



2011 Child Rights NGO Report Australia

Homelessness and Standard of Living

*My Mum and I had to move to Perth. We had nowhere to stay so we lived in a car - 17 YEAR OLD
ABORIGINAL BOY, PERTH, WESTERN
AUSTRALIA*

Despite the Australian Government's efforts to reduce the incidents of homelessness, many children and young people continue to experience homelessness with almost half the people trying to access homelessness services being under the age of 18. Reports show that homelessness services such as early intervention programs, shelters and other supported accommodation services are stretched to capacity and are forced to turn people away.

Public awareness must be spread to recognise that children can experience homelessness in a different way to adults, often as children fleeing conflict with single parents or as teenagers escaping family conflict alone. The voices of vulnerable children need to be heard in the debate on child homelessness.

Recommendation: Australia should improve the coordination and integration of early intervention services to prevent young people becoming homeless.

ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING AMONGST VULNERABLE GROUPS

While most Australian children enjoy relatively good standards of living, the following groups are less likely to realise their right to an adequate standard of living:

- **Aboriginal children**ⁱ are significantly more likely to experience homelessness and live in overcrowded housing conditions than non-Aboriginal Australians.
- **Young people from refugee backgrounds and newly arrived communities** are estimated to be up to 10 times more at risk of homelessness than the general population. Access to safe, secure and affordable housing is central to social inclusion and the ability to settle successfully in a new country,

however, young people of refugee backgrounds often feel unable to access homelessness agencies.

- **Children living in rural and remote areas** do not have access to adequate childcare services.
- **Mothers and children living in rural and remote communities** do not have access to safe houses, and when they need to leave domestic violence are often forced into inadequate housing conditions.
- **Young people who have been in care** are over-represented in Australia's homeless population. One cause is that young people leaving care are not provided with appropriate support while adjusting to independent living.

Recommendation: Australia should review and renew its efforts to address incidents of homelessness of children and young people, and commit to the development and implementation of a framework built on the specific experiences and needs of children and young people. It should include specific strategies for Aboriginal children, children from newly arrived communities, children leaving care, children in regional and remote communities, and same-sex attracted or questioning or gender diverse children.

FAMILY ASSISTANCE PAYMENTS

Security payments and rebates do not sufficiently cover the actual costs of raising children and are not determined on the basis of actual need.

PAYMENTS TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- Children under the age of 16 have no entitlement to social security benefits (15 years if 'living independently').
- Despite the provision of "Youth Allowance" for children above these ages, the payment is conditional on an 'activity' test.
- Benefits of the activity test are questionable as an independent review of the new compliance framework proposes it may be more appropriate for a young person to continue actively searching for work (at least in the short term) than to be forced back into education or training 'for which they are unsuited or unready'.
- The rate of Youth Allowance is significantly less than the equivalent allowance for a person over 21 years of age, and falls far short of the generally accepted poverty line figure in Australia.

Recommendation: Australia should review all benefits to and for children and young people to ensure compliance with child rights principles, to align these benefits with need and to remove unjustified discriminatory features.

INCOME MANAGEMENT

Northern Territory Emergency Response introduced an individually regulated social security payment scheme to members of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The Australian Federal Government has now extended the scheme across all of the Northern Territory, within certain groups in Western Australia and Queensland as well as five new locations since May 2011.

The scheme targets Aboriginal Communities and appears to be contrary to the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth). The Federal Government have justified their actions by declaring that the scheme falls within a category of “special measures” within the legislation.

These “special measures”, which specifically target Aboriginal people, fail to:

- meet the principles of proportionality, reasonableness and attention to human dignity;
- build capacity of care-givers; and
- provide acceptable evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness to improve outcomes for children.

These measures can directly disadvantage Aboriginal children through long-term psychological and mental health impacts.

Recommendation: Australia should repeal the scheme or review and replace the scheme with provisions for voluntary arrangements. If the scheme remains in place, Australia should institute proper evaluation based on data and measurable outcomes.

For more information see the full *Listen to Children* Report at www.childrights.org.au

ⁱ Throughout the NGO Report, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are referred to as ‘Aboriginal children.’ The authors acknowledge the diversity in culture, language, kinship structures and ways of life within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and recognise that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples retain their distinct culture, irrespective of whether they live in urban, rural, regional or remote areas of the country.