

Realising the Impact of the Pandemic

Jenna Hegedus, Youth Reconciliation Practitioner, Hope Street Youth and Family Services

Services' Youth Reconciliation Program provides one-to-one strengths-based and solutions-focused counselling and support to young people who are experiencing homelessness. Where this is desired by the young person, the program supports them to establish and maintain constructive relationships with family and broader support networks. The program also supports young people with referrals, mentoring, family counselling, mediation and facilitation of family meetings. In continuing to provide services during the pandemic, the program's processes and practices were honed, extending flexibility and creativity, with many interactions via online platforms. This article will provide an overview of the increased vulnerability and disadvantage experienced by young people and young families impacted by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that young people have experienced something beyond their imagination, having not previously faced such a global health crisis in their own lives. Statistics provide some insight into the impact of the pandemic on young people. However, it is important to remember that the dimensions of this impact may take some time to emerge. This becomes even more concerning when we consider its consequences for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

It is important to remember that young people who are homeless are not always visible. Many young people are moving between crowded-dwellings, couch surfing, both short and longer-term supported accommodation or staying temporarily with others. Homelessness and the threat of homelessness puts pressure on young people and their families.¹

Homelessness disproportionately affects young people, with rates already rising before the pandemic. Statistics are telling us that, compared with older age groups, during the pandemic, young people have experienced higher rates of psychological distress, loneliness, educational disruption, unemployment, housing stress and domestic violence.²

Young people report that the pandemic and the government's response has negatively affected their social connectedness, especially for young people in Melbourne who experienced significantly longer lockdowns and public safety measures/restrictions. The shift to online learning removed the critical experience that young people gain from socialising together at school and in some cases resulted in a difficult return to class or school refusal. Remote learning has heightened the digital and social inequalities with significant educational consequences for those who were disengaged or disengaging from education and training pre-pandemic.³

Young people are generally limited in their financial resources, and this can lead to housing stress and may lead to homelessness. While the government put some unparalleled protective factors in place, such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments and a moratorium on rental evictions for those unable to meet their commitments, the pandemic still resulted in other ways for housing to become unstable or completely break down. Young people often cite family conflict as a major reason for leaving their home or experiencing homelessness. Some examples of this include the need to flee family violence, overcrowding, changes in household structures and relationship

breakdowns. Family reunification and conflict resolution was challenging during the pandemic. In these types of situations, psychological distress emotions become heightened and resilience is lowered.

As the pandemic has resulted in even higher levels of psychological distress for people with pre-existing mental health disorders, homeless young people are likely to have been greatly affected as they already report higher rates of distress.⁴ At times during the pandemic 50 per cent of Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) mental health services were delivered via telehealth.⁵

While the government responded to the needs to young people at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping with strategies, including the hotel emergency and temporary accommodation and the eviction moratorium, longer-term reform and support is required.

To address the needs of young people beyond these crisis interventions, our response needs to be evidence-based, involve early intervention, be well planned, and sustained.

Endnotes

1. Heerde J, Patton G, Young J, Borschmann R and Kinner S 2021, Preventing a rebound in youth homelessness after COVID-19, *Pursuit*, University of Melbourne. <<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/preventing-a-rebound-in-youth-homelessness-after-covid-19>>
2. AIHW 2021, *Australia's youth: COVID-19 and the impact on young people*, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/covid-19-and-young-people>>
3. Robinson C 2020, *The impact of COVID-19 on unaccompanied homeless children in Tasmania*, Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.
4. AIHW 2020, *Mental health services in Australia*, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/covid-19-impact-on-mental-health>>
5. AIHW 2020, op cit.