

**Submission  
No 330**

## **INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA**

**Organisation:** Centre for Multicultural Youth

**Date Received:** 16 March 2020

## Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Willow Kellock

**Organisation Name:**Centre for Multicultural Youth

**Your position or role:** Senior Policy Advisor

### SURVEY QUESTIONS

**Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::**

Services,Public housing,Housing affordability,Rough sleeping,Mental health,Family violence,Indigenous people,Employment

**What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :**

An advocacy body ,Working in Homelessness services

**Are there any additional themes we should consider?**

Young people

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds

### YOUR SUBMISSION

**Submission:**

**Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:**

### FILE ATTACHMENTS

**File1:** 

**File2:**

**File3:**

**Signature:**

Willow Kellock



# CMY's submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

March 2020



## Introduction

The Centre for Multicultural Youth welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into the state of homelessness in Victoria. To inform this submission, CMY reviewed our previous research and policy work in this space, consulted with a number of CMY staff who work extensively with young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and consulted with a number of services who attend the Victorian Youth Settlement Network and work with young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Ten years ago, CMY undertook extensive research into the issues facing young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds relating to homelessness, and put forward a number of recommendations in the report [Finding Home in Victoria](#). Unfortunately, the majority of the issues and recommendations are still relevant to us today in 2020. For this reason, we outline below a brief summary of current key issues – and request the committee refer to [Finding Home in Victoria](#), including its recommendations, as part of our submission.

### 1. Background: Victoria's youth population is increasingly culturally diverse

According to the 2016 census:

- Almost half (48%) of young people living in Victoria were either born overseas, or had at least one parent born overseas, and increase of 4% from one decade earlier.<sup>i</sup>
- More than one in five Victorians (22%) were born overseas, an increase of 6% from one decade earlier.<sup>ii</sup>

### 2. What do we know about youth homelessness in Victoria?

- Homelessness in Victoria is on the rise.<sup>iii</sup> Young people (aged 12-24) make up over one quarter (26%) of Victoria's overall homeless population.<sup>iv</sup>
- The housing service system is in crisis and is unable to meet the housing needs of young people and families. The private rental market is competitive and unaffordable for low income earners<sup>v</sup>; the public housing system is falling drastically short of demand, with estimates of an additional 727,300 additional social dwellings needed in Australia over the next 20 years<sup>vi</sup>; and, emergency and transitional housing options are extremely difficult to obtain, and are in many cases, inappropriate or unsafe for young people – particularly young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

### 3. Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds – a 'hidden group'

There is a scarcity of data available in Victoria on the extent of homelessness amongst young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, resulting in them often being 'hidden' in terms of homelessness data. However it is estimated that young people from refugee backgrounds are six to ten times more likely to be at risk of homelessness than Australian-born young people.<sup>vii</sup>

#### 3.1 Why is there a lack of data?

There are two key reasons for this lack of data:

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1. *There is a lack of consistent data collection across housing and related support services with regards to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of young people presenting with homelessness issues.* This has implications for understanding the nature and extent of the issue, including effective responses. The recent Victorian Family Violence Data Collection Framework provides a good starting point in terms of emphasising the importance of government departments, agencies and services collecting at the very minimum collecting:
  - country of birth
  - cultural background and ethnicity
  - main language spoken at home
  - interpreter required.<sup>viii</sup>
2. *Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds tend to underutilise mainstream housing/homelessness services, and instead tend to 'couch surf' between extended family and friends' houses.<sup>ix</sup>* Families from migrant and refugee backgrounds are also often hesitant to use mainstream housing services. Overcrowding is widespread, with many communities attempting to accommodate one another to fill the housing gap. This underutilisation of the housing service system is due to a number of factors, including:
  - unfamiliarity of the service system and their rights,
  - lack of an adequate response from services (including a lack of cultural responsiveness), and
  - the potential stigma in their community of being homeless.<sup>x</sup>

If young people do present at a service and do not receive adequate help, many times they will not return due to a failure of trust that they will receive an appropriate response.

### 3.2 What national data do we have around homelessness amongst migrant and refugee communities?

The 2016 Census provides the following national snapshot:

- Those who were born overseas and are newly arrived (five years or less in Australia) make up 15% of all those categorised as homeless;
- The majority of homeless people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are young - 79% of the CALD homeless population were aged between 12-34;
- More than three-quarters of the rise in homelessness in the 19-24 age bracket consisted of overseas born homeless young people living in 'severely' overcrowded accommodation.<sup>xi</sup>

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#### 4. The challenges for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds with regard to homelessness

*“Family support is crucial for young people during the transition to an independent adulthood and a sustainable livelihood. When family support is weak or non-existent, young people are much more likely to experience homelessness and long-term disadvantage.”<sup>xii</sup>*

Young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to homelessness due to a number of intersecting factors, including:

- The refugee experience – such as separation from families and significant others; potential of trauma; a history unsafe and insecure housing
- Family breakdown – due to disrupted, separated and reconfigured families; and intergenerational conflict (exacerbated by different rates of acculturation)
- Loss of extended familial and social networks due to refugee or migration experience, resulting in fewer ‘back up’ options in terms of accommodation
- Experiences of overcrowded accommodation – resulting from financial stress, and larger and/or reconfigured families (including young people in the care of relatives such as aunts/uncles or grandparents). Overcrowding has been linked to infection-based illness, interrupted sleep, negative educational outcomes, heightened parental/guardian stress resulting in punitive parenting and increased parent-child conflict, increased exposure to abuse and mental-ill health<sup>xiii</sup>
- Unfamiliarity and/or lack of trust with the service system in Australia
- Low socio-economic status and experiences of poverty, common amongst communities from refugee and migrant backgrounds who often struggle to find employment in the Australian context – resulting in private rental being inaccessible
- Lack of housing options that can accommodate larger families (which can be common amongst certain migrant/refugee communities), leading to overcrowding and adolescents often being ‘squeezed out’, and;
- Lack of private rental history, often required by real estate agents, including facing racism and discrimination in the private rental market.

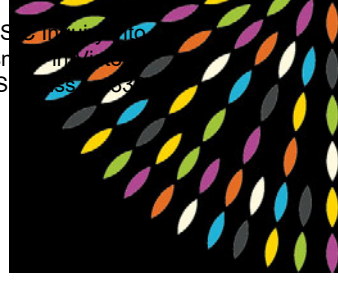
#### 5. The changing nature of homelessness for young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria

CMY is observing the following trends in terms of homelessness in Victoria:

- ***An increase in homelessness amongst young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and a housing service system at breaking point***

CMY’s experience is that homelessness for young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds is increasing, and becoming more entrenched. Once a young person or family is homeless, it is increasingly difficult to find a secure, sustainable housing outcome. Accessing appropriate housing options for young people and families in crisis is more challenging than ever, given the scarcity of suitable and affordable accommodation available. The housing service system is at breaking point, with many vulnerable young people and/or families being turned away due to there simply being no housing options available.

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For instance, CMY staff from Pasifika backgrounds have highlighted that previously they have never known of young people from Pasifika backgrounds to ‘sleep rough’, as culturally, it is considered quite normal for young people to move between extended family or community members. However they are beginning to see instances of young people from Pasifika backgrounds sleeping on the street, who do not appear to be linked in to the service system.

- ***A push from early intervention to crisis***

CMY delivers Reconnect - the only early intervention, refugee-specific, youth homelessness support service in Victoria, funded by the Department of Social Services. Through CMYs Reconnect program, we have seen a shift in terms of higher numbers of young people referred at the ‘crisis’ end of the service system. Given the demand and urgency of the need, the program is being pushed into working with those already experiencing homelessness and family breakdown, rather than the early intervention work that prevents homelessness. This overall shift was also highlighted in a 2013 review of the Reconnect program more broadly.<sup>xiv</sup>

Anecdotal reports suggest that creation of the federally funded Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), formally Humanitarian Settlement Services, and Specialised Intensive Services (formerly Complex Case Support) has resulted in less targeted and intensive support for newly arrived young people (and their families) experiencing complex social and settlement related needs. This may be increasing the likelihood that issues and support needs are only identified and referred at points of crisis. CMY is concerned that changes in program and funding models is contributing to a loss of targeted early intervention support for newly arrived young people and families. This raises concerns about how and if young people from humanitarian backgrounds are accessing the support they need, when they need it, and requires further investigation. As noted by CMY previously,

*“In the absence of early and adequate settlement support, the risk that young people will require assistance in the future to address issues such as homelessness, family breakdown, poor health, crime, drug and alcohol use and other social problems, is magnified.”<sup>xv</sup>*

- ***Young women forced into inappropriate and/or unsafe housing due to a lack of options***

Young people are being pushed into inappropriate and/or unsafe emergency housing – such as rooming houses – due to a lack of viable housing options. This is particularly unsafe and culturally inappropriate for young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds,<sup>xvi</sup> given rooming houses are overwhelmingly occupied by men over the age of 45,<sup>xvii</sup> many of whom have mental health and drug and alcohol issues.

Similarly, mixed gender refuges are culturally inappropriate for many young women from particular cultural or religious backgrounds. However, if young women leave or refuse an emergency housing offer (due to feeling unsafe), they can be deprioritised by housing services due a perception that they must have other options.

Lack of appropriate accommodation options also results in young people sometimes returning to unsafe living environments, staying with strangers or seeking out other risky housing solutions. CMY is aware that housing insecurity can contribute to young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds entering into unsafe and/or unhealthy relationships (often with older men) to meet accommodation needs, which is also confirmed by academic research.<sup>xviii</sup>

Women’s only refuges for young people, such as Counterpoint, coordinated by Anglicare, provides a good example of how gender-specific youth refuges can meet the needs of vulnerable young women. There is a strong need for investing in and establishing gender-specific emergency housing for young women such as this, that is culturally responsive.



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- ***Homeless families – a housing crises within particular refugee/migrant communities***

Some migrant and refugee communities are experiencing, in their words - 'a housing crisis'. Entire families are being displaced due to a competitive and unaffordable private rental market, and due to public housing being almost non-existent. For instance, CMY is aware of seven South Sudanese families living in one motel alone – many of whom are female-headed single parent households who are living below the poverty line.

CMY is also aware of entire families seeking to rent a bedroom from other families, due to a lack of affordable options. In these situations of overcrowding, young people are often reluctantly asked by families to seek alternative housing options, impacting on their wellbeing, safety and educational and employment outcomes.

- ***Young people with low or no income***

Another group within migrant and refugee communities that are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, and face immeasurable challenges should they become homeless, are young people with low or no income. Without income, finding secure and safe housing is almost impossible. Emergency and transitional housing usually requires that young people contribute to the rent, and young people are often asked to leave if they cannot provide this. Particularly vulnerable groups include:

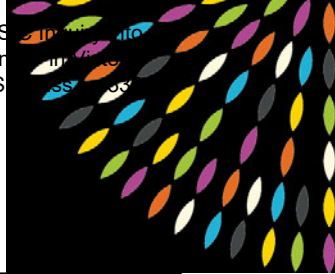
- Young people on visas with social security waiting periods (e.g. Orphan relative visas - 117, Remaining relative visas – 115, and spouse visas);
- Young people and families from Pasifika backgrounds on visa 444<sup>xix</sup>;
- Young asylum seekers as they are ineligible for most services and cuts to Status Resolution Support Services (42% of SRSS recipients are under the age of 25; 17% are aged between 13-24 years; and it is estimated that four out of five asylum seekers are at risk of homelessness if SRSS payments are suspended)<sup>xx</sup>; and
- Young people who are unable or unwilling to claim independent living allowance due to not wanting to financially disadvantage siblings and parents/guardians who are reliant on Centrelink.<sup>xxi</sup>

## 6. Case studies

The following case studies were shared by CMY staff who work directly with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, with regards to the issues young people encounter in the homelessness service system:

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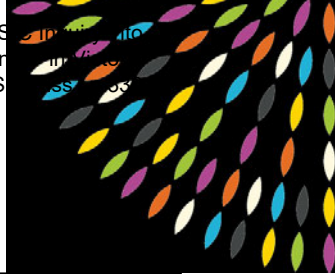
**L's story**

L is an 18 year old young woman of refugee background who was reunited with her aunt and uncle in Australia after many years of separation. As a result of family conflict, she ended up having to leave her extended family and couch surfed between friends' houses – eventually ending up in a youth refuge due to exhausting her options. After a period of time in the youth refuge, she was told she would need to find more permanent housing – yet there was no transitional housing for her to move on to, and she was unable to secure any private housing that she could afford as a student learning English. The refuge insisted that she would have to move into a rooming house, given she had no other options.

Reluctantly she moved into a rooming house, where she shared a lounge, kitchen and bathrooms with other people of mixed ages and genders. Some of these people had mental health, drug and alcohol issues, and she felt very unsafe. She had to pay \$180 for a room which had bedbugs. Her English level was low, and she felt unable to express herself and unsafe to interact with other residents.

As her mental health declined, she decided she needed to leave. She returned to couch surfing. When she exhausted her contacts and out-stayed her welcome at people's houses, she re-presented to a housing service to seek help. They informed her that they were unable to help her, given she had rejected the opportunities given to her.





**Z's Story**

Z came to Australia when she was 17 years old. Z was accompanied to and from school by her father or brother and was never allowed out of the house without a chaperone. Her parents claimed a youth allowance benefit on her behalf, and it went straight into their account. Z was not allowed to handle money, and her mother purchased all her clothing, toiletries and food. If Z ever spoke up to her father, he would physically assault her, and had on occasion threatened to kill her if he ever found out she had been talking to boys. He told her once she finished school all she would be good for is having children. Her mother told her that her life would be easier if she listened to her father.

One day at school, Z told the school welfare co-ordinator that she did not feel safe to go home, and that she was afraid that her father would hurt her. The welfare co-ordinator called in the CMY multicultural youth worker who was based at the school.

Z did not want to involve police, but did not want to go home. She told the youth worker she wanted to leave immediately, before her brother came to the school at 3.30pm.

Z was offered a referral to family violence support service, who said they could put her in a hotel for the weekend. Z would not be allowed to contact anyone, because this could put her and other women who were staying there at risk. Z would not have any support over the weekend, other than a phone check in once a day from the family violence service. Z felt like she would not be able to manage if she had no-one around her.

Instead, Z was offered a referral to a crisis accommodation provider for young people. It was staffed 24 hours and provided up to four days accommodation. However, there was only one bed left, and it would not be available until 9:00pm.

At 9:00pm the youth worker and Z caught a taxi to the corner near the refuge, as directed by the refuge staff, and walked down the alley way to the door of the refuge. The street was dark and Z was shaking. The youth worker had to hold her hand and encourage her the whole way down the street.

Once inside the refuge, Z was too afraid to talk, because one of the staff members was male. There was also young men staying in other rooms of the refuge and hanging out in common areas, which caused her to feel highly uncomfortable.

The youth worker planned with Z to meet first thing Monday morning to plan next steps. When the youth worker returned to the refuge on Monday morning, she was told Z had gone home before 9:00am on the morning after she arrived. The refuge staff had tried to stop her, but she was insistent. The youth worker was extremely concerned for her wellbeing, given the violence and control present at home. The youth worker was dismayed that the service system was unable to offer Z what she needed to feel safe and secure - that is, gender-specific, culturally appropriate, youth-friendly accommodation.

**7. Key recommendations:**

Based on recent consultations with staff and services CMY would like to draw the Committee's attention to the following recommendations, first made in our report, [Finding Home in Victoria](#), published almost a





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decade ago. CMY urges the Committee to review the full suite of recommendations contained in this report given their continued relevance to the current inquiry.

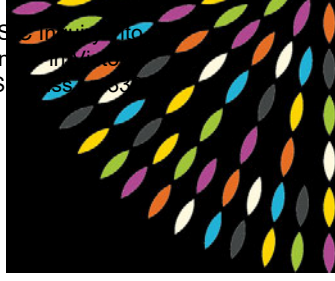
Additionally, CMY would like to highlight:

1. *That all levels of government urgently invest in affordable housing stock – emergency, transitional, social and public housing - to meet a variety of family sizes and configurations, including accommodating larger families (supporting families to remain intact and providing critical support for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds).*
2. *Develop schemes to ensure private rental is affordable and accessible to those on lower incomes in Victoria, and that address discrimination on the basis of race, age, family size and a lack of rental history.*
3. *Acknowledge the specific vulnerability of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds with regards to homelessness, and ensure all government-led strategies respond to this cohort.*
4. *Resource gender-specific emergency and transitional accommodation options for young women, creating safe and culturally appropriate housing options.*
5. *Provide timely access to special benefit or social security income for young people who are currently ineligible or are on visas with waiting periods who are at risk of homelessness.*
6. *Invest in strengthening the cultural responsiveness of the housing service system on all levels to meet the cultural diversity of the Victorian community – from personnel, organisational policies and procedures, and accommodation options available – and require services to demonstrate accountability in terms of cultural responsiveness.*
7. *Increase early intervention and support to families and young people from refugee and backgrounds to prevent the escalation of complex issues. This includes those who are often ineligible for settlement or generalist services – for instance, orphan visa holders (117), remaining relative visa holders (115), those on spouse visas (and their children), and those on Special Category (444) visas from New Zealand.*
8. *Investigate the effectiveness and impact of changes to the Specialised and Intensive Services (formerly Complex Case Support) for humanitarian young people and families through the Humanitarian Settlement Program – given that anecdotally it appears to be resulting in less early intervention support, increasing the likelihood that issues are only detected and referred at points of crisis.*
9. *That State and Commonwealth governments develop a more detailed and consistent data collection system in relation to migrant and refugee young people, and ensure consistency of data collection across all housing and housing-related services – to gain a more accurate understanding of homelessness amongst this group, and ensure they are responded to adequately.*

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## End Notes:

- <sup>i</sup> CMY (2019), *A Young and Multicultural Victoria: The 2016 Census*, CMY, Carlton (forthcoming).
- <sup>ii</sup> CMY (2019).
- <sup>iii</sup> Between 2006 to 2016, homelessness in Victoria increased from 35.3% to 41.9% - Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2049.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016. Retrieved 18 November 2019 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>
- <sup>iv</sup> ABS, 2016 Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness.
- <sup>v</sup> Anglicare (2009), *Rental Affordability Snapshot*, Retrieved 22 January 2020. <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final---rental-affordability-snapshota302da309d6962baacc1ff0000899bca.pdf?sfvrsn=4>
- <sup>vi</sup> Lawson, J., Pawson, H., Troy, L., van den Nouwelant, R. and Hamilton, C. (2018) *Social housing as infrastructure: an investment pathway*, AHURI Final Report 306, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/306>
- <sup>vii</sup> Coventry, L., Guerra, C., Mackenzie, D. and Pinkney, S. (2002) *Wealth of All Nations: Identification of strategies to assist young people in transition to independence*, Australian Clearinghouse of Youth Studies, Tasmania.
- <sup>viii</sup> Victoria State Government (2019), *Victorian Family Violence Data Collection Framework*, <https://www.content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-11/Family-Violence-Data-Collection-Framework-October-2019.PDF>
- <sup>ix</sup> Couch, J (2017), 'Neither here nor there': Refugee young people and homelessness in Australia, *Children and Youth Services Review* (74): 1-7; Francis, S. & Cornfoot, S. (2007), *Multicultural Youth in Australia: Settlement and Transition*, CMY for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.
- <sup>x</sup> Toure (2008) in CMY (2010), *Finding Home in Victoria*, CMY: Carlton.
- <sup>xi</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2049.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016. Retrieved 18 November 2019 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>
- <sup>xii</sup> Mackenzie, Flatau, Steen & Theilking (2016), *The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia: Research briefing*, Swinburne University. [https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/CYHA\\_FINAL\\_REPORT\\_18April2016\\_v0dqGpT.pdf](https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/CYHA_FINAL_REPORT_18April2016_v0dqGpT.pdf) Retrieved 25 November 2019.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Couch, J (2017), 'Neither here nor there': Refugee young people and homelessness in Australia, *Children and Youth Services Review* (74): 4.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2013. Reconnect Departmental Review, Retrieved 20 December 2019 [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02\\_2013/dept\\_review\\_of\\_the\\_reconnect\\_program.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2013/dept_review_of_the_reconnect_program.pdf)
- <sup>xv</sup> CMY. (2006). *Settling In: Exploring Good Settlement for Refugee Young People in Australia*. Carlton: Centre for Multicultural Youth., p. 8
- <sup>xvi</sup> Couch, J. (2017), 'Neither here nor there': Refugee young people and homelessness in Australia, *Children and Youth Services Review* (74): 4.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2049.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016. Retrieved 18 November 2019 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Couch, J (2017), 'Neither here nor there': Refugee young people and homelessness in Australia, *Children and Youth Services Review* (74): 5.
- <sup>xix</sup> For more information on issues facing young people and families on Special Visa 444 see: CMY (2018), *Young People on Special Category (444) Visas – Pathways and Referral Options*, Carlton: CMY. Retrieved 22 January 2020. <https://www.cmy.net.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Young%20People%20on%20Special%20Category%20%28444%29%20Visas.pdf>
- <sup>xx</sup> Refugee Council of Australia (2018), *An unnecessary penalty: Economic impacts of changes to the Status Resolution Support Services*. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss-economic-penalty/> Retrieved 25 November 2019.
- <sup>xxi</sup> CMY is aware of a number of young people who refuse to claim the independent living allowance from Centrelink due to not wanting to negatively impact their family, particularly younger siblings, and in an attempt to preserve family



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relationships to some extent. They perceive claiming this allowance as sending their siblings or parent(s) into further poverty and disadvantage.

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