



**Youth Advisory Council  
New South Wales**

## **Youth Homelessness Forum Report**

### **The Forum**

On Wednesday 5 August 2009 a Youth Homelessness Forum brought together 40 young people and 20 adults, including workers, peak organisations and government, to discuss how youth homelessness could be prevented.

Young people who attended the forum were aged between 13-23 years. They came from across NSW and had different experiences of homelessness. In addition to set Forum sessions, a diary room was set up allowing delegates to record their views, ideas and experiences.

In the lead up to the Forum the NSW Commission for Children and Young People and the Inspire Foundation talked to over 100 young people in face to face and online consultations (<http://au.reachout.com/connect/forums>). This information was used to inform the Forum.

The Forum was sponsored by the NSW Youth Advisory Council (YAC) with the support of the Commission for the Children and Young People, Inspire Foundation, Youth Accommodation Association, Salvation Army and the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies.

### **Why are young people homeless?**

Young people at the Forum said that the causes of homelessness were as diverse as young people themselves.

One of the main causes identified was family and/or relationship breakdown. This included breakdown due to the death of a family member and lack of respect and communication between young people and their parents.

Lack of support from parents was highlighted by Forum delegates as a reason why many young people become homeless. *"We leave because there is a lack of guidance and we just don't want to be around the home"*.

This also included a lack of support available from youth and housing services.

- *"Lack of awareness for what services are out there"*
- *"Not having enough workers"*
- *"(There are) too many barriers for accessing services like red tape and stuff"*

Young people at the Forum said that mental health issues and drug and alcohol use by parents are a key factor for many young people becoming homeless. *“Parents going through stuff, like being alcoholics or substance abuse and it makes you depressed so you just don’t want to stay at home”.*

Forum delegates said to a lesser degree young people’s mental health issues or use of drugs and alcohol may lead them to homelessness, *“If you’re using drugs and alcohol, your parents kick you out”.* The delegates also acknowledged that many homeless young people are vulnerable to mental health issues and depression, making their situation worse.

Financial issues, including inability to pay rent or get Centrelink benefits, were identified at the Forum as reasons for homelessness. *“If you can’t get a job, you can’t get a house but you can’t get Centrelink without an address”.*

The young people said that family violence and abuse also contributed to homelessness. Other factors identified at the Forum included lack of education, pregnancy, cultural issues and seeking freedom and independence.

### **What could stop young people from being homeless?**

Participants at the Forum identified appropriate support as a key to preventing young people from becoming homeless. If young people have one negative experience, such as a service or worker breaching confidentiality, they may decide that all services are untrustworthy and be reluctant to seek help.

Many delegates from the country said that there were limited or no services in their area. Some delegates said they had to move from their home town to Sydney to access support services leaving behind their community networks and friends. Some young people from small communities talked about the impact the closure of a service has, resulting in young people feeling abandoned and having nowhere to turn to for help.

The young people wanted more access to outreach support where workers visited them at home or school as much as you need them, for example weekly or daily.

The delegates said workers should understand where young people are coming from and listen to them, instead of making assumptions.

- *“Case workers need to get to know you – know the facts and not just read them (in a file)”*
- *“Youth workers have no experience they just read the text books”*
- *“They (a good worker) ask you, ‘what do you want to do today?’ Instead of ‘this is what you will do today’”*
- *“We just want people that get it...We just want to be able to trust them, that’s all”.*

Many delegates at the Forum had used multiple services and had had both positive and negative experiences. They said it’s hard to adjust to refuge rules when they had been living independently and wanted services to give them a second chance.

Participants said that housing services and government agencies need to be more friendly and welcoming to young people, *“Make these places look and feel more*

*homely not like an office*". This included employing younger staff who can relate to their experiences. *"Having specific sections in government sectors like Centrelink and Department of Housing that are specific for young homeless people or even young people in general so all the workers specialised in working with young people like a youth worker"*. They also wanted to have the option of changing support workers if problems arise.

The young people at the Forum wanted to see services that provide a *"A one-stop shop where we can access all the services in one area like counsellors, doctors and nurses, legal aid, Centrelink and Department of Housing"*.

Forum delegates wanted to have more of a say in how they were dealt with and supported, *"Unless you're 18 and have a job or stable housing, no one takes you seriously – they all make decisions for you"*.

Delegates reported that better communication between government agencies and service providers would improve outcomes for young people, for example having information at police stations about the local youth services. Young delegates also reported having bad experiences with the Department of Community Services (DoCS).

- *"DoCS lies to you"*
- *"I hate DoCS in general"*
- *"There is no scheme, no one to take you in apart from big scary DoCS"*.

The young delegates identified support and education for parents as a key to preventing youth homelessness.

- *"My mum suffered from depression, and if she had more support I might not have had to be homeless"*
- *"The attitudes of parents needs to change"*
- *"They can't take care of other people, if they can't take care of themselves"*
- *"The solution starts at the home"*.

They wanted parenting classes to teach parents how to connect with their children, understand them, see their needs and talk about different support options in a way that parents won't feel ashamed to ask for help.

The young people also thought that as well as parenting education there needs to be more access to mental health and drug and alcohol services for all family members. The delegates said that these services, as well as housing services, need to be accessible in all communities, particularly in regional and rural areas.

- *"The city has more services, where the government is putting their money it needs to be spread out to cover all areas not just in the city"*
- *"More support in the community, there is only one youth service and that doesn't help, we need more support and more hostels"*.

Young participants at the Forum wanted to learn more budgeting, parenting and life skills.

- *"It's too late for our parents, but if we get help, we can be better parents"*
- *"Fix us, teach us, it's for the future"*.

The young people at the Forum also wanted access to education that suited their needs and life experiences. Suggestions included special colleges that include

accommodation and education, specialist university courses for young people at risk of homelessness and scholarships for them to get back into mainstream education. *“A campus, like Uni, where there is education and living in the same place, but not having the formalities of school”.*

Young people wanted more pathways to employment, such as short courses including first aid, Responsible Service of Alcohol, driving lessons and hospitality. *“If we had jobs then we’d have money to be able to rent, get food and stuff”.*

Forum participants said that constructive activities such as crafts, sport and recreation would have potentially stopped them from becoming homeless. Often these activities provide relief from the stress and pressure of home and build support networks. Some young people living in refuges said it was hard to participate in recreational and social activities because of refuge rules and the shame of others finding out they’re homeless.

As stated, some young people said support with drug and alcohol abuse would have prevented them from becoming homeless. However young people at the Forum said that drug and alcohol abuse was a symptom of homelessness not a cause. Young people said that on the street there is more access to drugs and pressure to use them, *“Being homeless is the worst thing because they (drugs and alcohol) are all around you”.* Delegates thought a way of overcoming this problem is for refuges to have better links with drug and alcohol services.

Some young people at the Forum reported that police put them in a juvenile detention centre to meet their duty of care obligation to find them somewhere to stay. One delegate reported being arrested on purpose as gaol provides food and shelter. Other young people told stories of young women getting pregnant to get priority housing and other help, *“I know one girl who has had five pregnancies to keep getting benefits”.*

One issue that the young delegates raised at the Forum was about the image and community knowledge of homelessness.

- *“You have to hold it all in because people might think you’re different; they might not want to know you or be around you because this is what you’ve been through”*
- *“As soon as you say you’re homeless, people automatically assume you’re a drug addict, a no hoper, a criminal and that you’re untrustworthy”.*

The young delegates wanted the community to know that homelessness is not just people sleeping on the streets or in refuges, *“I would rather sleep on a friend’s couch than in a refuge”.* The young people thought the perceptions of homelessness could be changed through running education and awareness campaigns.

Throughout the Forum young people talked about working with adults and decision-makers to fix the problems - they wanted to be part of the solutions.

## Recommendations

The Council would like to provide the following recommendations:

1. That the Government include young people who have experienced homelessness or unstable housing in decision making about services that affect them, as set out in the Premier's memorandum on youth participation. This should include, but not be limited to:
  - a. Representation by young people on the Premier's Council on Homelessness.
  - b. The establishment of a consumer group, that includes young people, to provide advice to the Premier's Council on Homelessness.
2. That the Government use the findings from the Youth Homelessness Forum to inform the implementation of the Homelessness Action Plan at a regional and local level, in particular in rural areas.
3. That the Government use the findings from the Youth Homelessness Forum to inform the implementation of *Keep Them Safe* the Government's response to the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW, including using the findings from the Forum to inform learning and development programs for Government and non-government sector workers.
4. That Government and non-government agencies use prevention and early intervention strategies to address the causes of homelessness. For example increase funding for the running and promoting parenting courses.
5. That the Government develop and implement flexible education and/or training options for young people experiencing unstable housing.
6. That the Government promote and distribute the Youth Homelessness Forum report to government and non-government youth services, so that its findings can be taken into consideration when running and developing programs and services for young people.
7. That the Government investigate a "one-stop-shop" integrated service delivery approach for youth services in NSW, including health, drug and alcohol, housing and counselling services.
8. That the Government run an awareness campaign to educate the community and reduce the stigma attached to homelessness.