

We are not all the same: Exploring Difference in Young People's Experiences of Couch Surfing Versus Sleeping Rough

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*'Couch surfing is usually the start to the slippery slope of youth homelessness'*¹

Recent surveys of young Australians show more young people couch surfing than ever before, although not all classified themselves as homeless.² Envisioning couch surfing as a form of extended sleep-over with a friend has contributed to the perception that couch surfing is a secondary and potentially less concerning form of homelessness,³ or even not a form of youth homelessness at all.⁴

While young people couch surfing may experience a degree of instability or reduced comfort, the assumption is that it is considerably safer and healthier than sleeping rough. There is considerable research that supports the highly negative impacts of rough sleeping including violence, poor physical and mental health, social isolation, substance abuse and juvenile crime.^{5,6} When framed by that research, couch surfing seems like the preferable option, promoting less risk and less exposure to harm.

But does couch surfing live up to this assumption? Commonly referred to as 'hidden homelessness',⁷ couch surfing is seen as a type of secondary homelessness in census data and other homelessness definitions.⁸ To date, there has been a considerable lack of research on couch surfing and little attention given to understanding how the experiences of couch surfing youth differ from other homeless young people, specifically those sleeping rough.⁹

Here, we share the preliminary findings from a comparative analysis of Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) client data collected at intake and exit from support. Analysis is focussed on the questions:

- How do rough sleeping youth differ in terms of demographics and personal histories from other homeless young people?
- How do couch surfing and rough sleeping youth differ from each other?
- How does housing status impact engagement with services?

In the 2016–17 year, 808 client records were coded for statistical analysis. Bivariate statistical analysis allows researchers to know if the differences between two groups arose by random change or because of a factor of interest (such as housing status). Of those 808 participants, 105 (13 per cent) were sleeping rough and 226 (27.8 per cent) were couch surfing. We first compared each group of interest to all others and then ran an additional analysis to look for differences between these two groups.

Analysis showed a number of key emergent themes:

Young women are significantly more likely to be couch surfing and less likely to be sleeping rough.

Within the whole sample, female-identifying young people accounted for just over half (53.8 per cent) of all young people seeking BYS support, however almost 70 per cent of those couch surfing identified as female compared to just 40 per cent of young people who are rough sleeping.

LGBTIQ+ young people are less likely to be sleeping rough than their cis or straight counterparts and are slightly more likely to be couch surfing.

Nearly a quarter (23.5 per cent) of young people who come to BYS identify as LGBTIQ+. Among those sleeping rough, though, the proportion of LGBTIQ+ youth drops

to 17 per cent. Comparably, among couch surfers, the proportion increases to 26 per cent.

Reported drug use is about the same between couch surfers and youth who sleep rough.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, only slightly more rough sleepers reported drug use in the past three months compared to those who were couch surfing (55.1 per cent vs. 45.1 per cent). Those sleeping rough reported similarly elevated rates of injecting drug use (45 per cent vs. 35 per cent). Compared to all other young people, though, rates of substance use among youth who were sleeping rough were higher. Young people who were sleeping rough also reported significantly higher rates of tobacco use (81 per cent) compared to all other participants and couch surfing young people (63.9 per cent).

Young people who are sleeping rough are more likely to identify their current substance use as a problem.

While drug use rates themselves were similar, 29 per cent of youth who were sleeping rough said their current substance use was a problem compared to less than a fifth (18 per cent) of couch-surfers. Yet nearly identical proportions of both groups (48 per cent of couch surfers and 50 per cent of those who sleep rough) reported that their substance use had been a problem in the past.

Young people who were couch surfing rated their mental health more poorly than all other participants and more poorly than young rough sleepers. When presented with a scale ranging from very poor (one) to very good (five), couch surfers, on average, rated their mental health at a 2.6, compared to an average of 2.8 overall. Remarkably, mental health ratings by young people sleeping

rough were at 3.1, higher than the rest of the young people coming to BYS, as well as higher than those who couch surf. Furthermore, couch surfers were significantly more likely to have attempted suicide or experienced suicidal ideation in the past (39 per cent) compared to rough sleepers (28 per cent). Though not statistically different, they were also more likely to report a history of self-harm (14 per cent vs. 11 per cent).

Though not statistically different, couch surfers tended to have contact with BYS services less often than youth sleeping rough.

Couch surfers accessed BYS services on average 15 times between 2016–2017, compared to 21 times for youth who identified that they were sleeping rough at intake. With 15

annual visits, couch surfers have one of the lowest engagement rates of all youth; only young people currently in an institution or in stable private or public housing had lower rates of contact with BYS.

Young people who were couch surfing at intake reported more positive housing outcomes when they exited from services.

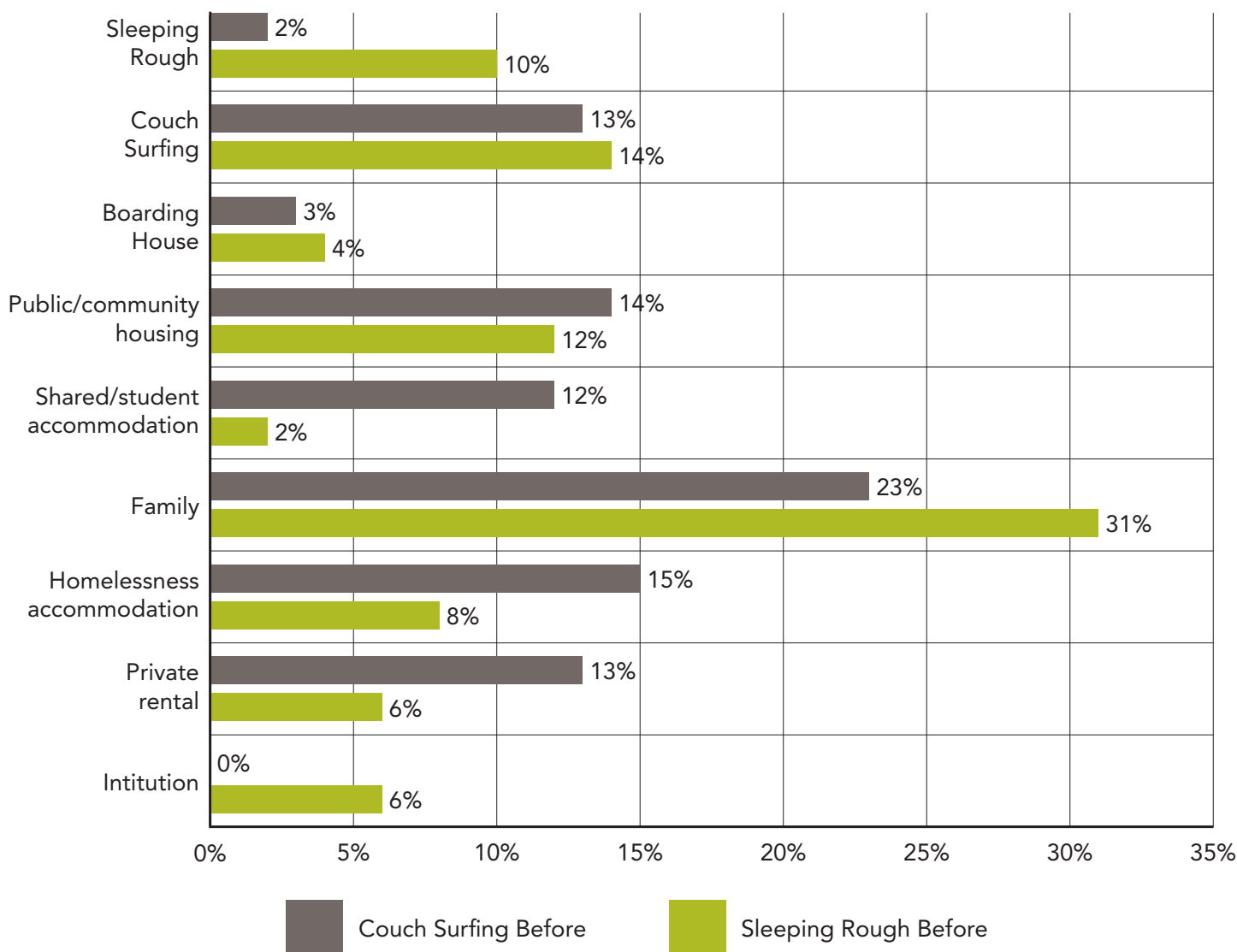
Tracking down homeless young people to measure their outcomes after accessing support is inherently complex and challenging.¹⁰

In 2016–17, outcomes were able to be measured for 40 per cent of young people who disengaged from support (206 individuals), and closure rates were statistically equivalent for young people who were rough sleeping (64 per cent) and those who were couch surfing (71 per cent). Where housing outcomes were able to be

measured, couch surfers tended to have more stable, independent and longer term accommodation.

19 per cent of young people couch surfing moved into a private rental, 14 per cent into community/public housing, 10 per cent were living in shared or student accommodation and 31 per cent moved to live with family. Just 7 per cent were continuing to couch surf and 5 per cent had converted to sleeping rough.

Conversely, among young people who were sleeping rough at intake, 10 per cent were continuing to sleep rough after accessing support, usually brief support only, and 15 per cent had begun couch surfing. A similar proportion of young people moved into community/public housing (12 per cent), however only one young person who was sleeping rough was able to secure a private rental, and



Housing Outcomes (% of young people assessed)

Figure 1: BYS Outcomes Data 2015-2017: Housing Outcomes for Young People Couch Surfing vs Sleeping Rough at Assessment.

the most common outcome was for young people sleeping rough to move to live with family (35 per cent).

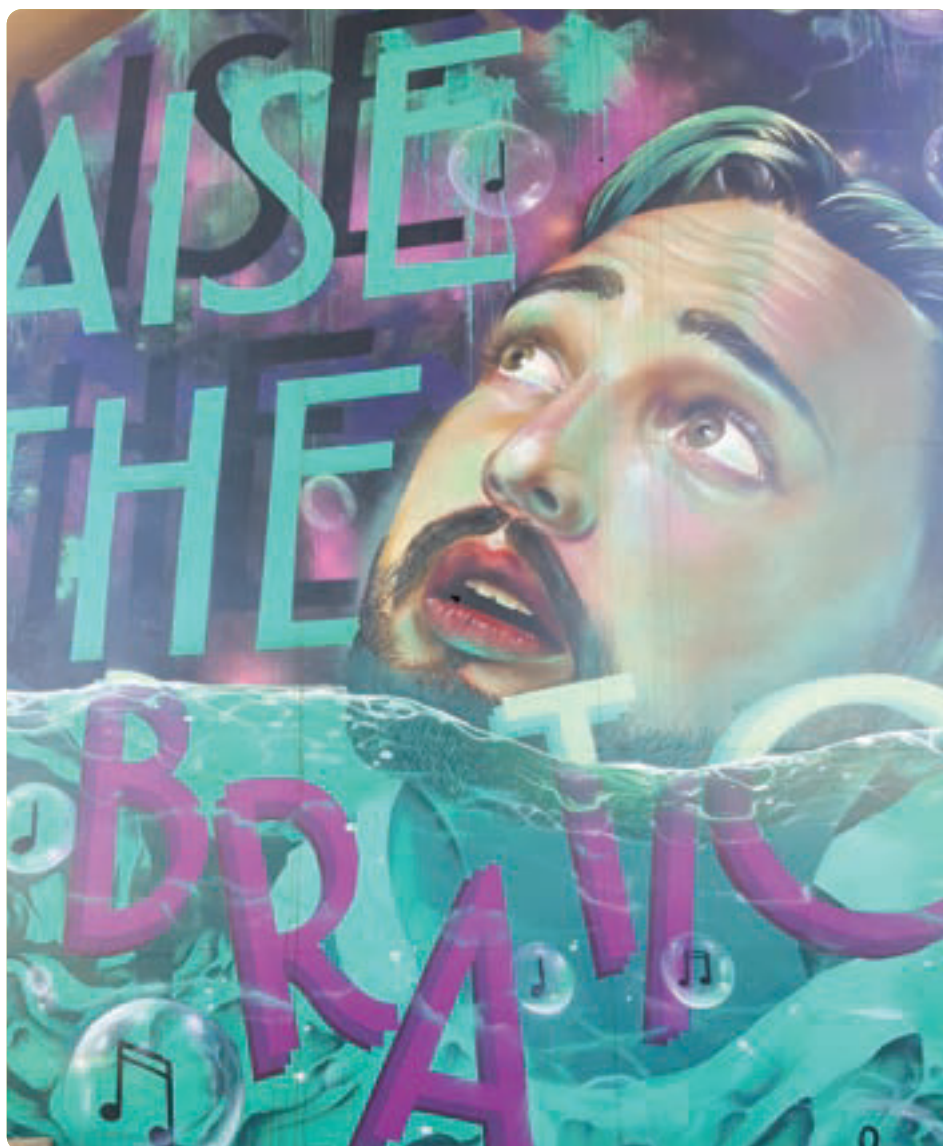
Application to Service

Contrary to common perceptions, couch surfing does not appear to be a substantively 'healthier' option for many young people. The high rates of suicidal risk, low self-assessment of mental health and lower likelihood of identifying a current substance abuse issue (despite similar rates of use) among couch surfers are red flags for service providers. Together they indicate that this living situation should not be seen as a preferable or acceptable 'stop gap' form of accommodation, but rather should be considered a differently, but still as a substantially disadvantaging form of homelessness.¹¹

At this point, we can only theorise about the reasons for the differences. It may be that more vulnerable groups of young people tend to couch surf rather than sleep rough. It may also be that the couch surfing experience impacts on mental health in ways that are not the same for those who are sleeping rough. In many ways, our preliminary findings support a harm reduction approach to working with different forms of homelessness.

Young people should be recognised as active agents in their own lives, and in some circumstances, the psychological aspects of sleeping rough may be a preferred alternative, for some young people, to the stresses of negotiating a couch to sleep on, or the influencing impact of the other people living in those households.

Furthermore, the lower levels of service engagement among couch surfers may indicate that they are either less likely to self-identify as in immediate need of homeless support, or may be inadvertently regarded by workers as being a lesser priority for homelessness intervention. Consideration should be made of sector and professional language that includes couch surfing as a form of problematic homelessness. With our results suggesting that traditionally vulnerable populations, such as LGBTIQ+ youth and young women have higher rates of couch surfing,



Brisbane street art

targeted service responses to these populations is especially crucial.

Further research is strongly recommended to better understand the subjective experiences of young Queenslanders in the context of their different homelessness experiences and pathways.

Endnotes

1. This quote was part of a 2013 Salvation Army campaign to raise awareness about youth homeless. See coverage of the event here: <http://www.bluemountaingazette.com.au/story/2545029/couch-surfing-the-start-to-homelessness/>
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4. Curry S R, Morton M, Matjasko J L, Dworsky A, Samuels G M and Schlueter D 2017, Youth Homelessness and Vulnerability: How Does Couch Surfing Fit?, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol.60, no's.1–2, pp.17–24.
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6. Larsen L, Poortinga E and Hurdle D E 2004. *Sleeping Rough: Exploring the Differences Between Shelter-Using and Non-Shelter-Using Homeless Individuals, Environment and Behavior*, vol.36, no.4, pp.578–591.
7. McLoughlin P J 2013, op cit, p.521.
8. Mackenzie D and Chamberlain C 2008, *Youth homelessness in Australia 2006 Hawthorn, Counting the Homeless 2006 Project*, retrieved from: https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/youth_homelessness_report.pdf.
9. Curry S R, et al 2017, op cit.
10. Vichta R 2017, Why is it so hard? The Challenges of Collecting Youth Homelessness Outcomes Data, *Parity*, vol.30, no.3, pp.24–25.
11. McLoughlin P J 2013, op cit.