

A close-up, profile shot of a person with dark hair, wearing a light blue surgical face mask. They are looking out towards a bright, hazy sky with soft clouds. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting sunrise or sunset. The person's hair is slightly tousled, and a small red earring is visible. The overall mood is contemplative and somber.

**Without a home:**

**First-time youth  
homelessness in the  
COVID-19 period**

**MISSION  
AUSTRALIA**

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold memories, culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are our future leaders.

A special thank you to the young people who shared with us, via the *2021 Youth Survey*, their responses on current issues, state of their mental health and housing.

We would like to thank the Mission Australia staff who contributed to this report by providing helpful insights, feedback, design and support.

## About Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national Christian charity that has been standing alongside Australians in need since 1859. Our vision is for an Australia where all of us have a safe home and can thrive.

Backed by our supporters, funders and community and faith-based partners, we combat homelessness, provide housing, assist struggling families and children, address mental health issues, fight substance dependencies, support people with disability and much more.

**Given the right support, we believe everyone can reach their full potential. That's why we stand together with Australians in need, until they can stand for themselves.**

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# CEO MESSAGE

**Most of us were fortunate enough to take sanctuary in our safe and secure homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. But for almost one in 20 young people, they instead were homeless for the first time in their lives. It is sobering to reflect on this.**

In recent years, it has been troubling to see an increase in the proportion of young people that we survey who report first-time homelessness. Most concerning, of the young people across Australia who were homeless for the first time during the pandemic, more than half experienced high psychological distress and more than half faced discrimination.

While it will take time to reveal the full impacts of COVID-19 on youth homelessness, this report offers valuable insights.

**Shining a light on these young people's experiences and the risk factors, including family conflict, poor mental health and discrimination, must lead to strong intervention and preventative action.**

Sadly, for Mission Australia's practitioners and others who have been working with young people during the pandemic, the report's findings are not a surprise. However, we cannot accept this as just the way things must be.

These are young people for whom early support can radically change their life trajectory. I have seen lives turned around and transformed by our services. Our specialists can identify the risks of homelessness, offer support and work with young people and their families (when it's safe to do so) in a holistic way.

Despite this, I also know that far too many young people fall through the cracks of the service system. The need for a comprehensive approach to ending youth homelessness has never been more urgent. If we don't take action to prevent and address youth homelessness, too many young people will miss out on crucial education and employment opportunities.

All young people should have a safe place to call home. **Early intervention is key and we urge governments and others to do everything it takes so that young people are adequately supported to avoid homelessness and reach their full potential, both now and into their futures.**

I encourage you to read this report, come to terms with the issues and risks these young people are facing, and engage with the solutions that will support young people on their journey. Please join with us in working to end youth homelessness.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sharon Callister".

**Sharon Callister**  
Mission Australia CEO

**MISSION  
AUSTRALIA**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Mission Australia Youth Survey is the largest annual survey of young people of its kind in Australia, attracting thousands of respondents each year who provide valuable insights into the issues and concerns affecting them.**

In 2021, Mission Australia conducted its 20th annual *Youth Survey*, receiving 20,207 responses from young people aged 15 to 19 years. These young people were located around the country, with the vast majority completing the survey online. Responses from young people via schools, organisations, community services and individual households contribute to the rich *Youth Survey* data.

**In 2021, many lives globally, including those of young people in Australia, were disrupted by the extensive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.** The *Youth Survey* was conducted between April and August 2021, a period when parts of Australia were in or were emerging from government enforced lockdowns.

Even before the pandemic, the crisis of youth homelessness was occurring at unacceptable levels in Australia. The actual number of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness is challenging to ascertain, because there is little agreement on how youth homelessness is defined or measured. Nevertheless, the size of the problem is indicated by the 27,000 young people counted as homeless in the 2016 Census (widely accepted to be an undercount) and by the 42,400 young people assisted by Specialist Homelessness Services in 2019-2020<sup>1,2</sup>. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and Mission Australia's *Youth Survey* all measure and report on youth homelessness differently, but each of these datasets and perspectives contributes to the overall picture. This report provides a unique view on the problem by shedding light on the lives of the young people who had a first experience of homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We consider the young people who took part in the Mission Australia *Youth Survey* 2021 and reported a first experience of homelessness during the COVID-19 period, defined here as being within the year prior to the respondent completing the survey. We compare their experiences with those who did not experience homelessness for the first time over the same period. Depending on when each respondent completed the survey, their experience of first-time homelessness would have fallen sometime within the period between April 2020 and August 2021.

**The purpose of this report is to bring these young people's experiences to light, by drawing on quantitative data to show the prevalence of first-time youth homelessness during the COVID-19 period.** It provides insights into the risk factors for first-time youth homelessness in this group and provides an overview of their mental health and housing situation.

The report confirms that known causes of youth homelessness continued to be risk factors for young people having first-time homelessness experiences during the pandemic. This is particularly important because we know from other research that an individual's first episode of homelessness is, in most cases, followed by other episodes which, for some, can entrench long-term patterns of homelessness which are hard to resolve<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, if risk factors are quickly addressed so the young person avoids becoming homeless for the first time, they are unlikely to experience it later in life. Understanding first-time homelessness risk factors is thus crucial for designing early intervention approaches that can effectively alter trajectories away from long-term homelessness, which bring poor life outcomes and high societal costs.

**As we move forward from the pandemic period, the issues and concerns raised in this report highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to ending youth homelessness.** The report discusses the implications for policy and practice, highlighting recommendations that move towards this ultimate goal.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021a)

<sup>2</sup> ABS (2016)

<sup>3</sup> Scutella et al. (2014)

# KEY FINDINGS

**This report shows a significant and worrying increase in the proportion of young people in Australia who experienced homelessness for the first time since 2017.**

One in 20 (4.8%) of respondents to the 2021 *Youth Survey* reported experiencing homelessness for the first time, which was a significant increase from the 2017 rate of 3.9%. Although this is a small group of 956 individuals, the survey results paint a worrying picture of these young people, which points to the need for focused effort to assist them towards positive trajectories.

## RATE OF FIRST-TIME HOMELESSNESS IN YOUNG PEOPLE



## GENDER DIFFERENCE



## DISABILITY DIFFERENCE

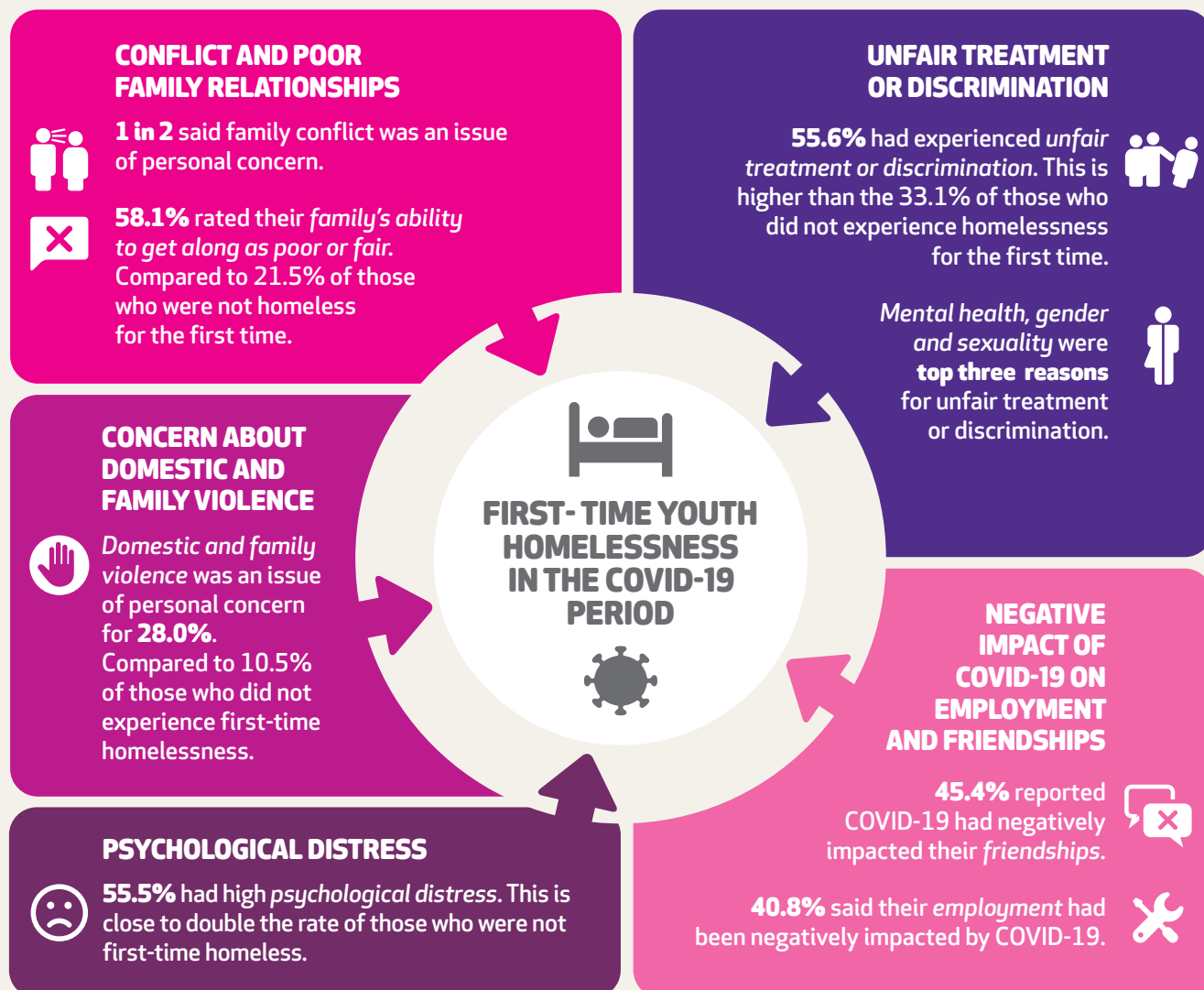


## ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DIFFERENCE



## RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH FIRST-TIME YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE COVID-19 PERIOD

Five risk factors for first-time homelessness during the COVID-19 period were identified, which include known risk factors for youth homelessness. These risk factors are outlined below, including key data for young people who were homeless for the first time during the COVID-19 period.



## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### Mental health of young people who experienced homelessness for the first time during COVID-19:



**35.8%**

Rated their mental health and wellbeing as *poor*



**25.0%**

Said they felt *negatively* about the future



**32.1%**

Said they were *very sad/sad*

**"Mental health, the entire system needs to be redone, there is barely any help for mental health and the waiting time to see someone is months, and to get into an inpatient unit takes a really long time, and hospital ER don't care about you and don't take you seriously, every nurse should be trained in mental health!"**

Female, 16, VIC, homeless for the first time during the COVID-19 period

## HOUSING SITUATION

### Housing situation of young people who experienced homelessness for the first time during COVID-19:



**86.2%**

Were living in *privately owned/rented* housing when completing the survey



**49.6%**

Had moved house at least once in the last three years



**33.6%**

Said their housing was less than adequate in at least one aspect

**"I moved out from my family home and came completely independent financially and emotionally. I had to get a job and become an adult over night while still studying full time. More needs to be taught about adult life in high school as it is a necessity."**

Female, 18, WA, homeless for the first time during the COVID-19 period



# POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendations for policy and practice presented here focus on the key issues and priority groups highlighted by the Youth Survey findings and informed by other research and by input from practitioners from Mission Australia.**

The findings reveal that the known risk factors for young people experiencing first-time homelessness continued throughout the pandemic. These risks are likely to remain without significant policy change.



## **BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION TO END HOMELESSNESS**

- 1.** Develop a national plan to end homelessness that is adequately funded.



## **PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION**

- 2.** Introduce universal risk screening for homelessness in all schools, along with more wrap-around supports for students in need and their families.



## **SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT**

- 3.** Develop localised student wellbeing strategies in all schools.



## **MENTAL HEALTH AND ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS (AOD)**

- 4.** Provide schools with the funds and skilled workforce necessary to respond to students' mental health needs.
- 5.** Improve access to appropriate youth AOD treatment options.



## **FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESPONDING TO DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE**

- 6.** Increase availability of family support services and domestic and family violence services.



## POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS



### SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

7. Increase flexible and alternative learning options for young people experiencing homelessness.



### EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

8. Provide tailored youth-specific employment services.
9. Support employers to hire, train and develop young people.
10. Increase income support payments so young people and their families can live independently.



### HOUSING

11. Increase rental subsidies, and investment in social and affordable housing.
12. Scale up youth-specific integrated housing-and-support models.



### DISCRIMINATION AND UNFAIR TREATMENT

13. Introduce a comprehensive strategy to reduce discrimination across all aspects of society.



### SERVICES AND CLIENT PRACTICE

14. Better support young people during times of national and localised emergencies.



**We stand together  
with Australians in  
need, until they can  
stand for themselves**

## Contact us

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**If you are a young person and need someone to talk with, you can  
contact Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (24/7) [kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)**