



Working with newly-arrived young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

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Introduction

Victoria's young people are very culturally and linguistically diverse. In the last five years around 55,000 young people aged between 12–24 years have settled in Victoria from overseas. Of these, approximately 6,000 have arrived as humanitarian entrants.¹

While young people generally are at greater risk of homelessness than others in the population, newly-arrived young people, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, face additional risk factors for homelessness and more systemic barriers to accessing safe, stable and appropriate long-term housing and support. Young people from refugee backgrounds are six to ten times more likely to be at risk of homelessness than are Australian-born young people.²

An inability to access appropriate, safe and affordable housing is one of the most significant problems newly-arrived young people encounter in Victoria; if they are not supported appropriately, then this places them at a high risk of homelessness and forms a substantive barrier to successful settlement.

Service providers need to be aware of the increased risk factors and barriers, so that they can identify early young people in this cohort and respond more effectively to them.

This information sheet provides guidance for:

- Housing and homelessness sector workers about how to work effectively with newly-arrived young people and with the multicultural sector; and
- Settlement (hereafter multicultural) sector workers about how to work with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and with the housing and homelessness sector.

Risk Factors

The refugee experience:

Young people who have arrived in Australia as refugees will typically have experienced some or all of the following circumstances:

- Long periods of living in unsafe, insecure and threatening environments.
- Separation from family or significant others, including loss of loved ones and disrupted attachment.
- Extended periods in transition countries or camps, limiting physical, emotional & social development.

Complex transition points

Vulnerability and risk of social exclusion increase at transition points in adolescence and young adulthood. Refugee and migrant young people often face numerous and profound transitions as a consequence of moving to Australia, including: settling into Australia, readjusting to different family configurations, learning a new language and culture and navigating unfamiliar education and employment pathways.

Social and community capital

Newly-arrived young people often lack social and community capital, and when in need of advice or help, turn to community members who are also not well connected with services. They frequently lack knowledge of the housing sector.

Financial and material resources

Newly-arrived young people are often at significant financial disadvantage, arriving with few or no possessions. Visa entitlements may limit their income and they may be sending money to family members overseas. Family and community members are often less able to assist with the costs of setting up a home.





Increased risk for family breakdown

Family breakdown is a direct cause of homelessness for young people, and young refugees have to negotiate particular family circumstances:

- **Re-composed families:** young people commonly arrive in Australia with (or to join) relatives whom they have not lived with before, or from whom they have been separated for many years.
- **Overcrowding:** young people may enter family arrangements that are already strained by overcrowding and accommodating other relatives.
- **Increased responsibilities:** Newly-arrived young people (particularly young women) are often expected to care for siblings or other relatives, do the housework and assist family members with language and systems.
- **Cultural dislocation:** Young people often acculturate more quickly to Australian life, which can lead to family conflict.

Systemic Barriers

Young people face particular barriers to accessing affordable and secure housing: lack of rental history, low incomes, age-based discrimination and insufficient emergency, short and long-term youth housing options. Newly-arrived young people face all of these barriers and more.

Newly-arrived young people often have very little or no practical or conceptual familiarity with Australian systems; and yet the current housing support system and services place the onus on the young person to discover and negotiate pathways to suitable accommodation.

Lack of cultural competency

Some services lack understanding of the needs of newly-arrived young people and of what may have led to their homelessness (e.g. the impact of trauma on current situation). There may also be reluctance to use interpreters and a lack of awareness of exit options. This means that housing services often refer newly-arrived young people to settlement services, resulting in a cycle of referrals.

“Too-hard basket”

Service providers can encounter additional obstacles when trying to find suitable accommodation for newly-arrived young people, including active discrimination. This can result in newly-arrived young people being of low priority in the system.

Scarcity of appropriate options

Youth housing options are severely lacking and those that exist are often not appropriate: lack of halal food, no prayer room, mixed sex dorms, etc.

Private rental system

Newly-arrived young people lack rental histories and references. They may struggle with limited income and financial resources to cover bonds, furniture, high rents etc. Racial discrimination is also not uncommon in the private rental system.

Tips for working effectively with newly-arrived young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

Tips for the housing and homelessness sector

- Aim to learn more about the emerging communities in your area. You may want to do this by inviting multicultural services to come and talk to you about the local communities or by engaging directly with the communities via open days or local events.
- Ensure you are familiar with the procedure for obtaining interpreters for interviews and meetings and offer to engage them whenever it appears that clients have English language difficulties.
- Consider proactive policies to recruit bilingual or bicultural staff that have a good understanding of the needs of the communities in your region.
- Don't put newly-arrived young people in the “too-hard basket”—work alongside multicultural sector workers to provide a holistic and individualised response to their needs.

Tips for the multicultural sector

- Inquire sensitively into newly-arrived clients' housing situations at the point of first contact, regardless of the nature of the interview or meeting.
- Think about issues for young people when working with families: be on guard for the possibility of family conflict and intervene early to prevent or minimise the effects.
- Get to know and communicate regularly with local housing and homelessness agencies.

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Tips for all

- **Take a holistic approach:** newly-arrived young people may require more intensive support than other young people, particularly around developing independent living skills and navigating service and support systems. Services need to consider not just their housing needs but also their access to education, employment, income, and improved family relationships.

Practical strategies in working with newly-arrived young people

Sourcing appropriate housing and support for newly-arrived young people can be frustrating, for the young person and for the worker. The following is a list of practical service strategies which can contribute to both the young person and the worker feeling more empowered.

- **Clarity around options and how the system works:** Many young people have unrealistic expectations of housing. Without a clear idea of the system they can be in danger of jeopardizing viable housing options. Be clear about options and remain consistent, whilst acknowledging that there are often inconsistencies and things that appear unfair. For example, a young person may wonder why it is that X got a house, which seems perfect, while s/he is still without stable accommodation.
- **Building networks:** Newly-arrived young people can often feel incredibly isolated—cut off from family, cultural, community and wider society. Link young people in with activities that build skills and increase networks. Ask young people to make a friendship/support map. Who would they feel comfortable calling on after-hours if they needed emotional or practical support?

- **Lateral solutions:** In addition to making use of specialist services, think of lateral ways that you can support clients. For example, it may be useful to ‘co-case-manage’ particular young people with a colleague. You may be able to trouble-shoot together while potentially providing more support to the young person. Similarly, it may be possible for two young people to share accommodation, meaning that they will begin or continue their journey in Australia together rather than in isolation.
- **An individually tailored response:** Newly-arrived young people require responses that are sensitive to their unique circumstances. These young people are not a homogenous group and while knowledge about the refugee experience, culture and religion is invaluable, it is essential not to make assumptions that overwhelm individual experience and needs.
- **Grasping change:** Young people from refugee backgrounds have experienced an enormous amount of loss and negative change in their life. Family breakdown within Australia can seem like a continuation of this. Encourage the young person to see the positive aspects of family relationships. Sometimes relationships change for better over time and family misunderstandings and estrangements are mended.

- 1 Department of Immigration Settlement Reporting Facility, available at www.immi.gov.au
- 2 Coventry, L., Guerra, C., Mackenzie, D. and Pinkney, S. (2002) *Wealth of All Nations: Identification of strategies to assist young people in transition to independence*, Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Tasmania, 50.

