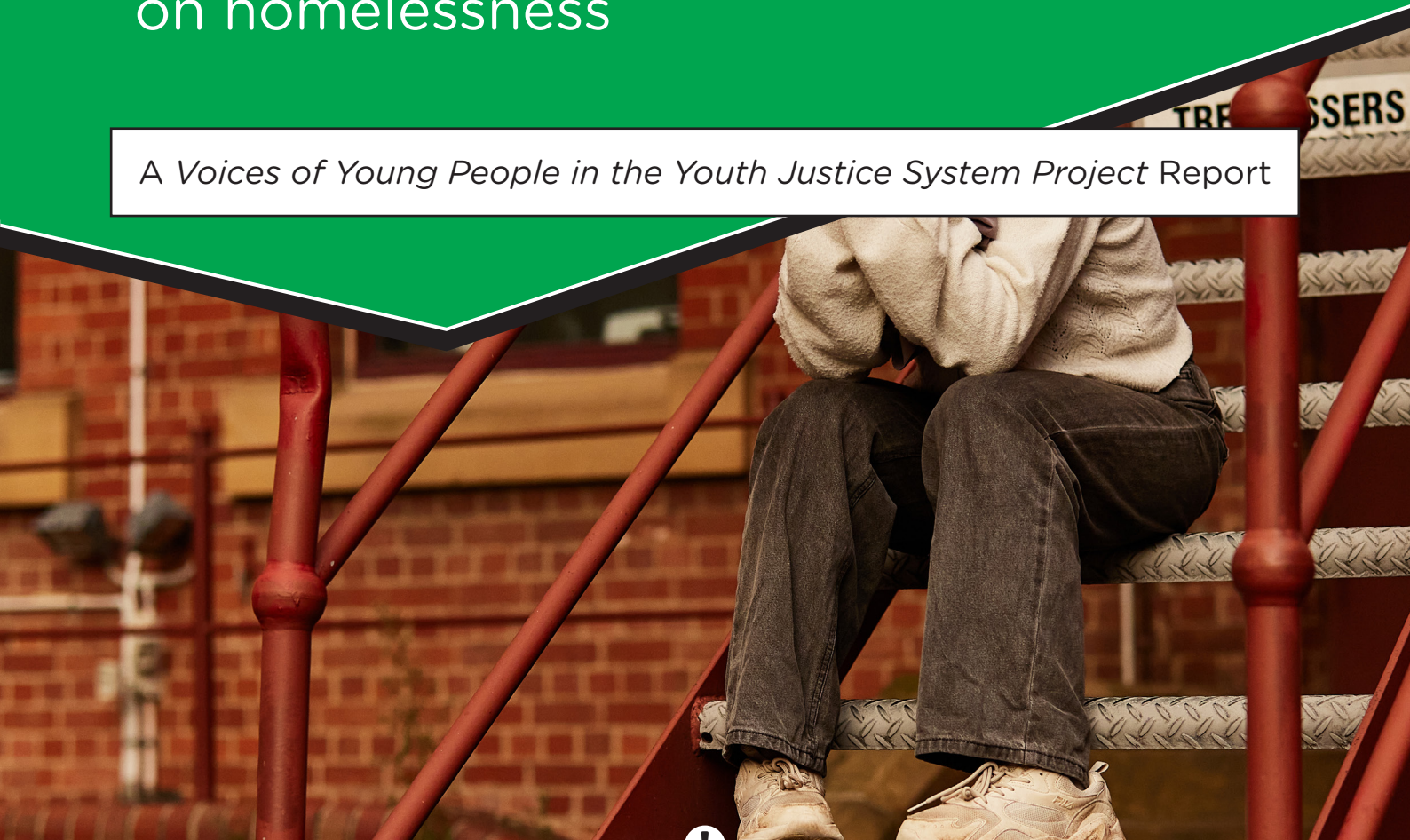




# Nowhere else to go”

Young people’s views  
on homelessness

*A Voices of Young People in the Youth Justice System Project Report*



## CONTENT WARNING:

This project is about the experiences of young people in Tasmania’s youth justice system. Some of their experiences include references to family violence, drug use and abuse. Some young people used strong language to describe these experiences. Readers might find the content of this report distressing. The services listed below can be contacted for support:

- **1800 RESPECT:** 1800 737 732
- **Family Violence Counselling Support Service:** 1800 608 122
- **Blue Knot (childhood and complex trauma support):** 1300 657 380
- **13YARN for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:** 13 92 76
- **A Tasmanian Lifeline:** 1800 984 434
- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14
- **Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Commissioner acknowledges and pays respect to the palawa people of lutruwita/Tasmania as the original and ongoing custodians of this land and for the more than 40,000 years they have cared for their country and their children. The Commissioner recognises Aboriginal people are best placed to determine and deliver services to meet the needs of their children.

## Other Acknowledgements

The Commissioner thanks the young Tasmanians with experience of the youth justice system who bravely shared their stories for this report. Their unique insights and views inform the Commissioner’s advocacy on behalf of all children and young people in the state. The Commissioner would also like to thank the staff of the Department for Education, Children and Young People (and the former Department of Communities) and non-government organisations for supporting young people to participate. Many thanks to the external reviewer who provided helpful feedback during the planning for this work.

## Adverse Comment Process

Section 21 of the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2016* (Tas) provides that the Commissioner is not to include any comment in a report that is adverse to a person unless that person has had at least 15 working days to make representations to the Commissioner before the report is finalised.

The Commissioner provided this report to Homes Tasmania, the Department for Education, Children and Young People, and the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

A response was received from Homes Tasmania on 16 May 2024.

A response was received from the Department of Premier and Cabinet on 24 May 2024.

A response was received from the Department for Education, Children and Young People on 27 May 2024.

These representations have been considered and incorporated into this report as appropriate.



*Nowhere else to go: Young people’s views on homelessness* is part of the *Voices of Young People in the Youth Justice System (Voices Project)* report series.

## Introduction

The *Voices Project* promotes and empowers young people with recent lived experience of the Tasmanian youth justice system to share their views on this system.<sup>1</sup> By working with young people to share their views about what contact with this system can be like for children and young people, this project provides critical insights into the system’s impact on children and young people in Tasmania. The *Voices Project* informs the Commissioner’s ongoing systemic advocacy about the reforms needed to promote, protect, and uphold the rights and wellbeing of children and young people in Tasmania.<sup>2</sup>

The *Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* sets out six key domains for child and youth wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> Two of these wellbeing domains, *Being loved, safe and valued* and *Having material basics* underline the importance of children and young people having access to safe, supportive and appropriate housing.<sup>4</sup> Despite recognition of this, and continued calls on the Tasmanian Government to develop a standalone co-ordinated housing and homelessness strategy for children and young people,<sup>5</sup> children and young people in Tasmania continue to experience homelessness both alone, and with their families.

This report shares the views of young people about what it is like for children and young people in Tasmania to experience homelessness, and the importance of having a safe, secure place to call home to prevent the risk of offending behaviour.



### *How we did the Voices Project*

More information about why and how we did the *Voices Project* is available here: <https://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/VoicesMethodology>. Note, to protect their privacy, the real names of young people who shared their views with us as part of the *Voices Project* are not used.

1. *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2016* (Tas) s 8(1)(e).

2. See further, Commissioner for Children and Young People, Submission to Secretary, Department of Communities Tasmania, Tasmanian Government, *Reforming Tasmania’s Youth Justice System Discussion Paper* (21 March 2022); Commissioner for Children and Young People, Tasmania, *The Age of Criminal Responsibility in Tasmania* (Memorandum of Advice, July 2023).

3. Tasmanian Government, *It Takes a Tasmanian Village* (Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, August 2021).

4. *Ibid.*

5. Most recently, this call has been made by the Youth Network of Tasmania, and other non-for-profit and community organisations. See Youth Network of Tasmania, ‘Call to combat youth homelessness, invest in evidence-based solutions’ (Media release, 17 April 2024). As part of the Adverse Comment process, Homes Tasmania emphasised that the *Tasmanian Housing Strategy* and *Action Plan* frames young people as a ‘priority cohort’, and that it includes ‘key initiatives that address the specific needs of young Tasmanians’.

# The role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Commissioner for Children and Young People advocates for all Tasmanian children and young people and has a special function to advocate for individual young people detained under the *Youth Justice Act 1997*.<sup>6</sup>

The Commissioner promotes good practice, policy, and legislation by influencing decision-making, undertaking research, monitoring, publishing reports, providing advice to ministers and government agencies, undertaking investigations, and making submissions to inquiries and reviews.

In exercising these functions and powers, the Commissioner considers the rights of the child under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the *Convention*) to ensure the wellbeing and best interests of children and young people are paramount.<sup>7</sup>

The Commissioner’s advocacy in relation to child homelessness focuses on the importance of meeting the housing needs of all children and young people to ensure they have a safe place to call home,<sup>8</sup> the need for appropriate bail accommodation to ensure that no child or young person is deprived of their liberty unnecessarily,<sup>9</sup> and ensuring that children and young people leaving detention have access to safe and supportive accommodation.<sup>10</sup>



## Rights Insight

Housing is a human right; the right to housing is particularly important for children and young people because of their special needs for care and protection.<sup>11</sup>

**Article 27** of the *Convention* enshrines the right of all children to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. The primary responsibility is on parents or others responsible for the child to secure the conditions of living necessary for the child’s development.

**Article 4** notes that Governments also need to take appropriate measures to assist parents to implement this right. This includes material assistance and support programs, particularly about nutrition, clothing, and housing.

**Article 37(b)** of the *Convention* states that children must be detained only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.

6. *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2016* (Tas) s 8(1)(b).

7. *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2016* (Tas) s 8(1)(b).

8. See for example, Memorandum of Advice - 14 July 2023; Commission for Children and Young People, Tasmania, *Unaccompanied homeless children under 16 years of age in Tasmania* (Memo of Advice, March 2019); Commissioner for Children and Young People, Submission to Secretary, Department of Communities Tasmania, Tasmanian Government, *Reforming Tasmania’s Youth Justice System Discussion Paper* (21 March 2022); Commissioner for Children and Young People, Tasmania, *The Age of Criminal Responsibility in Tasmania* (Memorandum of Advice, July 2023); Commissioner for Children and Young People, “Listen: This is my Voice” *Young people’s experiences of the youth justice system* (Report, 2023).

9. See for example, Commissioner for Children and Young People, Submission to Department of Communities Tasmania, *Comment on Tasmania’s Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Discussion Paper*, Commissioner for Children and Young People to Secretary, Department for Education Children and Young People, 23 December 2022.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Chris Sidoti, ‘Housing as a Human Right’ (Speech, National Conference on Homelessness, council to Homeless Persons, 4 September 1996.

## Background: Child and youth homelessness in Tasmania

Under a broad understanding of homelessness, many children and young people in Tasmania are homeless.<sup>12</sup> It is, however, difficult to identify the number of children and young people who are experiencing, or have experienced, homelessness in Tasmania due to the different ways that they can present and experience homelessness.<sup>13</sup> Children and young people can experience homelessness alone, or with their families.



### Data Insight

In 2023, there were at least 1712 instances of children and young people aged between 8 and 17 years presenting unaccompanied to specialist homelessness services in Tasmania<sup>14</sup> This number represents a slight decrease from 2019 (n= 1759), although it is higher than the five-year average (m=1664). Providing further context, other data indicates that on an average day in Tasmania, requests for help from at least 2 children or young people aged 17 or younger from specialist homelessness services go unassisted because the service is unable to help them.<sup>15</sup>

Homelessness can affect children and young people from a range of backgrounds. While each child or young person's experience of homelessness is unique, there are several factors that increase the likelihood that a child or young person will experience homelessness. These factors include being under statutory care and protection orders, poor exit planning and support after leaving institutional care, a lack of family support including for family and domestic violence, and a lack of physical and mental health treatment and support options.<sup>16</sup>

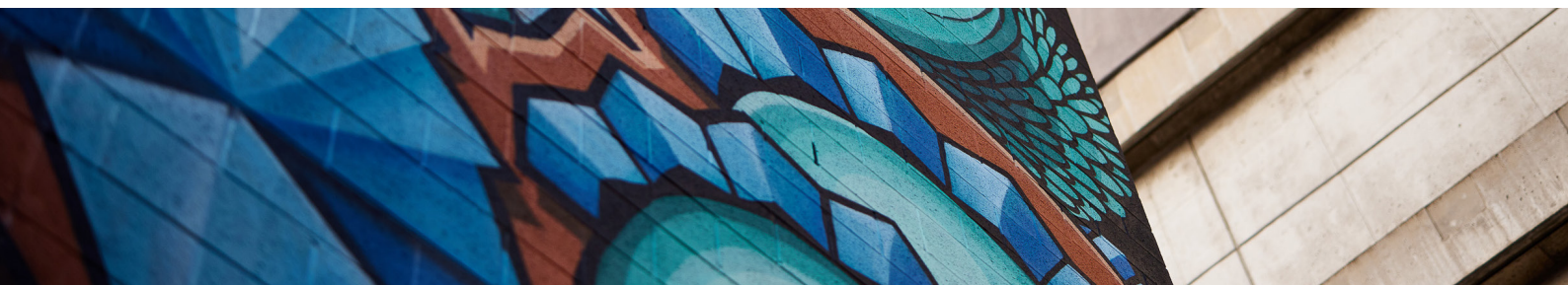
12. This report uses Mackenzie and Chamberlain's widely adopted cultural definition of homelessness which extends from primary homeless (e.g., sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings or tents), secondary homelessness (e.g. emergency accommodation, shelters, or couch surfing) through to tertiary homelessness (e.g. a boarding house or caravan park). See further, Chris Chamberlain and David Mackenzie, 'Understanding Contemporary Homelessness: Issues of Definition and Meaning' (1992) 27 (4) *Australian Journal of Social Sciences* 274-297.

13. The Salvation Army, 'Youth and Children Homelessness: Facts and Statistics' (Web Page).

14. Homes Tasmania, *Commissioner for Children Data (Specialist Homelessness Services, Safe Spaces and Housing Register) Jan - Dec 2023*. These data are provided to the Commissioner as part of her monitoring of the wellbeing and rights of children and young people in Tasmania. Of note, Homes Tasmania provides data to the Commissioner about the number of children and young people presenting alone to specialist homelessness services and Safe Space. Only data provided about specialist homelessness services are disaggregated by age. Safe Space data is not disaggregated by age (only identifying all clients presenting alone under the age of 24), subsequently we are not able to identify the number of children under 18 who present to the service; therefore, it is not reported here.

15. As part of the adverse comment process DPAC noted that according to the *Tasmanian Housing Strategy 2023-2024*, 1467 children and young people aged between 15 and 24 presented alone to specialist homelessness services largely due to family violence. They note that the Government's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan is relevant to this issue.

16. Department of Communities Tasmania, Tasmanian Government, *Under 16 Homelessness: A Policy Framework for Tasmania* (Report).





The Government currently provides a range of services for children and young people experiencing homelessness alone, including shelters, the Lighthouse pilot program, and the Youth2Independence program.<sup>17</sup> While these services provide critical accommodation for some children and young people, the Government has acknowledged that more services and support for children and young people under 16 years of age, particularly those with the most complex trauma and support needs, are urgently required.<sup>18</sup>

Safe, age-appropriate spaces, supported accommodation, and stable housing is critical to meet the needs of children and young people. A lack of suitable housing and support can lead vulnerable children and young people to find themselves in unsafe situations – sleeping rough, associating with unsafe adults, being at risk of exploitation and engaging in harmful behaviours (including offending behaviours), sometimes to survive.<sup>19</sup> For children and young people who have or are at risk of having contact with the youth justice system, access to a range of safe and supportive places to live ensures that they are not unnecessarily deprived of their liberty before, during, and after detention.<sup>20</sup>

In the *Youth Justice Blueprint 2024-2034*, the Government committed to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years by July 2029.<sup>21</sup> To achieve this, the Government must develop a greater range of responsive, short, medium and long-term housing, accommodation and support options across the public health continuum for children and young people in Tasmania.<sup>22</sup>

17. Homes Tasmania, ‘Housing Connect’ (Fact Sheet); Homes Tasmania, ‘Y2I Program’ (Web Page).

18. Department of Communities Tasmania, Tasmanian Government, *Under 16 Homelessness: A Policy Framework for Tasmania* (Report). As part of the adverse comment process, DECYP advised that Kingston House provides accommodation and support for children between 12 and 15 years. According to Mission Australia who delivers the service, Kingston House accommodates up to 5 children and young people who are working towards family restoration and are not under a Care and Protection Order.

19. Commissioner for Children and Young People, Submission to Secretary, Department of Communities Tasmania, Tasmanian Government, *Reforming Tasmania’s Youth Justice System Discussion Paper* (21 March 2022)

20. Letter from Commissioner for Children and Young People to Secretary, Department of Communities, and Secretary, Department of Education, 23 September 2022; Commissioner for Children and Young People, Submission to Secretary, Department of Communities Tasmania, Tasmanian Government, *Reforming Tasmania’s Youth Justice System Discussion Paper* (21 March 2022); Commissioner for Children and Young People, Tasmania, *The Age of Criminal Responsibility in Tasmania* (Memorandum of Advice, July 2023); Australian Law Reform Commission, Australian Government, *The Provision of Throughcare* (Report, July 2017).

21. As part of the adverse comment process, DECYP and DPAC commented that the *Youth Justice Blueprint 2024 - 2034* demonstrates the Government’s commitment to improving the outcomes for children and young people over the long term.

22. Commissioner for Children and Young People, Submission to Secretary, Department of Communities Tasmania, Tasmanian Government, *Reforming Tasmania’s Youth Justice System Discussion Paper* (21 March 2022); Commissioner for Children and Young People, Tasmania, *The Age of Criminal Responsibility in Tasmania* (Memorandum of Advice, July 2023).



### **What we heard**

Many children and young people who are in contact with the youth justice system have experienced homelessness.

Children and young people in detention need *safe and stable places to go when they leave detention*.

Where possible, children and *young people should be supported to stay with their families, and families need to be supported to care for their children*.

If a child or young person cannot live with their family, they need *support to live outside their family home*.

### **What needs to change**

*All children and young people need safe, stable, and appropriate places to live.*

Tasmania needs a *stronger policy and program-level response* to support children and young people experiencing homelessness alone.

Families need *better support* to care for their children who display harmful behaviours.

Children and young people who are not living with their families must be provided with a *continuum of therapeutic and trauma informed services, including safe and appropriate housing and accommodation*.<sup>23</sup>

23. Ibid.



## Listen, learn and act: The views of young people

**Nowhere Else to Go** is about young people’s views on homelessness, and how homelessness can fundamentally shape a child or young person’s pathway into (and out of) the youth justice system in Tasmania.

### “They got no home”: Young people’s views on homelessness and offending

More than half of the young people who participated in this project identified homelessness as a key factor influencing some young people’s contact with the youth justice system. Explaining this, James stated:

*...most of my mates, they got no home, or they’re broken and just they don’t know what to do in their life so that’s what they do. Get in trouble (James, 15)*

Providing further context, young people talked about how homelessness often leads young people to offend to survive:

*When you’re homeless, you’ve got to do more shit to survive. Drugs just make you do dumb shit...That’s mainly what got me into doing this. Had to do crime and shit to survive really. Had to steal from shops, do robberies to get money, get my food. Fuckin, when I was living in a tent I had to do that. Get money in case you needed something, fix it up (Liam, 16)*

*...Usually I just slept out in the cold and that’s what we did when - me and my mates and - that’s why we got in trouble. We’re out walking in the middle of the night, but we probably go steal a car or something just to go sleep in and go drive because we’ve got to walk everywhere... We’ve got no home to go to, or [food to] eat, you know?... (James, 15)*

Young people also talked about how homelessness can entrench offending behaviour. Several young people described how being homeless increases exposure to risky adults and environments:

*... there’s a high chance that if you hang around the shelter, you’re going to be out running amok all day, or there’s going to be other bad people in the shelter, which is going to lead to bad things (Ryan, 17)*

*...So I’d just go hook up with the older ones and go do a bit of crime, shit like that (Lucas, 18)*

*So you just go out and you’ve got to go steal food to eat and you’ve got to go steal - oh, make money just to go - like being with the older people to go to a hotel so that I can go to sleep there for the night (James, 15)*



In discussing why young people were homeless and offending, young people talked about how family conflict often meant that they could not live at home and had no-where else to go. Describing this, Lucas explained:

*Getting kicked out of your mum’s and father’s, having nowhere else to go, but yeah, shit like that... I had a fight with me mum and she kicked me out and that, but I’ve nowhere else to go (Lucas, 18)*

Reflecting on how young people can feel because of family conflict, and being homeless, Ryan commented:

*Well, I suppose if [Harley]<sup>24</sup> didn’t have a family, he would feel – what’s the word? If he didn’t have a family and he’s living in the shelter, I could imagine Harley would be feeling worthless and feeling upset that he doesn’t have people there to support him (Ryan, 17)*

## “The Government doesn’t care”: Young people’s views about the lack of support

Children and young people who experience homelessness face barriers accessing supports.<sup>25</sup> Stevie shared their view about what the lack of support meant:

*The Government doesn’t care about these kids that like are sleeping in alleyways or sleeping in parks. Like you know, where do they go at the end of the night? They sleep in a park. They sleep on the street. It just keeps happening (Stevie, 15)*

Reflecting the need for support, many young people talked about how being homeless negatively impacts mental health.<sup>26</sup> James describes this:

*When you don’t got a home or nowhere to go and you’re sitting on the doorstep crying to come home, it’s pretty sad and it makes you depressed...sometimes you sleep in the bushes and that. Like, it’s shit not having a home (James, 15)*

24. Harley is a ‘made up’ character the young people could talk about, instead of referring to their own experiences, see further: <https://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/VoicesMethodology>.

25. Catherine Robinson, ‘Ending unaccompanied child homelessness in Australia’ (2023) University of Tasmania Journal contribution 59-62.

26. Headspace, ‘Clinical Toolkit At-risk group: Homeless Young People’ (Fact Sheet).

## “It feels like you never get out of it”: Being in the system

Some young people reflected on how being homeless not only makes it more likely that a child or young person will have contact with the criminal justice system, but can also make it harder to get bail, and leave detention. Describing this, Stevie stated:

*...let's say you've done an armed robbery or something like that, and you get arrested. Where are you supposed to get bailed to, because you're homeless? You're living on the streets. You have nowhere to get bailed to... like Harley, he lives on the street... he's gotten done with something. Where is he supposed to go apart from detention? And if he does go into detention, where is he supposed to go when he gets out? Or how is he going to get out if he has no bail address, so the court won't bail him because he has nowhere to go to? (Stevie, 15)*

A young person also explained that the experience of homelessness can make it hard for young people to care about their situation:

*...when you've been thrown out of your house at 14, you come to not be afraid of a lot of things, least of all power-hungry cops or grumpy old men...You just don't care about anything... It takes a lot to – it took a lot to start caring about all this...I feel like once you're in the system, once you get involved with – especially with youth justice or other government services like that, that support services as well, at least for me it never feels like you get out of it, you never get away from it...I hate this system (Jack, 19)*

Another young person explained that for young people with a care experience, being told that housing will be available after they leave detention, only to find that it is not available can mean they are homeless and end up in Ashley again:

*I was in [Ashley] for...months. [Child Safety] had...months to organise me a house. Told me it'd be ready by the time I got out. The final week come... Told me they had a house ready, it was all ready for me to go back to. Night before I got out...[they] told me the house isn't ready. I've got to find somewhere to stay myself until it's ready. And yeah, that led to me getting locked back up, had nowhere to stay... I got back locked up - straight back up, and now I've got no house to go back to and shit again (Liam, 16)*

Others described how some children and young people prefer to be in Ashley as the only alternative is to be homeless:

*Some of them choose to stay [at Ashley] because they got no homes, so they feel like this is a home to them (James, 15)*

*...the people I used to hang out with talk about it a lot, how they enjoyed the structure of being in the Ashley detention centre. They enjoyed how they got everything they needed provided to them, like a bed, food, safety... (Jack, 19)*

*'It's like, well, where else am I going to go? You know what I mean' I've got no fucking family that will take me. Then you've got to stay in there do your time and then you get used to it...And you think, oh well, that's me new fucking home. Might as well go back there. You know what I mean? (Lucas, 18)*

## “Somewhere to live and someone to help”: What needs to change

Young people identified several things that could make things better for young people who are homeless and at risk of entering the youth justice system. These things included more shelters and crisis accommodation for children and young people, and supported stable, longer-term options.

Stevie shared that while shelters can be somewhere for young people to go when they are homeless, often they are full, and even if a young person has a place in a shelter, it is not a long-term option:

*Yeah, like even homeless shelters, they're all full up all the time...but when they're all full, where are those other kids supposed to go? You know what I mean? There's not enough shelters either. But even the kids that are in the shelter, where are they supposed to go? Because they can't live there forever (Stevie, 15)*

Ned also talked about shelters, and emphasised how important it was for children and young people to have a 'good stable place to be' so that they did not reoffend:

*Well, obviously like a good stable place to be...something set up... Not just putting them back out pretty much to do the same things again. Most kids are either homeless or they've got really nowhere else to go, or their parents are not in the best way and that. They get put out into shelters and sort of things like that (Ned, 17)*

Going further, Ryan pointed out that it is not enough for young people just to have shelter, they also need someone who can support them:

*Make sure people build houses, so there's enough houses for everyone to live... Got a warm bed... because Harley's only 16, someone living there with him to support him, cooking food and stuff like that...they should have care houses everywhere...Like a house where staff stay, and they help you and feed you and give you a warm bed and stuff like that (Ryan, 17)*

Making another point, Ryan also talked about how homeless children and young people need financial support:

*Maybe the age that people can get their money under different circumstances, so someone’s homeless and under the age of 15 or 16, they should be allowed to have some money to keep them going or something*  
**(Ryan, 17)**

Young people talked a lot about the kind of support young people need when they leave detention. For example, Lucas talked about the importance of having opportunities to learn new life skills and have a space of their own after leaving detention:

*[In a shelter]...You got to learn how to cook yourself. You got a chance to do shit like that, heaps of shit like that. You feel more spaced out. You’ve got your own little room, you can go in and just chill or you can have whatever you want in your room, fucking stuff like that* **(Lucas, 18)**





## Conclusion

This report, **Nowhere Else to Go**, is about young people’s views on how homelessness can influence children and young people’s involvement in offending, and what is needed to ensure young people have the support they need to grow and thrive.

We heard that children and young people experience homelessness because of family breakdown and family violence. They also told us that before and during an experience of homelessness, children and young people may be living without access to the things they need for a good life.

We also heard that children and young people experiencing homelessness may resort to offending to get the things that they need to survive, and, as a result of their homelessness, they may associate with risky adults and form relationships that encourage offending.

Young people also told us that leaving detention can often be a very difficult transition. This is made more difficult when they are unsure of where they are going to live, and what (if any) support they will have in the community. When children and young people do not have a safe place to live in the community, where their needs are met, detention facilities offer a level of support and structure that can be stabilising.

Unaccompanied child homelessness is the result of multiple systemic failures that cause real and long-lasting harm to children and young people.<sup>27</sup>

As the *Convention* outlines, all children have a right to a standard of living that meets their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development needs. Governments has a responsibility to support families to realise this right, and where the state is the parent, a responsibility to the child or young person themselves.

It is imperative that the Tasmanian Government acts to ensure that children and young people experiencing homelessness, or who are at risk of experiencing homelessness, have access to safe and supported short, medium and long-term accommodation and housing options that meet their needs.

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27. Catherine Robinson, ‘Ending unaccompanied child homelessness in Australia’ (2023) *University of Tasmania Journal contribution* 59-62.

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