Final Report: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria

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Executive summary

Young people are a significant group experiencing homelessness in Victoria. Compared to older cohorts, young people have distinctive pathways into, and experiences of homelessness. To effectively meet the needs of young people a youth-specific homelessness strategy is required in Victoria.

This Final Report presents the research findings for the project *Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria* by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) for Melbourne City Mission (MCM). The Final Report synthesises the findings of the Positioning Paper and the deliberations of the Investigative Panel facilitated by AHURI.

The Positioning Paper reviewed the existing Victorian youth homelessness system and policy environment that guides the delivery of support services available to young people experiencing homelessness. Findings of the Positioning Paper showed that the current policy environment has been ineffective in reducing youth homelessness, support systems are fragmented and there are deficits in present service delivery. Recommendations of the Positioning Paper include the need for developing a youth-specific homelessness strategy in Victoria and presents key components that should inform the development of a new strategy and service responses.

The findings and recommendations of the Positioning Paper formed the basis of a focused panel discussion between sector leaders and the policy community (Investigative Panel) that considered what strategic policy framework is required to support young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria most effectively.

Findings of the Investigative Panel

A youth specific lens is an essential component of all service systems, including homelessness

- Young people have distinctive pathways into and experience of homelessness, including having limited coping strategies and resources as well as being at high risk of further trauma. This requires the service system to apply developmental approaches.

- Victorian homelessness responses could be better tailored to the specific needs of young people by aligning to other key sectors, e.g. justice, out-of-home care, mental health, that have youth-specific frameworks.

An intersectional perspective is required for both systems and populations

- Young people are a significant cohort in the Victorian homeless population and are at a particular developmental phase in their lives that requires support and service responses that are specific to their life stage.

- A youth homelessness strategy needs to embrace all young people regardless of how they might self-identify, by applying an intersectional perspective.

A person-centred approach is needed to ensure young people have positive pathways to independence

- A person-centred approach is required to address the individual needs of a young person and enable them to reach their potential.

- A young person's feeling of safety is fundamental to their service engagement and requires trusting and continuous relationship to their support workers.

- Person-centred approaches would contribute to the development of individual pathways, rather than the young person getting 'stuck in the system'.

- Access to support services for young people experiencing homelessness is required outside of the specialist homelessness sector with many young people not 'identifying' themselves as being homelessness.

Early and effective intervention is required to mitigate longer term consequences

- Youth homelessness has significant consequences for the long-term trajectory of young people.

- A youth-specific strategy can help disrupt the pathway from youth homelessness into adult homelessness.

- Early intervention and prevention approaches can lead to future cost reductions in other service systems, for example the criminal justice system or health system.

- Best practice approaches to mitigate longer term consequences are trauma informed and trust based.

Housing solutions are fundamental to effective service system responses

- The lack of appropriate, secure and safe housing options affordable for young people is a key contributor to homelessness in Victoria. Housing solutions tailored to the needs of young people are fundamental for any effective service system response.

- Feeling of safety is essential for a young person's recovery, requiring housing to be culturally appropriate and not be merged within more general accommodation for the adult homeless population, in order to reduce risks of harm to young people.

- A range of housing options should be considered to provide more youth-specific housing in Victoria.

1. Introduction

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) was commissioned by Melbourne City Mission (MCM) to investigate the policy framework for addressing youth homelessness in Victoria, informed by the literature and current best practice. This Final Report is the second of two reports from this process. The first provided a review of the literature on the causes of, and best practice responses to youth homelessness. It analysed current data on youth homelessness in Victoria and reviewed the current policy framework at state level. A public webinar was held to discuss the findings of the first report and to engage the sector and government with the issues. This was attended by over 300 people.

Subsequently, AHURI facilitated a focused panel discussion between sector leaders and the policy community (Investigative Panel) to address a range of specific questions. The purpose of the Final Report is to synthesise the deliberations of the Investigative Panel and the findings from the Positioning Paper. The Final Report aims to support MCM, together with other actors in the sector, as they consider what strategic policy framework is required to assist Victoria's young people experiencing homelessness.

1.1 Method

The Final Report builds on the Positioning Paper and integrates new data obtained through an Investigative Panel process. The methods employed initially and written up in the Positioning Paper included:

- Evidence review and synthesis: a review of published and grey literature on best approaches to support young people experiencing homelessness

- Analysis of homelessness data

- Review and analysis of the existing Victorian youth homelessness system and policy environment

The findings from this process informed the design of the Investigative Panel.

Investigative Panels are a research method, developed by AHURI, designed to bring about direct engagement between experts from research and policy communities and practitioners from industry and community sectors, to interrogate a specific policy or practice question. The Investigative Panel approach draws together elements of key informant interview and focus group approaches. Its aim is to generate new knowledge through expert panel discussions. Investigative Panels also function as a vehicle to bring together stakeholders from disparate policy and practice areas, to share knowledge and to facilitate dialogue.

Investigative Panels are best suited to research examining new or emerging policy issues for which rapid evidence building is required. Investigative Panels are structured to comprise a mix of presentations by panellists and research team members, and roundtable sessions involving the full panel. In this instance, the panel comprised:

- Senior representatives from a number of metropolitan and regional Victorian providers of services to young people experiencing homelessness

- Representation from Victoria's peak body for the homelessness services sector, the Council to Homeless Persons

- Persons with lived experience of youth homelessness

- Policy decision-makers from Victorian Government departments, including both central agency and relevant line agency representatives

- AHURI researchers and executive staff

Building on the findings from the first stage of the research process, the deliberations of the panel were structured around the following questions:

- How might the service system be re-shaped to provide better outcomes for young people?

- How does a youth homelessness strategy sit alongside a housing strategy (currently being developed by the Victorian Government), and what homelessness support does a housing strategy lens not capture?

- How should the need for a specific approach to youth homelessness be balanced with a need to integrate with associated service systems?

- How can the sector work with government to deliver an effective strategy for the youth homelessness system?

2. Findings of the Positioning Paper

This section presents the key findings of the Positioning Paper. The purpose of the Positioning Paper was to review the Victorian homelessness policy and support system and identify best practice approaches in supporting young people experiencing homelessness.

2.1 Understanding Victoria's youth homelessness system

In Victoria, there is currently no overarching strategy to address youth homelessness and coordinate support and interventions for young people who are homeless. General state-wide homelessness and housing policies, not specific to the needs of young people experiencing homelessness, are what presently provides strategic guidance to address youth homelessness. Supports for young people experiencing homelessness are situated within a range of support systems, including education, health, mental health, justice, and out-of-home care. Despite some acknowledgement of needing to coordinate support services, there is limited integration between support systems in terms of implementation, delivery, and cross-service collaboration. Figure 1 illustrates the components of the service system for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Victoria, and the relevant key policies.

Figure 1: Design of Victorian homelessness policy and service system
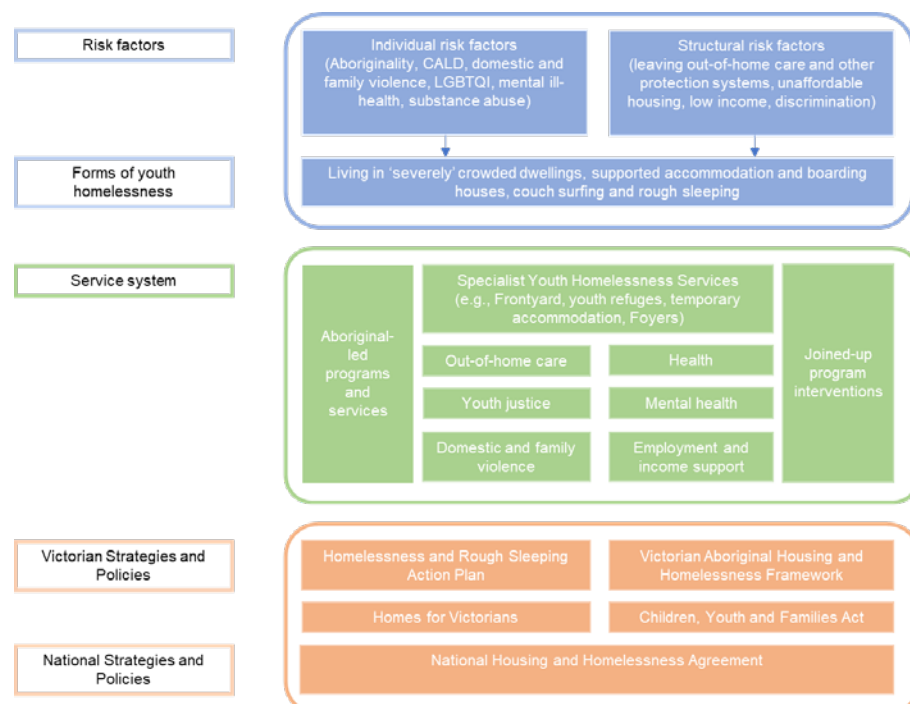
Source: Authors.

Young people experiencing homelessness are recognised under the NHHA as a national priority cohort, with support provided through the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) system (CFFR 2018). SHS organisations are funded by governments to provide housing and/or support services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (AIHW 2020). Homelessness services are mostly funded through governments in Australia, with around 85 per cent of the funding received by SHS providers being from government sources and the remainder coming mainly from philanthropic sources, impact investment, and self-sourced funding, like rent (Flatau, Zaretsky et al. 2017).
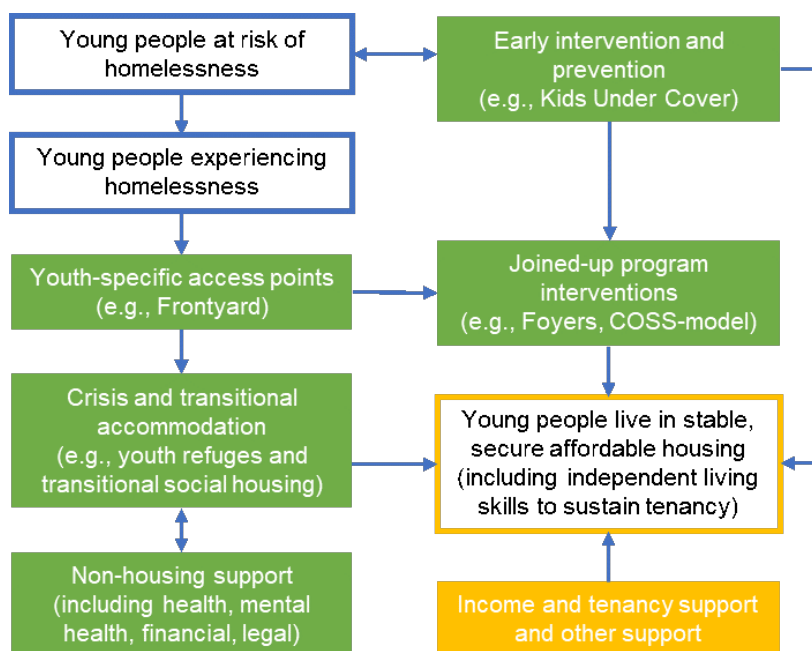
2.2 How do young people experience the homelessness system?

Young people experiencing homelessness are supported through SHS providers that focus on assisting people who are homeless, or through organisations that specialise in certain services, such as youth services (AIHW 2020). Support for young people through the SHS system in Victoria includes refuges, Youth Foyers, transitional housing and Frontyard, which is the only access point to the SHS system designed specifically for young people, as well as a range of case management, early intervention, and support programs.

The experiences of young people involved with SHS, and especially their pathways through the SHS system, have not been studied extensively. The components of the Victorian SHS system, and the pathways of young people experiencing homelessness that are implied by current policies and program provision are represented in Figure 2.

The actual interactions of young people with the SHS system, and the trajectories they follow, does not necessarily align with this idealised model. Further research would be required to gain a better understanding of young people's experiences of the youth homelessness system in Victoria, but a state-wide strategy could help to clarify and articulate its intended operation, and that the system functions as envisaged.

Figure 2: Intended pathways for young people interacting with the Victorian SHS system, inferred from existing policies and programs

Source: Authors.

2.3 Findings of the Positioning Paper

The current policy environment has been ineffective in reducing youth homelessness

- The number of young people experiencing homelessness has been increasing in Victoria, including young people who are couch surfing and living in overcrowded dwellings

- A growing number of young people fleeing domestic and family violence, and leaving care, are supported through the specialist homelessness system

- There is no strategic policy or framework to guide service delivery and coordinate outcomes in the youth homelessness system

- General homelessness and housing strategies mostly address the needs of young people within an early intervention and prevention context but lack a youth-specific focus otherwise

Support systems are fragmented

- Young people experiencing homelessness require access to a range of support services that are not necessarily well integrated, either across support systems or within the youth homelessness system

- Missing integration of services is particularly problematic for young people at transition points in service system

- Youth-specific housing and other support services are not necessarily available across all of Victoria

There are deficits in present service delivery

- Current support programs are often funded and designed to deliver crisis responses to assist young people experiencing homelessness. There is insufficient focus on early intervention and prevention approaches and limited resources to provide long-term support, enabling recovery orientated pathways

- Trauma-informed and intensive case management approaches could be embedded more extensively in service delivery to provide inclusive and culturally appropriate and sensitive support, based on long-term trusted relationships

2.4 Options identified for discussion in the Positioning Paper

Develop a stand-alone youth homelessness strategy

- Despite existing policies and homelessness strategies mentioning youth homelesssness, they are not tuned to the specific needs of young people

- The youth homelessness system operates differently and to some extent separately from the rest of the homelessness system and requires a strategic policy framework to ensure coordination of its particular components and consistent, equitable outcomes for homeless young people

Put young people at the centre

- Strategies guiding youth homelessness responses require a youth-specific focus that takes account of the development of a young person

- Support system should be coordinated to facilitate better transitions for young people

- The development of any youth-specific strategy needs to involve young people with lived experience of homelessness. This could include reflexive or codesign processes, which engage young people in designing service responses

Learn from Aboriginal-led models

- Aboriginal young people and communities could be better supported to improve outcomes for Aboriginal young people, who are significantly over-represented in the homelessness system

- In addition to Aboriginal-led policy frameworks providing guidance on culturally appropriate and sensitive approaches, they offer insights into the delivery of holistic supports that are trauma-informed

- Learnings apply not only to Aboriginal young people and Aboriginal-led organisations, but could also inform mainstream service delivery

Integrate best practice approaches

- An increasing evidence base on Victorian interventions to support young people experiencing homelessness provides valuable insights to draw upon

- Trauma-informed principles should be widely embedded in the homelessness system and the delivery of services assisting young people's recovery

- Support for young people should include intensive case management, enabling long-term trusting relationships with support workers

Implement coordinated and effective processes

- Components of a strategy to improve housing and non-housing outcomes for young people include clearly defined implementation processes that propose specific goals and provide sufficient resources

- Currently funded programs could be supported to adopt best practice approaches and ensure resources are utilised efficiently

Create better understanding of young people's experiences and pathways

- Young people's experiences of homelessness, such as overcrowding, and couch-surfing, and their pathways navigating the support systems are unique

- Further research could involve a review of current youth homelessness responses in Victoria, such as the refuge system and transitional housing

- More evidence is needed to understand the access to and quality of youth homelessness services across regional and metropolitan areas (both inner and outer urban) in Victoria

3. Findings of the Investigative Panel

This section presents the findings of the Investigative Panel. AHURI facilitated a focused panel discussion between sector leaders and the policy community to deliberate on the findings and recommendations of the Positioning Paper.

3.1 A youth specific lens is an essential component of all service systems, including homelessness

Service and system responses to youth homelessness need to consider that the issues and pathways of young people experiencing homelessness are distinct from those of adults experiencing homelessness (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). This includes having limited coping strategies and resources as well as being at high risk of further trauma (Wang, Mott et al. 2019). The panel described youth developmental approaches, such as developed in the Barwon regional partnerships, that aim to meet the needs of young people by supporting their transition to adulthood across a range of domains encompassing housing and living skills, health and wellbeing, education and learning, employment and economic participation, and connection to culture and community.

The panel discussion centred on strategies needing to recognise young people as a distinctive cohort experiencing homelessness. A youth specific focus for homelessness would align with similar approaches taken by the government in other sectors, for example, justice, out-of-home care, and mental health. Examples for youth-specific policy frameworks include the Victorian youth justice system that is framed by the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020-2030* (DCJS 2020). The strategy provides directions focusing on the needs and circumstances specific to young people. It highlights the importance of partnerships between homelessness and housing providers and the justice system, to enable young people to have positive transitions out of the justice system and to have access to appropriate housing and support (DCJS 2020). Enabling positive transitions is also a recognised issue for young people leaving out-of-home care. In response to the Home-Stretch campaign, the Victorian government is in process of raising the age range of young people supported through out-of-home care from the age of 18 to the age of 21, acknowledging the distinctive needs of young people (DHHS 2019). Similarly, the *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* acknowledges that younger people are adversely affected by mental illness impacting their life trajectory (Victorian Government 2021). The report proposes to establish a dedicated youth mental health and wellbeing service stream that reforms and expands youth services (Victorian Government 2021).

Previously, the Victorian Government has recognised the importance of having a youth-specific strategy to address the needs of young people experiencing homelessness in a coordinated and targeted way. The most recent youth-specific homelessness strategy is the 2004 *Youth Homelessness Action Plan* (DHS 2004). Its purpose was to better coordinate government and homelessness providers to improve young people's access to the service system. The strategy highlighted the importance of preventative approaches to break the cycle of homelessness, strengthen pathways to independence, provide more integrated and responsive services and have more effective responses to the specific needs of young people (DHS 2004). Since the release of the strategy in 2004, changes to the housing and support system have impacted youth homelessness in Victoria, requiring revised strategic guidance for effective service responses.

3.2 An intersectional perspective is required for both systems and populations

In section 3.1 above, it was noted that because of their specific developmental needs, young people require separate consideration within systems that provide services to the whole population. In most service systems this is already the case (e.g., the health or justice systems), and in the housing and homelessness system, this had been addressed previously in the 2004 *Youth Homelessness Action Plan* (DHS 2004).

An intersectional perspective is also relevant when considering young people's needs to access housing and homelessness services. Aboriginal people, people with disability, people from CALD backgrounds and people who identify as LGBTQI+, for example, can have specific needs in relation to their housing and are overrepresented in the homeless population (McNamara 2015). Young people are also a significant cohort in the homeless population but are not a minority group in the same way. Young people are highly represented among CALD and LGBTQI+ sectors of the population, and among people with disability, as well as forming part of the general population.

Regardless of whether they identify with certain sectors of the population or not, young people are at a particular developmental phase in their lives and require support and service responses that are specific to their life stage (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). An intersectional perspective can help to shift the narrative that young people are a minority group so that all young Victorians at risk can be supported better and to ensure better integration of support services based on individual need.

The panel also noted that a youth homelessness system exists, with or without a strategic policy framework, and is comprised of a range of funded programs and initiatives that are youth specific. The coordination, coverage and effective operation of this system would benefit from an overarching strategy. The role and rationale of a youth homelessness strategy is very distinct, therefore, from consideration of the need to integrate the perspectives and needs of particular groups (e.g., Aboriginal young people, CALD community or people with disability) into the wider homelessness system. Indeed, these considerations would need to be integrated into the youth homelessness system also, and a strategic framework would help to facilitate this.

3.3 A person-centred approach is needed to ensure young people have positive pathways to independence

Beyond immediate housing needs, young people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness have a range of other needs, including for practical, emotional, and social support. The panel deliberations emphasised the importance of a person-centred approach to address the individual needs of a young person and enable them to reach their potential. Fundamentally, this includes the young person's feeling of safety, beyond the physical dimension of the housing situation, such as establishing a trusting and continuous relationship to support workers. To have a more coordinated service response, the panel also referred to the concept of a 'common client'.

Another consideration discussed within the panel is the young person's relationship to their family. Family breakdown and domestic and family violence are relevant issues as these can contribute to young people to becoming homeless (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). The panel emphasised the important role of support services to address the potentially significant issues in the young person's family situation and, if and where appropriate, re-establish connections to family and other important relationships for them.

A recommendation of the panel is for support services to better recognise the situation and causes contributing to a young person becoming homeless. The focus of service responses should accordingly be on addressing the underlying issues for the young person requiring specific supports, with homelessness services being only part of the response. In many cases, young people do not 'identify' themselves as being homeless and requiring support, despite living in overcrowded dwellings or other forms of insecure housing (Thielking, Flatau et al. 2015).

In addition, young people are not necessarily familiar with available supports and do not access specialist homelessness services. In contrast, young people in the homelessness system can find themselves trapped in a fragmented system with no clear pathways out of homelessness based on their individual circumstances (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008). Rather, than the young person getting 'stuck in the system', a person-centred approach, as proposed in the panel, would contribute to the development of individual pathways.

3.4 Early and effective intervention is required to mitigate longer term consequences

The trajectories of young people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness can be positively impacted by youth-specific housing and support interventions. The panel emphasised the need for more preventative approaches as well as the capability of appropriate service responses to change the trajectory of young people with more complex needs. Interventions can include preventing young people becoming homeless in the first place and/or providing access to required supports to break the cycle of homelessness and transition to a well-supported trajectory, for young people experiencing homelessness. For interventions to be effective, the panel highlighted that services need to be sufficiently resourced to meet the increasing demand of young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria.

Existing research argues that more investment in early intervention and prevention approaches potentially achieves significant benefits across the system and can lead to future cost reductions in other service systems, for example the criminal justice system or health system (McKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). Exiting homelessness is fundamental for young people to succeed in other domains, such as education. Without secure and stable housing other life issues, such as mental health or substance use, may worsen (Duff, Hill et al. 2020). For young people who become homeless trying to gain a sense of belonging and peer support can gravitate into homeless sub-cultures, which may include engaging in using substances or rough sleeping (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008).

Youth homelessness has significant consequences for the long-term trajectory of the lives of young people. Australian evidence has shown that the longer young people stay in homelessness, the higher the risk they will continue to experience it over the course of their life (Johnson, Scutella et al. 2015). For example, young people leaving care experience poorer life and outcomes than their peers, with at least one-third experiencing homelessness and nearly two-thirds of homeless young people having lived previously in out of home care (Commission for Children and Youth 2020; Flatau, Thielking et al. 2015). Studies have shown the intergenerational impact of homelessness, including young people experiencing homelessness having an elevated risk of suicide, both as young people and later in life (Brackertz 2020).

To mitigate these long-term consequences of homelessness the panel highlighted best practice approaches that are trauma informed and trust based. Such approaches recognise the severe impacts that experiences of homelessness have on young people's lives as well as the causes of their homelessness, including family breakdown and domestic violence (Martijn and Sharpe 2006). Trauma-informed practices need to be better integrated within the homelessness support system, in which young people continue to have experiences of re-traumatisation (Pollock, Davis et al. 2020). This requires a strategic approach and system-wide service and policy coordination.

3.5 Housing solutions are fundamental to effective service system responses

The lack of appropriate, secure and safe housing options affordable for young people is a key contributor to homelessness in Victoria (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020). The panel discussion highlighted that any strategic service response to effectively address youth homelessness needed to provide housing targeted to the needs of young people. A diverse range of housing options would be needed to account for young people's experiences of homelessness, their distinctive requirements, and their different life stages.

Another issue raised by the panel is that a feeling of safety is essential for a young person's recovery. A consideration is the provision of youth-specific housing that is culturally appropriate and in which young people are not accommodated with adult cohorts, is needed in order to reduce risks of harm and negative influences on vulnerable young people (MacKenzie, Hand et al. 2020).

Housing needs to be integrated with support services in order for young people to develop independent living skills and be able to maintain their tenancies (Parsell, Moutou et al. 2015). In many cases, young people require interventions that are time limited. Instead of focusing on permanent housing solutions (which is best practice for older cohorts with experience of chronic homelessness), interventions should prioritise young people's immediate need for a home and supports. Access to other appropriate, affordable and safe housing might be more appropriate when they are ready.

Suggestions proposed in the panel discussions include that the Victorian Government develop alternative housing options beyond long-term public housing (which may not be appropriate for most young people). Rather, youth-specific housing could be provided through the Big Housing Build in Victoria and supported through Victoria's upcoming *10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing*. Another proposed option is enhancing collaboration with private rental landlords to diminish barriers for young people accessing the private rental market.

4. Conclusion

This Final Report has presented evidence that young people are a significant cohort of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria and have distinctive support needs. The research has shown that the current policy environment has been ineffective in reducing youth homelessness, support systems are fragmented and there are deficits in present service delivery. To inform the research's purpose, this Final Report from *Towards a Youth-Homelessness Strategy in Victoria* has shown how a strategic policy framework is required to support young people experiencing homelessness to more effectively deliver the best outcomes.

To summarise, the following considerations should inform the development of a youth-specific homelessness strategy in Victoria:

• A youth specific lens is an essential component of all service systems, including homelessness

• An intersectional perspective is required for both systems and populations

• A person-centred approach is needed to ensure young people have positive pathways to independence

• Early and effective intervention is required to mitigate longer term consequences

• Housing solutions are fundamental to effective service system responses

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