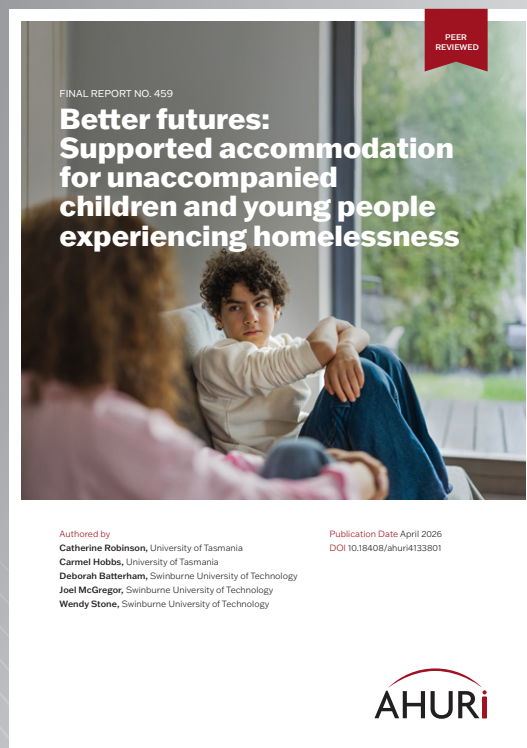


Better futures: rethinking supported accommodation for unaccompanied children and young people



What this research is about

This research project examines the effectiveness of Australia's supported accommodation services in meeting the needs of unaccompanied children and young people aged 12–24. It proposes principles to guide policy and practice toward a better system.

Why this research is important

Unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness are at risk of significant lifelong negative outcomes. Supported accommodation services are a critical response to homelessness; however, these services do not always meet this cohort's needs. A strengthened system of care is required to better align services to unaccompanied young people's needs.

Based on

Final Report No. 459: *Better futures: Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness*

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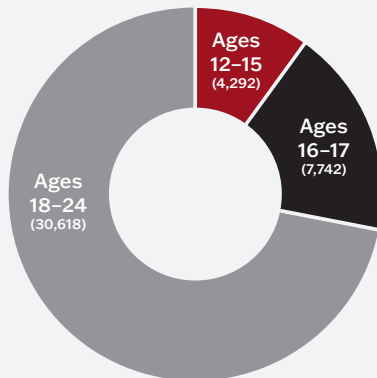
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At a glance

Unaccompanied young people aged 12–24 made up 15% of Specialist Homelessness Services' clients in 2023–24.



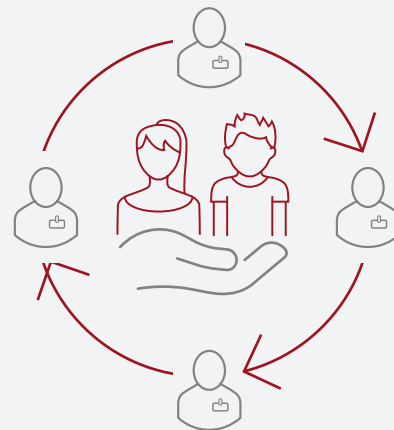
Young people deemed higher risk can be excluded from support and accommodation.



Service design should acknowledge young people benefit most from extended stays in stable, homely environments.



Increasing staff-to-client ratios can improve quality and continuity of care, as well as staff satisfaction.



Key findings:

An under-recognised group

In 2023–2024, 42,642 people aged 12–24 were supported by Specialist Homelessness Services while unaccompanied by a parent or guardian. This group comprised 15% of all clients, and 67% of all clients aged 12–24.

This group receives little attention in national policy and is inconsistently addressed across state and territory housing and homelessness policies.

Different drivers and solutions

Unaccompanied child and youth homelessness has distinct drivers and solutions from adult homelessness. It is primarily linked to lack of guardianship and care, rather than lack of affordable housing.

Without family support, young people rely on services to meet needs typically provided by caregivers, such as safety, guidance, and basic material support. When these needs are unmet, efforts to improve education and employment outcomes and long-term wellbeing are unlikely to succeed.

Solutions should focus on medium- and long-term support to help young people transition to adulthood and build positive family and community connections.

A system not designed for young people

Supported accommodation services do not always meet the age-related and developmental needs of unaccompanied young people due to design and resourcing constraints.

Key care limitations include short support periods, understaffing and service gaps. Service design and practice may also not comply with Child and Youth Safe Organisations legislation.

Where returning home is unsafe and there are few pathways to stable housing, young people with complex needs can become 'stuck' cycling between crisis and medium-term support.

'Care conditionality' hurting children, young people and staff

Care for children and young people can be restricted, temporary and dependent on meeting certain conditions, rather than provided according to need. This is referred to as 'care conditionality'.

Unaccompanied children and young people who are perceived as higher risk are particularly vulnerable to care conditionality and may be excluded from services because their vulnerability exceeds service risk thresholds, capabilities and capacities.

This is damaging for unaccompanied young people during a developmentally critical period and exposes staff to high stress, moral injury and vicarious trauma.

'Unaccompanied child and youth homelessness has distinct drivers and solutions from adult homelessness. It is primarily linked to lack of guardianship and care, rather than lack of affordable housing.'

A cohort that slips through the cracks

Homelessness alone does not trigger state guardianship in Australia. Parents retain legal responsibility for children who are not under child protection orders, resulting in situations where children receive neither guardianship at home nor response from child protection services. Most states and territories do little to provide for unaccompanied homeless children, meaning they survive without access to supported accommodation until they 'age in' to youth and adult services around age 16.

Policy actions:

Principles for policy and practice development

This research identified four policy and practice principles to guide system improvements, each with proposed actions.

1. Include unaccompanied homeless children and young people in policy, system and service design

Government commitments to engage youth advisory councils on key policy areas could be expanded to include unaccompanied children who have experienced homelessness, in particular under-14s, whose voices are rarely heard in research.

2. Design and deliver age-appropriate supported accommodation services

This requires a shift from housing-focused services to child and youth-focused models that prioritise rights, safety, wellbeing, and development. This requires further research, better workforce training, and stronger resourcing to deliver evidence-based care, with a focus on prevention and early intervention work, particularly with families.

This research proposes a care continuum model that addresses identified supported accommodation gaps and improves system entry and assessment. It features:

- youth hubs as a single point of entry and contact
- well-resourced relationship-based care in accommodation services
- flexible family reunification
- medium-term, transitional and long-term supported accommodation services with low barriers to entry.

'Government commitments to engage youth advisory councils on key policy areas could be expanded to include unaccompanied children who have experienced homelessness, in particular under-14s, whose voices are rarely heard in research.'

3. Unconditionally match service design and resourcing to the complexity of homeless children and young people's care needs

There is need for national policy guidance on inclusive, accessible accommodation and staff-to-client ratios should be introduced, with a two-worker model set as a minimum national standard.

Service design should acknowledge young people benefit most from extended stays in stable, homely environments that enable:

- rest, recovery and trust-building
- access to health and mental health services
- participation in education and employment
- life skills training
- assistance navigating welfare systems.

4. Strengthen responses to unaccompanied homeless children and young people nationally

A National Child and Youth Housing and Homelessness Plan could provide strategic direction for policy reform and drive service innovation, care standards and good practice across states and territories.

A service innovation fund enabling services to document, evaluate and share service design and models of practice could be funded by government.

Research design:

This project was undertaken using a mixed-methods approach. Data on Specialist Homelessness Services was used to examine the need for supported accommodation for children and young people. Group interviews were undertaken in Tasmania and Victoria with 51 unaccompanied people aged 14+ and with 29 social housing service and youth outreach practitioners. A National Practitioner Advisory Group and the Yfoundations Youth Homelessness Representative Council provided guidance and critical review.

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