

# COUCH SURFING LIMBO



## REPORT OVERVIEW

### LEGAL, POLICY AND SERVICE GAPS AFFECTING YOUNG COUCH SURFERS AND COUCH PROVIDERS IN MELBOURNE'S WEST

Couch surfing is increasingly being recognised as a form of homelessness in Australia. It is a particularly complex issue for young people (aged under 25) in outer urban areas, who face additional challenges due to lack of infrastructure, support and services.

Little is known about the legal challenges these young people face due to, or because of, couch surfing. Even less is known about the experiences and challenges of the 'couch providers' – individuals and families who provide a place to stay for these young people.

This research sought to fill this gap in knowledge, by looking into the experiences of young people who are couch surfing and the experiences of couch providers – seeking to identify the legal, policy and service gaps for these groups and provide a way forward in addressing these issues.

The research revealed that it was a combination of structural, legal and policy issues which led to, or exacerbated, the vulnerability of young couch surfers. It also revealed a lack of community service options for couch surfers and couch providers.

Young couch surfers are falling through the gaps – not yet considered adults, but not given the same level of protection as children, these young people are forced to couch surf to avoid violence at home and family conflict. The preference young people (and couch providers) had for their situations to remain 'out of the system' was indicative of a lack of trust in how their situations would be handled. Young couch surfers' lack of identity as being homeless or victims of family violence was mirrored in the lack of recognition in the systems that were intended to support them.

The lack of restorative approaches – which favour a less adversarial approach than that of other justice responses – to young people's experiences of violence limited young people's ability to stay in the family home or report the violence they experienced.

When young people needed to stay away from home, couch surfing was often considered the better of the few options available to them. Independent living was rarely, if at all, an option for the young people in this study. The lack of financial resources, and an inability to stay in the family home, meant many young people had no choice but to couch surf. The conditions on access to Youth Allowance could also mean many young people had no income support at all.

Staying engaged in schooling was a challenge, as the young people in the study battled constant illnesses, poor mental health, and lacked the financial and other resources to stay engaged in their education. They also experienced discrimination at school because of these circumstances. School, however, was a critical touchpoint for these young people and an important place in which they could be connected to the supports they needed.

Public transport, infringements, and other debts (including those owed to Centrelink) were another significant problem that further entrenched couch surfers levels of vulnerability. Already financially and otherwise disadvantaged because of their housing situation, fines continued to accumulate, with young people having no real capacity to pay them.

Couch providers offered a level of informal care that they were not always financially and emotionally resourced to. This had implications for their wellbeing and caused a level of financial stress. Couch providers were limited in accessing additional income support without complications, despite the additional costs of caring for another person. There was also no service for couch providers to access any other supports they might need.

Conversely, some young people reported being exploited by couch providers.

It was clear for both groups, there was a lack of legal and policy protections because of the nature of their experience. Services are not designed for these groups. To this end, a range of recommendations are offered.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1: Infrastructure

Victorian Government to: increase youth accommodation and support capacity in Melbourne's west; fund new youth refuge in Wyndham to assist young people from a point of crisis to supported housing or independent living.

### 2: Family violence jurisdiction

Victorian Government (and other relevant bodies) to invest in extending restorative justice models for young people experiencing family violence.

### 3: Research into young people's experience of family violence

More research to be undertaken to better understand young people's experiences of family violence, the links to couch surfing and further homelessness.

### 4: Small property matters

Victorian Government to legislate to remove licensee disputes re: small amounts of property from the jurisdiction of the Magistrates' Court and into the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

### 5: Public transport policy

Victorian Government to: provide a compliant pathway of travel for young couch surfers through a new temporary travel card or the provision of Myki cards to schools.

### 6: Social Security changes

Federal Department of Social Services to: make changes to eligibility criteria, and improve access to, Youth Allowance Unreasonable to Live at Home benefit; resource Centrelink youth outreach re: debts and benefit suspension. Federal government to increase funding to specialist social security services.

### 7: End discrimination in schools

Victorian Government to amend Equal Opportunity Act 2010 to include Social Status and Family Violence as a protected attribute. Department of Education and Training through schools need to develop more effective practices to identify vulnerable students who are couch surfing or experiencing family violence. Schools should be prohibited from excluding students from their education, including suspensions and expulsions, based on a breach of school uniform policy.

### 8: Access to flexible support packages

Victorian Government to recognise the financial burden placed on couch providers and allow them to benefit from family violence flexible support packages in order to support the young person in crisis and connect them with specialist family violence services.

### 9: Information provision for young people

Victorian Government should resource an online guide for young people who are couch surfing that provides practical information about their rights and where to access services and support.

### 10: Support services for young people

Victorian Government to: fund a specialist youth housing & homelessness service in City of Wyndham; strengthen pathways to support for young people through youth-specific homelessness workers and stronger linkages between school welfare workers and youth-specific homelessness workers; improve youth specific engagement skills across the Specialist Housing Services (SHS).

### 11: Family violence support for young couch surfers

Victorian Government to: consider needs of young people experiencing family violence in design of the 'Support and Safety Hubs'; increase funding to specialist family violence services to provide youth support programs to 15-18-year-olds; fund specialist family violence services in schools; investigate the opportunity for schools to access Support and Safety Packages.

### 12: Support for couch providers

DHHS to fund advice line or programs which offer information and support to informal carers (i.e. couch providers).

### 13: Continued funding of innovative programs

All levels of government continue to fund innovative programs such as those outlined in this report. These programs are designed to work holistically with young people who are couch surfing that are flexible, specialised and for where young people wish to seek support. Many young people do not wish to seek out more formal support systems, and programs such as these are critical.

### 14: Funding for new programs

DHHS to fund pilot service for young people that are couch surfing.