Better care: Improving the SHS supported accommodation system for unaccompanied children and young people

Associate Professor Catherine Robinson, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tasmania

catherine.robinson@utas.edu.au



What the research investigated

- This research was undertaken as a partnership between the University of Tasmania and Swinburne University of Technology:
  - Catherine Robinson and Carmel Hobbs (UTAS)
  - Deborah Batterham, Joel McGregor and Wendy Stone (Swinburne)

- The project investigated:
  - the diverse supported accommodation needs of homeless unaccompanied children and young people aged 12-24
  - the ideal continuum of supported accommodation types envisaged by young people and practitioners

How the research was undertaken

- The project was undertaken in Tasmania and Victoria with guidance from a National Practitioner Advisory Group and members of the Yfoundations Youth Homelessness Representative Council
- Customised data from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) was used to examine the range and scale of need for supported accommodation of unaccompanied children and young people aged 12-24 presenting to SHS
- 'Dinner table' interviews were conducted, involving 51 young residents from crisis, medium-term and transitional supported accommodation services (and a lot of pizza) for unaccompanied children and young people aged 12-24
- A mix of group and individual interviews were undertaken with 29 practitioners from youth outreach services and crisis, medium-term and transitional supported accommodation services for unaccompanied children and young people aged 12-24

Key findings: Understanding the scale of need

- **40,537** unaccompanied children and young people received support from SHS in Australia 2024-25
- This represents 14% of all clients accessing SHS 2024-25

Table 1: Number of unaccompanied children and young people accessing SHS by age group in 2024-25

	National	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
12 to 15	3505	2060	490	140	268	334	104	27	93
16 to 17	7426	3086	1607	1213	483	537	283	136	163
18 to 24	29,606	8,773	9,262	5,462	2,105	1,839	1,021	514	996
TOTAL	40,537	13,919	11,359	6,815	2,856	2,710	1,408	683	1,252

Source: (AIHW, 2025) Data tables: Specialist homelessness services annual report 2024–25, Table YOUNG.1: Children and young people receiving support alone, by age and sex, 2024–25

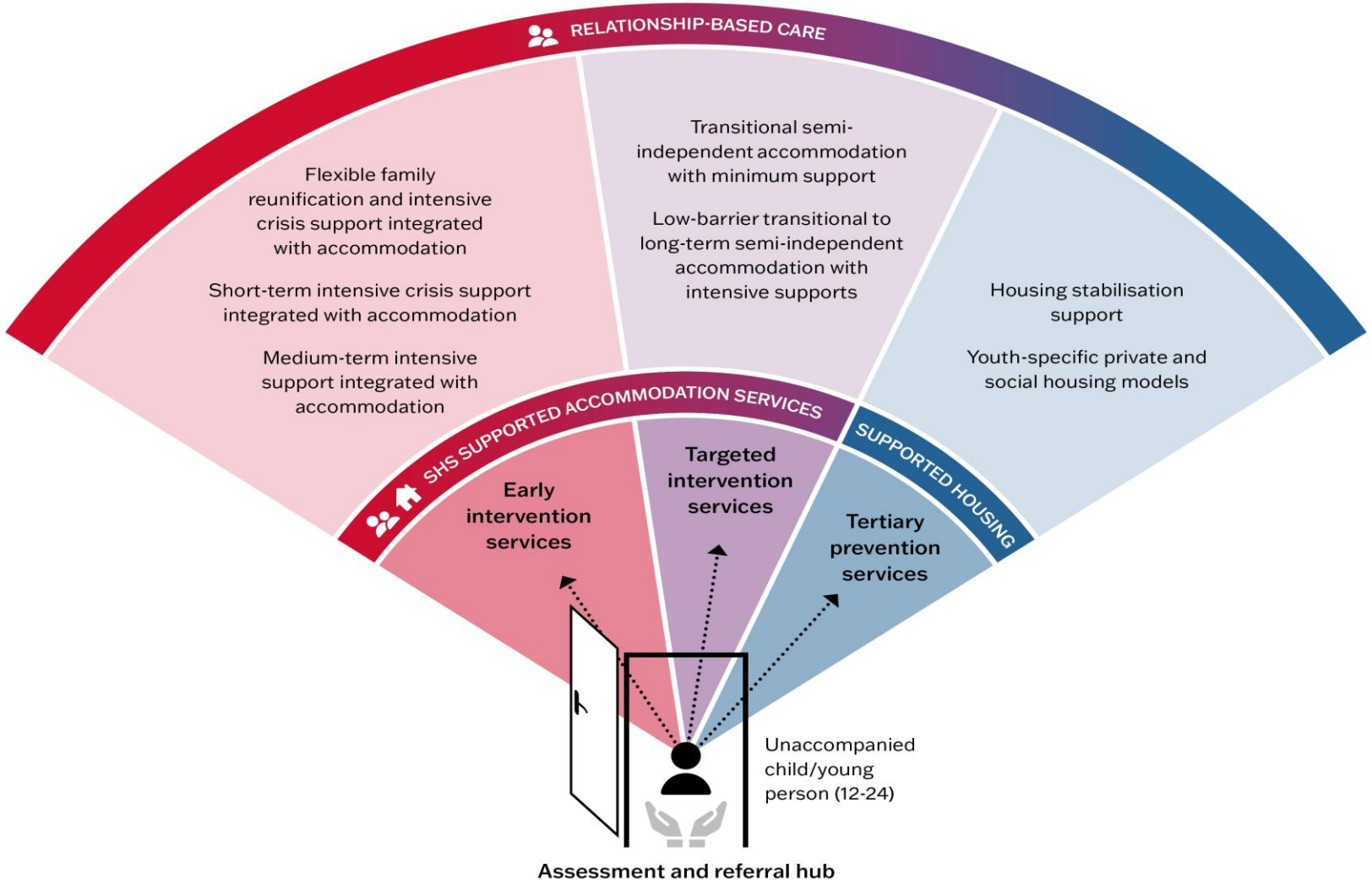
Key findings: Care conditionality in the SHS supported accommodation system

- Young participants and practitioners characterised the existing system of supported accommodation as systemically harmful
- This systemic harm arises from ‘care conditionality’ where the limited care currently on offer is not matched to what unaccompanied children and young people want and need
- Particular care gaps are being experienced by unaccompanied children and by those with complex unmet need

Key findings: Addressing care conditionality in the SHS supported accommodation service system

- Extend the duration and quality of care relationships
- Widen the scope of care
- Respond to specific system gaps by:
  - Building awareness of the child and youth homelessness system
  - Delivering early intervention for children and their families
  - Including low-barrier services
  - Extending care through outreach
  - Improving the homeliness of services

Key findings: The ideal care continuum imagined by young people and practitioners



Key findings: Policy and practice development

- To deliver accessible, inclusive, homely care through the SHS supported accommodation service system in Australia:
  - Include unaccompanied children and young people in policy, system and service design
  - Design and deliver age-appropriate supported accommodation services
  - Unconditionally match service design and resourcing to the complexity of care unaccompanied homeless children and young people need
  - Strengthen responses to unaccompanied homeless children and young people nationally

Thank you