

Young People in Boarding and Rooming Houses

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The incredibly frustrating reality in the homelessness assistance sector is that utilising rooming house accommodation has become the norm. Due to a shortage of crisis accommodation options and the fact that young people simply cannot access affordable rental properties, homelessness assistance services are forced to refer young people into private rooming houses. Although rooming houses are generally not sustainable for young people due to exorbitant rent charges and substandard living conditions, when the only other option is to sleep rough, there leaves very little choice.

Five years on from Jane Lazzari's *Parity* article 'My Least Favourite Room: Young People and Rooming Houses in Victoria'¹ the issues of concern remain the same. Jane reported that 'while private rooming houses are generally not an appropriate housing or crisis response for anyone, young people experience particular disadvantages in this housing type'. Such disadvantage is reported all too frequently at homelessness assistance services, with young people in overwhelming numbers describing feelings of fear and vulnerability when presented with the idea of living in a rooming house.

Young people who have experienced living in rooming house accommodation in the past often respond to this type of situation with fright and hyper-vigilance due to the real or perceived threat to their safety and wellbeing. A young person living in a rooming house is at risk of violence, theft, assault and being exploited by landlords who prey on a young person's lack of knowledge of their rights, not to mention their lack of options for any other accommodation.

On Census night in 2011, there were 17,721 people in rooming house accommodation. Census data showed that the homeless rooming house population is overwhelmingly male (75 per cent) and much older than the rest of the homeless population — 46 per cent of the rooming house population is aged 45 years and above.²

Given the frequency of homelessness assistance services' clients being referred to rooming houses, many of these houses are populated by individuals who are without employment, suffer from mental health issues, engage in substance abuse and/or have serious behavioural issues. Placing young people in these environments has a detrimental impact on their efforts to engage in support to address their own issues. Young people are typically impressionable and young people who are experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable. They can find it tempting to join in with behaviours in order to not be targeted or alternatively as a way of developing a social network. Some young people may isolate themselves in order to not attract attention and therefore further withdraw from society. Assertive outreach and follow up support would ideally be provided to all young people who are referred to a rooming house.

This type of support has proven to be effective in providing early intervention in such things as conflict resolution, continued engagement with services and assisting individuals to move into more secure and appropriate accommodation.³ Many homelessness assistance services, however, are not specifically funded

to provide this type of support, and demand on existing resources within those organisations already exceeds capacity.

There is a severe lack of alternative accommodation available to young people, and whilst shared housing is appropriate in many cases, the young homeless population generally have reduced living skills and shared housing often breaks down due to conflict. Providing a stable base for a young person with support to develop their independence and skills reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Without the appropriate levels of support, the rooming house 'crisis option' breaks down quickly, often within the first two weeks.

The landlord retains the rent and the young person ends up back at the homelessness service; but this time, their likelihood of being able to access financial assistance from the Housing Establishment Fund has greatly reduced. Funding for additional case workers would, of course, be a welcome step to support homelessness services to ensure that the likelihood of young people becoming entrenched in homelessness is reduced. A support structure is essential if homelessness services are forced to continue to rely on rooming houses as a source of crisis accommodation.

Endnotes

1. Lazzari J 2010, *Parity*, vol.23, no.3, Council to Homeless Persons, Collingwood.
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2011*, Australian Government, Canberra.
3. Council to Homeless Persons Rooming House Project 2014, *The state of rooming house reform in Victoria*, Council to Homeless Persons, Collingwood.