



Centre for Multicultural Youth

## **HOMELESSNESS IN REFUGEE AND MIGRANT YOUNG PEOPLE: an increased risk**

The Commonwealth and Victorian governments have committed to reducing youth homelessness as a priority, and also to providing greater support to re-engage at risk or homeless youth with family, school or work.

Young people are at particular risk of homelessness. Young people aged 12 to 25 years are the single largest group assisted by the homelessness service system in Victoria<sup>1</sup>.

Young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds are **six to ten times more likely** than other groups of young people to be at risk of homelessness<sup>2</sup>. Despite this, there is no mention about the specific challenges facing culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) young people in the National Homelessness Framework, or in *Homelessness 2020*. Given their vulnerability to social exclusion and homelessness, it is vital that young people from a refugee or migrant background are explicitly recognised and responded to in the development and implementation of any policies or programs under the *Homelessness 2020* strategy.

This briefing is based on CMY's experience of working with refugee and migrant young people. It provides some background information and highlights key issues and recommendations in response to the some of the questions raised in the *Homelessness 2020 strategy* discussion paper.

### **Refugee and migrant young people in Victoria**

Victoria's newly-arrived refugee population is essentially young: over the last five years 30% of Victoria's 19,825 humanitarian arrivals were aged between 12 and 24 years at the time of arrival. A further 30% were younger than 12.<sup>3</sup>

Young people of CLD background also make up a sizeable proportion of Victoria's youth: while 15% of young people aged between 12 and 24 years were born overseas, one in five young people speak a language other than English at home<sup>4</sup>.

Young people are often part of large families: 25% of refugee families settling in Victoria in 2008-2009 had five or more members (compared with 1% of families arriving under the family and skills migration streams)<sup>5</sup>. Alternatively, they may come on their own, as 'unaccompanied minors'.

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<sup>1</sup> Understanding Youth Homelessness, Office of Housing – Department of Human Services website. [www.housing.vic.gov.au](http://www.housing.vic.gov.au)

<sup>2</sup> While accurate information is lacking, this is the most widely used figure, aggregating data from a range of sources, including Coventry, L., Guerra, C., Mackenzie, D. and Pinkney, S. (2002) *Wealth of All Nations: Identification of strategies to assist refugee young people in transition to independence* (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies: Tasmania).

<sup>3</sup> DIAC settlement reporting facility

<sup>4</sup> *State of Victoria's Young People*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

Migrant young people face the challenges of settling into a new country at a significant developmental stage, having left behind important relationships and a sense of belonging to their community. For young refugees this difficult situation can be further accentuated by new family configurations, disrupted schooling, identity issues and adolescent development<sup>6</sup>. All contribute to increasing their vulnerability to homelessness.

### **Prevalence of homelessness among refugee and migrant young people**

Typically, young refugees have experienced long periods of homelessness before arriving in Australia – some may never have had a ‘home’. This makes it difficult for them to identify ‘homelessness’ in an Australia context, and to seek appropriate help.

Indeed, refugee and migrant young people will not often define their living situations as homeless or ‘rough sleeping’. They often identify a parent, guardian or other relative’s address as their own, largely to ensure they can give a stable contact address to services. For many, homelessness manifests as living in overcrowded homes or as ‘couch-surfing’ between the homes of friends and families.

Homelessness has significant ramifications for refugee and migrant young people’s social inclusion: involvement in education and employment, family relationships, mental health etc.

Despite this, accurate information on homelessness affecting these young people is lacking. The Victorian SAAP figures for 2007/08 provide further information about homelessness amongst people from a refugee or migrant background:

- 16.6% of all SAAP clients (not just young clients) were born in a country other than Australia;
- 16.9% identified as being from a culturally and linguistically diverse overseas background.

It is likely that these figures under-represent the extent of homelessness amongst people from a refugee background, as research suggests that they under-utilise mainstream services<sup>7</sup>.

### **Why are refugee and migrant young people more at risk of homelessness?**

Access to safe, secure and affordable housing is central to social inclusion and the ability to settle successfully in a new country. Social exclusion (including economic hardship) combined with the variables of the refugee experience place refugees at extreme risk of remaining in a cycle of chronic homelessness.

Compounding this is the stigma surrounding homelessness in newly-arrived communities: a young person leaving home may bring shame to the family; this will not only affect their family support but also diminish the strength of their connection in their ethnic community.

Factors that contribute to homelessness among refugee young people include:

- The refugee experience significantly impacts on family functioning. Young people commonly arrive in Australia in family arrangements where they have not previously lived together, where they were separated for many years, or where there has not previously been opportunity for bonds to develop. Reconfigured family groups often require additional support to manage pressures placed on them due to settlement, which can lead to family breakdown and homelessness;

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<sup>6</sup> Ransley, C. and Drummond, S. (2001) *Homeless Twice: Exploring resettlement and homelessness for migrant and refugee young people* (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues: Melbourne), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, S. and Cornfoot, S. (2007) *Multicultural Youth in Australia: Settlement and Transition* (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues: Melbourne, for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth), 20.

- Some young people arrive in Australia through the 'orphaned relative' category; they come to live with a carer with whom they may not have had contact for many years – or may never have had prior contact or relationship with. It may be difficult for a strong relationship to develop and family conflict or breakdown may ensue
- 'Unaccompanied minors' are refugees younger than 18 who arrive with no adult relative in Australia. As they have no family to support them, they require the support of DIAC, settlement services and other agencies to obtain housing and other necessary services. This is an emerging, fast-growing, high-risk group in Victoria. There is currently a lack of housing for many of these young people, some of whom remain in motels or other unsuitable accommodation for extended periods;
- Pregnant refugee or migrant young women may be forced to leave home to hide their pregnancy from their family or because their family asks them to. The shame of leaving home is compounded by the stigma surrounding their pregnancy
- Settlement issues, including dealing with experience of trauma, the loss of family members, cultural isolation, loneliness, lack of language and social networks;
- Refugee young people may enter houses already strained by overcrowding;<sup>8</sup> and
- Young people may experience a conflict of values with the adults with whom they come to live, particularly because of differing rates of acculturation – young people wanting to live like 'Australians' while their families remain more attached to their culture of origin.

### **Barriers to accessing appropriate housing support for refugee and migrant young people**

Refugee and migrant young people also experience a number of barriers to securing appropriate, affordable and long-term housing and support.

Some barriers are related to their personal circumstances:

- Age or ethnicity-based discrimination in the private rental market, and difficulties relating to financial/employment status and lack of rental history and references;
- Young people's lack of financial resources (sometimes as a result of migration visa types) to cover bonds, furniture, household items, high rents and rent increases;
- Given the strong family-centred culture of many refugee-source countries, a reluctance to leave the family home to utilise welfare services even when it is a 'risk' environment for the young person;

Some are related to the quality of housing available to them and their families:

- Available housing may not meet families' needs, e.g. not enough rooms for a large refugee family. Many refugee or migrant young people enter the homelessness system because they are living in overcrowded accommodation (e.g. 2 bedroom homes for a family of 9). Overcrowded housing often leads to family conflict as young people negotiate independence and access to appropriate places to study;

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<sup>8</sup> In 2008–09, 25% of all refugee families settling in Victoria had five or more members, compared with only 1% of families arriving under the family and skilled migration streams (data accessed from DIAC's online Settlement Reporting Facility ([www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au)), accessed 26 November 2009).

- Lack of affordable and appropriate housing may force families to move to outer suburbs; this is a particular problem for young people who need to be linked into appropriate education and/or training, and are typically without private transport;
- Crisis accommodation options are often not culturally appropriate – e.g. lack of halal food, no prayer room, mixed sex dorms;

Other barriers are associated with services (housing and otherwise)

- The housing and homelessness services system are often difficult to navigate for young people with limited English language skills and unfamiliarity with Australian systems – e.g. advocating for housing needs, leases, tenancy rights etc. There is often no equivalent in their countries of origin.
- This is compounded by limited resources within the housing sector to assist young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds to negotiate the system;
- Mainstream services that may support young refugees and migrants at risk of homelessness are still not able to respond appropriately to their needs; for instance, they may fail to identify risk factors, or be unsure how to respond to them in a different cultural and family context.