Learning from the Lived Experiences of Young Couch Surfers

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'I want to know that I can wake up and come home to the same place.'

Homelessness is commonly associated with images of rough sleeping. There is, however, increasing awareness that the majority of homeless young people are surviving in a less visible way, opting to couch-surf as a way to avoid sleeping rough, to escape child safety intervention or to find safer spaces than their home environments when crisis accommodation is not available or accessible.[1] Young people who couch surf because they have no safe or stable home of their own represent a transient, somewhat hidden group who can be hard to identify, understand, and support.[2]

There is limited research on the challenges, risks and dynamics of couch-surfing, particularly as told by young people themselves. There are persistent assumptions that couch surfing is a relatively safe, if temporary, accommodation option. Couch surfers can seem like a lower priority for crisis intervention, particularly in the context of ever-more limited housing availability. Previously published Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) research has highlighted the correlation between couch surfing and high mental health risks for young people, as well as high rates of disconnection from support networks.[2] There is a clear pattern of emerging research showing the negative health effects associated with couch surfing including impacts upon mental and physical health, exposure to substance use and abuse and exposure to violence. It is critical that services learn from the lived experience of young couch surfers and be led by their voices in improving practice responses to the risks and stresses that young people experience while couch surfing.[3]

Recognising the gap in knowledge about what happens for young people behind the closed doors of couch surfing environments, BYS has been working with Dr Katie Hail-Jares of Griffith Criminology Institute and with the support if Brisbane City Council and the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women in undertaking a substantial qualitative study on couch surfing. The study interviewed 65 young people who were currently or recently couch surfing as a form of homelessness. Young people were recruited through BYS programs, through educational sites (flexi-schools and university campuses) and through social media campaigns. Half of the sample responded to social media advertising, with this being the primary recruitment method post-COVID onset.

This sampling saw data collected from a wide range of young people of diverse ages, cultures, sexualities and genders, including young people both connected and not connected to support services. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes, were conducted in person and by phone/zoom (post-COVID) and participants were paid $40 for their expertise.

Additionally, a community advisory group (CAG) made up of individuals with lived experiences, service providers, academics and other community/sector representatives guided the research process throughout. Data was inductively and deductively analysed by a collaborative group including people with lived experience, interviewers, workers supporting young couch surfers and the lead researchers.

What did we learn about young people's experiences of couch surfing?

While young people's stories were complex and detailed, there were a number of key intersecting and overlapping themes that re-occurred across stories. This article will touch on some of the key findings relevant to supporting workers in understanding and assessing risk.

Instability:

The most common and pervasive of themes described by young people was the stress of pervasive instability. Instability was often associated with feelings of high anxiety about what was going to happen in the spaces they were staying in, how long they could stay, and where they would go next.

> *'Having to worry about what the next day was going to be like. Having to worry if I was going to have a, or if I was going to sleep in the streets the next day. Or I wasn't going to be in the same place. Or where was I going to be or how I'm going to eat? Or how I'm going to get to this place, if I have no money on my Go Card to get places?'*

Many young people described the compounding effect of highly unstable living situations in that it exacerbated the impact of the chaotic or traumatic home environments that they had left; and which also made it impossible to achieve future stability in housing, work, education, income, health or sense of the hope for the future. Young people commented on the challenge of finding stable accommodation when you don't have an address, stable tenancy history or demonstrated capacity to sustain housing. Further instability was found in the unpredictability of

hosts and other people in the environment creating risk and uncertainty.

'It's too unpredictable. You'd be kicked out the next day. You could get into a domestic violence or a fight. Could do anything'

Young people linked the persistent feelings of hopelessness and anxiety of living in constant instability with a spiralling negative impact upon their sense of safety in the world and sense of self-worth, which triggered and exacerbated ongoing mental health concerns.

Expectations:

Navigating the expectations of hosts was a cross cutting key challenge that is particular to the experiences of couch surfing. While some described conditions of staying that they thought were manageable and reasonable (for example, help out with chores, pay when you can), other conditional expectations exacerbated anxiety. Some young people felt that they could not relax as they were expected to be constantly looking for a way to get out and move on.

'If I was sitting there, on their couch, just hanging out, it was like what am I doing right now, I could be searching for a job or searching for a place to stay and so I never felt very comfortable.'

Other expectations were more exploitative. Young people described being expected to provide unpaid labour, including caring positions for children or the elderly in order to maintain housing. Financial exploitation was not uncommon, with young people paying excessive amounts of 'rent' for poor living conditions and no legal rights or security of tenancy. Substance use featured strongly in expectations — both in being expected not to do drugs, and being expected to use alcohol and drugs at unhealthy levels – to 'party enough' to justify staying. There were expectations of illegal activity – theft and dealing drugs in return for staying. And
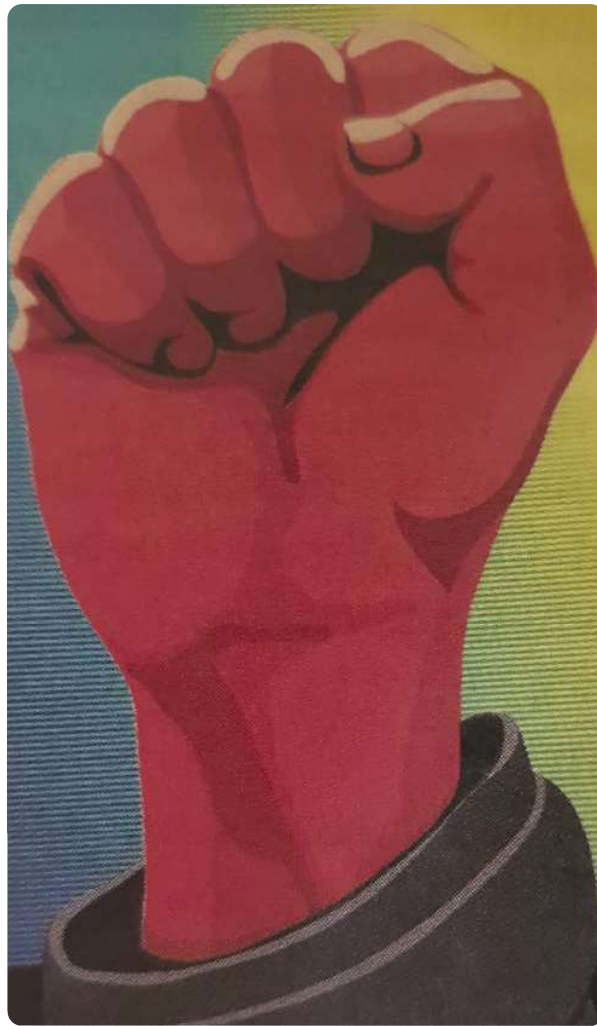
then there were the ever-present themes of sexual expectations, exploitation, assault and abuse.

'I felt like if I stayed at his house I would have to use drugs and do sexual stuff and that'

While they found these expectations took a toll on their mental and physical well-being, young people in these situations expressed that the unstable nature of their housing meant that they didn't feel as though they had any other choice.

Lack of privacy and access to basic needs:

Young people described sleeping in a range of conditions from very public spaces such as mattresses in the main living area to shared beds to sheds and hallways. Another key challenge described by young couch surfers was lack of privacy, security, safety and a sense of belonging in their living spaces. This extended to lack of access to washing and personal hygiene, food and basic comforts. During these important

developmental stages, young people discussed the mental health impacts of having little control over their privacy, leaving them uncomfortable and vulnerable to having their belongings and personal safety violated.

'I don't know, because when you're asleep you're pretty vulnerable. Anybody can rob you or do anything. I don't know, it just freaks me out.'

Young people also spoke of the sense of feeling invisible, isolated and like the only one in the household who didn't belong. This had a profound impact on their sense of self-worth, autonomy and place in the world.

'You don't have a space of your own, you can't have any privacy really. You don't feel like you have control over your situation, you feel totally out of control.'

Discomfort:

Discomfort was a broad, cross cutting theme that spanned physical and emotional discomfort. Many talked about flea-infested mattresses, sleeping across three stools, or having to pack up their things every day to hide it out of sight.

'I was sleeping pretty much like this, with my feet up on the edge of the couch, in the foetal position. It's just irritating and you wake up with cramps, and stiff back, and sore knees, and sore joints, and it's just not comfortable.'

They also talked about feeling unsafe and uncomfortable with exposure to known and unknown dangers. Young women lived with the knowledge of their constant vulnerability to assault.

'I just didn't feel safe living there just me and him. It was just a weird environment. I was anxious all the time. There are a lot of sick people out there.'

These experiences were often accompanied by a sense of hopelessness for young people who felt that they didn't have any other options, with the pervasiveness

of the discomfort resulting in a profound impact upon their mental and physical well-being over time.

Burden:
A surprisingly strong theme in young people's stories was the deep sense of guilt over imposing on their host's space. The sense of being a burden came up repeatedly across young people's stories.

> 'You don't know where you're going to be next and you feel really guilty and terrible about doing it, because you feel like you've been a bit of a burden, a bit of a parasite.'

Young people described becoming hypervigilant to signs of wearing out their welcome and using multiple strategies to mitigate their guilt and reduce the impact of their presence on the household. These strategies included moving quickly from place to place; having 'time-out' from places by sleeping rough or in all night venues, going home with strangers or sleeping in cars; doing chores; trying to be invisible by staying out of sight; not eating the household food; not washing to avoid wasting water.

> 'I always felt really like a burden, so I'd always jump around — which didn't feel good… but… I didn't want to be annoying.'

Not only did self-management exacerbate instability and vulnerability to harm, but these persistent states of feeling guilty, in the way, and like a burden exacerbated already unstable mental health conditions.

Implications for Service Providers
One in five young people had never accessed support. For those who did know about available support,

many felt as though they were undeserving of this assistance and that their situation 'wasn't as bad' as other forms of homelessness, perpetuating the assumption that those who are sleeping rough are the main priority for support. On top of these concerns, young people had a fear of being let down based on negative past experiences, having confidentiality breached and a lack of trust that services (adults in authority) would do the right thing by them.

The primary barriers to support that need to be overcome to build service accessibility are:

a. young couch surfers were out of the service networks so often did not know what help was available to them

b. they did not think they were eligible for support because they were too young, not young enough or not as needy/ important as rough sleepers

c. they trusted peers rather than adult systems that had let them down in the past, but were disconnected from homelessness knowledgeable peer groups.

When we asked young couch surfers what they would do to fix the issues there were a range of different responses, key amongst which was, unsurprisingly, the need for greater access to affordable safe housing. The next most common response was that there needed to be more awareness of, and communication about, available services for young couch surfers. Further, these services need to be safe, respectful of young people's right to informed choice and privacy, free and accessible,

knowledgeable about couch surfing risks, and they should help to create a sense of community.

This is only the tip of the iceberg of the knowledge shared by these 65 couch surfers. What is clear, however, is that the assumption that couch-surfing is a safer and less risky option is not necessarily accurate. Young people's stories challenge misconceptions that they are 'ok for a while' and provoke greater focus on accurately assessing situational risks for young people who seek support while couch surfing, particularly those that are related to profound and lasting mental health impacts.

While safe stable housing options may be very limited, young couch surfers are not necessarily a lower priority than those in other forms of homelessness. Listening to the wisdom of young couch surfers provides the opportunity for the sector to improve practice in multiple areas including risk assessment, ongoing case management, intervention and harm-minimisation strategies. Most importantly, this knowledge will help service providers to challenge assumptions and build trust in engaging with vulnerable young people couch-surfing in our communities.

Endnotes

1. Hail-Jares K, Vichta-Ohlsen R and Nash C 2019, 'Safer inside? Comparing the experiences and risks faced by young people who couch-surf and sleep rough', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol.24, no.3, pp.305–322.

2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018, *Couch surfers: a profile of Specialist Homelessness Services clients*, Cat. no. HOU 298, AIHW, Canberra.

3. Beekman R, Byrne J and Vichta-Ohlsen R 2021, 'A couch is not a home: new ways of understanding and assessing risks with young people who are couch surfing', *Parity*, vol.34, no.3, pp.11–13.

Personal Statement: Theo Butler, Author/Community Advisory Group Member

I came into the Research Community Advisory Group experience with what I considered to be 'nothing but lived experience'. As I have engaged with the research through the CAG process, I have reflected on what it has brought me. My experiences with homelessness and couch surfing allowed me to connect with other young people's stories. This gave me a new perspective on my own experiences, as I recognised and related to the emerging themes in ways that I had not necessarily fully named for myself before. his was, in itself, a challenging but cathartic and restorative experience. Being a part of this lived-experience research process has meant that I could use my own experiences to help provide a valued perspective to the analysis and interpretation of the data, and thus to the usefulness of the findings. It has also provided me with the opportunity to broaden my professional experience. This has meant that I have been able to meaningfully give back to an area in which I once struggled, turning my lived experience into a contribution, this has been rewarding and healing for me and my journey.