

**Joint submission to the Government of Western Australia**  
**Department of Communities**  
regarding the new

# Youth Action Plan

on behalf of the  
**Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA)**  
**Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (WAAEH)**  
and  
**St Vincent De Paul Society of Western Australia (Vinnies WA)**

25 March 2024



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness and St Vincent De Paul Society of Western Australia acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands, waterways and plains on which we live, work and play. This land always has been and always will be Aboriginal land.

## **ABOUT YACWA**

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak body for young people and the youth sector that supports them in Western Australia. YACWA operates primarily as a human rights organisation that seeks to address the exclusion of young people in a rapidly changing society. YACWA represents around 60 youth sector organisations and 418 individual members, including both young people and compassionate community members.

## **ABOUT WAAEH and WA Advance to Zero (AtoZ)**

The Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (WAAEH) is an independent body of individuals and organisations committed to working together to end homelessness. Open to anyone who believes homelessness is solvable, the Alliance works by taking a deep dive into understanding the problem and ending it together. We do this by empowering communities through research, sharing and learning, innovative collaboration and measurable outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. The WA AtoZ empowers communities to work in collaboration to reduce and ultimately end rough sleeping and chronic homelessness in their local communities.

## **ABOUT VINNIES WA**

Vinnies WA offers vital support, advocacy and guidance to people in need, with understanding and without judgement. Vinnies WA provides a helping hand up through our Members and Conferences, Specialist Community Services (Homelessness, Housing Plus and Mental Health), Community Engagement Services (Emergency Assistance and Support, Financial Counselling, Volunteer Services and Youth Engagement) and our Social Enterprise (Vinnies Retail and Distribution Centre).

## **ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS**

This submission draws upon content from a number of existing reports and resources as outlined in the list of references. This secondary evidence was contextualised and reinforced by the voices of the people from across the youth homelessness sector to ensure that the advice was representative of the collective voice.

The submission was co-developed by Claudia Carles (Policy and Advocacy Officer, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia), Harry McEvoy (SCS Impact Project Officer, Vinnies WA), Emily Williams (Community Impact Advisor, Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness), Si Lappin (Manager Strategic Projects, Vinnies WA), Alicia Keenan (Policy and Project Support Officer, Youth Homelessness Advisory Council) and Viv Jones (Admin Officer, Vinnies WA).

# 1 Introduction

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA), Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (WAAEH) and St Vincent De Paul Society of Western Australia (Vinnies WA) welcome this opportunity to contribute to the development of the Department of Communities' new *Youth Action Plan*.

The development of the *Youth Action Plan* presents a crucial opportunity for Government to commit to meeting the foundational needs and uphold the human rights of all children and young people in Western Australia. Housing security is essential for human survival and wellbeing, yet young people in Western Australia are living through interconnected housing and cost-of-living crises forcing many into housing insecurity, rental stress and at worst - homelessness. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Australia in 1990, codifies the right to an adequate standard of living including housing for every child,<sup>1</sup> and governments must meet this need if parents and caregivers are unable to.<sup>2</sup> Without their basic needs being met, many young people are being forced to focus on their short-term survival instead of defining and reaching their goals and aspirations. Youth portfolio priorities such as wellbeing, goal setting, and reaching one's potential are not possible for young people without access to safe and secure housing.

The focus of this submission is to ensure that housing security for young people is a priority under the Cook Government's *Youth Action Plan*. We want to see meaningful action based on the included recommendations to ensure that all young people have access to secure housing as a baseline from which they will be supported to thrive and reach their full potential.

This 5 recommendations made by this submission align with the following *Youth Action Plan* themes:

- A voice for young people;
- Success and reaching your potential; and
- Wellbeing, connection and inclusion.

## 1.1 Structure

This submission includes:

- A list of 5 key recommendations, 12 aligned actions for inclusion in the *Youth Action Plan*, and 18 actions requiring interagency action from Government (pages 6 - 11), and
- Supporting evidence (pages 14 – 27).

Each recommendation is presented as follows:

- **Recommendation**
  - **Aligned Youth Action Plan priorities;**
  - **Youth Action Plan actions:** commitments for the Minister for Youth to insert directly into the Youth Action Plan;

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNGAR 44/25, 1989. Article 27.1 and 27.3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

- **Whole-of-government actions:** a roadmap to end youth homelessness in Western Australia developed by sector organisations in 2024, to be considered through a whole-of-government approach across portfolios including Youth, Mental Health, Housing and Homelessness, and the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence. We recommend that these actions are included in the *Youth Action Plan* in synergy with related strategies such as the *At-Risk Youth Strategy 2022-2027*<sup>3</sup>, *State Commissioning Strategy for Community Services*,<sup>4</sup> *All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness*,<sup>5</sup> and *Path to Safety: Western Australia's strategy to reduce family and domestic violence 2020-2030*.<sup>6</sup>

We contextualise these recommendations and actions by including data and evidence developed through consultation with sector on pages 14 – 27.

We have included this information, including detailed data on youth homelessness in Western Australia to:

1. Ensure that the development of the *Youth Action Plan* considers the connection between housing insecurity (or lack thereof) and Youth Action Plan priority outcomes for young people such as success and wellbeing;
2. Advocate for the amplification of the voices of young people in Government decision-making contexts;
3. Demonstrate the cost and impact of failure to prevent housing insecurity and homelessness; and
4. Ensure that youth homelessness is visible to the Minister for Youth and her Cabinet colleagues to support investment and action for the benefit of all young people in WA.

## 1.2 Method

This report draws from the growing body of evidence being gathered through academic research and service evaluations. This evidence has been contextualised and reinforced through the use of a survey and verbal consultations that captured the voices from local organisations working with young people experiencing homelessness across Western Australia.

We received 30 responses from workers from the following organisations:

- The Mental Health Commission's Drug and Alcohol Youth Service,
- The Department of Education,
- Centacare,
- Investing In Our Youth Incorporated (Bunbury),
- Passages Youth Engagement Hub,
- 55 Central,

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<sup>3</sup> Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, *At Risk Youth Strategy 2022 – 2027*.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Western Australia, *State Commissioning Strategy for Community Services*.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, *All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness*.

<sup>6</sup> Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, *Path to Safety: Western Australia's strategy to reduce family and domestic violence 2020-2030*.

- Headspace,
- One Mob Youth Mentoring,
- Mission Australia,
- Vinnies WA,
- Youth Homelessness Advisory Council,
- The Salvation Army,
- Perth Inner City Youth Services (PICYS)
- STAY (Short Term Accommodation Youth-Geraldton),
- Indigo Junction,
- MercyCare, and
- Anglicare WA.

## 2 Recommendations

### 2.1 Summary of actions for inclusion in the *Youth Action Plan*

1.1 Increase the accessibility of the private rental market for young people by utilising a combination of rental caps, subsidies and landlord insurance to recruit ethical landlords and increase housing affordability and access for young people.

1.2 Drastically increase the amount of social housing available to young people in Western Australia by increasing supply and ensuring a designated quota of social and affordable housing is allocated specifically to young people.

2.1 Rollout a grass roots community campaign around homelessness that is co-designed with the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council and other young people with lived experience of homelessness, in order to alter community perceptions of homelessness, dispel stigmatising myths and facilitate a collective community response to housing insecurity and homelessness for young people.

2.2 Target corporate and philanthropic partners to provide support in raising awareness around the issues of housing insecurity and homelessness for young people.

2.3 Following the trial of Home Stretch WA, amend legislation to enshrine the option for young people to extend the age at which they leave care to 21.

2.4 Support the Commissioner for Children and Young People to report on the main drivers of youth homelessness and have oversight over the adequacy of interagency response to these issues.

3.1 Establish an ongoing and meaningful relationship with the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council (YHAC) as the Minister for Youth.

3.2 Commit to advocating in Cabinet for secure housing options for all young people in Western Australia as the Minister for Youth.

3.3 Work with Local Government Areas and consult with local communities to develop localised response strategies to housing insecurity and homelessness for young people.

4.1 Build on existing digital tools to develop a mainstream online platform for young people to get information about homelessness services, social and affordable housing, and where best to find immediate safe and secure accommodation.

4.2 Develop and prototype a Youth Data Locker that enables young people to control their personal information and determine when and where it should be shared across the system.

5.1 Advocate for the needs of young people experiencing housing insecurity and/or homelessness by advocating actively in Cabinet for increased and sustainable investment into accommodation services for young people.

## 2.2 Key recommendations and aligned actions

Each recommendation has been developed by sector to align to one or more priority themes within the *Youth Action Plan* consultation paper, and includes actions for inclusion in the *Youth Action Plan* alongside broader actions that require a whole-of-government response.

### Recommendation 1: Ensure adequate, affordable housing is accessible to all young people in Western Australia.

<b>Aligned Youth portfolio priorities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success and reaching your potential</li> <li>• Wellbeing, connection and inclusion</li> </ul>
<b>Youth Action Plan actions</b>	<p>1.1 Increase the accessibility of the private rental market for young people by utilising a combination of rental caps, subsidies and landlord insurance to recruit ethical landlords and increase housing affordability and access for young people.</p> <p>1.2 Drastically increase the amount of social housing available to young people in Western Australia by increasing supply and ensuring a designated quota of social and affordable housing is allocated specifically to young people.</p>
<b>Whole-of-government actions</b>	<p>1.3 In partnership with Aboriginal communities, work to reduce overcrowding and homelessness in rural and remote Aboriginal communities by committing to a long-term funding agreement for accessible housing as well specialised support for young people and their families.</p> <p>1.4 Fund specialist accommodation services for young people with complex mental health presentations in areas where this service is urgently needed, including youth-specific step up/step down accommodation services.</p> <p>1.5 Develop a suite of specialist accommodation services for young people under 15, including housing options, crisis accommodation and targeted service support.</p> <p>1.6 Support the development of <a href="#">Housing First for Youth</a><sup>7</sup> modelling in Western Australia.</p> <p>1.7 Co-design state-wide low barrier crisis accommodation services that can respond to the diverse needs of vulnerable young people e.g. LGBTQIA+ young people, young people with complex mental health needs, and provide support and pathways as part of these services for young people to transition into long-term independent accommodation.</p>

<sup>7</sup> Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, *Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) Project Report* (February 2023) (available online via <https://www.yacwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Housing-First-for-Youth-Project-Report-FINAL.pdf>). See also Stephen Gaetz et al, *THIS is Housing First for Youth. Part 1 – Program Model Guide* (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2021).



## Recommendation 2: Invest in preventing youth homelessness.

<b>Aligned Youth portfolio priorities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success and reaching your potential</li> <li>• Wellbeing, connection and inclusion</li> </ul>
<b>Youth Action Plan actions</b>	<p>2.1 Rollout a grass roots community campaign around homelessness that is co-designed with the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council and other young people with lived experience of homelessness, in order to alter community perceptions of homelessness, dispel stigmatising myths and facilitate a collective community response to housing insecurity and homelessness for young people.</p> <p>2.2 Target corporate and philanthropic partners to provide support in raising awareness around the issues of housing insecurity and homelessness for young people.</p> <p>2.3 Following the trial of Home Stretch WA,<sup>8</sup> amend legislation to enshrine the option for young people to extend the age at which they leave care to 21.</p> <p>2.4 Support the Commissioner for Children and Young People to report on the main drivers of youth homelessness and have oversight over the adequacy of interagency response to these issues.</p>
<b>Whole-of-government actions</b>	<p>2.5 Co-design and test a ‘no-fail’ system coordinated by regular meetings of service providers, across-government services, and those with lived experience. This will ensure that each young person receives appropriate and adequate support for their needs, regardless of whatever door or service they walk through and no vulnerable young person slips through the gaps between services.</p> <p>2.6 Fund Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to lead the support for Aboriginal young people leaving care across the state by developing place-based models.</p> <p>2.7 Co-design a highly accessible and practical skills-building program for at risk young people, particularly those leaving state care.</p> <p>2.8 Develop a school-based program where support is provided to hosts of couch surfers in order to provide improved stability for a young person’s accommodation and to facilitate a pathway into longer-term housing.</p>

<sup>8</sup> See Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, ‘Home Stretch WA – about the program’ (updated 30 January 2023, retrieved online 19 March 2023 via <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/departments-of-communities/home-stretch-wa-about-the-program>).

**Recommendation 3: Value and amplify the voices of young people with lived experience of housing insecurity and homelessness.**

<b>Aligned Youth portfolio priorities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A voice for young people</li> <li>• Wellbeing, connection and inclusion</li> </ul>
<b>Youth Action Plan actions</b>	<p>3.1 Establish an ongoing and meaningful relationship with the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council.</p> <p>3.2 Commit to advocating for secure housing options for all young people in Western Australia in Cabinet.</p> <p>3.3 Work with Local Government Areas and consult with local communities to develop localised response strategies to housing insecurity and homelessness for young people.</p>
<b>Whole-of-government actions</b>	<p>3.4 Establish ongoing and meaningful relationships with the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council.</p> <p>3.5 Ensure young people are a priority cohort for social and affordable housing planning and development across all regions of WA.</p>

## Recommendation 4: Broaden the knowledge base regarding young people’s experiences of housing and homelessness in Western Australia.

<b>Aligned Youth portfolio priorities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success and reaching your potential</li> <li>• Wellbeing, connection and inclusion</li> </ul>
<b>Youth Action Plan actions</b>	<p>4.1 Build on existing digital tools to develop a mainstream online platform for young people to get information about homelessness services, social and affordable housing, and where best to find immediate safe and secure accommodation.</p> <p>4.2 Develop and prototype a ‘Youth Data Locker’ that enables young people to control their personal information and determine when and where it should be shared across the system.</p>
<b>Whole-of-government actions</b>	<p>4.3 Create a shared data system that eliminates, where possible, inconsistencies and inaccuracies in data reporting for homelessness services and facilitates better and more accessible support for young people.</p> <p>4.4 In partnership with the current administrations of the By-Name List (BNL)<sup>9</sup> model, work with the Office of Homelessness and WAAEH to increase youth data on BNL and ensure that services are able to contribute to the BNL.</p> <p>4.5 Empower Western Australian services to utilise evidence-based decisions assistant tools to give the sector a common language and framework to understand the kind of services young people need, and how our system currently meets those needs.</p> <p>4.6 Develop a ‘What Works’ centre as a way to identify and scale the practices and models that have the most impact and capacity to end homelessness for young people.</p>

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<sup>9</sup> See Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, ‘By-Name List: Tracking Homelessness’ (2023, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.endhomelessnesswa.com/bynamelist-datapage>).

**Recommendation 5: Support existing services to continue to improve accommodation and housing outcomes for young people.**

<p><b>Aligned Youth portfolio priorities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success and reaching your potential</li> <li>• Wellbeing, connection and inclusion</li> </ul>
<p><b>Youth Action Plan actions</b></p>	<p>5.1 Advocate for the needs of young people experiencing housing insecurity and/or homelessness by advocating actively in Cabinet for increased and sustainable investment into accommodation services for young people.</p>
<p><b>Whole-of-government actions</b></p>	<p>5.2 Build on the success of existing outreach-based services and engagement hubs to develop a more comprehensive state-wide service system that provides 24/7 support and access to case management for young people in Western Australia who may be sleeping rough or have high and complex needs.</p> <p>5.3 Expand the integration of mental health and AoD supports into place-based hubs and existing accommodation programs to ensure that young people are able to access stable support in one setting throughout their service experience.</p> <p>5.4 Build the capacity of youth homelessness services by utilising and improving on existing training for staff to increase their ability to create a safe and accessible environment for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal young people.</li> <li>• Young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds.</li> <li>• LGBTQIA+ young people.</li> <li>• Young people with disabilities.</li> <li>• Young people with complex mental health and/or addiction issues.</li> </ul>

## 3 Discussion and evidence

### 3.1 Housing security is a pre-requisite to young people's wellbeing and success

The discussion underpinning this submission follows the premise that:

1. The rate of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness in Western Australia is increasing.
2. Unaccompanied children and young people need a home and developmental opportunities to realise their potential and live full lives. It is ethically unacceptable and economically unsustainable to continue to allow unaccompanied children and young people to experience or be at risk of homelessness.
3. Government leadership and collective action is required to minimise the risk factors driving youth homelessness so that all young people are equipped and empowered to realise their potential, are resilient to risk factors and have a representative voice to ensure that service systems remain responsive to needs and demands.

The State Government must comprehensively address youth homelessness to guarantee the success, wellbeing, and empowerment of young people. The 2021 Census revealed that over a fifth of all people experiencing homelessness in Australia were between the ages of 12-24 years.<sup>10</sup> Since then, rates of homelessness amongst young people have only further increased<sup>11</sup> as their unique developmental and social status makes them particularly vulnerable. With rates of homelessness on the rise, it is apparent that the State Government has failed in its duty towards young people. The *Youth Action Plan* has a crucial role in establishing the Government's commitment towards ensuring the wellbeing of and empowering young people.

To allow young people to succeed, all tiers of Government must address the underlying factors and barriers that impact their success. For many young people, the structural and systemic barriers that lead to homelessness prevent them from developmental opportunities that are a pre-condition for future success. This is further exacerbated by the challenges young people are presented with when navigating the housing sector. The cyclical relation between the necessity for housing and the inaccessibility of housing for young people leads to an inability for young people to see a future that is any different from the present. The demanding nature of housing insecurity and homelessness then impacts other aspects of a young person's wellbeing. Health, education, relationships, and responsibilities are no longer a priority when you are simply trying to survive the day-to-day.

Providing young people with a secure, safe, and stable place to live not only impacts their future success, but it is extremely influential in determining their current wellbeing, connections to others and inclusion in the wider community. A sense of home brings with it a sense of belonging. Homelessness leads to disconnection and exclusion of support systems

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<sup>10</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Estimating Homelessness: Census' (released 22 March 2023, retrieved online 19 March 2023 via <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release#age>).

<sup>11</sup> See Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022-23' (updated 13 February 2024, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/young-people-presenting-alone>).

and community. Young people with complex needs are particularly vulnerable to this isolation, as services are not funded or geared to support them, creating further difficulties in seeking help. Access to stable housing not only allows young people to focus on their wellbeing and connect with the wider community, but it prevents the further escalation of complex issues they are already facing.

The lived experience of young people must be used to target the Government's initiatives to comprehensively address youth homelessness. Young people experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to political marginalisation; their lack of inclusion in decision-making continues the inability of the Government to adequately address aspects of youth homelessness. The inadequate inclusion of young people's lived experiences has led to a failure to address and prevent youth homelessness.

The Minister for Youth is responsible for working with other ministers through inter-agency collaboration and advocating for young people across parliament. It is essential that young people with experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity are included in the Minister's advocacy efforts.

Established mechanisms such as the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council<sup>12</sup> provide the opportunity for the Minister to work alongside young people with lived experience of homelessness to create community-wide change that reflects the direct needs of young people. Valuing the lived experience of young people helps remedy the disenfranchisement they face while allowing young people to take personal ownership to ending homelessness through the development of effective solutions to end homelessness.

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<sup>12</sup> Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, 'Youth Homelessness Advisory Council' (retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.yacwa.org.au/youth-leadership/yhac/>).

### 3.2 A voice for young people

Young people with lived experience of homelessness are politically marginalised in Western Australia. Fortunately, the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council (YHAC)<sup>13</sup> offers the Minister for Youth an established mechanism through which to increase the inclusion of the voices of young people with lived experience of homelessness in Government decision making, remedying their disenfranchisement from political processes that impact them and ensuring that their voices are heard.

YHAC is a peer-led, lived experience advocacy group auspiced by YACWA since 2019. Council members should be engaged in an ongoing capacity by the Minister for Youth and her colleagues in Cabinet in relation to any policy development impacting young people, including the new *Youth Action Plan*, to ensure that their experiences are reflected in policies that impact them.

YACWA consulted with the YHAC regarding the development of the new *Youth Action Plan* in January 2024. YHAC members highlighted the interconnected nature of the listed ‘issues of importance’ listed for ranking in the *Youth Action Plan* Consultation Paper survey. Their collective emphasis on the interconnected nature of wellbeing, mental health, community connection, employment, and access to decision making signal a clear need for genuine whole-of-government collaboration to meet the interconnected needs and priorities of young people today. Other themes that emerged during our consultation were political disengagement and distrust in Government decision making impacting young people, due to the lack of inclusion of young people with lived experience of housing insecurity and homelessness in Government processes.

Lack of inclusion of the voices of young people ensures that youth homelessness remains invisible to the Government systems responsible for providing access to housing. Without adequate visibility, how will the Minister for Youth and her colleagues address and prevent homelessness in Western Australia?

Sector tells us:

**“Youth homelessness is hidden. You do not see it the same way you see adult homelessness. It is hidden, at friends and family houses, in parks, in abandoned buildings, in crisis accommodation.”**

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Survey Participant

The Government’s repeated failure to address and prevent youth homelessness in WA indicates that the voices of young people are inadequately included in Government decision making, despite the fact that the scale and impact of youth homelessness in Western Australia has been communicated to Government repeatedly by the sector in recent years. Detailed pathways forward, such as the [Housing First for Youth](#) framework developed by

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<sup>13</sup> Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, ‘About the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council’ (online: <https://www.yacwa.org.au/youth-leadership/yhac/>) retrieved 21 February 2024.

YACWA in 2023, have also been shared with Government. Government has the knowledge, resources and democratic mandate to action positive change that addresses and prevents youth homelessness in Western Australia.

The Minister for Youth represents and needs to amplify the voices of young people by committing to advocating for their right to secure housing in Parliament and Cabinet. By actively fostering collaborative relationships with related portfolios such as Housing, Homelessness, Mental Health, Education, Aboriginal Affairs, and the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, the Minister can demonstrate a genuine commitment to the 'whole-of-government' approach promised by the new *Youth Action Plan*.

This approach will ensure that the Minister for Youth is advocating for the ongoing inclusion of the voices of young people in related Government policy areas impacting young people within her portfolio remit, such as:

- *All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020–2030*,<sup>14</sup>
- *Western Australian Suicide Prevention Framework 2021 – 2025*,<sup>15</sup> and
- *Path to Safety: Western Australia's Strategy to Reduce Family and Domestic Violence 2020 – 2030*.<sup>16</sup>

The new *Youth Action Plan* presents an opportunity for the Minister for Youth and her colleagues in Cabinet to address and prevent youth homelessness in Western Australia by listening to the needs of young people who are currently living through interconnected housing and cost-of-living crises. Developing a relationship with YHAC and committing to inter-agency collaboration within Cabinet will demonstrate that Minister for Youth is committed to listening to and advocating for the voices of young people in Western Australia.

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<sup>14</sup> Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, *All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness*.

<sup>15</sup> Government of Western Australia, Mental Health Commission, *Western Australian Suicide Prevention Framework 2021 – 2025*.

<sup>16</sup> Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, *Path to Safety: Western Australia's strategy to reduce family and domestic violence 2020-2030*.



### 3.3 Success! Reaching your potential

**“There needs to be more wrap around services for each individual to be able to reach their goals and full potential.”**

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Survey Participant

For young people, gaining access to safe, stable, and sustainable housing serves as a fundamental initial step towards reaching their potential. The grim reality is that without such housing, many young individuals remain ensnared in intergenerational homelessness, resulting in a significant reduction in their quality of life.

*“The disruptive effect of experiencing homelessness during one’s youth can have many far-reaching effects. Disruptions to education and transition to employment can harm future job opportunities and potential earnings, while disruptions to social life can harm social networks. Harsh living conditions can leave young people traumatised and at greater risk of experiencing persistent homelessness. These far-reaching impacts are often unique to young people’s experience of homelessness, as many have not yet developed the skills required for independent living.”<sup>17</sup>*

Young people who are homeless generally don’t have the statutory protection of minors and are often too old for the overwhelmed child protection system, they don’t have the life skills or financial security of adults to secure a home or manage their way off the streets, and they are poorly served by the adult-oriented specialist homelessness system which is not set up to cater for their developmental needs (such as basic life skills and relational skills).

#### 3.3.1 Young people are developmentally different from adults

The issues and pathways of young people experiencing homelessness are distinct from those of adults experiencing homelessness. This includes having limited coping strategies and resources as well as being at high risk of further trauma. As highlighted by YACWA, unlike adults, young people transitioning from homelessness are often experiencing a lot of ‘firsts’, including living independently. They need specific support across a range of domains encompassing housing and living skills, health and wellbeing, education and learning, employment and economic participation, relationships, and connection to culture and community. As is typical for people of their age, they may also need to try several living arrangements before settling into a long-term home.

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021-22’ (updated 8 December, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/58593639-1b15-4d3c-98f0-fb1769a9e32c/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report-2021-22.pdf?v=20231219090815&inline=true>).

### 3.3.2 A window of opportunity

Compared to adults, children and youth experiencing homelessness are at a tipping point where safe shelter and access to services when they need it can be the difference between sliding into a life of chronic homelessness or becoming an independent and resilient adult.

Evidence from the human services field as well as neuroscience shows that intervention can make a difference, but the window of opportunity is small: if a person reaches the age of 25 and they haven't started to become self-sufficient, the probability that they ever will plummet.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Baker, P. and White-McMahon, M., *This Hopeful Brain: Neurorelational repair for disconnected children and youth* (Lulu Publishing Services, 2014).

### 3.4 Wellbeing, connection and inclusion

**“20% of homeless young women and 12% of homeless young men had attempted to take their own life in the last 6 months, and 55% had received no professional mental health support”**

The Cost of Youth Homelessness Study, 2016

Youth homelessness represents one of the most severe forms of disconnection and exclusion experienced by all forms of vulnerable young people. Many face a lack of safe accommodation, leading to disconnection from family support and rejection from available options due to insufficient resources. There is an increasing level of concern among young people about issues related to housing and homelessness, up from 7% in 2021 to 12% in 2022 and 19% in 2023.<sup>19</sup>

Not having a home puts young people on the margins of society where they experience stigma and judgment by other members of the community, often contributing to a heightened sense of shame and helplessness. Australians experiencing homelessness are dying prematurely with an average age of death at 44.<sup>20</sup>

Young people who have the most complex needs, such as mental health issues (e.g., trauma) substance abuse, relationship/family breakdown, and involvement with the justice system are repeatedly turned away a service system that is overwhelmed and not resourced to provide the support needed.

Staff in the sector describe a system biased against young people with complex needs. These obstacles prevent them from improving their well-being and engaging with their communities. For instance, youth with mental health issues are often denied accommodation, yet they can't address their mental health or seek support due to accommodation shortages and exclusion criteria. This perpetuates a cycle of exclusion from vital support services meant to enhance their well-being and community ties.

With the rising rates of youth homelessness and the economic pressures worsening, sector staff reported a sense of urgency for accommodation services, as without, more young people will fall into homelessness, lose their connection to community and their wellbeing will plummet. This sense of urgency is felt around the country.<sup>21</sup>

Sector staff see firsthand how youth support systems fail to protect young people and that without the right support, many will struggle with extreme levels of distress, low self-esteem,

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<sup>19</sup> McHale, R., Brennan, N., Freeburn, T., Rossetto, A., Richardson, E., Boon, B., and Christie, R, *Youth Survey 2023* Mission Australia (Report, 2023), p 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Knaus, C. et. al, 'Out in the cold' *Guardian Australia* (2024) (online series, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/feb/06/australia-homeless-population-deaths-numbers-prevention>).

<sup>21</sup> Pearson, D., 'Australia needs more housing but that alone wont stop homelessness deaths' *Guardian Australia* (2024, retrieved 19 March 2024 via <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/commentisfree/2024/feb/12/australia-needs-more-housing-but-that-alone-wont-stop-homelessness-deaths>).

depression, mental health problems and behavioral problems because of the compounded effects of their trauma.

**“With the closure of 'Safe night space' we have had an increase in supporting [victims of] sexual assaults against young women living on the streets.”**

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Survey Participant

The local *Youth Experiences of Housing First*<sup>22</sup> report reinforces survey participants statements noting that:

- 79% of the 104 young homeless people studied reported being attacked or beaten up since becoming homelessness;<sup>23</sup>
- 84% had at least one serious health condition;<sup>24</sup>
- 94% reported problematic drug or alcohol use;<sup>25</sup> and
- 78% had co-occurring mental health, AOD and chronic health conditions.<sup>26</sup>

**“We need emergency shelter funded and built for young people at night. No young person should sleep on the streets or have to sell their body because they need to find somewhere safe to stay. Every young person should have the ability to go somewhere that they can lock the door and have a safe place to rest.”**

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Survey Participant

Youth homelessness has significant consequences for the long-term trajectory of the lives of young people. As a sector, we understand that more young people are becoming at-risk of homelessness due to the lack of prevention strategies and safeguards for young people in our community during this difficult time. Without the right support, many will struggle with extreme levels of distress, low self-esteem, depression, mental health problems and

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<sup>22</sup> Vallesi, S., Wood, L. and Quinn, D., *An Evaluation Snapshot: Youth Experiences of Housing First* RUAH Community Services and the University of Western Australia (Report, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

behavioural problems because of the compounded effects of their trauma. Many will struggle with homelessness their entire lives.

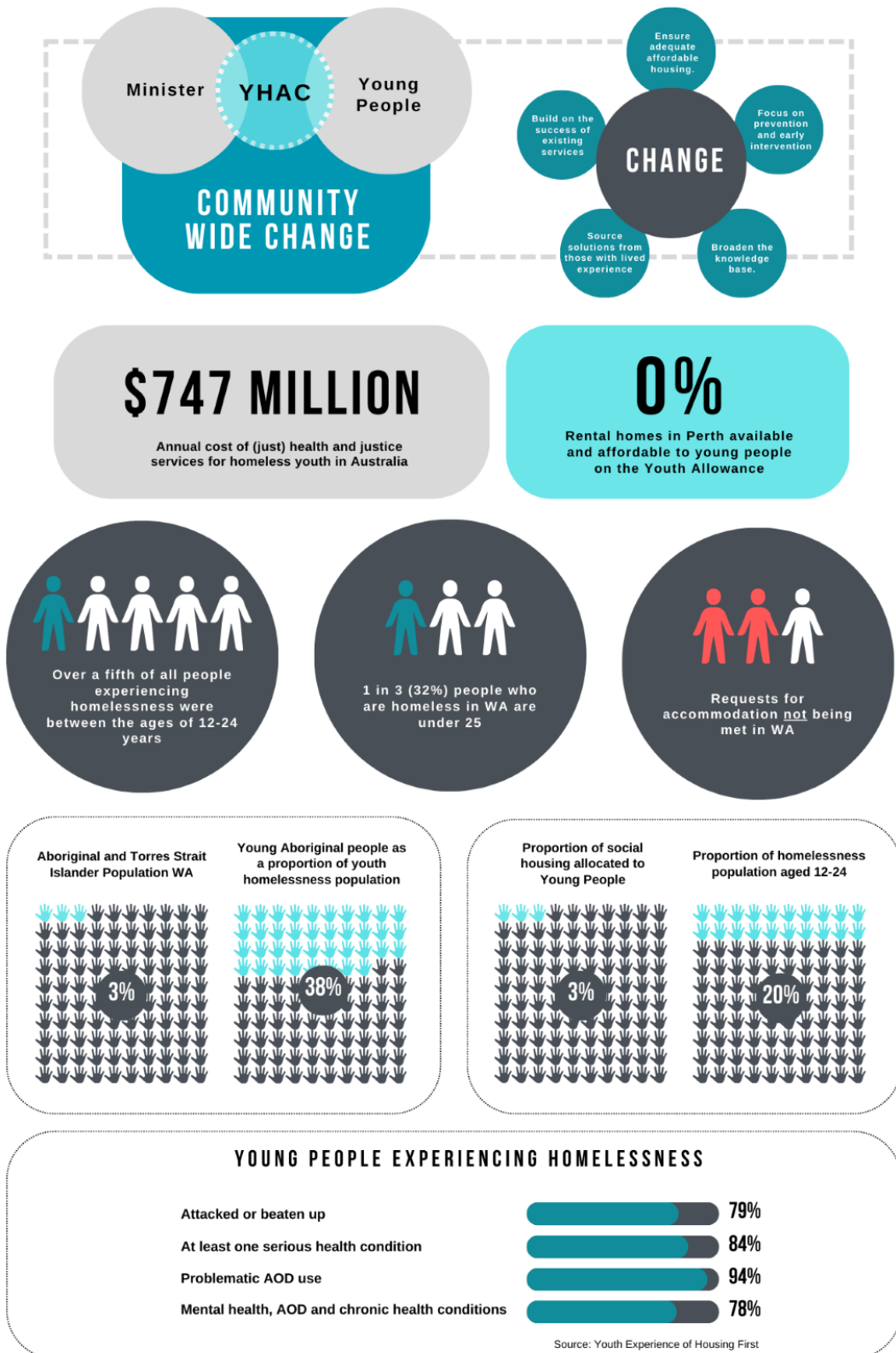
The [\*Western Australian Youth Homelessness Action Plan\*](#)<sup>27</sup> aims to ensure that no young person in Western Australia will sleep rough for more than five nights before moving into a safe home by the year 2028.<sup>28</sup> This cannot be achieved without cross cabinet support and advocacy for the allocation of resources to protect children and young people's well-being. We invite the Minister to fight for young people and make meaningful actions that are led by young people and staff with system insights.

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<sup>27</sup> Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia and the Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, *The Western Australian Strategy To End Homelessness* (2018, retrieved 19 March 2024 via <https://www.yacwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Youth-Homeless-Action-Plan-YACWA-FINAL.pdf>.)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p 2.

## 4 The cost of inaction: Youth homelessness in Western Australia in 2024



Key statistics collated by Vinnies WA (March 2024)

#### 4.1.1 Far too many young people in Western Australia are homeless

Based on 2021 Census<sup>29</sup> data:

- 1 in 3 (32%) people who are homeless in WA are under 25;<sup>30</sup>
- Youth represent 20% of the homeless population, despite comprising only 12% of WA's overall population;<sup>31</sup>
- 1,927 (20%) are youth aged 12-24 (plus another 1,694 are marginally housed);<sup>32</sup>
- The percentage of young homeless people identifying as female is growing. They now represent 51% of youth who are homeless, compared to 45% of WA's overall homeless population.<sup>33</sup>

The impact of family breakdown, violence, poverty, mental health and associated trauma is disproportionately being felt by young people, and increasingly girls and young women.

A further 1,694 young people are identified as marginally housed (1,591 of these are recorded as living in 'other overcrowded dwellings').<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.1.2 The true numbers are much higher

**Table 2:** Youth Homelessness in WA by Living Arrangement <sup>35</sup>

ABS Category	Number	Percentage
Sleeping rough	171	9%
Supported accommodation	452	23%
Staying temporarily with others	333	17%
In boarding houses	84	4%
In temporary lodgings	12	1%
In severely crowded dwellings	883	46%
TOTAL	1935*	100%

*\*Slightly differs from other ABS figure of 1,927 likely due to rounding differences*

It is widely acknowledged (including by the ABS) that these numbers under-represent the true situation as young people aged 12-24 are more likely to 'couch surf' with friends and acquaintances, be staying in unsafe or inappropriate accommodation, and less likely than adults to present at refuges (even if there were any with available beds). This means the actual number is greater and hidden from the official statistics.

Taken alone, the reported numbers are disturbing; the fact they are an underestimation adds further urgency to the crisis that is youth homelessness.

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<sup>29</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Estimating Homelessness: Census' (released 22 March 2023, retrieved 19 March 2024 via <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Manual count from ABS 2021 Census [population and age spreadsheet](#) in accord with national percentages.

<sup>32</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Estimating Homelessness: Census'.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

### 4.1.3 WA is behind the curve

Based on ABS data, 171 young people are sleeping rough in WA – making them 7.4% of the rough sleeping total – much higher (76%) than the national rate of 4.2%.<sup>36</sup> Other notable shortfalls include:

- Sector staff surveyed in February 2024 rated the Government's response to the issues affecting young people at just 2.3 stars out of 5;
- Western Australia has the highest proportion of rough sleeping in the country and the second lowest rate of government investment in homelessness services in the country per capita;<sup>37</sup>
- We lack enough quality data to fully understand the vulnerabilities young people are facing in Western Australia;
- In February 2024, there were 146 homeless young people (under 26) on the Perth Metro By-Name List (BNL) and 46 (32%) of these young people do not have a lead worker or organization. Young people represent less than 10% of the Perth BNL.

### 4.1.4 Young Aboriginal people make up 38% of the youth homelessness population

Current ABS data shows that of the 3,378 Aboriginal and/ Torres Strait Islander people who were homeless in WA, 734 were aged 12-24 years.<sup>38</sup>

This makes them 38% of the total 1,927 young homeless people in WA. Of these 734 young people, 237 (33%) were recorded as being homeless in the greater Perth area.<sup>39</sup>

Forty-eight of the 146 young people experiencing homelessness captured by the Perth By-Name List<sup>40</sup> at time of writing identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, representing 30% of the youth BNL population.

### 4.1.5 Young people need our help

Key considerations:

- Sector staff rated accommodation as the most under resourced service for young people experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness in WA;
- Young people receive the lowest wages and statutory incomes of any age group;
- Regional accommodation and housing options for young people are even lower in supply than in the Perth Metro area;
- Young people have the highest unmet need within the Specialist Homelessness System in WA – representing 30% of all 'unassisted requests' for services;

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. See Data sheet 4.6.

<sup>37</sup> Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020-21' (updated 7 October 2022, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/ec49bd27-6138-4298-8b99-8f567f8e64d0/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report-2020-21.pdf?v=20221006161932&inline=true>).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. This includes 71 individuals sleeping rough and 460 who were staying in severely crowded dwellings. A further 576 were in marginal accommodation including caravan parks and other crowded dwellings.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, 'By-Name List: Tracking Homelessness (Live Data)' (retrieved online 21 March 2024 via <https://www.endhomelessnesswa.com/bynamelist-datapage>).



- Young people on low incomes are shut out of the general housing market and face a long queue for government subsidised housing:
  - There are no (0%) rental homes in Perth available and affordable to young people on the Youth Allowance and even share rooms are cost prohibitive;<sup>41</sup>
  - Social housing stock (as a proportion of housing in WA) is going backwards, falling further to 3.8% despite crippling unaffordability in the private market and a current waitlist of 34 201 individuals;<sup>42</sup> and
  - Only 2.9% of social housing nationally is allocated to young people (national figure) even though they make up around 20% of the homelessness population.<sup>43</sup>
- Youth homelessness is not a choice:
  - Poverty, disadvantage, unaffordable and inaccessible housing, and unemployment are major structural drivers of young people becoming homeless. These drivers are only increasing.<sup>44</sup>
  - Young individuals experiencing homelessness typically lack the statutory safeguards afforded to minors and often find themselves beyond the scope of an already strained child protection system.
  - Adult-centric homelessness services fail to address youths' unique developmental requirements, including fundamental life skills and interpersonal abilities.

#### 4.1.6 Changing the trajectory

Currently, the common life trajectory for those unaccompanied children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness includes:

- Deterioration in mental and physical health;
- Increased disconnection and isolation;
- Sustained disengagement from education and training;
- Entrenched unemployment;
- Deepening trauma;
- Chronic homelessness as an adult;
- Lifelong poverty; and
- Premature death.

Evidence shows that changing this trajectory requires services and supports to be:

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<sup>41</sup> Anglicare Australia, '2023: Rental Affordability Snapshot' (published 13 August 2023, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/publications/2023-rental-affordability-snapshot/>).

<sup>42</sup> Shelter WA, 'Social & Community Housing Statistics' (updated January 2023, retrieved online March 2024 via <https://www.shelterwa.org.au/our-work/advocacy/social-housing-2/social-community-energy-efficient-housing/>).

<sup>43</sup> My Foundations Youth Housing, 'Youth Housing Product Overview' (retrieved 19 March 2024 via <https://mfyh.org.au/youth-housing-product-overview/>).

<sup>44</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Australia's Welfare 2023: Data Insights, Homelessness and Housing Affordability' (published 7 September 2023, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2023-data-insights/contents/homelessness-and-housing-affordability>).

- Youth specific;
- Low threshold/eligibility (i.e. very limited conditions on access);
- Trauma-informed;
- Developmentally focused and relational;
- Individualized and strengths based (focused on goals as well as needs);
- Flexible support that extends beyond initial engagement;
- Able to work holistically on the interrelationships between homelessness, mental health, substance use and justice interaction;
- Based on providing 'housing first' rather than requiring people to be 'housing ready' before having access to a stable home.

Youth homelessness is a solvable problem – and to us a moral and financial imperative. But it requires collective action and investment – from governments, community organisations, and socially conscious businesses and individuals.

Children and young people are listed as a priority cohort in the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*<sup>45</sup> in recognition of the severe impact that homelessness has on the lives of young Australians. They are also a priority within the State Government's *All Paths Lead to a Home* strategy. However, five years on, these commitments are yet to translate into any sizeable investment into models that help young people build sustainable pathways out of homelessness and turn their lives around.

#### 4.1.7 The economic cost of inaction is massive

There are strong moral reasons to end youth homelessness and its consequences. But there are economic incentives for society as well.

Children who grow up exposed to trauma and homelessness may experience long-term effects on behaviour, employability, relationships and brain development. As they grow into adulthood, society ends up paying for the consequences through law enforcement, the criminal justice system, social services and the opportunity costs of people not being employed or engaged in meaningful activities. And these issues are inter-generational.

For decades, national and international research has clearly shown that the costs of non-intervention are far greater than the costs of positive intervention to end homelessness:

- The annual cost of (just) health and justice services for homeless youth in Australia is \$747 million - an average of \$17,868 per person per year.<sup>46</sup> This exceeds the total cost of providing Specialist Homelessness Services to the 256,000 people (young

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<sup>45</sup> See Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 'National Housing and Homelessness Agreement' (updated 28 January 2022, retrieved online 21 March 2024 via <https://www.dss.gov.au/housing-support-programs-services-homelessness/national-housing-and-homelessness-agreement>).

<sup>46</sup> See Mackenzie, D., Flatau, P., Steen, A. and Thielking, M., 'The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia: Research Briefing' Swinburne University Institute for Social Research, the University of Western Australia and Charles Sturt University (published 28 April 2016, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via [https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/20343727/1000008507\\_published\\_report.pdf](https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/20343727/1000008507_published_report.pdf)). See also Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 'Cost of youth homelessness' (published 5 May 2016, retrieved online 19 March 2024 via <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/analysis/news/cost-youth-homelessness#:~:text=The%20research%20identified%20that%20the%20costs%20to%20the,other%20costs%20such%20as%20lower%20employment%20rates%20etc.%29.>).

and old) assisted by the system over the same period.<sup>47</sup> These costs do not include the additional lifetime impact of early school leaving and low engagement with employment.

Another recent actuarial study<sup>48</sup> found that people who use homelessness services in a New South Wales context cost governments \$186,000 on average over six years,<sup>49</sup> nearly four times more than the general NSW population. This equates to an average of \$31,000 per person per annum, with the main costs being in health, justice, income, drug and alcohol, and out-of-home care support. The research confirmed people accessing specialist homelessness services have significantly higher use of other government services than the broader population.

A 2012 study<sup>50</sup> commissioned as part of the *National Homelessness Research Agenda* estimated the lifetime service costs for housing, health, community services and justice at between \$1 and \$5 million for a single homeless person.<sup>51</sup>

We will not realise the desired return on investment under the *Youth Action Plan* unless the structural, system and personal factors that drive unaccompanied and youth homelessness are addressed.

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<sup>47</sup> See Mackenzie et. al, p 21 – 24.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor Fry on behalf of the New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice, *Pathways to Homelessness* (Report, 2021) (retrieved 19 March 2024 via <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=823631>).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, xxiv.

<sup>50</sup> End Street Sleeping and Nous Group as cited in *Parity* (April 2023, 36, p 46) citing a 2012 study by Baldry et al – *Life course Institutional Costs of Homelessness for Vulnerable Groups* (University of New South Wales, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p 6.

## 5 Conclusion

We look forward to the Minister for Youth's response to the recommendations and evidence included in this submission.

This submission aims to:

1. Ensure that the development of the *Youth Action Plan* considers the connection between housing insecurity (or lack thereof) and *Youth Action Plan* priority outcomes for young people such as success and wellbeing;
2. Advocate for the amplification of the voices of young people in Government decision-making contexts;
3. Demonstrate the cost and impact of failure to prevent housing insecurity and homelessness; and
4. Ensure that youth homelessness is visible to the Minister for Youth and her Cabinet colleagues to support investment and action for the benefit of all young people in WA.

Any questions regarding this submission can be directed to [yacwa@yacwa.org.au](mailto:yacwa@yacwa.org.au).