

# “They can’t go back home”

## Young People and Homelessness in Mparntwe (Alice Springs)



August 2023



*"You can have 20 people in a house, coming in from out bush. Everyone trying to stay in one house, it's really a struggle. It counts as homelessness. To be in that position, it's stressful, it's hard. To even sleep, you need your own space, your own house, and be more free. You need more support, you need help, help with the housing from Government."*

*Elijah, 21.*



## Executive Summary

The rate of young people experiencing homelessness in the Northern Territory is almost 12 times the Australian average. It is essential that we seek and listen to the experiences and opinions of young people on their housing and shelter needs. Through consultations with the young people of Mparntwe (Alice Springs, hereafter referred to as Mparntwe), this project develops recommendations by young people, for young people regarding their housing and shelter needs.

As a commitment to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children in the Northern Territory and continuous improvement and innovation in policies and practice, this project was undertaken in partnership by NT Shelter and the Office of the Children's Commissioner Northern Territory. The lead organisations were supported by a Project Group of young people with lived experience of homelessness and a Steering Committee of homelessness, housing, and youth support service providers.

In this project we heard that young people in Mparntwe believe that they are more at risk of homelessness than young people elsewhere due to above average levels of domestic and family violence and alcohol and other drug abuse. Young people see poor mental health outcomes as the primary impact of not having somewhere safe to stay.

The young people consulted identified youth-specific accommodation and increased housing investment as key to solving the issue of youth homelessness in Mparntwe.

This project evaluates the words of young people and offers evidence-based housing solutions from around Australia and overseas. It is our hope that this project informs a way forward for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Mparntwe.



# Contents

Acknowledgements	5
NT Shelter	6
The Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory	6
A Strengths-Based Partnership	7
Project Leads	7
List of Abbreviations	8
Definitions	9
The Project and Our Approach	11
Project Context	13
Project Findings	17
Are young people in Mparntwe more at risk of homelessness than young people elsewhere?	18
Why do you think young people in Mparntwe are more at risk of homelessness?	20
Violence and alcohol and other drugs	20
Poverty or lack of money	21
Intersection with the justice system	21
Affordable and appropriate housing	22
What impact does not having somewhere safe to stay have on young people?	23
Health	23
Disengagement from education	24
Safety	24
Impact on girls and women	25
What services are you aware of that can help?	26
What would help?	28
Youth-specific accommodation	28
The Youth Foyer Model	29
The Housing First for Youth Model (HF4Y)	30
Common Ground	30
Lead Tenant Model	31
More appropriate and affordable housing and investment in current housing infrastructure	31
Safe spaces and programs for young people	32
More money and material necessities	32
Support and education for caregivers	33
More services and education on existing services	33
A way forward	35
Summary of Key Recommendations	36
References	38

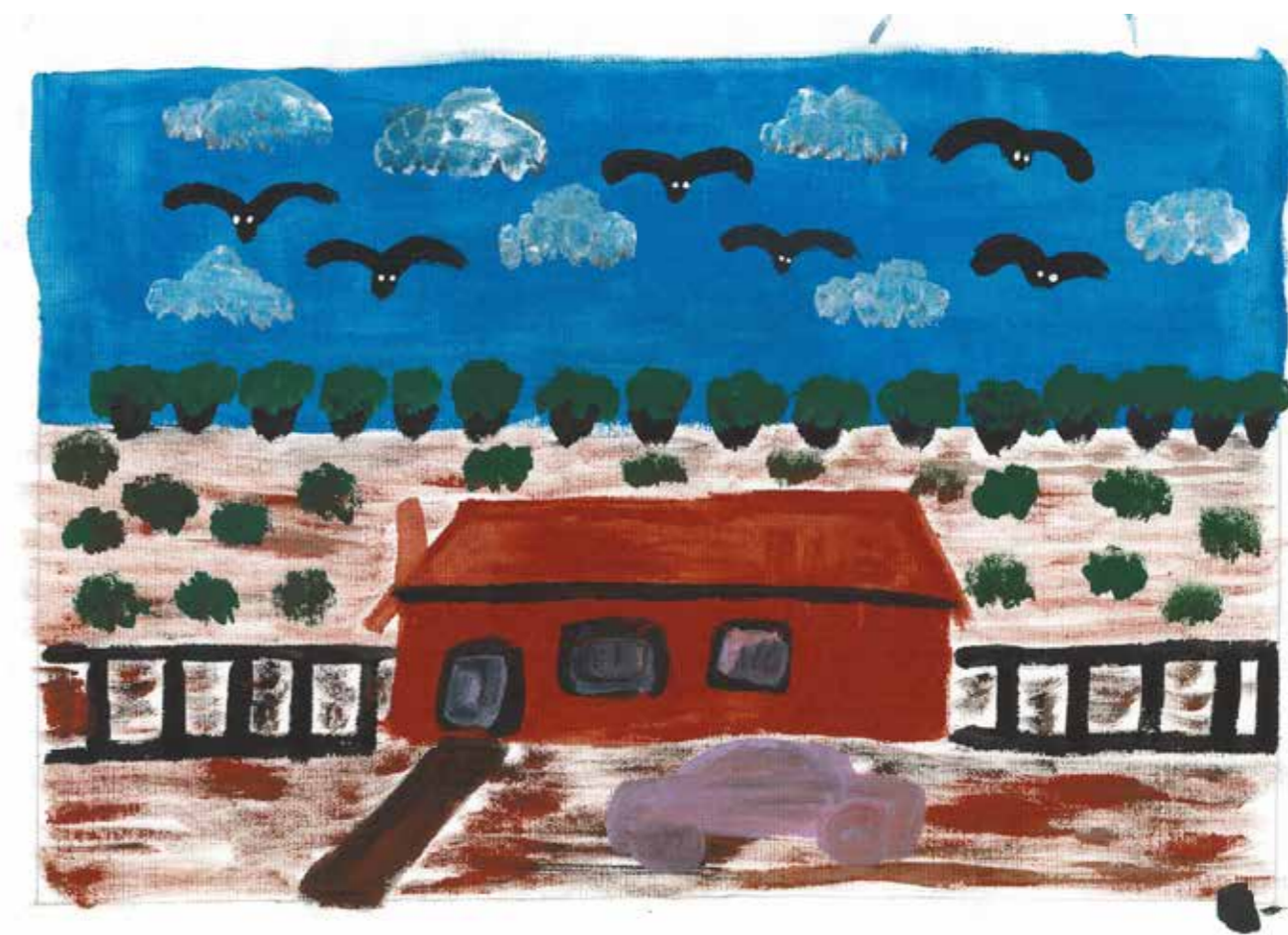
# Acknowledgements

NT Shelter and the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) Northern Territory acknowledge the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands across the Northern Territory and their continuing connection to land, water, and culture. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and value the role their children and young people play as future community leaders. In particular, we acknowledge and thank the Arrernte people on whose Country this project took place.

We thank the Project Group and Steering Committee who guided the development of this project. We also thank the many organisations, educational institutions, and stakeholders who supported this project with their expertise, time, and effort.

The artwork for this report was created by young people who access Brown Street Youth Centre run by Tangentyere Council, along with the team at Tangentyere Artists. We thank them for lending their talent to this report and giving colour and movement to its pages.

Finally, and most importantly, NT Shelter and the OCC NT would like to extend our gratitude to the young people of Mparntwe who chose to share their stories and ideas with us. We acknowledge that sharing experiences of homelessness takes a personal toll. Your stories are powerful, deserve to be heard, and will make change for young people in Mparntwe and elsewhere.



## NT Shelter

NT Shelter is a non-government, not-for-profit, incorporated association. NT Shelter is the peak body for affordable housing and homelessness in the Northern Territory.

Since 1992, NT Shelter has proudly represented a range of organisations and individuals committed to improved housing outcomes across the Northern Territory.



NT Shelter's purpose is to advocate, influence government policy, collaborate, consult, grow the capacity of our sector, and grow public awareness of housing issues.

NT Shelter's vision is appropriate and affordable housing for all people of the Northern Territory.

[ntshelter.org.au](http://ntshelter.org.au)

## A Strengths-Based Partnership

With this collaborative joint project, NT Shelter and the OCC NT have united with the joint goal of supporting the young people of Mparntwe to develop a call to action on their housing and shelter needs.

The partnership between NT Shelter and the OCC NT is strengths-based, each offering their respective

expertise; the OCC NT brings their knowledge of child-centred consultative processes and connections to the youth sector, whilst NT Shelter offers connections to the housing and homelessness sectors and an understanding of the housing context and challenges facing Mparntwe.

## Project Leads

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### James Cameron

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## The Office of the Children's Commissioner Northern Territory

The Northern Territory Children's Commissioner is an independent statutory officer whose core functions focus on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children. The Commissioner's functions are set out in the Children's Commissioner Act 2013 (NT) and are guided by the underlying principles of the Act.

The vision of the OCC NT is that children and young people in the Northern Territory reach their full potential.

The mission of the OCC NT is to ensure the rights and best interests of children and young people are safeguarded and promoted.

[occ.nt.gov.au](http://occ.nt.gov.au)



## List of Abbreviations

<b>ABS</b>	Australian Bureau of Statistics
<b>AOD</b>	Alcohol and other drugs
<b>ASYASS</b>	Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services
<b>CALD</b>	Culturally and linguistically diverse
<b>CMS</b>	Centralian Middle School
<b>CNOS</b>	Canadian National Occupancy Standard
<b>COSS Model</b>	The Community of Services and Schools Model
<b>DFV</b>	Domestic family violence
<b>FNS</b>	Family and natural supports
<b>HF4Y</b>	Housing First for Youth
<b>LGBTIQ+</b>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse people
<b>NHHA</b>	National Housing and Homelessness Agreement
<b>OCC NT</b>	Office of the Children's Commissioner Northern Territory
<b>PAHC</b>	Poverty after housing costs
<b>SHS</b>	Specialist homelessness services
<b>YP</b>	Young people

## Definitions

### Dwelling

A dwelling is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as a structure which is intended to have people live in it.[1] Some examples of dwellings are houses, motels, flats, caravans, prisons, tents, humpies, and houseboats.

### Lived experience

This report uses the Oxford Reference Dictionary definition of lived experience, referring to lived experience as the personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in homelessness rather than through representations constructed by other people.[4]

### Homelessness

The ABS provides a widely accepted definition of homelessness for the purposes of collecting Census data. This definition is:

When a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives, they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- » is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- » has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- » does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.[2]

The ABS definition of homelessness is informed by an understanding of homelessness as 'home'lessness, not rooflessness.[2] It emphasises the core elements of 'home' in Anglo American and European interpretations of the meaning of home as identified in research evidence.[3] These elements may include: a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. Homelessness is therefore a lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home'. [2]

### Overcrowding

The standard definition of overcrowding used in Australian data collection is imported from the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS).[5] The CNOS assesses the bedroom requirements of a household based on the following criteria:

- » there should be no more than two persons per bedroom;
- » children less than five years of age of different sexes may reasonably share a bedroom;
- » children five years of age or older of opposite sex should have separate bedrooms;
- » children less than 18 years of age and of the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom; and
- » single household members 18 years or older should have a separate bedroom, as should parents or couples.

Using this measure, households that require at least one additional bedroom are considered to experience some degree of overcrowding.<sup>i</sup>

## Severe crowding

Severe crowding is defined in the Census as living in a dwelling which requires four or more extra bedrooms to accommodate the people who usually live there.[8]

## Shelter

For the purposes of this project, we define shelter as temporary shelter or crisis accommodation that young people can access in the event of experiencing or being at risk of experiencing homelessness. The young people consulted in this project often refer to safe places or spaces for young people.

## Young people/person

In this report we frequently refer to young people or a young person; for the purposes of this report, this is someone between the ages of 12 and 24. Due to variations in the way young people are defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and Specialist Homelessness Services, this report often notes distinctions in this definition. For brevity, young people is shortened to 'YP' in graphs.

# The Project and Our Approach

This project centres on the housing and shelter experiences and opinions of young people living in Mparntwe. The project was conceived by the OCC NT and NT Shelter in 2020 through a shared desire to support the young people of Mparntwe to share their experiences and develop a call to action regarding their housing and shelter needs. This project highlights that better decisions are made when young people's opinions are heard and listened to and that all people, regardless of their age, should be part of the decisions impacting them and their community.[9]

Since inception, the development of the project has been led by a Project Group of young people with lived experience or risk of homelessness residing in Mparntwe. The Project Group told us where and how we should engage with young people and shaped the questions asked during consultations. The Project Group were reimbursed via a gift card system to acknowledge their expertise, time, and effort.

A project Steering Committee of local youth services supported the Project Leads by lending their knowledge, time, and insight across all stages of the project.

The consultative process, through guidance from both the Project Group and Steering Committee, acknowledged several barriers to engagement, including the over-consultation of Aboriginal people, the trauma associated with homelessness, the relationship that some young Aboriginal people may have with figures of authority, and the stereotypes associated with homelessness.

To lessen these barriers, when feasible, young people were supported during consultations by existing support structures including teachers, staff from the services with whom they had established relationships, family, and friends. Consultations were done in familiar environments, including where young people were staying, their school, other educational institutions or youth hubs.

Consultations were adaptive to the changeable environments in which they took place; some consultations took an interview format with one or more young people participating, some used a survey,

and another was done in a World Cafe Workshop<sup>ii</sup> format with a large group.

Project Leads took a semi-structured approach to interviewing participants; predetermined closed and open questions, developed in consultation with the Project Group and Steering Committee, were asked in the same order while time was also given to allow young people to spontaneously explore tangents and experiences relevant to them. Questions allowed young people to answer broadly rather than speak to their direct experiences; throughout this report the quotes included are often in third person, using 'they' when referring to young people and their experiences rather than 'I'. With consent from participants, audio of the interviews was recorded to ensure rigour and validity. A questionnaire was developed with further consultation with leadership staff at Centralian Middle School (CMS). This questionnaire was used at the school when the setting did not allow for in-depth interviews.

Prior to all consultations, Project Leads introduced the project and defined homelessness and what it means to be at risk of homelessness. An academic definition of homelessness is provided for the purposes of this report. During consultations Project Leads used the following child-friendly definition:

*It sounds obvious, homelessness means that you don't have a home but it's important to understand that you are also defined as homeless if you are couch surfing with friends or family because you don't have a place to go to, or if you're living in a house with too many other people and you don't have control of your own space. That's called overcrowding. You can also be at risk of homelessness. This means you're staying in a place where you don't feel safe or staying somewhere that is not permanent.*

As part of the consultations, we asked young people what they would like to see this project turn into and how the voices of young people could be communicated to decision makers. Many young people want governments to see the on-the-ground reality for young people in Mparntwe. Some extended an invitation to decision makers:

<sup>i</sup> There is debate about the suitability of CNOS in measuring the experience of overcrowding for culturally and linguistically diverse and First Nations peoples. Indigenous-specific cultural norms, such as high levels of mobility, cultural obligations to accommodate kin and other visitors, and connection to Country are critically important. However, influences such as severe overcrowding, complaints from neighbours, larger maintenance bills, pressure on dwellings and amenities, and paying rent consistently may act as barriers to accessing housing

and managing tenancies.[6,7] These interrelated factors put First Nations people at greater risk of homelessness and may lead to frequent changes of housing or tenancies. In any event, overcrowding, which causes stress to household members and pressure on dwelling facilities and resources, is a significant issue among First Nations peoples. Of particular concern is the high prevalence of First Nations people living in severely crowded dwellings. These issues are reflected in the responses of young people set out in this report.

<sup>ii</sup> The World Café Method draws on seven integrated principals to create a flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. These principals are as follows: set the context, create hospitable space, explore questions that matter, encourage everyone's contribution, connect diverse perspectives, listen together for patterns and insights, and share collective discoveries.[10]

*“Come down and see it for yourself. Maybe sleep a night where they’re sleeping. Experience what they experience every single day.”*  
**Chloe, 18.**

The responses young people provided have guided the outputs of this project but whilst we use their words, all names have been changed to protect the anonymity of those involved.

This report is complemented by an easy access, child-friendly version to ensure accessibility for all ability levels.



## Project Context

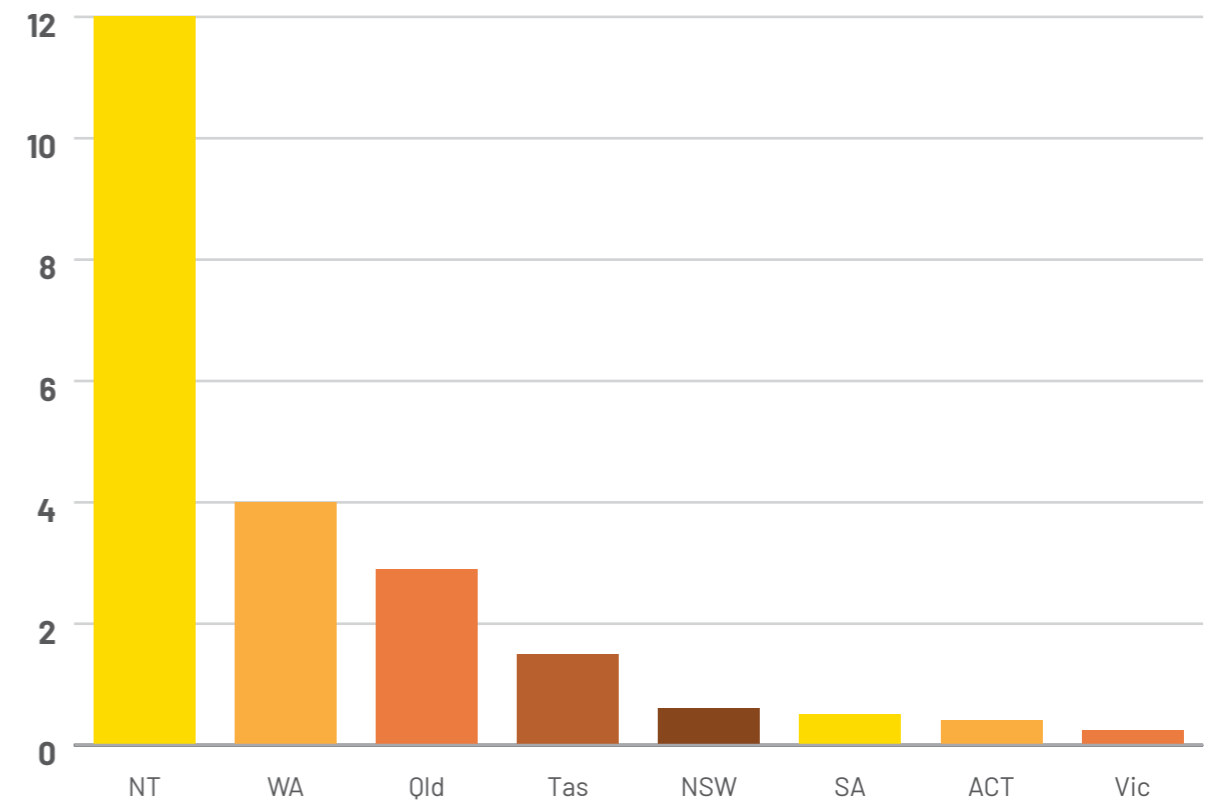
*“Show how hard it is and the struggle.”* **Elijah, 21.**

Young people are disproportionately represented in the Northern Territory’s homeless population. Despite representing less than 17% of the Northern Territory population, people aged 12-24 represent a quarter of the Territory’s homeless population.[11] On the night of Census 2021, 3,255 young Territorians aged 12 to 24 were experiencing homelessness.[11] This is more than the entire population of Tennant Creek. The rate of young people experiencing homelessness in

the Northern Territory is 11.74 times the Australian average.[11]

It is important to note that the Northern Territory recorded the highest net undercount (6%) of any Australian jurisdiction for Census 2021.[12] Nationally, the net undercount for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are 26.3% of the Northern Territory population,[13] was 17.4%.[12] Both undercounts have a bearing on the ABS data included in this report and may contribute to masking the true number of young people, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, experiencing homelessness in the Northern Territory.

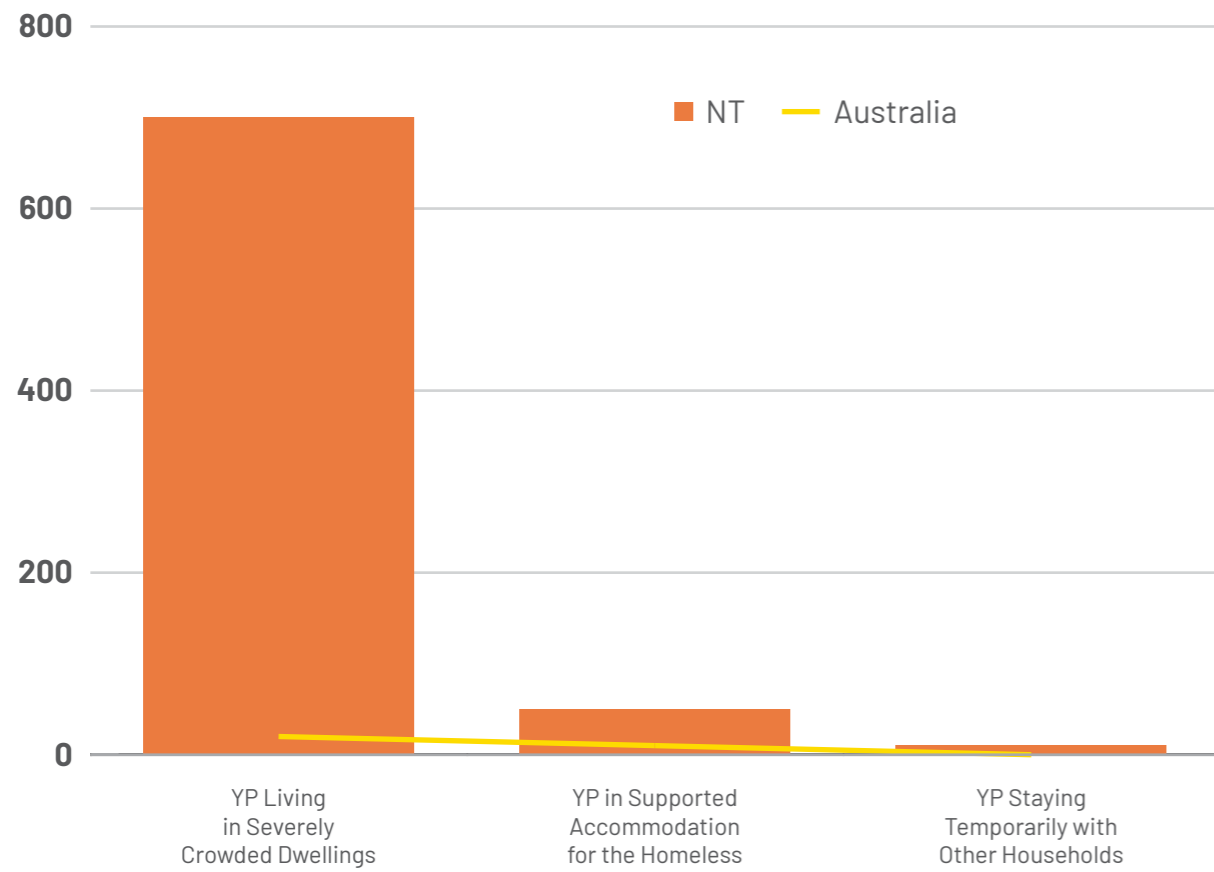
**Figure 1.1: Census 2021 - Rate of youth homelessness per 10,000 of the population across Australian jurisdictions.**



The vast majority of youth homelessness in the Northern Territory is due to severe crowding. Young people living in severely crowded dwellings represent 87% of homeless young people with the remaining 13% consisting of young people living in supported

accommodation for the homeless (8.5%), staying temporarily with other households (3%), living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (1.5%), and less than 1% living in boarding houses.[11]

Figure 1.2: Census 2021 - types of homelessness experienced by young people: rate per 10,000 population NT and Australia

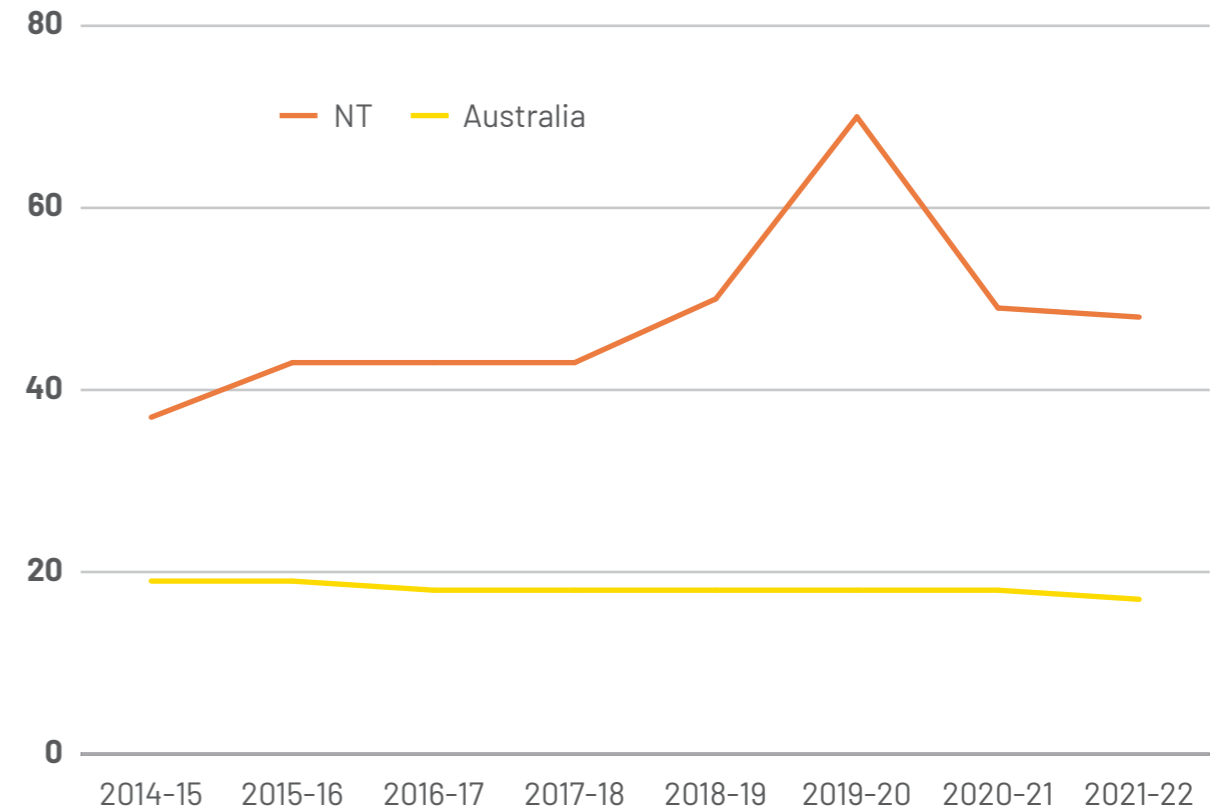


On any given day in the Northern Territory, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) support over 2,600 clients.[14] 320 of these clients are young people<sup>iii</sup> presenting alone and 720 are children<sup>iv</sup> in families.[14] If we consider that the average domestic passenger plane in Australia has capacity for 180 travellers, this is almost two planeloads of young people on their own being supported by homelessness services every day.

Between June 2021 and June 2022, the rate of young people presenting to SHS alone in the NT was almost four times the national average.[15] Whilst nationally the rate of young people presenting alone to SHS has decreased overall in the eight years to 2022, the rate has risen steeply (55.8%) in the Northern Territory.[15]

<sup>iii</sup> In SHS data collection, young people are defined as between 15 and 24 years of age.  
<sup>iv</sup> Children are aged 0-17.

Figure 1.3: The rate of young people presenting alone to SHS per 10,000 population in the NT and Australia from 2014-15 to 2021-22



The most common reasons young people present alone at homelessness services are housing crisis, family and domestic violence, and relationship/family breakdown.[16] However, the large proportion of young Territorians experiencing severe crowding suggests that their homelessness is the result of systemic failures including insufficient affordable housing supply rather than interpersonal challenges.[17]

It is important to note that the above figures represent only those who sought support from SHS and do not reflect the level of unmet demand in the community. A 2014 national survey suggests that of those who had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years, approximately 67% did not seek assistance during their most recent experience of homelessness.[18]

SHS record unmet requests for assistance. Unassisted requests occur when a person requests assistance from an SHS and receives no assistance at the time of request. These requests may not be met for a variety of reasons including the capacity of the service or its speciality. In the Northern Territory, an average of 23 requests for assistance were unable to be met each day between June 2021 and June 2022.[14] 32% of

these unassisted requests were from people aged under 25.[16]

At the time of publication, there were 17 SHS programs being delivered in Mparntwe. Of these, only one service provides specialised accommodation to young people experiencing homelessness via the delivery of three programs.

Further along the housing continuum, many young Territorians face barriers in obtaining affordable and appropriate housing, whether through the private rental market or the social housing system. In the Northern Territory, the public housing system is flailing under the weight of need; at the time of publication, wait times for public housing in Mparntwe are between six to ten years.[19] In the Northern Territory Government's own estimation, the Northern Territory has a shortage of 8,000 to 12,000 social and affordable homes needed by 2025.[20]

In the Northern Territory, young people must be aged 16 or over to apply for public housing. If a young person who is experiencing or at risk of homelessness presents to an SHS at 16, completing an application for urban public housing in Mparntwe upon presentation,



the best-case scenario is that they are housed six years later. Even if the young person is able to access the only generalist medium-term (12 month) housing program for young people aged 16-21 in Mparntwe, they are still likely to experience up to five years of homelessness. While they wait for a public housing allocation, they may be forced to stay with family or friends in housing that may be crowded or inadequate to their needs or be forced to sleep rough and be at an increased risk of mental and physical health challenges, violence, engagement with the justice system, and inability to pursue education.[21]

The longer young people experience homelessness, the higher the risk that they will continue to experience it over the course of their life causing long-term impacts, including intergenerational impacts, and at significant personal and economic cost to the individual, the government, and the broader community.[17] The lifetime cost to government of supporting a young person who has accessed a SHS is estimated to be \$386,000.[22]

The private rental market is also out of reach for many young Territorians. A 2023 report from Anglicare NT looked at the rental properties available in the Northern Territory over a weekend in March 2023 and found that no properties were affordable<sup>v</sup> to individuals receiving Youth Allowance.[24] This included shared accommodation.[24]

Unaffordability is not the only barrier to the private rental system that young people may face. Among fluctuating vacancy rates in a town characterised by a transient and highly paid workforce and short lease periods, rent bidding is not prohibited or illegal in the Northern Territory and, once a rental is secured, the Northern Territory Residential Tenancies Act offers few protections to renters.[25] This contributes to a competitive private rental market where the 'cherry-picking' of new tenants by landlords in order to minimise perceived risk leaves young people, who are more likely than other age groups to experience

financial precarity, open to discrimination.[26] Research has found that discrimination against young people occurs in both subtle and overt ways across the rental process resulting in homelessness[26]; a survey conducted by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission found that young people aged 18 to 25 reported that their age had led to them being refused a rental property.[27] There are additional barriers reported for young people under the age of 18, LGBTQI+ young people, young people with disabilities, Aboriginal young people, and those from CALD backgrounds.[26,28]

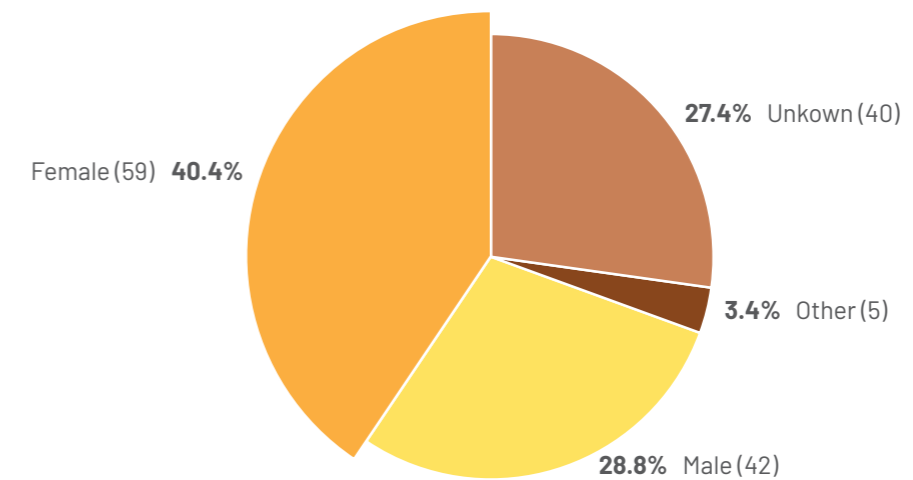
The need for appropriate and affordable housing options for the young people of Mparntwe is frequently raised in strategies and submissions to government by peak bodies and the social services sector.[29,30] Nationally, young people are a priority homelessness cohort under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement<sup>vi</sup> (NHHA). A recent Productivity Commission review of the NHHA recommends that the next iteration of the Agreement should include a commitment from Governments to establish a separate pool of funding for homelessness prevention and early intervention which includes supporting young people and families at risk of homelessness, including their engagement in education, employment, or training, and the community.[31] State and Territory housing strategies are required to address the priority cohorts defined in the NHHA and outline initiatives that reduce the incidence of homelessness amongst these populations.

In the Northern Territory, youth-specific accommodation is identified as a priority in Pathways Out Of Homelessness: The Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2018-23.[32] The Northern Territory Youth Strategy also identifies access to housing as a key issue for the Territory's young people.[30] Despite this, the Northern Territory is yet to make meaningful progress to improve housing outcomes for its next generation of young people.

## Project Findings

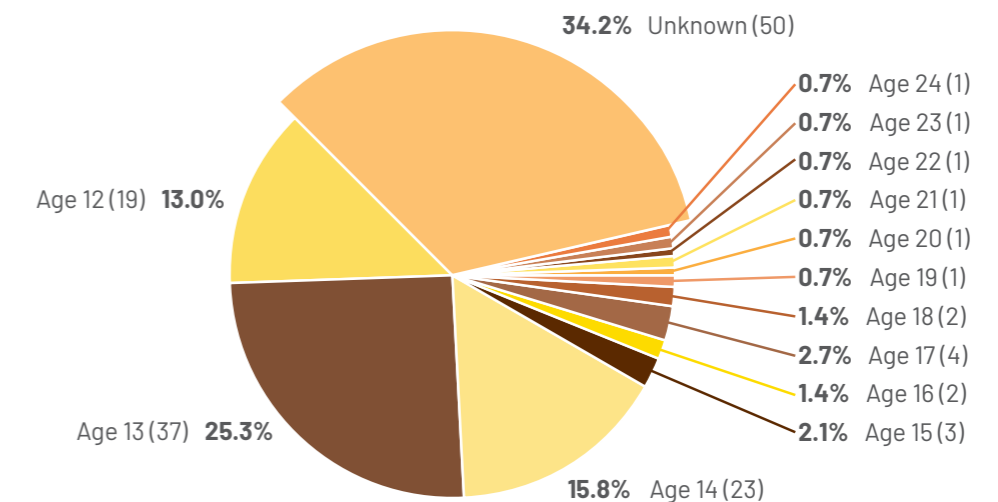
The project consulted with approximately 146 young people in Mparntwe in October 2022.<sup>vii</sup>

Figure 2.1: The gender of young people consulted



Over half of the young people consulted were between 12 and 15 years of age (54.1%).<sup>viii</sup>

Figure 2.2: The age of young people consulted



Young people were not pressed to answer every question, meaning that whilst the project consulted with approximately 146 young people, not every

question received 146 answers. Conversely, some questions elicited multiple answers. Graphs included in this report reflect this.

<sup>v</sup> It is commonly accepted that when a low-income household spends more than 30% of gross household income on housing costs, they are considered to be in housing stress.[23]

<sup>vi</sup> The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement is the agreement through which State and Territory Governments receive funding from the Federal Government to improve Australians' access to secure and affordable housing across the housing spectrum.

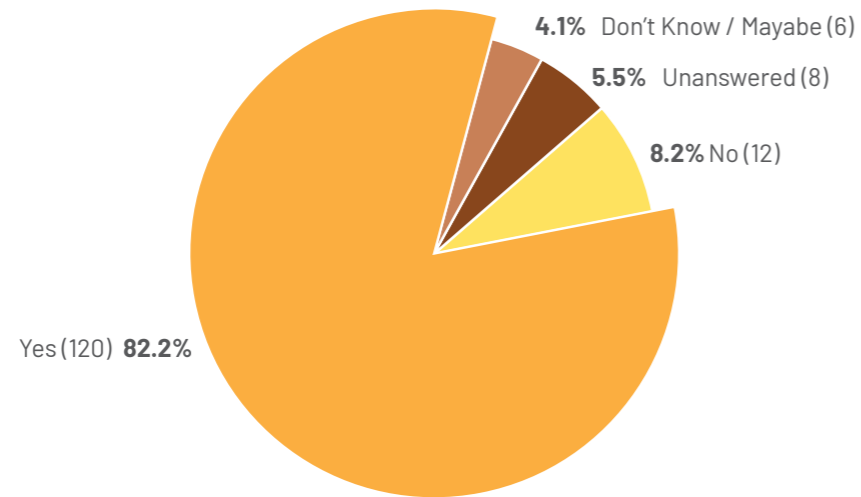
<sup>vii</sup> The large portion of young people for whom gender was not recorded was due to the group nature of a consultation that took place at CMS.

<sup>viii</sup> Age was not recorded for 34.2% of young people largely due to group consultation at CMS. The consultation referred to took place amongst year nine students and therefore it is likely that the majority of the unknown figure are between 14 to 15 years of age.

# Are young people in Mparntwe more at risk of homelessness than young people elsewhere?

The majority of young people consulted as part of this project believe that young people in Mparntwe are more at risk of homelessness than young people living elsewhere (82.2%).

**Figure 2.3: Do you think young people in Mparntwe are more at risk of homelessness than young people elsewhere?**

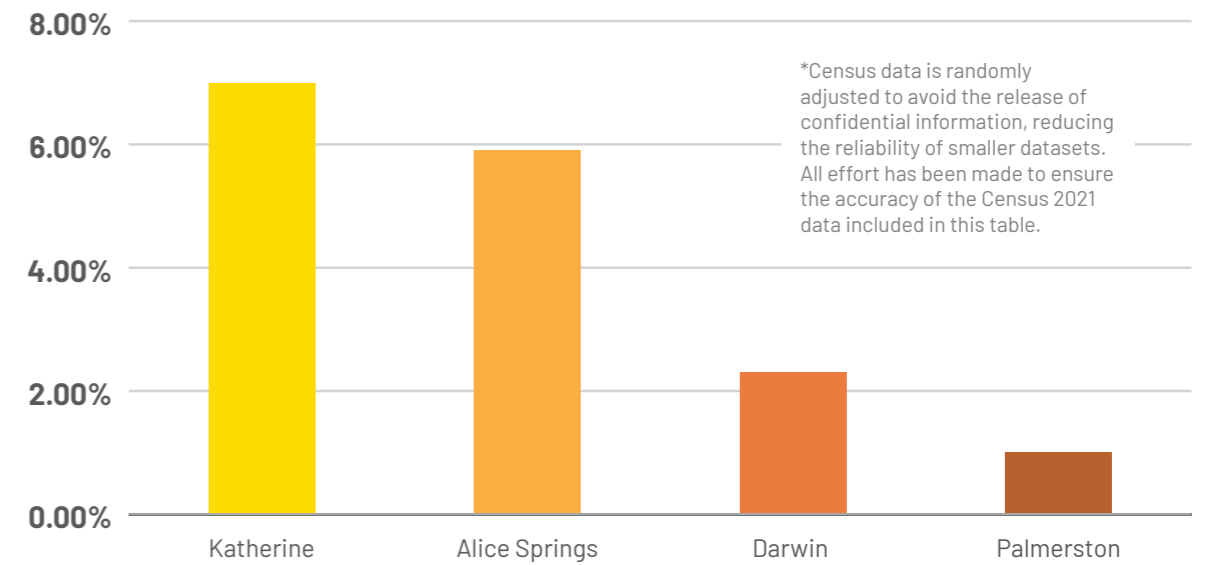


Young people's perceptions are supported by data. On the night of the 2021 Census, 232 young people were experiencing homelessness in Mparntwe.[11] Youth homelessness in Mparntwe accounts for 19.7% of total homelessness in the town.[11] Young people experiencing homelessness are 5.8% of the total youth population of Mparntwe.[11] Compared with most other enumerated urban Local Government Areas in the Northern Territory, homelessness impacts a significant portion of young people in Mparntwe.[11]\*

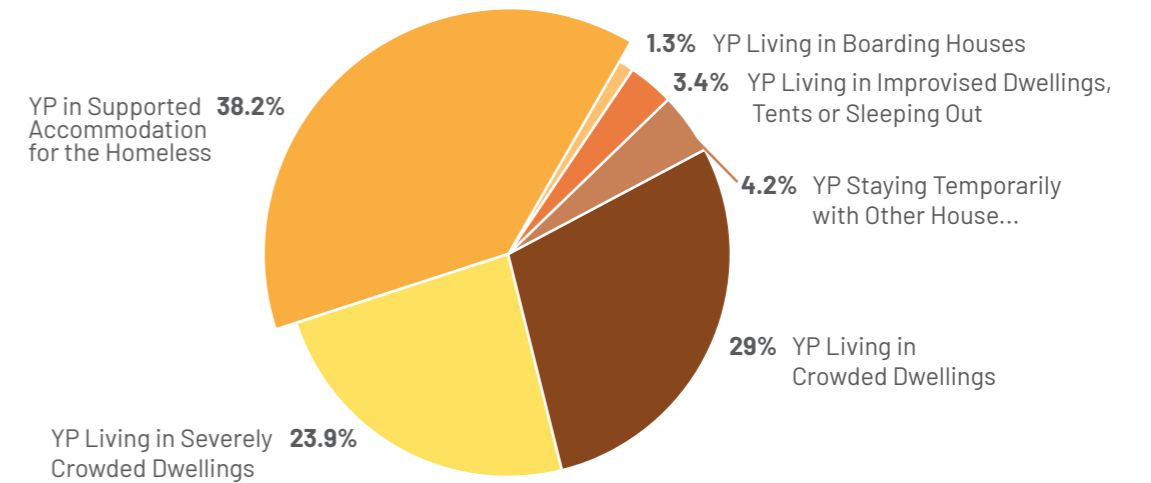
The majority (52.9%) of young people experiencing homelessness in Mparntwe on Census night 2021 were living in crowded or severely crowded dwellings. 38.2% were living in supported accommodation for the homeless.[11] Eight young people were living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out.[11]\*

Almost half (45.6%) of total clients accessing SHS outside of Darwin between June 2022 and June 2023 were aged 24 and under.[33] This is despite areas outside of greater Darwin holding just 40% of the Northern Territory population.[34]

**Figure 2.4: Census 2021 – Youth homelessness as percentage of youth population in enumerated urban areas in the Northern Territory**



**Figure 2.5: Census 2021 – Young people experiencing homeless in Mparntwe.**

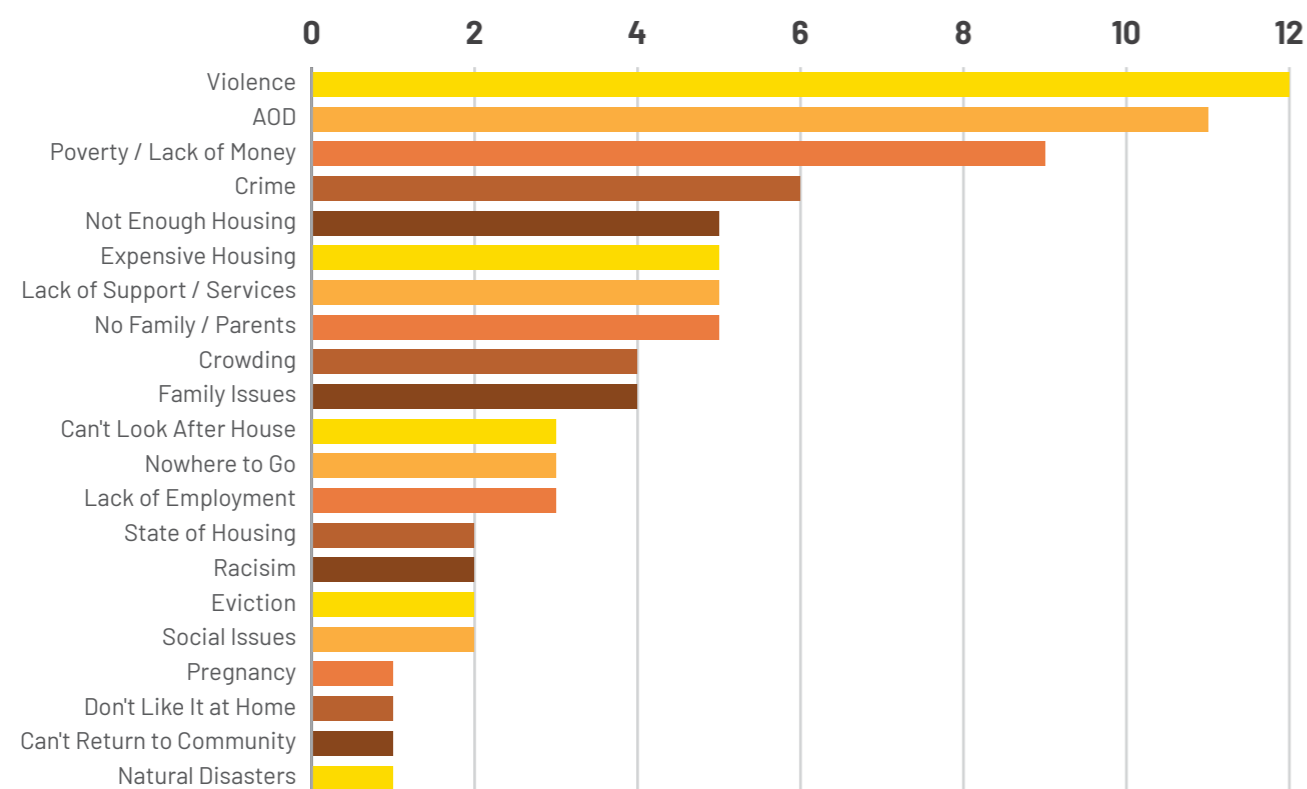


\*Census data is randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential information, reducing the reliability of smaller datasets. All effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the Census 2021 data included in this table.

# Why do you think young people in Mparntwe are more at risk of homelessness?

Violence, alcohol and other drugs, and poverty were the top reasons young people identified for this increased risk of homelessness.

Figure 2.6: Why do you think young people in Mparntwe are more at risk of homelessness than young people elsewhere?



## Violence and alcohol and other drugs

The top reasons young people identified reflect that the Northern Territory has higher than the national average rates of both domestic and family violence and alcohol consumption. The Northern Territory has seven times the national rate of domestic and family violence (DFV)-related homicide and three times the national rate of DFV-related assault.[35] The rate of DFV-related assault increased 27% in 2020 and 12% in 2021.[35]

The Northern Territory has the highest alcohol consumption per capita and the highest rates of

hospitalisations and deaths due to alcohol misuse in Australia.[36] The alcohol consumption rate in the Northern Territory is 173% greater than the national average.[36]

*"A lot of these kids have seen violence, have seen people shoot up, have seen drugs, have seen alcohol." Kaia, 17.*

Youth homelessness can stem from challenges in a young person's home life or family relationships

which can make remaining in the home emotionally or physically difficult. Nationally, 35% of young people presenting alone to SHS between July 2021 and June 2022 had experienced DFV.[16] 16% identified DFV as a reason they sought assistance and 12% identified relationship or family breakdown.[16] 13% of young

people presenting alone to SHS had alcohol and other drug issues.[16] In the Northern Territory, 35% of young people presenting alone to SHS between July 2021 and June 2022 had experienced DFV and 6.3% reported experiencing problematic drug or alcohol use.[16]

## Poverty or lack of money

Young people also identified poverty or lack of money as a top reason for youth homelessness in Mparntwe. Poverty, housing, and homelessness are inextricably linked with trends in poverty reflecting growth in housing costs, particularly for low-income earners.[37]

*"Housing is pretty dear here at times, even the small units and houses. Or their houses are too crowded and too unstable to even breathe in. They are exposed to domestic abuse and you can't get that space where you can get space to yourself." Lily, 15*

*"Adults -> Cost of housing -> Stress -> Anger (at kids) -> Kids not feeling safe." Harrison, 14.*

It is estimated that over three million Australians are living in poverty after their housing costs are taken into account.[37] At the time of the 2021 Census, the Northern Territory had the second highest median weekly earnings in main job by state or territory, however vast income disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the rest of the population mask the reality of the deep levels of poverty that exist in the Northern Territory with nearly 45% of all Indigenous households in the Territory located below the poverty line.[38]

*"If you're Aboriginal it makes it harder to get a house/job." Levi, 13.*

## Intersection with the justice system

In Mparntwe, public debate and discussion referencing young people, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, often cites their involvement in crime. The narrative that conflates young people on the streets at night with criminal activity and antisocial behaviour frequently fails to examine the factors that contribute to young people 'day-breaking', that is *"staying up all night, not sleeping, waiting 'till the sun goes up and then finding a safe place to go."* Cora, 24.

A number of responses identified crime as a reason why young people in the town are more at risk of homelessness.

*"With the crime rate out of control, people will hurt them [young people] or say things." Logan, 13.*

Homeless young people are at a higher risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system than their housed counterparts.[39] Children who end up in youth detention are also more likely to reoffend and have further interactions with the justice system.[40] In addition to this, homeless young people have often experienced complex and multiple traumas.[39] Such experiences of trauma can lead to poor self-regulation and coping skills, further adding to the risk of offending behaviour.[39]

*"[Homelessness has] a huge impact on later life because homelessness is a traumatic experience." Ben, 13.*

The link between crime and homelessness was raised often and in different ways. Several young people raised crime or 'starting trouble' as a consequence of youth homelessness.

*"They don't have anywhere to go at night, they'll be running around causing trouble." Emily, 13*

Inversely, the physical safety of young people experiencing homelessness and the increased risk of crime being perpetrated against them was also highlighted.

Crime was also raised more specifically in relation to crowded housing.

## Affordable and appropriate housing

The availability, expense, and adequacy of housing were repeated themes in consultations and were raised 12 times as a response to this question. Crowded housing was also raised and often fed into responses about affordable and appropriate housing. A small number of responses referred to tenants being unable to look after their house and some young people went on to reference eviction.

*"Alice Springs doesn't provide enough house and money." Ricah, 13.*

The Australian social housing system has been labelled "under-resourced and manifestly unable to meet demand"[41] by the Australian Productivity Commission. With significant and disproportionate levels of homelessness, the Northern Territory experiences a particularly acute housing need. At the time of publication, over 2,000 applicants were waiting for an urban public housing allocation[19] and modelling shows a shortfall of up to 12,000 social and affordable homes required across the Northern Territory by 2025, approximately 75% of which are estimated to be for social housing.[20] This reflects the order of magnitude of the gap between the current level of social housing supply and what is needed.

*"When they're [adults] intoxicated and they just come through whenever they like, it's just very hard. [It impacts] just going out, trying to take my baby out. What if someone comes in and takes her stuff, my stuff? You don't have a key to the house and you don't know who will go in when you're not there." Chloe, 18.*

*"I reckon we will have better outcomes if we have more positive things instead of just negative rumours attacking the kids. For black fellas, racism is alive and well in this town. Kids have the potential to make it far, in life, in sports, take the next step in life but they just sort of give up because they don't know their path. They have goals but don't reach for it. The Government sort of forgets about us." Liam, 23*

*"There isn't much places to go beside relatives or some shelter." Jaime, 14.*

*"It [living in crowded houses] makes it harder; you gotta share with lots of people. If you share with lots of families things will run out quicker, like food." Brayden, 14.*

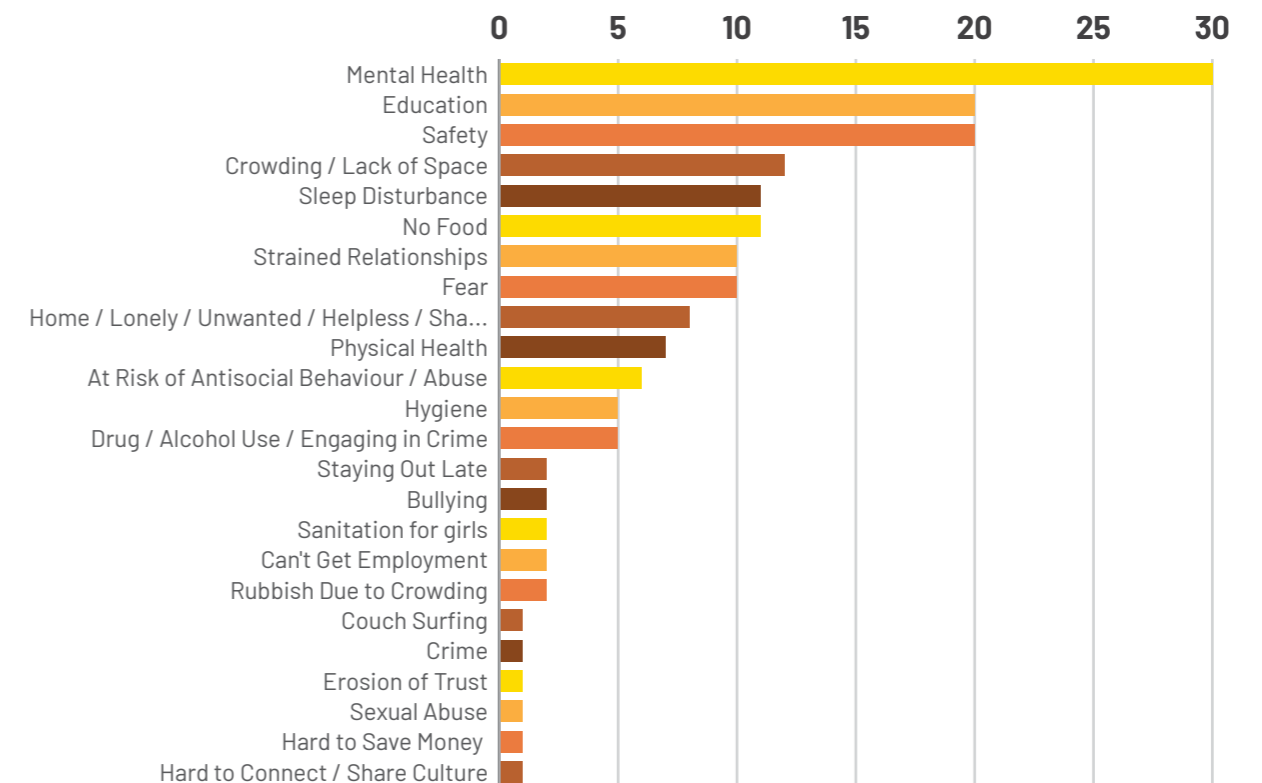
There are significant negative impacts associated with overcrowding, including antisocial behaviour, child safety and wellbeing concerns, and food theft.[42] Family strain heightened by overcrowding can lead to the breakdown of relationships and family violence.[42] Overcrowding is also associated with adverse health outcomes including the transmission of infectious disease and psychological stress.[43]

76% of homelessness in the Northern Territory is due to severe crowding.[11] The rate of severe crowding in the Northern Territory is 426.0 per 10,000 people compared to the national rate of 18.8 per 10,000 people.[11] For young Territorians, this rate is substantially higher at 724.0 per 10,000 people compared to the national rate of 35.8 per 10,000 people.[11]

## What impact does not having somewhere safe to stay have on young people?

Project participants were asked what impact not having somewhere safe to stay has on young people. 172 responses were received. These responses have been broadly categorised in the 24 categories included in figure 2.7.

Figure 2.7: What impact does not having somewhere to stay have on young people?



## Health

The negative impacts that homelessness has on mental health emerged as a strong concern for young people.

*"I reckon there's a big mental toll, cause not knowing where you're going to sleep, that's like stressful. We're kids! I think the fact that we're literal children being put out like to I guess...survive without any help, that's hard as it is." Scout, 17.*

Homelessness and mental health are inextricably linked; mental illness is a risk factor for homelessness and homelessness is a risk factor for mental illness. It is estimated that mental illness is a contributing factor to homelessness for 35% of young people who have experienced homelessness.[44] HeadSpace estimates that 48% to 82% of homeless young people have a diagnosable mental illness,[45] whilst another study estimates that as many as 90% of young people experiencing homelessness would meet the criteria for the diagnosis of at least one mental disorder.[44] Nationally, 48% of young people presenting alone to

SHS between July 2021 and June 2022 had mental health issues.[16] In the Northern Territory, 16% of young people presenting along to SHS during the same time period had a current mental health issue.[16]

*"I've had a few friends who have to couch surf. It's hard for them, their mental [state]. Also emotional effects with their relationships with other people. People get depressed and get drawn away." Daysha, 16.*

Mental health and physical health were often linked in responses to this question. Research on the life expectancy of people experiencing homelessness and those who are not, shows a significant gap. In the United Kingdom and the United States of America, this gap is more than 30 years. In Canada, for people in marginal housing, it is more than 10 years.[43]

## Disengagement from education

Education and the difficulty in attaining ongoing educational outcomes was identified 20 times. Several young people mentioned shame and feelings of helplessness at the situation.

*"By not having somewhere to stay safe, young people won't get the full access to education, healthcare and it is easier for them to experience mental health issues." Aria, 13.*

Homelessness can have a significant impact on a young person's education. Homelessness is associated with decreased engagement in the classroom and poor academic achievement.[47] Canadian studies show that between 63% and 90% of homeless young people did not complete high school.

## Safety

*"Lack of safety. Always being on edge, someone could take advantage of a homeless young person." Douglas, 14.*

The physical safety of young people experiencing homelessness was raised in 20 responses to this

Australian research undertaken by the Menzies School of Health Research and others showed that people presenting as frequent attendees at the Katherine Hospital Emergency Department were 16 times more likely to be homeless than not homeless.[46]

*"I'd say it takes a physical toll because you don't have like proper food each day and you slowly begin to starve and that leads to physical problems. Malnutrition, so basically starvation. You become weak, you have no energy, basically each day you didn't have a home you'd be hunting for food and if you didn't have enough food your body ends up shutting down as it tries to just conserve energy as much as possible." Henry, 14.*

[48] In Australia, 72% of young people presenting alone to SHS between July 2021 and June 2022 were not enrolled in any form of education or training at the start of their support period.[16] Research has also connected crowding to poor educational attainment.[42]

Adverse impacts on education engagement can lead to a vicious cycle. While positive educational environments are a protective factor for children,[49] children not engaged in or achieving positive results at school are at greater risk of a wide range of adverse outcomes including poorer health and wellbeing, elevated risk of anxiety or depressive symptoms, and increased risk-taking behaviours such as substance use and violence.[52]

question. The physical safety of an individual who is homeless is under constant threat and young people experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable.[51] Being homeless can also expose young people to sexual exploitation and violence[52] with an estimated 83% of homeless young people

experiencing physical and/or sexual assault after leaving home.[39] A combination of physical safety, poor mental health, the use of alcohol and other drugs, and limited access to medicine, treatment, and basic hygiene, contribute to young homeless people facing high mortality.[52] Overcrowded conditions can also

expose young people to increased violence and abuse.[52]

*"Getting kidnapped or something dangerous or traumatising [happening]." Ethan, 13.*

## Impact on girls and women

The increased impact of homelessness on girls and women was noted in responses with regards to safety and access to sanitary products. Hygiene in general was also highlighted.

*"I reckon there are definitely factors that would make it a lot harder [to be homeless as a girl], such as sanitary items being able to acquire them because they're expensive! Which personally I think they should all be free. I don't know, there's just a lot of factors that come into play about whether it would be harder for a girl or a boy to be homeless." Scout, 17.*

Despite women experiencing homelessness at much higher rates than men in the Northern Territory and nationally, there is little research into the menstrual management experiences of women and girls experiencing homelessness, much less the experiences of non-binary, gender non-conforming,

and others on the transmasculine spectrum. In general, obstacles to personal hygiene increase vulnerability to disease.[53]

Research into the different experiences of women who experience homelessness has found that women have higher rates of diagnosed mental health issues, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and adverse childhood trauma.[54] The Australian Human Rights Commission has found that women experiencing homelessness require specialised support services to cater for their needs.[51] This support should include sexual assault counselling, domestic and family violence counselling, pregnancy services, protection of physical safety, income support, and assistance with legal issues such as parental rights.[51]

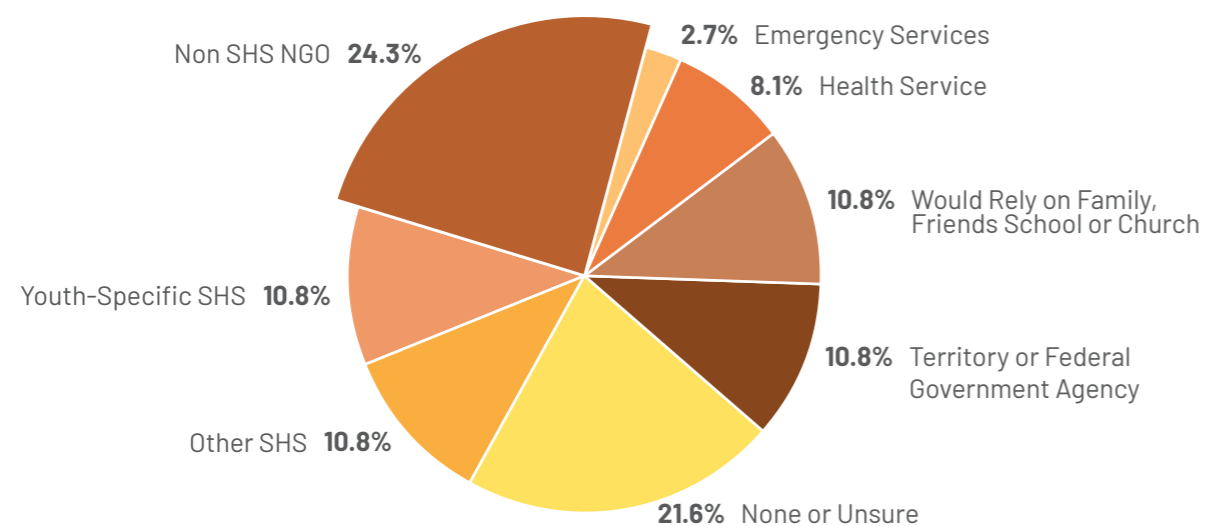
*"Young people, mainly women, need their own space and privacy. There aren't enough safe spaces for women and young people." Liam, 23.*



## What services are you aware of that can help?

*"No, there's nothing actually. The services in Alice Springs don't really put themselves out there to be known by young people, so it's kind of all hidden in a sense. So, I feel like the services do need to be talked about more and just put out there so that kids know that if they can't stay at home because they're not safe, there is somewhere to go that is safe." Scout, 17.*

Figure 2.8: What services are you aware of that can help?



During a group consultation at CMS, students identified a variety of services as displayed in figure 2.9. The World Cafe Method of consultation meant that the young people rotated through different stations using butchers' paper to write their responses to discussion questions. Some services are ticked, meaning that they were identified by two different groups of young people.

The CMS students suggest that services increase young peoples' awareness through education and exposure. They also suggest access points and designated catchments within which services operate. This was reiterated during interview style consultations.

*"They [services] definitely need to be put out there more. The main ways to get the word out about these places is obviously conventions at school, so like CMS, CSC [Centralian Senior College], all those places." Henry, 14.*

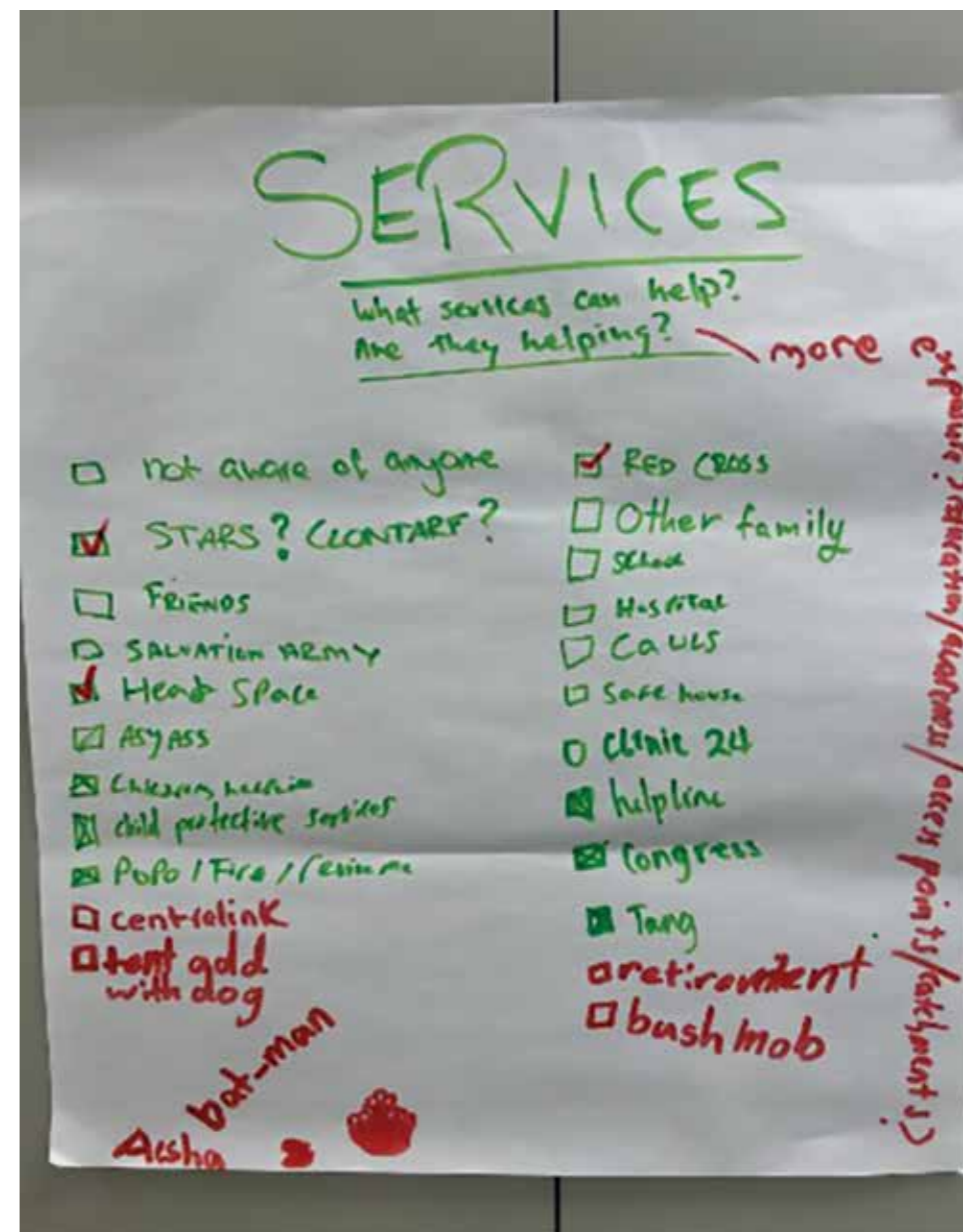
Despite rates of youth homelessness in the Northern

Territory sitting at almost 12 times the national average and the disproportionate representation of young people in the Northern Territory's homeless statistics, there are relatively few SHS funded to deliver services specifically to the young people of Mparntwe. The high number of young people who were unaware of services or thought that there were none, reflects this.

Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services (ASYASS) is the only youth specific SHS in Mparntwe, effectively servicing a region that, in land mass, is 42% of the Northern Territory and home to an estimated 14,000 people aged 24 and under.[55] The closest SHS offering specialised accommodation to young people is the Katherine Youth Accommodation and Support Service (KYASS), over 1,000 kilometres away.

ASYASS provides crisis, short, and medium-term accommodation to people aged 14 to 23 across three programs; youth housing, crisis youth refuge, and young mothers accommodation (Ampe Akweke). The Youth Housing Program provides semi-independent

Figure 2.9: What services are you aware of that can help – CMS



accommodation for up to 12 months to young people aged 16 to 21 years. At the time of writing, the waitlist for the program is closed due to the volume of applicants. The Crisis Youth Refuge provides support and accommodation for young people aged 15 to 17 years for up to three months. The refuge has a total of seven beds. Ampe Akweke is focused on providing short and medium-term accommodation to young mothers. At the time of writing, the waitlist for Ampe Akweke is closed due to demand. Ampe Akweke has five beds.

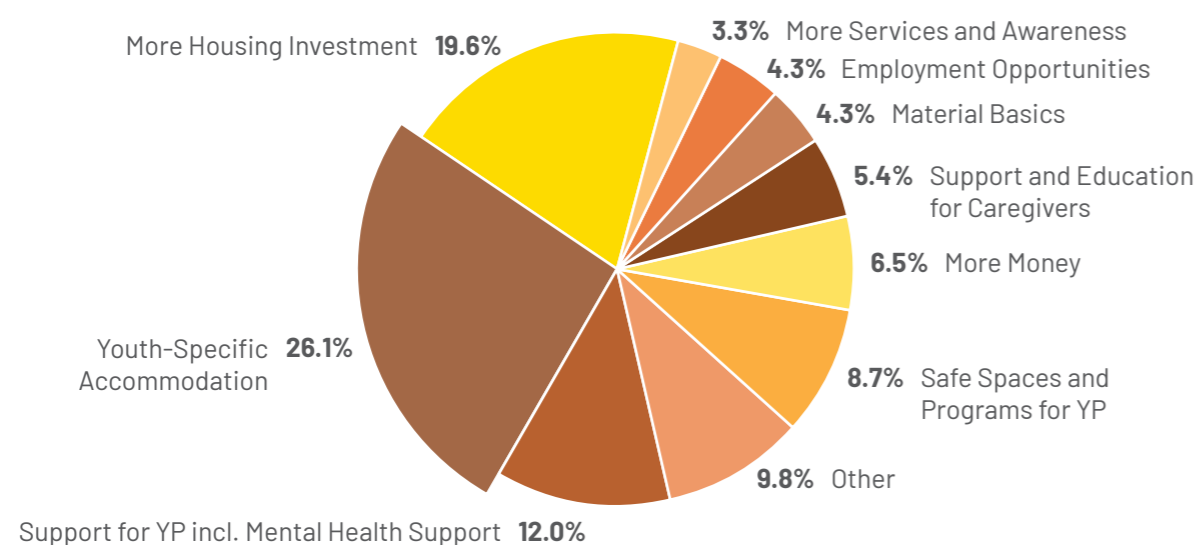
Two other services offer specialist residential programs to young people on bail or experiencing issues with alcohol and drugs.

Two youth drop-in centres operate in Mparntwe: Brown Street Youth Centre run by Tangentyere Council and The Gap Youth and Community Centre. Both provide a temporary safe place for young people. Gap Youth and Community Centre operates from 3:30 to 9:30pm seven days a week and Brown Street Youth Centre operates from 5:30 to 9:30pm from Sunday to Thursday and until midnight on Friday and Saturday. Gap Youth and Community Centre also offers an early intervention program for young people at risk of homelessness or homeless.

## What would help?

It is critical that young people inform the decisions that impact them and their community, as is their right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[9] We asked young people what they thought would help reduce youth homelessness in Mparntwe.

Figure 2.10: What would help?



## Youth-specific accommodation

45.7% of responses to the question, “what would help?” identified housing and accommodation-related supports; the majority (26.1%) specifically identified youth-specific accommodation. What this looked like varied; for some it was short-term shelter and for others it was medium and long-term accommodation with wrap-around support.

*“I reckon we need accommodation, nurse in one building. I feel like we need a youth centre with accommodation all in one, all services in one. That would be a good way to stop the homelessness, to re-engage kids in school, in activities, to get them check-ups, you could have like a nurse, a counsellor, all services in one.” Cora, 24.*

Young people identified that accommodation must be fun, relaxing, alcohol-free, include activities that

distract young people from the challenges in their lives, and provide support to make them feel less alone.

*“Somewhere where they can go, sleep or they need something like food or just somewhere to stay. They can go there and just chill out. Somewhere to relax and just think.” Bridget, 17.*

Youth-specific accommodation is central to decreasing youth homelessness. The needs of young people, particularly those with a lived and ongoing experience of homelessness, are distinct from adults and therefore the supports available should reflect this.[56,57] It is essential that housing solutions for young people are tailored and that they are not merged within general accommodation for the adult population.[17]

Many of the young people who identified youth-specific accommodation went a step further and told us that whilst youth-specific accommodation is important, it is also crucial to consider what other supports young people who experience homelessness need, including social, mental health, financial, and integration supports.

For young people who are homeless, the transition from homelessness to independent living is often complicated by a lack of family support[58]; supported accommodation is essential.

## The Youth Foyer Model

The Youth Foyer is one model of youth-specific accommodation that has proven successful as a model for at-risk or homeless young people in other Australian jurisdictions and overseas. Foyers first emerged in Australia in the early 2000s.[59] Youth Foyers are placed-based, integrated learning, employment, and accommodation settings for young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness for up to two years.[60] With stable accommodation, Foyers intervene in disadvantage in other areas of young residents’ lives.[60] Foyers seek to tap into and nurture the aspirations of young residents with the goal of ensuring that they become educated, employable, and empowered, allowing them to achieve genuine independence.[60]

Foyers are recognised globally as a pathway out of homelessness and service system dependence, yet the Northern Territory remains the only Australian jurisdiction without a facility.

Youth Foyers are an environment in which young people can relax, undertake hobbies, social activities to make them feel less alone, and sleep, all needs highlighted in the responses of young people during consultations. A core function of the model is to broker real world opportunities for residents that are matched to their ambitions, including education, training, employment, volunteering, mentoring, and recreation.[60]

80% of Foyer participants exit into stable housing with 72% exiting into private housing.[22] Young people engaged in a Foyer program are 1.6 times more likely to achieve a higher level of education than if engaged

with an SHS.[22] 65% of Foyer participants gain employment.[22]

There is a strong economic argument for the Youth Foyer model; the lifetime cost to the government of supporting a young person that has accessed an SHS is estimated at \$386,000.[22] 48% of this cost is incurred by the Australian Government and 52% by state and territory governments.[22] On a per person basis, Foyers create an average of \$84,000 in benefits for the Australian Government across taxation uplifts, welfare, housing, and federal health savings.[22] Foyers also create \$89,000 in benefits for state and territory governments through the avoided social housing, state health, and justice costs.[22] Put simply, the Foyer Foundation has calculated that for every \$1 spent on Foyers, the model generates an additional \$6 in value for governments.[22]

The young people consulted as part of this project have strongly identified a need for youth-specific accommodation. The housing and homelessness sectors in Mparntwe have identified the establishment of a Youth Foyer as a regional priority. Further, the Northern Territory Government has prioritised a Youth Foyer proposal in the Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy 2018-23: Pathways out of Homelessness.[32] Federally, a Youth Foyer was identified by the Federal Opposition as a priority in 2019, when \$10 million was committed by Federal Labor for the establishment of a Youth Foyer in Mparntwe.[61] Despite the broad recognition that a Foyer is needed, the Northern Territory Government is yet to commit to its establishment.

## The Housing First for Youth Model (HF4Y)

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) is another model that has achieved international recognition. The model treats housing as a human right that is not conditional on the readiness or compliance requirements of those that will inhabit it. The premise of the model is that housed young people are more successful at recovering from homelessness if they are rapidly moved into permanent housing with appropriate supports rather than first transitioning through crisis or short-term accommodation.[62]

Whilst there are similarities between HF4Y and the Youth Foyer Model, a significant difference is the rapid approach to housing offered by HF4Y compared to the Foyer Model which requires certain commitments from participants as a requisite for residency.[63] Another key difference is the flexibility of time frames in the HF4Y model of which a core principle is individualised, client-driven supports with no time limits.[63]

HF4Y is central to Canada's approach to youth homelessness and Canada is where the youth approach to the adult Housing First Model was pioneered.[64] Canada is also where HF4Y has been adapted for Indigenous young people through the addition of culturally appropriate supports that facilitate cultural engagement with communities and ensure Indigenous ways of knowing are embedded into the model.[64]

## Common Ground

The Common Ground model draws on the principals of the Housing First model, however it uses a congregate housing setting with wrap-around support services and tenancy management offered on site.[66] Common Ground targets a cohort with experiences of chronic homelessness and complex needs.[66] Common Ground projects commonly incorporate mixed-tenure arrangements, often providing permanent affordable housing to people on low-incomes.[67] The congregate living approach aims to create socially mixed communities and strengthen neighbourhoods,[66] however concerns have been raised regarding the limited flexibility of the model to

Home Fire in Calgary Canada is one of these adaptations, providing housing support for Indigenous young people aged 16-24. Home Fire focuses on providing a cultural home where youth can reconnect with family and culture and begin healing.[62] There are important lessons Australia can learn from the program; Home Fire uses existing scattered-site accommodation, and this poses challenges for young people who may face feelings of isolation and loneliness.[62] Cultural disconnection is also exacerbated by the scattered-site model,[62] a key argument for a purpose-built facility. Any adaptation of HF4Y that aims to provide accommodation to Indigenous young people must be Indigenous-led and involve a hybrid model of service delivery, combining the HF4Y framework and core principals with Indigenous ways of knowing and support that emphasises cultural engagement and reconnection.[62]

While HF4Y has been part of Australian discussions of youth homelessness since 2006,[63] Australia is yet to establish a HF4Y program. A key challenge is the low social housing stock in Australia, which sits at 3.8% of overall housing stock.[65]

accommodate changes in the tenant's life[66] and the potential for large-scale congregate living settings to foster feelings of institutionalisation.[68]

Common Ground projects have been developed in Australia since 2008 and evaluations have shown positive outcomes in reducing homelessness, improving housing and non-housing outcomes, and cost-effectiveness in part due to the congregate living approach which reduces costs related to tenancy management, asset repairs and maintenance, and the delivery of support services.[66]

## Lead Tenant Model

Lead tenant programs aim to provide stable and supportive semi-independent living environments to young people through the provision of sharing-style accommodation with a live-in case manager, known as a Lead Tenant. The model is focused on supporting young people to grow their independent living skills and is generally aimed at young people leaving care arrangements.[69] Lead tenant arrangements

are best suited to young people who are ready to develop independent living skills in a share house arrangement, but who require some support to live successfully and independently in the future.[70]

Lead tenant programs exist around Australia and may be a complementary option to larger scale youth accommodation in Mparntwe.

## More appropriate and affordable housing and investment in current housing infrastructure

More housing, affordable housing, and investment in existing housing were strong themes identified in consultations. More housing investment was identified in 19.6% responses to the question, "What would help?"

*"Give people proper houses, flats or something. The houses now, too much people, full up. There's just not enough at the moment and the houses that are there I don't think they are good. We need more houses and people to come fix them." Angus, age unknown.*

'Proper houses' were described by different young people as housing that is affordable, well-maintained, comfortable, secure, and not crowded.

People aged 0 to 24 make up 52% of Territorians living in crowded dwellings and 53% of Territorians living in severely crowded dwellings.[11] The negative impacts of overcrowding are clear; it leads to a lack of space and privacy, noise, antisocial behaviour, negative impacts on health and wellbeing, concerns regarding child wellbeing and safety, extra housework, food theft and security, strain on family relationships, financial strain, strained relationships with the housing provider, damage to property, and precarious housing/risk of eviction.[42]

*"The Government needs to give more money to town camps and housing instead of*

*spending it on other things. Using the money for fixing housing in town camps and making sure it's used on housing. Find somewhere for young people to stay." Emma, 16.*

Some young people identified specific issues impacting their own housing: *"Our screen door's been broken for maybe two years and we don't have a back screen door for maybe four, maybe five years. That's how we live at home." Chloe, 18.*

The Northern Territory has an ageing public housing portfolio and housing stock is inefficiently matched to tenant needs.[20] Whilst there has been investment in housing in remote communities through the Our Community. Our Future. Our Homes. program,[71] further investment is needed in urban and regional communities, including Mparntwe.

*"A lot of these kids need help. We gotta stop letting them struggle because they're gonna get worse. And everyone is gonna start complaining to the police, knowing full well that we coulda done something earlier. Housing and homelessness is a way to do that." Kaia, 17.*



## Safe spaces and programs for young people

Many young people identified the need for more safe spaces and programs for young people, particularly options available at night.

*“More places for kids to go when something is wrong at home. There are lots of places for adults to go when they are in trouble but what about the kids? Something fun where you can just relax. Something with rooms and a basketball court where kids can play to make them feel like they are safe and not feel like they are the only ones. Have activities so kids can forget what’s going on at home.”* Daysha, 16.

The need for homelessness access points was also mentioned.

*“More cooperation between corporations and organisations because without talk between them like communication breaks down and like you get multiple different stories sometimes from the youth because they tell one story to one person and that person interprets it one way while another interprets it another way and it leads to multiple different outcomes and it just sends the youth*

*on a spiral of they just don’t know what’s going on and it adds stress to their mental health.”* Henry, 14.

A report published by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) explored a system redesign for homeless youth and made recommendations for policy development.[72] One of these was improved access to the homeless system through Youth Entry Points with the goal being a more efficient system that simplifies contact with and access to support services, minimising the number of times a young person needs to retell their story.[72]

Other Australian jurisdictions have established homelessness access points and youth crisis hotlines. The Victorian homelessness system is organised under The Opening Doors Framework.[73] Through designated entry points into the homelessness system, Opening Doors provides a coordinated service response.[73] The purpose of the entry points is to assess a person’s needs, prioritise their case, and connect them to services and resources.[73] There are designated access points for young people including Frontyard Youth Services in the Melbourne Central Business District where young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness can find emergency accommodation, find quality case management from staff, and access a range of co-located and visiting services.[74]

## More money and material necessities

Young people identified poverty or lack of money as a top reason why the young people of Mparntwe experience homelessness. When asked what would help, more money was raised in 6.5% of responses.

*“Double the money they get.”* Riley, 12.

In 2021, median personal income for Indigenous Territorians was \$323 per week, just 34% of the Territory-wide median of \$936.[38] While non-Indigenous households in the Northern Territory

experience the least poverty compared with other non-Indigenous households in Australia, Indigenous households in the Northern Territory experience some of the deepest levels of poverty in Australia.[75]

Recipients of Youth Allowances (student, apprentice, and other) and Austudy who also receive Commonwealth Rent Assistance<sup>ix</sup> (CRA) have amongst the highest levels of rental stress of all income support payment recipients receiving CRA.[31] A Deloitte report found that increasing the base rate of Newstart and Youth Allowance by \$75 per week will

<sup>ix</sup> Commonwealth Rent Assistance is a non-taxable supplement payment to eligible people who rent in the private rental market or community housing.

boost wellbeing and lift the incomes of people most in need.[76]

The young people of the Northern Territory have the right to an income that will support their housing needs.

The need for clothes and material basics for young

people experiencing or at risk of homelessness was identified in 4.3% of responses to the question put to young people “What would help?”. This indicates a need for these basics to be provided to young people via an assertive outreach response or at such drop-in safe spaces mentioned above.

## Support and education for caregivers

Early intervention is understood to be a more effective method of preventing homelessness than crisis response. Research has shown that systemic implementation of a place-based community approach of early intervention can reduce the incidence of youth homelessness.[72] Such approaches involve proactive identification of risk, a tiered practice framework, an extended workforce of youth and family workers, and school welfare/wellbeing staff working under a formal collaboration framework.[72]

*“Support families, help them to have kids in a safe place where they are comfortable and feel safe.”* Elijah, 21.

The model of enhancing family and natural supports (FNS) can help break the cycle of homelessness and, in many cases help families navigate interpersonal

challenges and conflict.[77] FNS is a housing stabilisation strategy with the core tenet being that young people remain in place in their communities.[77]

The Community of Services and Schools (COSS) model of early intervention is a place-based model for supporting vulnerable young people and their families with the aim of supporting families where relationships are heading towards crisis and possible homelessness, as well as other adverse outcomes.[72] The model, delivered as a pilot in Victoria, achieved a 40% reduction in adolescent homelessness and a 20% reduction in early school leaving.[72]

The young people of Mparntwe need investment not only in a crisis response to youth homelessness, but also in early intervention strategies that focus on supports for young people and their families and allow them to remain connected to family and community.

## More services and education on existing services

Awareness raising on the existing services that can assist a young person experiencing homelessness in Mparntwe was a priority identified during consultations, both when young people were asked what would help and what services they were aware of that currently offer such support.

*“Not too sure. If there’s someone there they can reach out and help young people and support them. I reckon more services to reach out and help people who are struggling, give them a hand. It would be good if someone can walk through the gate and ask if they need help.”* Daysha, 16.

In Daysha’s quote there are two key points; one is the lack of knowledge that she has regarding existing services and the other is that services must be proactive in reaching young people at risk.

A centralised entry point to the homelessness system would go some way to negate the need for individual services to reach young people through outreach. However, while the young people of Mparntwe remain without an entry point, their suggestion is that services are promoted through social media and schools.

We also note the request that youth programs and services be designed in consultation with young people.

*"Maybe get people to spend time with them to understand who they are and what they've been through in life. Make them know that*

*there's actually people that care. I feel like they wouldn't feel that kind of comfort and support from anybody. Maybe I guess make a whole program based on this and just try to listen to what they want and what they hope they can do, be." Bridget, 17.*

## A Way Forward

In conclusion, the young people consulted in this project identified youth-specific accommodation and investment in housing as the primary ways in which the risk of young people experiencing homelessness in the town can be reduced. Mental health supports, increased safe spaces and programs for young people, more money and material basics, support and education for caregivers, and increased efforts to make young people aware of existing supports, were also identified as key.

Despite year-on-year increased presentations to SHS at a pace far greater than the national trajectory and a rate of homelessness that sits at 12 times the national average, the Northern Territory receives just 1.3% of funding through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement's existing population-driven distribution model, the lowest amount of any state or territory. The consequences of this gross underfunding has insidious on-the-ground impacts. Proven, effective models of accommodation and support do not exist in the Northern Territory; the Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction without a Common Ground or Youth Foyer facility and, despite its success, the Northern Territory does not have enough social housing to support the Housing First Model.

Another impact of the Northern Territory's poorly

funded housing and homelessness system is the pressure on Specialist Homelessness Services to meet the increasing demand for services in a resource constrained environment. With the cost of homelessness estimated at more than \$26,000 per person and, as earlier stated, the lifetime cost to the government of supporting a young person that has accessed an SHS estimated at \$386,000, a relatively small investment in frontline case workers and specialist staff would see significant cost savings over time.

Young people require stable housing to grow and develop. The right to housing is enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.[78] The right to adequate housing is more than a right to shelter; a home is a place where people can live in security, peace, and dignity.[78] Currently, many young people in the Northern Territory are not being afforded this human right.

The Northern Territory must make inroads in the delivery of sustainable, effective accommodation and support programs. The words of the young people who participated in this project inform a way forward for the Northern Territory; their ideas are central to making a sustainable change to the high and increasing levels youth homelessness in Mparntwe.



# Summary of Key Recommendations

The following summary of recommendations reflects what was heard from the young people consulted in this project.

*"...just try to listen to what they want and what they hope they can do, be." Bridget, 17.*



## Youth-specific accommodation

*"I reckon we need accommodation, nurse in one building. I feel like we need a youth centre with accommodation all in one, all services in one. That would be a good way to stop the homelessness, to re-engage kids in school, in activities, to get them check-ups, you could have like a nurse, a counsellor, all services in one." Cora, 24.*

The young people of Mparntwe have identified youth-specific accommodation as a priority.

Youth-specific accommodation is central to decreasing homelessness in Mparntwe. Young people are a priority cohort under the NHHA and supported accommodation for young people has been identified in a number of Northern Territory Government strategies. This report references multiple youth-specific accommodation options that have proven successful in Australia and internationally.



## More appropriate and affordable housing and investment in current housing infrastructure

*"Give people proper houses, flats or something. The houses now, too much people, full up. There's just not enough at the moment and the houses that are there I don't think they are good. We need more houses and people to come fix them." Angus, unknown*

The Northern Territory has inadequate and insufficient social and affordable housing and an ageing public housing portfolio.

The Northern Territory needs a coherent, proactive, whole-of-Government plan to meet current and future housing needs.



## Safe spaces and programs for young people

*"More places for kids to go when something is wrong at home. There are lots of places for adults to go when they are in trouble but what about the kids?" Daysha, 16.*

The young people of Mparntwe have identified a need for more safe spaces and programs for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. These are particularly needed at night to avoid young people having to 'day-break'. The need for increased supports for young people, particularly mental health supports, was also noted.



## More money and material necessities

*"Double the money they get." Riley, 12.*

Poverty and housing are inextricably linked. First Nations Territorians experience the deepest levels of poverty in Australia. Research providing a snapshot of the Northern Territory's rental market in March 2023, found that no properties were affordable to individuals receiving Youth Allowance.[24]

The young people of Mparntwe and their caregivers need adequate income support to avoid poverty after housing costs.

The need for clothes and material basics for young people at risk or experiencing homelessness was also identified. This indicates a need for these basics to be provided to young people via an assertive outreach response or at drop-in programs.



## More services and education on existing services

*"I reckon more services to reach out and help people who are struggling, give them a hand. It would be good if someone can walk through the gate and ask if they need help." Daysha, 16.*

Awareness building on the existing services that can assist young people at risk or experiencing homelessness in Mparntwe was a strong priority identified during consultations, both when young people were asked what would help and what current services they were aware of.

Young people suggest that services are promoted through social media and schools.

This report also notes the need for a 24-hour centralised entry or intake system for young people who are at risk or experiencing homelessness. A centralised entry point to the homelessness system would go some way to negate the issue of young people being unaware of the services that can assist them.



## Support and education for caregivers

*"Support families, help them to have kids in a safe place where they are comfortable and feel safe." Elijah, 21.*

Early intervention is a more effective method of preventing homelessness than crisis response.

Whilst an adequate crisis response to youth homelessness is needed in the Northern Territory, there must also be investment in evidence-based early intervention strategies that focus on supports for young people and their families and allow young people to remain connected to family and community.

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