



# Youth homelessness in Australia

## How many young people are experiencing or at risk of homelessness across Australia?

In 2020–21, 41,700 young people were supported by specialist homelessness services. [1] It's important to remember that this is the number of young people who accessed support last year; the number of young people who would benefit from homelessness services on any given night is generally accepted to be higher than this.

## Why do young people become homeless?

The causes of homelessness among young people are complex and varied, but the vast majority have been affected by some form of family dysfunction such as domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV), parental alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, and relationship and/or family breakdown.

Many young people experiencing homelessness have experienced disadvantage, intergenerational poverty, complex trauma, exposure to unsafe living environments, mental illness and ill-health, and limited education. Young people leaving out-of-home care (OOHC) are particularly vulnerable to experiences of homelessness – around 1 in 3 young people leaving OOHC experience homelessness within 12 months of leaving care. [2][3]

## Are there different types of homelessness?

Yes – in Australia, homelessness is defined in three categories:

- Primary homelessness refers to people living without conventional accommodation. They may be sleeping rough on the streets or in a park, squatting, or sleeping in cars.
- Secondary homelessness refers to people who may move between temporary shelters, including staying with other households (e.g. couch surfing), emergency accommodation, refuges, hostels and boarding houses on a short-term (less than 12 weeks) basis.
- Tertiary homelessness includes people who are living in unconventional accommodation on a medium- to long-term basis (over 13 weeks) in boarding houses, hostels, caravans, etc. This group are experiencing homelessness because they do not have a secure tenure and their accommodation is not self-contained, so it does not meet the minimum community standards.

In other words, homelessness doesn't necessarily mean 'rooflessness'. Many people needing support may not even recognise that they're experiencing homelessness.

## Why do young people couch surf?

When young people need to stay away from home, couch surfing is often considered to be the best of the few options available to them. There is a significant shortage of refuge beds available to young people, especially in urban areas, which means that young people have to move outside of their local area, causing further social isolation, stress and disengagement from school. Even when formal crisis accommodation options are available for young people, negative perceptions of refuges can be a deterrent to seeking support.

Couch surfing is perceived to be less risky than rough sleeping, so many young couch surfers find they are a low priority for transitioning into stable, long-term housing. [4] Independent living is rarely an option for young couch surfers – someone entitled to Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance may receive up to \$650 a fortnight, but that won't go far in the private rental market.

## What else do we know about Australia's couch surfers?

While lacking a home, couch surfers do have a roof – so they fall into the category of 'hidden homelessness'. [5] Couch surfers are a transient group of vulnerable people and they can be difficult to identify. However, we do know that couch surfers are [6]:

- More likely to be young people – between 50–60% of all couch surfers are between 15–24
- More likely to be young, single women
- Likely to be in school when they first start couch surfing, so have limited access to finances
- Have likely experienced family and/or relationship conflict or breakdown, including DFSV
- More likely to identify as LGBTQIA+

## What are the risk factors associated with couch surfing?

### *General health and wellbeing*

Young people experiencing homelessness have reduced access to health services due to increased mobility, lack of transport and financial difficulties, making the management of any long-term and/or chronic conditions especially challenging. [7] People who couch surf rarely feel comfortable and secure for long, and often lack the stability needed to plan and work towards a solution to their homelessness.

### *Safety*

Some couch surfers experience and report:

- Victimization (e.g. rape, assault, disabling accident, forced to participate in crime, victim of crime)
- Experiences of couch surfing as 'casual sex' or 'sex surfing' – 'survival sex' is especially common among young women, and issues of consent and coercion become murky when young people decide to stay with a couch provider and have sex with them rather than sleep rough. Some young people report knowing that sexual exchange is implicit in the agreement to stay with a couch provider [8]
- Economic exploitation, e.g. having Centrelink money, Youth Allowance or Family Tax Benefit directed to the couch provider

However, it's important to remember that many couch providers – including the parents of friends, extended family members, or other members of the community – genuinely want to help young couch surfers and provide a roof, food, care, safety, clothes, amenities, transport and money. [9]

### ***Mental illness***

People with mental illness or poor mental health are at increased risk of experiencing homelessness, due to increased vulnerability, difficulty sustaining employment, and withdrawing from friends and family. In turn, the stress of homelessness increases the risk of poor mental health.

Living without a home is an inherently stressful predicament, which may increase fear, anxiety, depression, sleeplessness and exacerbate or trigger underlying mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. [10] These risks increase with the duration of homelessness.

In 2020–21, 48% of the young people presenting to specialist homelessness services reported mental health issues. [11]

### **Are all people who couch surf experiencing homelessness?**

The nuclear family home is a Western concept that does not apply to every community, and it is important to recognise that in many cultures, children and young people regularly move between the homes of family and community members, often for extended periods of time. There is a community responsibility to raise children, and each member of the community has a different role to play. This is particularly true for First Nations peoples, Pacific Islander and Māori communities. So no, not everyone who couch surfs is experiencing homelessness.

## **References**

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[4] Hail-Jares, K., Vichta-Ohlsen, R. & Nash, C. (2019). "Safer inside? Comparing the Experiences and Risks Faced by Young People Who Couch-Surf and Sleep Rough." *Journal of Youth Studies*. 24(3), 305–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1727425>.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2018). Couch surfers: a profile of Specialist Homelessness Services clients. Cat. no. HOU 298. Canberra: AIHW <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/ef251a96-2089-41ab-928c-119ffd349a9a/aihw-hou-298.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

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