NMYIN SUBMISSION: National Inquiry into Youth Homelessness

BACKGROUND

This submission has been developed by the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) for the National Multicultural Youth Issues Network (NMYIN) of Australia.

The NMYIN was established in 2005 in response to an identified need for a national advisory and advocacy network for multicultural youth issues. A key objective of is to increase collaboration and coordination between states and territories around the needs and issues of multicultural young people in Australia.

The NMYIN is a national body with representatives from Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. The NMYIN is committed to highlighting the rights and interests of multicultural young people living in Australia, with particular focus on young people from refugee backgrounds.

NMYIN aims to:

- To provide advice to State/Territory and Commonwealth governments on multicultural youth issues.
- To support State/Territory and Federal policy and infrastructure development for multicultural young people.
- To promote good practice across the States/Territories for workers who work with multicultural young people.
- To promote diversity and anti-racism initiatives.

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This submission outlines the key factors that contribute to homelessness for refugee and migrant (CALD) young people, and identifies a number of barriers that CALD young people face in accessing housing and navigating the housing and homelessness service system.

This submission reflects the breadth of knowledge and expertise of the NMYIN organisations in their work with young people from culturally diverse backgrounds across Australia. Specific case studies from South Australia, Northern Territory and Victoria are also included.

A short list of recommendations concludes the document.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nationally, approximately 25% of the youth population are identified as culturally and linguistically diverse. Current immigration trends have seen further increases in the number of humanitarian entrants to Australia. The number of humanitarian youth arrivals under the age of 28 years represents nearly 50% of the intake from new and emerging communities including Africa, Middle East, Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia. Those young people from African communities comprise up to 64%.

Young people from refugee backgrounds are one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society.

Refugee young people have, by definition, already experienced profound homelessness on arrival in Australia and this impacts on their capacity to negotiate the challenges of resettlement. This also has implications for common frameworks used to understand youth homelessness in the Australian context and for developing service delivery responses.

It is widely recognised both nationally and internationally that obtaining appropriate, affordable and secure housing is critical to effective resettlement. Studies undertaken in the UK, Zetter and Perl (1999) emphasise the strong link between housing and settlement and in Canada, Hulchanski, Muride and Chambon (2000) argue that 'finding a suitable place to live in a good quality, supportive neighbourhood is an important first step toward successful settlement of new immigrants'.

2. NATIONAL THEMES AND CHALLENGES

Refugee and migrant young people are at increased risk of homelessness due to the refugee and migration experience and the impact this has on individuals and families.

In an Australian context, little to no research has been undertaken to quantify youth homelessness among young migrants and refugees, however, within the literature located, it is estimated that the risk of homelessness for CALD young people, is up to 10 times higher than for the general population (Coventry, et.al. 2002:50).

More broadly, regarding the experiences of homelessness among newly arrived refugees, one interesting study, though not youth specific, is Beer and Foley's 2003 survey of 434 newly arrived refugees in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

While there is limited quantitative evidence for youth homelessness among CALD youth, NMYIN members agree that in our practice and experience (as well that of our organizations and local networks), homelessness is a widespread issue for CALD youth and

has significant ramifications in a range of areas including employment and education, mental health, family, safety, etc.

2.1 The refugee experience

The refugee experience is characterised by homelessness – forced displacement, grief, loss and trauma and has a profound impact on the individual, family and community.

While there is no single refugee experience, young people who arrive in Australia as refugees will have experienced all or some of the following:

- A dangerous escape from their country of origin, often walking long distances by foot,

- Years spent in refugee camps (unsafe and insecure environments with limited access to adequate health care, income or education) or immigration detention centres,

- Torture and trauma,

- Becoming lost or separated from their usual sources of support, including family, friends and familiar networks and,

- Forced to assume adult responsibilities to care for elderly or younger family members.

Family structures are often radically altered, for example:

- Young people may have been required to adopt adult roles and responsibilities, either in their home country, on their journey to Australia or during the resettlement process.
- Young people may carry the burden of communication with institutions and services in Australia or care for younger siblings and this can undermine parental roles and responsibilities.
- Families are often adjusting to new configurations of the family unit in Australia. Some young people may have fled their country of origin and arrive in Australia under the care of distant relatives with whom they have no prior relationship, having left behind significant others including one or both 'parents'.
- Families may have been separated for many years and only recently reunified in Australia.
- Some young people have become separated from family during their flight from their country of origin and arrive in Australia alone, with limited or no support from extended family or community.

2.2 Young migrants

Young people who arrive in Australia as migrants, must also face the challenges of making a new life in a new country at a significant developmental stage. Like refugee young people, many have left behind important relationships and a sense of belonging to community or their country of origin. Many migrant young people may not have had any choice in resettling in Australia and may be relied upon to assist other family members to negotiate a new language, culture and systems.

2.3 Settlement

CALD young people therefore face significant challenges in establishing a new life in Australia. These include limited or no English language skills, disrupted, little or no formal education, limited or no understanding of Australian culture and systems, negotiating past trauma and altered family structures, roles and responsibilities, negotiating new friendships and peer networks and, limited or no family or social support.

In addition to this, many families (and young people individually) are sponsoring family members from overseas and, as such, are responsible for financial and social support. This is often additional stress for families already struggling with the demands of resettlement.

Even when young people are not sponsoring family members to Australia, they are often sending money regularly to family members who are in desperate need of assistance or, paying off debts incurred in their country of asylum.

2.4 The refugee and migration experience and family conflict

In our experience, the refugee and migration experience, coupled with the stressors of resettlement in Australia, places refugee and migrant families at a higher risk of family conflict and, where conflict is untenable or protracted, at a higher risk of youth homelessness.

Family conflict often arises in CALD communities because of the differing rates of acculturation between young people and adults. Parents or adult carers often perceive young people as adopting the values and behaviours of Western culture and young people often feel isolated and under pressure as they juggle familial and cultural obligations, expectations, and their own identity.

Financial difficulties are often a key source of conflict. The obligations and responsibilities of young people and families to provide for sponsored relatives often leads to overcrowding, conflict, and pressure on young people to secure paid employment to generate income and/or move out to make room for others. This is often compounded by Centrelink income support paid directly to a young person, who may not be obliged or willing to contribute to family home expenses.

How well CALD young people and their families negotiate these challenges will impact on their vulnerability to homelessness. This is largely dependent on the family and personal strengths and resources, as well as the level of culturally appropriate support provided to negotiate resettlement challenges.

One report received by MYSA in South Australia was that a young African woman was working two jobs to support her family both in Australia and sending money back overseas, when she got pregnant. She became very ill from the pregnancy and was unable to work, resulting in her losing her job. As a result of this she was asked to leave the family home because she was both seen as bringing shame on the family and was a financial burden. Further, she was isolated from the community as a result of her pregnancy and did not have the knowledge or experience to access support and assistance.

3. Barriers to equitable access to the housing and homelessness system

In addition to those factors that can precipitate homelessness for refugee and migrant young people, this group of young people also experience a number of barriers that prevent their equitable access to adequate housing and housing support – which in turn increases their risk of homelessness. These barriers are nationally consistent and include:

3.1   Young people's limited English language skills, and unfamiliarity with Australian culture and systems, resulting in an inability to understand and navigate the housing and homelessness service system - for example, advocating for their housing needs, lease agreements, procedures for terminating a tenancy, etc.

3.2   Limited resources within the housing sector and a lack of culturally appropriate support, at both individual and organisational levels, to assist CALD young people in negotiating the housing system.

3.3   Young people's lack of financial resources (sometimes as a result of migration visa types) to cover bonds, furniture and other household items, high rents and increases in rent.

3.4   No rental history for young people in Australia and lack of appropriate references.

3.5   Racism and discrimination in the private rental market - from real estate agents and landlords, resulting in young people being denied their preferences and being forced to accept unsatisfactory housing.

3.6   Implications of current homelessness policy and practice frameworks (that shape funding guidelines) for CALD young people – i.e. limitations of the term homelessness for accurate data collection and the definition of homelessness in relation to early intervention and prevention support programs.

3.1 Limited English language skills and cultural barriers

Navigating the housing system is a challenge for many mainstream young people, however, coupled with difficulty of language, cultural differences and a lack of familiarity to localised systems and norms, migrant and refugee young people are particularly affected by this. Beer and Foley's study (2003:18) found that some 27% of respondents gave language difficulties as their first nominated problem within the housing market.

It has been noted that where some CALD young people were successful in obtaining housing in the private rental market, the lack of support in understanding lease agreements and their consumer rights has resulted in exploitation. Reported cases have shown that some young people have been renting rooms at a highly inflated rate and they are limited in access to the standard facilities in the home including kitchens, laundries and TV rooms.

3.2 Limited resources within the housing sector (through the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program) and lack of culturally appropriate support

CALD young people often present to support services with complex needs and require targeted, often intensive, culturally appropriate support to assist them to negotiate the housing system. Often this support is not provided through the SAAP sector. This is due to a number of reasons, including:

- Lack of resources allocated to this sector and therefore insufficient numbers of housing support workers.
- Broader SAAP sector policy directives (at funding body level) around length of support and type of assistance. This can lead to withdrawal of support
- Insufficient private rental assistance due to the intensive nature of this support.
- Lack of familiarity with culturally appropriate service delivery – e.g. use of interpreters (this may also be a resource decision by organisations); appropriate intake and referral procedures; lack of resources to provide holistic support to this client group; provision of male workers with female clients; unrealistic expectations of CALD young people's capacity to negotiate the housing system with minimal support – i.e. organisational policies and procedures that do no take into account the particular needs of this client group.
- Lack of crisis housing options within regions – i.e. young people accessing crisis accommodation outside their support networks.
- Lack of support to young people to develop independent living skills – e.g. cooking
- Lack of culturally inclusive housing – not acknowledging particular religious or cultural needs, e.g. areas and time for prayer.

Unaccompanied minors and young people with tenuous family connections are especially affected by these issues, as they have limited family and social support in their community.

Northern Territory Case Study
An 18 yr. old male from a Sudanese background came to our service and was experiencing mental health issues, homelessness and total community isolation. He had conversational English language skills, was unemployed, and had been asked to leave the education institution he had been attending due to irregular attendance and behaviour issues.

He sought to live in a unit on his own. He was a client at the SAAP crisis service. He was unable to cook culturally appropriate food at this service, his clothing and belongings were regularly stolen. While living at this service he was employed in the hospitality industry. He was continually told he had to be back at the service by 9pm, which he was unable to do, due to his employment late in the evening. He sought the services of other SAAP services

for adults, but was rejected due to the services feelings he would be particularly vulnerable due to his age.

He found a friend who was also from Sudanese background and they attempted for over three months to find a rental property but were rejected on all occasions, even with support from both young men's employers and negotiating Centrepay for regular payments.

The young man continued to stay at the SAAP service and eventually left his employment due to what he felt was pressure from the staff at the service not to work past 7pm. He continually went to Centrelink for income support services, which were inappropriate and was regularly cut off payments due to his misunderstanding of reporting requirements.

The young person had limited capabilities to pay for psychtropic medication due to costs associated with the SAAP service and transportation and job searching requirements. The young person spent over five months trying to secure Independent status of Youth Allowance, which resulted in his limited income. With this limited income he was not a great prospective rental tenant.

After applying for priority housing with support letters from seven different agencies a very positive outcome was reached where this young man was secured affordable safe accommodation in less than three months. After this placement his mental health improved significantly. He was able to find full-time employment, return to school on a part-time basis, and improve his communication with the community. A significant issue of the unsure waiting period, meant that the young person had to sign a lease for six months at a property with the support of a housing agency and he had to break the lease after three months, another difficult process to navigate. Overall the quick response and recognition of the specific risk for this young person has resulted in an increase in this young person's ability to function and he is no longer sleeping in the bus stops of Darwin.

Victoria Case Study

Agii was a 22 year old young woman from Sudan who had been in Australia for 2 years when she contacted CMYI for support to find housing. She was 7 months pregnant, had recently broken up with her boyfriend and could no longer afford rent in the flat they had shared. She had been estranged from her uncle, with whom she had come to Australia, for some time. She had been evicted from her flat and was staying at friends. She had told the CMYI worker that she had phoned a youth housing service and was given phone numbers of other services to call others. Agii made a total of 7 phone calls and only once had been asked for her name. Each agency had said that they had no vacancies and that she should phone again next week. The CMYI worker was unable to find either housing for Agii or a housing worker who could support her. She was able to find material support for her through a mainstream agency that provided material support to young mums. The worker was told by one agency that they were already supporting 6 young pregnant women in addition to those who were housed with the service.

3.3 Lack of financial resources

While parallels can be drawn with the mainstream community, where limited financial resources impacts on all young people, for CALD young people this is a significant obstacle - particularly when combined with the many barriers particular to this group.

The lack of financial resources is often due to low employment (compounded by disrupted education, limited English language and cultural barriers), confusion in negotiating with Centrelink, lack of knowledge of housing support (e.g. bond assistance) and in some cases, visa conditions. Further, with limited rental choice, budgeting skills and support to identify affordable accommodation options, CALD young people are at high risk of over committing and being unprepared for rent increases - ultimately resulting in an inability to maintain appropriate housing. This adds an extra stress on securing private rental in an already competitive environment. This is supported by the research of Beer and Foley (2003:18), who found that limited financial resources was the second most cited reason for experiencing difficulties in the housing market.

Case Study South Australia
Two young women were forced to vacate their private rental they had secured and resided in for over 12 months as they could not afford the unexpected rent increase. They were not aware that landlord's had the right to increase rent given due notice. As they had applied for over 22 homes prior to securing this one, they were already paying rent beyond their means and could not afford an increase and were forced to forfeit the residence.

3.4 No rental history in Australia and lack of appropriate references

In most rental agreements the need for localised rental history referees is required. For newly arrived refugees and migrants this poses an immediate dismissal from consideration and further exacerbates stresses of settlement. This may not be an issue we can control within the private rental market, but it is an issue that requires a policy response given that it is a factor contributing to homelessness among this group of young people.

3.5 Racism and discrimination from real estate agents and landlords

Similar to many service areas, young people are already disadvantaged based on societal assumptions that young people are unreliable and irresponsible. For CALD young people, particularly those who are perceived as a visible minority, this is a more pertinent issue, arguably a result of negative media stereotypes and a lack of community awareness.

Some young people have reported that they change their names on application forms from typical cultural names including 'Mohammed' to more Australia sounding names like 'John' or Daniel'. However, once they are spoken to on the phone, they have reported the surprise in the caller who then asks where they're from. The young people perceive this as discrimination.

Another young woman who moved to South Australia from Tanzania with her family under a skilled visa, was told by a landlord that "you seem like a nice girl but we don't want trouble here" when applying for a property near to her university.

This young woman felt that the landlord did not understand her circumstances, that she did not come to Australia as a refugee and had money to pay her rent and had the intention of only being close to her school. She felt like she was categorised as a *"trouble maker or having trouble making friends because she had black skin"*.

3.6 Homelessness definition and implications of current homelessness frameworks for policy and practice

The western definition of homelessness is not generally a well-understood term among some of the new and emerging communities. Beer and Foley also highlighted this difference in the understanding of the term of homelessness through the relatively low rates of self identified reports in their research, although approximately 40% of respondents involved in the study had been homeless at one point, having been forced to live with family or friends or use temporary accommodation. (2003:21-3)

NMYIN's practical experience has shown that young people from CALD backgrounds will not define their living situations as homeless nor rough sleeping. (Indeed this is a service system term but one unfamiliar to CALD young people and one requiring explanation). It is more likely that CALD young people will identify a residential address as their own, be it a parent, guardian or extended family member. The main reason reported for this was to ensure benefit continuity through Centre link. For this group of young people, homelessness may best be described as moving around between friends and family – often known as 'couch surfing'.

Current homelessness frameworks that inform policy and practice use particular definitions and frameworks that have been developed from research into homelessness for mainstream young people. NMYIN has found that these frameworks are not necessarily applicable to refugee young people. As explored earlier, refugee young people are by definition homeless and their first experience is one of profound and traumatic homelessness.

This is a different type of homelessness to that understood by many funding bodies that provide prevention and early intervention programs focussed on young people at risk of homelessness. In turn, this has implications for how mainstream definitions or frameworks of prevention and early intervention translate into program responses to refugee young people. What does prevention and early intervention look like for refugee young people who have experienced profound homelessness prior to their arrival in Australia? It is NMYIN's experience that those programs available to refugee young people at risk of homelessness operate within guidelines and frameworks more applicable or meaningful for mainstream young people. As a result, funding requirements limit the type of support that can be provided to refugee young people, thereby at risk of not meeting their needs.

Definitions of homelessness more appropriate and relevant to refugee and migrant young people are provided by Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1998). These include 4 broad categories or a continuum of homelessness from primary homelessness through to marginally housed.

NMYIN has found that when refugee young people are not supported adequately to secure and maintain stable housing, they revert to survival behaviours acquired during their journey to Australia and in response to trauma. For many refugee young people, the experience of homelessness in Australia is a re-traumatising one that precipitates or

exacerbates the emergence of survival behaviours or a trauma response (e.g. physical and mental health issues, disengagement from school, withdrawal from social connections, strong distrust of others, etc.) Young people need culturally responsive and often intensive support to manage these behaviours and assist in their recovery from trauma.

Northern Territory Snapshot

The issues facing young people in Darwin are similar to those issues affecting young people from a refugee background nationally. These issues include limited availability of rental properties in general, continually high prices for properties, and high competition for available affordable properties. These issues often lead to crisis situations with young people from a refugee background being disadvantaged in finding housing.

Local issues have also created difficult situations for young people seeking housing, resulting in homelessness. In Darwin, there are eight beds in the youth crisis shelter (SAAP service). This limited number of beds creates incredible difficulties in access and availability of crisis accommodation. A YWCA SAAP medium term housing program no longer accepts any males in their service. The other medium term housing program, run by Anglicare's Youth Housing Team, only offers shared accommodation in two bedroom units. For young people from a multicultural background sharing accommodation with only one other person from a different culture requires significant work with both young people to understand different cultures and practices. Currently this option has resulted in limited success and has in some cases created physical violence and targeted racism towards young people from refugee background.

Darwin also hosts a seasonal tourist industry. In the dry season, May – July every year limited availability of alternative short-term housing is almost impossible to source. Hostels, backpackers, guest houses, and caravan parks are booked for months in advance for tourists. This has resulted in young people being given tents to stay in parks until short-term accommodation is available.

Other challenges include:

1. Lack of access to support beyond a young person's first housing experience, resulting in an inability to improve the quality of their housing.

2. Lack of targeted support for pregnant young women from CALD backgrounds.

3. Overcrowded housing/lack of appropriately sized housing (including public housing stock) for large families/sibling groups. Many CALD young people enter the homelessness system because they are living in overcrowded accommodation (e.g. 2 bedroom units or houses for a family of 9; 3 bedroom houses accommodating families of 16). Overcrowded housing often leads to family conflict as young people negotiate independence and access to appropriate space to study.

4. Location of accessible housing in outer suburbs, where young people and/or families have limited access to public transport and community networks and services.

5. General shortage of private rental low-cost housing.

6. General shortage of public rental housing.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made by NMYIN in order to respond to the current challenges of youth homelessness among CALD young people:

4.1   Development of a National CALD Housing Strategy that would encompass, e.g., adequate and consistent data collection, adequate interpreter funding, extended periods of support, and the following recommendations.

4.2   Refugee youth-specific orientation programs in each state and territory that equip young people with adequate knowledge and skills to access housing information and support and effectively navigate the housing system.

4.3   National research to inform the development of homelessness frameworks that better reflect the experiences of refugee and migrant young people and the consequent development of program models that more accurately respond to their particular needs and issues.

4.4   An increase in housing information and support for young refugees during the first three years of settlement.

4.5   Increased support and resources to mainstream housing agencies to more effectively support and respond to the needs of young migrants and refugees.

4.6   Targeted services to support CALD pregnant young women.

4.7   Targeted funding to support CALD young people to access the private rental market.

4.8   Increased funding for refugee and migrant youth-specific early intervention strategies to support young people who are at risk of becoming homeless – e.g. CALD-specific Reconnect services, an expansion of the Newly Arrived Youth Support Service (NAYSS)

4.9   More flexible and responsive service delivery models to support refugee and migrant young people who present with complex needs – e.g. assertive outreach service delivery models to assist in navigating the housing system, rather than reliance on the provision of written information.

4.10   Increased flexibility for longer support periods in the SAAP system.

4.11   Increased flexibility and capacity for SAAP services to accommodate asylum seekers or those on visas that limit their access to income support.

4.12   Community education campaigns and strategies to reduce racism and discrimination in the housing market – in particular targeting real estate agents and the private rental market.

4.13   Allocated housing supplies (material aid) for refugee and migrant young people, including supported accommodation options.

5. REFERENCES

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