



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Young People's Voices

Completed by:

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Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Young People's Voices

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Glossary of Terms

CPFS Child Protection and Family Services, now part of the Department of Communities, Western Australia. Formerly these responsibilities were carried out by the Department for Child Protection and Family Support, and before that the Department for Child Protection.

DCP Department for Child Protection, a previous name for CPFS, still commonly used by young people and service providers.

Foyer The Foyer Oxford, a form of supported youth accommodation which provides medium term supported accommodation to young people aged 16 years and older. The young people are accommodated in self-contained single rooms. Case work support is available to help young people re-enter school or employment and to access other services such as substance abuse services or health services.

LIFT The Living Independently for the First Time (LIFT) program, provides long-term support for young people leaving care. Under this program young people who are in the care of the department can get additional help to transition to adult life. This support begins at the age of 15 years, and can continue until the young person turns 25 years old.

Post-vention, a type of support provided after housing to prevent re-entry into homelessness.

About this report

This report is one of four linked reports that relate to this project. These reports will be available electronically on the website of the Commissioner for Children and Young People and through the Social Program Innovation Research and Evaluation (SPIRE) research group at Edith Cowan University.

1) *Homelessness in young people aged under 16 years: A literature review* was conducted prior to the commencement of this project and informed the research design, the interpretation of data and the recommendations.

2) *Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Research Design*. . This document presents a detailed account of the research design for this study.

3) *Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Young People's Voices* (This report).

4) *Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Service providers' perceptions*. This report presents the results of the survey of service providers.

In order to protect the privacy of the young people involved in the interviews, we have chosen pseudonyms when referencing their names in quotes. The names used throughout the report are not the young people's actual names.

Executive summary

Young people's experiences of homelessness

- 1) **Pathways to homelessness were varied:** Some young people had been abandoned or told to leave by parents/carers. Some were removed from their parents and placed in Child Protection and Family Services (CPFS) hostels (operated by the Department of Communities Western Australia), where some said they felt unsafe. Some young people left home because they felt unsafe. For some young people the family unit disintegrated, because the family had no stable accommodation and the parents had moved away, or because a parent died. Only one young person we interviewed said she left because she was rebellious and thought her parents were too strict.
- 2) **Family circumstances were often difficult prior to homelessness:** In many instances (but not all) young people had experienced very difficult family circumstances for many years prior to becoming homeless, and they had experienced enduring abuse and neglect. Difficulties reported included family violence, family homelessness, family drug and alcohol misuse, prostitution, parental mental illness and parental imprisonment.
- 3) **Difference from peers:** Young people often saw themselves as different from their non-homeless peers, who did not understand their struggle or their experiences. Circumstances prior to homelessness had meant that several young people had had to assume responsibility for themselves and other family members from an early age. This made them resourceful and often gave them practical daily living skills, but also meant they were used to a high level of autonomy.
- 4) **Lack of stability:** Some had no experience of stability prior to leaving home. Some young people reported they had no adults in their lives who prioritised the needs of their children.
- 5) **Formal and informal supports:** One young person reported they had been reliant only upon formal services, whereas another young person had relied only upon informal support services and had had no contact with service providers. Most young people used a mixture of formal and informal supports.
- 6) **Importance of one supportive trusted adult:** Many young people referred to one person who had made a big difference to them. Sometimes this was a family member (most frequently a grandparent), other times it was a youth worker or a social worker.
- 7) **Access to money:** Where young people had not had timely access to Centrelink payments, some had survived by stealing, begging, or forming or maintaining sexual relationships to have somewhere to sleep.
- 8) **Couch-surfing:** Most had couch-surfed with friends in the early stages of homelessness. This option was the easiest to access but was stressful and potentially risky.
- 9) **Makeshift accommodation:** Some had lived in cars, sheds or tents, often with partners or other young people.

- 10) **Living on the streets:** Some had lived on the streets, a few for extended periods. This had exposed them to many hardships and risks, but was seen by them as preferable to the situations they had left.
- 11) **Prison:** Some had been in prison, a few multiple times. One referred to this as her family.
- 12) **Child protection:** Many (but not all) had had contact with child protection either before or after they became homeless. Some had been in the care of the department. Many felt that CPFS interventions had been insufficient or too inflexible. Some avoided CPFS because they feared any intervention would make their situation worse. A few reported good individual support and the LIFT program was highly regarded.
- 13) **Education:** Many said they valued education. Most had had to drop out of school either before or after they became homeless. For a few young people school and education was an important point of stability after they were homeless.
- 14) **Pregnancy:** Young people we interviewed were more likely to experience early pregnancy than their non-homeless peers of the same age. Most young people we spoke to (both female and male) had positive feelings about becoming parents.

Implications for policy and services

- 1) **Family reconnect services:** These services would have been of limited value for most young people we spoke to because very few had family with whom they could safely live. For a small number of kin-carers, greater sustained prior support may have prevented relationship breakdown that led to homelessness.
- 2) **CPFS Hostels:** Most young people we spoke to who had experienced CPFS hostels found them very difficult (and most had left). Some feared bullying and theft and left to live on the streets. Others found the instability and constant change of residents difficult.
- 3) **Foster care:** Participants expressed a range of different feelings in relation to foster care. It would have been welcomed by one young man who had not been offered a foster placement. It was feared by some others who had had bad prior experiences in foster care. These young people avoided child protection services partly out of fear they may be placed in foster care.
- 4) **Kin-care:** Some grew up with grandparents who were aging and not in good health. Relationships broke down as children approached their teens, especially when grandparents had multiple children in their care. More support may be needed for both grandparent carers and for the young people in their care. The purpose should be to support relationships and offer respite care or activities. One young person expressed concern that her mother was now a grandparent carer for her sister's children, even though she had not been able to care for her own children and was still an injecting drug user, and who was not sending the children to school. If this is so, this does not seem a positive arrangement. Some young people had informally found accommodation with relatives, including grandparents. In a few cases this was stable and provided an important support for the young person. In many cases these arrangements were not stable.
- 5) **Child Protection and Family Support case work:** One young person provided a very positive report of how a social worker had assisted her. According to the young person, the features

that made this relationship positive were that the young person felt that the social worker was flexible, cared for her and listened to her, and there was continuity of the relationship. Several young people reported negative experiences. These included a lack of response when they asked for help, lack of continuity and unhelpful intrusion into their lives. Some avoided contact with CPFS completely. This often followed negative experiences as children or as young people.

- 6) Youth Services:** Several made positive comments about youth services. Young people valued long-term support, an approach that was responsive to their individual needs and that considered their priorities. They valued supportive non-authoritarian relationships, and services that would accept them back even if they made mistakes. Flexibility was valued. Many found life in youth accommodation hostels difficult because of the continuous change of residents, and the conduct of some other young people. The LIFT service funded by CPFS and offered by Indigo Junction seemed to have made a big difference to the lives of some young people who had been long-term homeless and were on this program.
- 7) School youth and welfare work:** One young person mentioned the early intervention support they received from a school chaplain who got them into accommodation and Centrelink assistance. Other young people had attended a young parent program attached to a school. School youth work is a non-stigmatising universal service that could have a greater role in early intervention with young people who are under 16 years and at risk of homelessness, as occurs in Victoria¹. It could be useful in WA.
- 8) Centrelink:** Timely Centrelink payments are essential to avoid survival theft, begging and sexual exploitation. If young people who are homeless do not have money for necessities, their survival activities may compound earlier trauma and make it harder for them to gain and retain stable accommodation, especially if they are on the streets or relying on partner relationships for accommodation. Many young people do not have identity documents when they become homeless. This issue needs to be addressed constructively and more help provided to young people to enable them to obtain their identity documentation more easily.
- 9) Homeless services:** Street-based services were an important point of contact and support to young people living on the street, providing practical services (food and showers) and emotional support. These services help to reconnect young people with sources of support.
- 10) Guardianship:** For guardianship purposes, young people are not considered mature minors until they turn 16. This is putting some young people at greater risk if they become homeless when they are under 16 years of age, because they do not access services (school, health). It is one of the reasons why some youth accommodation services are reluctant to take young people in this age bracket. Some young people in this position have sufficient maturity to make decisions on their own behalf before the age of 16. If young people become homeless before they are 16 years old, their individual maturity should be assessed. Where they are capable, they should be deemed mature minors. In other situations, guardianship issues

¹ MacKenzie, D. (2017). The Geelong Project: Interim Report 2017-2017. Retrieved from Melbourne: Swinburne University, retrieved 13th April 2018

need to be resolved in ways that are practical and enable young people to live as normally as possible.

- 11) Hospitals and health services:** Some young people who were homeless regularly attended hospital, and sometimes could not be discharged because they had nowhere to go.
- 12) Mental health services:** Some young people mentioned mental health diagnoses. Many young people mentioned they wanted someone to talk to who cared about them and some young people also said it took them a long time to trust someone, which made traditional counselling services difficult for them. There is a need for informal counselling within youth services, supplemented where necessary by supported referral to specialist youth mental health services such as Headspace or Youth Link, similar to the model that is used at Indigo Junction.
- 13) Young parent support:** Young people who experienced early homelessness were more likely to become parents whilst they were young, and often before they had stable accommodation. Some were very reluctant to contact child protection services because they feared their baby would be removed. There is a need for more services that offer both stable accommodation and extended parent support like the Nest (Youth Futures) or the Foyer young parents' program.

Recommendations

- 1. Guardianship:** Review of guardianship laws to allow young people to become mature minors at a younger age if they have sufficient maturity. Where they have not reached sufficient maturity, attention needs to be given to finding practical arrangements that will work.
- 2. Child Protection and Family Support:** Provide funding to youth services to support young people who become independently homeless and resolve guardianship issues.
- 3. Youth welfare workers in schools:** To work preventatively to stop young people becoming homeless and/or to connect them to support services quickly, following the Victorian model². This needs to begin at the point of transition into high school before the young person has disengaged from school.
- 4. Financial support:** More streamlined processes to receive Centrelink support for young people, including better support to help them obtain relevant identity documents.
- 5. Accommodation:** Flexible approach to accommodation – hostels do not suit all young people. If a young person wants a foster care placement, attempts should be made to place them. A Foyer or boarding house option may be appropriate for some young people. If placed with family or friends, support should be offered.
- 6. Practical and emotional support:** Several young people wanted someone to talk things over with who could offer practical help and advice. They valued an approach that is supportive

² MacKenzie, D. (2017). The Geelong Project: Interim Report 2017-2017. Retrieved from Melbourne: Swinburne University, retrieved 13th April 2018

of their aspirations and was not authoritarian. This is a role that is well suited to youth work agencies, where access can be initiated informally by young people without stigma.

- 7. Education:** A flexible approach is required in order to maintain or re-engage young people with education. Where young people are engaged with school this should be supported as it can provide important stability. Where the young person is not engaged with school, they should be involved with education through care schools that are able to provide additional welfare support.
- 8. Wraparound support:** Some young people need support from multiple services, including substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, parent support, justice, education and education services. Youth work agencies could co-ordinate wraparound support for young people who need multiple services.
- 9. Expand successful services:** Increase funding for LIFT and for youth work services that provide supported accommodation for young parents (Nest, Foyer).

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Young People’s Voices

1 Introduction

This report describes young people’s perceptions of their experiences of early homelessness and their accounts of their experiences with service providers. Young people’s pathways and experiences of early homelessness are very varied, and the young people we spoke to showed resourcefulness and persistence.

Young people were asked about their experiences of homelessness, what services they used, found useful or found unhelpful. Most of the young people we spoke to found homelessness to be a harrowing experience that had been forced upon them. The interviews with young people illustrated a diversity of experiences of those who became independently homeless at an early age. This was a self-selected sample recruited through multiple channels, including youth homelessness services, snowball sampling and word of mouth. Five of the young people we spoke to identified as Aboriginal. Aboriginal young people are over-represented in the data on youth homelessness³. The study is useful because it illustrates diversity, however, it is not possible to claim that the sample is representative. It is possible this sample over-represents those who have survived early homelessness, as we did not recruit in prisons, although a number of our interviewees had been in prison. It is equally possible the sample may under-represent those who have successfully exited homelessness without formal support, because our recruitment channels were mainly through homelessness services. Before each interview participants were advised that they should only answer questions they felt comfortable to answer. Some young people provided lengthy and detailed responses, and others provided less detail, and we did not push young people to elaborate if they were not comfortable. A full account of the research design has been provided in *Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Research Design*.

Table 1: Summary of ages of participants

Pseudonym	Age first homeless	Age when interviewed	Current housing status
Emily	15	15	In youth accommodation
Sarah	12	15	With grandparent
Lauren	14	23	Shared rental
Rebecca	14	22	Buying home
Georgia	13	22	Renting
Caitlin	15	16	In youth accommodation
Samantha	15	26	Buying home
Rachel	14	16	In youth accommodation
Ashleigh	15	15	In youth accommodation
Nichole	15	21	In youth accommodation
Stephanie	15	15	In youth accommodation
Jacob	14	17	In youth accommodation
Michael	13	22	In youth accommodation
Matthew	14	23	Renting
Daniel	8	18	In youth accommodation

³ It is not known by how much in this age cohort, but estimated at more than 17%. See the discussion in Cooper, T. (2017) *Homelessness in young people aged under 16 years: A literature review* Perth: CCYP, p. 8

The young people's accounts of their trajectory through early homelessness shows there is no single 'typical' pathway shared by all. They had different pathways into homelessness, varying access and experiences with different mixes of formal support services and varying perceptions about what they had found useful. For those who had exited homelessness, there were also many pathways out of homelessness. The perceptions of youth service providers who have been working with this cohort can be found in a separate report at *Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Service providers' perceptions*.

Once again, we thank all who participated to make this report possible.

2 Pathways into homelessness

There were five main pathways into early homelessness, 1) abandonment or being told to leave, 2) removal from parents, 3) the young person fleeing family violence or abuse, 4) family disintegration and family homelessness, and 5) voluntary homelessness. For some young people, their pathway was multifactorial, for example, family disintegration and removal from parents, or removal from parents, and told to leave by kin-carers, or family disintegration and fleeing violence.

2.1 Abandonment/ Told to leave

Six young people had been abandoned or told to leave. The youngest was eight years old when his parents left him by the side of the road.

When I first became homeless I was eight years old. My parents umm, threw me to the side of the road, so abandoned me, so I began from eight years old. I tried Child Protection, I didn't find the support I was receiving from Child Protection at the time was sufficient enough for what I needed at the time and the counselling I needed, so I done another ten years on the street straight. (Daniel)

A twelve year-old girl was taken to the train station with only a bag of clothes and two dollars.

She [mum] left me at the train station with a bag of clothes and two dollars and said find your way from here. (Sarah)

One young woman was 14 when her mother, who was suffering from mental illness, told her to leave.

Was living with mum, there was a family trauma, mum had mental health issues which declined, she kicked me out, then kicked my brother out. (Lauren)

Two others were in the care of Child Protection and Family Support and had been placed with grandparent carers, who terminated the placements.

I was 13 when I'd been kicked out of home from my nanas, I'd been kicked out for, not for being naughty, well really I just wanted to see my mum, and every weekend I'd run away to go to see my mum, because I was in DCP [CPFS] care I wasn't allowed to go and see my mum without my being supervised and stuff, I didn't understand why and when I would run off to see my mum, my nanas instructions from DCP were she had to ring the police and Crisis Care. (Georgia)

I was 14 when I became homeless. I got kicked out of my grandparents. I don't know my parents, I've never met them. They (grandparents?) took me to a hospital for some weird reason. I was in there till DCP found me for about 2, 3, 4 weeks, a month. (Matthew)

In the first instance, the young woman was put into another placement, which quickly broke down and she left. In the second instance the young man had been placed in various CPFS hostels, which he left periodically, preferring to live on the street.

2.2 Removal from parents

At least seven of the young people had been removed from parental care at some time. This may be an underestimate if young people chose not to share that information. In addition to the two young people mentioned in the previous section, five other young people had been in care either as young children, or their removal from parents occurred in their early teens. In two instances a foster placement broke down.

I don't know how to say this, it's not that I don't want to answer, I don't want to pull myself down or pull anyone else down, it didn't work out at that (foster) placement. (Stephanie)

I got kicked out, (of the carer's home) well not really kicked out, but I was sort of, well I made a decision I didn't want to live there anymore. (Georgia)

In another instance the mother received a prison sentence.

She [mother] ended up back in jail and I ended up with DCP, in and out through different hostels, I've been in ten hostels for like, a couple of times, it's been like move, move, move. I've been in jail or in a house for not too long, couch surfing, or something, then back in the hostel. Yeah the majority since I was very little, but I've been at a hostel since I was 14. (Nichole)

In several other instances the young person did not elaborate on the circumstances leading to their removal from their parents, simply stating the fact.

I got taken into care at the age of 13. (Michael)

2.3 Fleeing violence/ abuse

Three young people made active decisions to leave their parental home. This usually occurred following a childhood of family violence, parental drug use and/or neglect. When a child reaches their teens, the prospect of leaving home becomes realistic for the first time. The first young woman was 15 when she left her father, her mother had left them when she was nine years old.

I had lived with my dad and my older brother up until my brother and I left home at the same time as each other, we were 15 and 16. What had happened is we had finished high school for the year and my father told me he wanted to take us out of school, get us working. We had part time jobs, he took both our key cards, never taught us responsibility with money and sort of stuff like that. So he wanted us to get full time jobs, he wanted to take our money to support his habit, his lifestyle, whatever. Dad had great plans for his little workhorses. He was a very

violent man, he was a very nasty man. I don't blame my mum for leaving, I just wish she had of done it the right way. (Samantha)

The second young woman was also 15 years old when she left her mum, after her mum became homeless.

I went to my Dad's, where did I go, I went back to my Mum's, and then Mum kicked me out so I went to my Dad's, I was at Mum's for six weeks before she got rid of me, I was at Dad's for a month and a half but I had to leave, cause it wasn't safe, cos it was like gang violence and stuff, like drugs and I was like, woo I was 25 weeks pregnant and there was like shoot ups at the house and stuff and it was like, I'd rather be homeless than live at a house like that. (Caitlin)

Grandparents helped one young woman and her sister to leave.

Mum's on drugs, she left us on our own last Christmas. Grandparents flew us to Perth. (Emily)

2.4 Family disintegration and family homelessness

For several young people, early homelessness occurred because the family disintegrated and they no longer had a home, for various reasons. In some instances, they had experienced family homelessness throughout childhood, but had now reached the age where family homelessness was the trigger to them leaving. The first young woman was initially homeless with her mother, after her mother left a violent relationship. She stayed with her mum in various temporary housing arrangements before leaving to live with her boyfriend.

Actually my mum's old boyfriend he had a drinking problem, he's always hitting my mum around and that, I didn't like that so when he kicked us out of his house, cos his family had a property, a farm, we actually were about four k[ilometres]'s out of town so we, I don't know how far, but we umm, there was basically bush that the house was on, so we walked back into town and then tried our luck to ask someone if they could help us. But the police ended up putting us in a motel for the night and then we asked a friend of my mum's to come pick us up and, because she said would help us out if we needed help or anything, so when she was around she would help and that, but umm, she had something like, I'm pretty sure her landlord or something or, cause the place that she was staying at, she wasn't really allowed to have anyone staying there, so it was kind of a bit hard as well for her I guess, so we basically didn't have anywhere to go after we got told that we couldn't stay there any longer, we were only there for only like a week or two weeks. Then we got put up in a motel in [regional town], stayed there for like, a few months I'm pretty sure, and then got in contact with my mum's dad and she asked him if it was alright to stay with him for a bit. Well we've come down here then, and stayed at his house for a month or two, um and I was at the house like my auntie's and look I don't really get along with my mum. It was not really a good thing to be there at the time and that, so we decided that if, maybe if mum asked our, my nan if we could stay at her house in [suburb] there, and she said yeah that's fine. That was a shed and no one would say anything more. It was basically ok there. (Stephanie)

Another young woman then left her mother and moved into youth accommodation with her boyfriend when she was 15 years old. The second young woman had experienced homelessness many times with her mother before she left to become independently homeless.

Well when I was 14, well really I've been homeless most of my life, lived a very unstable life. I've been in and out of refuges, houses, house to house, ever since I was little, in and out through different hostels with my mum in refuges. (Nichole)

Caitlin had been homeless throughout her childhood, and left her mother to live with her boyfriend after she became pregnant.

I didn't exactly leave home, I was homeless before I even decided to leave home, I was always homeless cos my mum uses drugs. I was with my boyfriend at the time cos I was pregnant, and I left her because I didn't want him [baby] to be around drugs when he was born. (Caitlin)

Two sisters became homeless when their mother became homeless following their father's death. Their mother then decided to move away from Perth to be with her mother.

Well I was living with mum and then she got kicked out and with my dad passing away. (Rachel)

Dad had a heart attack and died. Mum got kicked out of the house we were staying at. There was too much stress in the house... Mum moved to [regional town] to stay with my Nan because my Pop had just died. I didn't want to go to [regional town] cos the girls there all want to fight me. (Ashleigh)

2.5 Voluntary

Only one young woman who told us her story left home voluntarily because she felt her parents were too strict.

I chose to leave home when I was 14 years old, I ran away, my parents were strict and I wasn't allowed a boyfriend or anything like that, so I left when I was 14 and one of my other friends left home as well, so we sort of ran away together. (Rebecca)

3 Experiences of independent homelessness

When young people first became homeless their lives were disrupted on many fronts. They usually had to find their own shelter. Most had no income of their own, and legally they should have been attending school. If they had part-time work, it was often hard to maintain after they became homeless. They had to take responsibility for their own day-to-day care and safety, but they lacked the legal authority to make decisions on their own behalf. Many had no reliable external source of support or advice whom they trusted.

3.1 Shelter

When young people left home before they were 16 years old their housing options were very limited because most formal housing arrangements were not open to them. Their informal support systems of extended family and friends, if they had them, could have been placed under pressure if they were expected to provide long-term support. Couch surfing with friends or relatives was one of the

most common arrangements. Some young women moved in with older boyfriends who had housing. Other options included makeshift shelters, such as sheds, cars or tents, living on the streets, living in CPFS hostels or living in youth services accommodation.

3.1.1 Couch surfing

Couch surfing with family and friends was a common crisis response to sudden homelessness. This frequently led to overcrowding and to strained relationships and for this reason couch surfing arrangements were mostly short term, lasting a few days or weeks. Sometimes, with relatives, these arrangements lasted longer. Many times the young person was staying with people they hardly knew. These examples illustrate the young people's varying descriptions of couch surfing.

We were just couch surfing, staying at mates' houses, staying at mates' friends' houses, you know the cycle. I was 15, just went on 15. (Caitlin)

Stayed with granddad's friend for a month, that didn't work well, so moved into [youth emergency accommodation hostel]. (Emily)

Um well I started out first I was sleeping in the streets of the city and that went for maybe a month or two and then I was just couch surfing at a lot of different friends' houses and then it got to a point where their mums didn't want, like their parents didn't want me there because I was doing all the wrong things and they thought I was a bad influence on their children so I just went back to the streets again. (Sarah)

I don't feel that I am the definition of homelessness, but I suppose the definition is someone who doesn't have a home and I didn't for a long time. I always had a roof over my head, just. Because I had friends, I was couch surfing, so I stayed with my boyfriend for a bit until I pissed off his housemate, then stayed with his mum until I pissed off his mum and then I went and stayed with numbers of my friends until I pissed all them off and I wasn't working. (Samantha)

Originally lived with best friend, shared bed for six months, bed-hopped due to arguments/change of friends, it's hard living with your mates, you go to school with them, hang around after school with them, eat with them, share a bed with them, it's too much, you need some space from them. Moved in with brother, was very close, he threw me out after a month. Moved back to mum's for one week until kicked out. Stayed with a friend, then two more. Lost some friends through sharing their beds and everything else. (Lauren)

I didn't really go to any agencies or anything like that, I just jumped from place to place for a while, for about three weeks, something like that all up, we made some bad decisions going to some people's houses and stuff like that, people I didn't know. (Rebecca)

After leaving a foster care placement another young woman couch surfed with the family of her sister's boyfriend.

So I moved to my sister's, well my sister's boyfriend's mum's house, and that was alright for the two terms it lasted, half a year, and actually I liked living out there, I even went and got a traineeship, a job and stuff, and then, I think we were asked

to leave because of just family, and because [sister's boyfriend] wasn't getting on with his family and stuff, so we were asked to leave there. (Georgia)

A young woman who was staying at her grandparents left because of overcrowding.

I shared a mattress [with her sister] for weeks. My cousin had moved in the other room. There wasn't room, I couldn't stay, couldn't share a bed permanently. (Emily)

3.1.2 Moved in with partner

Several young women moved in with a partner who could provide housing, either of his own or with his parents. One young woman's story shows how she and her daughter spent several years living in various temporary arrangements with her partner's extended family before moving back to her mother and then getting permanent accommodation.

I was seeing some other guy and then I think I went to a shopping centre and she [friend] knew a guy that was working there, his name was [name], he had a best friend and she dated his best friend at one point and I didn't know him at all, and he offered, he asked if we wanted to move in with them at the apartment he was living at, so I did that even though I didn't know him from a bar of soap, then it, I conceived [daughter]I ended up moving in with [boyfriend], we ended up dating for three years, we lived in the apartment for a while, then we ended up in [suburb], moved into his dad's when [daughter] was three months old. (Rebecca)

For several other young women the move to live with their boyfriend, or his extended family was not so positive, as this young woman reflects.

So we decided to leave, we went to stay at a friend's house for a couple of months. I went from an abusive father to an abusive boyfriend. Which I understand now is not very uncommon, you tend to go for what you grow up seeing. My brother ended up a lot like my father, which is sad. (Samantha)

Another 15 year-old young woman put up with violence from her partner for an extended period of time because she was fearful of having nowhere to go, and felt she had no alternatives.

It was his (partner) parent's house. So I was staying with him at the time. And I just thought if I ever said anything about what he did to me I'd lose the stability, like of having somewhere to go every day... I thought if I ever spoke up about what he did I'd lose everything all over again and I didn't really want that to happen but then it just got to a point where he was throwing knives at me and he was smashing things over my head, I had to sit there and watch him have sex with other girls and then he'd still abuse me saying I was cheating on him and everything.

Yeah they were aware [his parents], but like his dad was the same as him to his mum so their family thought that was the right thing to do, sort of thing, because that's all they had grown up with and I had never really, because like my mum she wasn't very abusive towards me, she was more physically, (pause) like mentally and verbally, like she'd call me names and scream at me but she hardly ever put

her hands on me and I wasn't used to the whole boys hitting girls thing, I thought that was wrong, I still do. (Sarah)

3.1.3 Makeshift shelter

Another option that many young people mentioned was living in other forms of shelter such as cars, sheds, or tents. This had the benefit of not requiring money. One young woman describes the difficulties of living in a car.

I stayed at a few people's houses, like boys and stuff, and at one stage my friend said I could sleep in his car for two weeks, so I did that...that was probably the worst part of it, the two weeks I was living in the car, I love my make-up and stuff, and I had to do without that, it wasn't fun. (Rebecca)

Another moved with her sister into her sister's boyfriend's dad's house that did not have power or hot water. When the young person's sister had paid the bills, other people took over the house and the two sisters were homeless again.

We all went back and stayed at my mum's for a couple of weeks, in that couple of weeks, [sister's boyfriend] had asked if we could live at his Dad's house, but the only thing with his Dad's house was there was no hot water, no electricity and no gas, because, and the house was just, people just came and left as they pleased because of that, and the bills were about eight grand, six grand, nine grand, and [sister] said 'if I pay off the power bill, if I link my name to the bills, and we pay off half and we get the electricity and water and all that back on, are we alright to live here, can we stay here?' and he said 'of course, this house is pretty much empty, you can stay here'. So yeah we, (sister) ended up doing that and had been paying off someone else's bills just so that we could get the lights, and hot water and all that back on. Then when it all came on the family came over, they started acting more controlling of the house, like the house actually had an ownership to it. (Georgia)

Temporary shelter was the current situation for two young people at the time of their interviews. One young man was living in a tent in the backyard because their rental was not fit for habitation.

We're sleeping in a tent outside, so we're currently sort of in a homeless situation. We've got no access to our cooker and fridge inside, so we're kinda living off tin food. (Daniel)

Another young woman was living in a backyard whilst trying to secure state housing.

At the moment we are in the backyard, but we are actually, doing what we have to do to get the house. Well we've already had a look at a house and put an application in, we just have to wait on... if it's a yes or a no. (Stephanie)

3.1.4 Street

Although living on the streets was a very difficult experience, several young people found themselves in this position where they felt they had no other options, or they felt that other options were worse. One 18 year-old interview participant had spent most of his time on the streets since becoming homeless at the age of eight.

I was ten years all up on the street...

They tried to find me [CPFS] but not exactly helping in a lot of ways. The help I was receiving wasn't the right form of help, I wasn't receiving assistance with counselling, really stuff I needed like counselling was the main thing I needed living on the streets for so long. I needed someone to talk to, because I never had someone who was there 24/7 for me. I always had a different person I seen when I came to DCP, it became frustrating and scary for me. So I never had no one to trust. (Daniel)

Another young man began living on the street following bullying in CPFS hostels.

I spent two years on the streets in Perth city, in between Hay Street and Murray Street, behind Hungry Jacks and KFC, they've got that alley way near Maccas, I was squatting basically in that alley way. When you are walking around and you don't know where to go for a shower or don't know where to go to wash your clothes, so you're walking around all scraggy and that, on your own, it really makes you feel down on yourself and then you don't feel like seeking help as much because in a way it kinda makes you feel like you're not worth helping. (Michael)

Living on the streets was especially difficult for young women who described that theft, violence and sexual assault were ever-present risks.

I used to get abused in the city every night, like people would (pause), I'd be sleeping and people would come steal my stuff off me, they'd bash me, like I'd get bashed by grown men, like they would touch me in my sleep... I got pulled into an alley way and I got touched by this old man, like this old man he was old, probably older than my grandad and he was homeless too ... I was like really vulnerable at that time, like I'd let anyone say anything to me, like if they wanted to have a go at me they could have a go at me, I didn't care...

Yep, staying out of, staying away from men. That was what I, that was my biggest problem because everywhere I turn there was always men, and it's always going to be like that but I was always scared of them. (Sarah)

Other young people spent shorter periods of time on the street.

A couple of times I've been out on the street. (Matthew)

Awful to live on the streets. I've tried it once and it's lonely. Miss family and friends. (Dianna)

3.1.5 CPFS Services

The Department of Communities, Child Protection and Family Support, offers various forms of accommodation including foster care, kin-care, and hostel accommodation. See section 4.1 for more detailed discussion of young people's experiences of CPFS services.

3.1.6 Youth Emergency Accommodation Hostels

Youth accommodation hostels take young people from the age of 15 or 16 years old depending on their funding agreement. They offer holistic support to help the young person find accommodation, stay in education, address drug, alcohol and mental health issues, and where it is safe, support reconciliation with their families. See section 4.2 for a more detailed discussion.

3.2 Money

On becoming independently homeless, most young people had an immediate need for money so they could pay for food and other necessities of life. Potential sources of income included part-time work, Centrelink payments or money from family. If they could not get money from these sources they had to find other ways to meet these needs. This could include begging, stealing or relying on others to provide for them, which sometimes left them open to sexual exploitation.

3.2.1 Centrelink

Centrelink has a responsibility to pay an allowance to young people who are independently homeless and whose parents cannot or will not provide for them. Some young people were able to claim this allowance, but many were not successful unless they had help from an agency. Many young people who were homeless did not receive any Centrelink payments for extended periods of time. There were several barriers to receiving payment, including not having identity documents and not having a permanent address. Those who received Centrelink payment frequently relied on charity vouchers to supplement their income. When they received the payments many struggled to make ends meet.

*...not enough money, have \$100 a fortnight, sometimes less after phone is paid.
(Caitlin)*

I get Centrelink. (Nichole)

Sometimes they were able to get additional emergency relief payments in the form of vouchers from charities.

I was on Centrelink and there's this place in Bassendean, you could get Coles Gift Cards and they give you 50 bucks ... they give you three sets of 50 every six months, I think it was. (Samantha).

One young man was placed on income management.

*(I) claimed payments at 17 and then DCP put me straight onto income management, involuntary income management so instead of a 50-50 split, it's a 70-30 split. So 70% goes on this card so basically you can only buy clothes with it.
(Michael)*

One young woman who was in the care of CPFS didn't have a permanent address and therefore couldn't claim the allowance.

I didn't get any money from Centrelink when I was moving around, they wouldn't help. (Georgia)

Others had difficulties with identity documents because they did not have their birth certificate or because Centrelink lost their documentation.

I am getting special benefits from Centrelink. The one thing that I'm not too impressed is how much they require ID, because when I didn't have any money they asked me for my birth certificate, my parents gave me a copy of it from the computer but it wasn't valid and it was very hard for me just to do it, it's difficult for a lot of issues. It's difficult how the government are treating people, they've enough information, but we have to pay \$48 for a birth certificate, \$300 for this passport. (Jacob)

Delay with Centrelink payments was terrible they lost all my documents and didn't tell me. They didn't advise of all options - this would have helped. (Lauren)

3.2.2 Working

A number of interviewees mentioned working, and a small number managed to continue working whilst they were homeless. This was sometimes possible if they were in supported accommodation or couch surfing, but was not a possibility for those living on the streets. Two young people worked for extended periods. One left school when she became homeless and found a job fairly quickly, which she kept.

When we moved into the apartments we were working at Hungry Jacks, he was working at Hungry Jacks, so he got me a job at Hungry Jacks, I worked there for a few years until I got too sick. (Rebecca)

Another young woman juggled schooling with part-time work whilst homeless.

Was able to work part-time throughout. (Lauren)

One young woman, who was working full-time when she was interviewed, said she had not wanted to work when she was homeless. She had run away from a violent and controlling father, who had tried to make his children work to support his drug habit. After leaving she enjoyed the freedom.

I didn't care to work, I was too busy having fun. Because all my life I had been told what I was going to do, how I had to dress, my routine was set out for me, my dad was very controlling, and he controlled with violence. So, when I got this sense of freedom, I didn't want a job, I didn't want to stay grounded, I didn't want to do anything and I kind of floated. (Samantha)

Other young people had had jobs for short periods of time whilst they were couch surfing but lost the jobs when they moved on.

3.2.3 Money from family

Only one young woman said that she received money from her father, but in this case it was given to her older brother who used it for himself.

Dad provided money for staying with friends and gave my brother lots of money to look after me. He [brother] kicked me out and used the money dad gave him for my care to get a mortgage. Dad lives up north. All the time I was homeless he never came to see me. (Lauren)

3.2.4 Begging

Young people living on the streets were most likely to report begging for food and money. Eating food that was being thrown away was a regular way to get food for some young people. As one young person observed, begging was most successful when he was younger.

From eight years old it was easy to begin with to ask for money from people, but as I hit 12 or 13 people started looking at me as a responsible teenager and I started getting pushed away and didn't get the support from there so that's where the stealing came into my life. (Daniel)

There were many other difficulties with begging, including the illegality, and the risk that any money received would be taken by others who are living on the streets.

The majority of the food that we ate while we were on the streets was, before Maccas became 24 hours, whatever they didn't sell by the end of closing time, what they didn't sell, like burgers and things, by the end of closing time they used to chuck them in the bin and I actually befriended the Hungry Jacks manager and he used to bring out a bag with the burgers and chips at closing time, it was still safe to eat but it's what they would have thrown away... writing a sign saying that you're homeless and can you spare change is actually, the police class it as a form of begging and if they tell you a certain amount of times not to do it and they catch you again, you actually can get charged for that, which I really do think that's kind of sad... if you do manage to beg for some form of money, there's always some people who will try and take it off you. (Michael)

3.2.5 Stealing

Stealing to get necessities was one part of the survival strategy of young people who lived on the streets, and also of some young people who had been cut off from Centrelink.

I used to steal. (Sarah)

I got cut off Centrelink for eight weeks, and I basically had to steal, I stole the whole time I was pregnant, it was horrible and I, like, I don't have a criminal record like, I'm like generally a good girl but like, I had to do it to survive. (Caitlin)

Well most of it was having to break the law, stealing food and stuff cos that's the only way I could survive at the time. (Daniel)

3.2.6 Partner provided

Some young people relied on partners for financial support. This arrangement provided some stability as long as the relationship lasted but could come to an end if the relationship broke down.

I was on my own with this guy and my son for a couple of years until she (mother) ended up moving back. In the meantime I had my daughter and it wasn't until I got out of that relationship, he was never abusive, he never hit me, we were never homeless, he provided, that was good. But, he cheated on me for three years and I found him in bed with my best friend when I was four months pregnant with his daughter. (Samantha)

3.3 Wellbeing

Some young people discussed the effects of homelessness on their physical, emotional or mental health and wellbeing.

3.3.1 Physical health

A few young people voiced concerns about their physical health saying they found it difficult to eat well because they did not have sufficient money.

I'm struggling with diet, not enough money, I have \$100 a fortnight, sometimes less, after phone is paid. (Emily)

3.3.2 Wellbeing and mental health

Several interview participants discussed concerns about their wellbeing. Some mentioned mental health diagnoses, which they connected to the drug use of their parents during pregnancy or their own drug use.

I've got bipolar and they said that's from like your drug use, your parent's drug use when you were a baby and stuff like that and I was like oh, so like everything in my life is like is kinda like pretty connected to drugs, like I'm going to get tested for schizophrenia tomorrow because my grandad thinks I have that. (Sarah)

Being homeless is probably been the worst time of my life like, getting beat nearly every day, and being homeless has led to, getting depressed, and taking drugs, you know I abuse drugs, cos you think it's the only thing to do, you don't have any money to spend on anything, you pick up drugs, you end up in debt to people you don't want to end up in debt with or you end up being really mentally unstable, because all your family's really rat shit. (Caitlin)

One young person mentioned self-harm.

In the end it was getting too hard and it led to my self-harm, even suicidal because of what they'd been doing in my family... I've gone through depression including emotional pain and that's very hard to go through and I've been experiencing that for a week straight, I was just falling apart, but when people are doing self-harm and are suicidal, and are experiencing depression, I have always been there. (Nichole)

Several young people mentioned feelings of loneliness and needing someone to talk to.

Homelessness is being lonely. But you meet lots of people. In crisis accommodation friendships are over as soon as someone leaves the accommodation. It felt very lonely. (Emily)

I needed someone to talk to, because I never had someone who was there 24/7 for me. (Daniel)

3.3.3 Alcohol and Other Drug use

A number of young people discussed their drug use, and the drug treatment services they had used.

I did smoke a bit of marijuana when I was pregnant but, that's why I was going to DAYS [Drug and Alcohol Youth Service] for, to see my levels were going down. (Caitlin)

It's [a] drug and alcohol counselling place, I'm going through them cos someone referred me saying there's a counsellor that they used to go to in Maddington. (Daniel)

We got into drugs a fair bit and stuff ...when I moved back to mum's house that was it. It's been three years now or more since I've taken anything. (Rebecca)

One young person mentioned recovering from an overdose.

I started using meth when I was thirteen but that's just cos of the environment I was in, like being on the streets and being at friend's houses that weren't stable in their own way and that were addicted to drugs, it was a bad environment for me to be around but it was the best environment at the time and so I started heavily using and then it got to a point where I'd overdosed three times and then the police called my mum and said we've found your daughter on the side of the road what do we do with her, do we take her to the hospital, do we bring her to you, cos they needed parent consent and um, cos I was talking to them and I was like just leave me alone, I don't want to go anywhere, I just want to die and then I went to hospital and all I remember is waking up and all the machines were just beeping I turned up to my sister's house, I weighed 28 kilos, I had nothing except the clothes that were on me and she took me to get these implants put in my stomach, the naltrexone implants, so I went and got them in and since then I haven't, I'm eight months clean now and I'm at my grandad's. (Sarah)

3.3.4 Hospitals

Hospitals were often a point of contact for young people needing health care and sometimes they could not be discharged from hospital because they had nowhere to live. In other instances, if they were in emergency youth accommodation, they might not be permitted to stay in the accommodation during the day. This meant that after discharge from hospital they would have nowhere to recover.

I've been in and out of hospital... Wasn't allowed to stay in [youth accommodation hostel] during the day, when came out of hospital had to crash at mate's place, just wanted to sleep. (Emily)

After having a baby a 16 year-old had to stay longer in hospital because she had nowhere to go.

I had to stay in the hospital for five days cause I, I was meant to be there for three days and I had nowhere to go, and that was the worst feeling ever and then I had to beg them to let me stay an extra two days in the hospital and that was the worst.... And that was, I was more embarrassed about having to tell them that I had nowhere to go, and begging for them to have me for longer, that was the worst, they were alright. (Georgia)

3.4 Justice system

Some young people who became homeless at an early age became involved with the justice system. This is not unexpected for a number of reasons, partly because some had no legal means of support, but also because people living on the street are more likely to get into conflict with the law. None mentioned community corrections, but three young people mentioned they had been in prison for periods of time.

3.4.1 Prison

Then I ended up back in jail, that's my family, then I got out again and came to this hostel. I came back when I was 20, then 21, and I was here at 15 as well, then after that I ended up staying here. (Nichole)

I was in jail before that. In and out of jail for the last four years. (Matthew)

3.5 Education

Many of the young people who shared their experiences with us had not completed their education. Several young people mentioned plans to further their education. One young person had completed a university degree. The majority however had had disrupted educational experiences prior to becoming homeless.

3.5.1 Schooling

Many young people had left school before becoming homeless

I was living with Mum, was working and dropped out of school cos mum didn't register me and [sister] in school. (Stephanie)

This is my 14th school/TAFE. (Emily)

I never used to go to school much, so I can't read and write properly cos I've always been moving round. (Nichole)

Me, school no, when I got homeless with mum, that was really hard for me to go to school and start having an education again. I never fit in with the kids at school to be honest. (Stephanie)

We had finished high school for the year and my father told me he wanted to take us out of school, get us working. (Samantha)

For many, school became even more difficult after becoming homeless.

I stopped going to school sometime last year, when I was in Year 10. I will have to repeat Year 10. (Nichole)

Like cos I wouldn't go to school because I never had somewhere set to go afterwards like the worst thing is going to school for a full day just to go lay on the streets, like you don't want to do that, you want to go have a nice day at school, go home, be safe because you're tired and you need rest. (Sarah)

I left school when I ran away.... I tried when my daughter was about one year old, to [school], they have a [young parents] program there, I went there for a few weeks but it became too much. (Rebecca)

I'm studying as well, I've just got accepted into TAFE. I dropped out of school half way through Year 10, so I've only completed Year 9. (Caitlin).

I stopped going to school sometime last year, when I was in Year 10. I will have to repeat Year 10. (Ashleigh)

Wasn't going to school. (Rachel)

For some young people, schooling was the only exit point from their current predicament, and a point of stability in an unstable world. These young people went to great lengths to continue their education. One young woman travelled for nearly two hours a day to keep going to school.

The accommodation I was in was 50 minutes away from school. This was hard going.... Loved school, was determined to graduate, did university whilst pregnant, now graduating. (Lauren)

Another young man who is currently homeless spoke about the importance of him being able to maintain his schooling and hoping to be able to go to university to become a teacher.

I want to become a mathematic[s] teacher in a secondary school and becoming a teacher for maths you have to have an ATAR of over 70, ...An ATAR of over 90 which is quite hard maths, but I'm going to have a shot at it. I'm the highest in the class right now for three years even though I've been changing schools, I'm still the highest. (Jacob)

3.5.2 Care schools

Three young people spoke of their experiences in care schools. These schools offer educational opportunities and welfare support for those who find it difficult to attend mainstream schools. For some, this was enabling them to further their education and gain certificates.

I only started school two weeks ago and I didn't go from Year 9 and I'm meant to be in Year 12 next year and I didn't go to school at all and I was failing and I couldn't get a job anywhere and I couldn't, like no one would even hire me like McDonalds or anything like that, so I came back to school hopefully now it puts me on the right path again. I'm at school and I haven't been to school in years, it feels so weird to be in like a school environment when you haven't been in one for so long, but it's not like a normal school environment, it's different and I like it cos mainstream schooling was just not for me. I'd always get in fights and people always bully me and being here no-one bullies you, they just, we just laugh at everything together and its good having that where you can just be yourself and not be judged, you know and like I really like it, cos even around my own family, I couldn't be like that around my own family because they, my family is very judgmental and I always had to act like something else and now it's like I can be me and no-one can tell me not to be... I'm doing my Cert I at the moment but I'm like a quarter of the way through and I only started two weeks ago so probably by

the end of this term I'll have Cert I nailed and then Cert II in a term or maybe two terms of next year. (Sarah)

This was not always successful the first time, but enabled young people to keep in touch with education and make some progress.

I went back to school eight months ago but I dropped out because, some girls were just doing normal girl stuff like wanting to fight and stuff.... At TAFE I'm doing my General Ed [education] just finishing. (Caitlin)

I went to school for a little bit, but then got kicked out of my last school and then I went to [Care school] and then I got kicked out of there. I sort of did Year 10 but that's about it. (Matthew)

3.6 Relationships with family

3.6.1 Parents

One young person reported good relationships with her family. She had originally left home because she thought her parents were too strict.

I live about 4 minutes away and see them just about every day. We are so close. (Rebecca)

No other young people reported good relationships with their parents. One young woman described the death of her violent father came as a relief.

It wasn't until he died that I realised he had no hold on me, he wasn't, there was nothing he could do to me any more. (Samantha)

Several other young people avoided any contact with their parents.

Love mum but I can't be around her. She says things to hurt me. She started taking drugs when she was 13. They moved to Perth from England. Mum's lost everything to drugs. She always puts me and [sister] last. (Emily)

I don't bother with family because all I've got now is my grandad and when he's gone that's it and I don't want to face that fact that I have no one else to turn to, sort of thing, because like no-one, ... it's like where, who do I go to like me? (Sarah)

I have no communication with my family except my uncle, but I haven't heard from him for five months. Both sides of the family have given up on me. (Jacob)

One young woman had tried to support her mother who had become homeless. This was not successful and she had resolved to keep her mother at a distance for the sake of her children.

My mother, a long story short, at the start of the year I got a house for her in my name and let her use my car. All the furniture in the house was mine, four months before the end of the lease she stopped paying the rent. She transferred the car out of my name. She took all the furniture and left. I don't know where she is... I am angry at myself because I grew up with this, I should have known better, well maybe not, I didn't grow up with her, I grew up with drug addicts, I know what

they're like and I feel, I'm annoyed with myself cos I should have known better. Things happen, you know what, it's all just things, and if that's an example I can exclude out of my children's life, then see you later. If the stuff in the house and the car and the back rent I paid, it's far less than the price I would have paid to let the children see that kind of relationship with their mother and grandmother, no way. I understand that the drugs are affecting her, don't get me wrong. I'm not going to welcome her back with open arms, I'm going to keep my mother at a distance for the rest of my life because I'm not going to stand for this because the next time that this happens, my kids will be older and understand and that's not happening no way. I have to be a bigger person than my mother, I have to be. (Samantha)

3.6.2 Siblings

Several young people discussed their relationships with their siblings. Some siblings maintained strong connections and provided mutual support. One of the two sisters who were currently living at the same youth accommodation hostel expressed hope that in the future they would be able to get a place together.

I'd like to get a place with my sister [both are currently living together in a youth accommodation hostel]. (Ashleigh)

Another young woman was planning to leave her present accommodation so she could move to the town where her sister and Nan lived because she missed being near them.

I want to be near [sister] and Nan. (Emily)

Many tried to help their siblings where they could. However, they were also aware of the limitation of the help they could provide without becoming overwhelmed by potential demands on their resources from other siblings who were also homeless. They were also aware that their help may not be reciprocated and possessions they provided on loan may not be returned to them.

My other brother, my older brother [name], we weren't on good terms, we had a restraining order against each other, he went to jail and when he got out of jail he came straight here, I said bro, you spent your time in jail and now you're a different person, you seemed like the old you and I don't want to ruin that, I don't want to live under the same roof as you and I don't want to start fighting, you can stay here for a couple of weeks, until you get your own place. I got him into St Pats, and it felt like I'd done something right for him, in his own place. After a short time he wasn't even there and I'd given him my TV and he left the TV in the bedroom and I can't afford to go giving you that and he'd leave it there, to not give it back. He's not there now, he's with my other sister, but there's three brothers that just are out and about (homeless). (Georgia)

Another young woman who was trying to stay clear of drugs did not want contact with siblings or parents because of their on-going drug addiction

My oldest brother he's addicted to the meth and so is my sister, so is my mum, so is my dad, my second oldest brother is in [another state], he's never allowed in WA again cos of charges he's got. (Sarah)

3.6.3 Grandparents

Grandparents were mentioned as a source of family stability for several young women.

I've just been kicked out from one place to the next, I've just been used to going back and forth between different houses, different roads, different parts of the city and now I'm with my grandad and no matter what he just won't kick me out, no matter what I do, no matter what I say, no matter who I bring to his house... I'm like really grateful that I have someone like that in my life. (Sarah).

Nan and Pop are always there for me ..., but money is an issue for them. Will be there for us always. (Emily)

One young woman who had been kicked out by her grandmother at the age of 13, returned to live with her at the age of 16 after she had had a child. She was reconciled with her grandparents and expressed her love for them.

I think Nana is more like a mum, I love her more than my mum, I love her like a mother. (Georgia)

One young man had lived with his grandparents until they asked him to leave at the age of 14. Since then, he has had no contact with them.

3.7 Other Relationships

3.7.1 Friendships

Several young people mentioned the strains that homelessness had placed upon their friendships, especially when they had to rely on friends to provide accommodation.

Families have different values. Living in someone else's bedroom was hard. Am still best friends with the first place I stayed, had a shower, roof but no space of my own. Second house had a study nook. Third house I had to share a bed. (Lauren)

Another young woman reflected upon her treatment of her friends when she was younger and how that had destroyed friendships.

*I burnt a lot of bridges, that I probably shouldn't have, I had some good people, like good friends that I've really ****ed over. I didn't pay them any rent, I was disrespectful to them and I packed my things and left when we had a fight and I was onto the next one. In retrospect I wasn't fair, but I was never without a couch and it was for about two years, until I was about 18. (Samantha)*

3.7.2 Partner relationships

Painful relationships, especially experiences of violent or abusive relationships, meant that some of the young people were wary of future partner relationships.

I've learnt the hard way I don't even bother with relationships anymore. (Sarah)

And then, he was like, he was abusive and stuff [boyfriend], so I was trying to leave him as well. ...I don't care if I don't have a boyfriend for the rest of my life, I

just never want to be in the drug scene, or homeless or dv ever again you know like. (Caitlin)

One young man spoke about his difficulties coping with the loss of love when his relationship with his girlfriend ended.

Then I've been in this situation where my girlfriend had to kinda break up with me for her personal issues, which I understand without family I feel so different, I start breaking down cos going through love all that time then there's suddenly you don't have any, it just feels so empty, you want it back but then again you don't want to go through the problems, so that was one of the worst things I probably had to learn since I was kicked out. (Jacob)

Another young woman mentioned the suicide of her baby's father.

He [ex-partner] committed suicide ... so that was pretty hard for me and bubba, very hard (Georgia).

Other young women were living in stable accommodation and bringing up their children and step-children.

3.7.3 Pregnancy and children

Seven of the young people who spoke to us mentioned a pregnancy – either theirs or their partner's. All young people were adamant that they did not want their children to have the same experiences they had had.

Frequently, but not always, the pregnancy was welcomed, even if it was not planned.

This is my baby's thing [car seat], I'm pregnant, I'm four months and a half, it's my first baby and am very excited, and it's a girl... I have a house here, but because I'm pregnant and have a kid on the way they're trying to get me into the family service, to help me get accommodation, while I'm young and that, they trying to help me. (Nichole)

We've got the kid on the way, its due in another four months, it will be interesting, my girlfriend's doing the scans, I've been trying to keep it secret because I don't want to know what the baby is, I think the first one needs to be a surprise. (Daniel)

One young woman was very unhappy when she found out she was pregnant and was most concerned about what her family, especially what her father would think about her, even though she was not in her father's care.

As a kid all I wanted was my mum or my dad, one of my parents to drop me off, one of my parents to pick me up, like I've got my mum and dad too you know, at primary school and that. That's why I was so upset when I first found out I was pregnant, I didn't want to be alive, I was so distraught, I was more afraid of the judgment of family and stuff, that was my biggest fear, cos I thought everyone was just going to hate me, I just had that in my mind every day, they disown me as like the grandchild or daughter or something, I was really embarrassed. But

when I told, the worst person to tell was my dad, and when I told him he was brilliant. (Georgia)

One young woman recounted how she had had her baby removed from her care for two periods of time following his birth because she had nowhere to live.

I got him taken off me for that exact same reason, cause of DCP, yeah, it was horrible, they took him off me for six weeks cos I got kicked out of my hostel and I was homeless, so they took him, he was three months, for six weeks they took him because of something my ex-partner did that I had no involvement in and then because of that the hostel kicked me out and he got taken off me, and it was just like why couldn't they have placed me somewhere. He was a new baby, he would have been missing his Mum, you know he wouldn't know what the hell was going on, you know you can't do that to a baby, it's going to cause problems for him later on in life, you know attachment issues and stuff, separation anxiety. I didn't see him for the first three weeks, I was homeless and I was couch surfing again for the six weeks, but then I found a place [in youth accommodation]. (Caitlin)

When Caitlin found accommodation she regained everyday care of her baby but he remains in the guardianship of CPFS.

3.7.4 Pets

One young man mentioned that pets had been important to him when he was homeless. In response to a question about who helped him when he was homeless, he stated that a pet puppy had been a great emotional assistance. He now has three dogs, which are important to him.

When I was homeless I never really had anyone to help [me], so the closest thing to me that I had to help was a pet puppy and I looked after that puppy with me everywhere, then I actually had the puppy taken off me cause I couldn't take care of it being homeless, that kinda tore me in half, just having my own best friend there 24/7, I had him for about three years, then he got taken away and that was kinda the end of everything for me, so I gave up for a little bit there and without the support from anyone else it was a little bit harder... I currently have three dogs as pets and a kid on the way, yeah my life's turned right around since I left the streets. (Daniel)

3.8 Learning to drive

Learning to drive can be especially difficult for any young person who does not live with parents who own a car. Three young people raised this issue. The first young woman had not learnt to drive because she had never had anyone to sit with her whilst she completed the necessary logbook hours.

Hard to get driver's licence as haven't got anyone who will do the hours with me. (Lauren)

The second young person had just obtained her learner's permits, and was learning to drive as part of the LIFT program offered at the youth accommodation service where she is staying.

I got my 'L's and that here (Nichole).

A third young person had the chance to get her licence through a youth service program when she was 18, but chose not to take up this opportunity.

I could of got my licence and I chose not to. (Samantha)

3.9 Feelings about homelessness

When asked to summarise their feelings about homelessness most young people had negative feelings about homelessness including that it was scary, unstable and very hard. They feared for their personal safety and were focused on survival.

The hardest thing was the lack of stability. It was never knowing where you are going to be or, and as much as it was the hardest.... there were some nights when I didn't know where I was going to end up sleeping and I didn't know what I was going to eat that night, that's the hardest thing, lack of stability. I had this big bag and everything stayed in there. I had no furniture, I had no bedding, I had my bag and my toothbrush and it went with me everywhere. It's not fun. (Samantha)

[Homelessness is] *Sad, very sad, not fun, my friend who lived with his parents would only let me go inside the house when his parents left, all night I would be in the car it was pretty cold. (Rebecca)*

Makes you feel umm, I dunno, it's been a long time, so I guess its frightening, you don't know what's going to happen to you on the streets and from, with my partner his is real different but me, I've experienced a little bit, but not so much, that I've had trauma from it. (Stephanie)

Money, schooling, finding a job, trying to balance everything whilst stressing about life. Not having anyone to talk things through with. (Emily)

Well it was sad, depressing. Awful to live on the streets. I've tried it once and it's lonely. Miss family and friends. (Rachel)

I've gone through depression including emotional pain and that's very hard to go through and I've been experiencing that for a week straight, I was just falling apart. (Jacob)

Yep, staying out of, staying away from men. That was what I, that was my biggest problem because everywhere I turn there was always men, and it's always going to be like that but I was always scared of them. (Sarah)

Notably, one young person who had already identified the negative aspects of the instability of homelessness, also noted that on occasion this instability offered her a sense of freedom she had not experienced previously in her life.

It was also joyful at times because it was where're we going to end up tonight you know, why don't we go to this person's ...Homelessness was an inviting feeling in comparison to the chaos that was at home, I loved it, in retrospect I would have done it differently, but it was better than being at home, definitely. (Samantha)

4 Experiences of support services

The young people we spoke to described varying degrees of interaction with support services. Some reported extensive involvement with child protection or family homeless services from a very young age. Some had only had contact with youth homelessness services after becoming homeless. Only one young person had not had any interaction with a youth homelessness or child protection service. She has now successfully gained stable accommodation. This section focuses on young people's descriptions of experiences of support services, in particular child protection services, and youth services.

4.1 Child Protection Services

In Western Australia the Department of Communities, Child Protection and Family Support (CPFS) offers a range of services that young people had used, including Crisis Care, foster care, kin-care and hostels for young people who cannot be placed in foster care (often referred to by the young people as DCP hostels). CPFS provides social work support through case management for young people in the care of the department. In addition, there is the Advocate for Children in Care, who is based with the department. CPFS also provides partial funding for some other youth support services offered by other non-government organisations. This includes the Living Independently for the First Time (LIFT) program that provides long-term support for young people leaving care and was mentioned by several young people. Other services mentioned by some young people include outreach services such as Youth Beat, Step One (formerly) and Passages, a resource centre supporting street present young people. Some of the young people had lived in other parts of Australia during their childhood, so the accounts here do not always refer to their experiences with child protection services in Western Australia.

4.1.1 Crisis Care

Crisis Care is an after-hours crisis service that responds to emergency situations and has responsibility for finding temporary accommodation for any child or young person who is homeless or who cannot safely stay in their home. Crisis Care work closely with the police and are the first point of contact between the public and the department if a young person suddenly becomes homeless or if they are at risk of harm. Any young person or other member of the public can contact Crisis Care directly if they have welfare concerns. One young person used the service in this way. This young man described his experience as follows.

I went to my friend's to ask to use the phone and I got very emotional and got very upset and they called Crisis Care and they got the police involved and they went to my parent's place to ask a few questions and something else, and then they went to me to check the situation from my point of view, and what's the next steps. (Jacob)

As a result of this intervention he was taken to hospital overnight and admitted to a Youth Accommodation Service in the locality so he would be able to stay at the same school. This example illustrates how Crisis Care is supposed to work in this kind of situation.

One young person who had lived in another state reported that the department responsible for child protection had not been willing to help.

Mum goes into [city in another state] for drugs & you know [prostitution]. Child safety wouldn't help, said we were too old for their help cos they struggle to get

accom (foster) for younger people. Packed my case and came to Perth to get away from mum, nothing gets mum off the drugs. (Emily)

The grandparents paid the airfares for the two sisters to come to Western Australia to stay with them. However, because their parents were not in Western Australia, the young woman reported that it had been harder to get assistance after she moved.

Crisis Care is also the point of contact if young people breach their care orders. One young woman recounted how her grandmother was required to report her to Crisis Care whenever she tried to visit her mother. This created tension between her and her grandmother, which contributed to the breakdown of the placement.

4.1.1 Avoiding CPFS

Not all young people sought help from child protection services or the police, even though they were in very difficult situations. One young woman explained that she did not seek help from CPFS even though her father was violent because she feared retribution in the long term.

Never. People were concerned, but we knew better than to make a report. There was one time when I had to wear pants to school in summer for about two weeks because my Dad belted me with a walking stick and left bruises and split my skin a few times, welts bruises, but we knew better than to tell people as well, cos we knew. My dad was a very patient man and he would have waited years, go figure, to square up with his children. (Samantha)

Another young man had been living on the streets from a very early age. He had been in the care of the department, which meant that if he was apprehended on the streets by police or social workers he would have been placed in a hostel. When asked about help from CPFS, it was evident from his reply that he was not trying to be found.

They [CPFS] tried to find me but not exactly helping in a lot of ways. The help I was receiving wasn't the right form of help, I wasn't receiving assistance with counselling, really stuff I needed like counselling was the main thing I needed living on the streets for so long. I needed someone to talk to, because I never had someone who was there 24/7 for me. I always had a different person I seen when I came to DCP, it became frustrating and scary for me. So I never had no one to trust. (Daniel)

Daniel's response clearly illustrates his perception that the assistance he was offered did not meet his needs and that the case workers had not provided supportive relationships. What he felt he needed at the time was someone he could trust and talk to, and who he felt cared about him.

4.1.2 Kin Care

Where possible, a child or young person coming into the care of the department is placed in kin care (with relatives) or in foster care (with non-related carers). Aboriginal children are placed with Indigenous carers wherever possible, and frequently this means kin-carers, often grandparents, but sometimes older siblings. This was not always easy for grandparents and frequently they had more than one child to care for and sometimes children from more than one family. One young woman reflected on her experiences, and with hindsight was very grateful to her grandparents for caring for her and her siblings.

For kids like us that were raised by their grandparents and the grandparents just couldn't wait for us to leave, for them to get rid of us because of not being well behaved, being sick of us, I know us kids were being pretty naughty and Nana being so old and I just think well, sometimes I just think well you could have just left us to go to all these foster homes and just being the grandma who came to pick us up on the weekend. You can still have that grandma relationship. Where I think Nana is more like a mum, I love her more than my mum, I love her like a mother. Nan is like 70 maybe, her partner's like 86 and he's really sick, he raised us as well. (Georgia)

However, she was very critical of the way CPFS had intervened in the relationship, when she did not understand why she was not allowed to see her mother, and implied that if it had been handled differently she may not have become homeless when she was 13 years old. CPFS intervened again when she was 16 after the birth of her child. They persuaded her grandparents to take her back. This arrangement lasted long enough for her to move into secure housing 16 months later, and her relationship with her grandparents is now strong.

Another young woman recounted how CPFS asked her grandmother to accommodate her and her newborn baby when she was 15 years old. Her grandmother was not willing to provide accommodation. The young woman became homeless on leaving the hospital and lost the care of her baby.

My Nan, my Nan, my only blood Nana, like I was in hospital I'd just given birth to him, DCP asked, she has a three bedroom house and lives by herself, DCP asked if I could stay for two weeks whilst they found me somewhere to live with him, she said no. (Caitlin)

In this instance, the young woman blamed her grandmother for not taking her in. There is an acute shortage of youth accommodation for mothers and babies.

Another young woman was concerned that her mother had just become a grandparent carer for her sister's four children. She believed that her mother's unresolved drug addiction meant she should not be caring for the children.

It's really sad, it really is because my mum couldn't even look after her kids, my mum had five kids and my sister she's got four babies already, a five-year-old, seven-year-old, two-year-old and probably eight/nine-month old now and my mum's taken all of them into her care but she could never look after us and now my sister's four kids aren't going to school, they're not being fed, they're not being cared for, they're not being bathed or showered and it's like why would you even take someone else's kids if you can't look after your own? (Sarah)

4.1.3 Foster care

In practice few foster carers are available for young people who enter care when they are 12 years or over. Only one young person had experienced foster care after they became homeless in their early teens. None who had experienced foster care spoke positively about this option.

I moved with these carers called, they were like foster family/ friends and I stayed there for a bit but come weekend I'd ask for some money and she'd give me ten bucks for the whole weekend and I'd be like 'this is bullshit' what am I supposed to get with \$10, a bus ticket and a coke, you know, it seemed like, that made my stay there, like not good, I didn't want to be there after that, and she was getting paid for me, plus she was getting extra vouchers and food vouchers for me and

she was only giving me \$10 a week on a Friday and I had to make it last until Sunday, how do you make ten bucks last Friday, Saturday and Sunday?... I got kicked out, (of the carer's home) well not really kicked out, but I was sort of, well I make a decision I didn't want to live there anymore. So I moved to my sister's, well my sister's boyfriend's mum's house. (Georgia)

Another young woman recounted an experience in foster care from her childhood, which made her wary of seeking assistance any assistance from CPFS.

I tried but like I couldn't [get help from service providers] it was a really long process because I'd have to go to one place and they'd always used to call DCP straight away and put me in DCP care and I can't be in DCP care cos I was in DCP when I was little with my brother and I was there for about two years because my mum was a recovering drug addict, she was clean for nine years and then she relapsed, so it just proves anyone can relapse really and it's like we were in foster care and we used to get sexually assaulted, my brother used to get burned, like there was food he couldn't eat and they'd make him sit there and eat it and eat it and eat it until he was sick and they'd hit him and put him to bed and it was just not the nicest place to be but it was better than nowhere I guess but in a way it wasn't and like we used to tell the DCP workers that this was going on and they were like no, plenty of kids go to these houses and its never happened. (Sarah)

However, two young men who had not been offered a foster placement believed in retrospect that the option of fostering or adoption might have been helpful to them.

They should have put me in a foster home, I was a little bit old apparently (aged 13). (Matthew)

Being taken into care at 13, no one wants to adopt a 13 year-old, they want a kid, they want kids younger that they can bring up in the family. (Michael)

4.1.4 DCP (CPFS) hostels

CPFS operates a number of hostels for children and young people who are awaiting foster placement or for whom a foster placement cannot be found. At least four of the young people we interviewed had spent some time in DCP hostels. None considered this a positive experience. Here are some examples of how they described their experiences.

I been in and out of hostels from 14 – 18. A couple of times I've been out on the street. (Matthew)

One young man chose to live on the street rather than in CPFS hostels because of bullying and theft.

There's only 'X' amount of youth hostels out there that DCP run and I was homeless for a number of years due to the fact that I kept getting, I've been mobbed a couple of times by the hostel boys.... DCP paid for me to get a few clothes but they all went walkabout overtime, through washing, other kids claim the clothes, so the majority of what I had was in a backpack with my two pairs of jeans, two t-shirts, and it was like try to get them washed when I could. (Michael).

A young woman had been through DCP hostels when she was pregnant.

And then after that DCP made me go to a refuge and I was at the refuge till I went term, then they put me in another refuge after I had [son], I was in the first refuge for about six weeks, and I was in the second refuge [youth accommodation] for 15 months, then I came here [youth accommodation hostel], I was 17. (Caitlin)

4.1.5 CPFS case work

All the young people who were in the care of the department should have had a case worker with whom they met regularly, whom they could contact if they had any problems, and who would assume aspects of the parental role, including guardianship, where necessary. One young person spoke very highly of one of her case workers.

I was lucky I had a good caseworker, her name was Jane, she was the best, she used to take me to all my doctor's appointments, she'd take me out for lunch and I was like no Jane it's ok you might not get reimbursed, she'd say I don't care, we're having lunch together and I'd say are you sure? You know they've got to get a receipt and take the receipt back so that they get their money back. I'd notice that she'd do it, like she'd, it didn't matter to her what it was or what it cost or where it was, she wouldn't take me to Maccas she'd take me into Dome, like I'd never had anybody take me into the Dome before and take me out to Rockingham along the beach for lunch and she was just the best and she was like you know what sometimes I don't get reimbursed but I don't care, and I was like what, she was awesome, I don't think I would have had, I see my brothers and stuff and I don't see them get that help and support that I did, when I was in that position and I see them in a worse position than me and I don't see them getting the help that I was getting and I suppose it depends on the person as well, doesn't it? Cos she was like a miracle, like an angel who fell from heaven like, she was awesome and I cried when she told me that she wasn't, that she was leaving... when I see my brother [Name], I see, he hasn't got a scrap, where's your clothes, they're everywhere, everything's everywhere, I'm like well do you have a toothbrush, are you brushing your teeth? Things like that, for me it was easy for me to get things, I'd just say Jane I've got no socks or underwear, or Jane I need a toothbrush or bodywarmer, or shampoo and conditioner' and I see these, cos he doesn't have like I had, I did have it better and I don't think he knows how to use his [case worker]... but anyway I don't think they would help him, they'd turn a blind eye. He's 18 now, and now that when they turn 18 they pretty much abandon them. He's like two years ago you were signing my school excursion slips for my school trips, as my parent guardian, and now you just want to leave me out in the world. (Georgia)

It is evident from this detailed description that the young person felt that the case worker cared about her as a person, and had gone out of her way to build a caring relationship her, and to pay attention to her everyday practical needs. This approach built trust with this young woman and gained her respect.

Young people also recounted less positive experiences. One young person needed practical help that she felt she had not got from her caseworker. The same young woman who was so positive in her

experience with her caseworker, had had a previous bad experience where she felt she had not been given sufficient information.

I was in DCP care I wasn't allowed to go and see my mum without my being supervised and stuff, I didn't understand why... I never really knew my mum as a carer, I only knew her, I remember seeing her and then she told me how to catch the bus to get to her house. And I'd have this big thing, cos I'd say why can't I go see my mum? and they'd tell me your mum's sick that she wasn't well, and I'd think she had like cancer or something but they didn't say she had a mental illness and she was drug psychotic and that she would harm me, they never said those things and I pretty much found that out on my own, think most of the problem was just wanting to have my mum, and not knowing the actual truth about it. I think if I was told differently, not that your mum's sick, or that your mum is not well, but that your mum can get really angry, I don't know how I'd explain it to a kid, but she would get angry and lash out, she might accidentally hurt you or something, something different other your mum's sick, instead of me thinking is she going to die before I see her, cos they told me she was sick and I never understood that. That's what I hate DCP for because I was running away to her and she (mum) would stand over me for my money, change in an instant, in a second, and she'd just pick me up and strangle me in the middle of everyone in the shopping centre, just weird shit like that, things that I never thought my mum would do to me and they knew, they could have said, they could have said more. (Georgia)

She felt that if the situation had been explained to her more clearly in an age-appropriate way, it would have prevented a lot of conflict.

Another young woman who was pregnant when she became homeless also felt that the caseworker had not responded to her needs. She felt the social worker had been more concerned with monitoring her compliance with a drug treatment program.

I needed was someone to sit there and help, like, I didn't know what Centrelink was when I was 15, didn't know what contraception was you know, I didn't have everyday life skills, I needed someone to teach me that stuff, not only that but, someone who actually knows what to do in those circumstances, because like they are social workers and I understand that, but a lot of them don't know what the hell to do, they just sit there and try to give you some advice, but at the time I was 15 I didn't know that the hell I was doing, you know, I was so young, so young, and having a kid was just like, if DCP could have pulled their head out of their arse and decided that they were going to put me somewhere safe with my baby knowing that my boyfriend was beating me and stuff, but no they just sat back and like asked me to do urine analysis, yeah at 40 weeks, when I was at term, that day, they asked me to do a random urine analysis. (Caitlin)

From the perspective of this young woman, the caseworker had not offered her the practical support she felt she needed and had failed to win her trust. The social worker had not built a relationship with her that made her feel like someone cared about her as a person, was interested in her and who had relevant experience to understand her situation.

4.1.6 LIFT

CPFS in Midland operates the Living Independently for the First Time (LIFT) program. This program offers long-term support to young people leaving care. Support can begin when the young person turns 15 and if required, can be offered until the young person turns 25 years old. It is a wrap-around service that offers intensive holistic support. CPFS fund a youth accommodation service to deliver the program. The program was well thought of by those who spoke to us who were participating in it.

The Midland DCP has a program run with [youth agency], which is absolutely brilliant. Its run by [name], its called the LIFT program, and what it stands for is, Living Independently for the First Time, and what it is, is it's designed to help kids that are turning 18 that are just getting out of care to get them into a place like [Youth Service] here, so that they can try to get their own Homeswest house. I've now got a private rental that I'm renting with a friend. (Michael)

As the program is relatively new, many of the young people currently in the program entered when they were older than 15 years old, and had been homeless for extended periods of time prior to entering the LIFT program.

4.1.7 Advocate for Children in Care

The same young man mentioned a positive experience with the Advocate for Children in Care. He described how her office had managed to get him into a hostel that enabled him to move into more stable accommodation. This young man is now also on the LIFT program.

The way that I actually properly got out of homelessness was I spoke to a lady, her name is Judy Garsed, she's the Advocate for Children in Care and she informed me that they had just opened up a new hostel in Kwinana, near the Casuarina Prison, called Casuarina House, which I was there for about three months. From there I made some friends who were moving up to [regional city], um who I spent a few months with, but from there I was pretty much couch surfing half way through 17 till 18, which is where I got the phone call asking if I would like to come to [youth accommodation service] and to be completely honest these guys are absolutely brilliant. (Michael)

Prior to this he had been in unstable accommodation for many years.

4.2 Youth work, including youth accommodation services

Youth services aim to work in a flexible, holistic youth-centred way to meet the social, recreational, developmental and well-being needs of young people. Young people were positive about youth accommodation services. They welcomed the support in a non-authoritarian environment, but some found some of the other residents annoying as well as disliking the continuous change of housemates.

This one's really good, there's a lot of leeways, lots of things to do, I got my 'L's and that here. There's good staff, some of them are a bit, like, but you get that everywhere, it's pretty laid back, I've got my own room and that cos I'm one of the older girls I get one with a shower and stuff. There's less food, people around, and stuff, yeah it's alright, I think they cover most things here. Sometimes we have a bit of falling out with staff members, but we build a bridge and get over it. They pretty much help me with a lot of things here. (Nichole)

A young man who had been living on the streets for an extended period of time, appreciated the support he had received.

[Youth accommodation service] had supported me the best, probably better than DCP or any of the homeless places I been through. (Michael)

Another young man, when asked how he could have been best helped, said:

I think if there was a way where people could have referred me to a place like [youth accommodation service] to begin with to have a hostel, somewhere to stay safely. Maybe to actually get to know who I am and someone to, sort of like mentor would have been nice. Because I lived in the situation I was in, if anyone was in my situation it would be very scary for them and they'd need someone who was there, always be there to trust. I guess that's why, at the moment, I still don't get on with counsellors because the counsellor keeps jumping around everywhere. I get a counsellor for maybe a week, then a new one the next week, so I find it hard to do counselling still, I am more into having someone who's there 24/7 it's a bit more stable, you don't have to give information and confidential information to new people all the time. That was through a company called XXX, its drug and alcohol counselling place, I'm going through them cos someone referred me saying there's a counsellor that they used to go to in Maddington, would be there, but she left when I came into the counselling. (Daniel)

Another young woman said:

I found a place called [youth accommodation service]. I went there and I stayed there for a few weeks and they actually helped me get myself up, they made sure I was up in the morning to go to his (her baby) visits, they made sure that I was doing a urine analysis, they made sure I was doing everything I needed to do, it would be nice if there were more people out there helping with this shit, because most of us kids don't have strict parents, we don't have parents telling us what to do. (Caitlin)

In this quote she indicates that she needed direction but this had to be offered in a caring way that she perceived as being supportive of her in achieving her goals, which were to get her baby returned to her care.

A young woman who went into the hostel following family disintegration after her father's death, appreciated the orderly arrangements at the hostel and the support.

Well first I went to my cousin house then I was getting nothing there. Wasn't going to school. Then I moved to [emergency accommodation hostel] because my case manager helped me...What I like about this place well it's well sorted and organised and also like how it's set and how the programs we do to learn more stuff and stuff around the house is respected and kind and the shopping. (Rachel)

Her sister appreciated finding somewhere they could be together.

I came to [emergency accommodation hostel]. Moved here last week. Sister was here already. My case manager at [youth agency] helped me get in here. (Ashleigh)

One of the main things that young people said they found difficult was the transience of residents and problems with other residents.

[Youth emergency accommodation hostel] were lovely. [Hostel] was only for three months, until I was 16. Fourteen other people stayed there in the three months. They were coming and going all the time. Then I lost the plot, didn't know what to do. (Emily).

Another young woman in transitional accommodation had a similar concern.

Shared 2-bed unit with one person that changed three times [in 12 months]. (Lauren)

Some young people discussed problems with the conduct of other residents. One young man said

Some clients that moved out today, I instantly felt far more safe and comfortable around here, whilst if she was still here I wouldn't feel comfortable. So one client can change everything. Everybody has their own privacy, mine was taken five months with my parents before I was kicked out and when I got here I felt different because I lost my privacy for so long, I felt like now I'm getting it back, but then recently the girls here have been really cheeky and stupid around me, they call me on private numbers and knock on my door and on the window trying to scare me and I keep telling them not to, and none of them listen. Some of the staff members don't do nothing at all, so that's what I'm complaining about this place is, sometimes the staff do nothing about it. (Jacob)

Another young woman encountered theft and conflict over chores.

There were always issues with housemates, housekeeping things, one girl stole ridiculous things, nothing worth anything just annoying. The youth agency did help, she got thrown out. (Lauren)

4.3 Other services

4.3.1 School chaplaincy

One young person mentioned she had received initial help through the school chaplain, who arranged various support services.

School was aware of circumstances, got involved with school chaplain. He arranged for mental health assessment, took me to Centrelink and saw social worker, took me to [Agency] who provided accommodation for 12 months. (Lauren)

4.3.2 Homeless outreach services

Young people who had spent time living on the streets appreciated support from homeless outreach services such as Passages.

The main place that I used to go to was called Passages in Northbridge. Apart from that we had a little youth bus that used to pull up across from the Maccas and they give you \$10 on a Telstra pay phone card and they used to provide sandwiches during lunchtime. (Michael)

4.3.3 Housing Association

Another young person found Youth Housing⁴ workers supportive.

Youth Housing were good, the worker that I had then was always following up, seeing what I needed, if I needed anything, unfortunately she left just after I got the house but she got me here and got me in, made sure I was alright. (Georgia)

5 Pathway out of homelessness

We interviewed young people who had become independently homeless before they were 16 years old and were under 26 years old. Some of the young people who were in their early 20s when we interviewed them, were now in stable accommodation and were no longer homeless. Others in their early 20s were still trying to find a pathway out of homelessness. Many of the young people we interviewed were much younger and in the early stages of their pathway out of homelessness.

5.1 Out of homelessness

We judged that young people were out of homelessness if they had secure accommodation and sufficient financial and emotional security to enable them to maintain secure housing even if they faced some unforeseen circumstances in their lives. Most in this situation now needed no on-going support services from youth work or from CPFS. Five young people were in stable accommodation (one was still in the LIFT program and connected to youth services). These young people were able to reflect on the strength and life experience they had gained as a result of their experiences of homelessness.

5.1.1 Current housing

Many, but not all, of the young people had children. This helped them access public housing, and for some also helped them find stability in their own lives. One young woman was able to get state housing after living with her grandparents, with support from youth housing. Initially, after the birth of her child she moved back with her grandparents. They were clearly concerned initially that she would not take responsibility for her baby, and they would be left, literally, holding another baby.

Then I went to Nana's and it was like you know you can't leave the kid in the room and go to Fremantle [Name] and I was I know that, she was like you can't be leaving the kid and going out for the day and I was like, I wouldn't leave the kid, I was like, what the hell, Nana I'm not that stupid. That was funny but I was with nana for a year and three or four months, I was at Nana's with bubba until I got, I was linked through Youth Housing, and going to all my appointments, I never missed one, all the things I had to do to get the house. I've been here ever since. I've been here for about five and a half/ six years, it actually feels like living here it is my own, being here so long. (Georgia)

Another young man who had a daughter was also in state housing, but his partner and daughter had moved out. This young man was still receiving some support through a youth service.

⁴ Youth Housing is a housing association

I live in my own house now through the Department of Housing. I haven't had it by myself long, I was in it with my daughter's mum, her son and my daughter, but then she left me. I've only been there by myself since about October. (Matthew)

A third young woman was living in a blended family with her partner in a house he was buying.

I don't know how and I can't explain why I have two great kids, a great job, a family, my bloke bought the house we're in. My parents never could do that... I broke the cycle, I didn't want my kids to see drug use, I didn't want them to see homelessness, I didn't want them to see chaos in the house, I never wanted my kids to experience the things I did, and it was when I had my son (second child) that my whole perspective changed. After my mum left I felt trapped with this guy, don't get me wrong, I loved him heaps, but it wasn't until my mum was back and we separated that I really got my head together. I started working, I got a car, and I felt like I had a purpose for my life, and now that my bloke [father of first child] and I now that we're together, we got back together, and really my life only improved in the last year. (Samantha)

One young woman was sharing a private rental and had recently completed a university degree. The fifth young woman was living with her partner and children in an unspecified type of tenancy, close to her parents whom she now saw regularly.

5.1.2 What helped

One young person felt that it was important for young people to understand that they did not create their family circumstances, but that they can change the choices they make in their own lives. She would also advise them to make better use of support services that are available to them, and to be more aspirational about their future.

I'd tell them it's not their fault. I'd tell them that they can't control anybody and they can't control their parents. All they can control is the decisions they make and the surroundings they chose to be in, that's all, so make the best of it. Use the help provided for you, because I didn't, I could of got my own place through the housing department, I could of got a job, I could of got my license and I chose not to, make better choices, want for more, because when you are young you see nothing ahead of you, ten short years and I realise all the time I wasted. Do something now, cos there's only two days in your life that you can't change, yesterday and tomorrow, so do something about it today. (Samantha)

Another young person praised one of her caseworkers (see section 4.1).

5.1.3 Importance of timing and flexibility

Young people who become homeless at an early age, exited homelessness by different pathways. The timing and appropriateness of assistance was essential, but what was needed, and when, differed between individuals, because they had varying life goals, were coping with differing past experiences, and had access to varying informal support systems. It appears to be important to offer support as soon as possible, even though not all young people were ready to accept support when it was first offered. With early support, one young woman was able to gain a degree by the age of 23, despite early homelessness. This occurred through her own determination and persistence, combined with early intervention to help her find supported accommodation, gain Centrelink

support and to stay at school. Another young woman took a different pathway to stability. She had been offered comprehensive support when she was 18 years old, but did not feel ready for the responsibility at that time. It wasn't until she was in her twenties, after the birth of her two children, that she felt ready to assume adult responsibilities.

I could've got my own place through the housing department, I could've got a job, I could've got my license and I chose not toSo it wasn't until mid-2016 that I really decided to get my head together. I got a job, I started working three weeks before my break up [with the father of her second child], because we were going to get married and whatever. I have a five and a three year old, they have different dads. (Samantha)

Another young woman who had become homeless at the age of 14, moved in and out of homelessness relying only upon informal supports of extended family and after a period of unstable housing and rebellion that lasted for a few years was in a position to rebuild her relationship with her parents.

5.2 Not yet out of homelessness

We judged that young people were not yet out of homelessness if they were still homeless or in temporary accommodation, or were still receiving intensive support from youth services. Ten of the young people were on a pathway out of homelessness, at various stages. We asked them about their current situation, their future aspirations, and what had been useful for them so far.

5.2.1 Current situation

Most of the young people who spoke to us were still living in some kind of supported accommodation, either a hostel, or externally supported accommodation in the private rental market or through public housing. Most were still trying to get work or to return to education. One young man living in transitional accommodation said:

I come in here today to do a bit of cooking, cos my girlfriend's pregnant and the toilet at home got blocked up and there's been a bit of leakage under the flooring, we're sleeping in a tent outside, so we're currently sort of in a homeless situation. We've got no access to our cooker and fridge inside, so we're kinda living off tin food. We might have our private accommodation next week, so we might not have to stick around long. (Daniel)

Others were considering moving in the near future, one young woman was hoping to get a shared private rental.

Now I'm having this place like, having a stable roof over my head is sort of weird to me, cos obviously I'm so used to moving back and forth it's been seven months. I'm moving out of here soon though, I haven't been kicked out, I'm moving, I'm looking for a rentalI'm moving in with a friend, hopefully, I plan to move in with a few friends, I can get a lease, I'm 17 and I'm financially stable. (Caitlin)

Another was moving because she missed her family even though she had nowhere to stay

I'm handing my notice in today (at this accommodation). I want to be near [sister] and Nan. If I can get there I can finish year 10 & 11 free. I just need somewhere to stay. (Emily)

One young woman was living with her grandfather, others were living in supported youth accommodation.

5.2.2 What is helping

We asked about what other formal and informal supports they had found useful so far. Young people's discussion of their positive experiences with DPFS can be found in section 4.1. Young people's positive experiences with youth work services can be found in section 4.2.

Young people described positive informal support they had received from friends and family of friends, as well as from their extended family. They also described negative experiences within informal networks. Informal support often helped young people meet their everyday needs for food and shelter. In some instances informal supports also provided emotional support to the young person. The next example shows how this young woman valued her special relationship with her grandfather.

Yeah of course, that's always been my safe place [grandad's] like every weekend he used to come pick me up and he's like come on we're going to the markets and we still do that to this day... I know there's some kids out there that don't even have a grandparent to turn to and they're gonna be worse off than me, if there's help out there they need to reach out I guess. (Sarah)

5.2.3 Future aspiration

We asked about their future hopes for their lives.

I'd like to get a place with my sister [who is also homeless]. (Ashleigh)

I'm just moving forward, not looking at the past... I want to become ...a teacher for maths. (Jacob)

My goals have always been to get off the streets, to stop using drugs and now I want to get my bachelor's degree in culinary arts. (Sarah)

I want my son to have the best, I want to have the best, I want to have a good paying job, that's what I want, I want to have money and I want him to go to a good school, and have a good education and learn life the way Mummy grew up isn't normal, and the way that Mummy grew up happens to kids but it's not going to happen to you, because Mummy wants to provide for you, you know what I mean?. (Caitlin)

Most young people had some goals in their lives. Some were quite short term, like getting somewhere to live. Others were much more long term.

6 Antecedents to early homelessness

Many discussions of the topic of youth homelessness begin with a presentation of the dysfunction of young people's prior family circumstances. We have not followed this sequence for a number of reasons. Firstly it can lead to overly deterministic thinking that is unhelpful to policy-makers. In particular, policy makers may become overly confident about their capacity to prevent early homelessness through family intervention. Secondly, professionals and young people may become overly fatalistic about the life prospects of young people, and come to believe young people are not able to overcome early adversity. Our interviews with young people provide many examples where

young people have overcome, or are overcoming very difficult early circumstances. Finally, although most of the young people who spoke to us had experienced adversity in their childhood, this was not so in every instance. It is important that experiences of early homelessness are not homogenised. Family problems preceding homelessness was a theme in all interviews, except one. However, there were differences in experience between young people, and they had varying access to informal supports.

We present this information to place young people's stories in context and to acknowledge the adversity, pain, fear, and rejection many young people had faced in their early lives. Hopefully this will help readers to understand more sympathetically why sometimes some young people made decisions that might be judged negatively by people who had not faced similar experiences. Hopefully too, this account increases awareness of the strength, courage and resourcefulness of the young people who shared their stories with us. This section has been kept short, intentionally, both to avoid providing identifying details of young people and because many of the young people wanted to put the past behind them, so they could focus on how they could change their lives in the present and future. Here are how some of the participants describe the situations they left.

6.1 Family instability

Several young people described long-term family instability including the breakdown of parental relationships, parent leaving, parental imprisonment, divorce, death and family homelessness. The instability was most frequently associated with poverty, violence, alcohol/drug use or parental mental health issues, all of which strained family relationships, and created an insecure and chaotic environment for children as they grew up. For example one young woman told us

I had like no home to go to, had no stability, had nothing, my whole life has had no stability, you know what I mean, I don't really know what stable is... I've been homeless basically all my life, I've only had, my Mum's only ever had a house lease about three times in her life, other than that we sub-letted, illegally sub-letted and lived within other people's spaces, living on the floor, living in the back yard, living in a shed, you know like, just wherever had a roof, it didn't matter, but that is still classed as homeless (Caitlin).

6.2 Alcohol, drugs and violence

Several young people described alcohol and drug misuse of their parents as factors in their childhood that had led to poverty, homelessness, conflict, violence, neglect and prostitution.

Mum's on drugs, she left us on our own last Christmas... Dad has drug psychosis... The grandparents always help mum. They send money over to help and for our birthdays, but we never see it, it all goes on drugs. (Emily)

Many attributed their homelessness on their parents' drug use.

I was always homeless cos my mum uses drugs. (Caitlin)

Well my mum's friends and family kept coming and giving her drugs and she wasn't paying rent and my older sister was fighting with me and mum all the time. (Rachel)

Or to family violence that resulted from alcohol abuse.

Actually my mum's old boyfriend he had a drinking problem, he's always hitting my mum around and that, I didn't like that. (Stephanie)

The drugs most frequently mentioned were methamphetamine, heroin and alcohol.

My dad was a heroin addict and like my mum was a meth addict and she turned to heroin for my dad and I was born both. (Sarah)

My childhood wasn't fantastic. I grew up in a house with two drug addict parents....both my parents were heroin addicts. ...She left my father,... they had been drug addicts for years prior, all their life and his drug use and abuse got a lot worse, he became an alcoholic and anything opiate-based that he could get his hands on he was down for that I watched my parents use drugs all my life and I watched my dad drink himself stupid, substance abuse was never something I wanted to do, homeless[ness] I didn't care about. (Samantha)

Two young people mentioned the links between parental drug use and prostitution.

Mum goes into [city] for drugs & you know (prostitution). Child safety wouldn't help, said we were too old for their help cos they struggle to get accom (foster) for younger people. (Emily)

He created a horrible home for us and for me being homeless and if it had of came about, drug use or prostitution, cos they kind of go hand in hand, would have been better than the reality I lived at home and I was quite prepared for it and I didn't care. (Samantha)

6.3 Mental illness

Four young people mentioned their parent's mental illness. Parental mental illness created problems for children not only because parents could be erratic, but also because their parent's illness was not adequately explained to the young person. Several other young people mentioned that their parents had drug-induced psychosis.

6.4 Family Violence

Many young people mentioned family violence in their childhood and several had experienced violence, described previously. Violence within the family was often also perpetrated by fathers, or mother's partner, upon their mothers.

We went through DV [domestic violence] for a while. Dad would smash mum up. Family and friends would take me and [sister] in. I've lots of photos of his family. (Emily)

*I watched my dad stab my mother, I watched him belt the **** out of her, I watched him break her bones. (Samantha)*

Some also mentioned sibling violence.

I don't wish to have communication. I am the youngest and have two siblings, I have a violence restraining order on my older brother because he threatened me

and almost killed me as well, so I had no choice but to put a violence restraining order on him. (Jacob)

My sister would bash me every day and so would her partner and I just couldn't be there so I left. (Sarah)

My older brother [name], we weren't on good terms, we had a restraining order against each other. (Georgia)

6.5 Parents and the justice system

Several young people mentioned parental involvement with the justice system, often for offences related to drugs. Two mentioned their mothers had been incarcerated. One young person discussed drug gang violence. Others mentioned siblings who had been incarcerated.

Like my brother he has \$250 shoes on his feet every day, different pair every day, he sells drugs, this is my older brother and he's been in and out of jail for the last six years and he's gonna go back for four years. (Sarah)

6.6 Maltreatment

In the interviews some young people mentioned maltreatment at the hands of their parents. This included physical violence, neglect and sexual violence. Some were very explicit in their descriptions other were more oblique.

There were many references to physical violence.

When my brother had been planning to leave for about a month, had things lined up, had been saving money, as he was working, for when he was leaving and four days prior he let me know and said I'm leaving and if you don't come with me Dad's going to kill you. He probably would have beat me into ICU, have no doubt about it, he flogged my brother and nearly broke his elbow with a baseball bat. I've got permanent scars from when he's [indistinct]..., my brother and I both. (Samantha)

Her and dad want me to get involved in their fights. I got flogged as a child, constantly. (Emily)

One young woman described her father's sexual abuse and her mother's refusal to believe her.

Me and mum, we didn't really get along and then I was a bit like (pause) so she kicked me out when I was twelve and when I was about eleven I went and stayed with my dad for a while and he was really abusive, like physically, sexually and mentally towards me and I went back to my mum about six months later and I told her everything and she told me I was lying, that it wasn't true, that he would never do something like that but I couldn't be in that house knowing that she held that against me thinking I was lying. (Sarah)

Some statements were less specific.

For 15 years I've been abused by many people, since I've been an infant, the first 12 years was by my biological mother. (Jacob)

6.7 No antecedent family problems

Only one young person did not mention any family problems

I had the choice to go home but I didn't want to. I was 14 to 15, quite young.... my parents were lovely, I was just going through a rebellious stage and just defying them. I live about four minutes away and see them just about every day. We are so close. (Rebecca)

7 Effects of early life experiences

7.1 Growing up fast

Many had experiences in life, both before and after they became homeless that meant they had had to grow up fast. They had sometimes suffered traumatising experiences without support and were used to managing and organising their own lives. One participant who had been living on the streets at the age of 12 recounted her daily experiences of physical and sexual assault and said:

It made me grow up a lot quicker like I don't think the same as half the kids at this school, I don't think the same way they do because I've been through too much than a sixteen year old should be put through. (Sarah)

Another young woman said:

Most of us kids don't have strict parents, we don't have parents telling us what to do, we just have ourselves, you know to just watch over ourselves, feed ourselves, clean ourselves you know ...I still have no one, I am the adult, I've been the adult since I was 13, I'm 17. (Caitlin)

Another participant who had been living independently couch-surfing and in other unstable accommodation since the age of 14 said:

It made me grow up, had a tough skin, learnt to cook, budget, made me strong, I wouldn't be where I am if this hadn't happened. (Lauren)

Others realised they needed to learnt fast.

I'm basically trying to push myself to understand and get ready for becoming an adult whilst I'm 15 years old even though I'm restricted in too many things. (Jacob)

One young person said simply

I don't want to be around parents any more. (Sarah)

These quotes illustrate that in their different ways all of the young people were accustomed to greater independence than their peers who had not experienced homelessness. They often had little trust in parental-style relationships and placed little reliance upon this kind of connection.

7.2 Determination to live different life

All of the young people who spoke to us were determined that they did not want, as adults, to be addicted to drugs, to be homeless or to experience more violence. Even though some of the young people who spoke to us had experienced violence in their own relationships, had been involved in

alcohol and drug misuse, had been in prison, they did not want these patterns to shape their own lives in the future. Those who had witnessed drug addiction, violence and homelessness, wanted to lead different lives from their parents, for themselves and for their children. This determination was what helped young people through difficult times in their pathways out of homelessness, and kept them going even when their lives seemed to slip backwards into patterns they had rejected.

Discussing violence, one young woman made the following observations:

*I don't want my kids to see what I saw, but that said it shaped me to who I am, I'll never be an alcoholic, because I don't ever want to end up like my parents, I saw so much, I watched my dad stab my mother, I watched him belt the **** out of her, I watched him break her bones, I'll never let my kids see that. My partner yelled at me once, I walked out and told him I was leaving, I was like, I'm out of here and then when I was all ok and sorted out I went home and said if you ever yell at me in front of any of the kids again, I'm leaving, I don't care how long we've been together, they're not seeing it. He's never yelled at me since.
(Samantha)*

A young man said:

If I have kids later in my life, I'm not gonna treat them like I used to have, it's so embarrassing, I wasn't asking for a life like this, part of it I do accept, the rest I don't, but right now I'm the person who I am. (Jacob)

A young woman said:

I don't want to be like my Mum, my Mum's 47 and she's still a meth user. She, her and her boyfriend fight all the time, her boyfriend's a nut job, like, he's crazy and it's just like, I don't want to be in that position. (Caitlin)

7.3 Guardianship and age

Guardianship was an issue that emerged in several interviews. It came up most often when we asked about barriers to living independently. Several young people felt that they were able to cope with managing their lives on a day-to-day basis, but were not legally able to sign forms on their own behalf, and had no one who could sign for them. This affected school or TAFE enrolment for some young people. For others it meant they could not access accommodation. In addition, two young people had been concerned that until they were independent minors, their parents could potentially start legal proceedings to force them to return.

One young woman said

Age was the barrier when I came to Perth. I was ok on my own, could manage cooking, cleaning etc. Could not return home. . Getting help was harder cos parents were in [another state].... Am going to get kicked out of TAFE cos parents can't send the forms. (Emily)

A young woman, who was 14 years old when she became homeless, couch surfed with friends until she was old enough for youth accommodation. She nominated aged as the biggest barrier she faced.

Being underage was the biggest barrier. (Lauren)

A young woman whose father was violent to her, left school when she left home, even though she would have liked to graduate from school. She left school because her father was her legal guardian. She feared that if she had tried to return to school she risked being returned to his care.

I really wanted to graduate high school, but my concern was if I went back to school, my father being my legal guardian could come and get me. If I made a scene, there would have been an investigation, and I knew that if my Dad ever got his hands on me I'd be in trouble and the best thing to do was to just leave rather than put myself in a position where I could be caught or have to start some kind of investigation. (Samantha)

A young man who was 15 years old at the time of the interview was frustrated that he was not treated as an independent minor until he was 16 years old, which he thought was an arbitrary restriction. He had also been concerned that his parents may start legal proceedings to force his return.

The biggest barrier for me getting something is my age...I've been rather worried because I thought my parents were trying to get me back through the legal terms.... The main boundaries I have for myself is mostly I'm just 15 and I'm almost a month away from being 16, you still have boundaries until the first second you turn 16 and you can do all these things and like its just ridiculous, you should be able to do something a couple of weeks before you turn 16. (Jacob)

This is an issue that requires attention.

7.4 Readiness for responsibility

When young people are offered support it does not always work out first time. One young woman, who is now in her mid-20s and working, was not ready to take responsibility for a lease on a unit when she was 17 years old. She was aware of that, and did not accept the lease.

I did go to one agency, it was one for youths, and I applied for it and never heard back from it. It was in West Perth. It had to do with the Department of Housing, it's like a sub-section of that, I was 17 and they said they would get me a one bedroom place and it would be, they would take 25% of my fortnightly benefits, so if I made 400 they'd take a 100 bucks a fortnight which I thought was fair, I could have my own little place and it was good. But I didn't care. I was so careless about everything, I didn't care who I hurt, where I was, I didn't care if I had my own place, I didn't care, I'd been restricted all my life. I didn't want to be boxed into a little apartment. It was a catch 22, cos the freedom was great, I'd never had my own place, then I was grounded and I didn't want to be grounded either... I wasn't ready to be helped and I didn't want it either. The things that I wanted and needed I didn't want equally as much, I needed stability, I needed a parental role model, I needed love, and as much as I knew I needed these things, I didn't want them right then, I didn't want to be held. I just wanted to feel free for a while, I wanted to feel that I didn't need to be anywhere, I didn't need to see anyone, but I could do these things if I wanted to. (Samantha)

Another young woman who was living in a youth accommodation service, had also previously had a unit, but that did not work out.

Yeah I did have a unit but stuff went down and too outta hand. (Rachel)

This is indicative of a need for external support for young people when they first take on tenancies. This point was made by one 23 year-old woman who had been homeless all her life, both as a child and as a young person. She had come into the care of the department and had lived in many different hostels.

I've been in this system for two years now. I stayed here for about six months, then moved into an external for like a year, but ended up moving back here cos there was a falling out, in the house I was in, it was out of control. Then I ended up moving back in here but I'm still like homeless, you know what I mean?... I think there should be more support in moving into houses from hostels cos we are used to the support workers and all that around and there's not really that much around when we move out and it's hard, we struggle with the little bit of pay from Centrelink and you feel very isolated and stuff. (Nichole)

Particularly for young people who have no experience of stable accommodation, there has to be an acceptance that not everything will work out first time, and sometimes a long period of support will be required.

8 Service providers

This section presents the main findings of the service providers' survey and interviews.

8.1 Perceived causes

Multi-causal: most service providers thought early youth independent homelessness was multi-causal, and includes family conflict and dysfunction, sexual abuse or sexual danger within the family, the young person's earlier experience of trauma, violence towards the young person or one of the parents, or extreme religious expectations in the family. Step families were identified as a source of conflict. Mental health issues and substance abuse experienced within the family or by the young person were also identified as risks for early homelessness.

Lack of support services for young people in this age group: the lack of suitable transitional housing, the lack of any accommodation services in some areas was a perceived cause of early youth homelessness. This was compounded where access to services was conditional upon young people divulging sexual or physical violence to the authorities, because many young people were unwilling to do this.

CPFS options do not match the needs of young people in this age cohort: services currently provided by CPFS were not perceived by some service providers to match the needs of this group of young people. Some were concerned that the risks present in emergency accommodation and CPFS hostels may reinforce and normalise deviance and experiences of trauma.

Poor family conflict resolution: A theme that came from further discussions was that early youth homelessness was aggravated when parents did not know how to resolve conflict or if they responded inappropriately.

8.2 Perceived challenges in meeting needs

Existing services not appropriate to young people under 16 years old: most service providers mentioned legal problems such as guardianship, difficulties in gaining support from Centrelink, and lack of longer term solutions and exit pathways from emergency accommodation. One respondent thought that there were no challenges and that existing arrangements are effective.

Lack of services: several mentioned the lack of accommodation services, and lack of ancillary support services such as drug and alcohol services, and the difficulties with transport to services.

Perceived as relevant by young people: some service providers felt that standard solutions such as foster care, and reconnect services did not seem relevant to a young person fleeing an abusive family situation.

8.3 Demand for service

Unmet demand not systematically recorded. Most agencies were unable to systematically document demand for emergency accommodation by this age cohort. Some made estimates, others did not keep records of unmet requests from young people who did not meet the criteria of their funding agreement. Service providers who were involved in further discussion were of the opinion that there are currently no adequate emergency housing services for the 12-15 year olds.

8.4 Perceptions of strengths of existing services

Strengths: One stated that 15 year olds were in a better position than 12-14 year olds because they could access emergency youth housing services. Four service providers felt there were few strengths in the existing arrangements. One stated that existing options (reconnect outreach services or departmental care) were not sufficient to meet the needs of young people under 16 years, they felt more diverse options were needed.

8.5 Perceptions of gaps

Gaps: Insufficient accommodation was available for those under 16 years. Several service providers said it was difficult to meet the needs of this group within existing structures. They considered young people aged 13-15 years often needed more intensive support and it was not possible to provide this under existing funding models. Some mentioned mental health needs, drug usage and borderline intellectual disability. Some suggested special accommodation for this cohort. Some suggested access to homelessness services through school and funding to allow one-to-one work with homeless young people in this cohort. One mentioned the need for better staff training and safer hostels. Service providers mentioned that current funding only permits one staff member on site overnight, which has risk management implications.

8.6 Perceptions of role of statutory child protection services

Role of statutory child protection. Most said that roles needed to change. Most respondents thought that CPFS should play some role in supporting young people in this situation, and that CPS should never leave a young person on the street or in an unsafe situation. Many would prefer a model whereby CPFS provided funding to other agencies that support young people. Several argued that youth accommodation agencies ought to be better resourced by CPFS to support young people under 16 years old. There was disagreement about whether CPFS should automatically open a case on every young person who is independently homeless under the age of 16 years. Two respondents argued that a case should always be opened. One respondent disagreed because the cause of homelessness does not always arise from child protection concerns.

Two suggested that CPFS ought to be more engaged with families to prevent family violence and family breakdown and to support young people to return home. One suggested better coordination between homelessness services and the Reconnect program. However it was recognised by some

respondents that the family was not always the best (safest) place for the young person, especially if there is on-going danger of harm. The need for flexibility was stressed in several replies.

Two respondents discussed the importance of the type of relationship between the young person and the worker. Two respondents suggested that a youth work-based relationship might be more productive than current relationships especially where young people have had previously unproductive relationships with CPFS. One respondent said the role of CPFS should be as it is.

Practical suggestions for change. There were several suggestions, including, provision of supported independent single person units, with wraparound services such as one-to-one educational support, better support for young people to stay in school, better financial support for young people, including items like 'Smart riders' (transport payment cards), and provision of therapeutic intervention to support young people before they returned to school. One respondent also suggested that school psychologists needed better training and that trained youth workers should provide support services in schools instead of chaplains. Another suggested a more streamlined assessment process.

8.7 Perceptions of prevention

Prevention: Prevention was considered as important, but not always realistic. It was considered that existing prevention services provided too little, too late. Service providers suggested more funding for services, improvements to early intervention strategies, starting with primary school age children, and work with families and young people to prevent crises. A holistic approach to young people was suggested, and more accommodation for young people who cannot live with their families. Service providers thought cooperation with emergency accommodation services and Reconnect was important and as well as workshops for young people on independent living skills. One person suggested family oriented placements for young people who can't be with their parents but can't manage on their own. Service providers considered it was important to support young people to stay in school. This would be assisted by homelessness prevention work by other professionals including youth workers in schools, and counselling for families and young people.

One of the recurrent themes from the interviews was the need for CPFS to consider more options for this age group, and that CPFS should work preventatively with families before conflicts become entrenched.

8.8 Suggestions for service improvements

Youth work agencies could meet needs if resourced to do so. Better support is required from CPFS for exit plans. Mental health and literacy were identified as areas where some young people needed additional support. Improvements to preventative work with families and reconnect services were mentioned again. Other suggestions included holistic and 'wrap-around' services for young people, use of social media to communicate better with young people. Services should better understand the real life experience of young people. Some commented that service providers should listen to young people, co-design services with young people, ensure that services made young people feel culturally secure, and that services should ask young people about their needs. One respondent also said that some young people want to maintain connections with siblings and parents even if they are homeless. Service providers needed to be more realistic about the position and life experience of young people. The intervention offered has to be sustainable in the context of the realities of the young person's life.

Better support for young people to remain in school. It is common wisdom in the literature that schools are useful for early intervention because they are a universal non-stigmatised service, however, concerns were raised about the lack of confidentiality for young people in a school context.

Better relationship and counselling support for young people and their families. One respondent suggested better access to counselling services but questioned the assumption that school was an appropriate location for the service, because of confidentiality concerns. Several services providers mentioned the importance of gaining trust of young people who are homeless.

Service providers were divided who should lead change. Half suggested changes should be led by the funders (CPFS) and the other half suggested changes should be led by youth services.

Improve communications between government departments. Respondents were concerned that currently departments operate do not communicate well with each other and do not know what other departments are doing.

8.9 Other

Youth accommodation services reported they saw greater numbers of young people under 16 years old than previously. Most felt that early support was important and that with adequate resources they could support young people under 16 years old. One expressed the concern that emergency accommodation was becoming a holding area for young people when other arrangements had broken down, and there was no effective long-term planning. Annual funding does not allow forward planning or shared learning. Current model of competitive tendering makes service providers wary and unwilling to share information about successes and failures.

The full service providers' survey can be found in the report documenting the research design⁵.

9 Discussion

The focus of this report has been upon understanding how best to support young people who experience early independent homelessness. Our interviews with young people illustrated that many had been resourceful actors in shaping their own lives. As some indicated to us, they tried to make the best of the options they perceived they had, knowing that sometimes they did not have any good options. Not all their choices were good, as some acknowledged with hindsight, and not all of their decisions would be sanctioned by society. Our focus is on understanding better what they did, their reasoning and what might have helped them on their journey.

The current support systems are not working well in some important respects. New thinking is needed that characterises young people as actors capable of shaping their own futures. This approach should build on the strengths of young people, support them to develop their talents, as far as possible, and support them to realise their goals in life. Young people's reasons for leaving home, their aspirations and their access to informal supports vary. No single service arrangement is going to work well or be appropriate in every situation.

⁵ Cooper, T. et al. (2018) *Policy and Support Needs of Independent Homeless Young People 12-15 Years: Service providers' perceptions*. Perth: CCYP and ECU

9.1 Homelessness prevention

At present, primary responsibility for young people aged 12-15 years who become homeless rests with CPFS. Concern about dysfunctional families has often been used to advocate early family intervention to prevent youth homelessness by alleviating the circumstances that trigger early homelessness. This is a worthy goal and forms the basis of proactive child protection strategy. Strategy has developed around two options, either amelioration of the family environment or removal of the child or young person to a place of safety. Both these approaches are difficult to implement successfully in the long-term. Intervention to change family environments has a high failure rate, especially where families only engage under duress. Removal of children from their parents does not always improve the young person's life from their perspective, especially if they feel that their concerns have not been acknowledged, or they do not understand why they have been removed. As can be seen from the young people we interviewed, removal from the parental home does not necessarily remove the risks of early homelessness. Almost half the young people who we interviewed indicated that they were or had been in the care of the department.

In Victoria, youth workers attached to schools undertake a general welfare role⁶. This includes homelessness prevention work and support for homeless young people to enable them to continue school attendance. Youth workers also provide breakfast clubs, where necessary, and follow up on school non-attendance. This is relevant because some young people who had become independently homeless at an early age, had had poor school attendance prior to homelessness, and may have come to attention of a service providing support for school attendance. In addition, many children and young people living in chaotic home circumstances who are at risk of homelessness appreciate extra food.

9.2 Initial Response

Except for one young person, all who spoke to us became homeless because they were escaping violence, were abandoned or told to leave, had no family home or were running away from CPFS care. When young people initially became homeless their two most pressing practical needs were for accommodation and for money. Initially most young people used their informal networks to couch surf with friends, relatives or partners. This could be either a relatively safe option or a highly unsafe option depending on where they were staying and with whom. Usually young people who were couch surfing did not have any contact with formal services. School youth workers in Victoria were able to maintain contact with young people in this position and provide support and advice and help them manage risk. In one instance the young person's friend's parents called Crisis Care, and Crisis Care were able to find emergency accommodation. In two instances young people had no informal networks and slept on the streets when they first became homeless. The two young people who did not have informal networks were both reluctant to contact CPFS. Young people who left CPFS placements unilaterally, were more likely to be living on the streets because if they contacted youth accommodation agencies this would be reported to CPFS. It is very difficult to provide support in this situation.

Centrelink support provided income for some young people, but most needed help to make successful claims. Those who did not have access to Centrelink payments were more likely to recount stealing, begging, or staying in abusive relationships in order to have accommodation. Only

⁶MacKenzie, D. (2016). COSS: Building a 'community of schools and services' model. *Parity*, 29(6), 19-21.

two young people managed to work long-term whilst homeless. One 15 year old young woman had her Centrelink payments cut off whilst she was pregnant and homeless.

Family reconnect services connect young people with their families and resolve family conflict. Whilst these services are successful in some instances, they would not have been useful for most young people we spoke with. During the initial stages of homelessness few had family within whom they could safely live. Most of the young people interviewed had no safe and stable family they could be reconnected to. In one instance where there was a stable family, the young person had left because she did not want to live there. She lived in informal housing arrangements, did not approach any services for assistance, found work fairly soon and would not have been considered a priority for reconnect services.

9.3 Accommodation for 12-15 year olds

At present there are very few accommodation options for young people aged 12-15 years. Kin-care arrangements were vulnerable to breakdown when young people reached their early teens. Foster care was rarely available and even when it was available was not often successful. Several young people were critical of CPFS hostels, including claims of bullying and theft. Most of the young people aged 12-15 spent some of the time couch surfing with friends or relatives, living in makeshift shelters, on the street, or living with partners. Young people living on the streets or living with partners were particularly vulnerable to violence and sexual assault.

Because of the high likelihood that the judgement of social workers will be questioned in court if something goes wrong, a culture of defensive practice has developed. The reasons for this are understandable, but it places social workers in a position where they have to prioritise the young person's compliance with orders, over other aspects of their role. When this occurs, it limits the capacity of caseworkers and other CPFS staff to build a supportive and trusting relationship with young people. In response, some young people walk away from the systems that are meant to support them. This increases their vulnerability, especially because if they walk away they usually have no access to any means of financial support. Some who had walked away commented on their lack of connection with caseworkers, some felt unsafe in their placement, and some feared loss of autonomy. One young woman felt that an important decision had not been adequately explained to her. Others felt they had no one they could talk to. The Advocate for Children in Care had played a positive role in the life of one young person who spoke to us and helped him find support in youth accommodation.

Most youth accommodation services only accepted young people who were aged 16 and over. A few agencies will take in young people aged 15. At present, youth accommodation services are unable to help young people aged 12-14 years. Many youth agencies offered wraparound support, including access to care school facilities, and drug and alcohol counselling. We spoke to four young people who had been in youth accommodation when they were 15 years old. They all spoke positively of their experience and said they found staff were supportive. Two reported that the transience of other residents was unsettling. It is possible this type of accommodation may be suitable for some young people who are aged 14 or older, but some youth accommodation workers expressed concern about housing young people who were under 16 in the same house as young people who are adult. Some young people mentioned mental health diagnoses. Many mentioned they wanted someone to talk to who cared about them. Some also said it took them a long time to trust someone, which made traditional counselling services difficult for them. There is a need for informal

counselling within youth services, supplemented where necessary by supported referral to specialist youth mental health services such as Headspace, similar to the model used at Indigo Junction.

Guardianship issues were problematic for many young people until they reached the age of 16 years. The issue of guardianship for young people aged 12-15 needs to be reviewed. At present young people can be classified as independent minors when they reach the age of 16 years, but there is no capacity to classify young people aged less than 16 years as independent minors, even if they have sufficient maturity to make their own decisions about their daily life. Guardianship legislation is intended to protect young people from exploitation, but in practice contributes to some young people being more vulnerable. It was a factor in some young people being unable to obtain accommodation and being forced into unsafe informal housing arrangements for extended periods of time, and also contributed to some being unable to attend school. Some young people were fearful about the possibility that their parents would try to force them to return to an unsafe family home.

9.4 Accommodation 16 plus

Many young people who became homeless when they were under 16 years old continue to need some support services when they are over 16 years old. Youth accommodation services accept young people who were aged 16 and over. Most young people appreciated the support they had received in youth accommodation hostels. The young people appreciated the supportive relationships with staff, and the flexible approach. Some found the rapid change of residents stressful, especially in emergency accommodation, and some also found the behaviour of other residents was difficult. The LIFT program, which was funded by CPFS but delivered by a youth work agency seemed to be working very well, and was successfully supporting some young people who had previously walked away from other forms of CPFS support. Many young people who had become homeless when they were under 16 years old became parents before they had gained stable accommodation. There were insufficient supported youth accommodation places that could take babies. Some young people who have faced particularly difficult circumstances will need support over an extended period of time and will need intensive support to make a successful transition from supported accommodation to independent living.

10 Implications for policy

A number of policy changes are required to respond to challenges identified in this report. In 2008, the Rudd government White Paper ⁷ recommended that additional youth support services should be funded to assist with youth homelessness prevention. Services funded included Headspace, youth mental health services; Reconnect (family conciliation services) and Care schools (schools that focus holistically on both educational and welfare needs of young people). The policy aimed to halve⁸ the number of homeless young people by intervening systemically to address three different aspects of the homelessness problem; namely entry points, homelessness and exit points. Strategy aimed to reduce the 'supply' of young people becoming homeless through strengthening of programs to prevent youth homelessness. Where youth homelessness could not be prevented, strategy aimed to reduce the 'stocks' of young people within the system by improving pathways to enable people within the system to become securely housed, as soon as possible. The final strategy aimed to

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia (2008). *The Road Home: A national approach to reducing homelessness*. Retrieved from: http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/australia_the_road_home_2008.pdf

⁸ MacKenzie, D., & Coffey, M. (2012). Ch-ch-changes?: ... youth homelessness in Australia. *Parity*, 25(3), 8-10.

prevent re-entry into the system through post-vention (support provided after housing has been found) to break cycles of homelessness. We now discuss possible improvements in policy at each of these intervention points. Many aspects of these policies have been successful with some young people, however, five issues emerged from these interviews

10.1 Policy to strengthen prevention of youth homelessness

Prevention and reduction of homelessness are compassionate and cost effective policy goals⁹. There are multiple pathways into homelessness, therefore flexible prevention and early intervention are required. Effective coordination is required to ensure that services are both flexible enough to meet individual needs and cohesive enough to ensure efficient seamless support. Youth workers in schools would be well-placed to provide local coordination of prevention strategy because they have regular non-stigmatising contact with young people and could develop a network of specialist support services, and formal and informal supports.

Youth workers in schools: Attach youth workers to schools in WA, to work directly with young people and their families to provide early intervention to support school attendance, coordinate early intervention if there is a risk of homelessness and to support young people to attend school if they become homeless (similar to the Victorian school youth work model).

Support for kin-carers and young people in their care: More support is needed for grandparents caring for grandchildren, and for the young people being cared for by their grandparents. Support should be provided by whatever agencies are most able to build rapport and a positive relationship. Aboriginal community organisations, and youth worker attached to schools or other local agencies might be well suited to this role in some instances.

10.2 Policy to reduce length of homelessness

Reducing the time a young person is homeless reduces the disruption to their lives. Most of the young people who spoke to us did not have any options that would have prevented homelessness, and homelessness prevention would not have been a safe option. Existing responses to homelessness through CPFS had not been effective with the cohort of young people who spoke to us. Many risks or harms connected with homelessness could be reduced if young people gained timely access to appropriate safe accommodation, income, sufficient support and appropriate autonomy to rebuild their lives.

Youth workers in schools: provide support to link young people quickly to safe accommodation (which may be formal or informal), to Centrelink support and to processes to adjudicate guardianship.

Centrelink: Centrelink claim arrangements need to be streamlined and social work support provided to young people to gain access to identity documents. Youth workers attached to schools and accommodation services could be well placed to provide support with Centrelink claims.

Youth accommodation services: Consideration should be given about whether some youth agencies should offer long-term accommodation for young people aged 12-15, possibly in a separate facility. These services should provide holistic wrap-around support for continued school attendance, at a care school where this is the best option, counselling or mental health support, substance abuse

⁹ Wood, L., Vallesi, S., Kragt, D, Flatau, P., Wood, N., Gazey, A. and Lester, L. (2017). 50 Lives 50 Homes: A Housing First Response to Ending Homelessness. First Evaluation Report. Centre for Social Impact: University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia

counselling and treatment, and review of guardianship arrangements. Reflective of the pathways into homelessness, services need to provide trauma-informed care and holistic responses to meet the needs of the client group they serve.¹⁰

Guardianship: Where young people have sufficient maturity they should be granted independent minor status. This decision should be made on a case-by-case basis with reference to their maturity rather than by reference to their age. Where they are judged not to have sufficient maturity, a public guardian or similar should be appointed, who should be independent of CPFS.

Couch-surfers: Couch surfing may be either relatively safe or relatively risky. School youth workers should attempt to maintain contact with young people who are couch surfers and help mitigate risks and strengthen informal or formal support systems.

Exit points: Exit points need to consider the maturity of individual young people. At present there are no exit points for young people under 16 years old unless they can be reconnected with family, placed in kin-care or, less frequently, foster care. These options should be supported where the young person wants this, where it is safe and appropriate support can be provided, and where there is a reasonable prospect of success. Where young people are judged as capable of independent living they should be supported to access supported youth accommodation including shared housing, Foyer type provision, transitional housing and independent living, as soon as they are sufficiently mature. Other alternatives to the care system or the traditional accommodation programs have been proposed for young people under 16 years old, including the use of an adolescent community placement program. Under this arrangement young people board with families, but in a relationship that is more independent than foster care. For some young people boarding school might be an appropriate option.

Transition from care: Expand the LIFT program so all young people with similar needs get similar opportunities.

Mothers with babies: Expand places for mothers with babies that provide support in parenting (like the Youth Futures Nest program, or the Foyer mother and baby program).

Emergency accommodation: Increase the number of beds in youth accommodation services, as necessary. CPFS hostels should be viewed as a last resort where no other option is safe or appropriate.

Street outreach services: Maintain street outreach youth work to gain the trust of young people living on the streets who are especially vulnerable. The goal should be to reconnect the young person to support services and permanent housing.

10.3 Policy to strengthen prevention of re-entry

LIFT program: The LIFT program was well regarded by young people and seemed to be successfully supporting some young people who had experienced long-term homelessness and other problems. This program should be offered to all young people leaving care and others in similar circumstances to prevent homelessness and to support transition to independent living.

¹⁰ Hamilton, A. B., Poza, I., & Washington, D. L. (2011). "Homelessness and Trauma Go Hand-in-Hand": Pathways to Homelessness among Women Veterans. *Women's Health Issues, 21(4)*, S203-S209. doi:10.1016/j.whi.2011.04.005

Permanent housing: Should be offered when the young person is sufficiently mature, in accordance with the recommendations of the 50 Lives 50 Homes project¹¹ and support should be provided to resolve other issues.

Transitional support: Strengthen transitional support programs for all young people moving into independent accommodation to reduce re-entry into homelessness.

¹¹ Wood, L., Vallesi, S., Kragt, D., Flatau, P., Wood, N., Gazey, A. and Lester, L. (2017). 50 Lives 50 Homes: A Housing First Response to Ending Homelessness. First Evaluation Report. Centre for Social Impact: University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia