

Opinion 4

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due to her housing instability, historical relationships and previous child protection engagement, Vanessa's child was removed at birth. While Vanessa fought hard to get her child back, the emotional despair and loss saw Vanessa lose hope and fall back into the cycle she knew.

BYS opens its doors daily to young people in crisis who need immediate support. Since commencing my role, the number of young people who fill our reception and car park, waiting to speak with a worker, is growing. Of the many young people who access support, 72 per cent have experienced family violence, 63 per cent have diagnosed mental health issues, 44 per cent are homeless and 10 per cent of women under 18 years were already parents. Over the past three years, the occasions of support have increased by 29 per cent.

Every day we provide pantry access to over 30 young people and their children. A regular order of tents and sleeping bags is distributed to those who need housing. The severe impact of the current economic crisis means that, in Brisbane, there is no affordable housing for young people. 'We can feel the desperation and tension that leave young people feeling hopeless and forgotten.'

The Federal Government must address Australia's child and youth homelessness problem. The argument for a National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan is not new. Many governments have attempted to address homelessness only to leave children and young people as one or two recommendations in an adult-focused strategy. While there have been many child and youth wellbeing strategies nationally

(National Mental Health Commission's National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy² for the most recent), they have not adequately addressed the issue of homelessness. The Federal Government has been largely silent on this issue.

The lack of Federal Government policy filters down to the states, evidenced by the few youth-specific commitments in the Queensland Housing and Homelessness Strategy. The Queensland Government has published a policy and integrated framework of housing support for young people;³ however, this does not fully address the underlying issues driving child and youth homelessness such as mental health, housing affordability, social isolation, or financial stability. Like other states, it focuses on information finding, early intervention and building a responsive and accessible system.

Although these actions are important, they only scratch the surface of addressing youth homelessness. While implementation of both the strategy and framework is in progress, a comprehensive, focused and accountable plan with targets and funding to address and decrease the numbers of homeless children and young people is missing. We need more than a band-aid solution to reduce homelessness. For example, development of a national plan could facilitate an overdue review of Services Australia welfare payments, including the Youth Allowance, and provide additional rental supplementation that adequately meets rising rental costs in both the private, public and community housing spaces.

Without a clear national plan and accompanying strategies, children and young people slip through the cracks. The lack of medium-term housing options for young people

aged 15 to 20 years means many reside in emergency accommodation longer than appropriate. Across Australia, services are left with no real direction as to how to address homeless children and young people aged under 16 years, or who is responsible for their wellbeing. Often the ball is handed to the child protection system; however, unless the child or young person is deemed at risk of significant harm, they are left to be supported by the homelessness system.

Another policy and service gap relates to young parents and their children. BYS supports many young people through pregnancy and into parenthood. These young parents face homelessness due to factors out of their control: history of trauma, housing affordability, intimate partner violence, and financial instability. Like Vanessa, many of these young parents

have a child protection history, struggle with housing stability, and have experienced family violence and no family support. These experiences often precipitate young families having contact with the child protection system. With little prevention, early intervention and support programs available, we see many babies removed at birth. We need a National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan that includes integrated solutions that keep mums and bubs together, supported and safely housed.

The drivers of child and youth homelessness and the strategies that intersect with these issues must align. Ideally, a National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan would empower each state to establish its own strategy for delivering on the plan with clear measures of success. Funding would be allocated federally and

by each state to ensure child and youth homelessness is brief, rare and non-recurring. It's time we change the life trajectories of children and young people in Australia who are homeless. Australia must lead the way in ending child and youth homelessness by acknowledging the next generation as Australia's greatest asset.

Endnotes

1. Anglicare Southern Queensland, Rental Affordability Snapshot 2022 Brisbane Metropolitan Area, Anglicare Australia, <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-Regional-reports.pdf>
2. National Mental Health Commission 2021, National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, National Mental Health Commission.
3. Queensland Government 2022, Towards Ending Homelessness for Young Queenslanders 2022-2027, Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy, https://www.qld.gov.au/_Data/assets/pdf_file/0012/53150/towards-ending-homelessness-policy.pdf