

CMY

Centre for Multicultural Youth

FINDING HOME IN VICTORIA

Refugee and migrant young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

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Finding home in Victoria

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About CMY

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) is a community based organisation that advocates for the needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. In supporting young people, CMY combines policy development and direct service delivery within a community development framework. This approach gives CMY strong connections with young people and their communities while enabling positive change on a local, state and national level.

Finding home in Victoria was developed in 2009–2010 through funding provided by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the Victorian Office for Youth.

For more information about the work of CMY, go to www.cmy.net.au

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Executive Summary

The difference between a house and a home can be described as the difference between a place to stay and a place to live.¹

Introduction

Young people from refugee backgrounds are six to ten times more likely to be at risk of homelessness than Australian-born young people.² An inability to access appropriate, safe and affordable housing is one of the most significant problems they 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.

It is widely recognised both nationally and internationally that obtaining appropriate, affordable and secure housing is critical to effective resettlement³: not only does poor settlement increase the risk of homelessness, but inappropriate housing in turn contributes to poor settlement. The relationship is therefore not a linear one from poor housing to poor settlement or vice versa, but more of a vicious circle.

Despite this, young refugees and migrants are not explicitly referred to in either *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* or *A Better Place: Victorian Homelessness 2020 strategy*. While *The Road Home* acknowledges that prevention strategies should focus on key transition points, explaining that “[m]ajor changes and transitions, such as young people leaving home early, can place (them) at greater risk” it does not mention young refugees or migrants, who face more complex transition points than other young people.

Given their vulnerability, young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds must be explicitly recognised

and responded to in the development and implementation of any policies or programs under the Commonwealth and Victorian homelessness strategies.

As the Victorian Homelessness 2020 strategy discussion paper noted: “Today we have a unique, possibly ‘once in a generation’ opportunity to address this social problem.”⁴ It is imperative that young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are not left behind at this juncture.

Finding home in Victoria

Finding Home in Victoria highlights the circumstances of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds that make them particularly vulnerable to homelessness. These include risk factors related to their migration and settlement experience; these risk factors are compounded by systemic barriers to their obtaining appropriate housing. It explores changes required at the resource and service provision levels and makes a series of recommendations for a way forward.

In developing this policy discussion paper, the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) has engaged with current policy developments and literature on homelessness before consulting with housing and homelessness services, multicultural and youth sector workers, and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. This paper also draws on CMY’s casework in its Reconnect Newly-Arrived and Refugee Specialist services, which provide support to newly-arrived and refugee young people at risk of homelessness.

1 Dutch Refugee Council/ECRE (2001) *Good Practice Guide on the Integration of Refugees in the European Union: Housing*. ECRE, Brussels, as quoted in Ager, A. and Strang, A. (2008) ‘Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework’ *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol. 21, No. 2, 166.

2 Coventry et al. (2002: 50).

3 Zetter and Perl (1999) and Hulchanski et al. (2000).

4 Department of Human Services (2009: 1).

Why are refugee and migrant young people more vulnerable to homelessness?

I just feel sad, because here I don't know anywhere to go, so if something is happening in the house, I feel bad I can't go anywhere.

Young woman from Liberia, in Australia for six months

Risk factors

While young people generally are at greater risk of homelessness than others in the population, those from refugee or migrant backgrounds face additional risk factors.

Vulnerability and risk of social exclusion increase at **transition points** in adolescence and young adulthood. Refugee and migrant young people often face numerous and more profound transitions than their Australian-born counterparts, prior to arriving in Australia, and subsequently face another set of complex transitions upon settling into Australia. This includes readjusting to different family configurations, learning a new language and culture, compensating for years of interrupted education (or sometimes no prior education), transitioning into age—rather than capacity-determined mainstream education settings and navigating unfamiliar education and employment pathways.

Family breakdown is one of the leading causes of youth homelessness, and is a direct cause of homelessness for refugee young people. There are circumstances specific to the refugee experience that complicate family relationships and cause tension, such as the impact of trauma and loss, disrupted and re-configured family relationships, overcrowded housing, increased responsibilities and high expectations for young people, and differing rates of acculturation.

When newly-arrived young people's family circumstances change for the worse, they struggle to understand

what options are open to them. Trauma, despair, concern for family and friends left behind, cultural isolation and lack of English language skills hinder a young person's ability to understand the complex housing system in Australia. They lack **social and community capital**, and when in need of advice or help, only have other community members (and sometimes teachers) to turn to. They frequently lack knowledge of and connections to the housing sector.

Refugee young people's options are all the more limited because their **financial and material resources** are scarce. They are often at significant financial disadvantage, arriving with few or no possessions, and being initially reliant on Centrelink (if eligible) and any assistance available through Humanitarian Settlement Services. Visa restrictions may limit their income and they may be sending money to family members overseas. Family and community members are often under financial stress themselves and are less able to assist with the costs of setting up a home e.g. providing material necessities. Even more than for other young people, it is not unusual for a refugee or migrant young person who has found accommodation to not be able to afford the cost of moving or of buying basic furniture—and there may be no parents, uncles or aunts to provide a helping hand.

Some groups of refugee and migrant young people experience particular vulnerabilities. This includes young mothers, refugee minors who arrive in Australia without relatives (Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors), those on orphan visas and young asylum seekers. For these groups, housing and supported accommodation options are very limited.

Systemic barriers

[My worker said] “You just have to wait. You have to wait ten years”. I said “Ten years?” [She said] “Okay I will give you another form, the quick one” – I done the form, the quick one, [she said] “you still have to wait”.

Young woman from Sudan, with a one year old baby

CMY acknowledges that the scarcity of housing options is an issue for all young people who are homeless. Youth housing options, including crisis and transitional accommodation, are severely lacking and are often not culturally appropriate for young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds – e.g. lack of halal food, no prayer room, mixed sex dorms, and other people with drug, alcohol and/or violence problems living on the premises. Waiting lists for public housing are notoriously long. The private rental system is all but inaccessible to newly-arrived young people in terms of requiring rental histories, references, high rents and bonds. Discrimination on the part of real estate agents has also been reported and needs to be systematically addressed.

While recognising these limitations, CMY also believes that there is room for improvement in the access young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds have to existing options, and in the quality of the service they receive.

Refugee and migrant young people face particular systemic barriers to accessing long-term, stable, appropriate and affordable housing, and housing and homelessness support. They are practically and conceptually unfamiliar 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. This inability to navigate the system and to use a range of options places them at a marked disadvantage when accommodation is scarce and services are stretched.

Furthermore, cultural competency varies across agencies; mainstream services that work with many different groups of young people often do not hold culturally specific knowledge and understanding of the circumstances and needs of young refugees and migrants⁵. There can be a reluctance to use interpreters and a lack of awareness of visa entitlements and exit options. As housing workers encounter additional obstacles when seeking accommodation for refugee and migrant young people (including active discrimination), there is a tendency to put them in the ‘too-hard basket’ and not spend the time and effort necessary to secure them a place.

Young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds often present with complex needs and require a range of social, emotional and financial support. It is a common complaint from young people that they have to knock on too many doors to receive help, and would rather have one worker helping them with all their needs. While the common entry point (Front Door) service system in Victoria was initiated with the aim of reducing the number of agencies that people at risk of homelessness had to approach in order to seek accommodation, in practice, it is under-resourced and over-stretched and is not providing a service to many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. There was consensus among the workers that CMY spoke with that it is very difficult to get housing for refugee and migrant young people - including asylum seekers—through the ‘Front Door’ agencies. The system is failing this vulnerable group.

⁵ Toure (2008: 18).

The way forward

Significant systemic change is required if the Commonwealth Government's interim targets for 2013 are going to be met in respect of refugee and migrant young people.

- **Prevention and early intervention:** The risk of family breakdown needs to be identified and addressed early. The Reconnect Newly-Arrived and Refugee Specialist services have been particularly effective at providing one-on-one and strategic case work support to refugee and other newly-arrived young people and their families, within an early intervention model. The program would benefit from more flexibility around the age of its clients and more services in LGAs with high settlement and secondary settlement.

- **Collaboration between services:** Refugee and migrant young people's risk of homelessness could be greatly decreased through improved collaboration between the settlement, youth, education and housing sectors from the time of settlement, leading to a continuum of service delivery that is currently lacking. Partnerships could take the form of workforce development and training, joint case management to provide culturally appropriate support, and sharing of knowledge.

- **Better engagement with the private rental market:** Relationships between the housing and homelessness service sector, the multicultural sector and landlords and real estate agents need to be strengthened to improve refugee and migrant young people's access to the private rental market.

- **A holistic approach to young people's needs:**

Holistic services are required, which take into consideration not just young people's housing needs but also their access to education, employment, income, and improved family relationships. Young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds may require more intensive support on the path to independence than other young people, particularly around developing independent living skills and navigating service and support systems. Consistent provision of outreach services is required, including after accommodation has been found for a young person.

- **Supportive housing models:** A more supportive approach to refugee and migrant young people's needs can be implemented that include longer periods of support, appropriate assessment of their needs, advocacy with other services including mental health services, alternative education and appropriate employment assistance.

- **Improved housing options:** Larger houses need to be available for families from refugee backgrounds, who are often accommodating relatives. New housing stock must be close to employment opportunities, educational facilities, public transport and community facilities. More crisis and transitional housing options need to be established in high settlement areas to allow refugee and migrant young people to continue their studies or training despite their housing crisis.

Finally, advocacy and service planning for this group of young people need to be supported by evidence. Longitudinal research on the prevalence and nature of homelessness amongst refugee and other newly-arrived young people is needed to identify good practice that can address the unique and complex needs of these young people.

Recommendations

Commonwealth and state government strategies

1. That the Commonwealth and state government acknowledge the particular vulnerability to homelessness of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and include them in their strategies.
2. That all Commonwealth and state government-funded projects and programs for young people include targets for young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds, proportional to their greater risk of homelessness. This includes the state government's flagship projects and allocation of new housing stock.
3. That the Commonwealth and state government develop a more detailed data collection system in relation to this cohort of young people and ensure consistency of data collection across all housing and housing-related services.
4. That the Commonwealth and state government's annual reports on progress towards the interim and 2020 targets specifically incorporate information about improvements to the housing stability and family, school and work engagement of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
5. That the Commonwealth and state government recognise the housing needs of large families and develop appropriate strategies to address them.

Research and data collection

6. That the Office of Housing and SAAP undertake an extensive audit of migrant and refugee youth access to the homelessness service system in Victoria to identify barriers to access and to inform the development of strategies to overcome these barriers.

7. That longitudinal research be funded and undertaken to focus on the scope and nature of migrant and refugee youth homelessness.

Services

8. That good practice early intervention models and community development approaches, such as Reconnect Newly-Arrived and Refugee Specialist services, be expanded and appropriately resourced in regions where there are high concentrations of refugee and newly-arrived communities to support young people who are at risk of becoming homeless, as part of the early intervention goals articulated in the Commonwealth and Victorian strategies.
9. That the complexity of needs faced by this cohort of young people be recognised by increasing the flexibility for longer support periods in the SAAP system (including in transitional and other accommodation), to enable refugee and migrant young people to develop sustainable skills and pathways into independent living.

Workforce Development

10. That multicultural services, youth services and housing agencies develop partnerships and collaboration around sharing of knowledge, referral pathways and advocacy strategies.
11. That a workforce development strategy and support be developed for:
 - the housing support sector in relation to cultural competency; and
 - the settlement and ethno-specific sectors in relation to youth work practice.

Early intervention

12. That Commonwealth and state-funded services work collaboratively to intervene at critical transition stages for refugee and migrant young people to help identify and appropriately refer those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

13. That good practice early intervention models and services recognise the critical importance of adopting a family-focused approach when working with refugee and newly-arrived young people, their families and communities.

14. That community education campaigns and strategies be developed to reduce racism and discrimination in the housing market—in particular targeting real estate agents and the private rental market.

Crisis services

15. That youth-specific crisis housing in areas of high settlement be increased and provide culturally-appropriate facilities and support.

Vulnerable groups

Unaccompanied humanitarian minors

16. That young people exiting from the Refugee Minor Program be well supported with individualised transition plans for independent living.

Young mothers

17. That increased support and housing options be created for pregnant young women and young mothers from refugee or migrant backgrounds.

Young people without income

18. That SAAP services undertake training in order to increase their knowledge of, and capacity to accommodate, young people on visas with limited access to income support (such as those on Orphan or Remaining Relative visas and young asylum seekers).

1| Introduction

1.1 Overview

Finding home in Victoria was developed in the context of recent commitments by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments to significantly reduce homelessness, including youth homelessness, by 2020. This policy paper advocates that the implementation of the national homelessness strategy at the local level must recognise—and provide targeted responses to—the particular issues that young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds face in the housing and homelessness service systems.

Finding home in Victoria outlines the factors that place and maintain refugee and migrant young people at greater risk of homelessness and the ability of the current housing and homelessness service systems to meet their needs. It discusses the changes required at the resource and service provision levels and makes a series of recommendations for the future.

***Finding home in Victoria* is divided into five main sections:**

- **Section 1** introduces the background to this paper;
- **Section 2** provides the policy context;
- **Section 3** explores the reasons why young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are at increased risk for homelessness and the systemic barriers they face when trying to access housing;
- **Section 4** looks at the changes needed to reduce the risk of homelessness for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and to enhance their access to affordable, appropriate and long-term housing;
- **Section 5** provides recommendations.



1.2 Methodology

In developing this policy paper, CMY engaged with current policy developments and literature on homelessness before consulting with housing and homelessness services, multicultural and youth sector workers, and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. This paper also drew on CMY's casework in its Reconnect Newly-Arrived and Refugee Specialist services, which provides specialist support to newly-arrived and refugee young people at risk of homelessness.

Current policy developments and literature

A review of current Commonwealth and Victorian housing and homelessness policies, frameworks and strategies was undertaken to explore their recognition of and responsiveness to the needs of refugee and migrant young people. A literature review was conducted about: the prevalence of homelessness amongst refugee and migrant young people; factors that place refugee and migrant young people at risk of homelessness; barriers to accessing suitable housing; and effective strategies for reducing homelessness amongst young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds.

Consultations with key stakeholders

a. Service providers

Early consultations were held with key housing and support service providers to gather information about the on-the-ground experience of providing housing and homelessness support to young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and to identify the extent of existing advocacy in the area.

b. Statewide homelessness workers' forum

In April 2010, CMY held a forum involving a range of experts and stakeholders who had experience working with refugee and migrant young people in the housing and homelessness service sector. The forum examined homelessness sector workers' experiences with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their recommendations for improving services to this cohort of young people. From this forum, a working group was formed to advocate for the needs of refugee and migrant young people at both the policy and service provision levels.

c. Consultations with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds

Young people from refugee backgrounds linked to CMY's Reconnect program were consulted to explore their own experiences of homelessness in Melbourne.

2| The policy context

Homelessness does not simply mean that people are without shelter. A stable home provides safety and security as well as connections to friends, family and a community. Homelessness makes it very difficult to hold down a job or lead a healthy and stable life.⁶

2.1 What is homelessness?

This paper adopts Chamberlain and MacKenzie's widely cited three-tiered articulation of homelessness:

- **Primary homelessness:** People without conventional accommodation—living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter. This is also known as 'rough-sleeping'.
- **Secondary homelessness:** People who move around frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another, including: people using emergency accommodation; teenagers staying in youth refuges; people residing temporarily with friends or relatives; and those using boarding houses on an occasional or intermittent basis.
- **Tertiary homelessness:** People living in single rooms on a medium to long-term basis. Residents of private boarding houses do not have a separate bedroom and living room; they do not have kitchen and bathroom facilities of their own; their accommodation is not self-contained; and they do not have security of tenure provided by a lease. They are homeless because their accommodation is inferior to the characteristics identified in the 'community standard.'⁷

Young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds primarily experience 'secondary homelessness', with couch-surfing, transitional and crisis housing their main options.⁸

2.2 Current Commonwealth and state policy

Both 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.⁹

A. *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*

In 2008 the Commonwealth Government released *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* (hereafter *The Road Home* or 'the White Paper') with the headline goals of halving homelessness in Australia and offering supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it by 2020. Interim targets for 2013 include increasing by 25% the number of young people (who are homeless or at risk of homelessness) who have improved housing stability and are engaged with family, school and work.

The Road Home proposes that homelessness can be prevented through early intervention, which includes:

- Tackling the structural drivers of homelessness, such as entrenched disadvantage, unemployment and the shortage of affordable housing; and
- Targeting groups who are at risk of homelessness, including older people in housing stress, women and children leaving violence, Indigenous Australians and people leaving state care.

6 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008: 3).

7 Chamberlain, C. and MacKenzie, D. (1998: 21).

8 Toure (2008: 26).

9 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008: 30) and Department of Human Services (2009: 5).

It recognises that prevention strategies should focus on key transition points and life events, as “[m]ajor changes and transitions, such as young people leaving home early, can place people at greater risk.”¹⁰

The Road Home identifies several causes of homelessness, many of which are relevant to circumstances that commonly impact on young people from migrant and particularly refugee communities, including: declining housing affordability and increasing financial stresses; long-term unemployment; poor education; family breakdown; and exiting into homelessness from state care.¹¹

In terms of improving and expanding services to achieve sustainable housing *The Road Home* notes that:

All people who are vulnerable to homelessness need help from mainstream services such as Centrelink and health and employment services. Those who become homeless may also seek help from the specialist homelessness sector. At present, they have to approach each service they need separately, often repeating their story over and over again.¹²

The White Paper stresses that there should be no ‘wrong doors’ for people seeking help for homelessness and that mainstream services need to identify people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness so that they can receive all the support they need. It emphasises that mainstream and specialist homelessness services need to work better together, as specialist homelessness services cannot be expected to deliver the entire homelessness response.

The Road Home further notes that to break the cycle of homelessness, ‘wrap-around’ support is needed to address all the needs of people who are chronically homeless.

Guiding principles of The Road Home are included in the Annex to this paper.

¹⁰ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008: 6).

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp 6-9.

¹² *Ibid.* p x.

B. A Better Place: Victorian Homelessness 2020 Strategy

State and Territory governments are responsible for implementing the national homelessness strategy. In October 2009 the Victorian government released *Homelessness 2020 strategy: A discussion paper*, as a response to *The Road Home* and as a timely tool to gather feedback in order to update the existing Victorian homelessness strategy. *Homelessness 2020* sought feedback on four key themes, which are similar to those that underpin *The Road Home*:

- Placing homelessness within a social inclusion framework;
- Improving prevention and early intervention within the continuum of service delivery;
- Integrating whole-of-government approaches; and
- Focusing policy and service delivery on the individual.

The Victorian Government released *A Better Place: Victorian Homelessness 2020 Strategy* (hereafter *A Better Place*) in September 2010. *A Better Place* proposes a greater role for mainstream services (e.g. schools, job networks, health services and Centrelink) and takes a life-stage approach to delivering services for people experiencing homelessness. It recognises that people at different stages of life often become homeless for different reasons and have different needs. It therefore targets particular strategies at three different life stages:

- Families with children and independent young people
- Adults experiencing short or long-term homelessness
- Older people.

2.3 Where are refugee and migrant young people in Commonwealth and state policy?

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.¹³

Young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds make up a sizeable proportion of Victoria's youth: 15% of young people aged between 12 and 24 years were born overseas, and 20% speak a language other than English at home.¹⁴ Victoria's newly-arrived refugee population is also essentially young. Over the last five years 30% of Victoria's 19,285 humanitarian arrivals were aged between 12 and 24 years at the time of arrival. A further 30% were younger than 12 years.¹⁵

While young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds demonstrate high levels of strength, resilience, resourcefulness and understanding,¹⁶ they face a complex series of transition points as they settle into Australia. An inability to access appropriate, safe and affordable housing is one of the most significant problems they encounter in Victoria; if they are not supported appropriately then it places them at a high risk of homelessness and forms a substantive barrier to successful settlement.

The best estimate available suggests that young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds are six to ten times more likely than other groups of young people to be at risk of homelessness.¹⁷

Despite their significant numbers and increased risk of homelessness, young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds are not specifically referred to in either *The Road Home* or *A Better Place*.¹⁸

Given their vulnerability, it is vital that young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds are explicitly recognised and responded to in the development and implementation of any policies or programs under *The Road Home* and *A Better Place* frameworks. As the Victorian *Homelessness 2020* strategy discussion paper noted: "Today we have a unique, possibly 'once in a generation' opportunity to address this social problem."¹⁹

It is imperative that young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are not left behind at this juncture.

13 See www.housing.vic.gov.au/homelessness-and-family-violence/homelessness/youth-homelessness, last viewed 28 June 2010.

14 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Planning and Community Development (2008: 23).

15 DIAC settlement reporting facility: see www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/settlement-reporting-facility.

16 Francis and Cornfoot (2007: 8).

17 While accurate information is lacking, this is the most widely used figure, aggregating data from a range of sources: see Coventry et al. (2002: 50).

18 There is reference in *The Road Home* that the national homelessness research strategy needs to engage with CLD communities: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008: 60).

19 Department of Human Services (2009: 1).

3| Why are refugee and migrant young people more vulnerable?

Risk factors and systemic barriers

Social inclusion is one of the most important principles guiding *The Road Home* and *A Better Place* frameworks.

Tackling homelessness is about more than shelter and support. The focus must be on building the capacity of people and communities to maximize everyone's potential to participate economically and socially.²⁰

Access to safe, secure and affordable housing is central to social inclusion and to a young person's ability to settle successfully in Australia. However, young people from a refugee or migrant background are at particular risk of homelessness because they often face unique challenges in their living situations and additional barriers to accessing appropriate housing.

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.²¹ It is widely recognised both nationally and internationally that obtaining appropriate, affordable and secure housing is critical to effective resettlement.²² Not only does poor settlement increase the risk of homelessness, but inappropriate housing in turn contributes to poor settlement. The relationship is therefore not a linear one from poor housing to poor settlement or vice versa, but more of a vicious circle.

Mainstream agencies and specialist housing and homelessness support agencies need to be aware of the circumstances that can precipitate homelessness for refugee young people.

3.1 Factors that contribute to homelessness among young refugees and migrants

A. The refugee experience

The refugee experience is itself one of homelessness; refugee young people have, by definition, already experienced profound homelessness and displacement on arrival in Australia.²³ While each refugee experience is different, it is likely that many young refugees will have experienced one or more of the following:

- Long periods of living in unsafe, insecure and threatening environments;
- Separation from family or significant others, including the loss of loved ones (which may be characterised as emotional and psychological homelessness), disconnection and disrupted attachment;
- Extended periods of time spent in transition countries or refugee camps, limiting their physical, emotional and social development.

The refugee experience can lead to issues that complicate settlement, such as trauma, mourning the loss of family members or significant others, concern for family and friends left behind, cultural isolation, loneliness, and lack of language (amongst others). These issues hinder a young person's ability to absorb new information and to understand the complex Australian support system.²⁴ This can make the transition to life in a new country more complicated.

Being homeless or at risk of homelessness may also re-traumatise young people from refugee backgrounds.²⁵

20 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008: 19).

21 Ransley and Drummond (2001: 12).

22 Zetter and Perl (1999) and Hulchanski et al. (2000).

23 Ransley and Drummond (2001: 12).

24 See also Toure (2008: 22).

25 Toure (2008: 33).

B. Multiple transitions

Newly-arrived young people, whether from refugee or migrant backgrounds, face the challenges of settling into a new country at a significant developmental stage. Young refugees have already undergone significant and enduring transitions by the nature of their refugee experience. Like young people from refugee backgrounds, many young migrants may also have had no choice regarding coming to Australia, and have had to leave behind important relationships and a sense of belonging to their community or country of origin.

It is somewhat surprising that refugee and migrant young people are not mentioned in the current policy context, given that there is great emphasis in *The Road Home* and *A Better Place* on prevention and early intervention and that one of the guiding principles of *The Road Home* is that transition points are a priority—because people are more vulnerable at points of change.

For many young people, vulnerability and risk of social exclusion increase at transition points during adolescence and young adulthood (e.g. transition to secondary school, transition to work and adult relationships).²⁶ Refugee and migrant young people often face numerous and more profound transitions than their Australian-born counterparts as a consequence of moving to Australia, including settling into Australia, readjusting to different family configurations, learning a new language and culture, compensating for interrupted education or sometimes no education as they transition into mainstream educational settings and navigate unfamiliar education and employment pathways.

C. Family breakdown

Family breakdown is a major cause of homelessness for young people trying to settle in Australia. While this may also be the case for other young people, there are circumstances specific to the refugee and migrant experience that complicate family relationships and cause tension.²⁷

Disrupted and reconfigured family compositions

The refugee experience separates families and significantly impacts on family configuration and functioning. It often includes the death of loved ones. Young people commonly arrive in Australia in family arrangements (with a long-lost parent, aunts, uncles, cousins etc) where family members have not previously lived together or where they were separated for many years. Many young people are in the care of siblings, or other young relatives who are themselves managing settlement processes. Some young people who have been sponsored through the orphaned relative migration category may have had no prior contact with the relative or carer they come to live with. As such it may be difficult for strong bonds to develop.²⁸ Reconfigured family groups who have experienced profound trauma and loss often require additional support. They often face many pressures that can lead to family conflict or breakdown and homelessness.

26 Department of Human Services, Department of Planning and Community Development and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008: 13-14).

27 See also Toure (2008: 27-29).

28 See also Toure (2008: 28).

Case study: Zac

Zac is 19 and has one older brother and two younger siblings from his parents' marriage. His mother was killed in civil conflict and Zac and his siblings were separated from their father for seven years. In 2009 they arrived in Australia and were reunited with their father who had remarried. His wife is only a couple of years older than Zac. The couple has two young children and they are expecting another.

The house is very overcrowded and there is conflict between Zac, his sister and their stepmother around food, housework and space. There is also disagreement around how Centrelink payments should be used. Zac's relationship with his father is strained; Zac says he is constantly criticised and compared to his older brother. To cope with the situation he has started drinking. Zac's father also drinks due to frustration, not wanting to take sides in the family and financial difficulties.

After an argument, Zac went to stay with a friend. Returning two weeks later his father threw his belongings on the street and told him not to come back. Zac sought accommodation with another friend who asked him to contribute to rent payment. A Reconnect-Newly Arrived Youth Specialist service assisted Zac to apply for the Independent Living Allowance but while waiting for the application to be processed, Zac's friend kicked him out saying it was taking too long. Zac's father agreed he could come back home temporarily but when Centrelink found out, they said that Zac was now ineligible for an Independent Living Allowance.²⁹

Overcrowding

Young people from refugee backgrounds may enter housing arrangements that are already strained by overcrowding (e.g. 2 bedroom homes for a family of 9, or 3 bedroom homes accommodating 16 people).³⁰ One of the young women we spoke with sleeps on a mattress in her friend's lounge with her one year old child.

“When we arrived we stayed with my auntie, she'd been here for five years, two bedroom house, we had ten people, but it was too many people so we had to find somewhere to live in a hurry.”

19 year old young woman from Liberia

“At the moment I stay with my friend, there are nine people in three bedrooms... me and my brother sleep in one small room, really small... I don't have bed. I sleep in my friend's bed. Me and my brother we sleep together in a queen bed.”

19 year old young woman from Burma

Increased responsibilities

Some young people have major support roles in their homes. Young women in particular may face gender-specific expectations and responsibilities. They may be responsible for housework and caring for family members after school before they can focus on their own needs.

Many families have high expectations for their young people and have limited knowledge of education and employment pathways. For young people who are managing the challenges of interrupted education, this can place enormous pressure upon them.

Young people are often expected to assist other family members to negotiate a new language, culture and systems. This may often change the power dynamics within the family as young people become more adept in negotiating their way around the services systems and culture. It can often lead to increased family tensions as the equilibrium of relationships within the family change.³¹

29 Case study taken from Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 19).

30 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 (see DIAC's online Settlement Reporting Facility, www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/settlement-reporting-facility, last viewed 26 November 2009). See also Migrant and Refugee Rental Housing Assistance Project (2007), Graduate Learning Team (2009: 14) and Refugee Young People and Housing Issues Working Group (2002: 22-25).

31 See also Toure (2008: 28).

Cultural dislocation

Young people can experience a conflict of values with the adults with whom they come to live, particularly because of the differing rates of acculturation between young people and adults. This is a major cause of family conflict and when acute, can lead to young people leaving home or being thrown out of home by their parents or guardian.³²

Case Study: Abe³³

At 16 years of age Abe is the oldest of three children in his family. His mother was separated from their family in Khartoum and while at the refugee camp in Kenya, his father remarried and had another child. The family has been in Australia for two years. Conflict occurred when Abe's mother was located and Abe wanted to start the process of getting her to come to Australia. The stepmother was unhappy about this possibility and the father was hesitant. Abe then became violent to both his father and stepmother. The police were involved and some charges were laid. The stepmother left and now six months on has re-partnered. Subsequently, Abe was removed from the family home as a result of child protection concerns. He was placed with a foster family from a different cultural background and left two weeks later having found the food and cultural differences too hard. He also dropped out of school.

Abe is currently staying with friends, but this is temporary.

D. Social and community capital

Newly-arrived young people in particular have limited social capital. When in need of advice or help, their only avenues are often other members of their community and teachers.³⁴ They are frequently many steps removed from those who may be able to help them, not just with housing, but also with employment, education, or health care.

This lack of social and community capital was illustrated by a young woman who had been in Australia for only six months when interviewed by CMY. When asked if she could turn to her community for advice, she explained that she couldn't *"because the people I know around here they are just newly-arrived"*.

Practically, this leads to young people having limited options when they are considering moving out of their accommodation. They often lack knowledge of and connections to the housing sector, are unsure who to ask, and know few people who can provide stable accommodation. As a result, they often end up staying at friends' houses for short periods of time, moving from house to house and from suburb to suburb—thereby making it difficult for agencies to reach them. They also find themselves in situations they may have limited control over, such as living with relatives or acquaintances who are abusive, or in households where domestic violence and alcohol abuse occur.

"In my house I feel scared, sometimes the husband comes home drunk and shouts and I am scared... Sometimes there's yelling, they fight... Even my son he cries sometimes, he doesn't want to see people yelling."

22 year old woman from Sudan

³² Ibid. 28-29.

³³ Case study from a Reconnect-NAYS worker – accessed from Reconnect-NAYS Teleconference Minutes from meeting held in February 2010.

³⁴ Migrant and Refugee Rental Housing Assistance Project (2007: v), Graduate Learning Team (2009: 17) and Refugee Young People and Housing Issues Working Group (2002: 26-28).

Carers or relatives may have limited means to provide ongoing appropriate housing or support for young people. They are often on low or no incomes, financially supporting other relatives (e.g. sponsored family members) and/or sending money to family members overseas. This makes it particularly difficult for them to support young people who might be dependent for long periods.

“No one is working in my house, so it’s very difficult... I want to work when I’m studying to help myself and help my family in the house.”

19 year old woman from Liberia

There may be unrealistic expectations among reconfigured families that young people will transition to independent living quickly, to secure their own accommodation and employment in order to relieve the burden on the household.

What does it feel like, not having a home?

‘Couch-surfing’ and living in unhappy and/or overcrowded houses have significant ramifications for refugee and migrant young people’s social inclusion, involvement in education and employment, family and other relationships and mental health.³⁵

Our discussions with young women from Liberia, Sudan and Burma who have been in Australia for less than five years indicated that they struggled to negotiate independence and access to appropriate places to study in houses that are too small or where there is no private space:

“Sometimes if I want to study someone will have the phone really loud, I will stop from studying, some people are watching films and shouting.”

“I have to do my homework in the library.”

The young women also demonstrated a profound sense of sadness and isolation, despite their being surrounded by people:

“I just feel sad, because here I don’t know anywhere to go, so if something is happening in the house, I feel bad I can’t go anywhere, sometimes I just take my book and go to the back of the yard.”

“Sometimes when you stay at home you think too much so sometimes I take my son and we just go and walk.”

Some were unable to have friends visit due to their living situations:

“I can’t have friends there, there are too many people.”

“I can’t have friends over. It’s not my house.”

“Living in overcrowded or non-family members’ houses also gave rise to safety fears among some of the refugee young people we spoke to.”

“Sometimes my heart is racing and I feel scared and sad and can’t sleep.”

35 See also Toure (2008: 32-35) regarding the impact of homelessness on newly-arrived young people.

E. Financial and material resources

Young people from refugee backgrounds are often at significant disadvantage financially when compared with their Australian-born peers. They arrive in Australia with very few or no possessions and, initially at least, rely on Centrelink payments (if they're eligible) and any assistance or material aid granted through the Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (HSS). Some newly-arrived young people in particular are subject to visa entitlements which may limit their access to income, such as spouse or dependent visas.

Further, many newly-arrived young people face barriers to accessing employment, including:

- language difficulties
- tight labour market
- discrimination.

A lack of secure employment further limits their financial and material resources, and therefore their housing options.

For those who are eligible for Centrelink payments, the amount of payment is often insufficient to cover bonds, rent-in-advance, furniture and other costs associated with moving into new accommodation. Even more than for other vulnerable young people, extended family or community members are rarely able to assist with the costs involved in setting up a home e.g. by providing material necessities (e.g. old fridges) or helping transport possessions in their cars or vans.

Some young people also send money to family who remain overseas, further limiting their own resources and options.

F. Particularly vulnerable groups

There are several sub-groups of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are, at different times in their lives, at particular risk of homelessness. While we have chosen to highlight the situation of unaccompanied minors, teenage mothers and young asylum seekers, this is only the 'tip of the iceberg'. There are also concerns and a need for specific approaches for young men exiting the justice system, young men and women with drug and alcohol issues, and those with mental health issues.

Unaccompanied minors

Some refugee minors arrive with no adult relative to support them to settle into Australia. These Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors (UHMs) are wards of the Federal Minister for Immigration and Citizenship (see glossary for further information). In Victoria, the Minister's guardianship function is delegated to the Department of Human Services (DHS) Refugee Minor Program (RMP), until UHMs are 18 years of age, with some discretion to extend that care for another twelve months.

Unaccompanied minors' lack of social and community capital is acute:

"My client said to me, 'I ask my friend at school what they do when they get home. He watches TV until his mum tells him to do home work, then he eats dinner and goes to bed. I am different. I go home; I wash and iron my uniform so it is clean for tomorrow. Then I cook dinner, and clean the kitchen. Then I do my home work if I am not too tired. I go to bed because I am lonely.'

He is 16 years old and currently living alone. He pays rent and bills in a house belonging to a relative who is overseas. He sends all of his remaining money home to his family still overseas."

CMY Reconnect worker

UHMs face the risk of exiting from the Refugee Minor Program into homelessness if the transition is not managed carefully, with a focus on equipping young people with independent living skills and developing the ability to seek support when required.

Young mothers

Pregnancy is one of the most common set of circumstances within which young women from refugee and migrant backgrounds present to homelessness services. Young women who become pregnant outside of marriage may be forced to leave home to hide their pregnancy from their family or because they are rejected by their family. The shame of leaving home is often compounded by the stigma surrounding their pregnancy.³⁶

“I come here with my uncle’s wife and my uncle, since I got pregnant they kicked me out of the house. I stay with my friend but her husband is not good, he’s always asking me when I leave.”

22 year old woman from Sudan

Having a baby presents additional challenges for young women looking for accommodation, be it with relatives, friends or crisis housing. Given their circumstances, they may often be unable to keep appointments; support offered by friends (such as sleeping on the floor or sharing a room) may not be suitable; and they may also drop out of school, thereby further reducing their social and community networks. There is a lack of targeted culturally appropriate support for pregnant young women and young mothers from refugee or migrant backgrounds.

The lack of options for young women in these circumstances can lead to many years of transience and instability, resulting in entrenched disadvantage and vulnerability.

Young people without an income

Some newly-arrived young people are living in the community without an income. This includes some young people who are permanent residents but are on Orphan or Remaining Relative visas (visa sub-classes 117 and 115 respectively) and asylum seekers.

For young people who are granted 115 and 117 visas, ineligibility for Centrelink support in their own right (in the form of Youth Allowance) increases the financial strain on the families who sponsor them to Australia and the risk of family breakdown. They can find themselves suddenly homeless without any access to an income of their own.

Young asylum seekers face specific challenges related to their visa conditions.³⁷ This is partly due to a lack of knowledge regarding ‘exit options’ of asylum seekers, which leads to housing services denying them entry, on the incorrect assumption that they will become a long-term burden. Asylum seekers do not have access to Centrelink support, and while it is true that, due to the constraints of the refugee determination process, the wait for an exit option may be lengthy, exit options do exist; they include access to the Asylum Seeker Assistance Scheme (ASAS), Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project (ASP) housing, Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project (BASP) and employment, among others.

Typically, asylum seekers require transitional housing; as their access to transitional housing services is currently extremely limited, this increases the probability that they will be forced to rely on emergency accommodation for extended periods of time, which in turn causes emergency accommodation services to be wary of accepting them.

³⁶ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 18).

³⁷ Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (2009) and Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project (2010)

3.2 Systemic barriers to housing and support services

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.

Refugee and migrant young people experience all the above barriers, and more. Their recent arrival in Australia makes the chance of having a rental history even slimmer, they may experience race-based discrimination,³⁸ and housing options may be inappropriate due to cultural or religious norms.³⁹

Research suggests that people from refugee backgrounds under-utilise mainstream housing/homelessness services.⁴⁰ There may be a number of reasons for this, including:

- the fact that many services do not provide an appropriate response
- lack of awareness by refugee and migrant young people of the service system and their entitlements e.g. their right to access it, even if they're 'couch-surfing' rather than sleeping on the streets
- stigma of being homeless in their community.⁴¹

These barriers may be particularly acute for newly-arrived young people.

A. Homelessness service provision

Inaccessibility of housing services

Many housing and support agencies do not take into account the unfamiliarity of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds with Australian systems—both conceptually and practically.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds typically have very little or no substantive knowledge of the complex housing and broader service systems (e.g. advocating for housing needs, leases, tenancy rights)⁴² as there is often no equivalent in their countries

of origin. They have to negotiate the labyrinthine housing system with little cultural and practical knowledge of how this system works. This is a system where currently, the onus is on young people to find their way and learn how to instigate or navigate it.

Lack of cultural competency

Cultural competency varies across agencies; mainstream services that work with many different groups of young people often do not hold culturally specific knowledge and understanding of the circumstances of young refugees and migrants.⁴³

Lack of knowledge of the circumstances of refugee and migrant young people can take several forms, including:

- Lack of understanding of young people's needs, and what may have led them to homelessness e.g. prior experience of trauma and its impact on their current situation;
- Reluctance to use interpreters when needed; and
- Lack of awareness of visa entitlements and exit options for young people.

“One of my clients was denied housing support on the basis that he relied too heavily on his case worker for interpreting during the interview and avoided eye contact with the intake worker.”

CMY Reconnect worker

Conscious of their lack of expertise to deal with settlement issues, some agencies refer newly-arrived young people in need of housing support to settlement services or to casework services like Reconnect Newly-Arrived and Refugee Specialist services—which cannot provide housing themselves. This contributes to young people becoming caught in a cycle of referrals, bouncing from one agency to the next.

38 Migrant and Refugee Rental Housing Assistance Project (2007: 9).

39 Refugee Young People and Housing Issues Working Group (2002).

40 Francis and Cornfoot (2007: 20). Also see Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010: 18-19).

41 Toure (2008: 24 and 34).

42 Migrant and Refugee Rental Housing Assistance Project (2007: 7-9), Graduate Learning Team (2009: 17) and Toure (2008: 35).

43 Toure (2008: 18).

Workers in CMY Reconnect services and in the housing sector highlighted that some refugee and migrant young people refuse to go to particular services in their area because of previous bad experiences. Young people's negative experiences with housing services can also have an impact on their relationships with youth support services, reducing their faith in not only the particular housing services, but also in the agencies and workers who took them there.⁴⁴

'Too-hard basket'

Housing and support services tend to put young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds in the 'too-hard basket'. This may be due to cultural competency issues, but also to the very real obstacles they meet when trying to find accommodation for these young people. Knowing they will have to deal with active discrimination from boarding houses, transitional housing and real estate agents, and given their limited resources, they opt to place those who are more readily accepted and will be easier to find accommodation for.

Comments similar to the following were reported numerous times by the workers consulted:

"We see particular racism toward our clients from African backgrounds in our region. We now only have one rooming house that will accommodate African young men. We also have direct experience with housing workers saying 'It will be a waste of my time to apply for private rental for her, because she is Sudanese.'"

CMY Reconnect worker

It is understandable that in a stretched system there is some apprehension and resistance to advocate for some clients. However, by anticipating failure, housing and support services contribute to the discrimination experienced by these young people, and erect further barriers to their ability to find accommodation.

A fragmented system

Housing is one need amongst many for young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds. They often present with complex needs and require a range of social, emotional and financial support.

Typically, young people prefer to deal with a 'wrap-around' or youth hub type service, which can offer support and outreach even if it cannot offer housing. It is a common complaint from young people that they have to knock on too many doors to receive help, and would rather have one worker helping them with all their needs.

Needs include:

- education, training and employment
- mental health support
- information and support with physical health
- support to reconnect with family
- learning independent living skills such as budgeting, building relationships etc
- skills required to access the private rental market, such as how to maintain houses and rental payments, particularly for newly-arrived young people who may not be aware of their responsibilities as tenants.⁴⁵

Housing agencies in some regions offer support with housing needs only, which does not acknowledge the need for a more holistic approach. They can also fail to meet young people 'where they're at' (geographically and psychologically) as workers are not aware of their other needs. A CMY Reconnect worker mentioned the example of a young woman with a small baby who had to catch a train and a bus to attend appointments. She kept missing them and was withdrawn from the service without the housing worker enquiring about the reasons for her missing appointments, or looking at other options.

⁴⁴ See also Toure (2008: 35), who notes that "where a young person had previously accessed a service and was not properly attended to, he or she often vowed not to go to any other."

⁴⁵ Migrant and Refugee Rental Housing Assistance Project (2007: 10) and Graduate Learning Team (2009: 19).

Disparity between regions is also of concern. Outreach and other housing support services are not consistently offered across Melbourne and regional Victoria. When young people move from one region of the city to another, the difficulties inherent in navigating the housing and homelessness service system are therefore compounded.

How the 'Front Door' system is failing young refugees and migrants

The 'Front Door' homelessness service system was initiated with the aim of reducing the number of agencies that people at risk of homelessness had to approach in order to seek accommodation. The aim is laudable and in theory—and when it works well—the 'Front Door' approach can serve to streamline the service system for clients. However, in practice, it is under-resourced and over-stretched and it is failing many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Reconnect workers and other youth and housing support workers that CMY consulted argue that the Front Door system actually creates a number of barriers to accessing suitable housing for refugee and migrant young people across metropolitan Melbourne:

- Front Door agencies do not provide the single entry point into the homelessness support system that was envisaged. Youth and housing support workers report that they often receive referrals from other community agencies, which they are required to refer to the local Front Door agency, before having the clients referred back to their own services for transitional housing (for which they hold nomination rights).
- Referrals to the Front Door agencies may be more of a procedural requirement than one that increases the chance of finding accommodation: a Reconnect worker recalled how her young client had located a

spare bed at a particular property after being told by a Front Door agency that there were no beds available, and then had to revisit the 'Front Door' agency to ask them to refer him to the bed he'd found for himself.

There was consensus among the workers that CMY spoke with that it is very difficult to get housing for refugee and migrant young people—including asylum seekers—through the 'Front Door' agencies.

Workers from the housing and settlement sectors stressed the importance of building relationships with Front Door agencies and property managers in order to ensure that their clients be seen. Often workers have to negotiate 'side doors' or 'back doors' to get help for their clients. Relationships and negotiations become vitally important in an under-resourced and competitive system.

“You will always get more for your client when you have better relationships and networks than what other people get who are using the system only. If you know the system better or have relationships with key people, you get better outcomes, which shouldn't be the case.”

Housing service worker

Significant implications are raised by these systemic barriers to young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds accessing housing through the 'Front Door' approach, including:

- The true extent of homelessness amongst young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds remains hidden—because they're not recorded in the 'Front Door' figures; and
- Many refugee and migrant young people are getting lost in the system, and simply not getting a service: they are not accessing crisis or transitional housing, are moving around, couch-surfing

and not re-presenting at services. Some of them experience long periods of transience of five years or more.

Access to housing support services is often contingent upon the knowledge of the particular worker or agency supporting the young person. Newly-arrived young people, that are less well connected, have additional or distinct needs, and are not prioritised in government and sector policies, inevitably languish at the bottom of the pile.

B. Availability and suitability of existing housing

Scarcity of appropriate options

Housing workers have very limited options for refugee and migrant young people with regard to safe and stable accommodation. Youth housing options, including crisis and transitional accommodation, are severely lacking and are often not culturally appropriate for young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds – e.g. lack of halal food, no prayer room, mixed sex dorms, and other people with drug, alcohol and/or violence problems living on the premises. There are extremely limited housing options for newly-arrived young people with no Australian rental history.

Rooming houses can be dangerous, and it is a common experience for housing workers to have to refer young people to accommodation that they know to be unsuitable (particularly for young mothers).

“One of the only options available (in our region), and invariably the only option given to our clients when presenting at a housing service, are rooming houses. These houses provide only overcrowded, expensive, dangerous and unstable accommodation. Rooming houses are often occupied by residents experiencing serious mental health issues or with alcohol or drug dependency. This is not a real housing option, but rather leaves young people

homeless at a secondary level. For a young newly-arrived person, potentially with a history of trauma, this can impact significantly on their ability to settle well into Australia.”

Reconnect worker

Accessibility

There is a lack of affordable and appropriate housing in locations with ready access to community, services, educational and employment opportunities.⁴⁶

Many young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds are forced to reside in the outer rings of development: ‘growth areas’ which are often car-centric and poor in employment and educational opportunities.

This is a particular problem for young people, who need to be linked into appropriate education and/or training sites and who are typically reliant on public transport. Settling in such areas compounds their disadvantage: without stable accommodation it is difficult to access education – a critical element of the settlement processes. In particular, housing that allows access to schools with English language support is essential.

“I catch a bus to get my son to childcare and then we have to walk to childcare, then I have to catch another bus to Sunshine, then take a bus or train to my school... We have to wake up early because I start at 9.”

22 year old woman from Sudan

“Sometimes I have no money to buy a ticket, I just wake up early in the morning and I just walk. Sometimes it takes me two hours to get there.”

19 year old woman from Burma

⁴⁶ Migrant and Refugee Rental Housing Assistance Project (2007: v) and Graduate Learning Team (2009: 13).

Public Housing waiting list

The length of public housing waiting lists is a constant source of despair for young people and the workers who try to assist them. This is not a unique situation: many Victorians are struggling to access affordable housing (as at March 2010, almost 40, 000 applicants were on the waiting list for public housing⁴⁷). But for newly-arrived young people it compounds a sense of despair about the complexity of the system and the scarcity of options at their disposal.

“[My worker said] ‘You just have to wait. You have to wait ten years’. I said ‘Ten years?’ [She said] ‘Okay I will give you another form, the quick one’ — I done the form, the quick one, [she said] ‘you still have to wait’.”

22 year old woman from Sudan

C. Private rental system

“I am not looking for private rental right now: too expensive... It’s just me and my brother so we can’t afford it.”

19 year old woman from Burma

The private rental system is all but out-of-reach for newly-arrived young people, or people of refugee and migrant backgrounds not living with their families. The main reasons for this are:

- discrimination
- lack of income and financial resources to cover bonds, furniture and other household items, high rents and rent increases
- lack of rental history and references.

On top of the lack of low-cost rental properties, this group of young people often faces discrimination by private rental agents. This issue is highlighted in a VicHealth study which found that people born in a country in which English is not the main language

spoken are more than four times as likely to report discrimination in housing.⁴⁸

During this consultation, CMY heard many reports of blatant racism from real estate agents towards young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds. There is evidence of private rental agents choosing not to offer properties to certain cultural groups, due to past experiences with some members of that group. Housing support workers report that several young people have been refused private rental and share accommodation on the basis that they are ‘African’ or ‘Muslim’. Young men in some regions are being advised by service providers to not apply for rooming houses because of their cultural background; or that there will be no point driving around looking at private rentals because of the discrimination that will work against them.

Real estate agents offering reasons such as “*we have had problems with (African country) clients in the past*” are rarely challenged because of the pressure on housing workers to maintain good relationships with them. As with Front Door agencies, the current scarcity of property leads to relying on contacts and positive relationships to obtain what is a fundamental human right—not a favour.

In this competitive private rental market, migrant and refugee young people have little or no chance of gaining entry. When family or relationship breakdown occurs, these young people are extremely disadvantaged in accessing housing options as they often have very little or no income. Many newly-arrived young people face barriers in obtaining secure employment and Centrelink payments are generally insufficient to allow them to compete in the private rental market.⁴⁹ They may struggle to avoid debt, which can disadvantage them when trying to access housing.

47 Figures retrieved from www.housing.vic.gov.au/applying-for-housing/waiting-times, last viewed 7 June 2010.

48 More than tolerance (2007:32)

49 Toure (2008: 29-31).

4| The way forward

The Commonwealth Government has set interim targets for 2013, with the aim to increase by 25% the number of young people (homeless or at risk of homelessness) who have improved housing stability and who are engaged with family, school and work. If this figure includes refugee and migrant young people—which, although it is not specified, is presumed—significant systemic change is required for this to be achieved.

Shortage of housing is the fundamental barrier to accessing accommodation for all homeless young people in Victoria. However, invoking it as the reason why young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds are disadvantaged in their search for a home is a short-cut—and, to an extent, an excuse. The barriers they experience are not just structural, and sufficient housing stock would not in itself be the panacea for these young people.

While operating in this restricted housing situation, improvements can be made within the system to ensure these young people have equal access to the housing that is currently available.

Workers consulted by CMY for this paper suggested that the way forward involved a combination of early intervention, workforce development, increased collaboration between agencies, and advocacy with Commonwealth and State Governments.

4.1 Continuum of service delivery

Much of the effort and funding currently dedicated to addressing young people's homelessness focuses on crisis responses. Refugee and migrant young people's risk of homelessness could be greatly decreased through improved collaboration between the settle-

ment, youth and housing sectors from the time of settlement, leading to a continuum of service delivery that is currently lacking.

A. Prevention and early intervention

The risk of family breakdown needs to be identified and addressed early, with a range of strategies and services available to work with young people and their families to reduce the likelihood of it occurring.

In the absence of early and adequate settlement support, the risk that young people will require assistance in the future to address issues such as homelessness, family breakdown, poor health, crime, drug and alcohol use and other social problems, is magnified.⁵⁰

A model of prevention/early intervention that has shown its effectiveness is the Specialist Reconnect program for refugee and newly-arrived young people. The program offers one-on-one and strategic casework support to refugee and newly-arrived young people at risk of homelessness by developing close links with culturally-specific services and youth services to intervene early to reduce the likelihood of homelessness.

The Specialist Reconnect model provides support for refugee and migrant young people and their families to assist them to cope with family and housing issues that arise in the course (and partly as a result) of the critical settlement period. The model acknowledges that young people from a refugee or migrant background require culturally-competent responses that are sensitive to the unique factors that increase their risk of homelessness and the barriers they face in obtaining housing. Reconnect has a focus on strength-

50 O'Sullivan and Oliff (2006: 8).

ening families and building connection between young people and their families. This can assist in reducing their vulnerability to homelessness.⁵¹

The Road Home recognises the effectiveness of the Reconnect program as an early intervention model. It notes that a recent review of the program showed that:

- 79% of clients reported an improvement in their overall situation as a result of Reconnect.
- 69% reported improvements in their family relationships.
- 90% were living in stable accommodation when they finished using the service.
- 50% had an improved connection with employment, education, training and the community.⁵²

The Reconnect program would benefit from more flexibility around the age of its clients. Currently Reconnect–NAYS' age criteria is 12–21 years. However, given what many of newly-arrived young people (refugee minors or those arriving under the orphan relative migration category) have been through, they need the support of services like Reconnect-NAYS up to the age of 25 years. There is also a need for more services in LGAs with high settlement and secondary settlement e.g. Wyndham, Whittlesea, Melton, Casey and Cardinia.

B. Collaboration between services

A continuum of service delivery also entails a consistent approach between services.

Services like the Specialist Reconnect programs often find it difficult to refer refugee and migrant clients to mainstream housing support services because these services are not confident working with young people of these backgrounds. A partnership approach between specialist and mainstream services (including housing and homelessness services, and those that

work specifically with multicultural young people) is fundamental to ensure that newly-arrived young people get the type of assistance that enables them to establish a home in Australia—physically, psychologically and emotionally.⁵³

Settlement and ethno-specific services are often the sector that newly-arrived communities turn to in times of need or crisis; these services need to be part of the homelessness prevention and early intervention strategy for newly-arrived communities. Currently, there are often poor and inadequate pathways between this sector and the housing and homelessness sector. Multicultural services need to be well connected to homelessness services.

Better pathways could include common assessment tools for the different sectors, common referral processes, a 'co-case management' approach, sharing of information, and workforce development. Refugee and migrant young people would greatly benefit from increased collaboration between the various agencies that support them.

C. Better engagement with the private rental market

Relationships between the housing and homelessness service sector, the multicultural sector and landlords and real estate agents need to be strengthened to improve refugee and migrant young people's access to the private rental market.⁵⁴ Some practical strategies include:

- Housing support workers to write support letters on behalf of their young clients and/or to explain the refugee experience to prospective landlords or real estate agents.
- Offering incentives for renting properties to newly-arrived young people.
- Establishing strong relationships with real estate agencies.

51 Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 19).

52 The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008: 30)

53. Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 19).

54 Graduate Learning Team (2009: 22).

- Encouraging young people to apply for private rental properties to build their profile and give them experience and a chance of securing long-term accommodation.

There is also a need to develop strategies with the real estate sector on anti-discrimination practices.

4.2 A holistic approach to young people's needs

Workers consulted by CMY were unanimous: newly-arrived young people deserve a holistic response that takes into account the complex issues they are working through—housing is an essential part of the equation, but not the only one.⁵⁵ They may require more intensive support on the path to independence than other young people, particularly around: developing independent living skills; navigating service and support systems; access to education, employment, and income; and improved family relationships.

There needs to be individualised support that takes into account the whole picture of the young person's life, and continues after accommodation has been found.

A holistic approach to refugee and migrant young people's needs can be implemented through supportive housing models and schemes. Some of the elements that such a model could include are:

- longer periods of support
- advocacy with other service providers
- mental health services
- employment assistance
- medical referrals
- an understanding of the impact of trauma
- an understanding of the settlement process for young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Increased collaboration and understanding between sectors would allow agencies to be more holistic in their approach to the issues affecting young people at risk of homelessness.

As explained by a Reconnect worker:

“It would be great if when housing workers told young people that they can't offer them a bed, they could still offer them support.”

An essential element of this approach would be the consistent provision of outreach services - not expecting young people to make it to appointments regardless of their circumstances.

Alternatively, co-case management models could be effective for newly-arrived young people. Co-case management between settlement and homelessness support services could be explored as part of an on-arrival case co-ordination model that would provide a holistic needs analysis and tailored support for all newly-arrived young people and their families.

It is acknowledged that housing workers' caseloads prevent them from dedicating the necessary time to their clients. Even if they are aware of their clients' particular circumstances and have designed an appropriate case plan, they may not be able, for time and funding reasons, to respond to them. The lack of culturally competent support is fundamentally a funding and resourcing issue, as well as a workforce development issue.

4.3 Appropriate housing options

While the provision of accommodation alone is insufficient to address homelessness and its impact, more affordable housing stock is urgently required. In particular, larger houses need to be available for families from refugee backgrounds, who are often accommodating relatives.

⁵⁵ See also Toure (2008: 18).

There is also a severe shortage of crisis and transitional accommodation for young people, particularly for young women who are pregnant or have children. In many regions there are none or only one youth specific refuge; a scarcity that creates very limited conditions for entry. The only option for young people is to go to the city or further out, into outer suburbs with limited transport options. The lack of crisis and transitional housing leaves young people of all backgrounds very vulnerable, and more options need to be established in high settlement areas to allow them to continue their education or training despite their housing crisis.

Cluster accommodation, in which intensive support is offered to groups of refugee young people who share similar experiences, can also be a suitable option for young people from refugee backgrounds—for instance pregnant teenagers or unaccompanied minors. The benefits of such a model include:

- Young people live in an environment with their peers and begin/continue their journey in Australia together rather than in isolation.
- Cluster support such as a ‘lead tenant’ model offers more intensive housing support with a strong orientation program linking young people to education/training, employment, social and community networks and the broader Australian community.
- This form of housing is a good introduction to housing services in Australia and the rights and responsibilities of tenants, particularly to those young people where English proficiency is low and knowledge of the service system is limited.
- Case managers are able to coordinate services for groups of young people living in the same area.

4.4 Evaluation and data collection

With a rare and welcome nod to the importance of engaging culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the national homelessness strategy, *The Road Home* acknowledges that:

Homelessness research needs to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse communities... There is a particular need to fund research into the service system and practice issues to ensure that the services provided to people experiencing homelessness are the best they can be.⁵⁶

While agencies working with young refugees and migrants are acutely aware of their vulnerability to homelessness and the inappropriateness of current responses, in terms of research they are operating in a vacuum. Advocacy for this group of young people and service planning needs to be supported by evidence. Research is needed into the causes, prevalence and nature of homelessness amongst refugee and other newly-arrived young people. Data collection and evaluation of existing service responses is required to identify barriers and gaps in service provision and to build a picture of models of housing and support that can address the unique and complex needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Data collection, analysis and reporting are time and resource intensive. Some housing and homelessness service workers report that they collect data on visa category and countries of birth of clients, however this does not appear to be a consistent practice across all services. There needs to be more effective means of tapping into the existing knowledge base, including clearer and more meaningful pathways for information transfer between agencies, and between agencies and government.

⁵⁶ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008: 61).

5| Recommendations

Commonwealth and State government strategies

1. That the Commonwealth and State government acknowledge the particular vulnerability to homelessness of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and include them in their strategies.
2. That all Commonwealth and State government-funded projects and programs for young people include targets for young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds, proportional to their greater risk of homelessness. This includes the State Government's Flagship Projects and allocation of new housing stock.
3. That the Commonwealth and State government develop a more detailed data collection system in relation to this cohort of young people and ensure consistency of data collection across all housing and housing-related services.
4. That the Commonwealth and State government's annual reports on progress towards the interim and 2020 targets specifically incorporate information about improvements to the housing stability and family, school and work engagement of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
5. That the Commonwealth and State government recognize the housing needs of large families and develop appropriate strategies to address them.

Research and data collection

6. That the Office of Housing and SAAP undertake an extensive audit of migrant and refugee youth access to the homelessness service system in Victoria to identify barriers to access and to inform the development of strategies to overcome these barriers.
7. That longitudinal research be funded and undertaken to focus on the scope and nature of migrant and refugee youth homelessness.

Services

8. That good practice early intervention models and community development approaches, such as Reconnect Newly-Arrived and Refugee Specialist services, be expanded and appropriately resourced in regions where there are high concentrations of refugee and newly-arrived communities to support young people who are at risk of becoming homeless, as part of the early intervention goals articulated in the Commonwealth and Victorian strategies.
9. That the complexity of needs faced by this cohort of young people be recognised by increasing the flexibility for longer support periods in the SAAP system (including in transitional and other accommodation), to enable refugee and migrant young people to develop sustainable skills and pathways into independent living.

Workforce development

10. That multicultural services, youth services and housing agencies develop partnerships and collaboration around sharing of knowledge, referral pathways and advocacy strategies.

11. That a workforce development strategy and support be developed for:

- the housing support sector in relation to cultural competency; and
- the settlement and ethno-specific sectors in relation to youth work practice.

Early intervention

12. That Commonwealth and state-funded services work collaboratively to intervene at critical transition stages for refugee and migrant young people to help identify and appropriately refer those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

13. That good practice early intervention models and services recognise the critical importance of adopting a family-focused approach when working with refugee and newly-arrived young people, their families and communities.

14. That community education campaigns and strategies be developed to reduce racism and discrimination in the housing market – in particular targeting real estate agents and the private rental market.

Crisis services

15. That youth-specific crisis housing in areas of high settlement be increased and provide culturally-appropriate facilities and support.

Vulnerable groups

Unaccompanied humanitarian minors

16. That young people exiting from the Refugee Minor Program be well supported with individualised transition plans for independent living.

Young mothers

17. That increased support and housing options be created for pregnant young women and young mothers from refugee or migrant backgrounds.

Young people without income

18. That SAAP services undertake training in order to increase their knowledge of, and capacity to accommodate, young people on visas with limited access to income support (such as those on orphan or remaining relative visas and young asylum seekers).

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ANNEX: Guiding principles for implementation of *The Road Home*

- 1.** A national commitment, strong leadership and cooperation from all levels of government and from non-government and business sectors is needed. Homelessness must be seen as a shared responsibility.
- 2.** Preventing homelessness is important. We need to understand the causes of homelessness and use this knowledge to stop people becoming homeless.
- 3.** Social inclusion drives our efforts. Tackling homelessness is about more than shelter and support. The focus must be on building the capacity of people and communities to maximise everyone's potential to participate economically and socially.
- 4.** Clients need to be placed at the centre of service delivery and design. People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness need to be included in decision-making processes.
- 5.** The safety and wellbeing of all clients is essential. Responses to homelessness need to focus on keeping people safe – including protecting women and their children who are escaping domestic and family violence, and people experiencing other forms of abuse. Special attention must be given to the unique needs of children at risk.
- 6.** The rights and responsibilities of individuals and families need to be protected. Assistance should be balanced to reflect the social and economic objectives appropriate to age, capacity and aspirations.
- 7.** Joined-up service delivery needs joined-up policy. An overarching policy framework is needed to guide all government approaches to addressing homelessness. Program funding and accountability boundaries must be changed to allow governments and funded organisations to take a multidisciplinary approach to addressing people's needs.
- 8.** Transition points are a priority. People are more vulnerable at times of change: becoming a parent, adolescence, school-to-work, retirement, family breakdown, leaving statutory care and leaving prison. These changes can be more difficult if compounded by poor health, mental health issues, caring responsibilities, bereavement, limited education and geographic or social isolation. Support at these points can prevent problems later on.
- 9.** Evidence-based policy helps to shape our priorities for action. Strong evidence on outcomes should drive policy and program design. Achievements will be measured to assess the economic and social returns on investment. Action research is important as it helps improve policy and ensures that best practice and experience can be shared.
- 10.** Targets are set to reduce homelessness and hold ourselves accountable. Rigorous and regular reporting against targets will ensure the Australian, state and territory and local governments and service providers are accountable.

