



Policy Platform: Housing and Homelessness Youth Coalition of the ACT

Housing is one of the fundamental of determinants of the wellbeing of young people and should be given extremely high importance in any government policy development. Safe and stable housing is also a basic human right. These human rights are protected by a number of international human rights treaties, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As a party to these treaties, Australia is under legal and moral obligations to promote, protect and realise the human rights of all people¹.

However, despite these treaties and an ACT Human Rights Charter, many young people still experience housing stress or homelessness. The Youth Coalition uses the following definition of homelessness:

- Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation such as those who 'sleep out', or use derelict buildings, cars, railway stations for shelter.
- Secondary homelessness: people who frequently move from temporary accommodation such as emergency accommodation, refuges, and temporary shelters. People may use boarding houses or family accommodation on a temporary basis.
- Tertiary homelessness: people who live in rooming houses, boarding houses on a medium or long-term basis where they do not have their own bathroom and kitchen facilities and tenure is not secured by a lease.
- Marginally housed: people in housing situations close to the minimum standard.²

On any given night in Canberra, data indicates that 1,364 people are homeless. 60% of those people are under 25 years of age. Whilst the topic of youth homelessness can invoke images of 'street kids', many homeless young people are invisible. 47% live with relatives and family, or even complete strangers, often couch surfing, while another 47% are in boarding houses or refuges. Of particular concern is that 22% of all the homeless people recorded in Canberra are under the age of 12³.

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

Housing support services that exist across Australia are struggling to cope with the demand, with the ACT having the highest turn-away rate in the country, due to a lack of accommodation. This ranged from a low of 77% in South Australia to a high of 95% in the ACT⁴. Young people identified that if an initial request for housing support is unmet, this may negatively influence their decision to seek assistance in the future⁵.

Much has been done over recent times to address the housing crisis, such as The Road Home Homelessness White Paper, introducing a national approach to reducing homelessness⁶. The Youth Coalition recognises some of the initiatives that have been introduced in the ACT as positive steps.

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

For many young people, living out of home for the first time can be an extremely difficult, as they may lack the necessary living skills, experience isolation and feel disconnected from their peers. Innovative, responsive and evidence-based models of supporting young people through various transitions, such as from experiencing homelessness to crisis accommodation, to supported medium term housing to independent living, are needed to ensure these transitions are successful.

It is also important to understand that for many young people, a linear move from homelessness to independent living is not possible. The Youth Coalition supports the concept of a spectrum of support that recognises this⁷.

Commitments

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

7. Advocating for the active and supported participation of young people in their individual care planning and case management.
8. Advocating for mechanisms to be developed and implemented that support young people to access the private rental market, and remove current barriers related to cost, availability and discrimination.
9. Advocating for expanded affordable housing programs for vulnerable young people.

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission (2008) Homelessness is a Human Right

² Chamberlain and Mackenzie (2001) Counting the Homeless NSW 2001, Swinburne University, Victoria

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) Counting the Homeless Report, Australian Government, Canberra

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010) Demand for Government-funded Homelessness Accommodation 2008-09, Australian Government, Canberra

⁵ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2004) Telling it How it Is, Canberra

⁶ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008) The Road Home Homelessness White Paper, Australian Government, Canberra

⁷ Coffey, M (2010) Out of Sight, Young People, the Hidden Homeless, Parity, Vol. 23, Issue 3