



# Clinical Toolkit

## At-Risk group: Homeless Young People

**This document aims to outline some of the facts about homelessness in young people and present some of the links to mental health issues in this group.**

### Introduction

A person is considered homeless\* when they do not have suitable accommodation alternatives and their current living arrangement:

- is in a location that is inadequate or
- is short-term without the possibility of extension
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to, space for social relations

\*definition adapted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

### How many young people are homeless?

Homelessness is difficult to adequately measure and it is likely to be underestimated. Best estimates suggest that over 32,000 people aged 12-24 are homeless in Australia, representing 1/3 of the country's total homeless population.

### Youth homelessness is unseen

Most homeless young people don't live on the street - They may be *couch surfing* or sleeping on floors, temporarily staying with friends, relatives, family and sometimes complete strangers, until they outstay their welcome and move on.

### Common causes of homelessness

The reasons for homelessness among young Australians are many and diverse, and include:

- Experiencing abuse
- Neglect
- Addiction
- Trauma
- Mental illness
- Domestic or family violence.

### Link between homelessness and mental health issues in YP

Homelessness in young people is strongly associated with mental and physical health concerns. 48 -82% of homeless young people have a diagnosable mental illness (including mood, anxiety, substance use and post-traumatic stress disorders). Homelessness is a risk factor for mental and physical ill-health and mental illness is a risk factor for homelessness.

Young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience:

- Psychological distress
- Psychiatric disorders
- Alcohol and drug misuse
- Self-harm and suicidal behaviour
- Inadequate nutrition
- Limited access to medical care
- Unsafe sexual encounters
- Violence

**These risks increase with duration of homelessness.**

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Despite increased incidence of mental health issues, young people experiencing homelessness are less likely to access mental health services and more likely to disengage with education and employment.

## What are the early signs suggesting a possible mental health problem?

Things to look out for include:

**Changes in mood** – feeling sadder, more anxious or more irritable

**Changes in behaviour** – being less talkative, becoming withdrawn or being more aggressive

**Changes in relationships** – falling out with friends or your partner, or conflict with family

**Changes in appetite** – eating too much or too little, or losing or gaining weight without trying to

**Changes in sleep patterns** – not sleeping enough, or sleeping too much

**Changes in coping** – feeling overwhelmed or tired of life

**Changes in thinking** – more negative thoughts or thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

## Helping yourself

Apart from seeking professional help there are a number of things you can do to look after yourself. Here are some strategies to try when you're feeling stressed out or having a hard time:

- Eat well
- Get enough sleep
- Spend time with people you trust
- Talk to people about your situation
- Exercise
- Avoid using alcohol and other drugs
- Find time for enjoyable activities in your day
- Get help if things aren't improving

## Homelessness and suicide

One in ten homeless young people report having suicidal behaviour in the past three months, and 28 percent of those had not told anyone.

## Getting help

If you need urgent help or are in danger, call 000 immediately.

If you are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, contact your local services (<http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/are-you-homeless>)

If you or someone you know is experiencing mental health issues relating to homelessness, **headspace** may be able to help.

## More information

For more information, visit Homelessness Australia at <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/>

## References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Information paper: A statistical definition of homelessness. ABS Cat. No. 4922.0.* 2012, Australian Bureau of Statistics: Canberra
2. **headspace** Service Improvement Project Component 2: Social Inclusion Model Development Study (2015)
3. **headspace** Position paper – Homelessness