



What SA Kids Have Told Us About... Youth Homelessness

Commissioner for
Children & Young People
July 2021

Young people who are homeless, or who are at risk of being homeless, are a group in our community whose voices are not often heard.

Homeless services data for South Australia shows that the number of young people presenting for homelessness support, has increased by an estimated 60% over the past five years. The data also reveals that one in five homeless people in South Australian are children and young people.

Youth homelessness remains an intractable issue within South Australia and the homelessness sector alone cannot resolve it. In 2020/2021 the Commissioner engaged a group of young citizen researchers from Youth Inc. to conduct a study into the experiences and understanding young people have of homelessness across metropolitan Adelaide.

The study consisted of two lines of enquiry. The first was learning what events led young people to become homeless and to 'couch surf', and the second, what other young people understand homelessness and couch surfing to be.

“ I don't necessarily see the massive difference between couch surfing and homelessness these days. In the past I used to view them as normal. The definition of couch surfing to me was having somewhere to go, whether it's friends or family, you'll have a place to stay. Homelessness is having nowhere to go.”

The study was undertaken to help inform service providers about young people's lived experiences of homelessness from the perspectives of young people themselves.

To complete the study the young citizen researchers chose to interview two groups of young people; those with personal experience of couch surfing, and those involved with Youth Inc. who had views on youth homelessness they wanted to share.

Listening to the couch surfing experiences of their peers had a profound effect on the young citizen researchers. Not only did it develop their understanding and empathy for young people who were homeless or couch surfing, it also highlighted the importance of providing the right support at the right time to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place.



Youth Inc. Homelessness Study

For some young people homelessness has been a part of their lives within their own families. They've experienced unstable housing over many short and long periods throughout their lives due to circumstances that are complex and recurring. For other young people the need for homeless support has come about because of a breakdown in their relationships with parents, and/or with other members of their family.

For still others, homelessness has been the result of a significant crisis event, such as a family fleeing from domestic violence, or the hospitalization of a parent who has become ill or had a serious accident. Events like these can sometimes require a young person to face a forced independence they would otherwise have not.

Some young people experience homelessness for long periods, while others have brief periods that are resolved when they find alternative accommodation with friends or other family members. Others are couch-surfing or living in otherwise precarious situations for both short and extended periods of time.

Some young people who find themselves homeless, connect with homeless services through family or friends. Others don't necessarily see or describe themselves as being 'homeless' and so are not made aware of the support that is available to them.

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“ *Homelessness means you have no roof over your head and no security, and couch surfing means you have a roof over your head but still [have] security issues.*”

For those over the age of 15, homeless shelter options are available. However, many young people said there are not nearly enough of them, particularly in rural areas.

“ *More housing options for young teenagers. I've found that there are not many housing options for young teenagers who are having trouble at home.*”

Homelessness and schooling

One of the key areas the study explored was the impact homelessness has on young people's capacity to maintain their connection with their schooling. This includes the way in which teachers are often the first adults to become fully aware of a young person's homelessness or couch surfing situation.

Young people said that for far too long, there has been an artificial separation between schooling and homelessness; almost as if they are not related, or that one doesn't impact the other. However, homelessness clearly has a significant impact on schooling, with teachers often required to take on the role of a first responder. What teachers know about homelessness, and how they act when their students confide in them, has the potential to make a real difference to the life of a young person who has become homeless or is forced to couch surf.

Young people who have experienced insecure housing said they often felt let down by schools and social services because they don't recognise their needs are quite different to those of adults. As one young person said, 'high schools aren't equipped to help homelessness, or home stability - only homework.'

Case Studies

Alison couch-surfed for about four years between the ages of sixteen and twenty. She mainly stayed on a particular friend's couch. Alison didn't realise she was homeless until a social worker told her. She thought she was just sleeping at a friend's place. She didn't comprehend the severity of her situation and says she just got 'really lucky' with a senior schoolteacher who knew how to help her. Other staff at her school had no idea she was homeless throughout high school.

Alison thinks early intervention is the key to helping young people who are couch surfing. She also thinks all adults working with young people at risk should be across all homelessness issues. Alison says she often gives advice to people she knows and tries to help connect young people to the right organisations. She believes there should be more pop-up information about homeless services on social media, so those young people who are couch-surfing know where to get homeless support when they need it. 'That's where people will actually look.'

Sam was unaware that she and her Step Dad were homeless until the friend she was staying with returned home from a holiday and told Sam and her Father they had to find somewhere else to stay.

Sam felt that as the 'child' she didn't have any autonomy over her situation. She felt 'really trapped' and 'had to be there (at various houses) with a parent who was couch surfing.'

Sam said the embarrassment she felt also made her hesitant to speak openly about her situation and seek necessary help. She said, 'The school, parents, friends - everyone knew.' 'I felt embarrassed 'cos I had to use food services as a teenager and that was a big thing.'

Sam found the whole situation rather difficult, and although everyone knew what was happening to her, they were unable to really support her. When reflecting on her experience, Sam said 'I wish that there was someone that said 'you are homeless but there is this number and you can contact them.' I think I knew this, but no-one actually said to me 'you don't have to be in this situation'. 'You can get help.'

In particular, she said her school knew of her situation but offered no support. Sam felt instead that the school actually held her up as 'an example of what you shouldn't be' and that 'they were no good.' Consequently, Sam started to disengage from school. When asked what type of advice she may give to other young people facing a similar experience, Sam said 'it's crucial to let them know that it's common, and that it can happen to anyone.'

Jordan couch surfed for about six months when they were sixteen. At the time Jordan said that although they were couch surfing, they wouldn't admit it to anyone. The experience was not great, and Jordan was quite scared, and not sure if they were welcome guests or just being used as a source of extra cash. Jordan described having no support system or anyone they were close to to ask for advice or get a perspective on what was happening.

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Jordan believes that schools should provide more education about the services available to young people who are experiencing homelessness. This information should be more widely available and distributed via 'social media, schools, public bathrooms, libraries, doctors/health services and bus stops. We need to know where to turn to to find services. So many of us try to live with pride but neglect the basics, thinking everything is okay. We don't know what we don't know.'

“ ‘Couch surfing you have a better support network, but it's a little too [f...ing] close to actual homelessness. You never know when you are overstaying your welcome. It's a shitty situation.’

Jo found herself couch surfing after having to leave a 'share house' due to issues with roommates and the landlord - 'I didn't have a say over the lease ending because my name wasn't on it.'

Having lived through the experience, Jo's advice to others is 'that while friends and contacts may come in handy to help you with somewhere to eat, sleep, or shower, reaching out to other services will help you get on your feet quicker. Don't let your pride take over, it isn't OK to struggle alone. Make use of any service that you have connections to. If they can't help you, they will point you in the right direction for help.'

Getting back on your feet without access to personal documents was a real challenge for Jos and her advice to anyone who thinks they will end up in a position of hardship is to always have your birth certificates, ID, and Medicare card available.

Jo also believes workplaces should distribute key information about homeless support services to their young workers. 'Even if you're working in an office job, anything can happen to anyone, and that's something I've learned about in this whole situation.'

What young people said is needed

Young people who participated in the Youth Inc. Study said that South Australia needs a homeless services response that ensures young people's right to education, health care, youth justice, mental health, and child protection services, all work together to best respond to their needs.

They said young people who are at risk of becoming homeless want more support earlier, not just when they are at crisis point. This means co-designing services with them, so that they reflect their actual experiences and needs, including providing information about what services exist to support them before they become homeless, so that if they do, they know where support can be found.

The overall objective should be working with South Australian young people to find ways of avoiding them having to face homelessness and couch-surfing at all.