

Housing for young people with complex needs

Yfoundations position paper

The issue

Every year thousands of children and young people turn up alone to homelessness services in NSW, often because of conflict in the home. Our services work tirelessly to provide a safe place for these vulnerable children and young people to stay and to help reunify them with their families. But the conflicts that too-often lead to youth homelessness often arise in the context of serious intergenerational issues, such as poverty, poor mental health, drug misuse and child abuse and neglect. This makes it difficult for homeless children and young people to return home and often leads to serious behavioural problems among these vulnerable youth themselves.

Youth homelessness services do not receive sufficient funding to provide the 24/7, therapeutic support that children and young people with complex needs require. Caseworkers within the Child Protection system have a statutory responsibility to care for all under 18 years olds, but they are often reluctant to step in with this group. This is largely because they often struggle to find foster and kinship care placements for children and young people with complex needs, there is a dire shortage of alternative, therapeutic accommodation across the out-of-home-care (OOHC) and alcohol and other drugs (AOD) system.

Home-based family therapies should always be the first line of action for children and young people with complex needs. But even the most intensive, evidence-based interventions aren't always appropriate or effective. It may be that the home environment is unsafe, or the parents and carers are unwilling to engage. Or it may be that families are simply unable to manage their teenager's behaviour or meet their complex needs. It's essential that the NSW Government expand the housing options of young people with complex needs, so that these vulnerable young people received the support they need to heal.



[See our position paper on the criminalisation of youth homelessness](#)

The current shortage of housing options for young people with complex needs means that youth homelessness services in NSW are being forced to care for residents who often present a risk to themselves and others. It also means that young people with complex needs are being 'risk assessed' out of services, and even being put in detention because there are no services that can care for them.

Our asks

The NSW Government must increase the number of therapeutic foster care placements.

[Thirty years of research](#) suggests that the first choice for young people with complex needs who can't live at home should be 'therapeutic' or 'treatment foster care'. In this model, young people with complex needs are placed with well-trained, supported and compensated carers, who provide one-on-one, around the clock supervision and mentoring.

As of 2021, the NSW Government currently funds three treatment foster care models: the [Professional Individualised Care \(PIC\)](#) program, [Treatment Foster Care Oregon \(TFCO\)](#), and [Therapeutic Home-Based Care \(THBC\)](#). Altogether, these programs offer less than 50 placements.

The NSW Government must increase the number of therapeutic residential care placements.

Residential care has a controversial history in Australia, because of the role of institutions in the forced assimilation of Aboriginal people and histories of child sexual assault. As such, residential programs are often 'last resort' for children and young people with serious behavioural problems. However, [research suggests](#) agencies can provide therapeutic accommodation for traumatised youth, provided they are sufficiently funded to provide relationship-based, individualised care in partnership with their family and community.

Yfoundations supported the NSW Governments efforts to replace its residential care system with an Intensive Therapeutic Care system by 2020. But to date, this goal has not yet been achieved, and there remains a dire shortage of both therapeutic and non-therapeutic residential placements.

The NSW Government must increase the number of secure care placements.

Locking young people up in youth justice facilities simply because they are homeless is a serious rights violation. However, [researchers suggest](#) that intensive, therapeutic residential care provided in a compulsory, restrictive setting may be necessary for those with the highest needs. This includes young people who are likely to run away from care and suffer significant harm in the process, as well as young people who are at risk of causing harm to themselves or others. NSW currently has only one 'Secure Care' facility, Sherwood House, which accommodates just six young people with extreme needs.

The NSW Government must increase the drug and alcohol rehabilitation placements.

Drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs can be effective for young people suffering from addictions. Unfortunately, there are currently only four public residential rehabilitation centres for young people across NSW, accommodating just 60 young people at a time. Demand for these facilities far outstrips supply.

The evidence

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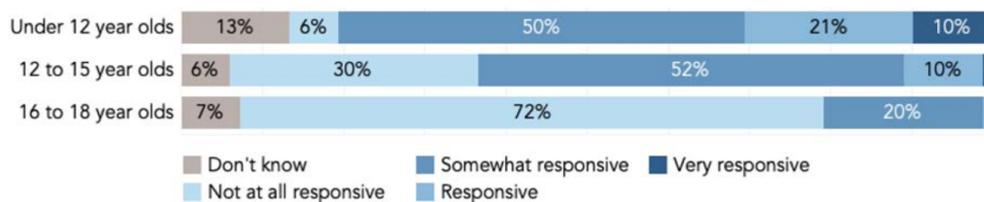
From 2016-17 & 2018-19, over 2,700 children and young people aged 12 to 15 received support from the NSW Homeless Young Assistance Program (HYAP).



A 2020 evaluation found that more than 50% of them had previously been reported to the Child Protection Helpline. As HYAP providers have noted, addressing the complex, trauma-related needs of both these young people and their families, is well beyond the scope of their program.

In 2020, Yfoundations surveyed 82 people who worked in youth homelessness services in NSW. Of these, 30% reported that Child Protection was “not at all responsive” to child protection reports regarding homeless 12 to 15-year-olds, and 52% reported that they were only “somewhat responsive”. More concerningly, 72% of SHS providers reported that DCJ was “not at all responsive” to reports for 16 to 17-year-olds, and a further 20% reported they were only “somewhat responsive”.

Chart 2: SHS survey respondents to question, “In your experience, how responsive are DCJ to child protection reports from SHS providers regarding young people aged...”



199 vulnerable young people were being housed every night in 'Temporary Care Arrangements'

Those who do enter the Child Protection system are often housed in hotels by rotating caseworkers. Data collected by the [Association of Children Welfare Agencies](#) suggest that around 199 vulnerable young people were being housed every night in 'Temporary Care Arrangements', usually in motels supervised by rotating caseworkers.

In the 2019/20 financial year, 236 under 18-year-olds were kept on remand in juvenile detention, simply because they had no alternative accommodation.

