

Attending School While Homeless: Emerging Evidence from Young People in Brisbane

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While education is known to be a critical factor in breaking cycles of homelessness for young people, new evidence from young people accessing Brisbane Youth Service paints an unexpected picture of homelessness and school attendance.

In 2020–21, 1,277 young people in Brisbane presented to Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) with 389 aged 15 to 17 years and 888 aged 18 to 24 years.¹ Homelessness intersects with a range of other challenges in young people's lives including exposure to violence, financial disadvantage, mental ill health, substance use, overall health/wellbeing, and disengagement from education and employment. Young people experiencing homelessness find it exceedingly difficult to remain engaged in education² and are at higher risk of leaving school early compared to their peers.³

For some young people, however, school and education can act as an important point of stability during experiences of homelessness.⁴ Participation in school and

further education/training can additionally act as a facilitator to exiting homelessness.⁵

In the broader Queensland population (aged 15 to 74), women, young people aged 15 to 19 and those who were not Australian or New Zealand citizens were slightly more likely to be enrolled in school/other study.⁶ For Australian secondary schools in 2021, young women were more likely to remain in full-time school between Years 7/8 to 12 (88 per cent) compared to young men (79 per cent).⁷ The full-time retention rate for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students was 59 per cent.

Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) has monitored the prevalence of homelessness and education attendance by completing pre-post assessments with all young people accessing support. Young people are asked to identify a) an education or employment focus and b) if they have an education focus, identify whether they are attending education/training regularly or experiencing barriers to attending. Homelessness includes both primary and

secondary homelessness: sleeping rough, couch surfing, boarding houses, and SHS accommodation. The following limited analysis is a snapshot of quantitative data from young people supported by BYS in 2021 with an education focus and experiencing homelessness at intake.

In 2021, 1,040 young people received ongoing, planned support from BYS. Of these, 287 had an education focus at intake. Demographic characteristics of young people with an education focus are outlined in Table 1.

Compared to all young people supported by BYS, young people with an education focus were, unsurprisingly, younger in age, but interestingly were also more likely to be female, less likely to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and slightly more likely to be CALD. This reflects the broader trends in Queensland and more broadly in Australia.

For young people attending education regularly, there was a clear difference between the age of young people attending school and those attending training/tertiary education. Unsurprisingly, the mean age of young people attending school regularly was 16.8 years, almost two years younger than all young people with an education focus. Those enrolled and regularly attending training/tertiary education had a mean age of 19.8 years.

Nearly half (45 per cent) of young people with an education focus were homeless at intake to BYS. Surprisingly, a similar proportion of young people experiencing homelessness were attending school regularly as those who were not experiencing homelessness (see Figure 1). This did not apply for

Demographic	Young People with an Education focus	All Young People supported
Mean age	18.3 years	20.7 years
Female	64 per cent	59 per cent
Male	32 per cent	37 per cent
Gender Diverse	4 per cent	3 per cent
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	23 per cent	29 per cent
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)	15 per cent	13 per cent

Table 1 — Demographic Characteristics of Young People supported by BYS in 2021

young people engaged in training and tertiary education who were less likely to attend while experiencing homelessness. Despite experiencing homelessness, young people who are engaged in school are more likely to participate regularly than those enrolled in training/tertiary education and an exploration of why this occurs is warranted.

Most schools are free for young people to attend with the expectation that students attend 5 days a week. Schools also have the added positive factors of social support and other practical facilities such as bathrooms and shelter. In Queensland, there are a growing number of alternative schooling options that can offer greater support for young people experiencing complexity to attend school regularly.⁸ Further exploration is needed to understand how and why these factors may influence young people's regular school attendance while experiencing homelessness.

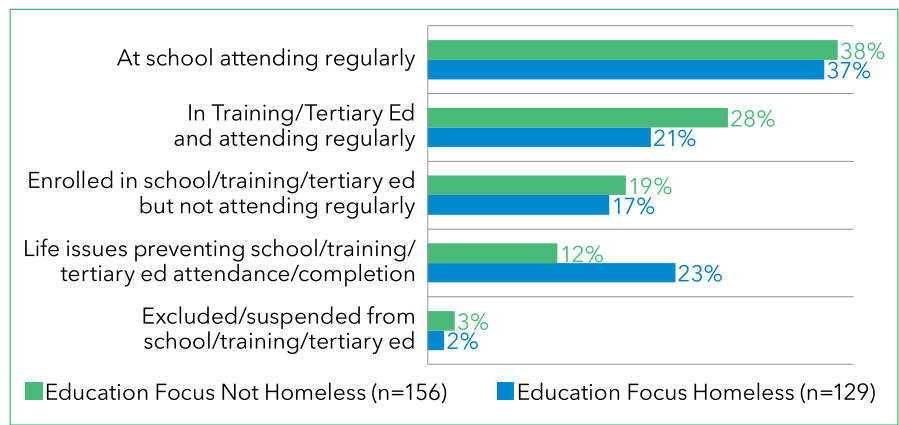
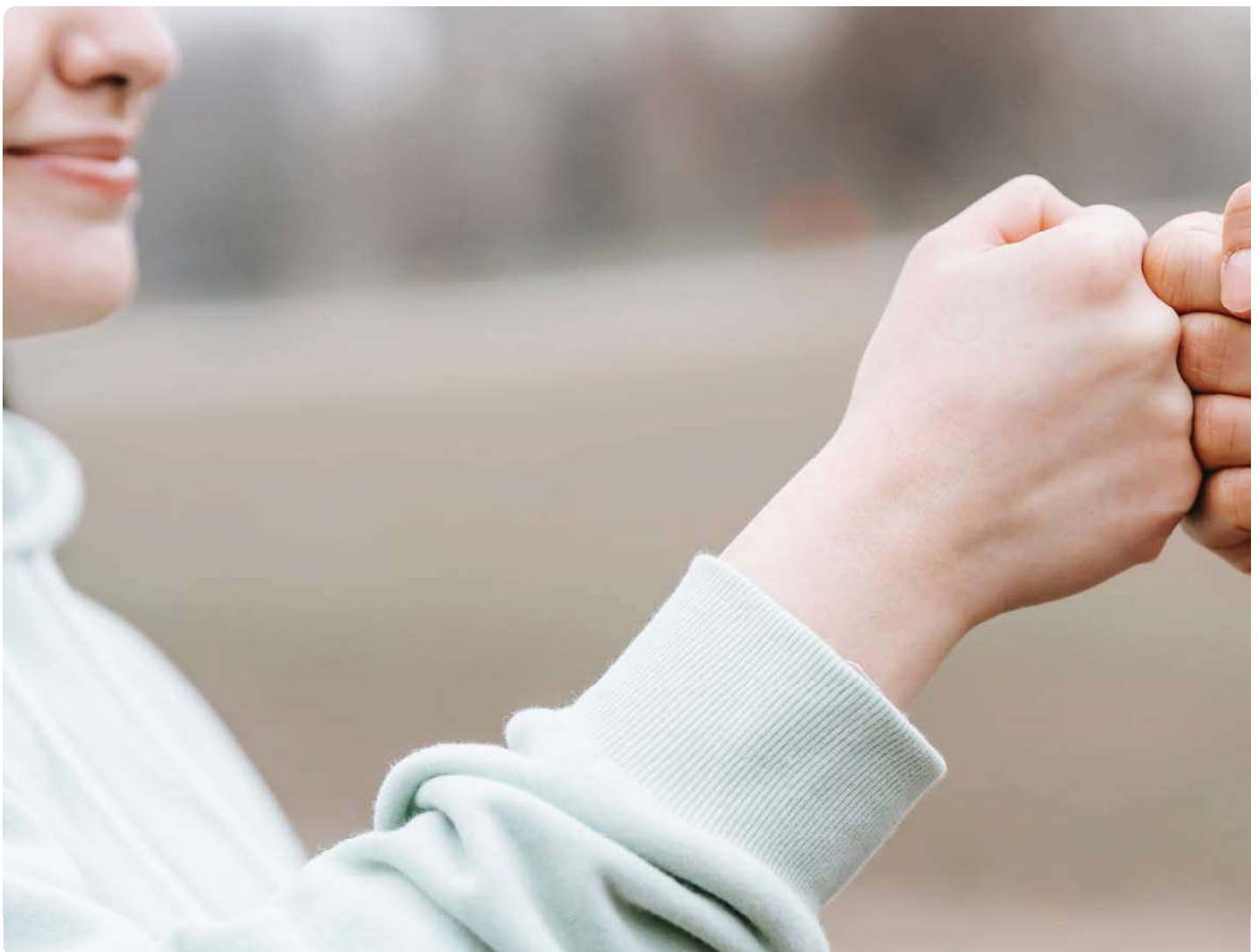


Figure 1 – Young People with an Education Focus at Intake by Housing Status

A closer look at homelessness and education attendance highlights the differences between types of homelessness and regular education attendance for young people. The most frequent form of homelessness at intake for young people with an education focus was couch surfing. Couch surfers were most likely to be attending school regularly (see Figure 2). Somewhat unexpectedly, just over one in three young

people who were sleeping rough at intake were attending school regularly. Young people living in SHS accommodation at intake were most likely to say that life issues were preventing education attendance. This was unsurprising as young people in SHS accommodation often have been homeless for longer than those sleeping rough/couch surfing, potentially having a more sustained impact on educational engagement.



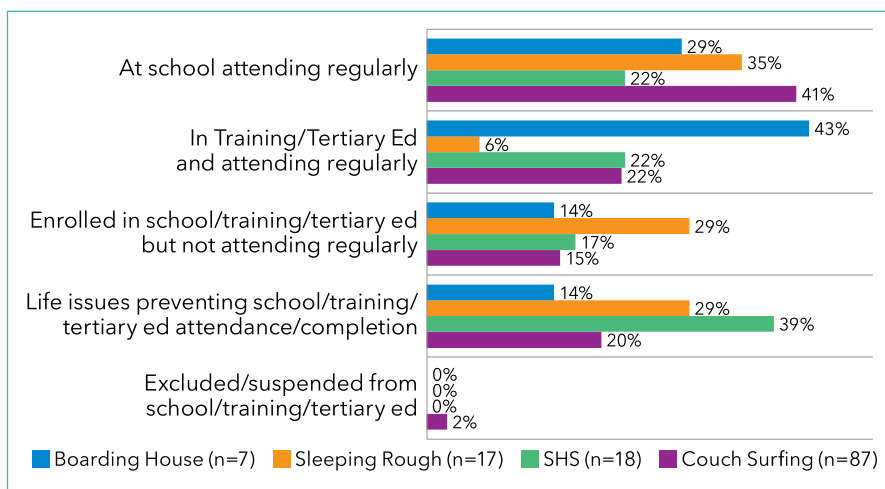


Figure 2 – Young People with an Education Focus by Type of Homelessness

Overall, this small data snapshot suggests that the stereotype of young people who are homeless dropping out of school does not necessarily hold true. This is especially evident for young people whose first experience of homelessness is couch surfing. School staff and communities can play a crucial role in facilitating early identification and links to

homelessness, family and community service interventions for young people experiencing homelessness. This early intervention can influence young people's wellbeing, return to housing security and support their continued engagement with education.

These findings should be interpreted within the context of 2021 in Brisbane.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing housing affordability and access crisis has severely and disproportionately impacted housing options for young people. Recent research found only one rental property in the whole of Australia that would be affordable for a young person on youth allowance.⁹ It is now more important than ever to support young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to break cycles of financial disadvantage and longer-term housing instability. This snapshot raises further questions of how and why almost half of the young people experiencing homelessness continue attending school and what aspects of school are protective and supportive for young people experiencing homelessness.

Endnotes

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021, 'Data Tables: Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2020-21', <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/data>>
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