignity, our human rights, our right to thrive. Homelessness has ongoing, devastating consequences that ripple through a person's lifetime. There is no research study that could ever accurately capture the compounding and life-long effects.

We are forever changed.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

“There was a time when I was alone, nowhere to go and no place to call home.”
– lyric by Ruth. B from the song, “Lost Boy”

A heads up, this is a real-life story – my story.

This means there is some raw shit with themes of family violence, addiction, sexual assault, and of course homelessness. If you have a lived experience, please look after yourself if you choose to read this.

How do young people become homeless? When I look at why I didn’t have a home, I break it into three different experiences.

1. My big holiday

The first time I experienced not having a home, I was a little girl. Mum and dad got divorced and me and two of my brothers were living with mum. We had a small house to start with right near our primary school. Mum fought for a long time without us kids knowing, but we soon lost the house.

I didn’t know at the time my mum was fighting addiction. I didn’t know my mum was fighting dad for child support. I didn’t know my mum had just declared bankruptcy. I also didn’t know we had no fixed address. My mum just told me we were on a big holiday.

The holiday started off camping. My mum, two of my brothers, three cats and I in a big tent out the back of my mum’s friend’s house. I was so devastated when our cats ran away, they meant the world to me. We managed to find one but mum said that the other two went to live with an old lady.

The next part of the holiday was at the motel. I still remember spending Christmas there and wondering why we didn’t have a Christmas tree. We were finally able to rent a house! My little brother slept on the couch and we put a curtain up to cut off the lounge room for him to use as a room.

2. I didn’t know where to run next

The second time I experienced homelessness, I didn’t want to go home. I was living with my dad at the time and he hit me so bad and I was so scared.

He wouldn't stop screaming and I couldn't stop crying. I wanted to leave the couch that I was lying on but all I could do was cry – I was frozen.

My big brother called my mum and we went to stay with her. She was sober and doing so well. Until one day she relapsed and we got into a fight. She pushed me up against the wall and hit me. After running from my dad's and now running away in the middle of the night from mum's, it's really hard to know where to run to next.

My friends then became my family. I would stay with my best friend most nights and other friends when I couldn't stay with her. I would always do the chores that my friends didn't want to do so their parents would like me and let me stay. I would steal food, clothes, alcohol and whatever else I needed. Back then a 40 deck of Choice Blue's was \$20; we would ask people walking by for money out the front of the sushi shop to get smokes and sushi. I would always get chicken teriyaki and avo.

3. My fault

The last time I experienced homelessness I felt like I couldn't go home. At 14, I was groomed and after saying no I was baby fed ice and then sexual assaulted. I was coming down off ice and felt like I couldn't go back home because I was on drugs and it was my fault for putting myself in that situation.

After that, I was at the worst point of my life – doing any drug I was given, hanging out at the train station all day and night, stealing everything I needed, using the parents room to microwave a burger I stole from Coles, and self-harming in public toilets. We would all hang out at shopping centres, stations, in main street and go back to whoever had a house we could stay at. Most of the time, I would have just met them or had never met them but a friend knew them and said it was all sweet.

Sometimes when we had nowhere to go, we would do speed, MD, or Biks, catch a train into the city and then spend the night walking around. We would meet other people who were homeless and they would show us which toilets to go to and where not to go because it wasn't safe. They really looked after us and I don't know how we would have survived without them.

Throughout all the times I've been homeless, I didn't know what I was experiencing at the time. All my friends were also experiencing homelessness, family violence and family breakdowns, and mental health issues. I thought it was normal and honestly didn't even think twice about it. I've always had to focus on surviving and didn't get to be a kid.

“Until I die”

I’m worried, will I live like this until I die?
After all, my past is waiting nearby
And I know I survived, I’m still alive
But a part of me, trauma always occupies

It doesn’t matter how hard I try
I only know calm in the storm’s eye
Maybe I shouldn’t fight my demise
In the end, no-one hears your cries

I’m caught by surprise
I’m tangled in toxic family ties
Dyed in blame and pain, amplified
I broke, hands over heart, trying to revive

I’m almost twenty five
They tell me I’m doing alright
But I still think of suicide
I’m so tired

Have I been cast aside?
Another lost to the great divide?
All the good homes are occupied
But I never qualified

Where am I classified?
How is the damage defined?
Systemic failure disguised
While trauma is stigmatised

Leave me to the roadside
All my suffering is justified
An insignificant sacrifice
sustaining a polluted paradise

My rights are denied,
No place to decide
The walls of poverty are fortified
Comply and supply

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