

Young Women Navigating Homelessness and Pregnancy: Pathways Into and Barriers Out of Homelessness

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In 2020-21, Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) received 2,629 new enquiries for support from young people impacted by homelessness or related support needs. Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) data indicates that approximately 1.1 per cent of young people who seek support nationally are young parents¹ and 17.2 per cent of new mothers are aged 24 years or younger, with younger mothers more likely to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.² At BYS, more than a quarter of the young people we support each year are young parents (26 per cent) and approximately 70 per cent of young parents coming to BYS identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Women who are young, pregnant, and navigating homelessness have compounding and intersecting vulnerabilities, with both their own and their unborn child's welfare at risk.³ Young women facing these challenges have increased risks associated with escalation of mental health concerns, family and relationship violence, physical health issues, poor nutrition, financial issues and a range of other stressors⁴ including the broader elevated health issues that impact Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people.⁵ Babies impacted by parental homelessness are more likely to have pregnancy and birth issues including low birth weight, developmental challenges, thrive delays and other medical complications.⁶

For 45 years, BYS have supported young people experiencing homelessness including a dedicated service for young women and young families. The Young Women and Young Families (YWYF) team face ongoing frustrations around the barriers associated with finding and stabilising sustainable housing for

young people who are pregnant, and in this article share their experiential learning. Pseudonyms have been used for staff member's privacy.

Pathways into Homelessness for Young Pregnant Women

Young parents and parents-to-be experience the same range of pathways into homelessness as any young person, including overcrowding, rental evictions, family conflict, mental health issues. Young parents-to-be are particularly at risk from the most common reasons for homelessness: family rejection and/or breakdown, family and relationship violence and financial hardship.⁷ These life challenges are frequently complicated by other experiences of disadvantage, adversity and trauma in childhood and young adulthood.⁸ Pregnancy can exacerbate pre-existing issues, lead to young people proactively seeking safe living environments, or lead to Child Safety interventions encouraging/requiring young people to find safer housing options.

Danielle, a YWYF worker explained:

Her parents didn't approve of her being pregnant, that was how she became homeless. We see a bit of that, but we also see that the young person or Child Safety may not deem their family safe enough, but there's actually not anything put in place as an alternative. This then ends up leading to children being removed.

Relationship breakdowns during pregnancy are another key pathway into homelessness for young pregnant women coming to BYS for support. When a young woman's partner does not want to be involved in the baby's life, the young woman faces a difficult choice between leaving,

being told to leave their home, or terminating their pregnancy.

Lucy (YWYF worker): [The young woman] left her partner because he had made it very clear he didn't want to be involved in the baby's life. She moved interstate, to Brisbane, and then had to sleep on the couch at her mum's place. There was, however, a lot of conflict in that household.

Lottie (YWYF worker): Sometimes the young women get kicked out of the accommodation they're in by the boyfriend who got them pregnant, because they refuse to terminate.

For some young women, an escalation of domestic violence once they become pregnant can be a key factor in leaving the relationship and home, even if that means sleeping rough or couch surfing.

Lottie: For a lot of young women navigating DV [Domestic Violence], ... an escalation in the DV when they become pregnant is often that tipping point where they might decide, 'enough is enough, I'm out of here'.

Barriers to Ending Cycles of Homelessness for Young Pregnant Women

For young pregnant women experiencing homelessness, navigating Housing, Welfare, Health and Child Safety systems is complex and fraught with barriers to accessing the support needed. This is further compounded by the siloed nature of the service system. Safe, suitable and affordable housing is a key facilitator of ending cycles of homelessness for young people and providing a safe, stable and nurturing environment for their



safe space by Jess

Artwork courtesy of Taskforce

children.^{9,10} While pregnant women may have once been prioritised for urgent housing, over the past three years, Queensland has seen the number of people on social housing waitlists increase by 65 per cent.¹¹ This has been coupled with a dramatic decrease in suitable private rental options, with rental vacancy rates at record lows and no affordable options for young people on youth allowance nor for single parents on parenting payments.¹²

SHS that provide accommodation in Queensland share vacancies on the Queensland Homelessness Information Platform (QHIP). BYS staff, however, have ongoing difficulty in supporting young pregnant women to access these vacancies.

Lottie: There is one [Service provider] that is pretty much the only one if [the young woman is] not prepared to go to refuge, but heaps of them aren't eligible for [that service].

Erica (YWYF worker): It used to be that if somebody was pregnant or parenting it was easier to fast-track them through the housing process. But now there's just nothing: there's little to no vacancies in family accommodation on QHIP, Department of Housing can't house them any faster, [and] there's no community housing options available.

Danielle: Pregnant young women are not eligible for places where they can have their baby with them, and the housing that they can access as a single woman, when there are vacancies, they won't continue to be eligible for that housing when they have the baby. They risk having the child removed or being homeless again. If they do get housing they can stay in with their child, and then Child Safety takes the child into care, they then lose their housing too. It's all a catch-22.

Financial resources are critical in accessing suitable, affordable accommodation for young pregnant women. For young people eligible for Centrelink payments, the increased parenting payment is not accessible until their child is born, meaning, while pregnant, they cannot apply for housing that they would be able to afford once they receive the parenting payment. For young pregnant women who are not Australian citizens, government financial assistance and housing may not be available.

Employment is not necessarily a protective factor for young women once they are pregnant. Many are unable, because of safety, health issues or employer discrimination, to sustain their employment through the pregnancy. However, having employment or savings becomes a barrier to accessing financial benefits that they need to prepare for parenting.

Lottie: [Young pregnant women] don't qualify for parenting payments so they can't afford a private rental generally.

Danielle: [Young pregnant women] can't access the parenting payment because [they] haven't had the baby yet but also [they] might not be able to work because [they're] pregnant.

For young pregnant women who are under 18 years old, accessing Centrelink supports can be complicated by difficult relationships with their parents.

Erica: When they're under the age of 18, trying to get payments through Centrelink can be really tricky because of their age and conflict with their parents. I've had young people whose parents will refuse to sign a form saying there's any conflict at home, to confirm that [the young woman] can't stay there.

BYS staff also noted financial barriers for the organisation in terms of brokering young pregnant women to stay in motel/hotel accommodation.

Erica: We were recently working with a heavily pregnant woman who was sleeping rough and couch surfing, she was 30+ weeks and just getting more and more stressed and desperate with nowhere to go. Access to emergency accommodation was challenging and is not suitable generally anyway yet she was about to give birth and she knew the consequences of not having housing.

Lottie: We are getting a lot of referrals for pregnant women who are sleeping rough, and they've had the baby, there may be more of a chance that we can find temporary accommodation for them — but when they're pregnant we just have to safety plan around rough sleeping or couch surfing, even though we know that that's a key developmental stage and stress is really going to impact the baby.

While being pregnant is associated with barriers to accessing housing, homelessness complicates pregnancy care through the hospital system.

Erica: When a young person is homeless, she is often unable to access antenatal support from a hospital because you need to be living in the catchment of a particular hospital to receive their support. When you are transient or homeless you don't have an address in any catchment. We had one young woman where the hospital was trying to get her to pay several hundred dollars for antenatal classes. She couldn't afford that; she was living out of a car.

Homelessness is often a key trigger for pre-birth notifications to Child Safety and children being taken into care at birth.

How Can We Break Down These Barriers?

It is clear, from the professional evidence of BYS staff, that the most critical issue is the interaction between Housing, Welfare, Health and Child Safety systems. A systemic failure to coordinate responses to young pregnant women who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, has created a support vacuum in which young women are unable to access the supports that they need to care for a new-born prior to the birth. As such, beyond the need for stable antenatal health and wellbeing during the pregnancy, they are unavoidably placed in a situation of being unable to prepare to provide safe stable living environment for a baby. The siloed systems create a loop in which a pregnant woman is treated as a single person until the birth, and she cannot access parenting support until after it is required to be in place. An integrated coordinated inter-departmental welfare response that views a pregnant woman as transitioning into parenting is a critical and urgent requirement to address these complex systemic barriers to safe and sustainable housing for young pregnant women.

Enhanced integration of welfare responses would ideally include advance access to parenting payments and rent assistance during the third trimester, where there is evidence that housing is unstable and potentially impacting the wellbeing of the mother and baby. In addition, the waiving of age as a barrier to accessing Centrelink

payments would see young women who are pregnant automatically qualify for independent payments, removing family 'permission' as a barrier to the financial means to access safe housing. More broadly, young pregnant women are just one group, albeit a highly vulnerable group, who need enhanced housing policy responses that will strengthen affordable housing for young people.

Acknowledgement

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Endnotes

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