

# #StayHome? The Impact of Covid-19 on Unaccompanied Homeless Children in Tasmania

Catherine Robinson, Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania, Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Social Sciences, UTAS

On 19 March 2020, the Tasmanian Government declared a Public Health Emergency, and subsequently a State of Emergency, in response to the global spread of the Covid-19 virus. This State of Emergency included travel restrictions, mandatory quarantine periods, and broad public health measures that enforced social distancing and required people to stay at home, except for activities deemed essential. Nationally, the directive to '#StayHome' became a media trend, with the hashtag even displayed by Australia's major telecommunications company in place of its own network name (Telstra) from March to June 2020. In the housing and homelessness sectors, the economic impact of restrictions and the social impact of stay-at-home requirements triggered rapid advocacy on mortgage and rent stabilisations, proactive accommodation of rough sleepers in some Australian states, and, where possible, the fast-forwarding of social housing investment.

All states and territories notably struggled however, to provide differentiated, cohort-specific responses, which led to rising concern about the impacts of Covid-19 and related required distancing and isolation measures on those especially vulnerable, in particular homeless children and youth.<sup>1</sup> This was troubling in Tasmania, which has a disproportionate number of young people aged 15 to 24 who are homeless,<sup>2</sup> and, of particular concern, for an unknown number of unaccompanied homeless children under 18, many of whom will not receive economic stimulus and social support measures because of their young age, transience, and non-involvement with Child Safety Services.

Children come to experience unaccompanied homelessness amidst breakdowns in family relationships and an absence of effective guardianship, and in the context of the broader lack of child, adolescent, and family support systems working to prevent and end child homelessness. Children who experience homelessness alone without a parent or guardian can experience abuse, neglect, and ongoing cumulative trauma. They are more likely to couch surf than sleep rough or access Specialist Homeless Services (SHS), to have a range of physical and mental health support needs, to be living with little or no income, and to face challenges in both accessing and remaining engaged in school.<sup>3</sup>

In 2018-19 SHS data recorded that over 14,000 children aged 10 to 17 presented alone to SHS in Australia, and 410 children aged 10 to 17 presented alone to SHS in Tasmania.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that such figures only reflect those in contact with limited services, and is not a reflection of the actual population size, nor of the predominant form of homelessness for this cohort: couch-surfing.

Despite these significant numbers and compounding risks, the conflation of child homelessness and youth homelessness in Australia has contributed to the only recent emergence of unaccompanied homeless children as an explicit focus of research in Australia.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally homeless children have only been visible as 'accompanying dependents' in the context of family homelessness, and more broadly it is commonly, but mistakenly, assumed that unaccompanied children receive a response through child protection services.

Unaccompanied homeless children, both with and without Child Protection Orders in place, have long received care within youth homelessness services. This practice has been made necessary by an absence of child protection capacity and alternative care services, and has had the unintended consequence of obscuring the developmentally specific needs of this cohort. As such, unaccompanied children are only slowly being recognised in policy and systemic service delivery, with the exception being the Homeless Youth Assistance Program in New South Wales (NSW) and associated NSW policy addressing 12- to 15-year-olds in Specialist Homeless Services.<sup>6</sup> In Tasmania, positive steps towards changes in policy and practice have been led by the Department of Communities Under 16s Homelessness Taskforce; its Ministerial Advice is now being considered for implementation by an operationally focused Under 16s Working Group, convened in June 2020.<sup>7</sup>

The long-standing impacts of inadequate responses to unaccompanied homeless children, and the anticipated health and social impacts of Covid-19 on vulnerable children,<sup>8</sup> prompted the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania to undertake statewide research to monitor the effects of Covid-19 on unaccompanied homeless children. Community-based support workers delivering youth outreach and SHS were involved in two waves of interviews with the first in May-June 2020 and the second in October/November 2020. More details about the research approach and findings can be found in the interim report made available in August, and a final report will be published in December.<sup>9</sup>

Outlined below are some headline observations which capture the poor interface between public health and this highly vulnerable cohort, and highlight the urgency of developing a full suite of prevention, early-intervention, and intensive tertiary responses to children who experience homelessness alone.

### 1. The problematic withdrawal of face-to-face service provision

During the declared public health emergency in Tasmania March–June 2020, both government and community services dramatically reduced their face-to-face contact with vulnerable children. While this was replaced with other forms of communication, support workers participating in the research consistently identified the essential value of face-to-face connection for children who have often already experienced complex trauma and are not in the consistent care of a parent or guardian. Phone support was shown to be inadequate for children who are often in high-risk settings, who rely on services for practical day-to-day support and who benefit from therapeutic in-person connection with safe adults.

### 2. Home school doesn't work for children without homes

Support workers reported that very few unaccompanied homeless children were able to take up 'home school' options, particularly those couch-surfing. High pre-Covid-19 levels of school disengagement, significant learning challenges, and lack of access to technology, an appropriate study space and adult guidance, made home schooling inaccessible for the majority of clients. After the end of the Term One extended holiday period, children struggled to access or engage with on-site schooling without the face-to-face encouragement, support, and transport provided by community service organisations.

### 3. The ongoing need for secure accommodation

During March–June, two youth shelters reduced capacity by 50 per cent and all SHS individually implemented public health advice on social distancing and stay home directives. Workers made it clear that children and young people were exited for breaches of Covid-safe house rules

and that others self-exited due to concerns about managing mental health and drug use and a lack of contact with family and friends in a locked down shelter environment. An increase in children rough sleeping was observed through the Safe Night Space and, whilst workers observed couch-surfing clients had managed to identify relatively stable placements during the emergency period, they felt clients were being welcomed into higher risk households. Having offered extended stays through the Covid-19 period, by October/November workers in crisis accommodation were beginning to feel the looming pressure of exiting clients. Workers consistently raised the paradox that due to pandemic tenancy protections, the lack of 'movement' in the housing system through evictions resulted in even fewer exit options, with those under-16 facing a particularly impossible future.

### 4. A lack of clarity about how to coordinate Covid-19 testing and age-appropriate isolation for homeless children not in the care of a parent or guardian

During March–June, workers reported being without clear advice on Covid-19 response options for unaccompanied homeless children. In late October, the Department of Communities released Covid-19 planning and outbreak management advice but, despite the advocacy of workers in the youth SHS sector, lack of clarity prevailed and remained evident in interviews with workers held in October/November. (10) In particular, workers continued to be unclear about how to transport children with symptoms to and from Covid-19 testing sites and how age-appropriate isolation would be provided. While they acknowledged the complexities posed by the unique combination of care issues in this cohort, they also saw the lack of detailed Covid-19 planning as symptomatic of the long-standing limited response to the care needs of these children in Tasmania.

### 5. The uphill battle for recovery when the 'return to normal' involves children living without a home or care

Aside from the negative impacts of the withdrawal of face-to-face support, support workers observed the striking lack of impact of Covid-19 in the

lives of unaccompanied homeless children, albeit within a context of low infection rates in Tasmania. Already experiencing homelessness, isolation, family breakdown, poor school engagement, poor mental health, and unemployment, the key threats posed to the broader community by Covid-19 were already normalised in the lives of unaccompanied homeless children. In fact, with increased income and accommodation somewhat stabilised during the lockdown period, the return to 'normal' for this cohort, as observed by workers, involved a return to worsened instability and poverty. Further, they were acutely aware of increased pressure across the support services that children rely on and of the negative impacts of broader community and family anxiety and economic stress.

### A 'new normal' for Unaccompanied Homeless Children

Implementation of the Covid-19 recovery catch-cry — 'building back better' — is more urgent in the lives of unaccompanied homeless children than ever before. In addition to the work of Under 16s Homelessness Taskforce and Working Group led by Department of Communities, and building in particular on the work undertaken by the Youth Coalition of the ACT,<sup>11</sup> Anglicare has continued to actively contribute to discussion about improved responses to unaccompanied child homelessness in Tasmania.

Specifically, Anglicare's recently published roadmap for ending unaccompanied child homelessness in Tasmania offers a vision for a 'new normal' of prevention, early-intervention, and care provision for children at risk of or experiencing the breakdown of effective guardianship and homelessness.<sup>12</sup> This roadmap includes responses to the specific issues so starkly exposed by Covid-19; in particular, the need for a suite of care options which cover both family reunification and long-term care, and the need to actively address the extraordinary ongoing learning loss experienced by unaccompanied homeless children.

Recovery, for unaccompanied homeless children, is certainly not about returning to pre-Covid life. It is about being able to access

foundational experiences of care and safety for long enough to heal from the impacts of family breakdown, abuse and abandonment, and rebuilding the family connections, other natural supports and educational pathways that will enable them to live independent lives with meaning. Tasmania seems to be on the cusp of a new era in which the presence and needs of unaccompanied homeless children are more broadly acknowledged, understood and responded to. What 'new normal' will be delivered for children, time will tell.

#### Endnotes

1. See Flatau P, Seivwright A, Hartley C, Bock C and Callis Z 2020, *Homelessness and Covid-19: CSI Response*, Centre for Social Impact, p. 8.
2. Australia Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2020, *Specialist Homeless Services Collection Data Cubes 2011-12 to 2018-19*, viewed 13 July 2020, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/specialist-homelessness-services-collection-shsc-data-cubes>.
3. Robinson C 2017, *Too hard? Highly vulnerable teens in Tasmania*, Anglicare Tasmania.
4. AIHW 2020, op cit.
5. See for example, Chowdry K, Barker J and Watts H 2018, *Youth workers' perspectives on youth homelessness for 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory*, Youth Coalition of the ACT, Canberra; Cooper T 2018, *Policy and support needs of independent homeless young people 12-15 years: Young people's voices*, Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia and Edith Cowan University; Noble-Carr D and Trew S 2018, *'Nowhere to go': Investigating homelessness experiences of 12-15 year olds in the Australian Capital Territory*, Institute for Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, Canberra; Robinson C 2017, *Who cares? Supported accommodation for unaccompanied children*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart; Robinson C 2018, *Outside in: How the youth sector supports the school re-engagement of vulnerable children in Tasmania*, Anglicare Tasmania, Hobart.
6. NSW Department of Family and community Services 2015, *Unaccompanied children and young people 12-15 years accessing Specialist Homelessness Services policy*, [https://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/file/0011/369515/Unaccompanied-Children-and-Young-People-12-15-Years-Accessing-SHS-Policy....pdf](https://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/file/0011/369515/Unaccompanied-Children-and-Young-People-12-15-Years-Accessing-SHS-Policy....pdf).
7. See Department of Communities 2020, *Under 16s Homelessness Taskforce: Ministerial Advice*, [https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0029/89705/Ministerial-Advice-Background-Documents-Final-24122019-Redacted-1.0.pdf](https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0029/89705/Ministerial-Advice-Background-Documents-Final-24122019-Redacted-1.0.pdf).
8. Berman G 2020, *Ethical considerations for evidence generation involving children on the Covid-19 pandemic*, Office of Research-



9. Robinson C 2020, *#StayHome? The impacts of Covid-19 on unaccompanied homeless children in Tasmania: Interim Report*, Anglicare Tasmania, <https://www.anglicare-tas.org.au/research/stayhome-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-unaccompanied-homeless-children-in-tasmania/>.

10. Department of Communities 2020, *Covid-19 Preparedness and response plan for specialist housing settings in Tasmania*, [https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/126373/Covid-19-Preparedness-and-Response-Plan-for-Specialist-Housing-Settings.pdf](https://www.communities.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/126373/Covid-19-Preparedness-and-Response-Plan-for-Specialist-Housing-Settings.pdf).
11. See Youth Coalition of the ACT, *Preventing child homelessness in the ACT*, <https://www.youthcoalition.net/preventing-child-homelessness-in-the-act/>.
12. Robinson C 2020, *A public health approach to ending unaccompanied child homelessness in Tasmania*, <https://www.anglicare-tas.org.au/research/sarcs-social-action-series-1-a-public-health-approach-to-ending-unaccompanied-child-homelessness-in-tasmania/>.