

# YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

## EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19

*This paper represents the experiences of young people consulted by YACWA between June and September 2020. While by no means comprehensive, it aims to provide a snapshot of the experiences of young people with lived experience of homelessness across Western Australia through the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. This paper was co-authored by the YACWA staff and the YACWA COVID-19 Youth Steering Group. This paper should be read in conjunction with the "Framework for Young People's Recovery from COVID-19" in Western Australia produced by YACWA in August 2020.*

**THANK YOU TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO GAVE THEIR TIME AND SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH US TO PRODUCE THIS PAPER.**

*All the young people consulted were in transitional or permanent housing at the time of consultation and this paper is not intended to represent young people who are currently street present or in insecure housing.*

## KEY FACTS



The 2016 ABS Census estimates nearly 28,000 young Australians aged 12 to 24 are homeless on any given night.<sup>1</sup>



21%  
21% of the homeless population of Western Australia are under 25.<sup>2</sup>



At the outset of the pandemic, referrals to youth homelessness services rapidly increased.

## ALEX'S STORY<sup>4</sup>

Alex, a 20 year old young man, was living in transitional housing after having slept rough and couch surfed for the past 18 months. Alex moved into transitional housing in November 2019 and was working hard to get his life back on track. Alex was attending therapy once a week and had begun studying toward a certificate 3 at TAFE. In January he began a job in hospitality where he was working 15 hours a week. Alex was doing really well at his new job and this was increasing his confidence and hope for the future. When COVID-19 hit, Alex was let go by his new workplace and ended up with Centrelink as his sole source of income again. Alex's TAFE classes and therapy sessions moved online as a result of the pandemic.

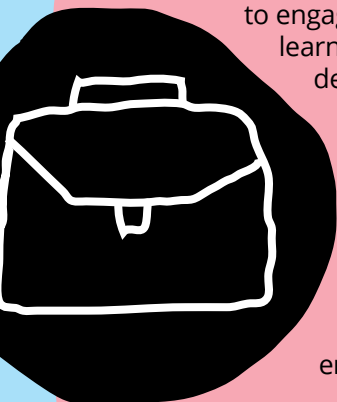
Before COVID-19, Alex was experiencing profound depression and anxiety. Therapy was having a positive effect on Alex's mental health, however after the lockdown restrictions began Alex experienced a worsening of his mental health. He struggled to get out of bed and leave his room. Maintaining contact with his therapist became increasingly difficult. Alex fell behind at TAFE as his mental health and motivation worsened. Eventually, he fell so far behind that he felt like his only choice was to drop out of the first semester.

Alex has not gone back to TAFE to complete the course during the second semester because isolation has caused him to become too anxious to catch public transport. With the restrictions now easing in Western Australia, Alex is trying to restart the process of stabilising his mental health so that he can start work again. He hopes to get his job at the restaurant back but is applying for as many jobs as he can in the meantime, as he worries this is not likely.

# KEY THEMES FROM CONSULTATION

## EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

For many young people with lived experience of homelessness, the pandemic caused a major disruption in the routines and progress they had made in achieving their goals. Many found it difficult to continue to engage with online education and often were not in home environments that supported their learning or work. Some young people described their uncertainty and fear during the pandemic as debilitating, and felt afraid to leave the house or go to school, TAFE or university. For many, this fear has continued to this day, with many not re-enrolling in TAFE or university courses.



For those who were employed prior to COVID-19 and lost their jobs, this was incredibly demotivating. Many young people had only just found work prior to lockdown and others had lost jobs shortly before the lock down and were now faced with protracted unemployment. For those in this position, the financial insecurity was compounded by the loss of routine, connection and support from their workplace, and resulted in devastating effects on their mental health. Many young people felt uncertain about the future of their employment, and the ongoing fear of how this might affect their housing.

## MENTAL HEALTH

During the period of lockdown, isolation and disruption negatively impacted young people's mental health. Many young people with lived experience of homelessness report that the trauma of their experience continues to follow them even after they are housed, making them particularly vulnerable to negative experiences of mental health and compounding the stress of financial and employment insecurity.

Many young people with experience of homelessness we spoke to felt uniquely isolated from their support networks, friends and family, and in some cases lacked technology to connect with them safely and regularly. Those who had lost jobs or dropped out of education that connected them with others discussed how this made them feel like they'd lost their identity and sense of purpose in the world. One young person disclosed that they had regressed in their mental health progress and felt too scared to leave their home most days.



## FINANCIAL INSECURITY

Prior to COVID-19, young people receiving Centrelink payments found it difficult to survive off the amount of money they received. For those with lived experience of homelessness this is exacerbated as they were less likely to have established savings. Young people who received the increased supplement during COVID-19 found the payments enormously helpful, with many paying off debt, buying clothes that actually fit them, buying glasses and cleaning products, and even being able to afford healthy food like fruit and vegetables for the first time.



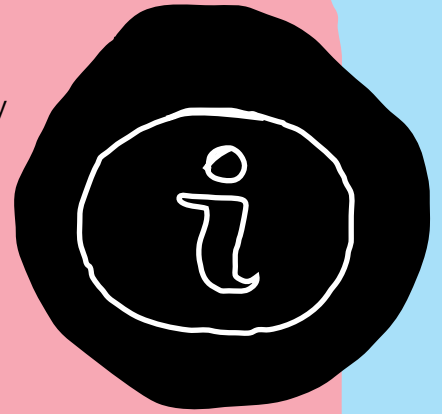
Young people felt the increased payments gave them independence and financial security, allowing them to stop relying on family, partners or friends for financial support. The elevated rate supported many in their mental health, feeling more secure in their future and their homes in the short-term. However, the uncertainty about the life-span of these payments caused many young people an immense amount of fear and anxiety of being plunged back into their previous state of poverty and distress when they ended.



## INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

During the pandemic some young people struggled to understand the constantly changing information around COVID-19 restrictions and changes to Centrelink support payments. Information on support payments was rarely provided in easy-to-understand terms, and required significant guesswork to understand how they would impact individuals with complex circumstances.

Some young people found it hard to navigate the Centrelink website to find out more about the changes, and relied on information provided from unofficial sources interpreting these changes. Young people struggled to navigate the enormity of the information and discussed the desire for a centralised “Hub” of relevant information written in youth-friendly language.



## IMPACT OF SERVICES MOVING ONLINE

During lockdown, many mental health, social work, housing and health services moved to remote delivery. Young people had mixed experiences with these services changing, often dependant on home environments and technology. Some young people found they were more open to talking to a psychologist or therapist while in the comfort of their own home, reporting that it was a safe space for them that felt less clinical.

Other young people couldn't find the motivation to pick up the phone when their therapist called and weren't able to continue treatment. Some didn't feel they could get accurate assessments from health professionals of the health of themselves or their children and didn't see the point in engaging with telehealth. Some young people didn't have the credit, data or internet connection or a suitable device to access services online.



# RECOMMENDATIONS TO START OUR RECOVERY



## WHAT

## WHO

Fully implement and resource the WA Strategy to End Homelessness's Youth Homelessness Action Plan	<b>Department of Communities</b>
Invest in a Housing First for Youth model that is specifically designed for young people aged 16 to 25, aligns with broader Housing First Homelessness initiatives, and enables access to and integrates wrap around supports such as mental health, alcohol and other drugs (AOD) and employment and education pathways.	<b>Department of Communities</b>
Invest in the Embedded Youth Outreach Program, formalising a partnership between the State Government, youth services and community leaders across the state to effectively engage street present and at-risk young people.	<b>Department of Communities or Department of Justice</b>
Invest in specialist homelessness services (including crisis accommodation) that provide targeted support for LGBTIQ+ young people and integrate mental health, AOD, and other wraparound supports into service delivery.	<b>Department of Education and Mental Health Commission</b>
Ensure direct infrastructure investment has a focus on the construction of additional social housing dwellings in Western Australia, aligned to meet needs identified by the Department of Communities modelling.	<b>Department of Communities</b>
Provide a rapid, flexible small grant program for youth services to enable rapid pivoting of service provision to meet emerging needs of young people, including a dedicated funding stream for telehealth and outreach services to engage isolated young people.	<b>Department of Communities</b>
Fund the Youth Digital Inclusion (YDI) Project as an ongoing, permanent program that provides technology to vulnerable young people, including young people experiencing homelessness, that enables them to stay connected to youth services.	<b>Department of Communities and Office of Digital Government</b>
Ensure access to tutoring and educational resources for young people living in poverty to respond to the gap in education outcomes created by COVID-19 in schools and TAFEs.	<b>Department of Education and Department of Workforce and Training</b>
Establish and trial a school-based program for homelessness prevention that aims to identify young people at risk of homelessness early, provides collaborative intervention in the form of family mediation in response to conflict and facilitates re-engagement with school.	<b>Department of Education and Department of Communities</b>
Advocate via the National Cabinet to immediately extend the Coronavirus Supplement payment and JobKeeper in light of the emerging second wave in other parts of Australia threatening to extend the economic impacts of COVID-19.	<b>Department of Premier and Cabinet</b>
Advocate via the National Cabinet to permanently raise the JobSeeker payment to the level of the Coronavirus Supplement.	<b>Department of Premier and Cabinet</b>
Advocate via the National Cabinet to abolish mutual obligations requirements and implement recommendations of the Newstart Inquiry.	<b>Department of Premier and Cabinet</b>

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). Census of Population and Housing, Estimating Homelessness. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2049.0Explanatory%20Notes12016?OpenDocument>
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). Census of Population and Housing, Estimating Homelessness. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2049.0Explanatory%20Notes12016?OpenDocument>
3. Department of Communities. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on the WA Community (Youth).
4. Alex is a fictional story made of composite experiences representative of stories from real young people.