

Issues Paper: Refugee Youth Homelessness



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Introduction

This issues paper presents the key findings and recommendations of the MY SAFE SPACE research project. This research aimed to determine the key factors contributing to refugee youth homelessness in South Australia. This project was funded by the Adelaide City Council and was undertaken by Multicultural Youth South Australia Inc (MYSA).

Background

Over 700,000 refugees have migrated to Australia since the end of the Second World War and up to 13,500 more are added to this number each year under Australia's current Humanitarian Program (Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC, 2009). Children and youth make up at least 40% of Australia's humanitarian intake at any given point in time, with almost 70% of the current intake being under the age of 30 years (Ferguson, 2009; DIAC, 2009, 2010). According to the Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010), young refugees and migrants are up to 10 times more at risk of becoming homeless than their counterparts in the general Australian population. A range of factors individually or combined contribute to refugee youth homelessness. The general shortage of appropriate and affordable housing together with resettlement difficulties, family conflict, changed family configurations, overcrowding, and a general lack of support, place many young refugees at increased risk.

Methodology

This study included two groups of informants: (1) service and education providers that work with young refugees and; (2) young refugees who had lived in temporary accommodation or had slept rough for six or more consecutive nights. Of the 58 service providers contacted, 35 completed questionnaires, yielding a participation rate of 60%. Of the 79 young people contacted, 69 completed questionnaires, yielding a participation rate of 87%. A cross-sectional questionnaire containing both quantitative and qualitative questions was used to gather information from both service providers and young people. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows was used to assist with quantitative data analysis. Qualitative data was analysed using a thematic approach and was coded manually as suggested by Krueger and Casey (2000, pp. 132-141).

Refugee Youth homelessness Key Findings: Service Providers

A variety of service providers across a range of service areas participated in the research, with housing services (15) representing the largest group, followed by education providers (schools) (7), mainstream youth services (5), general community services (4), multicultural services (2), local government services (1), and peak bodies (1).

Of the 35 service providers who returned their questionnaires, 83% reported that they had observed an increase in refugee youth homelessness over the past five years.

The factors cited as contributing to youth homelessness included:

- Family conflict and/or violence
- Lack of independent living skills
- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Lack of access to housing
- Teenage pregnancy
- Language and cultural barriers
- Mental health issues
- Behavioural issues
- Overcrowding
- Financial hardship
- Racism and discrimination

The strategies service providers suggested would help address refugee youth homelessness include: (a) targeted intervention programs to reduce family breakdown; (b) improved access to education, training and employment for young people who are homeless or who are at risk of becoming homeless; (c) support to help young people obtain their own accommodation and maintain independent living; (d) youth specific housing advice and support; (e) targeted housing information and options for youth in crisis; and (f) targeted interventions to prevent youth homelessness occurring as a result of behavioural problems.

"Homelessness with new arrival refugees has increased, especially within African communities. We ... need more training and resources to be able to work with this group. They are highly at risk and current shelter-style accommodation is not [the] most suitable for refugees."

"Multicultural young people that access our service are usually victims of domestic violence and unable to stay in the family home or are needing a safe place to stay."

"Young people are being kicked out of home due to ... conflict with the family and trying to seek greater independence."

"Not understanding the culture here and not having skills to live independently leads to homelessness."

"Refugees report that they are unable to find suitable accommodation as everything is at capacity."

"[There needs to be] increased community/government focus on community support for refugee families, including advocacy, transition support, parenting support and education – all with a focus on minimising family violence – a large factor is refugee/migrant youth homelessness."

"We have also noticed high levels of racism in the housing market."

"Some of these things are already happening but [service name removed] says they look after refugees for two years after they arrive in Australia but really they drop the support after 6 months ... there needs to be continued support for refugees, especially youth after age 17 when they no longer attend school and can't get employment."

Refugee Youth homelessness Key Findings: Young People

In total, 69 young people aged between 16 and 29 years participated in the research. Of these, 29 were male and 40 were female. Participants came from a variety of refugee source countries including Afghanistan (4%), Burundi (3%), Congo (9%), Ghana (1%), Iran (2%), Iraq (4%), Kenya (1%), Kurdistan (2%), Liberia (9%), Sierra Leone (7%), Somalia (13%), Sudan (44%) and Uganda (1%). In total, 74% had arrived in Australia during the last five years and of these, 33% had arrived in the last two years. Although 66% of young people had at least one biological parent living in Australia, 11% only had older siblings and 8% had no caregivers at all.

In total, 36% of young people were under the age of 18 years when they first became homeless and 64% were 18 years of age or older. The average age at which those under the age of 18 years first came homeless was 16 years, with the youngest age being 14 years. With respect to the duration of homelessness, 64% of young people reported being homeless for two months or less while others reported a more protracted period of time ranging from 3-6 months (16%), 7-11 months (7%), 12 months (10%), and 18 months (1%) respectively. Just under half (47%) of young people had been homeless once, 40% had been homeless between two and four times, and 13% had been homeless five times or more.

Family violence (34%) and conflict (34%) were the two most important factors contributing to refugee youth homelessness, completing eclipsing other factors such as the expiration of humanitarian settlement service accommodation (10%); overcrowding (9%); choosing or being forced to live independently (9%) and; eviction from private rental properties (4%).

With respect to service utilisation rates and patterns, 77% of young people reported they had accessed one or more services when they became homeless. MYSA was the most frequently used service (55%), followed by Trace-a-Place (45%), Housing SA (13%), MRC (7%), school counsellors (7%) ARA (7%), and Chisholm Place (7%).

The remaining 23% reported they had not accessed any services at all. The reported barriers to service utilization included:

- A preference for managing problems alone (21%)
- Lack of knowledge about where to find help (14%)
- A general lack of understanding about how services work (14%)
- Not wanting to go to service providers (12%)
- Communication or language difficulties (10%)
- The perception that services would not help (10%)
- Not receiving help despite seeking it out (7%)
- Feelings of embarrassment when asking for help (5%)
- Overly lengthy waiting times for appointments and assistance (5%)
- Being too far from service providers (2%)

"My father hit me and I had to go to hospital. It was very bad. My brother also hit me."

"I got pregnant and my parents kicked me out. I can't live with my boyfriend because he lives with his family."

Refugee Youth homelessness Key Findings: Young People

Young people were asked to provide suggestions on how to address refugee youth homelessness. Some young people suggested that nothing could be done, or were unsure about what could be done to address the problem. However, others cited a need for: (a) greater access to public housing suitable for the specific needs of refugees, in particular those who are single and those who belong to large families; (b) an increase in government housing and related subsidises so young people can be more competitive in the high-cost private rental market; (c) greater access to student accommodation for those who are at school, TAFE or university when they become homeless; (d) family and parenting intervention programs to enable parents to maintain supportive parenting; (e) improved knowledge of and access to housing information and support services; (f) independent living skills programs to enable young people to live on their own and; (g) education programs to reduce racism and discrimination in the private rental market.

"When we came to Australia, she [mother] told me to follow tradition and get married to the person she chose for me. That's when I left because I couldn't take it anymore. She became more abusive than usual."

"[HSS housing] finish and then I have to move somewhere. They did not give me a house so I stay with friends but [I have to] move and move because I have no house for me. I am angry and it's hard to do this by yourself. I have no family here."

"The house is too small ... my dad ask me to leave the house ... I still talk with my parents. I couldn't live at home because it's too small. So government should also give houses to fit big families, at good prices."

"I was lucky because I spoke to good people who helped me quickly."

"I miss my mother but she can't ask my [violent] brother to leave because he is very strong and tall."

"It's hard because I don't have a job and I have to study. I lost my parents during the war. It really pains me."

"One housing place I went to, I had to wait for an hour and when I asked to see a worker, the receptionist told me in a mean way to wait [as if to say] 'Why don't you just fucking sit down' so I left and didn't come back."

"MYSA [was] very good. I feel help and happy for someone to care for me because it is hard to do by yourself ... good help for me so I am study now and live good life."

"Nobody help me. Nothing is being done."

"Trace-a-Place was helpful. She was giving me all the support I needed. Housing SA told me they couldn't help me because my Centrelink payments were down. At MRC they helped me a little bit. They took me to a hotel and gave me emergency accommodation."

"I've been told to help myself. I get sick of asking for no result."

"[The service] wasn't helping me enough ... not helpful, telling me only information."

"The workers explained everything to me but they always said the waiting list was long. They couldn't really help me find my own place, only shared accommodation and I didn't want that."

"We need more understanding ... they think we lie and they need to be understanding of our issues."

"Don't turn them [homeless refugees] away. It's embarrassing to ask for help especially when you're an adult. Show more compassion, don't just follow the rules."

Refugee Youth homelessness: Recommendations

Improving access and equity in housing outcomes for young refugees requires attention from policymakers and service planners. The following recommendations have been developed to address the key concerns identified in this research.

1. *Increase public housing stock, including stock suitable for single people and larger families.*
2. *Increase access to short-term emergency and crisis accommodation with a particular focus on young mothers, pregnant women, young people with behavioural and mental health issues, and young people escaping family violence.*
3. *Increase financial support to young refugees moving into private rental properties (e.g., increase rent assistance).*
4. *Increase education and training for young people in tenancy rights and responsibilities and housing support services. This should include age and culture appropriate tenancy education materials and resources, including DVDs.*
5. *Increase access to youth-specific housing information with an emphasis on the different needs of young mothers, pregnant women, and those with behavioural and mental health problems.*
6. *Provide more support to refugee youth to maintain independent living. Programs should focus on daily living skills such as budgeting, cooking and managing a household.*
7. *Improve access to education, training and support for refugee/migrant youth who are at risk of becoming homeless.*
8. *Develop targeted programs for families experiencing violence and conflict. Programs should acknowledge and respect cross-cultural differences in parenting values and practices and work in partnership with refugee communities in the development of support services.*
9. *Provide appropriate education to real estate agents about anti-discrimination laws and cultural awareness.*
10. *The housing related issues and needs of young refugees need to be accorded special consideration in program and service responses resulting from the Homelessness 2020 initiative.*
11. *Ensure that housing support and related services collect accurate and informative data about the cultural and linguistic identity of service users so that refugees and migrants can be distinguished from other groups.*

References

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