

An estimated 761,000 or one in six children live below the poverty line in Australia. And with inflation climbing rapidly, tensions within 100s of thousands of Australian homes are rising.

Prior to inflation, COVID saw pressures within homes escalate as people were locked down and income security was tenuous for those who couldn't work from home.

It is therefore no great shock to learn that the number of young people in Australia at risk of homelessness and seeking accommodation has risen dramatically in the last couple of years.

The most recent Census figures reveal young people make up 21 per cent of the total homelessness population, with an estimated 24,200 youth experiencing homelessness on Census night.

A recent Mission Australia report quantified what those working at the coalface in the youth homelessness sector knew: that COVID created enormous stress in families and lead to a doubling and tripling of enquiries from desperate young people across Australia looking for accommodation and support.

One in 20 young people experienced homelessness for the first time during COVID, with 49.3 per cent stating they were concerned about family conflict, and 28 per cent concerned about family and domestic violence.

While the number of young people at risk of homelessness grew by 20 percent during the pandemic, the sector expects numbers to remain high as inflation adds enormous pressure to houses and families already doing it tough.

Even a brief experience of homelessness can severely affect the life trajectory of young people, who are especially vulnerable to the impacts of disrupted schooling and employment.

Long-term impacts include significant increases in mental ill health, including anxiety, depression, behavioural problems, and substance abuse.

And those impacts have not just a heavy social cost, but a large economic cost as young people engage our health, mental health, emergency services, juvenile justice, and often our adult prison system.

The cost of indifference is not cheap.

Added to inflationary and COVID pressures is the precarity of housing and a crisis of accommodation for vulnerable young Australians.

Jim Chalmers' decision to devote part of this year's budget to wellbeing hopefully augurs a return to a big picture view that marries good social policy with sound, economic investment.

The federal government needs to match initiatives, such as that of the Andrews government last December which earmarked \$50 million in social housing for young people at risk of homelessness.

The government also needs to provide more affordable housing for low-income families, and better pathways out of homelessness for young people including the adoption of a Housing First approach, which places young people in safe environments and then sets about providing wraparound services after the initial emergency situation is passed.

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*See more: [Housing forum showcases fixes for a broken ecosystem](https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2022/05/housing-forum-showcases-fixes-for-a-broken-ecosystem/) (<https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2022/05/housing-forum-showcases-fixes-for-a-broken-ecosystem/>).*

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Substantial investment is also needed in early intervention and prevention initiatives, as well as wrap-around supports that provide young people with an off-ramp to youth homelessness.

But does ending youth homelessness in Australia belong in the realms of fantasy or reality? Fortunately, Finland has shown the way here and proven that in fact youth homelessness can be eradicated by using the Housing First model. For the Housing First model to work, we must first have housing available to offer, hence the need to increase housing stock.

That is the model Australia needs. Provide accommodation to young people as a starting point, then provide wraparound services, from counselling, to mentorships, to teaching practical life skills that will help young people live their best lives.

And we know from the young people under this model of support in Australia that it works. At Stepping Stone House, young people who receive housing and wraparound support are much more likely to attend school (87 per cent), to complete year 10 (82 per

cent), year 12 (64 per cent), to go to university (33 per cent), to go on to live in independent accommodation (100 per cent) and to be employed (100 per cent).

Those are the statistics, but statistics often obscure the impact and importance of such programs for individuals. When we're talking about imparting practical life skills, that has meant showing young women how to use a sanitary pad or a young man how to write a CV. When we talk about mentorship, that means introducing young people to successful people like Ronaldo Mulitalo who has walked in their shoes.

Conversely, a failure to address youth homelessness is not only a moral failure for a wealthy nation like Australia, it represents a massive social impost on society and economic cost on the taxpayer.



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