

# **“Nowhere to go”: Investigating homelessness experiences of 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory.**

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## Executive Summary

Youth homelessness has been recognised as being a significant issue in Australia. Despite this, there has been little attention given to understanding how young people, especially those under 16 years of age, experience and navigate unaccompanied homelessness. A recent report on unaccompanied homeless people aged 10-17 in Tasmania highlights that, in addition to experiencing complex adversity, young people in this age group may be particularly vulnerable to policy and service provision gaps (Robinson, 2017).

With an aim to better understand the issue of youth homelessness for 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the ACT Government's Community Services Directorate (CSD) commissioned the Institute of Child Protection Studies (the Institute) to conduct a qualitative study. The study interviewed ten 16-19 year olds who were asked to reflect on their experience of homelessness when aged 12-15 years. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the factors that contributed to young people aged 12-15 years becoming homeless in Canberra, ACT?
2. What were the lived experiences of these homeless young people?
3. What were the informal and formal support and service experiences of these young people?
4. What were the needs of these young people?
5. What would help prevent young people (aged 12-15yrs) from becoming homeless?
6. How might we best provide support to young people who experience homelessness when aged between 12-15 years in Canberra?
7. Who or what helped these young people transition out of homelessness?

The findings of this study highlight some common precursors and pathways into homelessness. Almost all participants in this study experienced significant adversity throughout their childhoods, often living in family homes characterised by violence, abuse and/or neglect. Half had been removed by child protection authorities into the out-of-home care system – but the young people felt this had not led to safe, stable or secure housing. As such, the majority of young people we interviewed felt like they had never had a home – a place of safety, security and happiness.

Family conflict, with parents or carers, was a significant issue for the young people in this study. Alongside conflict at home, the young people we spoke to were facing a range of other challenges including: declining mental health, problems at school and feeling that no-one really understood the significance of the problems they were experiencing, or could do anything to help. With these challenges compounding, and with limited resources and minimal supports to turn to, young people felt they were left with little choice but to leave their unsafe or uncaring homes and enter into unaccompanied homelessness.

Once homeless, young people felt scared and alone and had nowhere to go that could offer safe or secure housing. Young people largely relied on family or friends for short term offers of housing and other basic needs such as money and food. For over half of the participants, spending nights on the street became inevitable.

Young people were connected to many formal services. However, none of these were able to meet the full range of their practical and emotional needs. Beyond access to housing or income support, which was particularly difficult for young people aged under 16yrs, young people required support with their physical and mental health and support to engage in meaningful activities (such as education or employment). Young people felt that more effective practical and emotional support could be provided if formal supporters listen carefully, take young people's concerns seriously and use their power to advocate for young people's needs. Effective advocacy to help young people navigate complex service systems and successfully access income and housing was particularly critical.

The desire and determination for a better life had led most of the young people to leave their family homes and enter into homelessness. This determination had sustained and motivated young people whilst they experienced the many challenges associated with being homeless. At the time of their interview, some young people had achieved stable housing and were making significant caring contributions to others and/or were meaningfully engaged in work or study. Half of the young people who participated in this study, however, remained homeless. As the young people noted, there is much work to be done to help prevent and better respond to youth homelessness in the ACT. The young people who participated in this study hope their views and experiences can assist in this important work.

## 1. Introduction

Young people in Australia experience significant rates of homelessness. According to the 2016 Census, 27,688 young people aged between 12-24 years were experiencing homelessness – accounting for one quarter of the total homeless population in Australia (ABS, 2018). The rate of youth homelessness is concerning given that homelessness is one of the most potent examples of disadvantage in the community, and one of the most important markers of social exclusion (ABS, 2012). Homelessness can profoundly affect young people’s mental and physical health, education and employment opportunities, and their ability to fully participate in society (AIHW, 2018).

Homelessness is not just the result of too few houses; its causes are many and varied. Scholars have established that youth homelessness and its causes are complex and multi-faceted (Barker, 2016). Research has identified a range of potential causes and correlates to the experience of youth homelessness that traverses individual, familial and structural level factors (Mallett et al., 2009). Vulnerable young people, such as those with a history of traumatic family experiences, or involvement in the out-of-home care sector or the criminal justice system, are particularly at risk of homelessness and have been found to experience homelessness at a much higher rate than their peers (AIHW, 2016).

Individualistic explanations of youth homelessness focus on individual pathologies, personal behaviours and deficits. These explanations often include young people’s deviant or reckless behaviour and their inability to achieve employment or financial independence and find stable accommodation (Barker, 2016). It is rare that these behaviours alone precipitate homelessness. In fact, in Australia and internationally, family conflict and breakdown remains the most significant factor in young people becoming homeless (Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 1998; Johnson et al., 2008; Rosenthal et al., 2006).

There are a number of factors that may place significant stress on individuals and family units that impact on the likelihood of family conflict and breakdown and heighten young people’s vulnerability to homelessness (Roche & Barker, 2017). Structural level factors including increasingly high costs of rent, high youth unemployment rates and insufficient levels of unemployment, parenting and disability support benefits from government also contribute to the challenges young people face in being able to secure affordable accommodation (Barker, 2016). The 2017 Anglicare survey of 67,000 rental properties across Australia found a single person on Youth Allowance and Newstart would find it almost impossible to find an affordable home anywhere in Australia - regional or metropolitan (Anglicare, 2017).

Despite increased understandings of youth homelessness, less attention has been given to understanding how younger teenagers, especially those under 16 years of age experience and navigate unaccompanied homelessness.<sup>1</sup> The experiences of these young people may be obscured by the fact that they are often ineligible for

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<sup>1</sup> Unaccompanied homelessness refers to young people who experience homelessness on their own (unaccompanied by an adult).

government funded homelessness services. As a result, we currently know little about the factors that contribute to unaccompanied homelessness among children under 16 years of age, what this experience is like for them, and what their unique needs may be. A recent report on unaccompanied homeless 10 – 17-year-olds in Tasmania highlights that, in addition to experiencing complex adversity, young people in this age group may be particularly vulnerable to policy and service provision gaps (Robinson, 2017).

With an aim to better understand the issue of youth homelessness for 12 – 15-year-olds in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the ACT Government’s Community Services Directorate (CSD) commissioned the Australian Catholic University’s Institute of Child Protection Studies (the Institute) to conduct a qualitative study with up to ten 16 – 19-year-olds who were asked to reflect on their experience of homelessness when aged 12-15 years. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the factors that contributed to young people aged 12-15 years becoming homeless in Canberra, ACT?
2. What were the lived experiences of these homeless young people?
3. What were the informal and formal support and service experiences of these young people?
4. What were the needs of these young people?
5. What would help prevent young people (aged 12-15 years) from becoming homeless?
6. How might we best provide support to young people who experience homelessness when aged between 12-15 years in Canberra?
7. Who or what helped these young people transition out of homelessness?

This report provides an account of the study methodology and methods, before exploring the experiences of ten young people (four males and six females) who participated in interviews for the study. Findings highlight the issues these young people faced before and during their homelessness and illustrate what it was like to locate and navigate supports and services that could assist them to find safety, security and happiness.

The findings provide important insights into the homelessness experiences of 12 – 15-year-olds in the ACT, and contribute young people’s perspectives to policy and practice responses that may assist in the prevention of, or more adequate responses to, this important issue.

## 2. Research design and methodology

This exploratory qualitative study of youth homelessness was conducted in the ACT, from February - April 2018. Ethics approval for this project was provided by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee. The study was underpinned by a phenomenological approach, which supports the study of subjective and complex human experience (such as youth homelessness) through an in-depth exploration directly with those who experience it (Lester, 1999; Padgett, 2008).

Consistent with this approach, we adopted a broad definition of homelessness in which homelessness is seen as living scenarios that are socially and culturally constructed as materially inadequate, centred on the absence of a home (Roche, Barker, & McArthur, 2017). In previous studies conducted by the Institute, children have articulated that they feel homeless when they feel disconnected from family and community and are living in unsafe, unstable, and insecure environments (Moore, Noble-Carr, & McArthur, 2007). For the current study, young people were again encouraged to explore their own subjective understandings of 'homelessness' and to opt-in to the study if they perceived they had experienced homelessness between the ages of 12-15 years.

To understand the experiences of homelessness for 12 – 15-year-olds, we recruited ten 16- to 19-year-olds to participate in a semi-structured interview. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of unaccompanied homelessness when they were aged between 12 and 15 years. Retrospective studies, such as this one, are commonly used to overcome ethical and methodological issues involved in conducting research with vulnerable children (McGee, 2000). A retrospective approach was particularly helpful in this study, as it allowed young people to reflect on their life before or during their experience of homelessness, and to also consider the factors that may have assisted them to transition out of homelessness into safe, secure and stable accommodation.

There were some limitations resulting from both the study size and the retrospective approach utilised. The study relied on the accounts of ten young people who opted-in to the study. Although these young people were able to remember the events and experiences that led to their homelessness and what homelessness felt like, they were often unable to recollect exact timelines of the events or service interactions they had experienced. There were many factors that impacted on young people's ability to provide exact timeframes. These included: the traumatic nature of the events they had experienced, past substance abuse, and/or the large amount of time that had passed since they had experienced homelessness aged 12-15 years. In some cases young people were recollecting homelessness experiences that had occurred up to seven years ago. Due to the retrospective accounts provided, and the inability to pinpoint young people's experiences to exact timeframes, it is difficult to directly associate young people's experiences to specific policies and service sector practices which may have undergone significant change over the last decade.

Interviews were structured around the key research questions (listed above on page 9). However, young people were encouraged to explore any issues they believed to be significant about their homeless experience. The full interview schedule is located in Appendix A.

The study was widely publicised through the housing, disability and child, youth and family service sector within the ACT. The following criteria were used to guide services to make appropriate referrals and to assess suitability of research participants. To be eligible for the study young people were required to be aged 16-19 years and to:

- have experienced homelessness as an unaccompanied person when they were aged 12-15 years;
- not currently be experiencing a crisis; and
- currently have access to key support people who can provide support in the unlikely event that they are upset as a result of participating in the study.

The research team were mindful of important ethical considerations when undertaking research with vulnerable young people on sensitive issues. Practitioners from support services who referred participants were available to provide support to young people during and after the interview process. This support included being present for the interview (at the young person's request) and following up with the young person post interview to debrief on any issues that emerged during the interview.

Two young people chose to have a professional support person present during their interview. An extra five young people chose to complete the interview at a formal support service (where practitioners were available for support, if required, during and after the interview). Before, and at the time of their interview, all participants were also provided with the phone number for a 24-hour support service, which they were encouraged to use if their participation in the study caused them any worry or upset.

Participants chose either a male or female researcher to interview them, and gave written and verbal consent to participate in the study. Young people were advised to share as much or as little of their experiences as they felt comfortable and could stop the interview at any point. Participants received a Community Participation Payment in the form of a \$50 shopping voucher. Participants were thankful for being able to contribute their experiences and views and were hopeful this would help inform prevention or response strategies to assist other young people who may face similar circumstances into the future.

With permission from participants, interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Data analysis was conducted using NVIVO (a qualitative analysis program) which assisted in a thematic analysis to identify coherent and important examples, themes and patterns (Boyatzis, 1998). All interview transcripts were analysed by both members of the research team, allowing codes and emerging key themes to be discussed and refined throughout the analysis and reporting stages. The findings of the report reveal the important key themes and issues that emerged through this process.

### 3. Participants

Ten young people (six females and four males) participated in the study. At the time of the interview, participants' ages ranged from 16 to 20 years (two 16-year-olds, two 17-year-olds, three 18-year-olds, two 19-year-olds and one young person aged 20 years). Five of the young people were Aboriginal Australians and one other identified as coming from a culturally or linguistically diverse background.

Through the course of their interview, two participants identified they had a disability and all participants talked about experiencing poor mental health or having a diagnosis of a severe mental illness. Most commonly, participants referred to experiencing depression and anxiety and some disclosed they had experienced suicidal ideations in the past and some had attempted suicide.

The young people who participated in the study were referred by a range of agencies including: youth crisis and supported housing agencies, a youth health service, a youth engagement service, a community based out-of-home care service provider and a consumer body that represents children and young people with an out-of-home care experience.

Three of the young people noted they had initially become homeless (first left home or entered residential care) when they were under 12 years of age. Two of the participants were 13 years old when they first became homeless and the remaining five were aged 15 when they first became homeless.

At the time of their interview, half the participants had safe and secure housing. Two of the young people were living in secure public or community housing, two were living in shared private rental accommodation, and one had returned to live at home with their parent. Four of these young people were meaningfully engaged in employment or education.

For those who were still homeless or at risk of homelessness, three were currently housed in youth crisis accommodation, one in medium term supported youth housing and another was at risk of being evicted from living in a family member's public housing property. Although still unable to find safe, secure and stable housing, two of these young people were meaningfully engaged in education and two others had significant caring responsibilities for family members.

Quotes from the ten participants are presented throughout the findings and illustrate key themes which emerged during analysis. Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms and other identifying features altered to ensure anonymity.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the key issues and themes which emerged from our interviews with ten young people who had experienced unaccompanied homelessness in the ACT when they were aged 12-15 years. The young people we spoke to, although coming from diverse backgrounds, shared many similar experiences that they stated contributed to their homelessness. These factors are explored on pages 15–20 and outline that all young people described their family homes as being places where abuse, neglect or conflict were the norm. As such, the majority of young people had always felt like they had been without ‘a home’: a safe, secure and stable environment where they could hope to be happy.

The next section of the findings: ‘Leaving home and becoming homeless’ (on pages 22-23) explains young people’s gradual or sudden move away from what they perceived to be unsafe or uncaring homes. This section illustrates that young people experienced significant challenges in finding secure and safe housing options and upon leaving their family homes had “*nowhere to go*”.

Homelessness was experienced as being “*really difficult*” and “*scary*” and young people felt very “*alone*”. The section titled: ‘The experience of being homeless’ (on pages 24-30) elaborates on what it felt like to be homeless and describes young people’s interactions with informal or formal supports that were central to their homelessness experience.

The majority of the young people remained homeless and were unable to find steady shelter, money and food for many months and even many years. The consequences of living in this ‘survival mode’ are highlighted on pages 31-33: ‘Impacts of homelessness experiences’.

The young people who participated in the study also reflected on the range of practical and emotional supports they thought they and other homeless young people needed to prevent them becoming homeless, or to better support them, once they had become homeless. These are detailed in the section: ‘What young people say they need to prevent and respond to their homelessness’ on pages 34-40. Many of the young people’s needs remained unmet and at the time of their interview, and half of them were without safe, secure and stable housing.

The findings section concludes with an account of how young people in this study were able to cope with the hardships and challenges they faced prior to, and during, their homelessness experience (pages 41-43). The determination of these young people was one of the clearest themes to emerge in the study. Despite the challenges they faced, half of the study participants had found safe, secure and stable housing and many were meaningfully engaged in education or employment and/or were making significant caring contributions to their families. The key factors which contributed to young people’s transitions out of homelessness conclude the findings section and offer important insights to policy makers and practitioners hoping to better support vulnerable young people in the community.

## 4.1 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HOMELESSNESS

This section answers research question 1:

1. What were the factors that contributed to these young people aged 12-15 years becoming homeless in Canberra, ACT?

The section provides important context and understanding of the life circumstances of the young people who participated in the study. This section (and Figure 1 on page 21) illustrates that the factors contributing to young people's homelessness were multi-faceted. Five main factors emerged from the interviews, which are explored in this section. Primarily, young people stated that they were at risk of homelessness due to living within violent, neglectful and conflictual home environments. The majority of the young people in this study explained that they had been living with violence, abuse and neglect within their family homes for as long as they could remember. This had led child protection authorities to remove five of the young people from their family home. For the young people in this study, entry into out-of-home care had not led to safe, stable and secure housing. Young people found themselves living in either residential care or foster care households unable to provide them with the felt safety or care they needed.

Alongside persistent violence, abuse and neglect, as they entered early adolescence young people found themselves experiencing increasing levels of conflict with their parents/carers and/or siblings. Young people stated their poor mental health and disengagement from school and peers compounded and contributed to their inability to cope at home and often increased tensions in their households. With increasing levels of unhappiness, a general feeling that nothing was 'going right', and no-one acknowledging, understanding or doing anything to help, young people left their homes and became homeless.

The figure at the conclusion of this section (on page 21) provides a visual illustration of the diverse precursors and pathways to homelessness described by young people in the study.

### 4.1.1 Living with violence, abuse and neglect within family homes

All but one of the young people in the study attributed their homelessness to experiences of growing up within violent, abusive or neglectful family homes. For most of these young people (seven out of ten), violence, abuse and neglect had been apparent from an early age. A further two young people explained that violence, abuse and neglect had only become a constant in their home from 10 years of age. For one young person this came after the death of their parent, which resulted in them moving in with their other parent who had substance abuse issues. For the other, home had been free of violence until she reached early adolescence when a parent became physically abusive towards her:

*I was living with my dad and my mum and when I got around to the age of like 13, me and my dad weren't getting along and it started off as abusive arguing, like ... like swear words and screaming, yelling and then it got to a point where it got abusive and physical (Clare).*

Therefore, for nine out of ten young people in this study physical violence, abuse and neglect had always been, or had become a persistent problem in their household and the main reason why they became homeless at a young age.

*I don't know, growing up was hard... Every day was hard...it was every day...My family life was really hard, my father wasn't around and my mother was a drug addict ... I copped all of the forms of abuse growing up as a kid from most of my family, I got beaten all of the time... And like it was never easy (Daniel).*

As Daniel's quote indicates, there were a number of equally challenging issues that co-existed within abusive and neglectful homes. These included familial substance abuse (most often parent/s, but sometimes also a sibling) and parental mental illness and disability:

*[There was a] bit of domestic violence [and] my mum [and sibling] was also on drugs at the time (Grace).*

*My dad has a [disability] and I think the medication he was taking or something. I don't know. But it kind of mixed with him the wrong way and he took his frustrations out on me (Clare).*

*I guess most of it was just my mother and her depression and all of that stuff. But she took it out on us kids and that is what affected us most (Daniel).*

Many of the young people reinforced it was due to these issues their parents were unable to provide a safe and happy home. The young people often stressed that their parents did love them, but because of their substance abuse or other issues they did not have the capacity to provide a safe and caring home.

*Mum has always been very loving. She's always been a very loving person. But I mean, she was an alcoholic at one stage, like pretty heavy and we got in a lot of arguments when she was an alcoholic. Yeah, and a lot of mental health problems (Isaac).*

*[My mum] used to do ice back when I was in foster care. She went to rehab, she did all that, but I guess it wasn't enough because she started drinking. I wish that I was still with my mum. I love my family (Sophie).*

*She [mum]... did look after us but not real well because she has, not 100% brain capacity, so they removed us and then I went into foster care (Jess).*

Due to the issues the young people described, at least seven of the young people were known to child protection authorities. Five children were removed into out-of-home care, whilst others remained living at home, often with some family support provided by community based agencies. Most of those remaining at home explained that multiple notifications were made throughout their childhood by various people, including school, staff and neighbours. As Daniel's quote illustrates, this often did little to improve the challenges and abuse he faced within his home, and sometimes even increased the abuse the young people were subject to:

*[The school] knew. They knew what it was like at home. And they [child protection] have been constantly getting reports but they... [did nothing]. And I got flogged for it every time (Daniel).*

Young people who had experienced persistent violence, abuse and neglect in their family homes, and were not removed by child protection authorities, stated they became homeless between the ages of 12 and 15 because they were not prepared to stay living in these households.

#### **4.1.2 Entering the Out-of-Home Care system**

Half of the young people in the study were removed from their family homes and placed into out-of-home care. As is evident by their participation in the study, this intervention did not prevent them from becoming homeless. Some young people were placed into foster care environments that either immediately, or over time, became just as challenging for them. Some placements quickly broke down. Others were placed in what appeared to be stable placements, but where young people reported feeling increasingly unsafe, unloved and uncared for. Young people in these situations felt they had limited opportunities to seek support:

*When you go into foster care, your family is supposed to be good... I have been in foster care all my life... Like they [Care and Protection authorities] were involved but I never felt like I was actually able to speak what I wanted to speak. Just because they were sitting right there and like they leave and then I get in trouble... I was just more too scared to make my voice heard (Lachlan).*

*[My foster home] wasn't very good... lots of screaming... physical violence... I used to wish all the time like, 'I just need to be somewhere that's not here'. And I felt really, really, really stuck. And I was quite unwell because of what I was living with... They just didn't notice and if they did notice they didn't do anything about it... So yeah... If I was listened to more or I don't know. I feel like people just look at kids and they think, 'they're so young. They don't know anything' (Poppy).*

Young people often took shared responsibility for the breakdown of their foster care placements, explaining this was due to their disruptive and challenging behaviours:

*I was like, naughty a little bit... Slamming doors and swearing... probably 'cause I was moved from my mum so it's all different, different like environment (Jess).*

For the young people in this study, there were two pathways out of unsatisfactory foster care placements – both of which led young people into homelessness. One was for the young person to voluntarily move out of home. The other was determined for them – with child protection authorities placing them into residential care settings.

Young people who had spent time living in residential care, explained that residential care facilities were not places that provided them with a safe, secure and stable environment. Two of the young people remained living in residential care up to the age of 15 years, and decided to participate in this study because residential care was not regarded as a place that provided 'a home' and therefore they felt 'homeless':

*I went into [different] houses... like at different times for different people. And had different carers each day (Jess).*

*It was hard because...it was just like I didn't feel safe there at all. I had to lock everything in a safe. They told me that this girl had stolen cars before. So I had to park somewhere else and I couldn't have lighters around, and the power was turned off at the wall (Poppy).*

Like their peers who remained at home and experienced persistent violence, abuse, and neglect within their birth family homes, the young people who were removed into untenable foster care placements or residential care, felt that homelessness – being without safe, secure and stable housing – was a constant in their life.

#### **4.1.3 Experiencing increasing levels of family conflict**

Existing alongside the issues of family violence, abuse and neglect, ongoing family conflict was mentioned by all young people as contributing to their move into unaccompanied homelessness. Increasing levels of family conflict often became the major reason young people gave for their first episode of homelessness.

Ongoing and escalating conflict between young people and their parents (and sometimes siblings) was mainly characterised as consisting of: “yelling”, “fighting”, “swearing”, “screaming”, but also, “not talking” and “keeping to yourself”. There were some shared themes in regards to the factors that contributed to escalating levels of conflict between young people and their parents. For example, within challenging home environments, and as they aged, some young people struggled to accept what they perceived to be authoritarian parenting approaches, including parents applying unreasonable rules and unrealistic pressure and expectations. Some described that their parents/carers were “always criticising” them and that they were constantly “being compared to other siblings” who they felt received more love and attention than them.

Young people found these parenting approaches difficult to tolerate, particularly when the rules parents were trying to enforce were inconsistent with what their offspring saw as negative parental behaviours. For example, Isaac described the conflict he experienced with his parents who were trying to control and restrict his behaviours, while struggling with their own substance misuse:

*For me personally when I was kicked out, I was pretty young for my first time. It was pretty much just I guess anti-authority towards parents and loved ones and family. Yeah, I don't know. I hated my parents and wanted to do all the things they were doing. ... Again, from my own experience it was like a lot of the things...being violent and disruptive... I kind of wanted to be kicked out at certain times of my life. ...So I want to be out of home... My parents are scum bags and I want to be out of home (Isaac).*

There appeared to be little respite to the conflict that existed between young people and their parents. Immediately prior to the young people’s first episode of homelessness conflict had become a dominant characteristic of their relationship.

#### **4.1.4 Feeling unwell, unhappy and becoming disengaged from school, peers and family**

The young people we spoke to described having to deal with a number of concurrent challenges, which they thought either contributed to conflict at home, or made conflict with their parents even more difficult to cope with. Young people stated that

their behaviours and actions played a significant role in family tensions and they shared some of the responsibility for the ongoing conflict in their homes.

*I wasn't treated the best, but also I wasn't acting the way I could have been... I was being very much a dickhead about the situation... So I could have been a lot nicer I guess... Yeah an accumulation of everything... so I just had to leave (Lachlan).*

When discussing their own behaviours that contributed to conflict at home, it became clear that at the time leading up to their homelessness, all of the young people were experiencing a general sense of unhappiness and disengagement with the world around them. The young males in the study, in particular, spoke about being angry and disengaged at school:

*Yeah school was really hard because I couldn't learn because of my [disabilities] and all of that stuff... School wasn't a happy place for me... I almost got expelled in year six. I was a bad kid (Daniel).*

*I was always getting in trouble in school... School was always a bit of a turmoil place. I don't know. I got bullied in primary school but I don't think that has a lot to do with it. Yeah, probably Year 9 is when it really started to become, I just became a violent person, I guess (Isaac).*

Females in the study also talked about experiencing problems and becoming disengaged from school, but were more likely to explain they were generally feeling depressed, anxious and isolated. They also described difficulties they were having with their friends:

*I was usually shy, didn't talk to anyone, didn't really do much work... Just I didn't do much work and in high school I skipped a lot (Jess).*

*I was hanging around bad influences. I wasn't going to school.... Yeah, I was peer pressured into doing stuff I didn't really want to do (Grace).*

With ongoing conflict at home, at school and with peers, many of the young people were struggling with poor mental health that for some led to self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts:

*I have depression and I had friends but I didn't hang out with them much. It's been weeks on end just in my bed... Yeah. I didn't call them [friends] (Sophie).*

*It got to the stage where I was self-harming pretty badly and just not, and then I attempted suicide (Poppy).*

*Some of the other time was feeling really shit and depressed... Had a lot of mental health issues when I was younger... Yeah. Just suicide attempts and thoughts. Numerous evaluations that were in the hospital for suicidal behaviour... just thoughts and just being in an unstable environment (Thomas).*

Although Emily's story (below), mainly focused on the conflict with her parents that led to her becoming homeless, encapsulates the feeling many young people had: that alongside family violence or conflict, nothing positive was going on for them when

they became homeless. As such, there were a number of factors influencing young people's actions 'to leave home' or parent's actions to 'kick them out' of home:

*I just remember being super upset, lying in my bed. I didn't trust my [sibling]... I didn't have any friends. Pressure, expectation, didn't really have attention, anything. I don't know. I didn't really feel like anything was really going for me. I think I lost interest in my sporting and stuff, too. I didn't want to move. I was tired. I didn't think I was eating very much, I'd lost my appetite... So I was just in a really bad head space... Dad was quite violent... The house rules were pretty fucked. We couldn't even lock or shut our doors. I was like, There's no privacy. There's nothing here. I was like, No, I'm gonna leave and I'm not coming back (Emily).*

#### **4.1.5 Feeling isolated: no-one understanding or helping with challenging life circumstances**

Emily's story is consistent with others' stories: she felt nothing was going right for her and nobody understood or could do anything to help. It was clear that young people considered that no-one had a full understanding or appreciation of how bad things were for them and the impacts this was having on their mental health and wellbeing.

Young people took shared responsibility for the fact that others did not know how bad things were, because they often could not, or did not, attempt to explain the challenges they were facing or how they were feeling:

*Because no one realised how upset I was... I don't think at the age of 15, or 14, that I could have articulated my words very well to explain what I was going through. And they didn't really check up on me... So they wouldn't have known that it was so messed up... It was in my head and they just weren't aware of it. I never really got any support around that (Emily).*

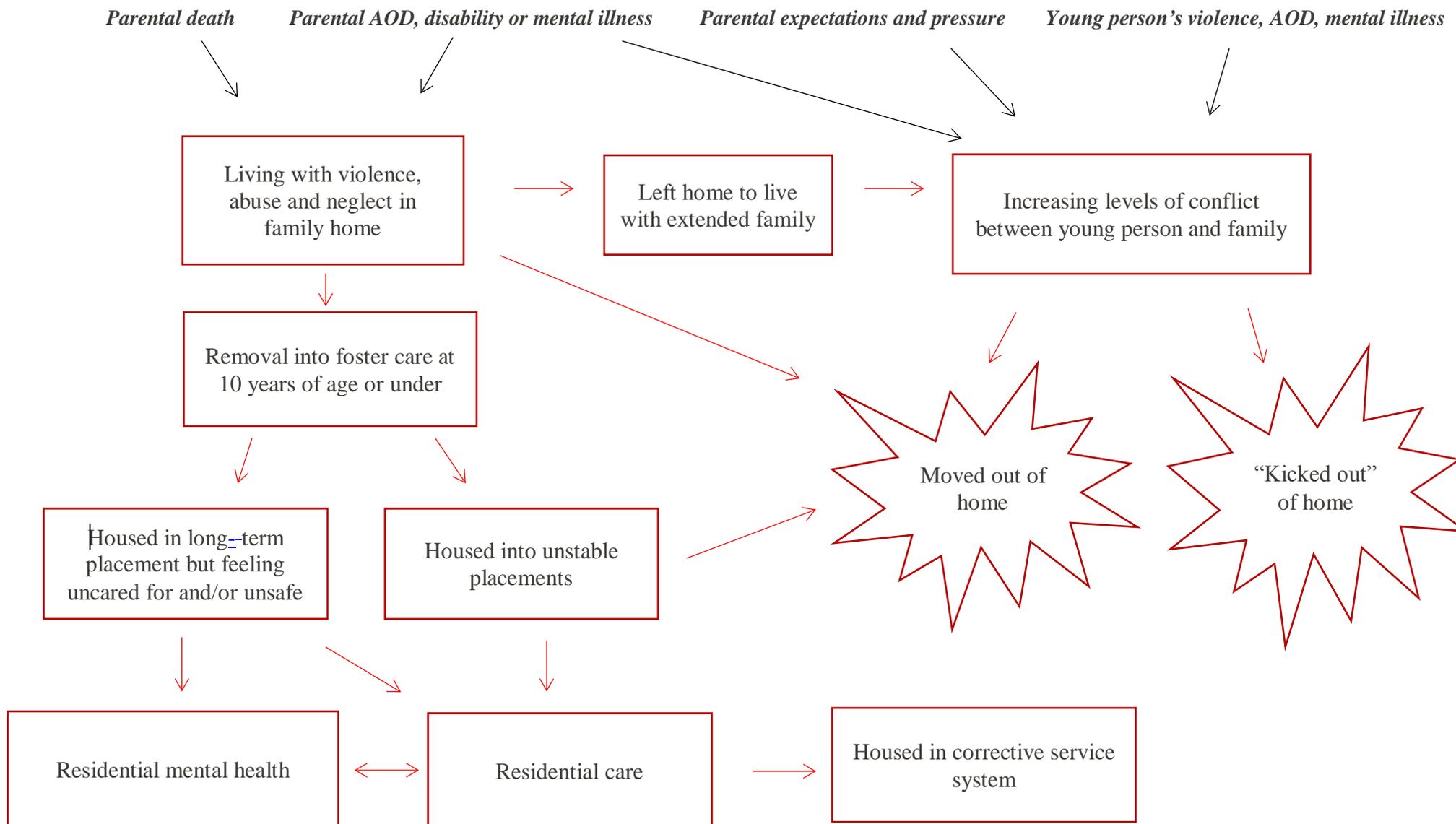
*Yeah they didn't really listen to me and I didn't tell them either [about how I was feeling when living in residential care] (Jess).*

Some young people had tried to reach out and explain their situation, but they felt like they had been shut down:

*Well that's when I felt like I had no options because literally every adult that I was asking for help was saying, "No." Like, "You have to go home." And I was saying, "I literally cannot go there. I cannot." So that's when I said I had decided I will sleep on the street. Anything would be better than going back into that house (Poppy).*

At this point, the young people in the study felt they were left with few options. They realised they had to make a change to their current circumstances, but they had "nowhere to go".

**FIGURE 1: PRECURSORS AND PATHWAYS TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS**



## 4.2 LEAVING HOME AND BECOMING HOMELESS

### 4.2.1 Wanting to move away from persistent family abuse, neglect and conflict

It was difficult to isolate the exact factors and direct precursors that led to young people becoming homeless. For most of the young people, the act of leaving home was one that came after persistent family abuse, neglect or conflict, at a time when they felt few things were going right in their life, and when they could not foresee that anyone could, or would, do anything to improve their life circumstances. With few options available to them, young people were clearly moving *away from* something, rather than moving *toward* anything.

*Domestic violence ...My mum was also on drugs at the time...Yeah, she couldn't support me physically.....And, I wanted to change, so that's what I did (Grace).*

*It was just a combination of everything and I was sick of the abuse and I just wanted to get out of it...I didn't feel like I had any options at all but to run away (Daniel).*

*So yeah I decided to run away just because I wasn't really feeling the best there and I just needed to get out of there I guess (Lachlan).*

*Yeah so it was definitely like, I remember thinking I still thought that it was me. But I knew that the environment that I was in was not gonna help me get better at all. So yeah I just said that I wasn't gonna go home which was like a whole big issue. It was very difficult (Poppy).*

### 4.2.2 Gradually moving away from home

For some, moving away from their home environment was a gradual journey. These young people did not recall making a definitive decision to move out of home, but simply found themselves spending more and more time away from negative and conflictual home environments, until at one point returning home no longer felt like an option.

*I went to school to get away from home and then I went home to get away from school and then when I went home, the streets was basically my home (Daniel).*

*Every night, I would sneak out of the house, and I would go [to]... this nature reserve... It was the only place I could really breathe... Then I would sleep through the day because I wanted to avoid my parents... I would go out every night, come in, in the morning... The night I got kicked out when I was 15, is because my Dad caught me sneaking back in at six in the morning (Emily).*

For some, this gradual move away from home involved seeking respite by spending a few nights, or weeks, at a family friend's household, and then returning home again. It is not clear whether this return home was done in the hope of things being better, or simply because they had run out of other places to stay. Regardless, each time they returned home, things were either the same, or worse. As such, they would inevitably leave again, eventually to never return.

### 4.2.3 Suddenly moving away from home: Critical events leading to homelessness

A gradual move away from home was the more common experience of the young people in the study. There were, however, a couple of young people that identified a specific event or point in time, when they made a clean break away from their home – moving out, determined never to return. For Clare, the specific event was a particularly violent episode where she was physically abused by one of her parents. Clare had experienced years of physical abuse in their home, involving multiple contacts with police and notifications to child protection authorities. Clare could not explain what set this violent act apart from previous ones, but simply stated:

*I just left and that was it. I didn't want nothing to do with either of them because my mum didn't stick up for me after seeing me get abused... I just grabbed all my clothes in a suitcase and I just took it with me. And it was really hard... it was really difficult because I had nowhere to go (Clare).*

For Poppy, the critical moment was her suicide attempt. During Poppy's stay in hospital and at a residential youth mental health program she was able to reflect on her home environment and how it had impacted her mental health. Before this time, she had accepted the abuse and conflict that occurred within home environment as being normal, because she had never known any different.

*I actually didn't know. I didn't think that there was a problem. Like I didn't realise. It's only now looking back that I think, "Oh my god." So at the time I didn't know that. I just thought going home to a screaming house was normal (Poppy).*

Once Poppy had time to reflect on how damaging this environment was to her mental health she decided that she could not return home.

*I don't think I've ever felt so desperate. Because... I was gonna be on the street or do something to end my life because they were my only two options (Poppy).*

Again, even in this circumstance, Poppy stated that the professionals involved in her care were unable to provide any viable housing options for her. Instead she stated:

*For me because everyone was trying to make me go home... And it was really frustrating for me because it got to the point where I was trying to express why I didn't wanna go home, but I was just being shut down a lot...and Care and Protection pretty much said, 'You need to suck it up'. And actually, literally said to me, 'You need to suck it up and go home because you don't have any other option' (Poppy).*

## 4.3 THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING HOMELESS

This section answers research question 2:

- What have been the lived experiences of unaccompanied homeless young people whilst aged between 12-15 years in Canberra, ACT?

As young people's interactions with others were central to their experiences of homelessness, this section also goes onto address research question 3:

- What were the informal and formal support and service experiences of these young people?

The section demonstrates that homelessness was experienced as being exceptionally difficult, and a time when young people often felt scared and alone. Having nowhere to go that could provide safety, security and happiness was the primary and shared concern of young people in the study. During their homelessness, young people became occupied with the constant struggle to source shelter, money and food. With limited informal support networks to meet these needs, young people would often spend nights on the streets. Although young people were well-connected with formal supports both prior to—and after—becoming homeless, their interactions with services (at least while they were aged under 16 years) did little to help alleviate their homelessness.

### 4.3.1 Nowhere to go and feeling scared and alone

As stated above, young people most often had nowhere to go when they left their family home. The majority had left with very few possessions and had to quickly work out where they were going and what they were going to do. This was described as being “*really difficult*” and a “*scary*” experience. Many stated they had never felt so “*alone*”:

*I did leave home and it was really difficult because I had nowhere to go... It was a really, really difficult situation... 'Oh my God, what am I going to eat for dinner tonight? Where am I going to stay tonight?'... It's a really frightening position to be in when you're that young... I felt alone... why am I in this situation and no one else is in this situation? (Clare).*

*That was a really hard day (Emily).*

*I didn't know who to go to... Yeah I didn't know who to talk to about being lonely and being by myself (Jess).*

It was difficult for us to capture and explain what it was like for the young people while they experienced homelessness. Many young people we spoke to struggled to remember what life was like for them during this time. The timelines that we tried to (retrospectively) develop with some participants about key events in their life related to their experience of homelessness and service use were not very accurate, as some young people found it difficult to provide a coherent and complete story of their past events and experiences.

*I literally just slept it away. I don't acknowledge anything. Personally, I was an emotional wreck because I didn't have anything to lose. Nothing really mattered, to be honest. I was just sad, numb sad (Sophie).*

Some young people stated that they were also using drugs whilst staying with friends or staying on the streets and felt this impacted on their ability to recall what life was like whilst they were homeless:

*I was more about drugs I guess when I was going through the homeless stage, just to try to lose grip of reality...Yeah, because I didn't really want to think about the stage I was in, in my life. So I took a lot of acid...Yeah so just because that helps you slip from reality I guess (Lachlan).*

Despite having some difficulties in sharing their felt experiences, young people were clear that they had to focus their energy and time on sourcing shelter, money and food. Although being connected to many formal support services, young people mostly relied on family and friends for these basic survival needs.

#### **4.3.2 Relying on informal support from family and friends**

After moving away from their family home, young people had little choice but to immediately turn their minds to sourcing shelter and food. The first option was often extended family, family friends or friends' households. Due to the circumstances that pre-existed their homelessness – which included becoming isolated from peers and experiencing enduring conflict with family, young people often had very few informal support options. Extended family members were often entangled in the family conflict and challenges that had caused young people's homelessness and this restricted the support extended family could provide:

*My mum's telling her mum not to let me come here and it was just really difficult and my friend's parents weren't letting me stay at their house ... I had nowhere to go (Clare).*

When sourcing shelter from extended family or family friends', young people sometimes discovered that these home environments were little better than their family of origin which they had just left. Nevertheless, with few options, young people attempted to stay for as long as possible, or until they sourced alternative accommodation.

*There was this really close family friend that I called my auntie and I still call her my auntie to this day, she was always there for me, but her and my mum did drugs and that together too (Daniel).*

In most cases, family and friends were often only able to provide housing for very short periods of time, sometimes a few nights, sometimes weeks and on a few occasions for some young people, months. This was often due to issues of overcrowding. In addition, friends' parents would often only help on a very short-term basis because they did not want to take responsibility for someone else, especially someone who is currently experiencing mental health or other life challenges. As a result, some young people found that their friendship circle dwindled quickly and those friends who did not share lives of instability, no longer became a source of support to them:

*Grandma's for a night, then a friend's house the other night, then another friend's house the other night and then back to grandma. It was just back and forth... [then some of my friends] they're not in an unstable environment and*

*situation like I was. So, they'll be like... I can't help anymore, I've got my life to worry about, I got work tonight, or I've got this (Clare).*

*Some of them said 'no' and then one girl that I was friends with, 'cause I didn't really have that many friends. So she, her parents said they didn't want, they knew, they just said they didn't wanna get involved with it (Poppy).*

Young people also explained that they were sensitive to their impact on others, and would often choose to leave short-term informal housing options because they felt guilty about the perceived negative impact they were having on people they were staying with and relying on:

*I was happy there and it was stable... but it was too crowded... That's one of the main reasons I didn't want to move there because I didn't want to feel like I was... intruding on their life and making everything difficult (Daniel).*

*I remember thinking that sort of thing. I wanted to survive on the street. I didn't want to couch surf because I felt guilty going to someone's house, eating their food, doing whatever, under their care. I did spend a month couch surfing with my boyfriend's best mate (Emily).*

Most often young people did not have an income of their own, so they were also unable to financially contribute to the households they were temporarily staying in or to buy their own food.

*I had to wait until I was 16 I think it was, before I couldn't even get an income. So, I had no money, I had nowhere to live... It was pretty ridiculous. [For three years] ...That's a long time... Then it put you in a really hard situation, because you got no money (Clare).*

*Yep. And from that, I guess I wasn't going to school so I got cut off Centrelink (Lachlan).*

Due to limited options, and feeling guilty for relying on others for too long, some young people spent years going from place to place, and inevitably spending nights on the streets and sourcing food and money from wherever they could.

*My [grandparent] gave me a little bit of money, not that much, like \$20 and she'd buy me lunch sometimes. My [sibling] always gave me a place to sleep and food on the table if I needed it. Not all of the time because she has a bunch of kids ...so it's like really crowded (Sophie).*

Despite the often inconsistent and strained nature of these informal supports, many young people stated they could not have survived their homelessness if it wasn't for the practical and emotional support of significant others, mainly their friends.

### **4.3.3 Surviving on the streets**

For those who did not have informal support options, or who found themselves in between friends' places with nowhere to go, the only option was to spend nights on the streets. Just over half of the young people talked about spending nights on the streets. This appeared to be particularly challenging, unsafe, and detrimental to their

health and wellbeing. Young people in these circumstances focused on surviving day-by-day (or sometimes even hour-by-hour) and felt especially vulnerable and scared:

*I remember picking, if I was gonna sleep at the night rather than walking ... I'd prefer to walk, because then I was aware of who was going to attack me. I was scared that someone was gonna attack me while I was sleeping. When I would sleep, I would pick areas in the dark, where no one could see me. I don't know. Like, in alleyways or whatever. But if someone was gonna get me, I was fucked, cause I was sleeping and they were gonna attack me. I would never sleep under a streetlight or anything, because I thought I was more likely to be attacked... I remember a couple of nights, people would come up to me, ask me if I've got a lighter or a cigarette or stuff. I was like, I don't even do drugs, so no, I don't have it. Then they'd get all scary and violent and I'd think, holy shit! How am I gonna fight these people? (Emily).*

*It was a scary feeling because you were like, I would have been a 13-year-old girl who was like... yeah, by myself, it's scary. And especially like, sometimes I wouldn't have credit on my phone or my phone would be dead and I would have to charge it and I had nowhere to charge it (Clare).*

Due to safety concerns, when they found themselves having to spend nights on the street, young people tried to make sure they were accompanied by friends. They also described that they got little sleep, choosing instead to remain vigilant to ensure their safety:

*So then me and my mate, he actually decided to come and live with me on the streets so yeah, we were sleeping just around [Canberra suburb] and stuff, just trying to find shelter and cover and things like that (Lachlan).*

*It was just like couch surfing all the time, every single night and if I had nowhere to stay, I would just... I wouldn't have anywhere to stay. Like I have to stay on the street or make one of my friends come with me. Or spent the whole night out on the street walking about and it was just ridiculous (Clare).*

Friends also helped with providing food. Many young people, however, described limiting their food intake out of necessity and a couple of the young people stated they had to resort to stealing the practical items they required:

*I don't think I was eating properly. I think I was underweight, like I remember I'd feel like sometimes I wouldn't eat and it was really hard and then I got to a point where I don't feel hungry anymore, which was really scary. Because I was so underweight (Clare).*

*Like, this is cold and I don't have enough clothes to be doing this, and I don't have the money for food, I don't have a job. [So there was] a lot of stealing, like a lot of stealing... clothes, shoes, food. Yeah, stealing things, giving them away. Losing a lot of stuff, just losing stuff, yeah (Isaac).*

Some young people in the study said they lived like this—staying for short periods of time with friends and family and spending some time on the streets—for up to 3 years.

#### 4.3.4 Interactions with formal supports

Although young people preferred to seek support from family and friends, all the young people we spoke to also accessed support from a variety of services or agencies. The young people in the study provided diverse accounts of what it was like to seek support, how well they were able to connect with individual workers within services/agencies, and the level of support they received from them.

Young people spoke about being connected to a large number of support agencies. These connections often existed prior to their homelessness and were most often maintained (albeit inconsistently) after they became homeless. The services and agencies that young people were connected to throughout their childhoods included: school counsellors, child and family support agencies, child protection authorities, youth health services and youth mental health services. The first section of this report ('factors contributing to homelessness') highlighted that young people often felt let down by these services – as they were unable to provide them and their families with the interventions and supports they required.

Upon becoming homeless young people often remained connected with many of these pre-existing services, and in addition, also became connected to further programs and services. Some of these support services included: mediation programs, crisis and supported housing services, mentoring programs, youth engagement services, employment or education programs, youth justice agencies and Centrelink. It was not uncommon for young people to be connected to more than six different agencies or services at the time while they were homeless.

It is not clear whether the young people sought out all of these services themselves or whether they were increasingly being referred to services because those they were currently connected with could not meet their needs. Despite having connections to many services, some young people explained that they were reluctant to engage with formal supports, because they preferred to be independent.

*Yeah. Just pushing family away, and pushing friends away, and pushing loved ones away. Pushing school away and pretty much any support services. Mental health services, places like this [housing services] if I needed it was, 'No, I don't need that' (Isaac).*

The apparent lack of control over the support the young people received may have contributed to their reluctance to engage fully and effectively with the array of services they were connected to. Young people described they had little control or choice over what agencies they became connected to, or the services they received from them. Young people also often described receiving a lack of information about how workers made decisions about the care and support they received within these services. In fact, many of the young people were not confident that most workers actually understood what they required. Young people stated this was often made difficult by the preconceived ideas others had about them because of their life circumstances and homelessness:

*Everyone thinks I would be doing drugs. I think that's the biggest ... when everyone jumps to conclusions, or that I've dropped out of school. At the [services] no one believed me when I hadn't ... And they thought maybe I was lying to them, so I wouldn't have to address those problems. But it's like, obviously I'm looking for help. I'm not gonna lie... If you have a decent conversation with me... I'll talk about whatever (Emily).*

At other times, when workers did appear empathic, young people felt that formal supporters were limited in the breadth of support they could offer and often could not do much to help anyway:

*Yeah, they [school teachers and counsellors] knew my circumstances that's why they weren't so like on my back all the time ... They would say that, 'She's struggling, she needs help.' ... They offered me more help, but it didn't really get anywhere (Clare).*

*They knew, they knew what it was like at home. They tried giving me some support at school, they gave me school uniforms and they helped with school excursions and just stuff like that at school... That's what I got all through my childhood, that's what I got, all different supports like that all through my childhood and I never got any of the support I actually needed (Daniel).*

As such, despite being connected to multiple services, young people stated that only one or two of these were likely to be helpful and only two of the young people stated they had encountered a service that was able to help meet all of their needs. The support young people most wanted - safe, secure and stable housing – appeared to be the most difficult for them to obtain. Most young people were only able to obtain crisis or supported housing once they were aged over 15 years. Young people explained they had to take personal responsibility for gaining access to the limited housing options available, either by submitting application forms for public housing, or by repeatedly calling a centralised housing support service every day to self-advocate:

*[I was] just almost 16. And that's when I contacted [ACT's centralised housing information and support service] '...I just looked them up. I can't remember how I knew about it but I just looked them up and contacted them. And I told them the situation and I said, 'I will be, like I don't have anywhere to go after this date'. And I called them back every single day 'cause she said it's good to call back and just remind us that the application is there. So I called them back every day... They didn't really say anything. They just said they would contact me if something became available. So I didn't actually, like I didn't know [what was going to happen] (Poppy).*

Young people noted that the housing supports offered to them did not meet their needs for secure housing. All of the places they were referred to provided only short term accommodation:

*Like even now, I'm finding it hard to find anywhere that I can actually stay because this is like 3 months. You can only stay here for 3 months (Sophie).*

Others, who had gained access to crisis housing supports, stated that as well as being short term, this housing often did not feel safe. After accessing this form of housing, many left, as they did not feel like it was a viable option:

*I think the refuge probably wasn't a place for me, because these people are doing lots of drugs. They shouldn't even be in the refuge. They should be in rehab or something, I don't know. That was quite confronting. I've been isolated and sheltered my whole life. I've never experienced anything on the outside. I never knew anything (Emily).*

*They gave me one place for a refuge and then I tried that refuge out ...And it was just not ... It wasn't a safe environment... I think they could've been a bit better with who they refer the younger people to that don't do drugs and don't drink alcohol at that age... I went to a refuge for like a night and I got bullied... Yeah, I felt really unsafe. Like it's ridiculous how they put kids in refuges like that, it's not a safe environment (Clare).*

In these cases young people chose to remain reliant on informal support networks for shelter, while continuing to access other youth services to receive some emotional support and practical support such as, bus tickets and food vouchers.

Overall, the service experiences of the young people were mixed. There were some young people who found crisis accommodation staff to be excellent. These young people stated that when they accessed crisis or medium term housing, this was the first time they received the holistic help they required to enable them to make plans for their future and seek further stable housing options.

*Since I have moved in here, they have given me all the support that I have needed and I have, when I moved in here, I wasn't doing anything with my life, I didn't really see where I wanted to go with it, it was just day by day.... I know I have always got somewhere that I can come back to if I need it and they will always give me support (Daniel).*

Supporters who could assist young people to navigate complex service systems to secure an income (through Centrelink) or long-term housing were particularly valued. All of the young people who spoke about making an application to the Department of Housing for long-term accommodation described that they had initially tried to do so themselves, but had experienced it as being a very frustrating process. Young people felt they had received adverse, unfair treatment from Department of Housing that was only able to be resolved with sustained support from a number of professional advocates.

Finding formal supporters who would not pre-judge, but would listen, and understand the issues facing the young person and advocate on their behalf was particularly valued by young people. When this care was received it made a dramatic difference to young people's lives and their outlook on their future.

## 4.4 IMPACTS OF HOMELESSNESS EXPERIENCES

An exploration of short- or long-term impacts of youth homelessness was not a focus of this study. The young people's accounts of unsafe and insecure housing, however, confirmed that being without a home does have a negative impact on young people's schooling, physical and mental health, relationships with others and future opportunities. Due to the range of challenges that young people faced prior to entering a period of unaccompanied homelessness, it is difficult to isolate a direct causal relationship with any of these issues to young people's unaccompanied homeless experience. Likewise the impacts, presented below, do not aim to provide a full account of the consequences of unaccompanied homelessness for young people. Rather, the brief account below highlights the significant and common effects of youth homelessness that young people themselves thought were important and wanted to share. These issues also provide important insights into the needs of young homeless people discussed in section 4.5.

### 4.4.1 Disengagement with school

As stated above on page 19, many of the young people had become disengaged from school prior to becoming homeless. Although all of the young people spoke about school staff (including teachers, nurses and counsellors) being supportive, their homelessness further entrenched their disengagement from school. While homeless, the practicalities involved in getting to school each day and doing any productive work once you got there, was often difficult:

*There would be days where I couldn't get to school because I had no money. And then there'd be days where I'd be going through all these stuff without my family and I would just feel too depressed to go to school. Or I would have no food to take to school and I couldn't focus because I'm hungry. It's so hard to focus when you're starving (Clare).*

*I literally can't even get to school because I have social anxiety and I can't catch buses because they freak me out. So I haven't been able to get to school lately even though I really need to go (Sophie).*

Once stable housing had been sourced, many of the young people reported that they had attempted to re-engage with school and spoke of enjoying the positive meaning and purpose it provided. These young people who had secured housing realised they had lost opportunities by being disengaged with their education and were trying to make up for lost time.

*I really like school, though. Because of not living at home, I feel like I've already experienced part of the adult life. So now that I'm finishing school, I don't really want to because school's so great. And I have to go there five days a week and just attend, at school, and the assignments are like nothing compared to everything else. So it's like really good. I love school (Emily)*

*Ever since I moved here [secure shared housing], though, I been going. I went every single day to school... Like everyone thought I wouldn't get a year 10 Certificate ...But what did I do? I got it (Grace).*

#### **4.4.2 Poor physical and mental health**

Young people's physical and mental health was often poor prior to becoming homeless. All of the young people in this study spoke of symptoms of anxiety and depression, or of having a severe diagnosed mental illness (such as: bipolar disorder, depression and eating disorders). Some young people spoke about the difficulty of managing mental health issues whilst being unsafe and unhoused:

*I also got diagnosed with depression while I was in there [residential care] too, because I was just by myself and I didn't know if I had any friends or who to talk to (Jess).*

Some young people turned to substance abuse to cope with their deteriorating mental health and difficult life circumstances. Isaac indicated that this is almost to be expected when living on the streets:

*I guess in the snowball it leads to drugs fairly quickly...As part of the lifestyle, I guess... Drugs and alcohol. Drugs is a big focal point (Isaac).*

For some, leaving stressful home environments and then finally accessing the support that came with supported housing, allowed them to finally address and improve their mental health:

*Like in a way it's been good for my mental health. I don't have that like criticism every day, like what I did... It was really negative (Grace).*

#### **4.4.3 Continued family conflict**

Young people who chose not to sever family ties when they left home faced many ongoing challenges in trying to negotiate contact with family members. Such contact remained conflictual, unsafe, and painful.

*Yeah [my mum] she calls me more, but I don't answer...Yeah. I think it's so broken down that nothing really progressed. Lessons haven't been learned or anything. I don't think she's gotten anything valuable to say. She doesn't have anything positive to say (Emily).*

*I started talking to my mum again and we started resolving things because she told me she was done with it and obviously she's not because...it's like totally bad again (Sophie).*

Despite all of these difficulties, some young people retained the caring role for parents and/or siblings that they had whilst living at home:

*Yeah I am staying there for a bit to look after [my parent and sibling]... My [parent] is in hospital and my [sibling]...I have to look after him and stuff too. So I am constantly going back and forth from the hospital (Daniel).*

#### **4.4.4 Loss**

Loss was the one issue young people were able to clearly indicate as having directly resulted from their unaccompanied homelessness. Young people were confronted with many losses as a result of leaving home. Young people who were removed from their parents' care talked about the loss that came with this:

*Yeah I was sad that I couldn't see her often... Yeah I worried about her a bit (Jess).*

*She [my mum] went to rehab... I wish that I was still with my mum. I love my family (Sophie).*

Even when young people had decided to move away from their family homes, they still felt the loss of no longer having a family and what this was supposed to provide. In addition, as the quote below explains, young people not only left their family behind, but also many of their possessions, longstanding friendships and connections with schools and places of employment.

*Between that phase [after leaving home] I lost, I had to come here [supported housing] and start fresh. I lost my job, I left school, I lost all my friends, lost my family, like everything was like come here and start fresh. Which was a good thing, but it was hard as well (Poppy).*

#### **4.4.5 Inability to be future focused**

With the many losses and the challenges they faced, young people often felt like their future opportunities were severely limited. Some were so unwell and consumed with surviving each day that they had lost the ability to be future focused:

*Well to be honest, I don't know, I don't plan my life that far ahead, I have never planned my life that far ahead because growing up, I never wanted to live so I never planned my life, I lived it day by day so that's what I still do (Daniel).*

## 4.5 WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY THEY NEED TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO THEIR HOMELESSNESS

This section provides young people's perspectives on research questions 4-6:

- What were the needs of these young people?
- What would help prevent young people (aged 12-15 years) from becoming homeless?
- How might we best provide support to young people who experience homelessness when aged between 12-15 years in Canberra?

The young people we interviewed were able to reflect on their experience of being homeless at a young age and articulate what they needed, both before and during their homeless experience. The needs of young people prior to becoming homeless included: a greater awareness and understanding from professionals about their home environments and the impact of family violence, abuse, neglect and conflict on children and young people; and a commitment and action from the appropriate authorities to keep children safe. Young people thought this could only be achieved by a greater will to engage with, and listen to young people and to take their concerns seriously.

Young people told us that when they leave their homes due to violence and conflict, they require safe and permanent housing options to be readily available (regardless of their age). Greater awareness of, and easier access to, housing and other basic needs such as income and food was also especially required. Due to the number of challenges and issues young people were facing while they were homeless, young people also felt they required consistent and effective emotional support and assistance to be engaged in meaningful activities (such as education and employment). These needs are further detailed in this section, and provide some clear direction to policy and practice professionals aiming to prevent youth homelessness, and respond more effectively to young people experiencing homelessness.

### 4.5.1 Needs before becoming homeless: preventing homelessness

For each young person in the study, the precursor to homelessness began in the family home. Violent, abusive, neglectful or conflictual home environments were realities for all of the young people. While the nature and impact of each young person's home experience varied to a degree, they all shared the common need for greater awareness of, and attention to, their challenging home environments. Many felt that a more sustained commitment was required from statutory authorities (such as child protection and police) who had the power to keep children safe. The participants also called for greater knowledge of—and access to—effective supports that could assist young people to explore and access housing options before they had to leave their family home.

### **Greater support for all members of families experiencing challenging home environments**

Many young people linked their entry into unaccompanied homelessness with the challenging home environments they experienced from an early age. Some explained that improved family support may have been able to prevent their need to leave home and become homeless:

*To prevent it [homelessness] would be more family counselling... I feel like instead of being scared that their kids are going to be taken off some if they do bad things, they should try and get the help they need (Sophie).*

*It was never having a stable home, and never learning how to grow up... [You should get] in the home, trying to fix it... monitoring everyone's behaviour and giving suggestions. Not being the person to take the kids away but, be a person to give suggestions and then, how they can do things better...better home environment... less drug use... before there's the need to actually take the kids away (Thomas).*

Many young people stated that it was important for formal support services to provide care and support to all members of the family (parents and children), especially if they were hoping to assess children's safety. Young people explained that children are often without any power, and have limited opportunities to speak out about how they are being treated and how they are feeling. For example, Lachlan expressed a need for supporters to ensure they check-in on, listen to, and take seriously children's feelings and needs:

*I was just more too scared to make my voice heard. I felt like I would have gotten in trouble from my foster mum for just some things I might have wanted to say... So I reckon it would be good just to take the kids away and actually have an honest conversation with just the kids without the family. Just to make sure that they are actually liking where they are living and things like that (Lachlan).*

Young people who were coping with increased levels of family conflict also explained that it would be helpful if support was directed to both the parents and young people. They felt this could help all parties to address the problems they were having communicating with each other:

*I think the government, whenever they see homelessness, they need to address the issues before it happens, to prevent it. By educating how to communicate effectively... Preventing it from the start. If my parents knew how to communicate better, with no judgment, to ask if I was okay, to support me... If we had stuck with the [family support service], I think I would still be at home (Emily).*

Later in her interview, Emily reflected that communication is not necessarily an inherent skill, but rather a learned and vital tool for combating difficult situations and circumstances in an individual's life. Emily suggested incorporating communication skills within school education and for the government to provide additional programs.

### ***A commitment to keeping children safe***

Many young people identified that the levels of conflict, abuse and neglect were often too severe for family support to be successful. In these situations, young people stated children required earlier responses by authorities to ensure they were safe. Young people thought child protection authorities clearly have a role to play in preventing youth homelessness, by taking action to ensure children's safety and wellbeing as early in life as possible. For example, Daniel stated that although many services were involved with his family from a young age, no-one appeared to understand the short- or long-term impacts resulting from the persistent neglect and abuse within his home environment. Daniel directly attributed his homelessness to child protection authorities' lack of action:

*I've been on the child protection, my file has been there since I was one... And they have been constantly getting reports... Care and protection didn't stand up and take the proper actions and stuff that they needed to do to make sure that I was safe and had the life and been treated the way I should have been... They did not do that for me at all... they had opportunities, time and time again (Daniel).*

Other young people shared this frustration, stating despite repeated and sustained involvement from child protection authorities and/or police, no-one responded with the support they required to ensure their safety:

*I think that there were a lot of things that went unnoticed. I feel like there were a lot of people who didn't do something when they could have... They just didn't notice and if they did notice they didn't do anything about it. So yeah I feel like that would have been a big thing that would have helped a lot beforehand so maybe it didn't get to that situation where I was literally homeless (Poppy).*

Those who had been on child protection orders felt that child protection authorities have a duty to ensure they are housed somewhere that is safe and secure. All of the young people who had been on care and protection orders felt they should have got better support from child protection authorities – both before, and after, they had become homeless:

*Even I guess, even being a worker because you walk around and you can clearly see kids living on the street and stuff. Maybe they need to have the initiative to walk up and be like, hey, what's going on? This is who I am, I am able to support you (Lachlan).*

Other young people emphasised the responsibility for keeping children and young people safe should sit with the authorities who have the power to intervene and offer support, rather than with children and young people themselves.

### ***Awareness of – and early access to – effective support***

Although most of the young people we interviewed were linked in with a number of formal support services, young people identified that greater information and awareness of where to go for support, especially practical support, was required. It may be that young people would have liked this information to have been available prior to moving out of their family home, as it appeared many only began to access housing related services after they had left home.

Young people also told us that when they independently sought out agencies and services to assist with housing or income, they were often unsuccessful in getting their needs met. It seemed to take some time, before young people received the level of support they required. For example, they often had to wait until a crisis—homelessness—before they found a professional who could provide the effective advocacy required to assist them to access and navigate complex service systems. Effective advocacy was especially needed, and appreciated, when trying to gain access to Centrelink incomes or public housing.

#### **4.5.2 Needs whilst homeless: responding to youth homelessness**

*[Homeless young people] need food, water, they need love and attention and care and they need a roof over their heads, a bed to sleep on (Jess).*

As Jess explains in the above quote, when experiencing homelessness, young people need easier access to safe and permanent housing, as well as assistance with other practical and emotional needs. Young people had some clear ideas on how these needs could best be provided.

##### ***Easier access to safe and permanent housing options***

The majority of young people emphasised the need for easily accessible, safe, stable and permanent housing options. Many of the young people had escaped violent and abusive home environments and needed housing to be readily available:

*[We need] accommodation that's safe. Like if the kids need to get away, they can get away. It's not this two year waiting list (Clare).*

Crisis youth accommodation that only provided housing for young people aged over 15 years, and for short periods of time, did not meet the needs young people had for safe, stable and permanent housing. As noted previously, young people were wary of moving into housing options they perceived to be unsafe. Some young people spoke about what 'safe' accommodation would look like; specifying a need for refuges to accommodate 12 to 15-year-olds specifically, and suggesting that shared housing options that allowed for some privacy would be an optimal solution:

*Getting refuges for that age of 12 to 15, not having older kids or anything in there because you are going to have older kids try and take over I guess (Lachlan).*

*I think it builds a system where there's all that other kids in that situation and we can all get together and they'll have like accommodation for those kids. So they don't feel alone, like it's just them (Clare).*

Housing also needed to have a sense of permanency to meet young people's needs. For example, Sophie talked about wanting a 'home' that provided stable accommodation without constraints on how long she could stay.

*Having somewhere they [young people] can call home... Somewhere that I can stay and know that I can stay there until I need to leave. Somewhere you can stay for a year or five if you need it (Sophie).*

Young people were adamant that sustained support needed to be consistently available until they had been assisted to locate safe and secure housing. This was vital, as many young people shifted from one insecure housing option to another for months or years:

*There was no happy place for me, there never has really been one. There have [sometimes] been safe places...but they are never permanent safe places (Daniel).*

### **Meeting other practical needs (for money and food)**

Once homeless young people required assistance to meet their basic needs for clothes, food and money. Limited access to income support was mentioned as being a particular barrier for young people and restricted them from being able to look after themselves, and source shelter or food.

*I was too young to go on an income apparently or something, because my parents weren't willing to rather let it out as an abusive home... 'No, if she doesn't live at home it's her fault'... and if your parents aren't willing to write a letter, because they're being stubborn... 'Well, if you want to live in the street you can start up and do that' (Clare).*

Without an income of their own, young people relied on others to meet their needs for shelter, food and transport. Support from formal services for these practical needs was limited, with many young people relying on intermittent provision of food vouchers and bus tickets from youth services. They felt that they required more sustainable support with these practical items, and thought that there should be more government assistance available to allow them to meet their basic needs.

*I needed like accommodation, someone to help me like ... Not my friends, someone to do a bit more, like my youth worker wasn't the best... my friends organising food vouchers and bus tickets and stuff for me and food and like letting me stay with them, like there was no government assistance (Clare).*

*Yeah it would have been nice I guess just to have different support networks coming in and like maybe just giving me like food vouchers or like clothing vouchers and stuff, just even have given me slight financial help would have been nice, just so I could have gone out and bought my clothes and things like that... Yeah that would have been really nice to have but it wasn't there (Lachlan).*

### **Meeting young people's emotional needs**

In addition to practical support young people identified a need for emotional support throughout their periods of homelessness. The emotional support required ranged from specialist mental health support, to just having someone available to listen, and take a non-judgemental approach to support and advocate on their behalf.

Mental health needs were a significant issue for all young people experiencing homelessness. Mental health support was an area young people identified as being critical to crisis or residential care housing services:

*Yeah, no one is actually happy at all [at the refuge]. Everyone is really depressed and probably need a lot of help because there's been a load of nights for me and those girls in which we've just sat there and cried... I know the staff, they can only do the best that they can but, better training in mental health situations would be great. And, learning how to... be able to talk to someone and let them know that you're there for them (Sophie).*

*The government could give youth workers more intensive training...Have the training to know how to talk someone down, to calm them down if need be. Train them to [be] more support[ive], and be more vigilant of what's going in the house. Because I can guarantee there are kids, even to this day, that are going to get bullied in care. It will go unnoticed by the youth workers (Thomas).*

Outside of these housing environments, other young people mentioned the need for mental health supports to be available and responsive when young people needed it.

*They'd say, of course, if you ever need anything. But they only work nine to five, or whatever it is. If you've got issues like you're suicidal, they always say, there's the helpline. But you wouldn't... They'd say if you need anything, call us. But if it's after their hours, they're not available. It's a little useless. What do I need from you nine to five, when I'm going to school nine to three? (Emily).*

When speaking about services mental health services, or any other service, young people emphasised the importance of having consistent workers, who are prepared to listen and have the time to get to know young people, was mentioned as being necessary to provide effective emotional support. At some services, consistent workers were a rare, and this affected young people's comfort with talking and reaching out for additional support. Young people thought that consistent workers were better placed to form an accurate understanding of their needs and advocate more effectively on their behalf. For example, Emily stated when she first became homeless she felt frustrated:

*I was put into the big system of [homelessness support], which was taking forever and they didn't believe me. The lady was really rude, actually, on the phone...I was just put into this big system. They didn't really advocate or talk on behalf of me (Emily).*

However, upon locating and accessing supported housing, Emily found herself paired up with a worker who listened, treated her in a non-judgemental way and provided her with the support she wanted and needed.

*My worker needs a shout out. He is the best... there's no judgment (Emily).*

The need for workers to listen to what the young person is saying, and understand what they need and want was mentioned consistently by young people:

*Probably maybe listen to them, like listen to what they're saying, and not just ignore them like listen to what they have to say. Let them speak their own words out of what they want, what they want done (Jess).*

*Yeah, someone that they can talk to. Not as a counsellor but, just as a person (Thomas).*

Being treated in a non-judgemental manner was particularly important to young people who felt stigmatised for being homeless. Above all, young people needed and wanted to be treated as human beings, rather than as a number or a problem:

*I realised no one really cares. I would go out in the community and no one cares, no one sees me... they see me as a number. We have all got numbers on our heads that the government has all given us and that's who we are, we are not people (Daniel).*

*If someone needs help, don't come into it with a government perspective. Don't come into it with a handout saying, 'We're the government. We're going to help you'. Come out to it like we're people. Like I'm just a person just like you (Isaac).*

### **Engagement in something meaningful**

Engagement in activities that provided meaning and purpose also appeared to be a need, motivator and aim in most of these young people's lives. For some young people, assistance with re(engaging) with school provided purpose to their everyday lives. Many took great pride in being able to achieve at school despite the many challenges they had faced in their childhood.

Many were hoping that this would lead to employment opportunities in the future that would enable them to make a contribution to their community and enable them to obtain and/or keep safe, stable and secure housing. A minority of the young people had already achieved this success and reiterated the importance of engaging in education and employment as a pathway to a better life.

*I am quite happy with myself. I am very proud of where I was and where I am now. I feel like I have done a pretty awesome job with my life, like I have done some real stupid stuff and just stuff I shouldn't have been doing but I have completely turned my life around... I was the first one out of me and my [siblings] and stuff to actually have like an apartment, start working full time... so that makes me proud, breaking cycles (Lachlan).*

Education and employment were only some of the ways that young people wanted to engage more positively in the world around them and better their lives. Two young people were deeply committed to caring for family members, whilst others talked about keeping healthy through engaging in sports or more creative pursuits, such as painting. All of these activities helped young people to cope with their everyday challenges, and assisted them to build positive relationships with others.

Maintaining involvement in these varied activities while homeless took a great deal of commitment, and was sometimes unachievable due to lack of resources.

*I think I needed... At that time, when I was talking to them [support services], I probably needed some positivity, some jokes... Probably because I was just negative. Do you know what I mean? Something to fill the time, something [positive]... Yeah, like an activity (Emily).*

Services and supports that could help young people engage in education, employment, positive relationships and activities were particularly needed and valued by young people.

## 4.6 YOUNG PEOPLE'S STRENGTHS AND TRANSITIONS OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

This section details the ways in which young people demonstrated resilience, strength, care and determination during their homelessness journey. Half of the young people who participated in this study had been able to transition out of homelessness. This section highlights the common factors that were present for these young people and in so doing answers the final research question of the study:

- Who or what helped these young people transition out of homelessness?

### 4.6.1 Determination

The young people in this study all shared a determination to find a better life for themselves. This often began with their decision to leave home, and to leave behind family relationships which were characterised by violence, abuse, neglect and conflict. The coping mechanisms they had developed to overcome adverse circumstances from a young age prepared them for the challenges that lay ahead of them. As Clare stated:

*It's been a long process. So if that answers your question [I needed]... resilience (Clare).*

Although sometimes shaken by challenging circumstances, young people's determination to secure a better life remained throughout their homelessness experience. This determination assisted young people to work towards locating pathways that could lead them to securing a home.

*Yeah, cause some people I guess, they're self-doubt. Like they doubt themselves, like some people when they're in difficult situations. I don't know, I didn't really doubt myself... I'm pretty resilient (Grace).*

*I just pushed myself to get through it, just, usually did nothing much, like I just pushed myself to get through it, like I knew I'd be home eventually so I just kept that thought and kept going (Jess).*

*[Homelessness] showed me what I didn't want to end up like. When I'm 24 years old, I don't wanna be doing ice. I don't wanna be... nothing, doing nothing. I've got goals... I wanna be successful. That's what drives me so much (Emily).*

As these quotes demonstrate, young people were proud of their determination and were motivated by their successes. Clare's quote below is reminiscent of Grace's on the previous page – as she speaks with pride of being able to achieve positive educational outcomes despite the adversity she has faced:

*[I am proud of] probably my education most of all... I got my year 10 certificate because I was so determined to get it done (Clare).*

In addition to being determined to better their own lives, some of the young people stated their experience of homelessness motivated them to make a difference to other young people's lives and to try and ensure other people receive better care and support than they did.

*There's a lot of gaps. I just think if I am in a position like that where I can even notice one thing that somebody who's there, notice things that haven't been noticed, or been missed, I know where the gaps of the system was. So I would really, really love to be in a position in the future where I can go and change that, and hopefully help people, prevent people, something like from other people being in that position. And that's why I'm super determined to get my certificates and stuff (Poppy).*

*No one has cared for me my whole life and that's why I am so much of a caring person though, because I have never had anybody there in my life that has been there to help me or support me. So I try and be there for everybody I can be, so they don't feel how shit I feel. No matter how shit I feel, I constantly just have to go back and think of it like that (Daniel).*

The hope of making things better for others was the factor which motivated many of the young people to participate in the study and tell their story:

*So I can help improve the services there is for younger people and help them to get the support that I never got... That's the main reason I wanted to do this (Daniel).*

#### **4.6.2 Transitions out of homelessness**

At the time of their interview, half of the participants had transitioned out of homelessness into safe and secure housing. However, none of the participants had been able to do this whilst aged 12-15yrs. Transitions out of homelessness were not easy, and for most young people, did not happen quickly.

Of those who were currently in safe and secure housing, two had secured public or community housing, two were living in shared private rental accommodation, and one had returned to live at home with their parent in a safe and nurturing home environment. Although the number of participants in this study was small, we were able to identify some of the factors that were consistent across the lives of these young people that the young people themselves attributed to their successful transition out of homelessness.

In addition to young people's determination, a critical marker in these young people's lives appeared to be the development of a meaningful connection with a support person who listened to them, understood their situation and assisted them to successfully navigate complex service systems to gain access to appropriate income and housing support.

*And [my worker] listened to me, so they arranged to have a big meeting about it to talk about it. And they just said from the very beginning, 'We're here to'. What's the word? 'Advocate for the young person. We're on the young person's side.' And when they said that, I was like, 'Oh my God. Somebody's finally on my side or wants to help me... fighting for me!' (Poppy).*

These supporters acted as an emotional support to young people - helping them to make sense of their lives and circumstances – and/or assisted them to find appropriate mental health and emotional support elsewhere. The importance of

being able to build a relationship with a consistent worker who could do this was mentioned as being most helpful.

*Here we have permanent workers...that you can build a relationship with and you get to know...You get along with them and you feel more comfortable with talking to them and building the friendship up with them and you will get more support (Daniel).*

The study findings highlight a combination of practical and emotional support was required to assist with, and compliment young people's own determination to find themselves a better life and a home where they can be safe and happy.

## 5. Summary of findings and conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the perceptions and experiences of ten young people who experienced unaccompanied homelessness in the ACT when aged 12-15 years. The majority of the young people we interviewed felt like they had never had a home – a place of safety, security and happiness. Throughout their childhoods, all of the participants in this study had experienced family homes characterised by violence, abuse, conflict or neglect. Half had been removed by child protection authorities into the out-of-home care system – but this had not led to safe, stable, or secure housing. Young people felt that if formal services provided greater attention, and more effective responses to the challenges facing parents and children in unsafe homes, some youth homelessness would be prevented.

Family conflict escalated for most young people as they entered early adolescence. At the same time, young people were facing a range of other challenges, including declining mental health, problems at school and a general feeling that no-one really understood what they were experiencing and that no-one could help. With, these challenges compounding, and with limited resources and minimal supports to turn to, young people felt they were left with little choice but to leave unsafe or uncaring homes and enter into unaccompanied homelessness.

The experience of leaving home and becoming homeless was different for each young person. However, all found this to be a difficult time. While homeless, young people felt scared and alone and had nowhere to go that could offer safe or secure housing. For over half of the participants, spending nights on the street became inevitable.

Each of the young people in this study were connected to many agencies and services. However, in some cases it took years to find any service that was able to address the range of practical and emotional support young people wanted and needed. While they were under 15 years of age, no formal services were able to help provide safe and secure housing, steady income or food. This resulted in young people relying on a small number of family and friends, who were rarely able to offer accommodation for more than a few weeks at a time.

In addition to practical support, young people required emotional support, which they sought from a variety of informal and formal supporters. At times, young people said they required skilled practitioners to assist with their mental health and wellbeing. Mostly, however, they called for supporters who were able to provide consistent support, and who would listen, be non-judgemental, take their concerns and needs seriously and be able to advocate for what young people themselves wanted and needed. Effective advocacy to help young people navigate complex service systems, and successfully access income and housing was particularly critical. If, and when, young people were provided with this support, they were able to transition out of homelessness, begin to (re)engage with meaningful activities such as education and employment and start to think about and plan for their futures.

The determination of young people was one of the clearest themes to emerge in this study. The desire for a better life had led most of the young people into homelessness, and had sustained and motivated them while they experienced the many challenges associated with being homeless. At the time of their interview, some young people had achieved stable housing and were making significant caring

contributions to others and/or were meaningfully engaged in work or study. Half of the young people who participated in this study, however, remain homeless. As the young people noted, there is much work to be done to help prevent and better respond to youth homelessness in the ACT. The young people who participated in this study hope their views and experiences can assist in this important work.

## Appendix A – Interview schedule

### Individual Interview Schedule – Experiences of youth homelessness

The interviews will be undertaken by experienced qualitative researchers who have extensive experience conducting interviews with a range of vulnerable and disadvantaged population groups.

This interview schedule provides a guide to ensuring that key questions and topics are addressed in the interviews, whilst still allowing each interviewer to adapt and respond individually to the interviewees/participants. A conversational and informal approach will allow the researcher to develop refined questions addressing the service experiences of the participants.

#### **Introduce the study**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a researcher working for the Institute of Child Protection Studies at ACU. We have been asked by the ACT Government to find out what it is like for young people (between the ages of 12 and 15yrs) to be homeless in Canberra.

*We particularly want to understand what might have caused you to become homeless at that age and supports and services you might have needed or wanted.*

This study aims to help the government to better understand this issue and the services and supports that might help prevention strategies or responses to youth homelessness.

#### **Refer to information sheets**

The information letter will not be read verbatim at this stage. It provides the interviewer with a detailed understanding of the key points they will address, in their own conversational manner. We will ensure the research participant has their own copy and has understood the content

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University.

#### **Provide consent forms and go through consent process.**

Check if they have any other questions and are happy to proceed.

## QUESTIONS:

### Demographics

- Age
- Gender
- CaLD / ATSI
- Pseudonym

### Check-in and Background Information

- Check-in (use kimoohies so that the young person can say how they are feeling at the start of interview)
- If you want to, you can start by telling me a bit about yourself and your family
  - Provide option to draw a family-tree if they want to
  - Where you are currently living and who with.
  - What you do with most of your time
- This project is finding out about young people who were homeless when they were between 12-15 yrs of age. At what age did you first become homeless (independently – without your family being with you)?

### Factors Contributing to Homelessness

- Can you explain to me what life was like for you just before you became homeless
  - Who was around?
    - Friends, family, other significant people
    - How were you feeling (were you happy and healthy)?
    - What was school like?
- What do you think were the main things that caused you to become homeless at this time
  - If you were able to pin-point the biggest factor leading to your homelessness what would it have been?
  - For how long had these things been an issue in your life?
  - Is there anything that you think could have prevented you from becoming homeless at this time?

### Experience of Becoming and Being Homeless

- When you became homeless what did you do? Where did you go?
- Can you explain to me what it was like?
- What affect did not having a stable place to stay have on the rest of your life
  - School, other activities, family relationships and friendships, health, how you were feeling/thinking
- How long were you homeless for?
- Did the factors that had caused your homelessness remain for you once you became homeless or did they ease or go away?

### Supports and Service Experience

- Was there anyone around to help you when you became homeless? (including informal and formal support)
  - Who?
  - What was it like asking for, and receiving, help from them?
  - What help were they able to provide and what difference did this make to your life?
- If you were able to transition out of homelessness who and/or what helped you to do this?

### Needs of Homeless Young People

- Did the help you received whilst you were homeless meet all of your needs?
  - What else would you have benefited from and who would have been/ be best placed to provide this?
- Did you continue to need this help, or different help, after you found stable accommodation?
- What would you say are the main needs of young people (12-15yrs) to prevent homelessness, or respond to them when they are homeless?

**Own Coping Skills and Strengths**

- When you were homeless how did you figure out what to do (and how to provide for yourself)?
  - What were the main things that helped you to cope whilst you were homeless?

**LAST QUESTION and Check-Out**

- Is there anything else you wanted to say about what it is like for homeless young people in Canberra and what the government could do to prevent it or respond better to the needs of young homeless people

Thanks so much for speaking to me today. It was really interesting and will help us a lot. I just want to check how you are feeling now at the end of the interview. (use kimochees again to ask how they are feeling).

If support or follow-up discussion around disclosures of harm/hurt are required please raise this now and discuss a way forward with the young person (and support person/other professional).

Remind participant where they can go to receive support.

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