

## **Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria**

Ms Jo Swift

**Organisation Name:** Kids Under Cover

**Your position or role:** Chief Executive Officer

### **SURVEY QUESTIONS**

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

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

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

Working in Homelessness services

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

### **YOUR SUBMISSION**

**Submission:**

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

### **FILE ATTACHMENTS**

**File1:** [5e40bb847fda2-KUC Hmlssnss submission 2020 final.pdf](#)

**File2:**

**File3:**

**Signature:**

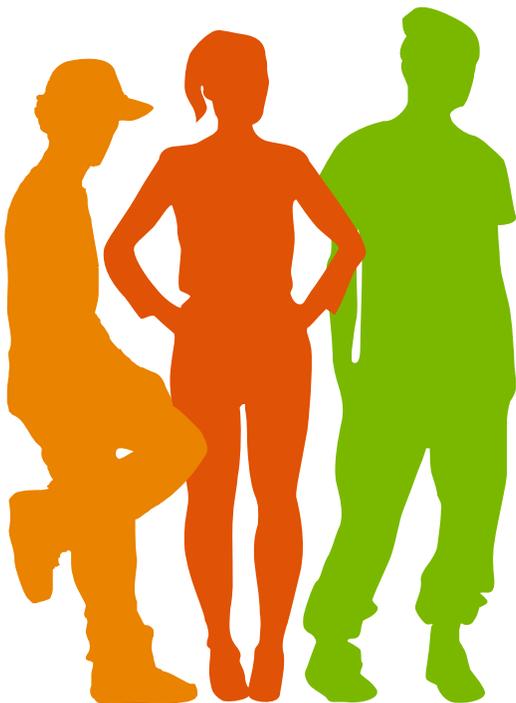
Jo Swift



Building foundations  
to prevent youth  
homelessness

# SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA



**Date:** 7 February 2020  
**Prepared and Submitted By:** Kids Under Cover

## Executive summary

Kids Under Cover was established in 1989 in response to the shocking rates of youth homelessness revealed by the National Inquiry into Youth Homelessness. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission found a large number of Australian children were being denied their fundamental human rights to receive adequate housing, and to be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation. More than 30 years later, thousands of Australian children and young people are still being denied these rights. 39% of Australia's homeless population are under 25 years of age.

This submission provides an insight into the current state of homelessness, with a focus on the unique challenges faced by young people. This submission also explores the power of early intervention in preventing youth homelessness. Kids Under Cover, the organisation this submission represents, recognises inadequate housing may cause homelessness, specifically for young people. The Kids Under Cover Studio Program is proven to provide a cost effective, early intervention approach to prevent youth homelessness.

Once we respond to the unique challenges of youth homelessness and increase funding for prevention, we can take steps towards a community where no young person experiences homelessness.

## What is homelessness?

Homelessness remains a significant problem in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2016 census data indicates over 116,000 people remained homeless on census night, an increase of 14,000 from the previous census data in 2011. Children and young people under the age of 25 made up 39% of this figure. By far the biggest increase was in severe overcrowding, which makes up approximately 44% of all homelessness in Australia and 34% of youth homelessness. Other categories that experienced growth were couch surfing (mostly young people living with friends or kith and kin) and those living in rooming houses or inadequate housing.

All these groups lack at least one domain of being housed; security of tenure (legal domain), adequacy of housing (physical domain) or security and privacy (social domain) (ABS 2016; ABS 2012). A broader definition of homelessness is understood as not just a lack of an abode or a roof over one's head, but rather, it is multidimensional and involves physiological, emotional, territorial, ontological and spiritual deprivations (Somerville 2013, 1992). Conversely having a house does not necessarily guarantee being at home and being at home does not necessarily require a house (McCarthy 2018; Robinson 2002; Somerville 2013; Veness 1992).

To be at home includes the experience of the 'key signifiers' of home, which include shelter, hearth, heart, privacy, roots and abode. These signifiers connote materiality, warmth, love, control, identity and a sense of place and belonging (Somerville 1992), all of which can be lost when crowding and other complications combine to cause chaos within the household.

The measurement of crowding utilised by the ABS is based on the Canadian National Occupancy Standard, which states a house is regarded as crowded if it requires one or more bedrooms after the stated criteria are met (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014, p. 17). Severe overcrowding is a household that requires four or more bedrooms to accommodate the additional numbers after the criteria had been met (ABS 2012). Severe overcrowding is considered a form of homelessness as individuals who experience this over an extended duration lack a social domain of being housed, which “does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations” (ABS 2012, p. 44). This also compromises the sense of ‘home’ (the qualitative measure) people in crowded circumstances may experience and thus satisfies the definition of homelessness (ABS 2011). Almost 25% of Kids Under Cover families were suffering from severe overcrowding at the time of application, with 93% self-identifying as suffering crowding in some form. Post intervention this number is reduced to 10%.

In order to minimize the effects of inadequate housing as well as the accompanying risk to homelessness as defined above, Kids Under Cover operates its Studio Program for young people who are identified as at risk of homelessness or family breakdown. Many commentators have attempted to define the causes of homelessness (Batterham 2017) and hence what may create risk to homelessness. Most of these commentators infer cause and effect between the risk and the outcome. An alternative is to see risk as a synchronic emergence (Elder-Vass 2010) where multiple factors converge at a particular time to occasion a deleterious circumstance. That these factors have a similarity in multiple households does not necessarily mean they will invariably produce the same result, but they contain a potentiality of risk.

## **Challenges of youth homelessness**

In addition to the loss of key signifiers of home in situations of crowding, the effects on young people can be devastating. They lose the ability to develop emotionally, grow their sense of self, deal with conflict, have adequate space to study and importantly retreat from the chaos of an overcrowded home. Precarious housing has been demonstrated to lead to several other insecurities which include of family life, of self, mental and physical health and financial and employment insecurities (Hulse & Saugeres 2008). In more recent research Stolz (2019) has demonstrated insecure or inadequate housing, compounded by crowding, can also lead to educational insecurity, particularly for young people.

## **Cost of youth homelessness**

A report into the cost to the economy of homeless young people over the period of 2014-15 suggests the total cost, including health and justice costs, may be \$747 million. This exceeds the cost of unemployed youth by \$626 million, and the cost of providing specialist homeless services to young people by approximately \$130 million (Flatau et al 2015). Whichever way the cost is calculated, the impost and impact of homelessness on the Australian economy is significant. When the cost of lost opportunity to the individual and the economy over a lifetime is factored in the impact is magnified significantly. Risk minimisation and early intervention is seen to be the cheapest and most effective approach to preventing homelessness (Crane & Brannock 1996).

Kids Under Cover recognises inadequate or precarious housing may cause risk of homelessness or homelessness, specifically for young people. Provision of culturally adequate accommodation with security of tenure has been shown to alleviate much of this risk over time (Stolz 2019). The Kids Under Cover Studio Program is proven to provide a cost effective, early intervention approach. A Social Return on Investment evaluation found for every dollar invested in this approach \$4.17 is gained in social benefit. This evaluation only looked at the immediate impact and did not consider the opportunity loss produced by the insecurities listed above. In some cases, these insecurities may last a lifetime.

## Impact of Kids Under Cover

Kids Under Cover is a not-for-profit organisation that has been focused on preventing youth homelessness since it was established in 1989. Kids Under Cover provides one and two-bedroom studios with a bathroom for young people aged between 12 and 25 years deemed to be at risk of homelessness or family breakdown. The reasons given for this risk include crowding/severe overcrowding combined with family conflict, trauma, mental health and disability, resulting in household chaos, instability of tenure, reduced individual development and educational disengagement. Recent research undertaken through a PhD with Swinburne University (Stolz 2019) indicates there are many benefits obtained through the provision of this additional studio space. The studios are installed in the rear yard of the main residence, thus maintaining a continuing connection between the young person and their family/carers. A kitchen is not provided because the program regards the shared meal of the family and the interaction this provides important in maintaining family connection, participation and rituals.

Studios cost between \$58,000-\$70,000, are six-star energy rated and can be relocated up to four times over their lifespan, with the average placement being six years. Studios are provided for use by young people aged 12 to 25 years of age, depending on personal and family need. When the young person no longer requires the studio, another young person from the potentially crowded household may move into the studio, or it can be relocated to another family in need.

Kids Under Cover also provides annual basic needs scholarships for all young people within the household engaged in education, which aim to remove financial barriers to participation in education. While early intervention and prevention are often lauded as the cheapest and most effective means of preventing homelessness, few services attain the social and economic impact that Kids Under Cover programs provide.

Currently Kids Under Cover has 581 studios across Victoria, housing more than 840 young people. 75% of studios are located in regional and rural areas, while 25% are located in metro locations. In 2017/18 Kids Under Cover constructed 55 studios, diverting an additional 78 young people from homelessness. In 2018/19 that number rose to 101 studios and 137 young people. This financial year Kids Under Cover are forecasting to build approximately 120 studios.

Aside from crowding and severe overcrowding, the risk of homelessness for the young people supported by Kids Under Cover's studios was heightened due to a range of contributing factors, including:

- 24% of households have disability present
- 27% of households have mental health issues present
- 16% of households have indigenous household members<sup>1</sup>
- 30% of households have child protection involvement

Recent research has shown provision of this style of accommodation is very effective in ameliorating many of the insecurities associated with inadequate housing (Stolz 2019). The results of the 2019 Kids Under Cover client outcomes survey provided the following insights on this intervention:

- Families self-identified that they experienced crowding prior to the studio reduced from 93% to 10%;
- Daily conflict experienced by families reduced from 55% to 6%;
- 97% of families now report that they get on quite or very well together, increased from 41%;
- Decline in young people being away from the property a lot/fair amount of time reduced from 35% to 6%;
- Decline in incidence of frequent/occasional risk-taking behaviours from 31% to 4%;
- Incidence of young person being usually/always happy increased from 18% to 94%;
- Proportion not going or rarely meeting the required level of educational attendance declined from 22% to 1%;
- Young people doing quite/very well educationally increased from 44% to 89%;
- Optimism about the future for the young person has increased from 43% to 89%.

While forecasting 120 studios to be built this financial year, during this same period Kids Under Cover will receive more than 250 applications for assistance. The inability to meet growing demand is purely funding based. The current funding model constitutes 35% Victorian Government funding, 33% philanthropic funding and 32% individual giving. Critically, while government provides 35% of funding, 60% of Kids Under Cover studios are located on Office of Housing properties. The inadequacy of existing DHHS housing stock size, availability and geographic location has resulted in the majority of Kids Under Cover's studios being located with Office of Housing properties. This intervention is a more cost efficient and nimble response than government demolishing and rebuilding stock, as well as being purpose driven by each household's circumstance. This solution also provides the ability to reassess if a family vacates a property, with the ability to relocate the asset or work with local housing officers to place a new family that meets suitable criteria for this program. The benefits of Kids Under Cover's studio program include:

- Removal of families and/or families from the housing waiting list
- Prevention of families and/or young people entering the housing waiting list
- Keeps young people housed in their local area retaining connection to community and education

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in the measures of homelessness established by the ABS (ABS 2012).

## Innovation in youth homelessness prevention

### Short Stay Studio Program

There is currently a major shortage of safe, inclusive and family-based emergency/short-term accommodation for young people in Victoria. There are less than 200 crisis accommodation beds available per night for young people and the turn-away rate across Victoria at an unacceptable level. Within metro Melbourne, 66% of young people presenting at a Melbourne City Mission crisis accommodation service are unable to be housed. In regional areas, young people seeking crisis accommodation are placed on trains into the city to try and find respite. This removes them from their known local environment and community connections while also disrupting their education.

Due to this shortage, case workers are often forced to place vulnerable young people in residential care. If this option is not available young people are placed in unsafe and inappropriate environments such as motels, backpacker hostels and in extreme cases, admitted to hospital even though they do not present with any medical conditions. This intensifies an incredibly stressful time for a young person who is already facing overwhelming challenges and may not have the capacity to cope in these unsuitable living environments, even for a short time.

One of the reasons for Victoria's lack of emergency/short-term accommodation for young people under 18 years is the shortage of foster carers compared to the demand for placements. This is due to a number of factors, including perceived lack of space in a potential foster carers home and people feeling unprepared for the challenges that may come with being a foster parent. To help bridge this gap, Kids Under Cover has developed an innovative and unique family-based accommodation solution for young people living in Out of Home Care (OOHC) and/or experiencing homelessness in Victoria. Young people aged 12 to 18 years can be placed in a Kids Under Cover studio (one-bedroom with bathroom) in the backyard of a foster carer's home, with a focus on short-term placements ranging from one night up to six months.

Studios are fitted out with furniture, soft furnishings and kitchenette appliances to create a calming, welcoming environment that provides the feeling of semi-independence for the young person. Carers are recruited, trained, accredited, managed and compensated as foster carers through a partner Foster Care Community Service Organisation (FCCSO); young people are managed by their OOHC or housing case worker at the FCCSO and Kids Under Cover fund and manage studio installation, ongoing maintenance and eventual relocation.

This program seeks to stabilise the young person and prevent/reduce trauma that is often occurs due to inappropriate housing options during a crisis period, providing both the case worker and the young person some breathing space during crisis periods, while allowing the case worker to identify the most suitable long-term placement for the young person based on what best meets their needs.

## Village 21

One of the highest risk pathways into homelessness is for those leaving state care at the age of 18 and moving into independent living, with 39% of young people experiencing homelessness within a year of leaving OOHC (The Home Stretch 2019). Trials through the Homestretch campaign have been initiated to ascertain if an extension to 21 years of age for young people in care will enable for a better transition to independent living. At present the transition to independent living for young people in state care retains a high degree of risk, particularly for homelessness. Kids Under Cover, in partnership with Anglicare Victoria, have initiated a model to lessen the risk of homelessness in this cohort of young people (aged 18-21) by providing small village-style accommodation. This is complemented by support to develop independent living skills, including household skills such as cooking, cleaning and laundering, and social and employment skills to support transition to employment and full independent living. Young people will leave Village 21 ready and well equipped for successful independent living. This program will have significant social and financial benefit for the young people and the general community.

Extending the age for young people in care to 21 and models like Village 21, will reduce the flow of state care young people into homelessness. This will provide significant economic benefit for far less investment compared to finding solutions for young people who are already experiencing homelessness. Early intervention based on sound evidence and research, particularly regarding young people who make up 39% of the homeless population, will be fiscally conservative and socially productive.

## Recommendations to Government

- Recognition of early intervention and prevention as being key to ending youth homelessness, combined with increased funding of prevention programs and services.
- A separate Victorian Government strategy to be developed for youth housing and youth homelessness as they are a distinct cohort with their own needs and challenges.
- Investment in appropriate emergency/short-term accommodation for young people
- The permanent extension of leaving care age from 18 to 21 years old to enable a more successful transition to independent living for young people.

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