

THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## **Homeless Youth**

**Report from the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare**

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ISBN 0 644 017 589

*Terms of reference*

*The causes of, the problems associated with and the effect on Australian society of homeless youth, including—*

- (a) the availability of suitable emergency and long-term accommodation and the factors affecting access by youth to such accommodation;*
- (b) the availability of and the need for complementary services and other community support;*
- (c) the appropriate responsibilities of governments at all levels in the provision of services to this group; and*
- (d) the role and responsibilities of the family in supporting young people.*

*MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE*

*Senator Shirley Walters (Tasmania), Chairman*

*Senator Neville Bonner (Queensland)*

*Senator Ron Elstob (South Australia)*

*Senator Pat Giles (Western Australia)*

*Senator Don Grimes (Tasmania)*

*Senator Bern Kilgariff (Northern Territory)*

*Former Member of the Committee*

*Senator Jean Melzer (Victoria) (to 30 June 1981)*

*Secretary*

*Peter Keele*

*The Senate*

*Parliament House*

*Canberra*

*'Homeless youths' needs are hardly extravagant and certainly fall within the inalienable rights of all people; the right to food, shelter and a positive, loving family environment. Since homeless youngsters do not have these needs fulfilled in a family context, it may be necessary to explore independent living facilities, teach them life skills and give them supports for an interim period, while they move toward adulthood.'*

United States Senate, December 1980

Report of the Sub-committee on the Constitution of the Committee on the Judiciary,  
U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington.

## CONTENTS

Strategy for Homeless Youth	Page xi
Recommendations	xiii

### CHAPTER 1 THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction	1
The family	2
Support for the family	4
Conclusion	5
A profile of homeless youth	5
Report on the Youth Services Scheme	6
Report of the Victorian Consultative Committee on Social Development	7
North West Youth Accommodation Working Group	7
South Australian Council of Social Services	8
Accommodation Needs of Adolescents, Tasmania (1977)	8
Canberra Youth Refuge, Australian Capital Territory	8
Wayside Chapel- The Shepherd of the Streets Program, Sydney	9
Community Seminar on Homeless Youths, Western Australia	9
Perth's Homeless Youth Research Project — January to August, 1980	9
Hostel population	10
Non-hostel population	10
Jesus People Welfare Services Inc. medical/social study of homeless youth	11
'Rough profile'	12
Effects of homelessness	12
Needs of homeless youth	13
Identified areas of concern	14
Unemployment	14
Education and the school system	14
Conclusion	16
Institutional background	16
Aboriginals	17
Needs of Aboriginal youth	18
Conclusion	20
Indo-Chinese refugees	20
Conclusion	22

### CHAPTER 2 EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction	26
Surveys	28
Conclusion	30

	Page
<b>CHAPTER 3 CRISIS ACCOMMODATION</b>	
Youth Services Scheme	31
Refuges not funded under Youth Services Scheme	33
The role of youth refuges	34
The need for youth refuges	36
The future of youth refuges	39
Staffing	39
Funding for crisis accommodation	40
Conclusion	41
<b>CHAPTER 4 BEYOND THE YOUTH REFUGE</b>	
Introduction	43
Why has the housing shortage arisen?	43
Access to private and public rental accommodation	46
Access to private market	47
Access to public housing	50
Specific youth housing schemes	52
Conclusion	56
<b>CHAPTER 5 YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND INCOME SECURITY</b>	
Youth unemployment	60
Unemployment benefits	62
Benefit levels	63
Benefit eligibility	63
Government responsibility	63
Overseas experience	63
Income security recommendations	64
Conclusion	67
<b>CHAPTER 6 GOVERNMENT SPONSORED YOUTH AND OTHER RELATED PROGRAMS</b>	
Introduction	69
Commonwealth funded programs	69
Family Support Services Scheme	69
Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service	71
Decentralised professional social work services	72
Employment and training programs	72
Trade training	72
Commonwealth Rebate for Apprentice Full-time Training (CRAFT)	72
Special Apprenticeship Assistance Program	73
Group One-Year Training Scheme	74
Group Apprenticeship Support Scheme	74
Special Training Arrangements	74

	Page
Skills Training	74
Skills in Demand Projects	74
General Training Assistance	75
Industry Training Services	75
Youth Training	75
School to Work Transition Allowances	75
Special Youth Employment Training Program (SYETP)	76
Special Training Program	76
Training for the Disabled	76
Training for Aboriginals	76
Commonwealth Employment Service	77
Other Commonwealth programs	77
School to Work Transition Program	77
Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS)	77
Purpose of programs	78
Conclusion	78

## **CHAPTER 7 SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**

Terms of reference	80
Identified areas of responsibility	80
Conclusion	82

## **CHAPTER 8 BACKGROUND AND CONDUCT OF THE INQUIRY**

Acknowledgements	83
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## **APPENDIXES**

Appendix 1 Extracts from 'Families and Social Services in Australia', a report to the Minister for Social Security, AGPS, Canberra, 1978	85
Appendix 2 Renting Conventions, Capital Cities, March 1981	90
Appendix 3 A Proposal for a Developmental Program for Homeless Young People	91
Appendix 4 Income Support Schemes and Other Measures—Overseas Experience	98
Appendix 5 List of Witnesses	110
Appendix 6 List of Submissions	118

## **A STRATEGY FOR HOMELESS YOUTH**

The Committee has developed the following strategy which it urges both government and community (particularly families) to acknowledge and recognise.

- 1.** That families have a legal and/or moral responsibility to support and shelter their children up to at least 18 years of age. This responsibility is reinforced in the Commonwealth Family Law Act 1975.
- 2.** That when family support breaks down irretrievably or is non-existent, both government and the community have a clear responsibility to provide the necessary support for the young person until such time as he or she is able to make the final transition to full independent living. Indications for intervention at any other stage by government are not at all clearcut and therefore it cannot be taken that assistance will be automatic and unconditional. Care must be taken that government does not usurp the responsibility of parents under most family situations.
- 3.** That young people have obligations. They cannot expect that the community will unconditionally support them if they wish to become independent without first being able to establish appropriate living skills and secure full-time employment.
- 4.** That family breakdown and youth unemployment are major factors which are associated with youth homelessness.
- 5.** That there is no perfect substitute for a strong supportive family network and full-time employment, and therefore any youth housing programs and income support schemes must be second best.
- 6.** That homeless youth programs should not isolate homeless youth from mainstream society.
- 7.** That homeless youth are individuals and the delivery of any program to assist them must acknowledge that personal needs of each participant may vary considerably.
- 8.** That homeless youth are an integral part of our community and their rights to public housing should be recognised. However, the needs of one group should always be seen in the context of the needs of all other groups. While hard and fast rules cannot be established regarding the setting of priorities, broad guidelines are nonetheless frequently adopted. For example, it is accepted that low income families should receive preference over homeless youth when it comes to the allocation of low cost public housing.
- 9.** That greater utilisation of social welfare resources can only be achieved by greater co-operation between the many well-established agencies and newly emerging groups. Regional programs managed by broadly based community committees which pool resources and talents will provide a far more effective social welfare delivery system than organisations working in isolation. There is a need for greater co-operation rather than competition.
- 10.** That government sponsored youth housing projects should endeavour to make full use of all existing dwellings before new capital programs are approved. There are many hostels, institutions and houses that are either lying idle or grossly under-utilised. Every effort should be made to assist schemes which can bring these types of accommodation up to an acceptable standard for homeless youth.
- 11.** That Commonwealth Government funds for homeless youth programs be made available only to community groups and organisations who have fully costed their proposals and have laid down clearly identifiable standards, goals and objectives and are willing to submit necessary data to facilitate the planning of services.
- 12.** That Commonwealth Government funds for homeless youth should be made available on the basis of a demonstrated need in a particular region or district.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### CHAPTER 3

#### CRISIS ACCOMMODATION

1. That the Youth Services Scheme guidelines issued by the Commonwealth Department of Social Security should state clearly that youth workers must attempt to ascertain the circumstances of a child becoming homeless and, wherever possible, should reunite the young person with his parents.
2. That the Commonwealth/State funded Youth Services Scheme be continued, but that there be a rationalisation of existing services.
3. That as part of the continuation of the Youth Services Scheme, adequate funds be made available to provide a nationally co-ordinated 'in service' training program. Further, funding of particular programs under the Scheme should be conditional on that program ensuring that all staff do undertake some form of approved 'in service' training.
4. That a rate of pay be determined by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission which would establish a salary scale for youth refuge workers that would be consistent with other rates of pay in the social welfare area.
5. That the present form of funding (Commonwealth/State matched grants) for the Youth Services Scheme be continued for the majority of funds expended on the Scheme.
6. That matching grants provided by the Commonwealth and state governments should be substantially increased from their present level of \$2 million per annum.
7. That the Commonwealth provides additional funds to ensure that a properly co-ordinated data collection study is undertaken and that a nationally supervised 'in service' youth refuge worker training scheme is established.

### CHAPTER 4

#### BEYOND THE YOUTH REFUGE

8. That more flexible housing policies at both Commonwealth and state levels be implemented which will make more efficient use of existing housing stocks and enable the conversion of other government owned dwellings to suitable residential accommodation.
9. That all state governments should seriously study the establishment of a universal bond insurance scheme.
10. That if the guidelines under the Homeless Persons Assistance Act cannot be modified in such a way as to help homeless youth housing schemes, part of the \$10 million special capital grant should be transferred to another area where youth housing schemes will be given more favourable treatment.
11. That money available under the \$10 million capital grants program be made available to fund medium to long-term supportive households. No funds should be made available from this grant to provide additional youth refuges such as those established under the Youth Services Scheme.
12. That funding for homeless youth under the \$10 million special capital grant program should give priority to community groups who put up medium to long-term supportive household proposals.

**13.** That all youth housing proposals should seek a commitment to both the conversion of non-residential properties and the renovation of vacant dwellings in order to maximise the accommodation available and to offer a range of housing alternatives for homeless youth. In this way the contribution of Commonwealth Funding to housing projects will result in the mobilisation of housing resources many times greater in value than the contribution made.

**14.** That Commonwealth funds be made available for youth housing proposals requiring the purchase of a dwelling only if there are no existing dwellings which could be made available to a particular community group within a specified region.

**15.** That further funding from both Commonwealth and state governments could be made available under the Housing Assistance Act 1981, once it is clearly demonstrated that the medium to long term supportive households do fulfil a necessary and continuing need for homeless youth.

## CHAPTER 5

### YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND INCOME SECURITY

**16.** That an allowance equivalent to the difference between the over 18 years of age unemployment benefit rate and the junior unemployment benefit rate should be made available to certain unemployed youth under 18 years of age. These would include:

- (a) those who have had to establish themselves away from the family or statutory home;
- (b) those whose family's financial circumstances are such that the additional benefit would enable the family to remain together as a unit rather than the young person being forced into possible homelessness.

Apart from special instances, the allowance would be paid directly to the hostel or supportive household which is accommodating the young person after an appropriate application has been made on his or her behalf.

**17.** That if senior secondary students (over 16 years of age) are homeless and have to seek accommodation in a youth hostel or supportive household, the Commonwealth Government should pay the cost of that person's board and lodgings and ensure that the Secondary Allowance is paid directly to the young person concerned. The total cost involved should not exceed the adult unemployment rate.