

COUCH SURFING STUDENTS:

# The Yarra Ranges Youth Homelessness Prevention Project



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*"School is school for kids. It's accessible. School has everything. School has a canteen where they can get food. School has a place where they can go and be part of the drama club. School has somewhere where they can go when they're getting in trouble. School has everything. It's that mini society for them, so they're sort of like, 'Well I can get everything I need from school. Why do I need to look outside that?'"*

School staff member - CSSS participant





# Background

*For most young Australians, the secondary school years are an important time focused on gaining a Year 12 qualification that will allow access to opportunities for post-school education, training or employment. In addition, it is a time when adolescents take on new challenges and try out new activities related to their increased autonomy and emergence into adulthood, such as tracking on a part-time job or learning to drive. **However, there are a growing number of young people who have such troubled personal lives and face such extreme challenges that merely attending school becomes almost impossible. These are those young Australians who become homeless whilst still attending school.***

The prevalence of young Australians, under the age of 25, who are without safe and secure accommodation account for 42% of the homeless population and it is estimated that approximately 44,000 young people are homeless on any given night (ABS, 2011). The experience of being without safe or secure accommodation, of having no permanent place to call home has significant negative impacts on young people's educational, social and personal outcomes (Moore & McArthur, 2009). The recent findings from the Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia (CYHA) project found that homeless youth have significantly poorer outcomes than their non-homeless counterparts and experience significant levels of psychological distress. One in five homeless young women and one in ten homeless young men in the CYHA study reported that they had (unsuccessfully) attempted suicide in the last six months prior to data collection (Flatau, Thielking, MacKenzie & Steen, 2015). For the most part, young people begin their 'homelessness journey' whilst they are still at school, however, research exploring the experiences of 'student homelessness' in detail is scarce.

*Homelessness is defined as a state of non-permanent accommodation or accommodation that falls far below minimum community expectations (MacKenzie and Chamberlain, 2008). Homelessness includes the following: living on the streets or sleeping in parks, cars and makeshift dwellings (rough sleeping), staying in crisis or transitional accommodation, temporarily living with other households (couch surfing), staying in hotels or motels, and living in boarding houses.*

In the youth context, it is important to recognise that homelessness is not synonymous with 'rooflessness' (McLoughlin, 2013). The most dominant form of homelessness for young Australians is couch surfing (Flatau, Thielking, MacKenzie & Steen, 2015). This form of homelessness is said to be a 'hidden' form of homelessness that often goes unrecognised. When couch surfing, young people move between the homes of their friends, acquaintances or family members, without any real security of tenure and are in a constant search for the next place to stay. In what was termed the 'homelessness career' by MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2003, see Figure 1) couch surfing usually occurs in the very early 'in and out of home' stage, when the young person is still at school ('homeless student'). According to this model, chronic homelessness is preceded by a set of common circumstances, such as the young person making a permanent break from home and dropping out of school.

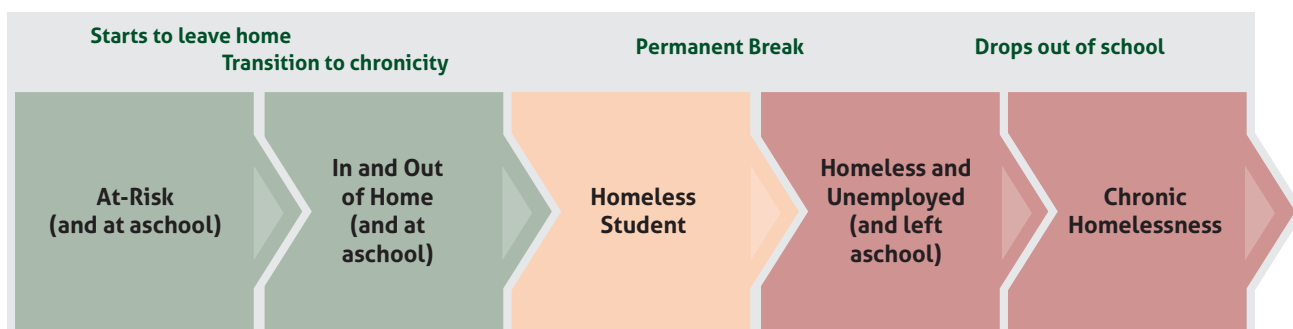


Figure 1 - MacKenzie and Chamberlain's (2003) Homelessness Career

**Young people begin to experience homelessness while they are still attending school. The availability of school-based services and supports that ensure continuity of schooling and a safe environment during this time is vital.** Moreover, a collaborative relationship between schools and local youth services is critical in order to provide accessible and approachable assistance, beyond that of which a school can generally provide, to vulnerable students who require it.

*The Couch Surfing Secondary Students (CSSS): Yarra Ranges Youth Homelessness Prevention Project* has developed out of a research partnership between Anchor Youth Services, the Outer Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network (OELLEN), Swinburne University and the University of Western Australia Centre for Social Impact. The partnership emphasises the cross-sector nature of youth homelessness as falling in both the educational and community services contexts. Anchor is one of two youth homelessness agencies in the region that supports the Yarra Ranges. OELLEN aims to develop sustainable partnerships between schools and industry to support the retention, attainment and career pathways of at risk young people.

**The study investigates the experiences of, and perceptions toward, couch surfing secondary students in the Yarra Ranges Shire. It seeks to provide evidence to better understand how to intervene earlier rather than later, and to ensure that services, like Anchor and OELLEN, are more able to effectively support the needs of schools who are at the 'coalface' of early stage homelessness in youth.**

According to Anchor data, in the 12 months between June 2013 and June 2014 a total of 839 distinct local young people and their dependent children presented as homeless or at risk of homeless to Anchor's Opening Doors emergency accommodation service (N=566) and Anchor's Youth Case Management Services (N=273) in Lilydale. However, the experience of those working in this area is that young people are reaching critical services, like Anchor, after they have already left home and school and not when the most effective homeless prevention interventions, to keep young people at home (if appropriate) and at school, can be implemented.

The study sample consists of two separate groups: school staff (teachers and other support staff); and young people who had experienced homelessness whilst attending secondary school. The school staff sample was sourced from a combination of secondary schools and alternative education settings in the Yarra Ranges Shire. The homeless youth sample consisted of young people who are or have been supported by a local youth homelessness specialist support service while attending secondary school in the Yarra Ranges.

**Insights from this study will assist in understanding the issues around supporting young people during this critical and very early stage of homelessness.** It will also assist in improving homelessness services and connections to schools in the local area, which will hopefully assist in developing better early intervention services and lessen the incidence of youth homelessness and early school leaving in the Yarra Ranges Shire.



# Key findings

**Thirty percent of the sample had first run away from home during primary school, with the average age being 10 years old.** Fifty percent slept rough when they first ran away from home, 67% stayed away overnight, while 33% had run away but returned home the same day. Seventy-one percent of young people reported that they first left their home due to a conflict either with parents (including step parents) or siblings (including step siblings). The conflict caused 70% to leave on their own accord, while 15% reported that they were 'kicked out'.

In terms of homelessness during secondary school, **the median age of first running away from home during secondary school was age 14**, with 29% indicating that they were 13 years old when first experiencing homelessness during secondary school, and 29% indicating they were aged 15 when first experiencing homelessness during secondary school.

There was a significant increase in service usage after young people began running away from home. Only one person was receiving support from a youth homelessness agency before running away while just over half (53%) began using this service after running away from home during secondary school. **There was a significant increase in the use of school counsellors (from 22% usage to 42% usage) and teachers/principals (from 11% usage to 37% usage) after running away from home during secondary school.**

**Half of the sample never considered themselves to be homeless. For those that did consider themselves homeless, they first considered themselves homeless at a median age of 16, which is two years older than the median age for when they actually first experienced homelessness during secondary school, and two years into 'the homelessness career'.** Interestingly, according to young people's perceptions of the definition of homelessness, staying with friends temporarily or extended family because home was not a safe or secure place to be was generally not mentioned as being a defining feature of homelessness.

Close to 90% of the young people were referred to a homeless youth agency and mental health services. In contrast, 60% were referred to general health services. Approximately half contacted teachers or a school support person themselves, while almost two thirds were referred to the school counsellor or student welfare coordinator. Of concern was that only 16% of the youth sample reported that they knew youth homeless services would support them before they experienced homelessness.

**Specialist homelessness services and schools both play a vital role in supporting students with issues associated with homelessness. Homeless youth agencies and friends were the most helpful in addressing issues around accommodation. Health services, school counselling, teachers and friends were the most helpful for personal issues.** School support persons, the student welfare coordinator and teachers were the most helpful in addressing family issues. School counselling, school support persons, the student welfare coordinator, teachers and friends were all helpful in assisting with school issues.

**Young people value their privacy and access to a confidential service when seeking help for issues associated with homelessness. They feared being judged and stigmatised and would avoid seeking help if this outcome was suspected.** Timelines for support and intervention was another factor that contributed to whether or not a service was sought, young people felt that their needs were immediate and therefore support should also be immediate.

**The young people in the study experienced high levels of volatility and instability in regard to their accommodation states during secondary school. However, incredible resilience was shown among this group of young people. While taking part in the study, 48% of the sample was still enrolled at secondary school.** For those who were still enrolled, 20% were currently in Year 10, 30% were in Year 11 and 20% were in Year 12.

# The sample

*Eight focus groups were conducted with a total of 17 teachers and school support staff members. Participants comprised a range of teachers, a school principal and student support staff (such as counsellors).*

School-based participants were invited due to their experience supporting students who had experienced homelessness. Twelve secondary schools and education settings from the Yarra Ranges area were represented. Schools consisted of a combination of public, Catholic and alternative settings.

The youth sample consisted of 21 individuals who had experienced homelessness whilst attending secondary school. Young people completed interviews during late 2014 and early 2015. All participants completed the *Couch Surfing Secondary Students Survey* (Thielking & Flatau) specifically developed for this project. The median age of participants was 18 and 57% of the sample were female (see Figure 1). All participants were born in Australia with 62% of the sample speaking only English with their family. One person reported an Indigenous background.

While taking part in the study, 48% of the sample was still enrolled at secondary school. For those who were still enrolled, 20% were currently in Year 10, 30% were in Year 11 and 20% were in Year 12.

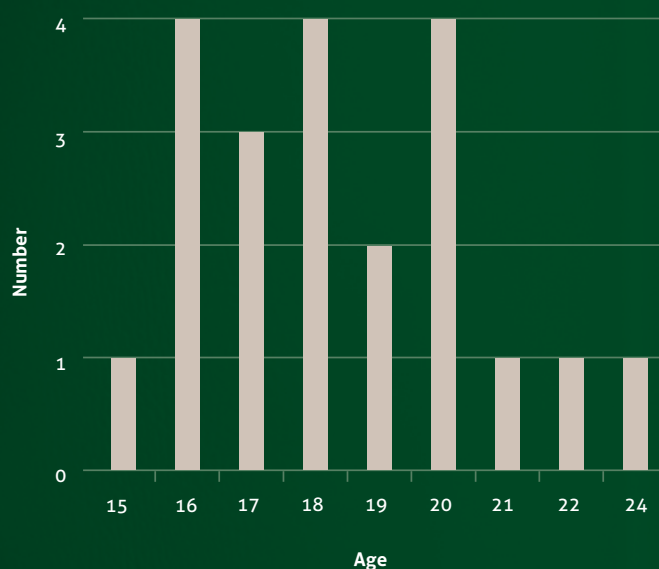


Figure 1: Sample age distribution



# Accommodation during school years

Figure 2 represents the current accommodation states of the individuals at the date they completed the survey. When responding, 95% said this was their usual accommodation at the moment. One individual was, at the time of data collection, staying with a friend but was usually at home in kinship care. The majority of young people (43%) were living in transitional accommodation and 24% were at home with one or two parents and/or guardians.

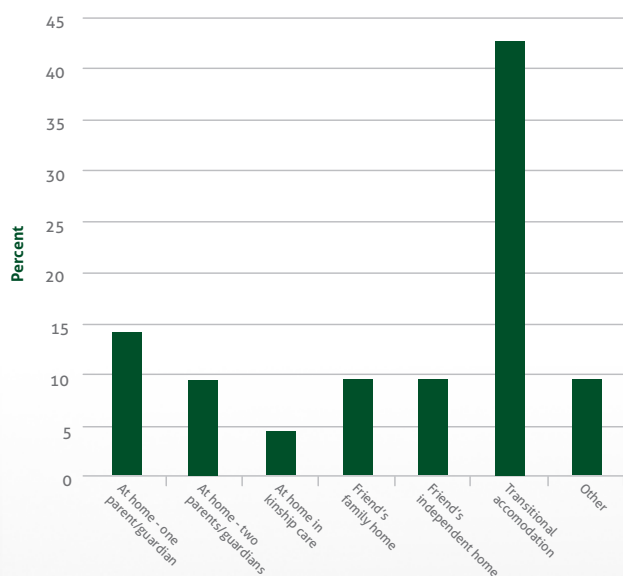


Figure 2: Current accommodation state.

Figure 3 below represents the housing states of the participants when they started high school. The majority of young people in the sample (86%) were living at home with one or more of their parents when they entered Year 7. There is a noticeable difference in accommodation states from when respondents began secondary school to when they completed the survey.

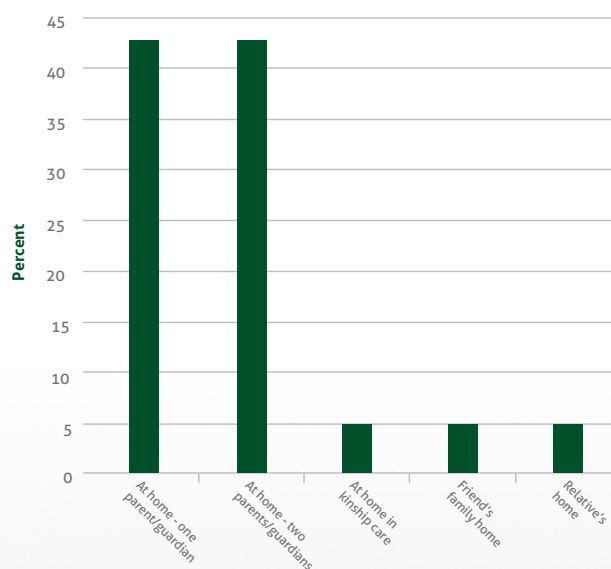


Figure 3: Accommodation state when starting high school (i.e. initial housing state).



# Early stage homelessness: Running away from home

Youth homelessness mostly begins with the act of running away from home, usually in response to a conflict within the home (Flatau, Thielking, MacKenzie & Steen, 2015). When young people were asked about their early experiences of running away from home prior to entering secondary school, 30% of the sample reported that they had in fact first run away from home during *primary school*. Of those who had reported running away during primary school, 67% stayed away overnight, while 33% had run away but returned home the same day.

For those young people who ran away during primary school, 17% first went to their other parent/guardian's home, 50% slept rough (street, park or open space), 17% stayed with a friend, and 17% stayed elsewhere (i.e., a relative or other person's house other than a friend or guardian).



Figure 4: Age when first remember being homeless.

Participants were asked to indicate how old they were when they first stayed at a boyfriend or girlfriend's place, at someone else's place because they had nowhere else to go, in crisis or emergency housing or in some temporary place of accommodation such as a caravan or boarding house, or any other form of homelessness whilst they were in secondary school. The median age reported was age 14, with 29% indicating that they were 13 years old when they first experienced homelessness during secondary school, and 29% indicating age 15 as experiencing homelessness for the first time during secondary school. This means that youth homelessness is an issue of concern for students in all year levels of secondary school, from year 7-12, and for a proportion of this group, homelessness even begins in the primary school years.

Young people were also asked 'at what point, if ever, did you consider yourself to be homeless?' Despite experiencing homelessness as generally defined in Australia, 48% of the sample never considered themselves to be homeless. Furthermore, for those that did consider themselves homeless, they first considered themselves homeless at a median age of 16, which is two years older than the median age for when they actually first experienced homelessness, and two years into 'the homelessness career' (MacKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003).

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS

Young people participating in the study were asked to reveal what the word 'homelessness' meant to them. Twenty-nine percent of young people identified a lack of stability in accommodation as a feature of homelessness, and they also concentrated on aspects of rough sleeping such as no shelter or food, being on your own and being physically out on the street. Staying with friends temporarily or extended family because home was not a safe or secure place to be was generally *not* mentioned as being a defining feature of homelessness.

When asked what the word homeless meant to them, 12 students referred to issues regarding stability of accommodation, 6 students referred to "sleeping on the street" and 3 students discussed the absence of safety and support from people around them. Only 1 student mentioned couch surfing in their definition of homelessness. Also, despite one student reporting that they "had nowhere to go" in Year 8, they still did not consider themselves "homeless".



## YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF COUCH SURFING

When asked about their perception of couch surfing, 12 participants spoke about temporarily staying somewhere without the intention to live there. These participants reflected on the experience of constantly moving around, which is common to couch surfing. One participant referred to couch surfing as last minute accommodation, which also highlights the lack of security. In their responses, nine participants referred to couch surfing as staying with friends, or people they know until finding somewhere else to go. Only 1 participant in this study did not know what couch surfing was and 1 participant reported that couch surfing was not homelessness because "they have a house to stay at".

*"Moving from house to house. No stability. Even if you stay at a friends house that welcomes you, there's still a chance they don't want you and getting told to leave. There could be a friendship break down and you are the one that has to leave"* - Student (CSSS Participant)

*"Staying at peoples houses that aren't your normal house – friend, family etc. Jumping from place to place and avoiding your permanent home or to avoid living on the street"* - Student (CSSS Participant)

These results could be interpreted as reflecting a lack of appropriate education for young people on the real definition of homelessness, but may also shed light on the way 'homelessness' is currently understood by young people (as largely meaning rooflessness) and that the current usage of the word homelessness or homeless support service is perhaps not appropriate with this age group.

*"When you don't have a roof over your head. Home is where you can be cared for. Home is where people are connected to you"* – Student (CSSS Participant)

*"Someone who doesn't have anywhere to live, no accommodation. Someone who moves around a lot"* - Student (CSSS Participant)

*"Not having a stable home. No stability. Even if you have a bed to sleep in there's no stability which has a massive effect physically and mentally. When you have physical and mental health issues, with no stability, it's hard to cope"* - Student (CSSS Participant)

# Identifying homelessness: By any other name...

## PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF ON IDENTIFYING HOMELESS STUDENTS

*"Because if they're staying at a friend's house, they're not homeless in their mind. Yeah. Unless they're living on the street, in the gutter, in the pipe at the playground, they're not homeless"*

- School staff member - CSSS participant

Analysis of interview data with school staff highlighted that young people would not seek help when first running away from home. This was often because they did not define themselves as homeless or at risk of homelessness, and hence did not think that they needed or deserved help. Teachers felt that young people did not acknowledge the seriousness of their situation and this contributed to a belief that they were not worthy of help, or that there were others in more need of support from services and teachers than themselves. School staff members also believed that couch surfing students were very unlikely to identify themselves as homeless or understand that temporary living arrangements account for a homeless situation.

*"There's also the - 'it's not that bad, I've got a friend to stay with, I've got this place to go' - If it's not actually sleeping rough, if it's sleeping at friends' places and that sort of thing - 'No, I've got it under control. It's not that bad. Other people are worse than me'"* - School staff member - CSSS participant

When asked about their experiences with students who are attending school but who are experiencing homelessness, teachers and support staff reflected on the issues the students were having with their families. That is, teachers and support staff suggested that the primary reason for their students being in the 'in and out of home phase' was due to family breakdown or separation, financial issues within the family, parent mental health issues, incidents of previous trauma in the students' lives or violence within the family home.

*"I think it's probably more the situation is just too much at home and they want out"*

- School staff member - CSSS participant

**Early identification by schools and teaching staff that a young person is experiencing homelessness is important in order to offer assistance early.** For the teachers who see these students daily, there were clear school-based signs or indicators that a student might not be at home, including:

- **School Uniform:** Not wearing the right uniform, wearing the same uniform repeatedly, no laundering of uniform
- **Attendance:** Arriving late or arriving very early to school, skipping days, not wanting to leave school at the end of the day
- **School work:** Not doing homework, not being able to keep up in class because of tiredness or distraction, falling behind which in turn, skipping days to avoid reprimand
- **Lunch:** Not bringing lunch to school (or not having money for the canteen)
- **Uncharacteristic behaviours:** For example, self-harming, rule-breaking, mental health issues, unsettled mood

Teachers and support staff also referred to three different reporting methods that helped them become aware of students who were experiencing homelessness. Firstly, in the participants' experience, many students or families self-reported or approached school staff themselves looking for help. This was mostly in instances where there was a good rapport built between the student and the teachers.

Secondly, other-reports (such as friends, peers or friend's parents) was also a common way of finding out a student was not returning home, and this was usually because another student may mention their friend 'staying over a lot' or a parent may ring the school because they're child's friend has overstayed their welcome and they are looking for assistance.

Thirdly, teachers heard through the 'grapevine', notice changes in students or hear things in the classroom/playground that help identify a potential issue. Suspecting an issue, they were then able to follow up with the student and their family.

*“Sometimes other students might say, look I’m really worried about my friend who’s off staying at all these different houses or all these different places or has just... like kids will use the term ‘run away from home’ a lot, so they might come in and say they’ve run away from home” - School staff member - CSSS participant*

Teachers and support staff varied in their reporting and identification of student homelessness. Some participants believed that their school had only a few students who couch surf, whilst others believed that couch surfing was highly prevalent and that many students couch surf ‘under the radar’ of school knowledge.

Some teachers and support staff reported that there are difficulties in identifying and hence estimating the number of couch surfing students in their school, suggesting that there are probably more than they know of. This uncertainty in identifying students who are homeless or at risk of homelessness was said to stem from the difficulties in defining homelessness and in the hesitancy from students and families to self-report or seek support from local services or the school.

## EARLY HOMELESSNESS EXPERIENCES

At the point when individuals considered themselves to be homeless, young people were asked to think back to what was happening for them at the time. A few common themes emerged. Generally, either the individual was asked to leave home, kicked out of home, experienced conflict with parents/guardians and chose to leave, or they had been sleeping rough for a few days.

In the sample there are some general housing experiences during secondary school that can characterise the sample. Since beginning secondary school, 19% of individuals spent over 1200 consecutive nights at home before changing housing state, and thus experienced a late onset of homelessness during the upper years of high school and a relatively stable lower years at school. Others experienced an early onset of homelessness with 14% of the sample reporting spending less than 200 nights at home before changing housing state.

In total, 19% of the sample experienced problems for a limited time, spending over 90% of their housing experience during high school at home with one or two parents or guardians, in foster care or in kinship care. The issues causing their situation were resolved quickly and they returned to stable housing. Conversely, over 40% of the study experienced homelessness and chaotic housing states for over 25% of their housing experience during high school. Close to half of the sample entered into patterns of homelessness at least once during high school, transitioning from one housing state to another repeatedly for a period of time.

On average, individuals changed school twice during high school, with school changes in the sample ranging from zero to five. In 76% of school changes, young people reported that they chose to leave school, while 18% of the time they were told to leave. Six percent young people revealed that a mutual decision was reached between them and the school that it would be best for them to leave school.

**Table 1: Frequency table for school transition reasons.**

Reason for changing, leaving or returning to school (respondents could choose more than one reason)	
Was asked to leave school/expelled	17%
Left school voluntarily	21%
I had friends at another school	2%
I changed from mainstream to VCAL	4%
School was too far away	4%
Conflict with teachers	8%
Conflict with other students	4%
Bullying	2%
School work was too difficult/too hard to catch up	6%
Felt I had a bad reputation at the school	8%
Other reason for leaving or changing school	11%
Returned to school after period of being away - To complete education	11%
Returned to school after period of being away - Other reason	4%

Young people reported a range of reasons for leaving or changing school/s during secondary school. Table 1 below outlines the frequencies of the different reasons reported. Seventeen percent reported being asked to leave or expelled, 21% reported they left school voluntarily, while 11% of individuals returned to complete education at a later date. Only 8% reported conflict with teachers as a reason for leaving, 6% left school as the work was too difficult and 8% felt they had a bad reputation at the school, which meant it was easier to leave than stay. For those not currently enrolled in secondary school (which was 52% of the sample), 64% completed high school in Year 12. On average, respondents completed secondary school in Year 11, at an average age of 17.



To create a visual picture of the lives lead by homeless high school students, Figure 5 below plots the number of school transitions versus the number of housing transitions for each individual as a different point.

For example, the point at (20,2) represents a young person who changed housing state 20 times and schools twice during their time at high school. In contrast, a point at (4,1) represents a young person who changed housing state four times and school once during high school.

Overall, the youth sample experienced high levels of volatility and instability in regard to their accommodation states during secondary school, with the majority of participants in this study changing accommodation an average of 9 times during secondary school (median of 8; range of housing state transitions being 3 to 20; and excluding one individual who changed accommodation states 57 times).

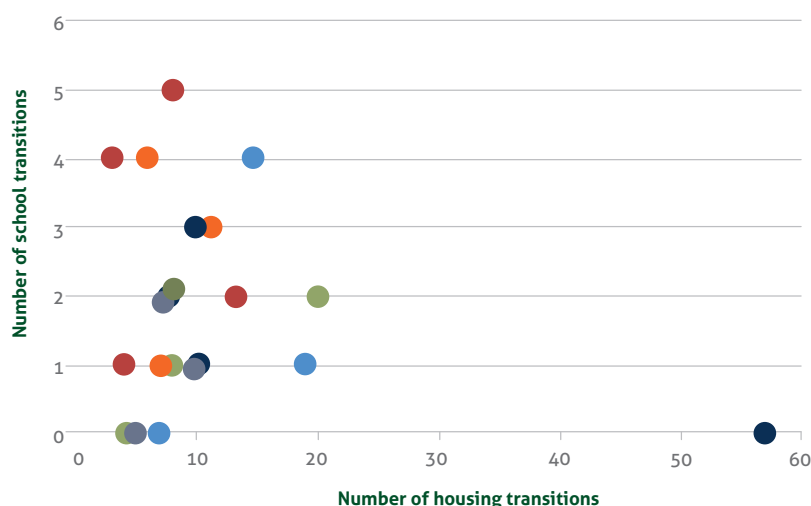


Figure 5: Number of school transitions versus number of housing transitions for each individual.

The entire sample spent some time at home with either one or two parents during secondary school. In terms of other forms of accommodation experiences, 20% reported spending time in kinship care, 14% experienced sleeping rough, 95% stayed at a friend's family home and 29% stayed overnight at a relative's home.

Excluding the individual who changed housing states 57 times, the average length of time in any one spell staying at home with one or two parents was 316 nights (range 1 to 1922 nights, median of 258); and in kinship care was 207 nights (range 7 to 900, median of 57). The average length of time in any one spell sleeping rough (also excluding one individual who spent 150 nights sleeping rough in one spell) was 11 nights (range from 1 to 21, median of 11); and staying at a relative's house was 81 nights (range 1 to 270, median of 56 nights). In terms of couch surfing, the average length of time in one place in any one spell was 62 nights (range 1 to 580, median of 30 nights) before moving on again to another place.

Periods of instability in housing, where young people moved from one place to another, were common. The average average duration of these periods of instability was 258 nights (range from 21 to 720 nights, median of 180). The individual who changed housing state 57 times during high school spent an average of 49 nights (range 1 to 300, median of 16) at home with one or two parents in any one spell; slept rough for an average duration of 1 night (range 1 to 2, median of 1); stayed at a relative's for an average duration of 9 nights (range 1 to 45, median of 2); couch surfed for an average of 2 nights (range 1 to 3, median of 1), and experienced one spell of 165 nights of regularly alternating between housing states.

## ACCOMMODATION TRANSITION REASONS

Study participants were asked "why did you leave or change your accommodation?" and "can you remember whose choice it was for you to move?" Table 2 presents the frequencies of reasons for a change in accommodation for the first time and for all transitions during high school (i.e., overall). Table 3 outlines the frequencies of whose choice it was in changing accommodation for the first time and overall.

### Reasons for first leaving home and continued housing transitions

Seventy-one percent of young people reported that they first left their home due to a conflict either with parents (including step parents) or siblings (including step siblings). The conflict caused 70% to leave on their own accord, while 15% reported that they were 'kicked out'. Following this, many are left with no stable place to go and enter into couch surfing – which involves staying at different places and moving around mostly because they do not want to outstay their welcome or do not feel comfortable. Individuals continue to move around until the initial problem at home is resolved and move home or they find stable housing

(e.g. transitional housing provided by a support service). The major difference within the sample is that some manage to resolve their housing situation quickly and so only experience a period of homelessness once, and have lower housing volatility. In contrast, others struggle to find stable housing and thus continue moving from one housing state to another repeatedly.

Examples of responses under other include: mental illness, drug/alcohol abuse, incarceration (parents and/or respondent), broke up with boyfriend/girlfriend, didn't want to overstay welcome, intervention from authorities (police, DHS), needed something from home, got a job and could afford to support themselves and found permanent accommodation elsewhere.

**Table 2: Frequency table for transition reasons.**

Accommodation Transition Reason	First time	Overall
Conflict with parent/guardian	40%	25%
Conflict with step parent/partner	17%	3%
Conflict with sibling	11%	5%
Conflict with step sibling	3%	0%
Conflict with host family member/s	0%	2%
Did not feel safe at the place they were living	6%	7%
Did not feel comfortable at the place they were living	0%	3%
Overcrowding at the place they were living	3%	4%
No/limited independence at the place they were living	3%	1%
Asked to leave/wore out stay	0%	7%
Could not afford costs	0%	1%
School was too far away	0%	1%
Crisis/conflict/problem resolved	0%	4%
I calmed down/time out and was able to return	0%	6%
Other resolution	0%	3%
Other reason	17%	25%

**Table 3: Frequency table for whose choice it was to transition accommodation.**

Whose choice to leave	First time	Overall
I chose to leave	70%	77%
I was told to leave	15%	12%
We decided it was best that I leave	15%	11%

### Teachers and Support Staff Perspectives: Couch Surfing Students

Teachers and student support staff were asked to share their perspective and experiences working with students who have or are couch surfing.

*"I just had a girl recently who is doing that, with the parents on board, living with her boyfriend out of the home. She's a Year 12 girl. So that seems to probably be the biggest thing, it's kids moving in with their partner"* - School staff member - CSSS participant

Teachers and support staff reported that the majority of their couch surfing students were living with their boyfriend or girlfriend. This was particularly true for young girls who were not living at home. Teachers and support staff believed that young people specifically sought partners that would let them to stay with them, and when relationships ended, they again sought a new partner that would let them stay. Interestingly, 34% of the youth sample reported that they stayed overnight at a boyfriend/girlfriend's home at some point during high school as they did not want to be at home.

When teachers and support staff were reflecting on their students' experiences of couch surfing, they acknowledged the rate at which young people quickly 'burn their bridges' and were forced to find somewhere else to stay. This highlights the constant uncertainty some young people experience in order to find safe and secure accommodation.

*"So, they're in and out of home, we get a lot of that. The older students tend to be with a lot of relationships, so they'll move in with their boyfriend and their girlfriend until that relationship pans out and then they might go back home for a month or two until there's a new boyfriend or girlfriend and then they'll go again and live with their new boyfriend or girlfriend"*

School staff member - CSSS participant

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, were also mentioned by school teachers and support staff as a mechanism for some students to communicate with each other about their temporary accommodation needs. They had heard of students posting requests for a place to stay on Facebook and then other students responding with offers to stay at their house in order to help them out.

# Use and helpfulness of Support Services in the Yarra Ranges

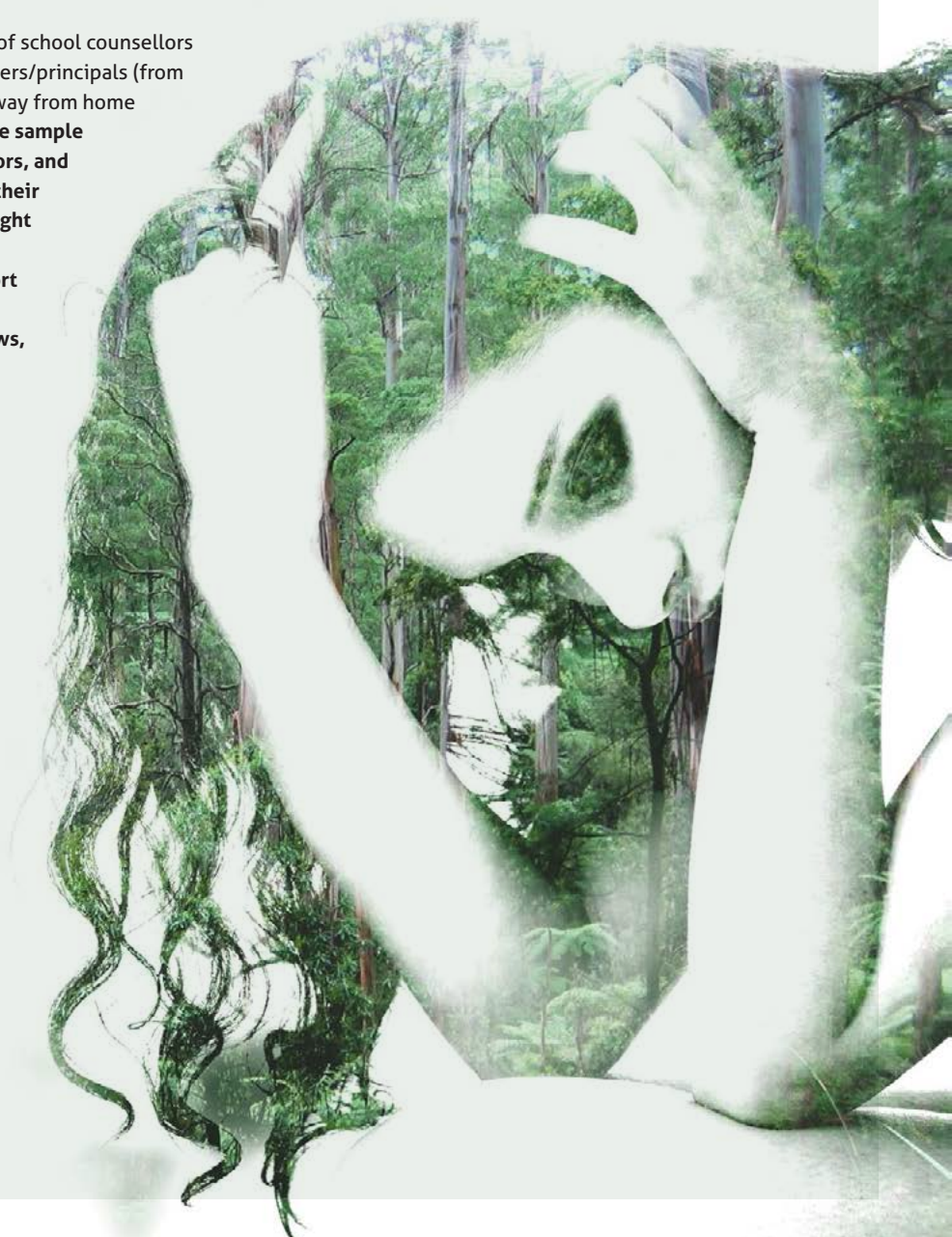
## COUCH SURFING STUDENTS AND THEIR USE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

Table 4 below details the usage frequency for services prior to running away and after running away. Table 4 also details the percentage of the sample who knew that particular service would help them, as participants were asked to answer the following question: *Think back to when you first began running away in secondary school. Which of these services did you know would have helped you or that you could have gone to with your issues that were causing you to run away or not have safe and secure accommodation – even if you didn't actually go to them?*

One in five individuals received support from Centrelink before their homeless experience but this rose to close to half when running away from home during secondary school. Only one person was receiving support from a youth homelessness agency before running away during secondary school while just over half (53%) had used this service after running away from home during secondary school.

There was a significant increase in the use of school counsellors (from 22% usage to 42% usage) and teachers/principals (from 11% usage to 37% usage) after running away from home during secondary school. **Around half of the sample knew teachers, student welfare coordinators, and school counsellors would help them with their homelessness issues. These results shed light on the important role that schools have in identifying and intervening early to support young people experiencing early stage homelessness. In the focus group interviews, teachers and support staff reported that students see school as a safe and familiar place and prefer to gather help from teachers first before accessing homeless specific services. Only 16% of the sample reported that they knew youth homeless services would support them when first running away from home.**

Table 4 also presents data on how contact with the service was initiated for those who did access a particular service. Half contacted Centrelink themselves while half were referred. Close to 90% were referred to a homeless youth agency and mental health services. In contrast, 60% were referred to general health services. Approximately half contacted teachers or a school support person themselves, while almost two thirds were referred to the school counsellor or student welfare coordinator. The majority contacted their friends themselves.





**Table 4: Participants responses to what services were received prior to and while running away, did you know this service would help you and how contact was initiated if you accessed the service.**

		Received service prior to running away	Received service while running away	Did you know service would have helped you		How did you contact this service
<b>Centrelink</b>	No	78%	53%	58%	I contacted them myself	50%
	Yes	22%	47%	42%	I was referred	50%
<b>Homeless youth agency</b>	No	94%	47%	84%	I contacted them myself	13%
	Yes	6%	53%	16%	I was referred	88%
<b>Emergency relief</b>	No	100%	100%	89%	I contacted them myself	No cases
	Yes	0%	0%	11%	I was referred	No cases
<b>Mental health service</b>	No	67%	47%	63%	I contacted them myself	10%
	Yes	33%	53%	37%	I was referred	90%
<b>Health service</b>	No	72%	74%	74%	I contacted them myself	40%
	Yes	28%	26%	26%	I was referred	60%
<b>Church/youth group</b>	No	89%	100%	95%	I contacted them myself	No cases
	Yes	11%	0%	5%	I was referred	No cases
<b>Drug and alcohol service</b>	No	100%	95%	95%	I contacted them myself	0%
	Yes	0%	5%	5%	I was referred	100%
<b>School counselling within school</b>	No	78%	58%	42%	I contacted them myself	38%
	Yes	22%	42%	58%	I was referred	63%
<b>SSSO/school support person</b>	No	83%	68%	68%	I contacted them myself	67%
	Yes	17%	32%	32%	I was referred	33%
<b>Chaplain</b>	No	94%	100%	95%	I contacted them myself	No cases
	Yes	6%	0%	5%	I was referred	No cases
<b>Student welfare coordinator</b>	No	67%	79%	53%	I contacted them myself	33%
	Yes	33%	21%	47%	I was referred	67%
<b>Teacher/principal</b>	No	89%	63%	53%	I contacted them myself	43%
	Yes	11%	37%	47%	I was referred	57%
<b>Friend</b>	No	67%	63%	58%	I contacted them myself	71%
	Yes	33%	37%	42%	I was referred	29%
<b>Other adult</b>	No	100%	79%	74%	I contacted them myself	50%
	Yes	0%	21%	26%	I was referred	50%

For each service listed, youth participants were also asked to indicate “how helpful was the service in addressing your accommodation, personal, family and school issues while running away?”. Table 5 outlines participants’ responses regarding of the helpfulness of the services. Homeless youth agencies and friends were the most helpful in addressing issues around accommodation. Health services, school counselling, teachers and friends were the most helpful for personal issues. School support persons, the student welfare coordinator and teachers were the most helpful in addressing family issues. School counselling, school support persons, the student welfare coordinator, teachers and friends were all helpful in assisting with school issues. These results clearly point to the important role schools play in not only providing education to students, but providing services that address student wellbeing issues as well.

*“School – supported family. Offered clothing and referred to housing support. Assistant principal helped. Housing services helped communicate with parents. Assistant principal informed teachers to give [me] a ‘break’ and support. School interviewed family [student] was staying with and offered them support including food and counselling” – Student (CSSS Participant)*

The results also call for an integrated service delivery model, between a range of service providers (education, community, health) to meet the multiple needs of homeless youth.

*“Relationships with teachers were a big contributing factor to doing so well. [Youth Agency] taught to source everything yourself which helped the process for moving...[Homelessness Agency] helped with connection to Centrelink and transitional housing. School provided fee support and provided food vouchers and emotional support. ...[Homelessness Agency] linked with counselling which helped” - Student (CSSS Participant)*



**Table 5: Study participant’s view of the helpfulness of services in addressing accommodation, personal, family and school issues. Emergency relief, church/youth group, and chaplain are omitted as no one reported accessing these services.**

Service	Degree of help	Accommodation	Personal	Family	School
Centrelink	Not helpful at all	75%	88%	100%	100%
	Moderately helpful	26%	13%	0%	0%
	Very helpful	0%	0%	0%	0%
Homeless youth agency	Not helpful at all	20%	50%	80%	78%
	Moderately helpful	26%	13%	0%	0%
	Very helpful	40%	10%	0%	11%
Mental health service	Not helpful at all	70%	10%	44%	90%
	Moderately helpful	20%	70%	44%	10%
	Very helpful	10%	20%	11%	0%
Health service	Not helpful at all	100%	40%	60%	100%
	Moderately helpful	20%	70%	44%	10%
	Very helpful	0%	40%	20%	0%
Drug and alcohol service	Not helpful at all	100%	0%	0%	No cases
	Moderately helpful	0%	0%	100%	No cases
	Very helpful	0%	100%	0%	No cases
School counselling within school	Not helpful at all	71%	29%	57%	29%
	Moderately helpful	29%	43%	29%	43%
	Very helpful	0%	29%	14%	29%
SSSO/school support person	Not helpful at all	33%	0%	17%	33%
	Moderately helpful	67%	84%	66%	50%
	Very helpful	0%	17%	17%	17%
Student welfare coordinator	Not helpful at all	75%	0%	25%	50%
	Moderately helpful	67%	84%	66%	50%
	Very helpful	0%	100%	75%	25%
Teacher/principal	Not helpful at all	86%	0%	57%	14%
	Moderately helpful	14%	58%	29%	29%
	Very helpful	0%	43%	14%	57%
Friend	Not helpful at all	14%	14%	14%	29%
	Moderately helpful	100%	0%	0%	0%
	Very helpful	43%	43%	14%	14%
Other adult	Not helpful at all	25%	50%	25%	25%
	Moderately helpful	25%	25%	25%	50%
	Very helpful	50%	25%	50%	25%





## BARRIERS TO HELP SEEKING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people were asked for their perspective on what was not helpful to them during their experience of homelessness. **Concerns about privacy and confidentiality and of not being judged by adults were mentioned by a number of youth participants:**

*"Horrible, judged, felt picked on"* - Student (CSSS Participant)

*"All students and teachers know and therefore talk about it. It was upsetting that everyone knew"* - Student (CSSS Participant)

Problems associated with help-seeking from youth agencies or government support were mostly attributed to long wait times:

*"Homelessness agency (in city/refuge) – grateful for the bed. The environment and others in similar situation made mental health worse. Centrelink – took a long time to prove unreasonable to live at home. Didn't seem interested in helping"* - Student (CSSS Participant)

Three participants said that they did not seek any help when they first started running away:

*"Nothing really. No referrals. I kept it all to myself. Wanted to handle things myself. Didn't think it was wrong and seemed normal"* – Student (CSSS Participant)

The responses indicate that young people prefer services that are able to offer immediate practical help (financial, accommodation, logistics of moving into new accommodation), provides for the mental health needs of the young person during this time, does not judge or stigmatise the young person, that is knowledgeable about and able to coordinate various services and that respects the young person's privacy and confidentiality. There is also an issue of trust that must be addressed when providing or promoting such services. Young people need to trust that seeking help from a service will not result in a worsening of their condition or situation.

## **BARRIERS TO HELP SEEKING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS AND STUDENT SUPPORT STAFF**

As mentioned, only 16% of the youth sample reported that they knew youth homeless services would support them before they experienced homelessness. The focus group interviews with school personnel supported this finding in that teachers and support staff felt that students were unaware of what services were available to them and how they might help. They reported that their students were commonly fearful of the unknown, which meant that students were not confident in how services work and how the situation of seeking help would unfold.

*Reasons specific to the Yarra Ranges region that prevent young people from accessing services included the small town nature of the region where confidentiality of shared information and trust in how their issues will be handled may not be ideal, long waiting lists for limited services available in the area, and poor public transport.*

Despite teachers and support staff acknowledging that young people might not know what services are available to them, they also discussed issues young people have with approaching adults for help. They reported their students as having a strong dislike for retelling their story over and over and are hesitant to trust adults or support services. This is especially the case when the staff at these services are constantly changing and they do not get to deal with the same person consistently. Importantly, teachers and support staff felt that some students wanted a change to their situation to occur quickly as soon as possible after they sought help, demonstrating the trust they put in professionals as well to take control of a difficult situation on their behalf and to put things right.

*"They expect once they've seen you, changes to happen straight away. So when counselling and stuff like that isn't a quick fix, they start to lose momentum and they go, 'It's a waste of time'" - School staff member - CSSS participant*

*Teachers and support staff also reported an intergenerational and peer-lead fear of DHS or other authorities. They felt that this fear strongly discourages support seeking, and this is especially strong for those young people who have had a previous negative experience with a service. Teachers and support staff felt that students feared being taken away or being relocated. Teachers and support staff agreed that students would prefer to sleep rough in a neighbourhood they know than be relocated.*

*"You mentioned DHS. And these are kids that might not have secure home lives and need DHS intervention, but it's – No. No. I hate DHS!" - School staff member - CSSS participant*

In relation to the fear that teachers and student support staff felt that students held about the outcomes of contacting DHS, it is important to note that teachers and support staff also believed that this impacted on the ability to properly identify younger students at risk of homelessness as these students were perhaps hiding their homelessness. Teachers and support staff in this study identified a real need to cater more sensitively to students who were less than 16 years, stating that fear of DHS involvement and mandatory reporting was discouraging students from making their situation known to the school.

*"Having said that, that's a massive issue when a lot of our kids start this at-risk or in out of home when they're year seven and eight. And so by the time they're here at year nine and we can hook them in with the other services, it's almost... too late" - School staff member - CSSS participant*

# Recommendations

## 1. LOCAL HOMELESS YOUTH SERVICES SHOULD BE A PRESENCE WITHIN SCHOOLS

Young people in the sample reported that by the time they started running away from home during secondary school over half had accessed support from a local homeless youth service. However, this still leaves a significant number who had not accessed such services. Teachers and school staff in this study felt very strongly about services being a presence within schools.

Teachers and support staff thought it was very important that local youth services build relationships with students, thus opening the doors of communication and breaking down any barriers students might face in approaching local services. By working with the students directly, participants felt that these local youth services would become approachable and comfortable places for students to seek-help. Familiarising students with local services in this way not only educates the students on what services there are and what they can offer, but it also allows them to see the staff at these services as approachable and trustworthy people. Teachers and support staff suggested that services should run fun activities at the school so that the students would have the opportunity to engage with the staff in an unthreatening and non-confronting way. Students would then be able to see the youth service staff as normal, fun, 'cool' people with whom they might not mind confiding in. Teachers and support staff felt that school was a safe place to introduce students to local services as they can learn about what help they are entitled to and it would consistently provide an arena for the young person to seek-help.

## 2. STAFF AND STUDENTS NEED TO BE EDUCATED ABOUT HOMELESSNESS & LOCAL YOUTH HOMELESS SERVICES

Teachers and support staff felt that not only do the services need to build relationships with students, they also need to educate and work with teachers directly. In doing so, the staff would have increased knowledge about what the services offer and would be more equipped to refer a student to an appropriate service. It was noted that teachers and school staff are not trained on this during their tertiary training, and it is a 'learn as you go' situation. For teachers who have not come across students at risk of homelessness before, they may not be aware of how to handle the situation or how best to support the student. From this point, it was discussed that services and local organisations had to be directly involved in working with teachers so that teachers do not feel the responsibility of helping that student alone.

*"And I think having someone or the services talking to actual staff within the school – informing them – is really powerful because they're the ones they see first off. They're noticing, "Look, I actually think there's a really good person who could help you with that stuff". - School staff member - CSSS participant*

Increased access to local youth services, which offer accommodation and support may help to avoid the situation that some teachers reported of young women forming relationships for the primary reason of securing a place to stay. Although this finding is purely speculative at this point, and requires further research, immediate access to safe and secure accommodation in a structured setting for all young people facing homelessness should be a priority.

## 3. SCHOOLS NEED TO BE EQUIPPED TO OFFER IMMEDIATE SUPPORT TO STUDENTS IN CRISIS

Once students started running away during secondary school, their use of school counselling services almost doubled. Teachers and support staff discussed the importance of either schools or services being able to offer immediate support – in the form of shelter, food and money ("unattached brokerage"). The participants in this study felt that their inability to offer immediate, tangible support further fueled their students' reluctance to ask for help. As many teachers reflected, it was the students who would serve as their greatest marketing tools. That is, when one student has a successful and beneficial encounter with a service or trusted adult, they are inclined to encourage their friends to also seek-help. This 'word of mouth' communication was thought to be the most trusted and important encouragement for students to seek-help. Conversely, a student who has a negative encounter with a service or adult is very likely to discourage peers from approaching that service or adult. This further adds to the schools' desire of promoting the relationship between their students and local support services in an engaging and safe way.



*"The kid who says to the other one, "I went to so and so. So they're actually – They're okay. They were there and they helped me out and they were pretty decent." That stuff is really powerful"* - School staff member - CSSS participant

#### 4. ACCOMMODATION AND OTHER SUPPORT NEEDS TO BE PROVIDED TO YOUNG STUDENTS

It was also discussed that services needed to accommodate younger individuals and that the 15/16 years cut off was not sufficient. Participants in this study were aware of younger adolescents who were in need of assistance, but were reluctant to ask for help because they knew only DHS was able to help them. If services could offer assistance to younger individuals, without the repercussions of authority involvement, then young people would be more inclined to seek-help in a time of need. This would also mean that students would come to the attention of the school and youth services before reaching crisis point.

*"Age. That's the biggest barrier and my God it's bad because they're all under 15 or 16. And they're all experience – They're all high maintenance and stuff, and there's not a lot of services out there to cater for them. It's DHS and only DHS"* - School staff member - CSSS participant

#### 5. RECONSIDER WHEN AND HOW THE TERM 'HOMELESSNESS' IS USED IN THE YOUTH CONTEXT

Only one student (out of 21) mentioned couch-surfing as a state of homelessness, half the sample considered 'sleeping on the streets' as the main definition of homelessness and close to half of the young people surveyed didn't ever consider themselves 'homeless', even though, according to current definitions, they were in fact without safe and secure accommodation. Teachers and student support staff also reported that young people do not automatically link couch surfing with being homeless. With this in mind, perhaps there is a need to view homelessness from the perspective of and of youth and reconsider the use of the terms *homeless* and *homelessness support service* in the youth context. Youth homelessness certainly exists, however how it is defined and communicated to the youth cohort may need to be addressed. As would be the symbolism that youth attach to the use of the term 'homelessness' and whether or not the use of the term and its associated symbolism is helpful in designing a youth friendly support system.

The stigma and associations related to being homeless (most probably fueled by the common media portrayal of a down-and-out alcoholic man living on the streets) may contribute to young people not accessing services connected to homelessness, as they do not feel that this service is for them. On the other hand, 'couch surfing' seemed to be well understood by the young people who participated in this study, and was defined as a temporary state of shifting from one friend's home to another. However, despite the academic definition of couch surfing as being a form of homelessness, young people would probably not label or understand couch surfing in the same way.

Youth friendly language should be a focus of further research and service practice. A result of this work may be the development of alternative ways to describe homelessness and the many facets of the 'homelessness career' that are more aligned to the youth experience.





# Summary

*The Couch Surfing Secondary Students (CSSS): Yarra Ranges Youth Homelessness Prevention Project aims to better understand the couch surfing and early stage homelessness experiences of secondary school students. **Through our detailed exploration of a small group of young people in the Yarra Ranges Shire, important discoveries have been made.***

First, homelessness starts early for many young people. Thirty percent of the sample had first run away from home during primary school, with the average age being 10 years old. Second, school counsellors and teachers/principals are an important source of advice and support for young people who run away from home during secondary school and who are homeless. Third, half of the sample never considered themselves to be homeless. For those that did consider themselves homeless, they first considered themselves homeless at a median age of 16, two years older than the median age for when they actually first experienced homelessness during secondary school, and two years into 'the homelessness career'. Fourth, specialist homelessness services and schools both play a vital role in supporting students with issues associated with homelessness. Fifth, young people value their privacy and access to a confidential service when seeking help for issues associated with homelessness. They fear being judged and stigmatised and this can deter them from seeking help. And finally, vulnerable young people experience high levels of volatility and instability in regard to their accommodation during secondary school.

**Young people who follow a path into homelessness during their schooling years face repeated difficulty in maintaining stable accommodation and attending school. Despite these barriers and their experiences, half (48%) of the young people surveyed were still enrolled at secondary school at time of survey completion. This shows incredible resilience and resourcefulness within this group.**

Our hope is that this study will help the education and youth homelessness sector to design services that meet the needs of young people facing this frightening situation and have the information needed to identify and intervene early in order to prevent students from progressing further along the homeless continuum. Stronger collaborations between schools and community services and better promotion of these services to young people should be a key priority.

Our key recommendations are that:

- 1. Local homeless youth services should be a presence within schools**
- 2. Staff and students need to be educated about homelessness and local youth homeless services**
- 3. Schools need to be equipped to offer immediate support to students in crisis**
- 4. Accommodation and other support needs to be provided to young students**
- 5. Reconsider when and how the term 'homelessness' is used in the youth context**





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