

OPEN Research/Policy Snapshot

Children and young people on the edge of care, out of home and alone

Danielle Thornton, David Politanski, Joseph Borlagdan & Shelley Mallett, Brotherhood of St Laurence: July 2020.

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This article explores the inadequacies of existing service provisions for children and young people aged 10-16 years who do not qualify for statutory removal but who cannot remain at home due to family conflict.

The absence and under-resourcing of specialised services to support these children and young people combined with weak accountability for this group has led to a cycle of *systemic carelessness*. The complex nature of this issue creates the need for a diverse and multifaceted response.

Key takeaways for child and family services

- **Further collaboration is needed between our sector and housing services**
In order to achieve better outcomes for young people leaving home due to family conflict, child and family services needs to work in co-ordination with homelessness and housing services. This could reduce the current service fragmentation and allow both sectors to draw on each other's expertise and resources to provide better co-ordinated support for these young people.
- **We should work to build professional capacity around conflict resolution strategies**
The professional development of service providers in conflict resolution has the ability to deescalate family conflict before it leads to homelessness. To make this possible for child and family services it is crucial that the sector prioritises intensive family work and greater resources are allocated to this area.
- **We need to develop a strengths-based model that privileges the voices of children and young people**
This paper shows that we must actively listen to the voices of children and young people and prioritise their opinions in any subsequent decision-making that may affect them. This could offer crucial insight into areas for improvement for the sector.

Research findings

1. Children and young people leave home for a variety of reasons

Family conflict may arise for many reasons: due to abuse or neglect, differing values or a desire for greater independence. When leaving home to avoid conflict, some children and young people may opt to ‘couch surf’, or they may present unaccompanied to Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) – who do not have the legal jurisdiction to support them. This inherent complexity of family conflict and homelessness means that a single approach to addressing the issue is inadequate.

2. Child and family services and Specialist Housing Services (SHS) lack the capacity and resources to achieve meaningful results for this population

Current child and family services are not sufficiently orientated towards mediation and lack the capacity to offer the appropriate support needed to resolve family conflict, leaving children and young people at risk of homelessness. Similarly, SHS providers do not have the legislative grounds to shelter these unaccompanied children without gaining parental consent first and lack the resources to offer family reunification. These factors contribute to poor outcomes for these children and young people.

3. Covid-19 is exacerbating factors that contribute to family conflict and homelessness

The current Covid-19 situation is worsening factors that contribute to family conflict including child abuse and domestic violence. Other compounding factors include restrictions on face-to-face contact with families, and additional life pressures such as unemployment, worsening mental health and rising use of AOD. These factors are increasing the risk of homelessness and creating long-term disadvantage over the life course for children and young people.

4. Systemic carelessness is perpetuated by limited accountability and fragmented services

The responsibility for child welfare spans across multiple sectors, meaning that no single sector or agency can be properly held accountable. This is exacerbated by inconsistent state and federal frameworks and funding models. Issues also include barriers to effective coordination across government departments, fragmented service provision and capacity constraints on providers. This leaves children and young people to navigate the system alone.

Policy recommendations

1. We need to move from a service system focused on managing need to one designed to develop capability

To allow children and young people to flourish we must move away from managing need and risk to building capability and providing young people the opportunity and resources to realise their potential.

2. A developmental approach to service design and implementation creates new possibilities for codesign

Leveraging the expertise of children, families, service providers, and stakeholders to provide ongoing feedback and assist in creating practical solutions to enduring problems.

3. Service responses must be multilayered and go beyond crisis management

In line with the Youth Coalition of the ACT service model, a three-tiered support model for children aged 8–15 years has been recommended. This includes early intervention and outreach; short-to-medium term respite or accommodation; long-term supported accommodation in a safe, stable home-like environment.