

SUPPORT FOR NEW PARENTS AND BABIES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Inquiry into support for new parents and babies in New South Wales

Yfoundations Submission

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About Yfoundations

For over 30 years Yfoundations has been the NSW peak body on youth homelessness, representing young people at risk of, and experiencing, homelessness, as well as the services that provide direct support to those young people. We advocate for the youth.

Our vision: Creating a future without youth homelessness. We believe that all young people have the right to safety and stability, home and place, connectedness and participation, education and employment, health and wellness (together these are the foundations of our organisation).

We know these are the foundations for the prevention of, and pathways out of, homelessness.

Our values underpin all the work we do. We value:

- Young people
- Justice and human rights
- Diversity and inclusion
- Optimism and hope
- Courage; and
- Integrity.

We know that homelessness is an interrelated issue. It requires a whole of government and service system response. We need to be innovative, collaborative and determined if we are going to end homelessness.





Safety and Stability

It is vital that all young people not only feel safe, but also are actually protected from risk factors that may impede their developmental process. During childhood and adolescence, young people must receive the necessary support to ensure they develop a strong safety system, both internally and within their external networks. A strong and stable foundation will foster confidence and independence within a young person, which will promote active participation in community life.



Home and Place

It is vital that all young people have access to a safe, non-judgemental home and place. A comfortable place that they identify with and feel a strong connection to. A Home and Place should be an environment that promotes growth and fosters positive development.



Health and Wellness

It is vital that all young people, particularly during the formative stages of their growth and development, are physically, socially and emotionally well. To ensure this, young people must have access to all the necessary prerequisites for achieving health and wellness. Being well and feeling healthy, will promote self-worth, and ensure young people feel competent to participate in their communities.



Connections and Participation

It is vital that all young people are given the opportunity to develop and nurture the connections in their lives. Connections to friends, family, community and society promote resilience and social inclusion. Youth people must be listened to and have the opportunity to influence outcomes. Positive connections to and genuine participation in community life during the formative stages of childhood and adolescence enables a young person to build a strong positive foundation and prepares them for adult life.



Education and Employment

It is vital that all young people are given the opportunity to pursue their educational and professional goals. Education and training is crucial to the growth and development of young people. Education and training, including formal tuition and practical life skills, promotes self-confidence and independence and provides young people with the skills and competencies

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Summary

This submission focuses on young parents experiencing homelessness. This specific cohort of new parents is relevant to this inquiry because this group is over-represented and highly vulnerable, as evidenced by:

- In Australia, young people experiencing homelessness are ten times more likely to be single parents than the general population of young people.
- Young people at risk of homelessness, such as care leavers, are more likely to become parents early.
- Homelessness has a number of detrimental effects – such as poor mental and physical health, and low education and employment attainment – on both young people and on children who are homeless with their parents.
- Young people experiencing homelessness are highly likely to have undergone significant trauma, such as experiencing family violence.

Young parents experiencing homelessness face specific challenges in accessing support. Whilst some youth homelessness services regularly support young parents, other community and government services have difficulty engaging this group due to:

- Lack of trust that the service will understand their situation and needs
- Lack of flexibility due to policies and procedures that exclude and reduce autonomy
- Inappropriate accommodation that does not meet their needs

In addition, financial supports are inadequate, with welfare payments insufficient to meet the full minimum cost of living, and childcare subsidies inadequate.

Yfoundations' Members, the homelessness services in NSW that assist young people, regularly support young parents with positive, good outcomes (for the client) and can demonstrate what is needed in a model of support for young parents experiencing homelessness. This includes a trauma-informed approach and case management model incorporating a range of necessary elements. Specialist services for young parents experiencing homelessness should be based on this model, but it is critical that more generalist services also be able to adequately support this group.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Small targeted youth-orientated accommodation models that specifically cater for the needs of young single-parents, and couples with children, should be developed and funded.

Recommendation 2: Young parents should be given priority to accommodation near essential services such as public transport, shops, medical services, childcare centres and support services.

Recommendation 3: Refuges and accommodation models for young parents, should give them control over their decisions. They should be voluntary to allow young parents to maintain both their sense of autonomy and their ability to make their own decisions.

Recommendation 4: Fund specialist young parent positions in youth homelessness services where numbers of young parents experiencing homelessness are not high enough to justify a specialist service.

Recommendation 5: Provide free, specific training, on assisting young parents, to all youth homelessness services.

Recommendation 6: Financial support, including welfare payments and early education childcare centre subsidies, should be increased to reflect the real needs of disadvantaged young parents.

Recommendation 7: Conduct research into the availability of parenting support services across the wider service support system.

Recommendation 8: Provide father-specific services, such as parenting classes and support groups.

Recommendation 9: Review the service system to ensure better access to health services for disadvantaged young parents.

Recommendation 10: Consult with services, and engage in research, on ways in which learning from other jurisdictions can improve the service system in NSW for young parents experiencing homelessness.

Introduction

Yfoundations welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this inquiry. Our focus in this submission is on a particularly vulnerable group of new parents: young parents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. There are two reasons why this group of young parents should be of particular concern to this inquiry:

- Firstly, they are disproportionately represented; for example, young people experiencing homelessness are ten times more likely to be single parents than the general youth population.
- Secondly, there are a number of negative outcomes from experiencing homelessness that can severely damage the lives and prospects of young parents and their children.

This submission will summarise the research on the overrepresentation of young parents in the homelessness population, and briefly look at the research on the negative effects of homelessness on young parents, before addressing the inquiry's Terms of Reference items 1 – 4 in regard to this group.

Overrepresentation

It is clear from the available research that young parents are overrepresented in homeless and at risk populations. Unfortunately no publically available data gives the exact numbers of young parents in NSW who are experiencing homelessness. However, national data on young single parents and homelessness is available, and there is research showing groups at risk of homelessness are more likely to be parents.

Single Young Parents Experiencing Homelessness

Census data shows that the proportion of young people (aged 15-24) in the general population who are single parents is 1.4%.¹ By contrast data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that the proportion young people (aged 15-24) being assisted by Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) who are single parents is 15%.² In other words, young people experiencing homelessness are more than ten times more likely to be single

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2016 Census – Selected Family Characteristics* (October 2017) Census TableBuilder <<https://auth.censusdata.abs.gov.au/webapi/jsf/tableView/tableView.xhtml>>.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Specialist Homelessness Services 2015-2016' (Web Report, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 15 December 2016):.

parents. (Note: The most recent homelessness data for the 2016-2017 period does not report on the number of homeless young people who are single parents, but overall numbers of homeless single parents have increased by 7% to 22,172 – representing 30% of those seeking assistance from SHS).³

Not only are young people experiencing homelessness more likely to be parents, they are also more likely to have experienced trauma and require support for this. For example, 40% of clients (or 114,757) seeking assistance from SHS were experiencing domestic and family violence, this is an increase from 38% in 2015–16.⁴ Yfoundations' research indicates that most services would regard 40% as an under-estimate and see much higher levels of domestic and family violence amongst the young people they assist.⁵ Most clients (56%) were at risk of homelessness when they sought assistance from SHS.⁶

At Risk Groups of Young Parents

Cohorts of young people who have higher risks of becoming homeless are more likely to become parents. There is a particularly significant link between early pregnancy and young people who are in, or are leaving, care; it is estimated that between 1/3 and 1/2 of young people become parents shortly after leaving the care system.⁷ Also, there is a clear association between socioeconomic disadvantage and early parenthood.⁸

Research suggests that there are many factors that lead disadvantaged young people to higher rates of pregnancy, including:⁹

- limited career or education options,
- high levels of idealization about being a parent,
- possible links between having unprotected sex and overall risk taking behaviours,

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Specialist Homelessness Services 2016-2017' (Web Report, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 14 December 2017)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jessica Fielding and Chris Stone, 'Slamming the Door: Policy and Service Gaps for Young People Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence' (Policy Paper, Yfoundations, April 2016).

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, above n 3.

⁷ Philip Mendes, 'Improving outcomes for teenage pregnancy and early parenthood for young people in out-of-home care' (2009) 28(4) *Youth Studies Australia* 11.

⁸ Elaine Chase, Claire Maxwell, Abigail Knight, and Peter Aggleton, 'Pregnancy and parenthood among young people in and leaving care: what are influencing factors and what makes a difference in providing support?' (2006) 29 *Journal of Adolescence* 437.

⁹ Mendes, above n 7.

- correlation between teenage pregnancy and dysfunctional family relationships (e.g. inadequate levels of parental monitoring),
- absence of positive role models, and
- viewing pregnancy as an opportunity to make positive changes in their lives,

Effects of Homelessness

It is clear that the issue of young homeless parents is an important one, particularly because youth homelessness has been linked to numerous negative long-term outcomes, such as poor mental and physical health, as well as low education and employment attainment. Children who experience homelessness with their parents are more likely to develop behavioural issues, significant emotional problems and have higher likelihood of depression or anxiety.¹⁰ Children experiencing homelessness are also more likely to succumb to sickness or disease compared to housed children in stable housing, due to poor hygiene and a lack of medical care accessible for the child.¹¹

Another issue that affects children experiencing homelessness is their education, as they are more likely to fall behind at school. Constantly moving accommodation can negatively affect a child's academic progress, where children are likely to score lower on tests and show behavioural problems whilst at school.¹² Developmental delays that children experience whilst being homeless can affect a child's performance with their studies along with their capability to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills. A delay in a child's development would mean that children will have trouble speaking, understanding their spoken language and are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems from impulsivity to aggression, and this can result in children failing at school and a likelihood of dropping out.¹³ Educational disadvantage can also be experienced by the young parents experiencing homelessness. Services report that many schools, though not all, have difficulties with young parents and in some cases they look to avoid enrolling them.

¹⁰ Austin O'Carroll, 'Young Homeless Mothers & Homeless Children – Literature Review' (Anew, January 2016) <<http://anew.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Young-Homeless-Mothers-and-Homeless-Children.pdf>>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ellen Hart-Shegos, 'Homelessness and its effects on children' (Report, Family Housing Fund, December 1999) 9 <http://www.fhfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Homelessness_Effects_Children.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

The adequacy of current services and structures

Supported Accommodation Services

It is deeply concerning that for those young parents, and their children, who experience homelessness, there can be significant gaps in accommodation and support available.

There are a very limited number of supported accommodation services specifically for young parents, which mean that young parents experiencing homelessness will often rely on more generalist youth or family homelessness services. While many youth homelessness services are able to assist young parents, some service providers struggle to engage this group in their services. Family support services do not always understand youth specific needs, while youth services often do not recognise the issues and needs associated with parenting.

We know from the youth homelessness services who regularly work with young parents what support for young parents should look like. We also know from research on the experience of young parents with homelessness services and the broader service system, what factors can reduce the support effectively available to young parents.

Lack of Trust

One critical factor is a lack of trust in services. In particular distrust of FACS is key. Young people are in many cases terrified their baby will be removed, and often are care-leavers themselves making this a real lived experience. One service reported a case where a young mother – aged 17, approaching birth, and in the care of the minister – was in a situation where FACS had not arranged the payments for her household goods before birth. The young person had a perception (and the caseworkers agreed this was a definite possibility) that if the house wasn't set up by the time the baby was born, that FACS would remove the child as the mother was 'homeless'. The Homelessness Service caseworkers advocated strongly to fast-track the process, and in the end used the organisation's own brokerage and fundraising to fill the need.

Young parents are likely to be involved in hostile situations with social services, education providers, and health care facilities. They may be reluctant to open up about their problems associated with parenthood if they do not trust the service to understand their situation. Distrust of staff, unattainable expectations, and a lack of services which align with their

wants and needs have all been found to act as barriers which prevent vulnerable young people from accessing support.

Issues of lack of trust are exacerbated by the conflict of interest involved in services being funded by the child protection body. The risk here is a reduced capacity to advocate for the young parents. Some services may be overly quick to facilitate the removal of children from mothers who are struggling.

Lack of Flexibility

It is also sometimes the case that service providers do not have the flexibility of support that young parents require to manage parenthood. A number of barriers to service delivery involve policies and procedures that preclude access to services for young parents, including age restrictions, no couples, or women only which exclude homeless fathers who want to stay with their partner and child. Young parents may be hesitant to seek support from shelters due to difficulties with following rules and trusting other people.¹⁴ These difficulties often arise as a result of difficult past experiences. A lack of control over their own parenting is also an issue that many parents face when they stay in a refuge, as rules and decisions regarding everyday events such as bed or meal times are often made by the service staff. By contrast, small and targeted services that are either youth-orientated or trained to be sensitive to the discrimination faced by young parents are more welcoming.¹⁵

Inappropriate Accommodation

The nature of the accommodation may also present challenges. Some parents find it difficult to live in a single room with a young child. The location of refuges can be an issue, such as if they lack adequate transport access, or are too far away from essential services, or far from family and friends and the support they can provide. Refuges in particular were seen as having a stigma attached to them and were considered to be impractical as they were unable to meet all of the parents needs.¹⁶

¹⁴ Morag McArthur and Erin Barry, 'Younger Mothers: Stigma and Support' (2013) 3 *Institute of Child Protection Studies*, 4.

¹⁵ Morag McArthur and Erin Barry, 'Younger Mothers: Stigma and Support' (Research to Practice Series, Issue 3, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, September 2013).

¹⁶ Lisa Anderson, Maria Stuttaford, and Panos Vostanis 'A family support service for homeless children and parents: User and staff perspectives' (2006) 11 *Child and Family Social Work* 119.

Financial Support

Disadvantaged young parents are particularly affected by limited financial support. Evidence indicates that the current support provided by Centrelink (e.g. Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment, Family Tax Benefits) is insufficient in meeting even the basic cost of living.¹⁷ A pregnant young woman is only eligible for Youth Allowance which is insufficient to support private rental.

University of NSW researchers calculated a basic budget that allows for a healthy level of social participation to reflect the real needs of Australians. The report *New Minimum Income for Healthy Living Budget Standards for Low-Paid and Unemployed Australians* calculated that a single adult would require \$600 a week to have a reasonable standard of living, while a couple with 2 children would need close to \$1200. The report found Australians living on unemployment benefits were not receiving enough money to cover this basic standard, and those earning minimum wage were also struggling to meet the standard. For example a couple with two children would receive between \$800 a week (if unemployed) and up to \$1000 (if earning minimum wage) which does not meet their reasonable standard of living.¹⁸

The welfare payment system is not easy to access and is often a slow process due to a long queue where many other Australians are attempting to access Centrelink, which can delay or hinder the chances of young parents experiencing homelessness accessing welfare payments. Without welfare payments, young parents experiencing homelessness will not be able to access food, shelter or water for their family and place themselves in homelessness.

In addition, subsidised childcare is critically important, but inadequate. Better support will allow young parents to spend time looking for education and employment opportunities whilst their child is at childcare, as well as allowing their children to grow up in a safe environment with other children the same age.

¹⁷ Australia's Homeless Youth – A report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness (National Youth Commission, 2008).

¹⁸ Peter Saunders and Megan Bedford, 'New Minimum Income for Healthy Living Budget Standards for Low-Paid and Unemployed Australians' (SPRC Report 11/17, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW, August 2017).

Changes to current services and structures that could improve outcomes

As mentioned in the above discussion, a number of youth homelessness services regularly support young parents and achieve sound outcomes. Such services can give a good understanding of what is needed in a model of support for homeless young parents. Given the strong likelihood of trauma in the background of any young people experiencing homelessness, support for young parents experiencing homelessness needs to take a trauma informed approach. It also requires a case management model that includes:

- affordable housing
- parenting programs
- financial literacy training
- developmental milestone awareness and education
- health and nutrition education
- relationship building and maintenance
- parenting training
- support groups

Some services reported having the skills to support young parents, but facing challenges due to a lack of appropriate accommodation options. There are insufficient suitable transitional houses, and refuges are not set up to accommodate children. Such services often support young people who are pregnant, but can't continue that support post birth particularly because they will often be supporting other young people with risk factors including sexualised behaviours and violence that mean that they can't house them and children together. Where the service can house a number of pregnant young women together, positive outcomes are achieved. But once those young people leave and a young person with more challenging behaviours is accepted, they might not be able to accommodate any pregnant young women until that young person leaves.

Further work in consultation with services to fully document their model of support is needed, in order to implement it in both specialist homeless young parent services, and in other more generalist services.

Where practical, there should be specialist services available that cater to young parents

experiencing homelessness. Such services would offer youth-oriented assistance that is sensitive to the discrimination faced by young parents and their needs. The services would need to be able to provide suitable accommodation for both young single-parents and young couples with children. In addition there are a number of aspects of the support program that would assist with keeping young people engaged and assisting them out of homelessness. Strategies such as having supportive and approachable staff, having numerous services available at the same place, providing childcare and education for parents, and being more inclusive of fathers, help encourage young parents to initiate and maintain engagement with support services.¹⁹ Also, identifying extended family and friends who can support young parents is critical, and challenging as family networks in homeless youth are often broken, but finding aunties, grandmothers, etc., who will provide practical and moral support can have a significant impact. Perhaps most importantly, the voluntary nature of participation in such services is regarded as crucial for many vulnerable young parents, as it helps them maintain both their sense of autonomy and their ability to make their own decisions about their future.

It will not be possible to provide specialist young parent accommodation services in all areas, and so it is critical that more generalist services are able to fully support young parents experiencing homelessness. Such approaches would need to ensure that youth homelessness services have the skills and resources to best address the needs of young parents they accommodate. This may include the funding of specialist workers in some areas, and at minimum specialist training on assisting young parents that is provided free to all services in NSW.

It is also important to note that there is a lack of standardisation of young parenting support, for example with some youth services provide parenting groups while others do not, some hospitals may have antenatal nurses experienced with helping young people while others do not. As a result there is a lack of knowledge about the parenting support available in the wider services system. Research to correct this is needed to inform any approach to helping new parents.

¹⁹ Christine Taylor, Annie Mills, Virginia Schmied, Hannah Dahlen, Weis Shuring, and Margaret Hudson, 'What works to engage young parents into services? Findings from an appreciative inquiry workshop' (2012) 42 *Contemporary Nurse* 258.

Recommendation 1: Small targeted youth-orientated accommodation models that specifically cater for the needs of young single-parents, and couples with children, should be developed and funded.

Recommendation 2: Young parents should be given priority to accommodation near essential services such as public transport, shops, medical services, childcare centres and support services.

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Recommendation 6: Financial support, including welfare payments and early education childcare centre subsidies, should be increased to reflect the real needs of disadvantaged young parents.

Recommendation 7: Conduct research into the availability of parenting support services across the wider service support system.

Specific areas of disadvantage or challenge

Of the sparse literature that addresses young parents and homelessness, the majority almost exclusively refers to the single, adolescent mother. Young fathers are often ignored in research and excluded from the conversation. This may be partly attributed to the perception that young fathers are tangential to pregnancy and are secondary to the need to

support the mother and child.²⁰ However, research indicates that paternal involvement has positive effects on young mothers and their children, whereas paternal absence is associated with adverse life events. Although it is noted that families experiencing homelessness are generally headed by single mothers for reasons of family breakdown and intimate partner violence, there is evidence that young fathers also make up a proportion of young homeless families. Where safe and appropriate, father-specific solutions should focus on inclusion in parenting programs and services. Father-specific parenting classes and father support groups encourage more involvement in the family. There are high levels of experience of domestic violence amongst homeless young people, so involving fathers needs to include sound risk assessment and needs to be hand in hand with support regarding domestic violence and changing violent behaviour.

Recommendation 8: Provide father-specific services, such as parenting classes and support groups.

Medicare cards are often a major problem for young pregnant women who were still attached to their parent's cards, and for women who had no access to the Medicare system, such as recent migrants and refugees. Without Medicare cards young women are unable to access local health services. The provision of bulk billing is also a factor. The lack of bulk billing is a barrier especially where young women do not have an income. Young parents experiencing homelessness are in dire need of accessing health and childcare services in order to maintain their and their child's health and wellbeing. Affordable healthcare will mean that young parents will not have to worry about the expenses towards paying for prescriptions, as well as being able to visit doctors. On top of that, access to healthcare is key to preventing young parents from suffering complications with their health, as well as giving them advice to improve on their quality of health. Good relationships with the local health services are critical. Young parents need support to access the right help.

Recommendation 9: Review the service system to ensure better access to health services for disadvantaged young parents.

²⁰ Karen Fairhurst, Laura David, and Tatiana Corrales, 'Baby and me: Exploring the development of a residential care model for young pregnant women and young women with babies, in out of home care' (Report, Anglicare Victoria, 2015).

Models of support provided in other jurisdictions

While it is important to utilise experiences in other jurisdictions, it is critical to keep in mind that the models explored there may not be straightforwardly applicable to the Australian and NSW context. Some models based on general principles of what is needed by young parents, may be informative and an example is given below. Research and consultation on how these might inform practice in our jurisdiction should be undertaken.

In England, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was informed by such discriminatory behaviour as mentioned above. A national training program was implemented to educate midwives, health visitors, and case managers about stigma and how to be welcoming.²¹ This involves an approach that demonstrates confidence in the young parent's ability and focuses on positive development, health and safety.²² There should be one-on-one parenting support for young parents that caters to the specific needs of each family and works to enhance parenting skills and confidence.²³ More specifically, families experiencing homelessness responded that they want staff who respect space, are flexible, honest, accountable, assertively engage with the families, and are genuinely interested in their circumstances. Young parents want staff to be more transparent, to listen to their problems, to build rapport with them, to recognise them as adults and be trusted to make decisions for their own family, and have a nonjudgmental attitude.²⁴

Recommendation 10: Consult with services, and engage in research, on ways in which learning from other jurisdictions can improve the service system in NSW for young parents experiencing homelessness.

²¹ 'Young mothers face stigma and abuse, say charities' BBC Newsbeat (online) 25 February 2014 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/26326035/young-mothers-face-stigma-and-abuse-say-charities>>.

²² Deborah Keys, 'Opportunity for Change: Young motherhood and homelessness' (Becoming a Mother Project Report, Key Centre for Women's Health in Society of University of Melbourne, 2007).

²³ Taylor, Mills, Schmied, Dahlen, Shuring, and Hudson, above n 19.

²⁴ Keys, above n 22.