A Couch is Not a Home: New Ways of Understanding and Assessing Risks with Young People Who Are Couchsurfing

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Couch surfing is the most common, if the least visible, form of homelessness for young people in Australia. Faced with a lack of affordable, safe, or crisis housing options, couchsurfing is often assumed to be a safer option than other forms of homelessness. Since young couchsurfers are often considered 'housed', albeit temporarily, they commonly become viewed as a lower priority for support. Similarly, qualitative research with couch-surfers suggests that many do not seek housing support because they do not view themselves as homeless, or as 'deserving' as those who fit the rough sleeping stereotype of homelessness.[1]

However, Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) research and specialised intervention has shown that young people who are moving transiently between houses without a stable home are a concerningly vulnerable population. In particular, the disproportionately high mental health impacts of couchsurfing require specific consideration and targeted service responses. With increasingly limited other housing options, it is critical to undertake targeted and evidence-informed risk assessment with young people who are couchsurfing to ensure the safest possible practice responses. Developed through the evaluated trial of a dedicated Couch Surfing Support Service undertaken by BYS, this paper shares key learning about the use of a targeted couchsurfing risk screening tool, to identify and respond to situational risk factors commonly associated with young people's couchsurfing experiences.

We know that, in 2019–2020, more than 42,400 young people (ages 15 to 24) were experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity in Australia.[2] This includes rough sleepers, and those who have a roof over their heads but do not have a 'home' of their own — a space where they have security, stability, safety, and a sense of belonging. While highly likely to be disproportionately under-reported, as a 'hidden' form of homelessness, the rates of recorded couchsurfing have escalated faster than other forms of homelessness.[3] This is likely to continue to grow as young people face an increasingly tight affordable housing market and ever-increasing demand for crisis and transitional housing. In Australia, the number of people who presented to specialised homelessness services and said they were couch-surfing increased by 33 per cent from 2011–12 to 2014–15, with the largest proportion of couch-surfers reporting they were under-25.[4]

There are many commonly held misconceptions about young people's couchsurfing. It sometimes appears to be the only, and therefore best, housing option, particularly in rural and regional areas. However, decisions about young people staying in other people's homes should be not be predicated on assumptions that it is a safer, less risky form of homelessness — nor that young people are necessarily relatively 'OK' while they are able to couchsurf. Previous research has demonstrated that there are a wide range of serious risks associated with couchsurfing for young people.[5,6,7,8] Young couchsurfers report disproportionately poorer mental health, increased risk of suicide and self-harm and less connection to professional and community support than young people in other forms of homelessness or housing insecurity.[9]

Young couchsurfers, despite frequently financially contributing, were found in BYS research and practice to be highly vulnerable to both being suddenly cast out and to physical, sexual, and financial exploitation at the hands of their hosts. Their couchsurfing is found to be frequently characterised by very high levels of transience and instability, with young people moving between sometimes 50 or more

different places during their period of couchsurfing. Young couchsurfers report very high levels of anxiety about 'where next, what next?'. The instability itself also becomes a barrier to stable income and finding housing, as well as to education, employment, social connection, and personal relationships.

In 2018, quantitative analysis of more than 800 BYS client records identified concerning patterns of demographics and co-occurring issues and risks of young people couchsurfing.[10] This evidence was used to design a targeted intervention for young couchsurfers, funded by the Queensland Mental Health Commission. This evaluated trial aimed to increase practice knowledge and develop tools for effective responses to the risks associated with young people couchsurfing.

Through this initiative, a targeted Risk Screening Tool was developed, which was trialled with young people using the dedicated Couch Surfing Service and in generalist housing intake service, before finally being refined into a tool suitable for use in multiple contexts. The Risk Screening Tool was designed to be used to enable workers to better understand, assess, and respond to risks experienced by young people in the context of their couchsurfing environments. The questions within the tool were formulated based on risks already identified through the previous research; risks commonly recognised in the wider homelessness sector (such as substance use risks); and also some of the lesser-acknowledged, but found to be common risks, associated with how young people find and negotiate couchsurfing arrangements.

Specifically, the Risk Screening Tool guides workers in assessing:

a) young people's access to basic necessities while couchsurfing

b) young people's access to privacy including sleeping and bathroom arrangements

c) the expectations of hosts — what are young people expected to do in return for accommodation?

d) the mental and emotional health impacts of being in the couchsurfing environment, and of the couchsurfing experience itself

e) access to support networks appropriate to their needs

f) alcohol and other drug, (AOD) use and exposure within, around, or arising from the living environment

g) physical safety risks including violence, health risks, criminal behaviours, abuse, assault etc.

The Risk Screening Tool was used to gather data about risk patterns and as a pre/post intervention measure of change in young people's couchsurfing risks. The 42.5 per cent of young people identified being as 'high' or 'very high' overall risk level at intake to the service reduced to 3.5 per cent (one young person only) post support. For the 50 per cent of young people who were found to be at a medium risk level, mental health issues and a lack of support for mental health were found to be key risk factors.

For the young people at highest risk, it was clear that they were in highly unstable and insecure living situations that frequently lacked access to basic necessities such as food, facilities to wash, clean bedding, or a bed at all. They are often uncomfortable or unsafe due to a lack of privacy or space to themselves. They are often

disconnected from support — largely because they don't know where to go — are not connected to peers for word-of-mouth, or do not feel eligible for homelessness support because they, technically, have a place to stay. Thus, they frequently remain in unsafe situations as long as they can, and only reach out for help when they have to leave. High-risk levels of AOD use and physical safety concerns were found in some environments. The critical questions were around the expectations of staying, and the mental health impacts of couchsurfing. These assessments showed that young people's mental health was a significant concern while couchsurfing and, as such, required specialist responses to stabilise their safety while couchsurfing and alternative housing options were sought.

The Risk Screening Tool was found to serve multiple purposes in a homelessness practice environment. It achieved its intended purpose of effectively guiding workers to ask less common but important questions that enabled identification of risks that may otherwise have been over-looked if 'a roof over your head' was the primary focus. While in some circumstances this led to rejecting the couchsurfing arrangement as a safe option, in other situations young people were able to be supported with additional referrals and interventions that mitigated those risks.
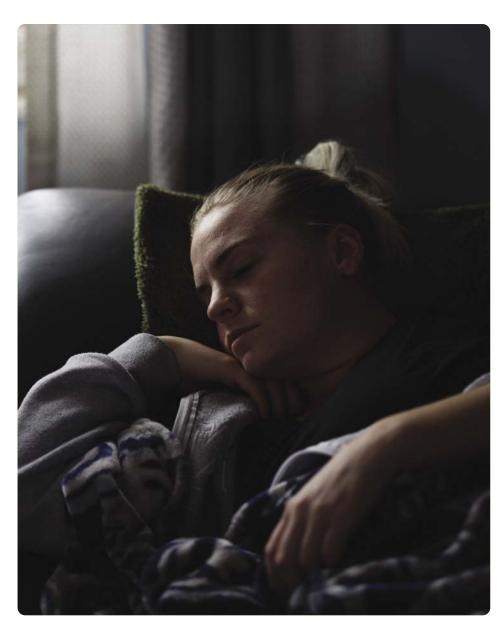
Concurrently, the tool served an educative purpose in building young people's capacity to self-assess risks of their wellbeing. The questions served to increased awareness about the potential risks of couchsurfing, enabling young people to increase their knowledge and confidence in making safer, better-informed choices around where and who to stay with and how to negotiate places to stay in future. Likewise, the tool also served an educative purpose for generalist housing workers who had not previously unpacked the complexity of couchsurfing. The tool was also used to guide conversation with family members, couch providers and other services who contacted the Couch Surfing Service for information and advice. Raising awareness of the common risks associated with couchsurfing, assumedly resulted in enhanced

support responses for young people. The tool's dual purpose was, therefore, to challenge assumptions and misconceptions, and to build community capacity to respond to young people's couchsurfing risks.

While inherently problematic in its instability, temporarily couchsurfing cannot always be avoided — particularly in highly disadvantaged or non-metropolitan areas where safe crisis housing services are not available or are inadequate to meet demand. This makes it critical to sensitively assess the impact of couchsurfing arrangements and environments and, where possible, provide stabilising support until alternate safe and sustainable housing can be accessed. Knowing that there are support services that are both available and responsive to the wide range of risks experienced by couchsurfers can significantly improve young people's safety and capacity to manage their own risks, identify their own support needs and strengthen their support networks. For some, only moving into more stable forms of housing will effectively reduce risks. For others, using a targeted Risk Screening Tool can assist workers and others with implementing risk mitigating strategies. These may include specialist supports for mental health issues, AOD use, relationships, exposure to violence, or other concerns that may otherwise be overlooked. It can help young people develop knowledge, language and capacity to negotiate their own needs. To assist this process, services need to ask questions that are informed by awareness of the complexity of couchsurfing beyond the assumption that 'at least it is a roof over your head'. [11]

The BYS Risk Screening Tool is available to support youth homelessness workers engaging with young couchsurfers in responding to the underlying or less obvious risks associated with couchsurfing. The tool provides a useful guide to meaningful conversations with young people, their family, couch providers and other service providers and, at the same time, increases service capacity to provide effective practice responses.

In February 2021, BYS held a webinar for the wider youth homelessness sector to share learning from the couchsurfing service trial and our broader quantitative and qualitative research about couchsurfing. Titled: *A Couch is Not a Home — Let's change the way we look at young people couchsurfing*, the full presentation is available at *www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQSJGiMeqSQ*

For further information, please contact research@brisyouth.org

Endnotes

1. Hail-Jares K, Vichta-Ohlsen R and Nash C 2020, 'Safer inside? Comparing the experiences and risks faced by young people who couch-surf and sleep rough', *Journal of Youth Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2020.1727425

2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2020, *Specialist homelessness services annual report*, AIHW Canberra, viewed 22 March 2021, *https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report*

3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2018, *Couch surfers: a profile of Specialist Homelessness Services clients*, AIHW Canberra, viewed 22 March 2021, *https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/couch-surfers-a-profile-of-specialist-homelessness/contents/table-of-contents*

4. AIHW 2015, *Specialist homelessness services 2014–15*, viewed 22 March 2021, *https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2014–15*

5. AIHW 2018, op cit.

6. McLoughlin P J 2013, 'Couch surfing on the margins: the reliance on temporary living arrangements as a form of homelessness amongst school-aged home leavers', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 521–545, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2012.725839

7. Hail-Jares K, Vichta-Ohlsen R and Nash C 2020, op cit.

8. Uhr R 2004, *Couch surfing in the burbs: Young hidden and homeless*, Community Connections Brisbane.

9. Hail-Jares K, Vichta-Ohlsen R and Nash C 2020, op cit.

10. Ibid.

11. McLoughlin P J 2013, op cit.