



Nowhere to go

Young people share their experiences of homelessness

In their own words, young people recount what led to their homelessness and how they found support and services that helped them find safety, security and happiness.

Their stories offer insights into how services can improve effective early intervention, offer responsive solutions to rehousing and state care, help young people engage with education, and link to training and employment.



Young people searching for a place to call home

All young people have the right to live in safety and in a caring family environment, to have adequate housing and support, to have access to education and to make their own life choices.

But for some young people, their family homes are places of violence, abuse and neglect. Some are removed by child protection authorities and placed into the out-of-home care system which does not necessarily lead to safe or stable housing.

Under these circumstances, they have nowhere to go.

In 2018 we interviewed 10 young people who had been homeless when they were 12-15 years old and living in the Australian Capital Territory.

We are grateful to these young people for sharing their stories and hope that their insights lead to better service provision for others facing the same plight.


Note: Names have been changed to protect individual privacy
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“It started off as arguing. Swear words and screaming and yelling and then it got abusive and physical.” (Clare)

Young people resorted to living on the streets to escape homes that are violent, neglectful and full of conflict. Many felt they had been living with violence, abuse and neglect within their family homes for as long as they could remember.

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A person wearing a dark hoodie is shown in profile, looking out through horizontal window blinds. Their hand is raised, touching the blinds. The scene is dimly lit, with light streaming through the slats of the blinds, creating a pattern of light and shadow. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

**“I never felt like I was actually able to speak what I wanted. I was too scared to make my voice heard.”
(Lachlan)**

Violent family environments lead to child protection removing young people from their family home. But living in out-of-home care did not lead to safe, stable and secure housing. Residential care and foster care did not always give young people the safety or care they needed.

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“Sometimes I felt really shit and depressed and had a lot of mental health issues. I was sent to hospital for suicidal attempts.” (Thomas)

Poor mental health and disengagement from school and friends made their inability to cope at home worse. It often increased tensions in their households and added to feelings of isolation. They felt that no-one understood or helped them with challenging life circumstances.

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**“I didn’t feel like anything was really going for me. I’d lost interest in my sports. I didn’t want to move. I was tired. I’d lost my appetite. I was like, ‘No, I’m gonna leave and I’m not coming back.’ ”
(Emily)**

Young people gradually became more deeply unhappy as they realised that nothing was going right, no-one acknowledged them, understood them or did anything to help. Homelessness was the only option.

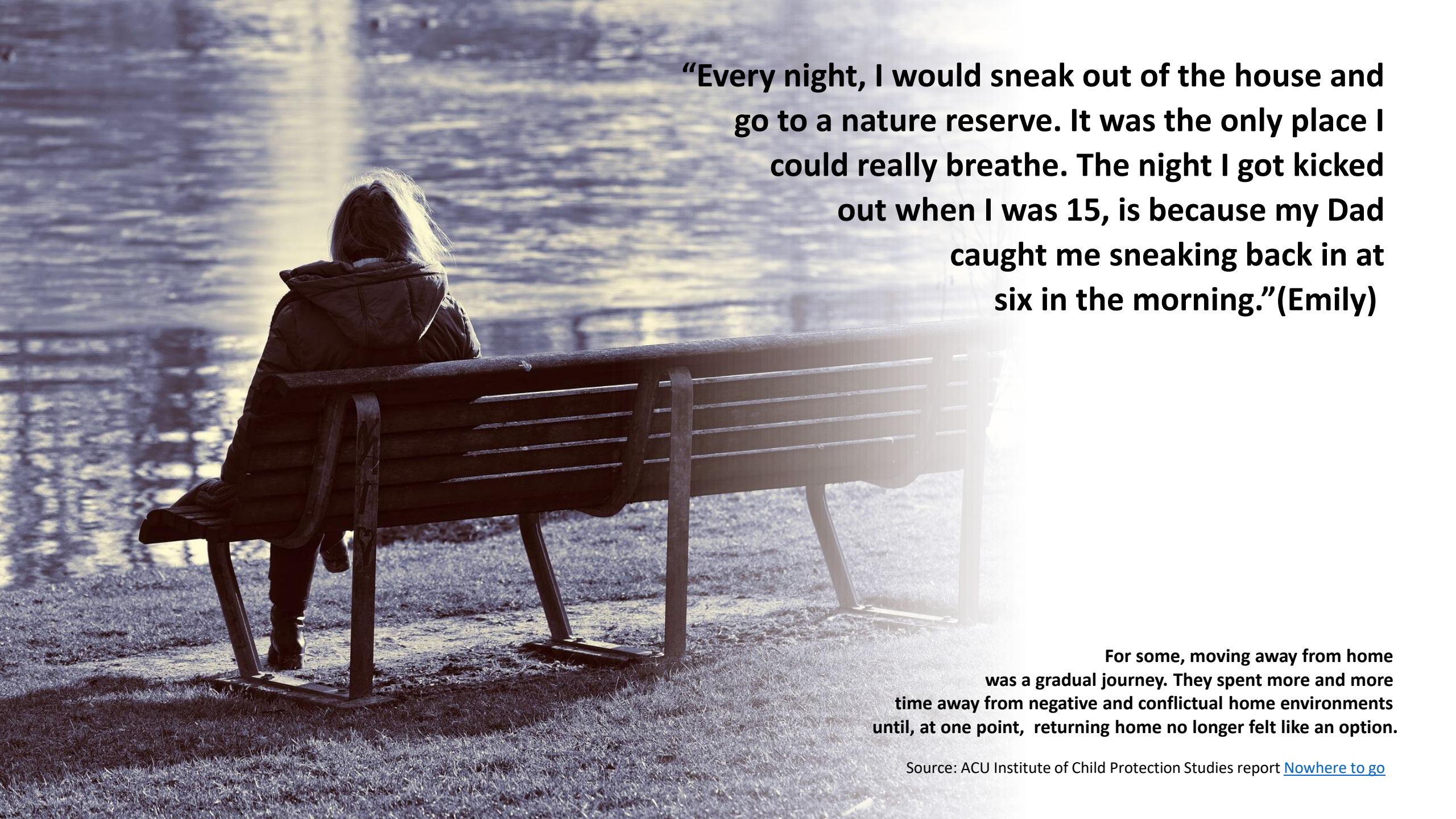
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“I was sick of the abuse and I just wanted to get out of it.” (Daniel)

It felt better to move away from persistent family abuse, neglect and conflict into a state of homelessness.

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“Every night, I would sneak out of the house and go to a nature reserve. It was the only place I could really breathe. 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, moving away from home was a gradual journey. They spent more and more time away from negative and conflictual home environments until, at one point, returning home no longer felt like an option.

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**“I just left. 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. It was really hard because I had nowhere to go.”
(Clare)**

In some cases, young people needed to move away from home suddenly. Critical events such as a violent episode led to homelessness.

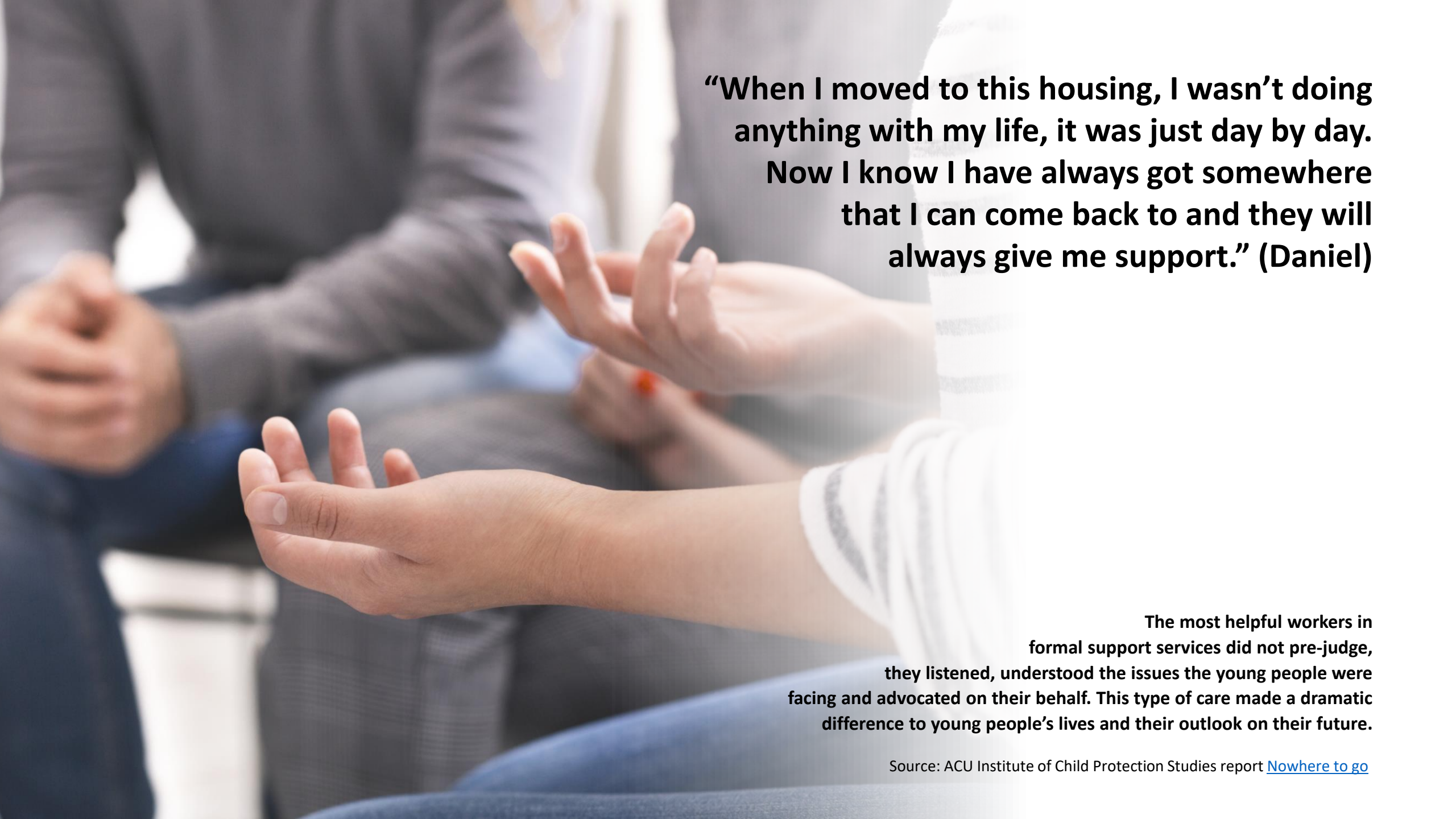
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“It was cold and I didn’t have warm clothes. I didn't have money for food, I didn't have a job. So I had to do a lot of stealing for clothes, shoes, food.” (Isaac)

Being homeless made young people feel scared and alone. They had nowhere to go that could provide safety, security and happiness. Life became a constant struggle to source shelter, money and food.


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A group of people, likely young adults, are sitting in a circle. They are wearing casual clothing like t-shirts and jeans. Their hands are held out in front of them, palms up, in a gesture of support, listening, or sharing. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the hands and the text overlay.

“When I moved to this housing, I wasn’t doing anything with my life, it was just day by day. Now I know I have always got somewhere that I can come back to and they will always give me support.” (Daniel)

The most helpful workers in formal support services did not pre-judge, they listened, understood the issues the young people were facing and advocated on their behalf. This type of care made a dramatic difference to young people’s lives and their outlook on their future.

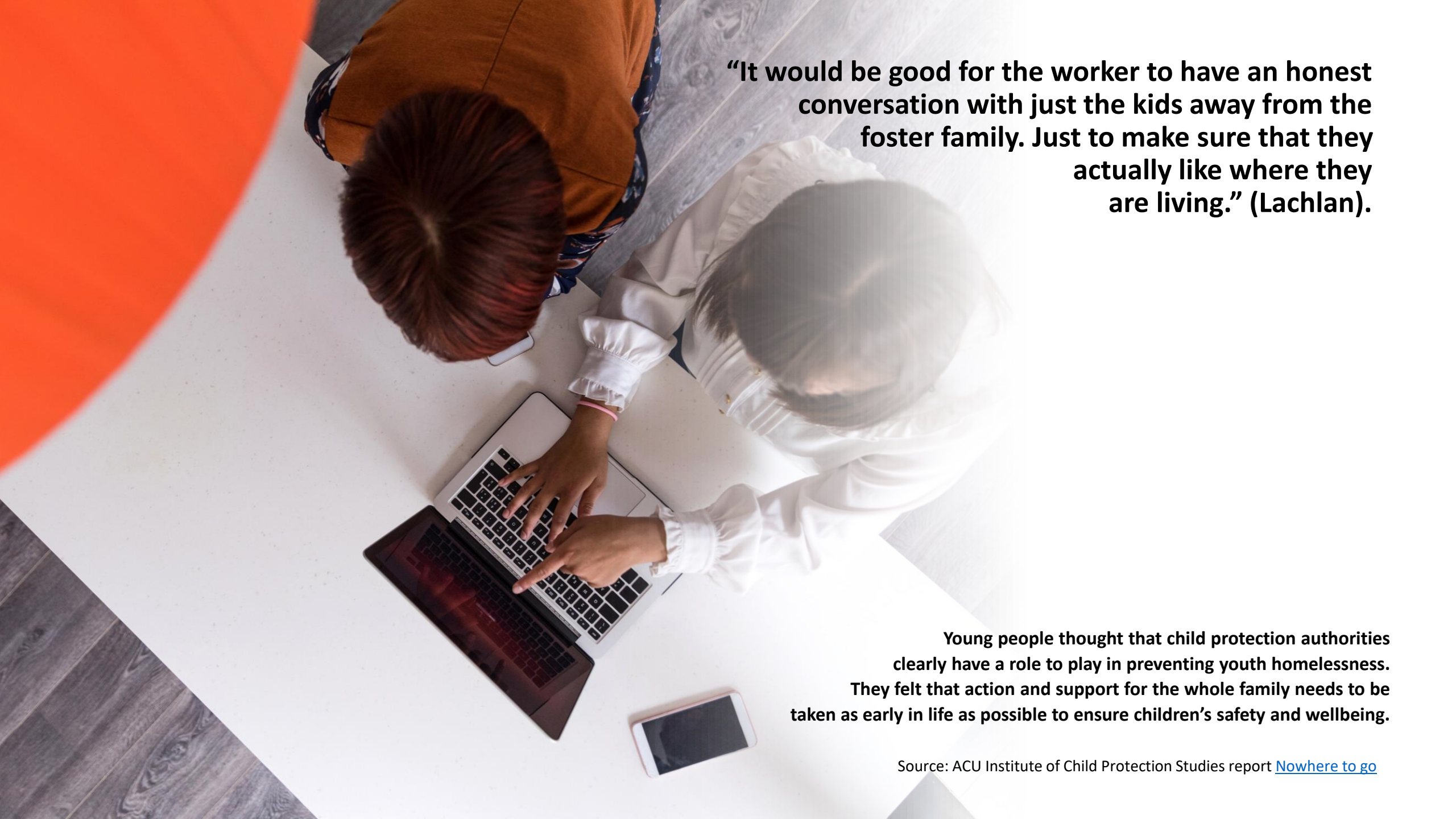
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“Preventing it from the start. If my parents knew how to communicate better, with no judgment, to ask if I was okay, to support me. If we had stuck with the family support service, I think I would still be at home.” (Emily)

Young people felt that if they had greater awareness about the impact of family violence, abuse, neglect and conflict on children and young people, they would have been better equipped to deal with their circumstances and know who to approach for help. They thought this could only be achieved by listening to young people and taking their concerns seriously.


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“It would be good for the worker to have an honest conversation with just the kids away from the foster family. Just to make sure that they actually like where they are living.” (Lachlan).

Young people thought that child protection authorities clearly have a role to play in preventing youth homelessness. They felt that action and support for the whole family needs to be taken as early in life as possible to ensure children’s safety and wellbeing.

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A young woman with dark hair is shown from the chest up, holding her hands up in front of her face to form a heart shape. She is wearing a grey patterned cardigan over a purple top. A rainbow flag is visible in the background. The image is softly blurred, focusing on her hands and the heart shape they create.

“When they said ‘We advocate for the young person, we're on the young person's side,’ I was like, ‘Oh my God. Somebody’s finally on my side and wants to fight for me!’ ” (Poppy)

Young people demonstrated resilience, strength and care during their periods of homelessness. Practical and emotional support helped them transition into a more secure setting and create a better life and home where they can be safe and happy.

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Where to from here?

The young people who took part in this study were determined to seek out a better life. This desire led most of them into homelessness. Their drive sustained and motivated them while they experienced the challenges while being homeless.

At the time of their interview, half of the young people had transitioned out of homelessness into safe and secure housing. However, none had been able to do this before they turned 16 years of age. Transitioning out of homelessness was not easy and did not happen quickly for most of the young people.

There is much work to be done to help prevent youth homelessness and to respond more effectively. A national strategy to end youth homelessness can help achieve this aim through early intervention, rapid rehousing, education, training and employment and extended state care. The young people who participated in this study hope their stories can assist in this critical work.

Helplines: [Lifeline](#): 13 11 14, [Kids Helpline](#): 1800 55 1800, [ReachOut.com](#), [St Vincent de Paul Society](#), [Salvation Army](#), [Australian Red Cross](#)

For more information about this study, read the report: Noble-Carr, D., & Trew, S. (2018). [“Nowhere to go”: Investigating homelessness experiences of 12-15 yearolds in the Australian Capital Territory](#). Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University. Or contact us: icps@acu.edu.au

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